

Against the Stream: Serving the Lord in Unity

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As most assemblies, the 1995 General Assembly was a turning point in the life of SYNDESMOS, a turning point which calls for reflection. In a few years' time, the organisation has more than doubled. The growth of member movements from Eastern Europe continued, with movements from other parts of the world lining up to join as well. SYNDESMOS is now a world-wide organisation, recognised by the UN, UNESCO and the CE, blessed by all Orthodox churches. Much has been achieved since the pioneers of Orthodox unity met before and after the Second World War.

Already in the 1930's, contacts between Orthodox youth groups in different parts of the world were established. Emigration, wider travel possibilities but also ecumenical meetings brought young Orthodox together and made them discover the "miracle of unity". Orthodox youth from different countries and traditions discovered that, fundamentally, they were one, that their life and their faith were one and that their service to orthodox youth was intrinsically linked with an understanding of the catholicity of the Church. The 1930 Orthodox Conference in Thessaloniki, Greece, "envisioned a co-ordinated movement which would help to bring about the authentic renewal of the Church in new circumstances, to reinforce ties between the hierarchy and the faithful, to promote the spiritual development of youth, to awaken the Church to its mission in the world and to bring local churches into an inter-Orthodox and wider ecumenical context"¹. In 1935, Lev Zander from the Russian Christian Student Movement in France proposed the creation of a department of Orthodox Student movements within the WSCF². In 1949, 25 Orthodox youth leaders met at the WCC Institute in Bossey, Switzerland and discussed youth ministry and the participation of Orthodox youth in the ecumenical dialogue. This process led to the creation of SYNDESMOS in 1953 as "a service of co-operation between the groups and movements of Orthodox youth"³.

From the beginning, SYNDESMOS was not just about co-operation and contacts. It was a movement with its proper vision and objectives. The groups that founded it shared a progressive, dynamic view of their service to the Church. An avant-garde, moved by youth's charisma and determination to search what is essential, they walked ahead -sometimes far- of their hierarchs, inciting them to live and preach more vividly the Catholicity of the Church. SYNDESMOS was created to unite youth groups and theological schools "serving the Church and her unity, witness, mission and renewal for the life of the world" (art. 2.1 of the Constitution).

Looking at the present state of SYNDESMOS -a large, heterogeneous body- we have to conclude that we have changed. We are no longer a progressive avant-

¹ SYNDESMOS brochure 1970

² B.P. Plyukhanov, RSKhD v Latvii i Estonii, Paris 1993

³ SYNDESMOS 40th anniversary brochure, 1993

garde, driven by the quest for a deeper syndesmos. We have become, somehow, heavier, and we reflect more and more the status quo than an ideal of Church life.

This is a fundamentally new situation since the status quo of the Church is not without problems. Tensions, although present long before the creation of SYNDESMOS, have grown and as a movement of unity are deeply touched by this. French theologian Olivier Clément states: “It is clear that our Church is deeply divided. She is divided between partisans of conservation and partisans of movement. Partisans of conservation have a strong sense of the heritage to be integrally preserved, in liturgical customs, language or theological thought. They consider the slightest alteration as treason; they are afraid of it. The partisans of movement, on the other hand, wish to speak to today’s man in a language he understands. They are partisans of certain re-adaptations, a new style where authority is balanced by communion.”⁴

On the 1995 General Assembly on Cyprus, tensions between local churches or theological currents surfaced in the form of conflicts between different youth groups. Groups even protested against each other’s presence within the Federation! Separate parts of national bodies became members independently, showing a fragmentation of youth work bodies which is worrying. Do all member movements of SYNDESMOS still agree with its aims and objectives? Has SYNDESMOS become a parliament of groups with conflicting “left-wing” and “right-wing” currents? Once more we see how much the state of SYNDESMOS is symptomatic for the state of Orthodox unity. Not accidentally, the Board chose “Serve the Lord in unity” as theme for the following triennium.

But, one will ask, where is the youth in all this? Will the history or politics of SYNDESMOS lead them to the life-giving treasure of the Church? This question leads us to the essence of our ministry to Orthodox youth.

In any division, be it between parents, friends, countries or churches, youth are the hardest hit. They are hardest hit because something essential to their being, their inborn sense of wholeness, is being overturned and damaged. When, at an Orthodox congress in France last year, partisans of different currents spoke with intolerance and violence, the audience sat and listened, but some youth left the room and cried. Youth are the first victims to division: what must, for instance, the Orthodox youth of Estonia do now their church has been divided between different jurisdictions?

Young people in the modern world -and the cultural differences between “traditional Eastern” and “modern Western” countries are disappearing rapidly- are more than ever in need of the wholeness offered by the one Church. “In our society where everything is quantified, where everything has been put on sale”, states Clément, “I would say that (...) we bring what is for free, we bring beauty, we bring what is of no use but may enlighten everything. If we do not find the road signs for today’s man, for today’s youth, we shouldn’t be surprised to see them join sects or become Buddhist.”

⁴ Service Orthodoxe de Press 213, December 1996

An Orthodox priest in Germany, Fr. Ambrosius Backhaus, expresses the youth's thirst of oneness and light in the following way: "Modern men and women are realistic. They consider facts and distrust words. They are eager for discussions and for airing philosophical and ethical problems. They have a penchant for work and action. They are full of doubts -both religious and ethical- but they are very sincere and have considerable integrity. They do not deny the dark depth in their soul; but more than they say or know, they have a conviction that there must be a true and clean way of living. They are full of sins, but they are already fully aware that their sins do not make them at all happy. They are prepared for sacrifice, while at the same time they doubt whether there is anything for which it is worth making a sacrifice. They practice things that their grandfathers and grandmothers hardly even dreamed of, and they are full of neurosis. And yet, they have already touched the frontier of true reality. While still being Saul on the Damascus road, they are not so very far from becoming Paul.

(...) It is the experience of many Christians that these people are ready to hear a statement of fact. You may doubt the fact, one tells them, but you must consider it. If, instead of entering into a discussion about the explanation of the fact, one simply bears witness to the fact itself, they are prepared -though doubting- to be led to put the fact to proof, in the same way as they are accustomed to prove facts. They will ask: where can we see and prove this fact? *What shall we do?* Thus they are already on the way, not far from the place in Bethlehem where our Lord was born, already on the road which the Prodigal took, back to his Father".

Themselves travellers on the road towards the Father, youth workers -and, in fact, all members of the community- have to work in two directions. On the one hand, they search the "road signs", ways to invite young people to see and prove the language, the respiration, the life and the evangelic truth of the Church. They help youth to become rooted in a way of life that is natural and true. On the other hand, they are the voice of youth in the Church. They listen to them, lovingly and respectfully, and they have the words to make the youth's joys and hardships known the hierarchy. They explain youth's difficulties in finding a place in life, in society, in the Church... They are a link, strengthening the ties between the communities, their leaders and their youth.

This is the place of youth groups in the Church in normal times. But what to do when, all of a sudden, the "miracle of unity" is in danger? What to do when Orthodox youth from different countries do not find that their *syndesmos*, because fear and hatred are driving them apart? *What shall we do?*

SYNDESMOS cannot be neutral. Is there a neutral position in the face of division and suffering? We must take upon ourselves once more, with courage and humility, our twofold ministry of unity, of *syndesmos*. We must remember our calling, our mission for the life of the world. We must remember that our aim is not only to bring together Orthodox youth, but also to strengthen the *syndesmos* among them, which is stronger than the political and cultural differences between their churches. And God has blessed us with many means to bear witness.

The extraordinary development that God has granted SYNDESMOS makes it possible to call Orthodox youth all over the world to join forces and to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness,

with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond (*syndesmos*) of peace” (Eph. 4,3). It is necessary to recall the member movements their engagement towards the aims of SYNDESMOS, towards unity. For, as underlines Clément, we all, partisans of conservation or partisans of movement, are in need of one another.

In the same time, making a dignified use of the confidence shown by Church leaders, SYNDESMOS must voice the pain of Orthodox youth in the face of division and fragmentation, and it hope for deeper unity. The witness of SYNDESMOS to Church leaders has incited exiting and courageous developments in the past, and former members of SYNDESMOS are now Church workers, bishops and patriarchs. SYNDESMOS works together with the Orthodox hierarchy and with its blessing, and so there is no reason to be afraid because our motives are pure and sincere.

Anyone who has taken part in a meeting of Orthodox youth has been touched by the miracle of Orthodoxy that takes place among them. Youth are gifted particularly with a capacity to overcome themselves, their limitations and to meet Christ who is in the person in front of them. Clément says: “When you have felt the miracle of Orthodoxy (...), when you have tasted the goodness of Christ in the force of the Resurrection which the Orthodox Church witnesses which such force, you can no longer fight, that is ridiculous, one cannot fight under the Cross, one cannot fight in front of the empty tomb”. A huge and inspiring task lies ahead of us. Let us invoke the grace of the Holy Spirit on our humble attempt to serve the Lord in unity.