

Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women's Consultation

**Hosted by
The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, St Vlash Campus, Durrës, Albania
October 3-7, 2019**

**THEME:
"Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace: The Journey of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental
Orthodox Women Today"**

REPORT

Part I: Introduction

- (1) *"Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women, ..., Mary, called Magdalene, ..., and Joanna, ... and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources"* (Luke 8:1–3).
- (2) Orthodox women, as members of the Body of Christ, follow as the first women who accepted the message of salvation. This attendance on Jesus Christ, which transcends the dimension of time, constitutes the pilgrimage of justice and peace "par excellence." Like them, we today are on the same way; a way neither usual nor common, because this way is a person, is the God Incarnate, the one who is the way, the truth and the life Himself.
- (3) Following Him, living in Him, we Orthodox women continue the fulfilment of Christ's commission, that is the mission of the Church. In this mission, unity between doctrine and practical Christian work is the necessary precondition. The concern for practical application of the Gospel and for theological work are not two different tasks but coexist in the Church, equally connected with what is called by the Church Fathers, "pastoral pathos." This "pastoral pathos," this self-offering, constitutes the kernel of Orthodox women's diaconal service in the Church and into this is compressed the Lord's saying *"whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant"* (Matt. 20:26). Thus, we Orthodox women today, like the first women disciples of our Lord, each one from her own position, become "living letters" of faith and an offering to our surroundings, utilizing the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God and the relief of our fellow human beings.
- (4) We are grateful to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the most Holy Theotokos—whose example of giving herself fully to the work of God emboldens us all—for the special opportunity we have had to reflect upon the Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace as Orthodox women

from the Eastern and Oriental families. The meeting took place upon the invitation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and thanks to the gracious hospitality of H. B. Anastasios of Tirana, Durres and all Albania, at the Skete of Holy Myrrhbearers on St. Vlash Campus of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, October 3–7 2019, convening around the theme “The Journey of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Women Today.”

(5) All eighteen female theologians and specialists gathered were official delegates of their churches, participants of various WCC Commissions or Reference Groups, or WCC staff members. We included in our midst and by virtual participation:

- Rev. Nicole Ashwood—WCC Staff
- Ms. Marina Baba—The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania
- Dr. Theodora Issa—Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East (virtual participant)
- Mrs. Katerina Karkala-Zorba—Ecumenical Patriarchate
- Prof. Dr. Marina Kolovopoulou—Church of Greece
- Prof. Dr. Dimitra Koukoura—Ecumenical Patriarchate
- Ms. Kristina Mantasavili—Ecumenical Patriarchate
- Ms. Ruth Mathen—Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church
- Mrs. Klaudija Milosevski—Serbian Orthodox Church
- Dr. Xanthi Morfi—Ecumenical Patriarchate
- Mrs. Jennifer Haddad Mosher—Orthodox Church in America
- Ms. Maria Mountraki—Orthodox Church of Finland
- Mrs. Margarita Nelyubova—Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)
- Ms. Violeta Plepi—The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania
- Sister Rakela—The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania
- Mrs. Anu Talvivaara—Orthodox Church of Finland
- Ms. Diamando Vlassi—Ecumenical Patriarchate
- Ms. Aikaterini Voulgari—Church of Greece
- Mrs. Maha Milki Wehbe—Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

The remainder of the Orthodox staff and Orthodox members of various WCC Committees invited sent their regrets at not being able to join us. These included:

- Mrs Iveta Apostu (née Starcova)---Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands and Slovakia
- Mrs Anne Glyn-MacKoul---Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East
- Ms Paula Marie Der Matoian---Armenian Apostolic Church (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin)
- Prof Dr Kyriaki Karidoyanni-FitzGerald---Ecumenical Patriarchate
- Prof Carrie Frederick-Frost---International Orthodox Theological Association
- Ms Karine Kocharyan---Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia)
- Dr Eleni Kasselouri---Church of Greece
- Ms Vanna Kitsinian---Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia)
- Ms Araz Kojayan---Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia)
- Ms Harriett Olson---United Methodist Women
- Ms Teny Pirri-Simonian---Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia)
- Ms Jooa Sotejeff-Wilson---Orthodox Church of Finland
- Ms Sonia Tziouvanni---Church of Cyprus

- Prof Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri--- WCC Deputy General Secretary
- Ms Semegnish Asfaw Grosjean---Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church WCC Staff
- Ms Kyriaki Avtzi---Ecumenical Patriarchate WCC Staff
- Dr Ani Ghazaryan Drissi---Armenian Apostolic Church (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin) WCC Staff
- Ms Carla Khijoyan---Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia) WCC Staff

(6) It was wonderful to be hosted so graciously in a distinctly Orthodox setting, able to pray together each morning and evening in a beautiful Orthodox chapel with a joyful mix of our respective languages and traditions. We are grateful for the diligent hospitality of Sister Rakela, Fr. Stephanos Ritsi, and local Orthodox faithful, who prepared our rooms, assisted with transportation, and fed us abundantly. Those of us who came from afar were also thankful for the chance to deepen our faith by learning more about our sister Orthodox Church of Albania, her history, her suffering under the Communist regime, and her ongoing resurrection, her vibrant growth and community life. We were inspired deeply by the brothers and sisters in Christ whom we met in Durres and Tirana, especially His Beatitude Anastasios, who received us as beloved daughters and sisters and shared with us his ecumenical experience, his missionary spirit and his deep faith in our Crucified and Risen Lord who does the sort of miracles evident in Albania. To pray with them all in the Divine Liturgy in the Cathedral in Tirana was a profound spiritual experience that fed our souls; glory to God for all things!

(7) As noted, the purpose of our gathering was to reflect upon the Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace as Orthodox women from the Eastern and Oriental families. To that end, we had eight sessions together, in which sisters presented on the following topics:

“The Participation of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women in the WCC, Past and Present”—Dr. Koukoura shared her decades of experience in the WCC, with special attention given to the conference at Rhodes (1988) and its significance to the Orthodox Church including women in their delegations; Mrs. Taalvivara shared her observations of women coming to study at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, eager to learn and to serve, but with few opportunities for eventual employment in the church; Ms. Ruth Mathen shared the legacy of Sarah Chakko from the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India, and what it teaches us of faith, resilience, and the significant contribution of even a single deeply-committed woman.

“Gender Issues of the WCC—Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Responses”—WCC staff Rev. Nicole Ashwood oriented us to the work of the Gender Advisory Group and the WCC foci of xenophobia and racism for 2019. Ms. Vlassi illustrated those realities within the multilayered challenges of the refugees and trafficking victims she serves, and also detailed the many junctures at which Christians can intervene to support and transform a difficult situation; and Dr. Issa shared extensively on the continuing terrorism, discrimination and general unrest within Syria, the yet unresolved situation of the kidnapped Archbishop Paul Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, and other abducted clergy and lay people, asking for prayers in the face of a shrinking Christian presence in the Middle East.

“Local Orthodox Women Speak”—Ms. Plepi shared the many roles women have played in the rebuilding of the Orthodox Church in Albania, while Ms. Baba and Sr. Rakela shared how women have been playing a vital role in the catechetical work and in broadening the educational mission of the church in Albania since the end of the communist regime in 1991.

“WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace” and “Protecting Our Children from Sexual and Gender Based Violence”—Ms. Mountraki detailed the WCC’s Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace efforts, and its endeavours to “strengthen fellowship,” “witness together,” “encourage spirituality, reflection, formation,” and “build trust and understanding.” Rev. Ashwood described the Pilgrimage and emergence of Women of Faith Pilgrim teams and Pilgrim Prayers, and invited increased Orthodox engagement in the WCC campaigns: *Churches’ Commitment to Children*, *Thursdays in Black*, and utilizing the EIU index’s *Out of the Shadows* report.

“Reflections on Economic crisis and Poverty”—Mrs. Milosevski, sharing the Serbian historical context, talked about how the Serbian economy and political stability had been decimated after the Ottoman period, World War I and the subsequent Yugoslavian civil war. The country now faces the phenomenon of emigration, where young, educated people are leaving the country due to lack of employment and material security. Mrs. Karkala-Zorba addressed the vital role of engaging with civil society, in order to provide pastoral and psychological care for all people. In the face of rising xenophobia, she shared the double burden of employment on women in Greece who either have no jobs or manage two or three jobs simultaneously; and thus articulated the special mission of Orthodox women in addressing poverty and unemployment in their local contexts.

“Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox women facing the challenges of the 21st century as healers and peacemakers in areas of war, conflict, and the migrant crisis”—Ms. Vlassi shared stories of three women refugees she had worked with, who were either Christians or had been helped by Christians. She spoke of the importance of counselling with Christian love, a unique gift that Orthodox women are equipped to provide to those in need. Mrs. Wehbe drew attention to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in Lebanon and surrounding areas, as well as the refugee crisis in host countries that face threats to already-scarce livelihoods. She highlighted the critical need for transformative change in today’s times by collaborating with civil society, and shared the story of her NGO and its grassroots empowerment program for all women, regardless of their religious traditions.

“Sharing experiences from the Ecumenical Journey”—Mrs. Nelyubova shared about her involvement in the ecumenical movement for several decades, including the many people and opportunities that helped guide and shape her own development. She also summarized the diaconal work being done in Russia by women on behalf of victims of domestic abuse and trafficking. She emphasized the importance of theological formation and education of the young faithful in the Church. Ms. Voulgari stressed the power of transformational discipleship, and the transformation of the world through an ecclesial point of view in the face of rising secularization.

“Educating Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Women on participation in the ecumenical movement and ecumenical issues based on the experience in the WCC”—Dr. Kolovopoulou reflected on the task of Orthodox academics in the context of the contemporary ecumenical movement. Dr. Issa gave the example of the extensive work in the Syrian Orthodox Church to provide greater access to education via technology and in educating women, youth, and their families who now live in the diaspora in Europe. Dr. Morfi emphatically spoke about the often-underutilized opportunities and resources of the WCC and the significance of Orthodox engagement within the ecumenical international movement and suggested ways in which it could be maximized to its fullest potential.

(8) In line with the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace theme, we have divided our report around three dimensions. Namely; a) Celebrating the Gifts; b) Visiting the Wounds, and c) Transforming the Injustices.

Part II: Celebrating the gifts—*Via Positiva*

(9) We are thankful for the journey of Orthodox women in the WCC, for “the gift of fellowship and togetherness,” for mutually enriching collaborations and growth, and for the opportunities to build our own relationships and networks.

(10) Hearing their stories and learning from their wisdom, we acknowledge and celebrate our older sisters who have labored long in the WCC and the global ecumenical movement, including those now asleep in the Lord. Their faith in Christ, their courage, determination, and resilience are deeply admirable and we believe they have exemplified “the power of love and not the love of power” in their service.

(11) Over 30 years since it was supported by the WCC, we remain intensely grateful for the Pan-Orthodox Consultation at Rhodes, Greece (1988) and its impact on the re-evaluation of the role of women in the Orthodox Church today. Those of us who were able to attend continue to be fed by the richness of our experiences together. Those of us who did not, have been encouraged by its documents and witnessed the fruit borne in the lives of its attendees; we know the Lord has done great things for us. We all hope the vision of Rhodes will be more widely shared and its conclusions studied and lived into fully.

(12) We acknowledge with gratitude how the decisions of the WCC governing bodies, enshrined in WCC bylaws, have helped support the development and integration of many Orthodox women into greater levels of education, engagement, and leadership. We have seen this fruit in our work in the WCC itself, but also in our work beyond the WCC, as we have taken the skills learned and inspirations gleaned from the ecumenical movement into our communities and the wider world.

(13) We are thankful for the changes in social conditions throughout the world that have encouraged more women to be involved in the pastoral, social, and educational work of the churches; strengthening and building our capacity to transform *Orthodoxia* into *Orthopraxia*.

(14) We rejoice in the many examples shared amongst ourselves these three days of women's gifts being released into the life of the church and the world. We have heard stories of the disciplined and evangelical use of women as catechists, social workers, and educationists in Albania, the expanding diaconal work of sisterhoods in Russia, the heroic work of the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee among and by women in Syria, and by women-led NGOs in Lebanon. But we also learned of acts of kindness and care enacted by Orthodox parishes, families, and individuals towards migrants, refugees, trafficked persons in Greece and elsewhere.

Part III: Visiting the Wounds—*Via Negativa*

(15) We grieve the ongoing socio-political conflict and persecution of Christian and other religious minorities in the Middle East and the forced migration and trafficking nightmares that have resulted. The suffering of the vulnerable continues with little end in sight and the resulting trauma will be with us and our children for generations to come.

(16) We have walked in the shoes of the world's refugees, and seen the many points along their journey at which their vulnerability could be recognized and met with resources, love, and support by parishes, Christian organizations, Christian families, or even Christian individuals—but often is not.

(17) We lament the trying conditions that have arisen in various countries due to war, conflict, and mass migration; we feel the burdens on refugee host countries, their fragile economies that are at risk, and the resulting temptation to xenophobia and racism.

(18) We acknowledge the crippling economic crises being endured by so many as the world's economic systems continue to evolve and develop in response to new challenges and opportunities.

(19) We recognize the anxieties of those Orthodox sisters who have worked hard to secure a theological education, but who now struggle to find appropriate and sustainable employment; they are often tempted to abandon their vocations because of the need to support themselves and their families.

(20) We mourn every instance of domestic violence and sexual abuse, both inside and outside Orthodox communities.

(21) We are acutely aware of the ways modern societies encourage self-preservation and self-enrichment at the expense of others; and how often we as Orthodox persons and communities do not resist these trends, leading to the weakening of our families, our parishes, our societies, and of our own souls.

Part IV: Transforming the Injustices—*Via Transformativa*

(22) In this section we suggest future actions to address concerns voiced during our meeting by our sisters. Thus,

(23) Encouraged by the ongoing engagement of Orthodox leaders and theologians in the ecumenical movement, we ask them to re-articulate the value of Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement for upcoming generations, to allow us to draw our wider communities into this work more deeply and sustainably.

(24) We encourage careful attention from all the faithful to how socio-cultural realities impose themselves upon our religious lives; a true *Orthopraxia* frees itself from the false expectations of the world for more diligent and energized following of the Lord's commandments and more fruitful labor in His vineyard.

(25) While access to theological education for women has expanded greatly, where it is still lacking, we ask for persistence, energy, and creativity in remedying that lack; however, we note there is a real and serious need for intentional and ongoing development of the necessary church infrastructure that will allow women to put their theological education to productive use, allowing them to serve Christ and the world with insight and excellence through sustainable employment.

(26) We seek further actions toward the development and sharing of Orthodox curriculum and resources that help cultivate women's gifts for *diakonia*, their witness and teaching, advice, and guidance as spiritual mothers and offering comfort to those in need. Let us learn more intentionally from the efforts of one another and, where possible, seek to make better use of the resources available to us through the WCC—especially regarding the dissemination of information, opportunities for online learning, and active participation in issues of global and/or local interest.

(27) We invite better promotion and vision for youth involvement in pan-Orthodox movements such as The World Federation of Orthodox Youth—*SYNDESMOS* in order to equip young Orthodox persons with the experience of working within an international community, sharing concerns, and learning from one another. This will generate a greater pool of young people and young theologians ready for future engagement in ecumenical affairs.

(28) We encourage the organization of more frequent meetings of Orthodox women to share our knowledge and experience with one another through networking, voice our global and local concerns, and to encourage mutual support in addressing country-/church-specific issues. In this regard we suggest the utilization of the agency of the WCC pre-assemblies and assemblies.

(29) Given the experience of several Orthodox communities with persecution, displacement, and diaspora, let us seek to become unequivocal in our love and welcome of the stranger, and be profoundly oriented to the trauma and vulnerabilities of others. May we all learn to hear the challenge to Queen Esther when faced with great need and risk: "Who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14) Acknowledging that Christian communities, families, and individuals can sometimes penetrate where the state cannot, let us equip ourselves with the resources and vision to meet these great challenges, to protect and heal.

(30) Let us give attention freely and generously to the needs of others, share our material resources, avoid excessive consumption, and shun exploitation for our own enrichment; in these

ways, we will more closely align ourselves with the ascetic ethos of Orthodoxy, the teachings of Christ.

(31) In the face of domestic violence, sexual abuse, xenophobia, and racism, we must acknowledge and confront the sin in our own midst and take our lead from women and men in our Orthodox communities doing innovative work in these areas or the best practices of other partners of good will. Those who seek justification in the Church and the scriptures for violent and destructive behavior must be corrected and guided towards repentance and healing.

(32) We encourage Orthodox communities to work retroactively (solutions) and proactively (preventions) for the eradication of domestic violence and sexual abuse in our communities. Let us develop and attend to youth protection efforts and explore the possibility of customizing materials and various training and counseling programs for our own communities in conjunction with WCC initiatives such as *Out of the Shadows and Into the Light*, *Thursdays in Black*, *Churches' Commitment to Children*, and other campaigns.

(33) We would like to investigate opportunities to host an Orthodox Women's Pilgrim Team Visit within a context of conflict and peacebuilding as an enriching contribution to the larger Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace team visits.

(34) We request more intentional and sustained mentoring for our young women by both our Orthodox sisters in the ecumenical world and WCC officials; if they are guided with the same insight, kindness, and generosity of spirit many of us received from our mentors, we will reap the fruit of their labors for decades to come.

(35) We seek a deepening commitment to care for and protect our environment as profoundly consonant with our Orthodox ascetic ethos.

(36) We ask for prayers for unity amongst churches and peace between all neighbors.

(37) Finally, we would like to underline that we respectfully offer the above as a means to pave the way for a just community of men and women with an expanded and deepened commitment to Orthodox Christian discipleship, who are encouraged to lead fuller lives and contribute their unique gifts and talents to the glory of God and the building up of the Body of Christ.