

## **Report of the SYNDESMOS President**

13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly 'Baptized in Christ, You have put on Christ' Brookline, USA.  
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Mr. Alexis Struve

Brothers and Sisters,

During the three years since our last general meeting SYNDESMOS has continued to live and to grow, at times with some difficulty but also with a measure of success. This work could not have continued without the contribution of the members of the Executive Committee who met at regular intervals and without the dedicated commitment of our two secretaries Mark and Anu.

Moreover, this work could not have been accomplished without the support of the movements and of the member schools of SYNDESMOS who have generously volunteered their hospitality and who have organized the numerous meetings of SYNDESMOS. Their combined efforts are the fruit of teamwork which is the primary factor that allows SYNDESMOS to continue to offer its services and to bear witness. We must all recognise the value of what we can accomplish together as the only international Orthodox organisation in the world.

SYNDESMOS is one of the rare places where members of the Orthodox confession from all the various Churches can come together without suspicion. This in spite of the fact that elsewhere it is difficult to bring them all together. I don't say this in a vain, triumphal spirit but rather so that we can better measure the importance of our engagement and our responsibility.

In my report I am not going to give a detailed summary of our activities over the past three years. Rather, I would like to draw some lessons from our experience in order to look ahead towards the future. We must begin by questioning ourselves on the meaning of the existence of SYNDESMOS, on its role and mission in the Orthodox Church and in the world today. Secondly, we must reflect on the means we have accorded ourselves in order to serve our Churches in a meaningful way.

The reflection we began three years ago on the subject of baptism revealed to us that the practice of this sacrament is all too easily misunderstood. Over time this practice has had to confront two undermining tendencies. On the one hand, Baptism is portrayed more often than not as something acquired, as a self-evident base to which we no longer need to return. The general feeling is that there's a sort of self-oiling machine: we are baptised, we are therefore members of the Church, and that's all there is to it.

On the other hand, baptism is too often considered as a means of assuring each man's personal salvation. The baptismal rite has progressively lost its ecclesiastical, cosmic and missionary character to be transformed instead into an intimate, family ceremony. The ecclesiastical and community character of baptism is, however, of paramount importance. Transforming baptism into an individual action, moreover, is the negation of the Church community / Body of Christ. As the late Fr. Alexander

Schmemmann said, it's the negation of the cosmic aspect of communion with all of God's creation. In fact, for all of us, for every member of the Church, Baptism calls each one of us to a perpetual conversion in an on-going process of rebirth.

This poor understanding of baptism reflects the current state of our Church. A Church that has experienced problems, that has trouble living in unity:

-Unity between theological discourse and sacramental practices

-Unity in the Eucharist

-A Church sometimes too clericalist, that on a practical level denies God's people the place that belongs to them.

We could cite numerous examples of this phenomenon. None of this is new. How many times have we heard this account, to the point that we tend to no longer hear it out of fatigue? This problem is quite real, however, and we have to keep it present in our minds.

SYNDESMOS was created out of reflection on this situation in order to bring together movements of young people who, through their attachment to Christ resurrected, seek to renew their faith in the Lord. By their presence they give evidence of their hope in a unified Church renewed in the spirit in the midst of the contemporary world. Indeed, it is for this reason that, during our last Festival, we placed our hope in the future council of Orthodox Churches. After centuries of isolation, when Orthodoxy was confronted more often than not with questions of survival rather than of ecclesiastical development, we wanted to believe that the desire to hold a council reflected a profound aspiration, for a renewal and an extension of the practice of conciliarity.

As a result, we wrote a letter with 28 questions, an unpretentious letter, perhaps a bit naïve, but which was nevertheless the expression of 150 young people from 11 different Churches. We sent this letter to some 500 Bishops. And the results? We received a total of 4 replies. No comment is necessary. Perhaps the postal service doesn't work so well, or perhaps we were truly naïve. These words may seem bitter. On the contrary, this experience comforts me in the thought that we have to continue our work through our movements, through our schools and with SYNDESMOS.

The choice of the theme of baptism was a challenge for us. Were we able to meet this challenge? Was our reflection dynamic enough and did it carry a message of hope? Having 'put on' the glorified Christ, were we able to make progress on the numerous challenges that our Churches are confronted with? Having 'put on' the glorified Christ, did we make real progress in the responding to the challenges our secular world heaps upon us and which constantly separate our young people from the Church by locking them up in the desperate perspective of materialism?

### **For the Life of the World?**

The world is going through a spiritual crisis. Every day we are confronted by a civilisation based on increasingly on the production and consumption of material goods. A civilisation that has left no place for the sacred and thereby questions the values by which man is a creature created in the image of God.

What is so terrible is that all of this is pursued in the name of a false liberty. Our primary task as Christians is to bear witness to hope in this shattered world. We must truly ask ourselves in what measure does the Church today endow itself with the means to come up with adequate answers to the challenge of modernity. Does the Church feel itself to be truly concerned by the hard reality of a world of indifferent and unbelieving people who know nothing about Christ and His Church. We must awaken ourselves to our urgent need to study in a new light the fundamental problems that condition the life of mankind and the world.

The record of the Orthodox presence in the world is rather less than glorious. We've become specialists in the art of presenting the Divine Truth as an abstract and disembodied theology. Often our testimony stops at the doors of the Church. We have not yet learned and do not yet know how to bring out the Liturgy through the sacrament of the Brothers. Often our parishes give evidence to the contrary; the religious substance evaporates, religious folklore takes the place of the spiritual. We've got to come down from our ivory tower. We must learn how to transcend our historical, sociological and political limits. In the words of Metropolitan Georges Khodr: 'Every theology, if it is truly a vision of God, is a source of action.' We must not be afraid to engage ourselves in a reflection on our presence in the world. But beware, for we must be clear-sighted in this engagement.

For Christians, the Spirit is a source of freedom. To the rest of the world, however, Christianity has often been presented as obedience to authority and to the Law. This has had some unfortunate consequences, for people have reached the point where freedom becomes an opposition to the Church. We often encounter this very temptation in certain international organizations, and sometimes in our own Churches as well. Sometimes out of our fear of shocking others, sometimes in the hope of making ourselves understood, sometimes out of weakness, we totally assimilate the references to this world. Thus the so-called Christian message becomes a message that resembles more and more all the others. We empty this message of its Christian substance, of its Spirit.

For our Churches it is not a question of remaining indifference to temporal matters. But neither must we bow down to the temporal realm. Rather, we must strive to transfigure it. The Church is called upon to answer the existential questions that so many young people, and those who are not so young, ask today: ecology, power, careers, ethics are all examples. SYNDESMOS certainly has a role to play here.

If the Orthodox Church is the continuation of the fathers and of the Church councils, it can and must be capable of responding to new problems with new solutions. It will thus renew its fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition and to the Gospels. For the Life of the World.

### **A Perspective on the Future**

On the base of these facts, and on the base of our experience, I would like now to submit some propositions concerning the future of SYNDESMOS.

#### 1) The Necessity of a Presence

SYNDESMOS is hardly or poorly perceived on the local level, be it on the local level, be it in the local Churches, in the parishes or even in the movements and schools that make up our membership. Of course, when we organize a meeting in a given place, there is a certain local impact. Obviously, for those who participate directly in our activities there is certainly an element of personal enrichment, and I don't think I'm being pretentious in saying this. But we must seriously ask ourselves what is the effectiveness of our action. Let us consider the image that we give one another of ourselves. Are we really satisfying the needs of our young people? All of this requires an even stronger local presence. Our present enquiry points in two different directions:

A) A genuine policy of communication and information on the subject of SYNDESMOS. We must generate a much greater participation of the movements in the preparation of texts. It is also necessary to organise a system of translation on the local level. SYNDESMOS News must not remain a journal of internal communication. Rather it should evolve into an instrument to promote our services. I also wonder about the impact of the books we publish. We truly need to reflect on this subject. It would be a good idea to display signs and brochures systematically in each parish and in each movement's headquarters. All of this material already exists, but we need to consider how best we can use it.

B) Regionalization is another way for us to strengthen our presence. We've been talking about regionalization for several years now. Several experiments have already been conducted. I am thinking in particular of meetings to bring together Poles, Finns, and Russians, and of the creation of a SYNDESMOS for the Middle East region. Regionalization is a way to build up presence on a local level. A way, moreover, to respond to the needs and special problems that exist locally. I would like this Assembly to consider the advantages of such a process of regionalization. We could consider two ways of taking action. First of all, setting a calendar of our activities that would favour regional work. For example, between two General Assemblies. One summer could be set aside for a regional Festival, and the following summer for an international Festival. Secondly, over the long run we need to integrate this regionalization into our byelaws.

2) The engagement and presence of the movements and schools in the work of SYNDESMOS.

There are roughly 50 movements and schools that belong to SYNDESMOS. If we were to evaluate their presence and participation, there are some active members and the rest are merely consumers of the services of SYNDESMOS. I think it would be useful for each one of our movements to conduct an evaluation of its presence and participation. For pedagogical purposes perhaps we, the delegates at this General Assembly for our movements should consider the meaning of our presence here. This should help us in our work. An engagement and a positive presence of our movements in SYNDESMOS is the condition of a real presence in the Church.

3) Engagement in pastoral work.

Today in the face of the reality of the world, a lively and bold pastoral approach is absolutely necessary. Our Churches must respond to the problems of

everyday life, rather than compose theological treatises.

I was struck at the last Festival by the questions that some young people asked, questions concerning the day-to-day life of Christians, questions that appeared simple and naïve but which in substance are essential in order to affirm ourselves as Christians in this world. It is our duty to show young people that Christianity offers them the possibility of becoming whole people. A wholeness and authenticity they're starving for. It is also our duty to show them that they can bear full witness to Christ for the life of the world. This is why I propose the following:

- To organize a reflection of priests and laymen engaged in the pastoral mission.
- To bring together priests and young people on a local level and on a regional basis in order to strengthen their relations.
- These reflections should produce concrete propositions.

All of this should be undertaken on the initiative of SYNDESMOS, but with the close collaboration of our Bishops to whom we should communicate our concerns and explain our initiative. This link with the Bishops is fundamental. Going to them is not always easy. We are not always heard (4 responses to 500 letters). They are nevertheless the pastors of our Churches. We constantly need to repeat to them the meaning of the work and the service of SYNDESMOS. We want to strive for a real and living ecclesiology, and this passes by way of our Bishops. But may our dialogue with them not impinge upon our authenticity and daring.

#### 4) Theological Reflections

Our engagement in the Church, our efforts for a new pastoral approach better adapted to the needs of young people calls us to a theological reflection. We are all invited to this reflection, whether we are theological 'professionals' or not.

SYNDESMOS is a privileged place because it offers the possibility of a meeting between individuals who exercise responsibility in the movements and young people from the theological schools. For us it is a matter of showing that our theology cannot be locked up in a purely academical box. It cannot be a science like all others, a science that closes up on itself by offering an inaccessible language.

A two-fold task awaits us:

- A) To show to our young people the capital importance of a theology that can answer their problems and meet their aspirations.
- B) To maintain a presence in our schools, and to affirm that a serious theology rooted in a living tradition is possible for the purpose of helping us approach the problems of our world in concordance with the Scriptures and with Tradition.

It has not been possible for me to cover all the areas of the work of SYNDESMOS in this report - its missions, its relations with the Oriental Orthodox Churches, ecumenism. I wanted rather to concentrate on the structure and fundamentals of our movement. We must be careful not to transform SYNDESMOS into a para-ecclesial organization, with each of our activities becoming an end in

itself.

An organization like ours must not have goals that are unique to it. Our existence is justified only by our desire to serve the Church. Just as our Baptism calls each one of us to a perpetual conversion, so must a Church organization know how to ask itself tough questions concerning its services, its testimony.

I hope that this Assembly will be full of vigour and imagination so that our work might progress along the path of a fruitful future. Our future will only be fruitful if it is based on a clear vision of our reason for being. To be witnesses of an invigorating Orthodox tradition, of a stable faith in Christ resurrected, of a love in conformity with the spirit of the Gospels, of an opening to the Holy Spirit rather than to human reason. So that this world may recognize the face of Christ in each one of us. So that we may merit the truth that we have engaged ourselves to proclaim as well as He who died and was resurrected 'For the Life of the World'.