

8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Orthodox Theology  
The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church:  
Orthodox Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
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THE REVIVAL OF ORTHODOX MISSION IN NEW BORDERS  
AND THE HOLY AND GREAT COUNCIL OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Two fundamental issues dominated the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete in 2016. The first issue was the proclamation of the mystical unity of Orthodoxy and its further deepening, and the second was the dynamic witness of Orthodoxy in the modern world. Characteristics in the preface of the Message of the Council highlight: “The foundation of our theological discussions was the certainty that the Church does not live for herself. She transmits the witness of the Gospel of grace and truth and offers to the whole world the gifts of God: love, peace, justice, reconciliation, the power of the Cross and of the Resurrection and the expectation of eternal life.”

The presentation that will follow will be limited to: The revival of Orthodox Mission in new borders and the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church.

The first spark for the revival of interest in Foreign Missions sprang up 60 years ago here, in Thessaloniki, in the autumn of 1958, at the Fourth Meeting of the International Organization of Orthodox Youth “Syndesmos”.

In February 1959, the publication of the Missionary Journal “*Porefthentes*” followed in Greek and English (Go Ye). In 1961, at the Fourth Meeting of “Syndesmos”, it was decided to establish the Inter-Orthodox Mission Centre “*Porefthentes*”. From the outset, it was clarified that the “*Porefthentes*” carried the missionary flame to the Orthodox, without intending to become a “missionary society” according to the western model, a missionary “Brotherhood”, as is customary in Greece, nor to carry out mission as an autonomous authority. Its main pursuit is the ministry of the Church, allocating the fruits of its efforts— studies, publications, research, leadership— to the use of competent ecclesiastical authorities for further normal ecclesiastical action.

The concrete attempt to revitalize Foreign Mission had defined basic characteristics: a) The coupling of theological reflection with a certain missionary activity so that the missionary zeal had a solid theological and ecclesiological foundation, and b) Respect of the religious and cultural distinctiveness of the peoples to whom the Orthodox message is addressed.

**1. Theological discussion** was based on a systematic theological study, in particular by deepening biblical and patristic tradition and historical research. At the same time, there was a need for a serious religious study especially of African religiosity, both in European libraries and on the field work research in Uganda and Kenya. The fruit of this long-standing scientific effort has been two religious theses and a series of related books and articles.<sup>1</sup> Religious study was based on the theological certainty expressed in the Acts of the Apostles, “(God) did not leave Himself without witness...” (Acts 14:17) to the Gentile world.

In the early 1970s, interest in interfaith dialogue began in the Ecumenical Movement. We then realized more clearly that the most crucial issue for dialogue and Orthodox testimony is the objective knowledge of Islam. In 1975,

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<sup>1</sup>Among them are: *M bantua and the framework of their worship*, Religious exploration of the sides of the African religion, PhD thesis (1970), “*God of brilliance*”, *God to the Kenyan mountain tribes*. Religious research (1971), *African ritual Forms. Initiation and sputtering east of Mount Rousensari* (1972). *Ruhanga – the Creator*. Contribution to the research of God and Man of African Beliefs (1975) et al.

the book entitled “Islam: A Religious Overview”<sup>2</sup> was published for the students of our Theological Faculty of the University of Athens.

Since the 1960s, we have participated in the inter-Christian theological discussion on Mission. At the Assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (Mexico City, December 1963), the then Deacon Anastasios Yannoulatos, a delegate of the Church of Greece, was elected a member of the “Commission on World Mission and Evangelism”. Since then he has actively participated in various theological and missionary committees by contributing the Orthodox view.<sup>3</sup>

Early in 1980, at the same time, we proposed the term “witness” as a synonym for the term “Mission”. Along with the wording of the Lord’s last commandment in the Gospel of Matthew, the passage was “and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”(Acts 1:8). “Witness”, with the double meaning: the witness, who testifies what he has learned and the witness, who is ready to seal his testimony with a personal sacrifice.

The theological search emphasized the certainty that the debt of mission, the “witness” of Orthodoxy around the world, is connected with the nature of the Church of Christ, that “Indifference to Mission represents the denial of Orthodoxy”. And yet that the horizons of the Orthodox mission do not coincide with the perception of earlier times with action in distant exotic countries, but that it is the transfusion of Christian life to those outside the Church beyond its established borders. When referring to “new borders”, we are not only speaking

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<sup>2</sup>The 16<sup>th</sup> edition in modern Greek, in a photocopied reprint, was published by the newspaper “To Vima” (2016). Regarding other religions, see summary reviews in the book *Traces of the Search for the Transcendent One* (2004), which was reissued under the title *History of Surviving Religions* (2016) from “To Vima” (2016).

<sup>3</sup>From 1969 to 1971 I was invited to the General Secretariat of the WCC in Geneva as Secretary for Missionary Research and Relations with Orthodox Churches. From 1974 to 1983 I was a member of the Theological Committee of Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions. From 1983 to 1990, I was Moderator of the Commission and the Assembly of the World Mission Mission Evangelism of the WCC. Finally from 2006 to 2013 as one of the WCC Presidents.

geographically, but also socially and culturally, for example, in societies that have been infected by atheism.

The theological understanding of mission was based on the teaching of the Holy Trinity. God, being love, extends his love to all mankind, to all creation. The starting point for every apostolic activity remains the promise and commandment of the Risen Christ in its Trinitarian perspective: “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you...and you shall receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:21-22). The love of the Father is expressed by the sending of the Son. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Then the Son sends His disciples with the power of the Holy Spirit to call all the children of God scattered (John 11:52) in His Kingdom. All people created in the image of God are called to return to the freedom of love, to participate in the life of love of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup>

**2. Creating support service structures for the support of foreign mission.** In the ensuing years various societies were also founded in Greece, such as, in Thessaloniki, “Friends of Uganda”(1963), which was then renamed “Hellenic Foreign Missionary Brotherhood”, and in Patras “The First-Called” (*Protokletos*) (1974). Later, other missionary support groups were formed. This was followed by the creation of various Centres for Foreign Mission, in Finland and in America.

The Church of Greece, under Archbishop Hieronymus I (1967-1973), adopted the program of External Mission by assigning it to the promoters of “*Porefthentes*”. During this period the Office of Foreign Mission was created in the Apostolic Diakonia of the Church of Greece, the Week of Foreign Mission

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<sup>4</sup>See: “The Theological Understanding of Mission” in the magazine *All the Nations* (1991). On this theological search, see articles in the *Poreuthentes* and *All the Nations* and in our present day *Mission in the Traces of Christ* (2007) and *To the End of the Earth* (2009).

was instituted with collections throughout Greece –an important institution that helped decisively many missionary cores in Africa and Asia. From 1971 to 1973, the Centre for Missionary Studies, in collaboration with the Holy Synod and the Faculty of Theology of the University of Athens, worked for a short time. The Chair of Missions was founded at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Athens, where Elias Voulgarakis, General Secretary of “*Porefthentes*”, taught. Also the women’s Monastery of St. John Kareia, which, as reflected in the dedicatory plaque: “is distinguished in (the Sovereign Monastery) serving external mission”. In early 1974 it was decided to stop the pause of “*Porefthentes*” magazine to continue its work with the edition of “All the Nations” of the Apostolic Diakonia of the Church of Greece.

Following the change of ecclesiastical leadership of the Church of Greece, the Centre for Missionary Studies and the Chair of the Mission at the School of Theology were dissolved.

**3. Active participation in the front line of missionary work.** The number of people who served in the front line of Orthodox External Mission is large and it would take a long time to simply mention their names. Let me be limited to a few short personal experiences. On 24 May 1964, following my ordination to the Priesthood, I left in the evening for East Africa. At the first Divine Liturgy I celebrated as a Priest in Kampala I also officiated the first baptisms and weddings in Tanzania. Due to a tropical malaria attack, I returned to Europe where I continued my postgraduate studies in Germany. In the context of this effort an on-the-spot study was carried out in Uganda (1967-1968).

In 1981, after the invitation of the Patriarch Nikolaos of Alexandria, I took over the *Locum Tenens* of the Holy Metropolis of Eireneoupolis (Eastern Africa) to heal a schism between the Orthodox Africans and the Patriarchate of

Alexandria, as well as the systematic organization of the Orthodox Mission in Africa. The first attempt was the establishment and operation of the “Archbishop Makarios III” seminary in Nairobi, for the theological and ecclesiastical training of African clergy and catechists.<sup>5</sup>

The continuous co-operation, “intercession”, theological search and missionary action contributed to the formation of some fundamental principles for Orthodox mission to new frontiers. These have been given the opportunity to further elaborate and implement them in the past 26 years in the missionary effort in Albania. As is known, since 1991, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which had ceded “autocephaly” to the Orthodox Church of Albania, and is responsible for the care of the Orthodox Churches in distress, initially as Patriarchal Exarch and from 24 June 1992 as Archbishop, commissioned me a newly-emerging mission: The re-establishing of the completely ruined Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania.

I am not going to refer to what the Grace of God did in Albania.<sup>6</sup> However I would like to briefly highlight three basic theological principles that guided this missionary effort: a) Preaching, catechism, worship in the mother tongue of each region. b) Creating native clergy and lay leaders. c) Ensuring financial autonomy, to continue the life of the Church and develop it in the future. I believe these are the fundamental principles of Orthodox missionary work in the future.

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The progress of the revival of Orthodox Foreign Mission was accomplished in parallel with the commencement and preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which was decided upon at the Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes in 1961. It is noteworthy that the items on the

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<sup>5</sup> See our *In Africa* (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See also our *In Albania – Cross and Resurrection* (2011). *The Reconstruction of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania* (2012) and the 4<sup>th</sup> Enhanced Edition (2017)

agenda, which were determined for further revision by the Preparatory Committees of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches, for approval by the Holy and Great Council, did not include the issue of the Foreign Mission.

Ecclesiastical ministry as Archbishop of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania offered a new possibility. In the Synaxes of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches (one of the most pioneering initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew) during the writing of the relevant Messages, the duty of the Orthodox “witness” in new frontiers was clearly mentioned.

For the first time in the 2008 Message in Constantinople, it is emphasized: “Inspired by the teaching and the work of the Apostle Paul, we underscore first and foremost, the importance of the duty of Mission for the life of the Church, and in particular for the ministry of us all, in accordance with the final commandment of the Lord: “you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The evangelization of God’s people, but also of those who do not believe in Christ, constitutes the supreme duty of the Church. This duty must not be fulfilled in an aggressive manner, or by various forms of proselytism, but with love, humility and respect for the identity of each individual and the cultural particularity of each people. All Orthodox Churches must contribute to this missionary effort, respecting the canonical order.”

In another expression, the duty of mission is emphasized in the Message of 2014: “Inseparably interconnected with unity is mission. The Church does not live for itself but is obliged to witness to and share God's gifts with those near and afar. Participating in the Divine Eucharist and praying for the Oikoumene, we are called to continue this liturgy after the Divine Liturgy, sharing the gifts of truth and love with all humankind, in accordance with the Lord's last commandment and assurance: “Go ye, and make disciples of all

nations... And lo, I shall be with you until the end of the ages” (Matt. 28.19-20).”

Finally, at the Synaxis of the Primates in Chambésy (2016), it was decided, together with the other texts redacted by the Preparatory Committees, to take into account the Messages of the Synaxes of the Primates, which had been signed by all the Primates during the previous decades.

In an official proposal of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the willingness to accept all members of the authorized committees and eventually of all delegates, the duty of Orthodox Mission throughout the world was tied to relevant biblical foundation in three texts: in the Encyclical of the Council, in the last text “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” and in the Message:

a) In the Encyclical of the Council it is stated: “By participating in the holy Eucharist and praying in the Sacred Synaxis for the whole world (*oikoumene*), we are called to continue the “liturgy after the Liturgy” and to offer witness concerning the truth of our faith before God and mankind, sharing God’s gifts with all mankind, in obedience to the explicit commandment of our Lord before His Ascension: “And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8). The words of the Divine Liturgy prior to Communion, “Dismembered and distributed is the Lamb of God, who is dismembered and not divided, ever eaten, yet never consumed,” indicate that Christ as the “Lamb of God” (John 1.29) and the “Bread of Life” (John 6.48) is offered to us as eternal Love, uniting us to God and to one another. It teaches us to distribute God’s gifts and to offer ourselves to everyone in a Christ-like way.”

b) In the Conciliar text “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World”, it was added: “The conveyance of the Gospel’s message according to the last commandant of Christ, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,*

*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you* (Matt 28:19) is the diachronic mission of the Church. This mission must be carried out not aggressively or by different forms of proselytism, but in love, humility and respect towards the identity of each person and the cultural particularity of each people. All the Orthodox Church have an obligation to contribute to this missionary endeavor.”

c) Finally, in the Message of the Council it is summarized: “Participating in the Holy Eucharist and praying for the whole world, we must continue the 'liturgy after the Divine Liturgy' and give the witness of faith to those near and those far off, in accordance with the Lord's clear command before His ascension, "And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (Ac. 1: 8). The re-evangelization of God's people in modern, secularized societies and the evangelization of those who have still not come to know Christ remain an unceasing obligation for the Church.”

The above clear references to debt of Orthodox mission around the world, in official Orthodox texts of the Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches and the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, is the result of spiritual awakening and revitalization of the missionary conscience of the Orthodox in our time.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century places new conditions, but also new possibilities for transferring the Christian message to new environments around the globe. The next generations will be called upon to address emerging problems and make good use of technological developments. It will be necessary to create the inter-Orthodox structures of Orthodox witness throughout the world, and to create competent ecclesiastical leadership, with spiritual distinction and boldness, combining theological study, missionary zeal and personal self-denial.

When I reflect on the long course of the last 60 years, the many problems, the trials presented, and the many blessings of God, “for blessings manifest and hidden that have been bestowed on us”, spontaneously appear in thought of some Psalmist verses: “The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the Lord” (Psalm 36 (37): 23), “By the word of Your lips, I have kept away from the paths of the destroyer” (Psalm 16 (17): 4), “Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (Ps. 125 (126): 6). And the soul is flooded with praise and gratitude to the One God in Trinity for the surprises it has reserved.