

A Letter from the Festival to the Bishops of the Orthodox Church

Syndesmos Festival, Spetses, Greece. 22/08-28/08 1988.

Participants

Reverend Fathers in Christ,

We have met, 150 Orthodox young people from 11 local Orthodox Churches in 23 countries around the world, gathered by SYNDESMOS, The World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, August 22-28, 1988, on the island of Spetses, Greece, in response to the appeal made by Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon at the final Liturgy of the Second Pre-Conciliar Conference of Orthodox Churches in 1982. We wish to join with you, the heads of our Churches, in the words of Metropolitan Meliton, 'in a dialogue from the grassroots to the summit'.

Conciliarity is the reflection in the Church of the life of the Holy Trinity. In as much as we have been baptized, we are called to participate in this conciliarity, for acceptance of our Baptism commits us to serving the Church. It is in this spirit that we ask and submit the following 28 questions, reflecting our experience, concerning some of the most pressing problems facing Orthodox young people today.

As the problems of the so-called 'diaspora' are acutely felt whenever young people gather, and as this issue will be dealt with at the next pre-conciliar meeting, we begin with the following questions:

- 1) How can we witness to truth and love, manifesting our Orthodoxy in orthopraxy, if we are unable to overcome our own canonical divisions, divisions which at times have even led to a break in communion, in a spirit of conciliarity?
- 2) Although the term 'diaspora' is commonly used, surely it is theologically incorrect from a Christian perspective, and increasingly inaccurate as a means of referring to Orthodox communities in North America and South America, Australia, and parts of Western Europe. Should we not refer to the 'diaspora' rather as those 'regions or areas with emerging local Churches'?
- 3) The question of multiple jurisdictions in certain areas of emerging local churches has long seemed to have reached a canonical stalemate. Is our goodwill so lacking, our love for each other so feeble, that this problem has to remain unsolved?
- 4) Why are Orthodox from areas of emerging local Churches not represented, or so minimally represented, when their problems are being discussed at pan-Orthodox levels?
- 5) Is it not possible to give dioceses in the regions of emerging local Churches both greater encouragement and freedom to solve jurisdictional problems among themselves?

As regards local Churches:

- 6) Can you help us manifest a creative local cultural presence as Orthodox Christians, beyond mere folklore, which speaks to the cultures in which we find ourselves, and addresses the problem of our societies?
- 7) Given that witnessing the Gospel and the universal Orthodox faith must take precedence in the Church over preserving national cultures, what prevents a local Church, diocese, or parish, from using whatever language most of its members speak?
- 8) In its concern to preserve an active presence in national life, the Church is often seen as yet another structure of power in society. How can we maintain and increase the Church's ability to perform her work in the world, while still witnessing to the radical difference between power in the world and service of the Church?
- 9) How can the social work of the Church be developed, and in such a way that it does not become an autonomous activity but still flows from and strengthens the spiritual life of the Church and her members?
- 10) Should we not be using the Church's wealth and property in a way that witnesses more effectively to the Orthodox Church's understanding of stewardship?
- 11) Charity is often the only way in which the Church tries to serve the material needs of people. Should we not reflect on other possible ways as well?
- 12) Clearly the Church must never identify herself with any political part, movement, or ideology: but Christians are often uneasy when the local Church is silent on topical issues. In its pastoral concern does the Church not have a word to contribute on such issues?
- 13) Given the abundant historical precedents for the service of deaconesses, what prevents a local Church from re-instituting this form of diakonia to serve local needs?
- 14) Since parishes or dioceses of unmanageable size impede communication and participation in Church life, can priority be given to revision towards smaller local Church structures so that they can more fully manifest conciliarity and communion?
- 15) Can we expect in the near future a full and open theological reflection on the place and role of women in the Church without defensiveness or preconditions?
- 16) Recognizing that the existence of diverse liturgical calendars often presents difficulties towards a common Orthodox liturgical life and witness, unfortunately even to the point of schism in many places, how can this problem be resolved?

As regards Orthodox witness:

- 17) Although mission is a basic Christian imperative, it has often been a low priority in our whole Church. Can we not coordinate our mission work better so that we can be more effective in witnessing the Gospel to the non-Christian world?
- 18) We cannot always hear the voice of emerging missionary Churches. What can be done to promote greater awareness of the problems of emerging missionary

Churches, as well as other minority Orthodox Churches undergoing difficulties, to increase our support for them?

19) Since lack of Christian unity is a grave impediment to our witness to the non-Christian world, and unity requires not only dialogue by prayer, can we not pray for the unity of all Christian more clearly in our services?

20) Can we not achieve an Orthodox consensus on such basic issues as Baptism in the Name of the Holy Trinity outside the canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church as well as on the ecclesial status of other Christian bodies?

21) While many Western Christians look to Orthodoxy for guidance and inspiration, narrow triumphalism and spiritual self-satisfaction often make it hard for them to hear the authentic witness of Orthodoxy. How can we work to overcome this?

22) Given the consensus of the unofficial dialogues between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox that the two traditions affirm the same Christology, what are the remaining obstacles preventing a restoration of communion between us? How can we actively work to overcome them?

As regards our personal participation in the Church:

23) How can we give concrete pastoral guidance to people while helping them to understand, accept, and learn the authentic freedom given in Christ? For instance, can we not encourage regular and continuing reflection in this spirit on general ethical themes such as sexuality, marriage, or our relation to money and profits; as well as on such specific topics as divorce, abortion, etc.?

24) In view of the confusing variety of teaching and traditions on our local Churches concerning fasting, how should we understand and practice authentic fasting?

25) In view of the bewildering and often contradictory teachings and traditions concerning preparation for, and frequency of, receiving Holy Communion in our local Churches, can we not work towards a fundamental consensus on the place and practice of the Eucharist in our Church life?

26) We recognise a general need for greater and more effective religious education for the whole people of God. Can we make it a priority to further develop and implement an authentically Orthodox approach to religious education?

27) What can be done to bring all baptised to a fuller participation in all aspects of Church life, and encourage awareness of the accountability of each member, lay or ordained, to the whole body of Christ?

28) Specifically, should we not seek ways to promote more active participation of the faithful as community, not just as individuals, in the worship through encouraging greater comprehension of the services, e.g. by reading the inaudible prayers aloud, giving priority to the words of the text, and using the vernacular texts when appropriate?

Reverend Fathers in Christ!

Clearly this is not an exhaustive list of our questions; it is only a beginning. These questions reflect the varying concerns and priorities of young Orthodox from many different Churches in various local situations. We are thankful that some are already being addressed in various places.

We hope that the questions we have raised here will meet with your consideration. We eagerly await your response.

In working together to formulate these questions we have experienced something of the joy, love and fellowship of the Church which constantly renews our hope. We are ready and willing to continue making whatever contribution we can to the conciliar process presently underway in our Church.

We should like to conclude by making the following requests:

- 1) That SYNDESMOS observers be invited to forthcoming preconciliar meetings, and
- 2) that meetings be called in local Churches, for clergy and laity, to hear from their hierarchs details of the preconciliar process, and to discuss the issues involved in the light of their own experiences and concerns.

It is our profound hope and prayer that together we may work towards a more effective witness to the world we are called to serve as Orthodox Christians.

The III SYNDESMOS International Orthodox Youth Festival.