

ORTHODOX REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY TO KARLSRUHE



CHRIST'S LOVE MOVES THE WORLD TO RECONCILIATION AND UNITY

Edited by: Ioan Sauca
Vasile-Octavian Mihoc



World Council
of Churches

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to Reconciliation and Unity

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Ioan Sauca and Vasile-Octavian Mihoc (eds)

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Contents

Preface.....	6
Report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022 “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”	9
<i>Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima</i> Christ’s Love, Peace, Justice, and Freedom Seen against the Challenges of the Modern World.....	19
<i>Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca</i> God Is Love: The Experience of the Just, Compassionate, and Merciful God	31
<i>Archbishop Vicken Aykazian</i> “The Love of Christ Urges Us On”: Reflections on Reconciliation	48
<i>Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest and Hungary</i> Reconciliation and Unity Are the Purpose of the Divine Love Incarnate in Jesus Christ.....	52
<i>Metropolitan Prof. Dr Nifon of Târgoviște</i> Understanding Love as Trinitarian Truth: Orthodox Considerations	60
<i>Metropolitan Dr Geevarghese Coorilos Nalunnakkal</i> Affirming the Wholeness of Life.....	69
<i>Prof. Dr Julija Naett Vidovic</i> Affirming Human Dignity and Our Common Humanity	77
<i>Prof. Dr Marina Kolovopoulou</i> A View from Orthodox Ecclesiology on the theme of the WCC 11th Assembly.....	96
Additional Resource	106
Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace: The Journey of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women Today	107
Contributors	118

Preface

Since 1983, it has become a tradition that before a World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly, an Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation takes place, where delegates from both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox delegates meet to reflect on the theme and sub-themes of the assembly. At the invitation of the WCC and with the generosity and blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Dr Vasilios of Constantia and Ammochostos, the consultation took place this time in Paralimni, Cyprus, between 09-16 May 2022. On May 12, the Feast of St. Epiphanius, participants were also warmly greeted by the Primate of the Church of Cyprus, Archbishop Chrysostomos II, at his residence in Nicosia, Cyprus, who underlined the importance of Orthodox preparing together for the 11th Assembly.

There were fifty participants, including delegates from twenty Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches: hierarchs, priests, deacons, professors, lay men and women, and youth, as well as ecumenical observers and consultants. All these delegates will be present at the assembly in Karlsruhe, among many other Orthodox delegates. Keynote speeches by men and women delegates explored the theme of the 11th WCC Assembly, “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity,” and the themes of the thematic plenaries during the assembly from various Orthodox standpoints. The purpose of the meeting was also to prepare the delegates for their fullest participation in the assembly. Moreover, participants had the opportunity to express their expectations of the assembly and life in the WCC and beyond.

Delegates underlined that—as Orthodox—they are committed to the goal of unity, which has been the vision of the WCC from its initiation. Participants expressed the wish to join with all Christians, seeking to promote unity, reconciliation, justice, and peace on the basis of Christ’s message and God’s love for humanity and all creation, with the awareness that these aspirations will be reached only by putting our trust as living faith in God’s love, which is also the basis of loving one another.

The meeting took place in the apostolic land of apostles Paul, Barnabas, and Mark, giving the participants the opportunity to pray together in various Churches and immerse themselves in the two-millennia-old Christian heritage of the island of Cyprus.

In the end of the pre-assembly, the delegates approved a report of the consultation and offer it as an Orthodox contribution to the 11th Assembly for

the wider ecumenical fellowship. The report reflects the thoughtful deliberations which occurred during the consultation. It brings a theological contribution to the assembly theme and highlights discussions on anthropology, the ecological crisis, COVID-19, and other topics in the context of the assembly and the life of the WCC.

The Inter-Orthodox Consultation took place during the war in Ukraine. Therefore, it was crucial that, in addition to the consultation's agenda, participants had the possibility to hear from the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church about the war in Ukraine and about the concrete responses of their Church to this tragic situation. Participants had the chance to discuss the attitude of the local church to this situation and shared their deep concerns for the developments in the region, prayed for peace, and expressed their hope that the theme, "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity," chosen for the next assembly period, will be another input that may lead this bled region as well as other wounded places from wars in the world, to peace and to overcome problems of division. In the report, participants were "unanimous in condemning the wars," calling "upon all the parties involved in the conflicts to do everything within their power for the urgent establishment of peace and for ensuring safety in Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the whole world."

The Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation in Cyprus has proven to be an important exercise of coming together, praying together, and deliberating in times of turbulence and war affecting the Orthodox family and the entire world. Above all, a great spirit of fraternal love and communion prevailed among participants, who are looking forward to a common Orthodox witness during the assembly in Karlsruhe and beyond.

We would like to express our deepest thanks to our host, Metropolitan Dr Vasilios of Constantia and Ammochostos and his staff for the generous hospitality. We remembered with gratitude the late Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima of blessed memory, who greatly contributed to the planning and the program of the meeting with his great experience and wisdom in organizing previous Inter-Orthodox Consultations.

In addition, to the official Report of the Consultation, the present resource book offers reflections on the theme of the assembly by His Eminence Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima and Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, WCC Acting General Secretary, as well as contributions provided during the consultation.

We express our gratitude to all presenters, moderators, and participants, who showed great commitment to all sessions, engagement in discussions, and shaped a joyful and blessed fellowship. It is hoped that these contributions will be of use in understanding the Orthodox perspective on the complex theme of Christ's love for our times.

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca
WCC Acting General Secretary

Prof. Dr Vasile-Octavian Mihoc
WCC Program Executive for
Ecumenical Relations and Faith
and Order

Report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022 “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”

Organized by the World Council of Churches & hosted by the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, Paralimni, Cyprus, May 10-15, 2022

Christ is Risen! *Krishti u Ngjall!* *Ἐρησυνου θωρηται*
ክርስቶስ ተንሥኦ ኦሎታን! *Христос воскрес!* *Hristos a înviat!*
Christ est ressuscité! *Χριστός Ανέστη!* *ክርስቶስ ከብ ሙታን ተንሢኦ!*
“Christos Anesti” - Chrystus Zmartwychwsta!
(ക്രിസ്തു ഉയർത്തപ്പെന്നേറ്റു) *Христос воскрес!* *المسيح قام!*
Kristus nousi kuolleista! *ክርስቶስ ከሙታን ተለይቶ ተነሣ!*
Vstal z mrtvých Kristus!

Preamble

1. We, Orthodox delegates to the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to be held in Karlsruhe, Germany, give thanks to the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—whose self-giving love is the source of the Church’s unity and the power that strengthens it to address all divisions.

2. The WCC, in the articles of its Constitution, is “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The primary purpose of this fellowship to which Orthodox churches have belonged since its founding in 1948, is “to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance toward that unity in order that the world may believe.” The Acting General Secretary of the WCC, Rev. Prof. Dr. Ioan Sauca, has called the Council a “blessed instrument” for promoting dialogue, witness, and service in the name of Christ.

3. Fifty participants, including delegates from twenty Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches along with observers and consultants, have gathered in Cyprus from May 10-15, 2022 for an Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation. We rejoice in the active presence of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church in such a Pre-Assembly meeting for the first time. This is

the sixth time, starting in 1983, that representatives of Orthodox churches have met in advance of a WCC assembly in order to reflect on the assembly theme, to identify how Orthodox Christians can contribute to the assembly's agenda, and to prepare for informed discussions on issues of the day. This meeting, organized by the WCC, is additionally intended to enhance Orthodox participation in the life of the Council. We express our gratitude to H.E. Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima for pursuing the vision of the late Rev. Ion Bria of Pre-Assembly meetings which include both Orthodox church families.

4. The theme of the WCC's 11th Assembly (August 31–September 8, 2022) is “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity,” a theme drawn from St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (5:14). Consideration of the theme is, at heart, a matter of spiritual discernment, and, thus, we have set our days of study and discussion in a context of prayer. A summary of our discussions is set forth in the body of this report, but we note at the outset that this theme is surely timely. We gather at a moment when around the world, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence, conflicts, wars, occupation, racism, poverty, and ecological devastation imperil human existence, contrary to Christ’s love that moves the world to reconciliation and unity!

5. The World Council of Churches is a significant forum for dialogue among Christian communities and churches that, while sharing a common confession of the Triune God, may have theological differences and genuine disagreements about issues of the day. In this context, we cannot imagine the expulsion of any member. We are thankful that the WCC has provided a setting for this consultation of Orthodox churches, Oriental and Eastern, and look forward to the Council’s 11th Assembly where we will join with the wider ecumenical fellowship in prayer, study of scripture, and dialogue. With them, we are called to witness that Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity! Being together as Orthodox families and with others in the fellowship of the WCC is itself a sign of God’s life-giving grace.

6. We express our appreciation for the extraordinary hospitality of H.E. Metropolitan Vasilios of Constantia and Ammochostos, of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, as well as the local municipal authorities of Paralimni, Sotira, Agia Napa, and Protaras. We were graciously welcomed by Cypriot presidential commissioner, Photis Photiou, who commended the Orthodox churches for coming together and the WCC for providing an “open platform”

for dialogue. We were warmly greeted by H.B. Archbishop Chrysostomos II in Nicosia. During this meeting, which took place on May 12, the Feast of St. Epiphanius, His Beatitude underlined the importance of Orthodox preparing together for the 11th Assembly. The same day also marked the 15th anniversary of the enthronement of H.E. Vasilios and the restoration of the Diocese of Constantia and Ammochostos.

7. The island of Cyprus is an apostolic land of the apostles Paul, Barnabas, and Mark, and was the first European country to receive the Gospel. It is also today a vivid indication of the need for reconciliation and unity. In addition to British colonial presence, one-third of the island is occupied by the Turkish army, including two-thirds of the diocese in which we have met. Nearly two hundred thousand Christians have been forced to flee their homes, and churches, Christian monuments, and other Christian cultural heritage have been, and continue to be, destroyed in the occupied territory. As H.E. Metropolitan Vasilios has said, the intention of Orthodox Christians is not to further inflame relationships with Muslims or the people of Turkey, but to call on all churches to pray and work for the reunification of Cyprus, for an end to destruction and injustice on this island, and for the restoration of its churches.

8. One hopeful sign for us has been the combined presence of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox delegates at this pre-assembly consultation. During our sessions, we have been encouraged and informed by speakers from both traditions, Eastern and Oriental, and we look forward to further growth, led by the Holy Spirit, in this relationship.

9. Those gathered for this meeting are only part of the Orthodox delegates that will take part in the upcoming assembly. In Karlsruhe, there will be nearly two hundred delegates from Orthodox churches that are members of the WCC, one-quarter of all the delegates to the 11th Assembly. There should be no doubt that the Orthodox voice is strong and valued in the life of the Council, demonstrating Christ's love in our relations with one another and with our sisters and brothers in other churches. The papers and discussions at this consultation have reminded us that Orthodox participation in the movement to restore unity with other followers of Christ in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is not foreign to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church. It is with that conviction that we commend this report to our Orthodox churches and the other member churches of the WCC fellowship.

Theological Contribution to the Assembly Theme

10. This is the first time that ‘love’ has been part of an Assembly theme. While that has commended the theme to many Christians, others have raised questions: Does the focus on Christ’s ‘love’ ignore the fullness of the Trinity? Does it undercut the importance of interfaith relations? Should the theme have explicitly included ‘justice’ and/or ‘creation’? What is the meaning of ‘unity’? The presentations at our Consultation have shown that an Orthodox understanding of the theme can effectively address such questions, and thus, contribute to the whole Assembly.

11. God is love (1 John 4:16). The whole creation has come into being due to the superabundance of divine goodness and is being saved by the same superabundant divine love. The ontological abyss between God’s divine nature and our human nature is overcome by the Word of God taking on flesh. It is Jesus Christ, through His giving of the self, who brings to us the all-abundant love of the Creator. The passion of Christ was not the price to be paid for human sins, nor the ransom to be given to Satan, but was the ultimate expression of God’s love for all people.

12. The Holy Trinity, the *koinonia* of love, calls humans to be participants in the love that does not discriminate but unites, that embraces not only the beautiful but also the disfigured, not only the perfect but also the imperfect, not only the world of angels blessed by heavenly bliss but also the world of pain and the realm of death. This love is universal. God entreats us to abide in this love by keeping his commandments (John 15:10). These commandments are “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

13. The love referred to in these commandments does not signify a demand of a superior to his inferior but is a corroboration of the divine will, according to the commandment given to Adam in paradise. The commandments constitute a *modus vivendi*, which connotes the living of the faithful according to the truth and reflects divine goodness. They are ‘light . . . and life’ (Symeon the New Theologian), leading human beings to the light and the real life that is Christ Himself.

14. The transformation in Christ leads to the second great commandment: loving one’s neighbor, whether they are agreeable or disagreeable to us, whether they are friends or enemies (Matthew 5:44). The love of

this kind has nothing in common with all the causes of love known in our human experience. Its nature is not sentimental, due to an enthusiasm or a type of interest; it is not a creature of imagination, it is not a simple desire of the other, but, as the perfection of love, goes beyond all these, having a catholic character. It is addressed to all human beings no matter who or where they are.

15. Love, in Orthodox Christian perspective, is not merely tolerance, but is rooted in the very nature of God and is manifest in compassion, in taking on and identifying with the sufferings of the world through ‘transforming discipleship.’¹ Love-as-sacrifice supersedes love-as-tolerance. Through the sacrificial love of God in Jesus Christ, we are taught (1 Thessalonians 4:9), and called to emulate, a deeper experience of self-emptying love that knows no bounds. This emptying of the self in love for the other is a clear virtue and Christian preoccupation. The impetus of this love is reconciliation.

16. Genuine Christian reconciliation requires a *metanoia*, a real transformation of unjust relationships by acknowledging and recognizing our faults and mistakes, and changing our minds and ways of life. Reconciliation is both the foundation of life as well as a ministry we are called to serve. Having then received Christ’s reconciling love, we are sent as ambassadors of reconciliation. The Church is called to be a peacemaker (Matthew 5:9). The unity of the church as witness to reconciliation, is always to be identical with and connected to its service in and for the transformation of the world. This is preceded by acknowledging one’s mistakes for lasting reconciliation. This transformation is not restricted to an exterior change of the human, but according to Orthodox Christian perspective, to the inner radical change that is offered through *metanoia*.

17. The achievement of the perfection of love presupposes the knowledge of God in as much as He reveals Himself to us. The internalization of this revealed knowledge is faith. Of course, faith is not merely an intellectual acceptance of the existence of God or even of the basic articles of faith but the absolute trust and self-giving of the faithful to God, as shown by Abraham and other saints, and most perfectly by the Theotokos, that permits the faithful to be known by God (1 Corinthians 8:1-3). It is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). In this perspective, faith is a foundational virtue and the spiritual prerogative, as without it there cannot be any spiritual building.

¹ Theme of the WCC World Mission Conference in Arusha (2018).

18. The building up of faith denotes the confession of faith in one spirit, because one is the Lord. After His resurrection from the dead and before his ascension to heaven, Jesus Christ instructed His disciples: “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 and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19) Jesus Christ, being the unifying principle for Christian faith, is the cornerstone on whom the spiritual construction is fit together, to whom we are assembled, becoming the temple of God in spirit. Thus, “we come to Him, the living stone... and like living stones we learn ourselves to be built into a spiritual house.” (1 Peter 2:4)

19. In this organic unity, founded on the one common faith and experience activated by love, Christ is the cornerstone. He is the Head of his Body, the Church, and the One who blesses, through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, those who believe in Him. In this way, He makes all partakers of the one bread members of the same body with Himself and with each other. According to St. Epiphanius of Salamis², to us, “this is the faith and this is the pride, and this is our mother; the Church that saves through faith, that is strengthened through hope and that is perfected through Christ’s love, in the one confession, in the sacraments . . . this is the faith, this is the reality of our life, this is the truth, and again, this is the life and the hope and the assurance of immortality.”

20. The ontological unity of humankind broken by sin is restored through the incarnation, passion, and sacrifice of Jesus, His suffering, death, and resurrection, for those who are born from Him of water and spirit (John 3:5). The arms of the Savior stretched out on the Cross embrace all ends of the world, uniting all people who rely on Him into “one man” whom the Savior places “in the bosom of one deity,” that is, reuniting them with God and deifying them (St. Gregory the Theologian). Faith, hope, and love are interconnected. Each one of them depends on the other. Loving God results in loving the other. Love is often considered as the climax of spiritual progress which cannot exist unless it is founded in faith. (Galatians 5:6)

21. The deepest mystery of human dignity is not reached only by human intellect but is mainly grasped through God’s revelation, achieving its fulfilment in Christ’s incarnation. In it is clarified that every human person has a great, unique and equal worth and that the origin of this should be

² Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion, De fide, 18-19.

sought exclusively in the fact that humans have been created “according to the image and likeness of God,” and this creation is the root of the inherent worth or dignity of each and every human person. As “an image of God,” humans must act, live and create in a godlike manner; to become God’s partner in creation. This type of conduct cannot be enjoyed apart from relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, meaning, apart from God. Therefore, human freedom, a major characteristic of this god-like image, reflects not only an autonomous chooser but also a responsible person with a sense of moral duty. This sense of moral duty, according to the Orthodox vision, should always be seen and fulfilled in the light of its eschatological dynamic.

22. The ascetic ethos of the Orthodox Church entails a manner of modesty in life and self-restraint towards all the offered goods of the creation and the respect to all resources, being to our disposal for the benefit of our life. It reminds us that we are responsible for the creation as its guardians but not its creators.

The Cry of the World

23. As Christians, we are greatly affected by the tragedies that have been unfolding before our eyes. Cries for help of millions of our brothers and sisters in various parts of the world must not remain the voice heard “wailing and in loud lamentation” like Rachel “weeping for her children, refusing to be consoled as they are no more” (Matthew 2:18) As Orthodox churches—which identify both their history and their present with the mystery of the Cross, the suffering and resurrection of the Lord—we are deeply concerned with the conflicts, human rights violations, the worsening refugee crisis, the systematic destruction of Christian cultural heritage, terrorist actions, and persecutions and uprooting of Christians taking place in different parts of the world. We are particularly concerned about, and lift up in prayer, the situation in Ukraine, Armenia, Cyprus, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and the Middle East and Africa, and other places in the world. We also sorrowfully remember 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. “Never again”: “we do not forget” the consequences of degradation and dehumanization which has resulted in untold pain, suffering, and sorrow for generations.

24. During our deliberations, there was an expression of grave concern over the armed conflict in Ukraine that has already claimed many people's lives. The participants in the meeting have been unanimous in condemning the wars and call upon all the parties involved in the conflicts to do everything within their power for the urgent establishment of peace and for ensuring safety in Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the whole world. We also condemn systematic campaigns of disinformation that promote divisions and hatred. In this time of great hardships, we are called to lift up fervent prayers to Christ the Savior so that hatred may not take hold of human souls and hearts, but, instead, love and fraternal communion may return to the brotherly peoples in anguish.

25. We should not allow our hearts and minds to be governed by all passions and old imperfections and expressions of our fallen human nature, which drives us to sin and distance from God and our neighbor. We believe that conflicts must be solved only through peaceful means and dialogue, and not through military action. We call and pray for the immediate cessation of violence in these areas, as in all places where conflict is occurring, and for the universal observance of self-determination and good governance. Christ's love moves us to work and pray for reconciliation and unity, to express God's will for peace.

26. At this meeting, we also discussed such documents as: 'Conversations on the Pilgrim Way – Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality' (received by the Central Committee in February 2022), informing our participation in the WCC. We recall what has been stated in the 2002 Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC in order to strengthen the ecumenical memory on special social and ethical issues: "The Council cannot speak for, nor require the churches to adopt particular positions. It can, however, continue to provide opportunities for all churches to consult one another, and, wherever possible, for them to speak together. By the same token, member churches should understand that not all matters discussed within their fora can be imposed on the WCC agenda. Skill and sensitivity are needed on all sides to perceive which matters should remain within the counsels of particular churches and which can be profitably discussed together."

27. We are called to bear witness to the Tradition of the Church of the first centuries, which is faithfully preserved and lived in the Orthodox churches. The state of ethics and morality in the present-day society urges us to raise

our voice in defense of the traditional values of family and marriage and in defense of human life, from the moment of conception until natural death. We must not be apathetic towards moral relativism and degradation. It is only the clear example of faithfulness to the commandments of God and a firm word that can produce results in order to “by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

28. The COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to rage on in many parts of the world at the time of this meeting, has wrought misery and death. The pandemic has reminded us of our inherent fragility. It has exposed great inequalities within and between nations: the unequal distribution of COVID-related health care and aid has prolonged the pandemic in the Global South, leading to health and economic crises that have pushed millions of people into further vulnerability and poverty. The pandemic must be understood as a consequence of humankind’s exploitative relationship with the rest of creation, an entitlement that is arrogant and neglects the ethos of *metanoia*.

29. Christ’s love reaches not only to the human realm but to all creation, calling Christ’s followers to responsible care for the creation. This is why the devastating impacts of climate change and potentially irreversible destruction of life on land and under water is an urgent priority for the Orthodox people. Paul’s words “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22) – take on new meaning for us in this era. Our Christian vocation means we should seek to rectify our wrongs against creation and aid in its full restoration.

30. We also received with appreciation the Report³ of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women’s Consultation which was held from October 3-7, 2019 by the invitation of the WCC and with the gracious hospitality of H.B. Anastasios of Tirana, Durres, and all Albania. 18 women, of which 6 are now present here, convened to reflect on the theme ‘Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: The Journey of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women Today’, and endeavored together to strengthen fellowship, witness together, and encourage spirituality. The meeting served as a platform to celebrate and learn from the innovative

³ The full Report of the meeting of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women’s Consultation held in Albania in 2019 on the theme ‘Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: The Journey of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Women Today’ can be found in this publication.

work and diaconal ministries of women in their unequivocal love for the stranger, the compassion and care of the refugee, the counseling and healing of the traumatized—all for the glory of God.

Epilogue

31. In our meeting we, delegates of both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, gave thanks to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for bringing us together in a spirit of love, reconciliation, and unity. We prayed to have our Lord Jesus Christ, “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6) always in our midst, trusting in His promise: “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you” (John 14:18). With this promise in our hearts, we renew our commitment and common obedience to our Triune God, that we follow His commandment to Love Him, to love one another, and to protect His creation, which is our home.

Christ's Love, Peace, Justice, and Freedom Seen against the Challenges of the Modern World*

Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima †

Where Do We Stand and What Do We Experience in the Contemporary World?

We live in a time in which humanity fights and struggles due to the lack of love for justice, peace, and freedom in a climate of confusion—“in the calm before the storm,” as the poets would say. In the 1960s and 1970s, the world rebelled for freedom; in the 1980s, it was concerned with ecological issues; and nowadays, the world's greatest desire is for justice and peace.

Whoever feels the pulse of the world knows well that justice and peace are threatened by a third world war that would bring destruction and the end of the world. It is thus becoming more and more obvious that our world faces dramatic problems that we believe can be solved using ecclesial tradition and experience as an ethical foundation. But our dilemma is how we, the faithful, can successfully face the most important demand for love, justice, and peace and continue in our quest for the establishment of freedom.

At present, we are still experiencing the storms and thunderstorms of war and its horrors. We have become birds in the storm. We are living in agony, fear, and the uncertainty of tomorrow. We are experiencing total insecurity. We are afraid that peace and justice will abandon us and that we will wait anxiously for their return.

Recalling “Love”

Much has been said about love, a concept that has been abused like no other in this futile world.¹ Love is a cornerstone of the Orthodox faith. Its importance is explained to us by St John the Theologian: “God is love” (1 John 4:7). Any rational approach to love is already condemned to failure.

Through the centuries, the fathers of our church have extensively explained to us the notion of love as they first experienced it through their relationship with God.

* This chapter was first published in *The Ecumenical Review* 72;2 (2020), 309-20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12504>.

¹ See Aristidis Daskalakis, “Love and ‘Love,’” *Aktines*, 3 January 2019.

According to Nicholas Cabasilas, “the power to love is planted in the human soul from the beginning.”² St Maximus the Confessor, in his “Chapters on Love,” states that “Love is a good disposition of the soul by which one prefers no being to the knowledge of God. It is impossible to reach the habit of this love if one has any attachment to earthly things.”³

Thus, the knowledge of love is the fruit of approaching God, the knowledge of God. True love toward our neighbour only comes when we love God and if we follow the first commandment of the Lord: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).⁴

Loving the holy God means unconditional obedience to his holy commandments, without the filter of reasoning. Today we are missing the words of prophets, the cry of anguish by John the Baptist, St Cosmas of Aetolia, and so many other modern saints and others.

This is not a time to have faith in God and to love the Lord. The “love” toward our neighbour comes first. But this neighbour is our own self. In the face of others, we justify our own passions. Therefore, this fake “love” that gives remission of sins to unrepentant neighbours and to us leads us to the cliff and to our deaths, according to the words “if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15:14). If we follow the blind, we will fall off the cliff and perish.

It is a fact that the sirens of love mislead us. They lead us astray and they lead us away from the final destination, from “Ithaca” and the kingdom of heaven.

A love that is the fruit of repentance and thus derives from the Holy Spirit struggles for the salvation of the neighbour. It would sound the alarm bell, awaken the conscience. It would not be pandering. It would not corrupt faith. This may all seem like a criticism or judgment toward some of our brothers and sisters; however, we do not judge people but situations.

² See Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 7.61: “This love of God is not human but divine.”

³ Maximus Confessor, “The Four Hundred Chapters on Love,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. George Berthold (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 36.

⁴ This commandment does not allow any of our actions, thoughts, or words, from the perspective of a distorted human-centred “love,” to contravene any of the other commandments of God.

Do not forget that the apostles and the martyrs of the church were not persecuted because they preached love and solidarity but because they preached about Jesus Christ. They were persecuted about matters of faith.

The person who loves accepts their beloved as they are and does not require them to change. Thus, my passions and sins, says the human being, will not be judged by God, and I do not need to force myself to act on his teachings out of fear alone. With only one prayer to him, God becomes love and accepts us in the kingdom of heaven. God thinks that with his logic, he can understand everything.

A modern thinker, Fr Georgy Belodurov, from the Russian city of Tver, notes that “the notion that God loves humankind, is an undoubted fact, for He sent his only Son for our salvation.” But how can we then interpret the well-known words of God, “He that I love I also pester,” which also express the divine love toward human beings? But what if God’s providence is not a type of judgment, as we are every day warned by being sent successes, hopes, and joys as well as sorrows, sickness, and death?⁵

But then again, rich is his mercy, to thank him and praise him. But most of the time we forget to thank and praise him. If we do not live in a Christian fashion, spiritually, we will not understand the providence of God.

This is why we do not doubt that all people will suffer God’s final judgment, since he has said it. But is it ever possible to have his judgment without his love?⁶

The metaphysical, spiritual, and ethical drought and the stagnation that results has led to a crisis at many levels. The results of this are seen in today’s mental fissures, personal degradation, and the alienation of the spirit of every transcendental society, as well as in the mental flight toward the holy world of Christ, who can be the only stable compass and exact scale to weigh every value that gives meaning to the goods of the earth and the spirit.

⁵ See V. Malcev, “‘Pink Christianity’: The Meaning of ‘Love’ Has Become Obscure. Why?” Orthodox Saint Petersburg, trans. from Russian, Orthodoxanswers, 29 December 2018; English version: http://www.oodegr.com/english/theos/genika/pink_christianity.htm.

⁶ All will enter into the kingdom of heaven? Both the good and the bad? The beneficent, the gracious, and the generous? The greedy, the stingy, and the gluttonous? The exploiters, the cold hearted, the criminals, and all the unrepentant? Of course not. There, in the kingdom of heaven, that is not possible. As it was said by the Lord – is it possible to not have justice and love?

The Struggle for Justice and Peace

Since its very beginnings, the church has been sent to the world to preach about love, justice, peace, and freedom. Christ's peace is the mature fruit of building everything on him; the revelation of the holiness and grandeur of the human image as an image of God; the projection of the organic unity of the human race and the world with him; the universality of the ideals of peace, freedom, unity, and social justice; and, finally, the fruitfulness of Christian love between people. True peace is the very face of the Godman. The church of Hagia Eirene in Constantinople was dedicated to our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the peace and freedom that has been given, for which the church always prays in its daily prayers.

We need to emphasize that the spiritual gift of peace depends on human synergy. The Holy Spirit grants spiritual gifts when the human heart ascends toward God through repentantly seeking God's justice. The gift of peace is revealed where Christians make good efforts in the works of faith, love, and hope in Jesus Christ.

The Orthodox Church considers that it is its duty to welcome everything that truly serves peace and opens the way to justice, brotherhood, freedom, and love. In any such path toward arriving at a just world, we are called upon to think how justice and peace are interrelated with the realization of the kingdom of God and our salvation.

We cannot remain indifferent to the tragedies that are currently taking place in Syria, in Iraq, in Palestine and the Middle East in general, in Nigeria, in Sudan, and other parts of the world. And yet our inaction renders whole states and nations unable to take radical initiatives and decisions to bring an end to the tragedy of the bloodshed experienced by so many people every day.

In our daily routine, each one of us is often overwhelmed by feelings of disappointment and anxiety about the evolution of humankind, for which, unfortunately, we are usually mere onlookers. But this negative perspective is not the only one in the world.

If we turn our eyes to different areas, we will see people suffering from tribalism, others who are poor and oppressed, religious wars, as well as the persecution of people who have proclaimed the Christian truths and have become martyrs for their faith in their struggle for the renewal and transformation of the world. Christ himself stands alongside these new martyrs

of faith, whose church, the assembly of the “chosen people,” united in all humankind, preaches the gospel of peace and righteousness (Eph. 2:17). This is the peace that was promised by Christ to his disciples at the last supper. It is a promise that was given to the world as well: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

The Orthodox Church recognizes and constantly highlights the centrality of peace and justice in the lives of human beings. One of the official documents of the Holy and Great Council addressed the issue of peace and justice, stating,

Drawing from these principles and the accumulated experience and teaching of her patristic, liturgical, and ascetical tradition, the Orthodox Church shares the concern and anxiety of contemporary humanity with regard to fundamental existential questions that preoccupy the world today. She thus desires to help resolve these issues, allowing the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7), reconciliation, and love to prevail in the world.⁷

Peace *and* war are born in the hearts of human beings because the heart, according to the biblical definition of the term, is the centre of the human being, the place in which all relations with other human beings are formed. But this is also where passions, licentiousness, envy, and so on are found, the old imperfections of the fallen person, which give birth to sin. It is sin which nurtures every social injustice, every upheaval of human affairs. It is, of course, sin that gives birth to every political system that is decayed, and it is found at the roots of war and all the suffering that ensues.

But peace, also, is born in the heart of the reborn person, because the reborn person has become godlike and has received the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This kind of peace has nothing to do with the fleeting moment of peace, which happens only apart from God and which is usually based on fear, terror, selfish interests, and injustice.

The struggle for peace brings people closer together and helps them to better understand one another, to grasp the deeper the important aspects of life,

⁷ “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World: The Contribution of the Orthodox Church in Realizing Peace, Justice, Freedom, Fraternity and Love between Peoples, and in the Removal of Racial and Other Discriminations,” Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, <http://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>.

and to demonstrate a high sense of responsibility.⁸ The Christian who struggles for peace experiences the spiritual renewal of their own existence and feels compassion toward other Christians—and even toward people of other faiths or religions who do not know our faith or the gospel.

The struggle for justice and peace has no limits and boundaries because it is based on the redemptive message of Christ the liberator and on the love of God for human beings.

Every Christian longs for justice and peace deeply in their heart. However, history teaches us that humankind cannot alone create or maintain peace.

The only thing the current world's political leaders have to do is to present their enemy as a horrible beast to ignite a war. Even though political peace is not identical to the peace of God, these notions are not irrelevant. The nations that coexist in peace are closer to the ideal of the kingdom of God than those that live in hate and enmity. Peace based on reconciliation has been taught by the Lord himself, and we must be ready to bear witness to it through Jesus Christ, with our words and deeds, something that requires love between us and even love for our “enemies.”⁹

There is also the issue of social, political, and economic justice. People want justice and have every right to demand it. And we have to proclaim it and serve it in all its forms. We are facing the greatest injustices that predominate in the modern world: global oppression, exploitation, inequality, tyranny, the new rich, and so on. And others unfortunately are deprived of freedom and justice and are obliged to accept the cruelty of life as it is manifested.

The church teaches that injustice in all its forms is a distortion of life and a sin. It is not the result of an accident of history or biology. Where there is injustice, someone is somehow responsible. Christ is the fulfilment of the law and of the prophets, and with his unwavering demand for justice, he promised to establish justice in his eternal kingdom. This is an important element of his mission as Messiah. He predicts that until his second coming in glory, there will be no justice on the earth. But he demands of his people that they be thirsty for justice and do whatever is possible to help it prevail in life, here and now.

⁸ The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World.”

⁹ Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). The apostle Paul speaks of grace and peace (Phil. 1:2) because God's peace is the unformed energy of the divine grace.

In the divine liturgy we pray: “Your peace and your love give to us, God our Lord, for you give us everything.” If the Lord has not just given us much, but everything, then we, more than other people, must love and serve justice on earth: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

Cries of Freedom

People everywhere yearn to be free and unbound. True freedom, in Christian love and form, is neither passive resignation to fate nor an impetuous rebellion against the conditions and structures of life. It would be better for us to say that it is a joyful acceptance of the worldly conditions given by a wise, graceful, and loving God who has given each one a life of calling to service and ministry to themselves and to humanity.

The content of liberation, according to Christian faith, necessarily involves faith in divine providence and the recognition that every person has a unique call from God to exult, transform, and be redeemed from the particular conditions of their life in ways offered and revealed by God.

People are genuinely free when they love their lives, their time, their place, their calling, and their duty; when they believe that the life given to them is the best way to fulfil their destiny; when they struggle to achieve their salvation through obedience to God and by the ministry of their fellow human being within their own individual conditions set or allowed by God; and when they trust the will of God, which is “in the interest of all wisdom of man.” Christ himself is the perfect example of this behaviour. He embraced the conditions of his earthly life. He was loyal to the Father “to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8) and to his holy mother and his protector, Joseph, “and was obedient to them” (Luke 2:51). But he was also loyal to the state government, as he paid the taxes (Matt. 17:27).

Everyone is called into the freedom of Christ, the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). The letter to the Galatians clearly refers to the call of the faithful for freedom: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal. 5:13-14).

Therefore, it is in Christ *and* in the church that we find the representation and notion of true freedom, which is the release from the law “of sin and of

death” (Rom. 8:2). Only in Christ and in the church do we find the pattern for a proper relationship between human beings, with their mental and emotional experiences, their earthly institutions, and their stories and with the issues of life and with God himself.

This proper relationship is true freedom. When one finds this freedom and experiences it, one is indeed free. Without it, there is only enslavement to corruption, to the “empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe” (Col. 2:8), and fruitless dependence from the graceless authorities of our time, the form of which is “passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31).

True freedom is experienced in the church, as it is the kingdom of God on earth. Our testimony and our ministry to the world is to invite people to see and become acquainted with all of this, so that they can be freed from the futility of their deceit, from their disappointments, their discontents, and their despair.

God’s command to love our neighbour, even our enemy, means that all Christians are called to love justice and to keep peace with all people, to the extent, of course, that it depends on us. This is why it is incompatible with the Christian life to actively support or silently adhere to an obvious injustice.

God has made a covenant—a covenant with his people to be worshipped and glorified with the life of this people in a world of justice and freedom. The glory of God shines, despite the disbelief of the people, because of the faithfulness of God, which renews his mercy and forgives his people: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13).

Awaiting New Hope for Love, Justice, Peace, and Freedom

In Christianity, there is a tendency to regard the spiritual tradition in terms of war. The cross of Christ is, for the apostle Paul, the place of the decisive victory of Christ in his battle against the demonic powers (see Col. 2:15); the resurrection of the Lord represents the “first fruits” of this victory in the world, when God is “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:20-28). We must engage vigorously against the forces of evil and the spiritual armies of darkness still permeating the world (see Eph. 6:17).

Today, the passion of the mystic Christ, embodied in the life of Christians who have been sacrificed that justice may prevail, has the same structure as

the passion of Christ as a historical figure. Like Christ, many people today are persecuted, murdered, or imprisoned because they defend the rights of those held in contempt and defend the righteous demands of the poor. They accept the faith in God that asks them to sacrifice and witness in Christ. Sacrifice and martyrdom are superior to life itself because they belong to God and his kingdom. Such people prefer the glory of a violent death to the joy of an accursed freedom, as it has been put by a martyr of the third century.

The resurrection of the crucified Christ attests to the fact that the sacrifice of a person's life out of love for the neighbour that is tested is participation in the fullness of life and in the definitive triumph of justice. The crucified Christ is also the one who lives forever.

A major question faced by Christians all over the world, and especially the Orthodox, is what is more important: the ultimate triumph of conformism in society or the creation of a *new* society, in which bitter memories give way to reconciliation and new ways to form relations with fellow human beings? We have inherited a tradition of martyrdom, and we recognize that a life of love is most important. And love is expressed in each person's particular way.

Nowadays, love can sometimes be expressed in a kind of overt or covert proselytism. Most Christians share the apostle Paul's belief that if our words are "orthodox" and angelic, if we don't truly have love that is identical to selfless offering and sacrifice, we are but "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1).

We live in a world that has concluded a covenant with death. But we also live as witnesses to a God who has concluded a covenant with life. The new testament "in the blood" of Christ is the proclamation of God and the renewal of the ancient creational *Amen* in life, the final seal in the divine decision to heal all creation.

Christians who understand the signs of the times know that the gospel is in direct contradiction with the dominant spirit of our times, the spirit deriving from the covenant of the world with death. The unity of humankind—which has been shattered by our pride, the will to be the ultimate master of all creation, and death as separation from God—can only be restored by Christ and through Christ. With the divine eucharist, we enter this infinite unity; we become members one of another, responsible for one of "each of us," who bears the whole of humanity inside himself. The eucharistic bread

produces something more than just creating a connection between the resurrected Christ and each one of us, more than revealing the visible unity of the church. It introduces us into the real unity of all humankind through communion and participation in the grace of God.

People in our century have witnessed a great wave of liberation movements, giving rise to several independent new states, usually by being liberated from the occupation of a foreign power. This situation is still a fact. However, we believe that human evil will try to prevent this inevitable historical course. The rich and powerful countries try to force the developing ones to grow internally in a way that perpetuates their dependence. People are still tortured by racial discrimination and various forms of humiliation and mistreatment. We are all debtors of love and justice.

The salvation of the human being has two dimensions for the Christian: the *transcendental* and the *earthly*. Without peace with God, there can be no true peace with human beings; purification from the passions and a sacrificial change of heart remain prerequisites for a better world.

There cannot be a *new* humanity before people change. Speaking about the two dimensions of Christianity, we must describe them as, on the one hand, faith, prayer, church, the mysteries, and eternity, and, on the other, a struggle for the transformation of life, for justice, solidarity, peace, disarmament, reconciliation, and a bridging of the gap between the rich and the poor, strong and weak, as well as ecological vigilance.

The greatest duty of Christians, therefore, is not some empty, general discussion about justice and peace but above all the efforts and struggles to uphold human rights and restore the conditions that make mutual trust possible, in this way rendering war inconceivable. This is not sterile morality but the only realistic approach to the problem, because as long as love, justice, and peace are put to one side and freedom is undermined, the risk of war will always be present.

Has Ecumenism Already Died?

During its 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea, in 2013, the World Council of Churches (WCC) launched a new initiative for its activities in the period until the next assembly, titled the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. During this period, all the activities and programmes of the WCC, as well as certain member churches, have focused on the pilgrimage, with two main points of reference: justice and peace.

There were high expectations, and this proposal by the assembly was accepted with great enthusiasm by churches and others. Many believed that the churches would be able to join this effort and would be able to respond to it with a common voice, despite the differences that divide their unity. They also discussed a path of pilgrimage such as this but with elements of spirituality, reflecting the internal liturgical and spiritual life of the church, as experienced by the faithful in their everyday struggle for survival, with the primary aim of saving their souls and gaining the kingdom of God.

But when we mention the term “pilgrimage,” how is it understood by the various Christian churches and faiths?

Many were aware, not least in the WCC and the churches, that a path of pilgrimage is, in principle, both an invitation and a challenge. Many questions arose—with doubts, questioning, as well as suspicions—about the assembly decision to create such a new perspective, leading to controversies around the interpretative and theological approach of the path being followed. Many have joined in the years since 2013 to offer an ecumenical understanding, so that the churches can express themselves in common and respond to the questioning and to the ultimate goal of this pilgrimage. The problem, however, is that this has an ecclesiological dimension and perspective, where the unity of the church dominates the interpretative explanation of the whole issue.

This is where we believe the problem is found. Since the churches, as well as the ecumenical movement in particular, have not yet found a common view on ecclesiological issues that they are able to comprehend and express together, rather than just limiting themselves to formal convergence, how is it possible to talk about a perceived ultimate goal?

The overall theme of the 2022 WCC assembly is “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” It is a fact that the issue of unity is dominant everywhere; it is not possible to override it because it has remained relevant since the foundation of the WCC, which has had the unity of the church as a primary aim and as the fulfilment of its mission during its more than 70 years of existence.

We must also mention that this pilgrimage has socio-political, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. So how is it possible to walk this path amid the global economic crisis, the violation of human rights, attempts to circumvent Christian values, the fear of war, poverty, misery, and the lack of peace, reconciliation, love, and freedom?

Modern humanity and our society in general are in a hurry due to globalization, and we lose our meaning and mission day by day.

How is it possible to speak of the salvation of the human soul when the human being has lost the being “in our image” and the “after our likeness” of God, when human beings have deviated from their basic and primary purpose, which is none other than the attainment of the kingdom of God?

How is it possible for human beings, under such conditions of panic and the horror of war, to attempt to speak about justice, peace, and reconciliation when they have not found peace with themselves, when their hearts have dried up from the lack of love, when Christ doesn't fill their hearts and lives?

The struggle for the realization of justice is a continuous and everyday Golgotha, a cross where pain, sorrow, despair, and frustration dominate and reign in the life of the modern person.

The human being has become “the bird of terror,” as the poets have said. They have lost the hope for tomorrow and are interested in the ephemeral; they are unable to follow the pilgrimage of love deriving from this love of Christ, leading to Christian unity and the reconciliation of the churches and peoples of humankind.

Thus, we can reasonably ask: Has ecumenism already died? Is there really no hope for a better tomorrow, where the love of Christ and the reconciliation of the world will reign? If it really is this tragic condition that people have been wishing for and expecting for many years, then what is it all about?

Let us therefore be in peace with Jesus Christ who is the “God of peace” (1 Thess. 5:23) and within us, and with others, be acting with love, justice, and freedom so that the world will have peace. We pray that, in divine favour and blessing, peace and justice are established, love is victorious over indifference to fellow human beings, and solidarity and reconciliation prevail.

God Is Love: The Experience of the Just, Compassionate, and Merciful God*

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca

In 2022, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is to gather in Karlsruhe, Germany, around the theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”¹ Originally, the assembly was to take place in 2021, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WCC’s governing bodies took the decision to postpone the assembly for one year. As a recent reflection on the assembly theme published by the WCC has described it, the assembly will gather following a time of waiting because of the pandemic, a virus that has exposed and highlighted both the vulnerability of all humankind and the profound inequalities and divisions among us. The world has been awakened to the ugly realities of privilege and oppression, of economic, social, and ethnic injustices.²

The Signs of the Times

Together with the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic is a strong and brutal reminder that human beings belong to creation and have been given the mandate to care for it. The pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities and exposing still further existing structural injustice. Alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemics of ignorance, white supremacy, and hate are deadly, as is the pandemic of injustice. Racism and the politics of fear and hate are dividing and killing people. Other global trends that the assembly needs to address have also been recognized. These include the weakening of democracy through authoritarian politics of fear and hate; the ambiguous consequences of the digital revolution; the increasing militarization of conflict and warfare that is

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¹ This is an expanded version of an article that was published in *Una Sancta* 76:1 (2021), 7-18. DOI: 10.1111/erev.12624.

² See Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: A Reflection on the Theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe 2022 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/christs-love-moves-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity-a-reflection-on-the-theme-of-the-11th-assembly-of-the-world-council-of-churches-karlsruhe-2022>.

making millions of people refugees and increasing the danger that nuclear or biological and chemical weapons are used; and the growing recognition that we are living in a multireligious world in which Christians engage in dialogue and cooperate more and more with people of other faiths.

These trends are not all new, but taken together—and especially with COVID-19 adding to the situation—they appear to take on the form of an overpowering wall that imprisons the world. Deep and radical changes are needed to bring this wall down, starting with the hope that it is possible to overcome paralysis and breach the wall. The assembly needs to address this situation and speak to the world in clear and direct ways that all may understand. It cannot gloss over the deep, multifaceted civilizational crisis that faces the world. However, the assembly has the chance to explore how Christ's love opens a horizon of hope beyond the wall. Reconciliation and unity are God's final purpose for humankind and creation, and it is indeed God's purpose to move the whole world and the entire cosmos to reconciliation and unity.

Reconciliation and Unity in a Globalized World

During the past two to three decades, there has been fearful talk about globalization. The term “global village” alluded to the possibility of creating a new world that transcends and dissolves national borders between nations and peoples. Despite its positive connotations, the idea of a global village also gave the impression that cultural and religious peculiarities might soon disappear in a new anonymous identity or “melting pot.” There was also talk of a new global culture superseding specific individual cultures.

The phenomenon of globalization provoked strong reactions, leading to the development of identity politics in many societies, including among Christians. Historically, people in the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, for example, have lived for centuries in multicultural and multireligious contexts. Their experience in the past taught them to share their bread with others and to open their homes to those in need. They always defended, preserved, and transmitted their faith to their children, even at the cost of their own lives, and they were not afraid of that which was foreign or different. They learned, in general, to live with others and respect each other. Recent events, however, also show among them signs of changing attitudes and perceptions. There is often

a fear of the stranger. We hear proposals to erect protective walls against oppressed people fleeing war and death. We hear calls for stricter surveillance of the seas over which migrants arrive, and on social media we have seen concrete proposals to capsize boats carrying migrants if they refuse to turn back.

From a religious point of view, the original vision of unity has often been challenged. The ecumenical movement that arose at the beginning of the 20th century to bring separated Christians together—to engage in dialogue and to work together—hoped to move beyond denominational realities and to achieve the visible unity of the church in a short period of time. There can be no doubt that in the eyes of many in the churches, however, the importance of ecumenism has declined sharply and has given way to growing concern about confessional identity. There is often a burning fear that we will lose our Christian identity and values. And together with this fear is projected the image of a God of “justice” who “rewards” with punishment all those who do evil.

Questions about the Assembly Theme

The theme of the WCC’s assembly in Karlsruhe is inspired by Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, where the apostle speaks of the love of Christ “that urges us on” (2 Cor. 5:14) and suggests that through Christ, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation that we might be ambassadors of Christ’s love (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Against the background of the contemporary challenges facing the world and the churches, some have welcomed the theme as a timely reminder of the core of our Christian faith and of the mission of the fellowship of churches that belong to the WCC.

As the former WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser has pointed out, most of the WCC’s assemblies for the first three and a half decades of its existence had a Christological focus,³ beginning with the Evanston assembly in 1954, which had as its theme “Christ – the hope of the world,” and culminating in the Vancouver assembly of 1983, which gathered under

³ For an overview of WCC assembly themes, see <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies>. On the assembly themes until 1983, see Konrad Raiser, “Jesus Christ – the Life of the World: A Meditation on the Theme of the Sixth Assembly,” *Ecumenical Review* 33:3 (1981), 232–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1981.tb03311.x>.

the theme “Jesus Christ – the life of the world.”⁴ At the Canberra assembly eight years later, however, the uncertainties provoked by the end of the Cold War, and the growing awareness of the environmental catastrophe that threatened the whole of the created world, led the WCC to formulate the theme as a prayer to the Holy Spirit: “Come, Holy Spirit – renew the whole creation.” The themes of the subsequent assemblies in Harare (1998), Porto Alegre (2006), and Busan (2013) had a “theocentric” focus: the Harare assembly issued a call to “turn to God” and to rejoice in hope, while the themes of the Porto Alegre and Busan assemblies were formulated as prayers to God to transform the world and to lead us to justice and peace.⁵

While some have welcomed what they see as a return to a Christ-centred theme as in the earlier days of the WCC after the theocentric focus of the recent assemblies, others have raised questions about the focus on “Christ’s love.” Does this not mean that by affirming the love of Christ alone, the WCC loses its trinitarian perspective and becomes Christomonistic, narrow minded, and exclusive, thus failing to address the needs of the whole world? Would not a formulation like “love of God” have better addressed our current situation and have been more inclusive? Others question speaking loudly of Christ’s love in a predominantly secular environment, as in Western Europe, or in the multireligious realities of many societies, with the growing importance of interreligious cooperation for the care for life, justice, and peace. How would the theme of the Karlsruhe assembly challenge dangerous identity movements that are sometimes at the origins of communal violence and terrorism and stand for the opposite of the search for unity and reconciliation?

In what follows, I would like to address these concerns in my position both as WCC acting general secretary and as an Orthodox theologian. The question is how we interpret the theme in a holistic way so as not to be exclusivist or narrow. In an attempt to bring into a coherent discourse and structure the theme of the assembly in light of these challenges, I see

⁴ Konrad Raiser has noted: “Most of the earlier assemblies had themes with a clear Christological focus affirming the fundamental orientation of the ‘basis’ of the WCC and its confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures. The themes were understood as a proclamation and a missionary witness of the churches to the world.” See Konrad Raiser, “The Busan Assembly in the History of WCC Assemblies,” lecture at the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute, Busan, 2013, Globethics.net Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/201459>.

⁵ Raiser, “The Busan Assembly.”

my contribution to be setting the direction and unpacking the theme in a holistic perspective. This is based on the major work done in the WCC on trinitarian theology over the years (with major Orthodox input) and on incarnational theology and the recapitulation and reconciliation of all in Christ that is expressed in the WCC document “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC” (CUV), presented to the WCC’s 8th Assembly in Harare in 1998.⁶

The Love of Christ Is Holistic, Cosmic, and Inclusive

The very theme of the assembly is based on a Pauline text (2 Cor. 5:14). For Paul, however, speaking of Christ is neither Christomonistic nor exclusive, but rather cosmic and universal. When Paul speaks about the love of Christ, he speaks about the love of God manifested in Christ, through incarnation. In Christ, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Out of love for humanity and the whole of creation, through *kenosis* he became human. He assumed all suffering and weaknesses of human nature and of the whole of creation, becoming one of us and identifying with us in order to heal and restore and reconcile humanity and creation with God (Phil. 2). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes of God’s plan “for the fullness of time, to gather up [ανακεφαλαιωσασθαι] all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). In Christ, God intended to bring about reconciliation and unity in the realm of the whole of creation: “He himself is before all things, and in [Christ] all things hold together . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:17-20). According to these texts, the purpose of God is reconciliation and unity—not only of one people or of a Christian group, but of the cosmos.

⁶ See T. K. Thomas, “WCC, Basis of,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 1238–39, at 1239, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/theological-and-historical-background-of-the-wcc-basis>. The article points out that the reformulation of the Basis at the WCC assembly in 1961 in New Delhi “underlines the ontological priority of what God in Christ has already accomplished” and that the “final doxological formula sets the Christocentric affirmation in a Trinitarian setting.” The dynamic character of the reformulated Basis “creates a ‘basis beyond the Basis’” that was evidenced in the CUV document presented to the Harare assembly. On the background to the CUV document, see also Marlin VanElderen, “Common Understanding and Vision: A Survey of the Discussion in the WCC,” *Ecumenical Review* 49:1 (1997), 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1997.tb00262.x>.

St Irenaeus is known as the theologian of the late 2nd century who shaped and articulated the redemptive recapitulation in Christ, based on the biblical texts above. This theology has marked Christian thinking in both the East and the West for almost a millennium. Apart from St Irenaeus, the theology of recapitulation is also found in the writings of other early church fathers such as Hippolytus, Methodius, Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine. In the era of post-patristic thought until today, the East remained faithfully attached to this theology and further articulated it in its liturgical expressions and spirituality. In the West, with a few exceptions, starting with the era of scholastic theology, the emphasis shifted from the redemptive recapitulation of the work of Christ to his person, and the Christocentric emphasis became predominant. The same has been the case with Reformed theology.

Discussions and exchanges within the ecumenical movement helped the revival and rediscovery of this old and common Christian affirmation, which is further developing in our times. At the WCC's assembly in New Delhi in 1961, it was the Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler who, in his masterful reflections on the Colossians text, said,

It is here declared that the sweep of God's restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six-times repeated *Ta panta*. Redemption is the name for this will, this action, and this concrete Man who is God with us and not God for us – and all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him.⁷

So, in the love of God, in Christ, we see the call for unity and reconciliation of the whole of the cosmos. This is also the perspective that we find in the CUV document. This document speaks of “the conviction that the object of God's reconciling purpose is not only the church but the whole of humanity – indeed, the whole of creation” and a vision that “encompasses the renewal of church and world in the light of the gospel of God's kingdom. In the face of all threats to life it affirms the Christian hope of life for all.”⁸

⁷ Joseph A. Sittler, “Called to Unity,” *Ecumenical Review* 14:2 (1962), 177, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1962.tb01999.x>.

⁸ “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches: A Policy Statement,” paras 2.4; 2.8.2; see “The CUV Document,” in *Assembly Workbook: Harare 1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 97–116, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/common-understanding-and-vision-of-the-wcc-cuv>.

The love of Christ that is central to the Karlsruhe assembly theme is thus placed within a trinitarian context and develops further the vision of the CUV document. It opens new horizons and possibilities of approach: it will concentrate on what it means for churches and for Christian unity to confront together the many challenges of the world we live in and to witness to our common gospel values. But it will not stop there, as the purpose of God's love in Christ is for the whole world.

This naturally requires openness and care for the whole world, for dialogue and cooperation with the people of other faiths or of no faith who share the same values. Looked at from this wider perspective, the assembly theme offers a theologically balanced and inclusive perspective that avoids possible pitfalls of Christian triumphalism and a narrow Christomonistic interpretation.

Christ's Love and Our Response

A second issue is that there is still misunderstanding about the content and the object of the "love of Christ" about which the theme speaks. Is it about Christ's love for us and the world or about our love for Christ?

Speaking of the love of Christ also means our love for Christ and our working in and with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, manifesting our compassion, taking on and identifying ourselves with the suffering of the world. In this way, the assembly is expected to deal with the ways Christians today respond concretely to the many challenges of our times through a transforming discipleship. As an eschatological community, experiencing the values of the kingdom to come as a foretaste, the church is expected to be a vector of unity and reconciliation for humanity and creation, thus remaining obedient to the goal that God's love has in its manifestation in Christ (healing, unity, reconciliation). To have the expected impact and to be credible to the world, Christians must continue their search for deeper unity and reconciliation among themselves and continue their pilgrimage of justice and peace, strengthening their fellowship and also cooperating with all people of goodwill for the healing of creation.

God's love, mercy, and justice opening the way to reconciliation and unity

In responding to concrete situations and sufferings, the assembly is introducing the love of God in Christ in its planning through the concept of the compassionate love of Christ. Narrative texts from the gospel that speak about Christ's compassion have been chosen for the worship and Bible

studies.⁹ Even in these cases, some voices questioned using what seemed a sentimental and emotional “cheap” love to deal with problems, rather than engaging in concrete actions and holding love and justice together. However, compassion in a Christological sense is not pity but suffering with, assuming full identification with.

Overcoming such fears and reactions is not an easy task. It cannot be accomplished with a language of cheap love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of cheap grace and inspired the language of costly rather than cheap reconciliation that developed in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa.¹⁰ As the South African Kairos Document put it, “Any form of peace or reconciliation that allows the sin of injustice and oppression to continue is a *false* peace and *counterfeit* reconciliation.”¹¹ Moving with Christ’s love to reconciliation and unity requires the liberating and transformative mercy and justice God can give. The human response, however, requires *metanoia*, the real transformation of unjust relationships and reconciliation that in many cases is not possible without reparations and restitution in favour of those who have suffered. This applies to churches as well as to people in their search for Christian unity and the unity of the human family.

The relationship between God’s love, mercy or grace, and justice is not a new theme in theology and its relationship with philosophy. In the literature and art of the Middle Ages, the tension between God’s love and justice is quite apparent. It was the great longing for a loving and merciful God who accepts and justifies the sinner that drove Luther to take the steps that brought about the beginning of the Reformation. The problem of justification is a central and recurring theme in Luther’s writings. For centuries, the problem of justification has remained a focal point of division in the Western tradition of the church. It was not until 1999, after a painstaking and thorough study, that the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation reached consensus and healed the wounds of the past by

⁹ This section draws upon my chapter “L’expérience de la justice et la miséricorde dans la spiritualité orthodoxe,” in *La miséricorde de Dieu sera-t-elle victorieuse?* ed. Philippe Barbarin (Sion: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2016), 73–87.

¹⁰ See, for example, P. G. J. (Piet) Meiling, “Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa: Through the Lens of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38:3 (2017), suppl. 1, 1–34.

¹¹ “The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church. Revised Second Edition,” in *The Kairos Documents*, compiled and ed. Gary S. D. Leonard (Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010), 55.

signing a joint document on justification.¹² Since then, other churches of the Reformation have adopted, embraced, and signed this document.¹³

The Orthodox Church did not experience the Reformation and therefore was not directly confronted with the delicate problem of the relationship between God as love/mercy and God as justice. But it must be said that it is thanks to its spirituality, and not to the dogmatic theology of its textbooks, that the Orthodox Church avoided this dilemma. The logic and discourse of the Greek philosophers greatly shaped the structure and perspective of scholastic theology in the Middle Ages, which influenced and shaped the Orthodox discourse in the Orthodox theology of the textbooks. Thus, the Orthodox Church had difficulty calling God “love.” This axiom remained, rather, a statement without logic and content. From the point of view of ancient philosophers, the apophatic God of Orthodox spirituality was conceived and presented in the textbooks of dogmatic theology rather than according to the criteria of experienced *koinonia* with God in prayer. God was the “existence par excellence” (self-existent), and God’s existence was not conditioned by anything. Consequently, God was impassive. God could not suffer. Any attempt to give God a merciful face of suffering was even considered heresy, such as the heresies of patripassianism (the idea that it is the father who is suffering in Jesus), or theopaschitism (the idea that God can suffer). In such a context, it was normal that the emphasis was on God’s justice rather than on God’s mercy for God’s creatures, using terms such as *justitia legalis*, *justitia distributiva*, and *justitia vindicativa*. Within the framework created by these philosophical concepts, it was difficult theologically to speak of love and mercy. The frescoes of the Middle Ages, with their lavish emphasis on the vengeful punishments and sufferings of hell, vividly demonstrate the theological concept that lay behind them.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his instructive and still topical book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*,¹⁴ has analyzed the main philosophical concepts that have influenced the theological development and the Christian vision of mercy. I summarize them below:

- For Plato, mercy (compassion) had a negative character because it could influence judges in their obligation to make the right and just decision.

¹² “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Church,” 31 October 1999, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-joint-declaration-doctrine-justification-20th-anniversary-edition>.

¹³ These include the Anglican, Methodist, and Reformed traditions.

¹⁴ Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2013); see especially chapter II.

- For the Stoics, compassion conflicted with the Stoic ethical idea of controlling the emotions through reason. It was therefore incompatible with *autarky* and *ataraxia* (self-sufficiency and peace of mind). The Stoics viewed pity as weakness and sickness of the soul, and promoted their ideal of standing still in the face of fate and achieving the state of *apatheia* (no suffering).
- Nietzsche created the strong and hard Dionysian type, the superman (*Herrenmensch/Übermensch*). For him, pity is an extension of suffering, and he despises it. The Dionysian type is superior in its selfishness and arrogance, not in its altruism. Dionysus is the opposite of the crucified Christ. In his work *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says that God died because of God's compassion, God's suffering with humankind.
- At the other pole were the philosophical concepts of Marx. He believed that "religion is the opium of the people"—in the sense that it was very often used as a kind of ideological protest that brought some comfort but no change. Marx wanted radical change. Stalin went even further and tried to eradicate suffering with violence and totalitarianism. Such philosophical concepts, which gave rise to fascism and communism, devastated the world in the second half of the 20th century.

Let us also look at the philosophical and spiritual foundations of liberalism, which forms the basis of many of our developed and democratic countries. Even in this philosophical system, compassion and mercy do not find a proper place. The principles of Adam Smith, the forerunner of liberal economic theory, are based not on love for people but on the creation of profit. They are based not on altruism but on selfishness; Smith believed that the operation of the free market would bring about social order. In this context, one can understand why the church's discourse on compassion and mercy does not easily pass the lips of many of our fellow citizens today.

Theologically, it has to be underlined that the justice of God—who is also just by nature—arises from God's self, that is, from God's love. God thus manifests justice through love, compassion, and mercy.

Even the very name of God, with its Hebrew nuances, expresses this. For Christian theology, which was more oriented to the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—the name of God was translated into eminently metaphysical categories: "*Ego eimi o on*" (I am the one who is),

supreme existence in itself. The same meaning was adopted by Philo of Alexandria, the Hellenized Hebrew philosopher of the 1st century, who developed the concept of God according to metaphysical criteria. But according to biblical scholars, the Hebrew meaning of JAHVE is more nuanced. His existence is not conditioned by things or sources outside his being but is relational in itself and directed toward his people and creation. His name could be translated as “I am the one who is there” for the people. The text of Exodus 33:18-19, which reproduces Moses’ dialogue with God, puts it this way: “[The Lord] said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name, “the Lord”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.’” The God of the Bible, then, is not a metaphysical and static God, but a living and dynamic God. A God who is with his people and for his people. A God who accepts and shares in the sufferings of his people. A merciful God.

In Christianity, the character of God who is loving, compassionate, and merciful is manifested in its fullness in the event of the Incarnation. Out of love for creation, God takes on creation through the flesh. God becomes a human being and takes on all the weaknesses and wounds of humanity and fallen creation, except sin, in order to heal, reconcile, and restore them.

But the theological articulation of this statement has not always been easy. *Kenosis*—that is to say, the character of a compassionate and merciful God who out of love took on himself humiliation to the point of death to save his people—has found its deep meaning in spirituality but has had difficulty being accepted when one has tried to affirm it through and within the ancient philosophical parameters mentioned above.

There are many examples. I would like us to recall the experience of the Scythian monks in the 6th century. They came from the Romanized province of Scythia Minor, the region of Dobrogea, in what is now Romania. They were connected to the monastic spirituality of their predecessors: St John Cassian, the saint of Marseilles, and Denys the Humble (Dionysius Exiguus), the founder of the modern calendar. Attempting to express this spiritual truth of *kenosis* in theological terms, they proposed a formula that reads in Latin “*Unus ex Trinitate passus est carne*” (One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh). But their formula very quickly caused a great scandal and was initially condemned as heretical and patripassian, even by Pope Hormisdas, whom they had asked for support. Only after years of discussion and reflection was their formula accepted, even though it did not bear their name.

To this day, the second antiphon sung at the beginning of the eucharistic liturgy of St John Chrysostom and St Basil the Great, which seems to have as its author the Emperor Justinian, recounts:

Only Begotten Son and Immortal Word of God,

Who for our salvation didst will to be incarnate of the holy Theotokos and ever virgin Mary,

Who without change didst become man and wast crucified, O Christ our God, Trampling down death by death, Who art one of the Holy Trinity, Glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us.

Although speaking of God's "suffering" is still sensitive in some theological circles, the great 20th-century Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae dared to re-examine God's participation in human suffering through his compassion, assuming this suffering through the incarnate Son:

Our Savior's Passion is the proof of the greatest love of God for men. The Son of God Himself, seeing us sinking down into a meaningless life, a selfish life, a painful lack of unity between us, He came and showed us the way we can get out of this. He made Himself man, but man without sin . . . His love was not only manifested by this humbleness of becoming human and showing us the example of a human, but it was manifested in His sacrifice for us, accepting death on the Cross, for only the one who is willing to die for others is the one who loves fully.

The Passion of Christ is the sign of the greatest love of the Son of God for men when He accepted to become like them and to remain man for ever and ever. He entered the eternity in His state of sacrifice, He went to the Father's Right hand, He offered sacrifice to the Father for us to give us an example of how we should live and how far we should go with His love, sacrificing one for another.

That is why the Cross is the means through which the Savior raised us, through which He could overcome death, because only by the supreme love manifested in His sacrifice, sacrifice of the only-begotten Son of God, He could overcome death.¹⁵

¹⁵ Fr Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Cross Is the Proof of God's Love for Us*, audio recording, 1990, <http://otelders.org/theology-and-spirituality/cross-proof-gods-love-us-fr-dumitru-staniloae>.

Overcoming evil with good and manifesting justice with love as a criterion of Orthodox spirituality

Orthodox spirituality as lived out has never had a problem with speaking of a *kenotic*, humble, compassionate, merciful God who participates in the sufferings that arise from human weaknesses and takes them upon himself to heal them. Consequently, the spiritual person who strives to be a theophore, “a bearer of God,” acts just like the master they have within them by grace. St Isaac the Syrian asked:

What is a compassionate heart? . . . It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person’s eyes overflow with tears owing to the strength of the compassion which grips his heart; as a result of his deep mercy his heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation. That is why he constantly offers up prayer full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy . . . he even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out beyond measure – after the likeness of God – in his heart.¹⁶

Such apophthegms abound in the spiritual literature of the desert fathers and mothers.

Closer to our time, St Silouan the Athonite and his disciple Father Sophrony adopted the same language: God’s love is for all creation; it is present even in hell because God’s presence is everywhere.¹⁷ God is the same, absolute love, even in hell. The “punishment” and sufferings that people endure in hell are sufferings caused by the presence of love and the impossibility of sharing in it. Justice is done through love, and evil is “rewarded” by the presence of good. In fact, they followed the Eastern Christian spiritual tradition that St Isaac the Syrian, whom we have already quoted, summarized so clearly:

I say that even those who are scourged in Hell are tormented with the scourgings of love. Scourgings for love’s sake, namely of those

¹⁶ *Daily Readings with St. Isaac of Syria*, ed. A. M. Allchin, trans. Sebastian Brock (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 29.

¹⁷ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, “We Must Pray for All: The Salvation of the World According to St Silouan,” *Sobornost* 19:1 (1997), 51–55.

who perceive that they have sinned against love, are more hard and bitter than tortures through fear . . . Love works with its force in a double way. It tortures those who have sinned, as happens also in the world between friends. And it gives delight to those who have kept its decrees. Thus it is also in Hell. I say that the hard tortures are grief for love. The inhabitants of heaven, however, make drunk their soul with the delight of love.¹⁸

Rather than the metaphysical theology of dogmatic textbooks, it is the spiritual perspective of a compassionate and merciful God and a God who applies his justice through love that has shaped the spirituality of the Orthodox people, their literature, and their way of life.

Dostoevsky said that “hell is the suffering of those who could not love,” and Eugene Ionesco argued that “hell is the crime against love.” In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (Book 6), Dostoevsky puts the above discourse and spiritual approach into the mouth of the Starets Zosima:

Brothers, do not be afraid of men’s sin, love man also in his sin, for this likeness of God’s love is the height of love on earth. Love all of God’s creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love. Love the animals: God gave them the rudiments of thought and an untroubled joy. Do not trouble it, do not torment them, do not take their joy from them, do not go against God’s purpose. Man, do not exalt yourself above the animals: they are sinless, and you, you with your grandeur, fester the earth by your appearance on it, and leave your festering trace behind you – alas, almost every one of us does! Love children especially, for they, too, are sinless, like angels.¹⁹

The Orthodox Icon of the Last Judgment shows the lamb of God on the throne, from which a ray of light is streaming down. This light is divided

¹⁸ Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises*, trans. A. J. Wensinck (Amsterdam: Uitgave der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), 136.

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue*, trans. Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 318–19.

into two halves: one half reaches to heaven and the other half to hell. God remains the same even at the last judgment, a loving, just, and merciful God. God always exercises justice, but through love and mercy.

Some of the reactions to the theme of the Karlsruhe assembly have shown that talking about compassion, mercy, and love has become problematic today. The powerful and those who are successful and wealthy are well regarded in this world. Competition is on the rise. The weak, the sick, and those who have not achieved what they set out to do are thrown on the trash heap of history. Only if we take this context into account can we understand why in our time there is more depression and suicide among younger people than among older people, as was the case a few years ago. We need to find a new discourse to be understood and heard by the people of today: not a God who is judge and gendarme, distant and apathetic, who controls in order to punish with the punishments of hell, keeps people away from the church, and ensures that the message of the gospel of joy is no longer heard and accepted.

On the other hand, one must not go to the other extreme. Love does not avoid or eliminate justice but embraces it. Compassion is not a simple and cheap sentimentalism that erases the application of justice. Compassion means suffering together and with the sufferer; it is a cry for justice and against injustice. St John the Baptist and the prophets show us what prophetic mercy is.

Mercy is not a contemptuous pity, but a love that takes on the condition of the other, that identifies with the other person. It is the effort to put oneself in the other's place out of love, to stay with the other, not to judge the other lightly, but to accompany and advise her or him in their need, without showing any sign of superiority or dominance. It is this love that changes and transforms and, in the end, creates justice. Justice is not the elimination of evil, but the transformation of evil into good through good.

The apostle Paul offers us this prescription, which is more relevant today than ever: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:20-21).

With the choice of the assembly theme, the exchange of such theological reflections and conversations about them need to inform the preparations for the WCC's 11th Assembly. The message of the assembly must address

the signs of the times and transform their intrinsic logic. Daring to speak of Christ's love in the present context, and thus of the love of the triune God, of God's mercy and God's justice, the assembly will find its purpose and goal.

Toward a Doxological Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the prayer of St Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow (+1867), which summarizes and affirms the main ideas of this contribution in the form of a doxology:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen!

Lord, may I calmly accept whatever this day may bring me and consecrate myself entirely to Your holy will. Guide me and help me in every hour of this day. Control my thoughts and feelings in all my actions and words. When unforeseen circumstances arise, do not let me forget that everything comes from You.

Teach me to be fair to my brothers and sisters, never to provoke trouble or cause pain. Control my will and teach me to pray, believe, hope, suffer, forgive and love.

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace; where there is hatred, let me spread love; where there is offense, forgiveness; where there is discord, unity; hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, joy where there is sadness.

O divine Master, let me give comfort instead of receiving it; let me understand others instead of being understood; let me love others instead of being loved. For when we forgive, we are forgiven. When we give, we receive, and when we die, we are born to Eternal Life.

Holy Spirit, help me to consecrate this whole life to my Savior and to my God.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, it is better not to live than to live without You. I thank You, O God, for the gift of this day and for all the good deeds You will help me to accomplish today.

Merciful God, free me from the desire for comfort and make me worthy at all times to forget myself for love of You and of my brothers and sisters, for this You have given me life. Help me to reject

everything that does not come from You and to accept everything that comes from You with pious faith, hope and love.

Give me the courage to serve You with dignity, to place justice above profit, to place noble deeds above fleeting pleasures, to place others above myself, and to fulfill Your commandment of love.

May the light of Your beauty, goodness and love shine in my soul.

“The Love of Christ Urges Us On”: Reflections on Reconciliation

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian

“Reconciliation” is a word loaded with meaning and employed in all sorts of circumstances. But it has a special meaning, and a special urgency, for those who embrace the Christian faith. For us, reconciliation is not simply a “fixing of accounts—as a bookkeeper reconciles his chequebook—but a deeper, inner reality of the human heart.

It is St Paul who gives us our greatest insight into reconciliation: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,” Paul wrote to the church of Corinth. “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

This passage in the Second Letter to the Corinthians is beautifully expressed and in retrospect stands at the centre of what the early Christian movement eventually became.

“For the love of Christ urges us on,” St Paul writes, “because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.”

He goes on: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:14-17).

What beautiful, hopeful words! And yet, leading into this passage, Paul makes the astonishing admission that some people thought he was out of his mind (2 Cor. 5:13) for thinking this way. He doesn’t deny the charge. But he suggests that, if it’s true, then it is a kind of divine madness he suffers from; an unworldly perspective that could come only after one has embraced the incredible, improbable, miraculous reality of Christ’s sacrifice, resurrection, and love.

From this perspective, we can see that reconciliation is both the foundation of life and a ministry we are called to carry out. For Paul, Christ on the cross made our own acts of reconciliation not only possible but mandatory.

Of course, these ideas hold a special urgency for us at a time when our world is a stage not only for the tragedy of war but also for conflict, distrust, and animosity at nearly every level of society. If ever there was a time when the ethic of reconciliation needed to be held up high for all to see, it is our own time, today.

The world in which we live is marred by many kinds of injustice and by the pain of many of its people, its creatures, and even the earth itself. There is terrifying war and violence in many places—between Ukraine and Russia, in the Middle East, Asia, Africa. We are horrified by the ongoing persecution of religious minorities, most notably Christians. And in the United States and Europe, we see clashes of race, class, and ideology eating away at the fabric of society. Meanwhile, people continue to pray and long for peace. There is stark inequality and unfairness: a few feast while many starve. In countless ways, human beings continue to exercise domination over others, to heighten prejudice and exert power to exclude and oppress. The resources of creation continue to be exploited and abused, as repentance and renewal are called for from all of us who share this common home.

As an Armenian clergyman, in the last two years I have seen the spirit of my people crushed by the unprovoked invasion and violent hatred of our homeland’s neighbour, Azerbaijan, and by that country’s ongoing desecration of ancient Armenian Christian cultural artifacts in our holy region of Artsakh.

The territories that have fallen under Azerbaijani control have been ethnically cleansed as a result of the hostilities. A large number of extrajudicial killings are on record—mainly of civilian residents who remained in their homes, mostly elderly and people with disabilities, including women. Following the signature of the tripartite statement on the end of hostilities on 9 November 2020, the Government of Azerbaijan continues its policy of ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh and terrorizes them with various methods. This includes but is not limited to psychological pressure and intimidation, the creation of a humanitarian disaster in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as violating the ceasefire statement and constantly shelling civilian communities. These activities of the Azerbaijani government are part of a systematic state policy of Armenophobia and hatred toward the Armenians that has been acknowledged and condemned by international institutions including the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the International Court of Justice, the European Parliament, and other bodies.

Aggression and genocides happen and proliferate throughout the world as aggressors and authoritarian regimes act with complete impunity and without due condemnation from international human rights organizations or from states that govern with values of democracy and human rights.

We look upon these matters—as well as on the small, personal conflicts afflicting our own lives—and sadly wonder: What place is there in this world for reconciliation?

The love of Christ can move the world to reconciliation and unity. The unity of the church, as witness to reconciliation, is also always to be identified with and connected to its service in and for the transformation of the world. A 1990 World Council of Churches text, *Church and World*, expressed it like this:

In offering its common life in the service of God and God's love for the world, the church has also constantly to struggle both through its presence alongside those who suffer and by its action on their behalf. In this sharing of God's love the church enables them to perceive the suffering love of God in Jesus Christ for them, and the church itself is led to a deeper experience of that love.¹

It is this love that inspires those who follow Christ to draw closer to one another in the unity that is God's gift. Love inspires communion, and love draws us to one another. Christ himself, for love of Jerusalem, cried out, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!" (Luke 13:34). Love, more than ideas and ideals, gathers, inspires, and creates unity. The church is a sign of this sacrificial love of Christ in the world, and the people of the church are servants of the gospel so that, through their love, both in attitude and in practice, they may inspire those beyond the walls of the church.

The lesson we must draw is that it is Christ alone who moves the world to reconciliation and unity with his love, with his Father and his Holy Spirit.

What we see most of all from those remarkable words of St Paul is that authentic reconciliation can be grounded only in truth. Restoring the friendship between two estranged parties cannot be done on a foundation of illusion, apathy, or deceit. It must be built on the mutual recognition and

¹ *Church and World*, Faith and Order Paper 151, §38 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.158/page/32/mode/2up>.

agreement on matters of fact and history; it requires, if need be, a confessional acknowledgement of the great matters of truth that stand above and apart from every conflict and cause of estrangement.

And the greatest truth of all—the very heart of the matter—is the truth of Christ. Acknowledgement of that truth is surely the key that will open the doors of unity and friendship among individuals, peoples, and nations. It will not happen today or even this year. But perhaps the seeds of reconciliation we plant today—in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in accordance with his example—will be the beginning of a new period of mutual outreach and an example for our troubled world.

Reconciliation and Unity Are the Purpose of the Divine Love Incarnate in Jesus Christ

Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest and Hungary

This is the first time in the history of the World Council of Churches (WCC) that the word “love” has been included in the assembly theme—“Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” After all, love is the essential idea of Christianity: “Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7–8), the apostle says.

In the New Testament, the ontological abyss between God and flesh, between divinity and humanity, is overcome by the Word of God becoming flesh. While before that God participated in the life of the people of Israel as though from the sidelines, from above, from heaven, now the Son of God comes to earth and becomes part of human history. At the same time, he, as before, remains the pre-eternal divine Word, inseparable from God. It is Jesus Christ who brings to us the all-abundant love of the Creator of the universe.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Based on these words of the apostle John, many holy fathers taught that the cause of Jesus’ passion was not the price to be paid for human sins, not the ransom to be given to the devil or God, but God’s love for people. As St Isaac the Syrian wrote,

God the Lord surrendered His own Son to death on the Cross for the fervent love of creation . . . This was not, however, because He could not have redeemed us in another way, but so that His surpassing love, manifested hereby, might be a teacher unto us. And by the death of His only-begotten Son He made us near to Himself. For the sake of His love for us and in obedience to His Father, Christ joyfully took upon Himself insult and sorrow.¹

The sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, his suffering, death, and resurrection, gave unity unto humankind. And in this feat of redemption committed by the Saviour, Gregory the Theologian sees the greatest miracle that should

¹ St Isaac the Syrian, *De perfectione religiosa*, 509.

be glorified rather than deliberated on in theological writings. “There arose within us a need for a God made flesh and made dead, that we might live,” he writes.

We were put to death together with Him, that we might be cleansed; we rose again with Him because we were put to death with Him; we were glorified with Him, because we rose again with Him. Many indeed are the miracles of that time: God crucified; the sun darkened and again rekindled . . . the veil rent; the Blood and Water shed from His Side . . . the rocks rent . . . the dead raised . . . the Signs at the Sepulchre and after the Sepulchre . . . and yet none of these equal to the Miracle of my salvation. A few drops of Blood recreate the whole world . . . drawing us together and compressing us into unity.²

The arms of the Saviour stretched out on the cross embrace all ends of the world, uniting all people into “one man” whom the Saviour places “in the bosom of one Deity,” that is, reunites him with God and deifies, St Gregory says.³ We find the same image in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem: “He stretched out His arms on the Cross, that He might embrace the ends of the world.”⁴ And in the liturgical texts of Holy Week we read: “Thou hast stretched out Thine arms and united all that before was separated . . . Stretched out upon the Wood, Thou hast drawn mortal men to unity.”

By his Son’s passion, the Lord granted unto us reconciliation with himself and with the entire humankind: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). It corresponds to the words of John Chrysostom, who writes: “For why did God not spare His only begotten Son, but delivered Him up, although the only one He had? It was that He might reconcile to Himself those who were disposed towards Him as enemies, and make them His peculiar people.”⁵ It was no God who was at enmity with humankind, but humankind was at enmity with God. Therefore, the sacrifice of the Son of God was the sacrifice of reconciliation. Yet, again, thanks to this sacrifice,

² St Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 45, 28-29 // PG 36, 661–64.

³ St Gregory, *Carmina moralia* 1 // PG 37, 535.

⁴ St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture*, 13.

⁵ St John Chrysostom, *Treatise on the Priesthood*, Book II // PG 48.

it was not God who reconciled with humankind, but humankind reconciled with God.

According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, the Saviour endured sufferings to redeem every human being. It is not for the sake of some abstract masses, some conceptual and generalized “Adam,” that Christ dies; he dies for the sake of every person, every individual Adam. And we all ought to follow the path of Christ and, finding strength in his love, strive for unity and reconciliation. Yet, regretfully, our thoughts and actions do not always accord with the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the last assembly, sorrowful events have happened in the family of Eastern Orthodox churches. Seeds of discord had been sown in the soil of our blessed communion. And thorns sprang up.

But let us try to unite in order to bear common witness to gospel values. We may be divided in the understanding of certain church-canonical or political realities, but we are united in our faith in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and in the 2000-year Tradition of Christ’s church, which we are called to reverently preserve.

We and our brothers and sisters from the Oriental Orthodox churches have always been viewed as one family in the World Council of Churches. Let us strengthen this unity and together glorify the name of Christ in all parts of the globe, wherever we have our parishes and faithful. The basic moral values, the virtue of mercy and works of love in Christ—this is what we all hold dear. And, most importantly, it is Christ himself who is dear to us—he who is the sole and unwavering foundation of our life, its cornerstone, the pillar and ground of the truth. All noble impulses of our soul are motivated by him and for his sake. So let us kindle this shared love for God and Saviour; let us bear this witness before those near and those far away, working tirelessly side by side.

The Russian Orthodox Church has maintained dialogue with the Armenian Apostolic Church for many decades and in recent years has initiated the establishment of bilateral commissions with the Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian Orthodox, and Malankara churches. This work has already proved to be fruitful. It is as though we open up to each other anew.

Before the assembly begins, all churches have ample opportunities to participate fully in discussions. Why is it so? Because we are not engaged in

disputes over primacy and any prerogative rights of one brother over the others. Here everyone can speak, defend his opinion, and be heard.

We believe in one, holy, catholic church founded by the Lord to bear witness to him in every corner of the earth. The apostles, who brought the glad tidings of Christ to people and endured torments and even death for it, were taught by the Lord himself not to think about superiority over each other. The youngest among them was the beloved disciple of Christ, but when he and his brother asked about primacy, they were rebuked by the Lord, who said, “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave” (Matt. 20:25-27).

So how can we exalt and honour ourselves in front of each other except for showing desire to serve our brethren? How can we believe that one church, even the smallest one, is less important to God than the other, even a more ancient and larger one? The grace works in the same way in every church founded by God. We are not of Paul, of Apollos, or of Cephas; we are of Christ (see 1 Cor. 1:12).

We all are called to bear witness about the Tradition of the church of the first centuries. The state of morality in present-day society urges us to raise our voice in defence of the traditional values of family and marriage, in defence of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. We should react to the loss of every moral authority in today’s society, to the triumph of falsehood and injustice, by bearing firm and unanimous witness to Christ, the Saviour of every human being. Our contemporaries need guidance and fundamental life principles, and it is only the Lord Jesus Christ who can give it. If it is not us, then who will bring this witness to them?

We must not be indifferent, seeing certain parts of the Western Christian world sliding into the abyss of absolute rejection of the Gospel and Christ and following the path of moral relativism and degradation. Our primary duty is to do all we can to reach out to strayed hearts, casting aside compromises and politesse. It is only the clear example of faithfulness to the commandments of God and a firm word that can produce results to “by any means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Here is a concrete example. In February 2022, the WCC central committee adopted a document entitled “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way: Invitation

to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality – A Resource for Reflection and Action.” It stated, in particular: “Central Committee receives with appreciation the Conversation on the Pilgrim Way as a resource document for member churches and ecumenical partners interested in dialogue on issues of human sexuality.” The text itself is relatively balanced. However, the contents of the appendix to it, which was not presented at the central committee meeting, is unacceptable for Orthodox Christians, since it justifies LGBT ideology. It was discussed at the executive committee meeting, and a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church managed to temporarily veto its adoption. We must make sure that this appendix is not adopted at the upcoming meetings of the executive and central committees and is not included in the document.

We are here to remind people of reconciliation and unity at a time when the world is being torn apart by conflicts and hatred. As Christians, we cannot remain indifferent to the tragedies unfolding before our eyes. Cries for help by millions of our brothers and sisters in various parts of the world must not remain the voice of one crying in the wilderness. These cries need to evoke a response in our hearts and in joint actions of our churches.

The suffering of people in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and African countries is incalculable. It should be noted that the WCC is one of the few Christian organizations acting in response to the human afflictions caused by armed conflicts and other tragic circumstances. I would like to point out that for the period between the 10th and 11th assemblies, the WCC did much to settle the situation in West Papua, Ethiopia, Colombia, the Middle East, and other parts of the world. On behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church, which took part in those initiatives, I thank the WCC leadership and the engaged working bodies.

The armed confrontation in Ukraine, claiming people’s lives, gives the Russian Church a special pain. Our faithful are on both sides. We mourn for all victims of the conflict regardless of their nationality and occupation, age and gender, and we believe that in this situation the church can have no message other than the peace-making one. With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church in all its canonical territory lifts up daily prayers for the soonest restoration of peace, mindful that it should be lasting and long term and, therefore, based on justice.

However, prayer alone is insufficient. It is important to help those afflicted. Over a million refugees have crossed the Russian border, and the church is

carrying out humanitarian work all over the country, unprecedented in scale, to provide emergency relief for people. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, historically and spiritually tied with the Russian Church as its self-governing part, is doing colossal work to render aid to displaced persons. Millions of refugees have found themselves in Poland, Romania, and other countries. We are grateful to the Polish, Romanian, and other local Orthodox churches, to non-Orthodox Christians, and to all people of goodwill who are helping the refugees. This is our common tragedy, and we have to go through it together.

Our Western partners often ask our church why we do not make certain statements or criticize this or that political decision. When people are in trouble, they do not need statements that have zero effect but rather actions that will save them and provide emergency assistance. When an opportunity presents itself to provide real relief to people, we do not miss it.

Here is an example. Some days ago, the evacuation of civilians held captive at the Azovstal plant in Mariupol was completed. The Russian Orthodox Church did not stand aside. On 29 April, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia called Metropolitan Mitrofan of Gorlovka and Slavyansk and asked him to go to Mariupol to take part in the negotiations and evacuation. On 30 April and 1 May, 101 civilians, including 6 children, were taken to safe places. Metropolitan Mitrofan was among the first to meet them.

This is what Metropolitan Mitrofan tells us about the events of 30 April:

At three in the morning I left Gorlovka, and at seven was in Bezymennoye village, having joined a convoy of representatives who were to take part in the process . . . The negotiations, conducted in two stages, with breaks and consultations, were concluded at around 2:00 p.m., and all those involved started moving in the direction of the Azovstal steelworks. The endpoint was the crossroads in front of the Azovstal bridge. The bridge was mined at the time . . . Over ten mines were removed from the bridge during demining. After that we proceeded to a meeting point . . . It was already twilight and it almost grew dark when a bus arrived from the Azovstal territory. Three Ukrainian military men brought people. They were twenty-one, including six children. There was even a six-month-old infant among them . . . I greeted all those coming out of the Azovstal with the words “Christ is Risen!” and conveyed to them greetings and words

of encouragement from His Holiness the Patriarch. Many of them were crying. First of all, we needed to say to them that everything was alright, that the war was over for them, and convince them that now they were safe. The elderly needed help walking and carrying their bags . . . We explained to the people that now they were safe, that they were going to a refugee camp where there would be enough food and water and they would receive medical and legal aid . . . that afterwards, each of them would have a choice, either to go to the territory of Ukraine, to Zaporozhye, or to stay here.

On 1 May, the process of evacuation continued, and more and more people were taken to a safe place. Metropolitan Mitrofan said:

To make the evacuation of civilians from the Azovstal plant possible, [a] great many people got involved, doing their job: negotiators, the military, medical doctors and many other professionals. Ceasefire was being maintained literally in manual mode, so that nothing would have fired and the process would not have been disrupted. All people took great care, working at their limit. I would like to express gratitude to His Holiness the Patriarch, for he took the situation to heart and did everything within his power to bring about the rescue of civilians from the Mariupol underground. And I was fortunate to see the reward – the eyes of the people coming out of there, their joy at realizing that now their life is no longer in danger . . . Thanks to tremendous work done by many people, one hundred and one persons are alive now.

On 6 May, 51 people were evacuated from the Azovstal. Both Russia and Ukraine announced that the evacuation of civilians had been completed. Metropolitan Mitrofan took part in the action. A grand total of 152 human lives were saved.

This is just one example of the work that the Russian Orthodox Church is doing today to save people in affliction, but there are many such examples. As Metropolitan Mitrofan said,

Of course, it would be wrong to consider the evacuation of civilians from the Azovstal plant as a starting point in the Church's intensified efforts to render aid to the people affected by hostilities. This is not a starting point, but one of the striking episodes. The Church has always helped and will continue to help people who have found

themselves in a difficult situation. Priests in Mariupol are doing this work every day, distributing humanitarian aid, helping to search for relatives, and participating in all processes not on instructions from above, but inspired by Christian motives.

Day after day, strenuous humanitarian and peace-making activities are being carried out, much of which remain unseen. We invite all interested parties to join efforts with us in rendering aid to the suffering. I think that time and again, our conflict-torn world will need Christians' help.

I believe that the theme "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity," chosen for the 11th Assembly, is timely. It allows us to focus on the major task ahead of us for the next few years since, today as never before, the world is divided and immersed in mutual enmity. Our civilization will be saved by reconciliation and unity, which for Christians are unthinkable without Christ the Incarnate Love, who gives us the only true purpose in life.

Understanding Love as Trinitarian Truth: Orthodox Considerations

Metropolitan Prof. Dr Nifon of Târgoviște

Introduction

The theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation *and* unity,” presupposes a serious reflection on this Christological affirmation at pan-Orthodox and ecumenical levels. The desire is to reach a deep consensus, both at a pan-Orthodox level and hopefully at a pan-Christian one, on understanding our trinitarian God, who is defined by St John the Evangelist as just “love” (1 John 4:8-9).

The four words that define the theme of the assembly are powerfully expressed from faith and missionary points of view: Christ, love, reconciliation, unity.

The assembly is convened at a time of unhappy provocations by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed the vulnerability of all humankind in terms of inequalities and divisions in a world dominated by dreadful realities of privilege and oppressions of economic, social, and ethnic injustices.¹ Around the world, politics of fear and hate divide and kill people. There are many European and global trends that the assembly must address: the weakening of democracy; the damaging consequences of the digital revolution; the militarization of conflict and warfare that is making millions of people refugees; globalization as a challenge for those who believe, rightly or wrongly, that an eventual global culture threatens specific individual and ethnic cultures. For example, people in the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe and the Middle East have lived for centuries in multicultural and multireligious contexts; they learned, in general, to live with others, to help and respect each other; we need to recognize that we are living in a multireligious environment in which Christians should engage in dialogue and cooperation.

¹ See: *Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: A Reflection on the Theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe, 2022* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/reflection-on-the-theme-of-the-11th-assembly>.

Some of these manifestations are not new, but the churches in the assembly and beyond need to be engaged in a deep and radical change to contribute to the saving of humanity through reconciliation and unity.

Bearing in mind all of these issues, the assembly has the chance to explore how Christ's love opens ways of understanding and acting for achieving unity and reconciliation. We should concentrate on trinitarian theology, seeking to develop further the vision of the document *Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC*, on the church and Christian unity.²

Understanding the Truth as Love: A Trinitarian Approach

We should start our reflection on our theme in a wider sense from Christology, the cosmic Christ, which considers creation as existing and living by the presence of God who is love in the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity exist in a communion of love, which is the common characteristic of the whole of the Trinity. Therefore, our Lord Christ is the transforming force in the world by the power of love.³ That is why we should strongly believe that the Triune God is the source and the model of church unity. Life is essentially a self-giving and receiving process.

If we contemplate Rublev's icon of the Trinity, for example, the figures of the Son and the Holy Spirit are turned toward the Father, who is the source of their life and whom they call "Abba" or "Father" (Mark 14:36; Gal. 4:6). That flow of love within the Trinity can also be seen in the history of salvation, in which the process of salvation and sanctification of the world is accomplished in the flow of love. The faces of the three Persons, whose eyes are centred on the cup of crucified love, are expressive of infinite tenderness and compassion. The Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit into the created world to involve the world with the divine life. While the Father gives the Son for the life of the world, the Son, having become human, gives himself to the Father as a sacrifice for the sin and life of the world.⁴ That is why he is, for eternity, our high priest as the sign of the glory of his sacrificial love. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and touched by the love of the Father

² "The CUV Document," in *Assembly Workbook: Harare, 1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 97–116.

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Cross Is the Proof of God's Love for Us*, audio recording (1990), <https://otelders.org/theology-and-spirituality/cross-proof-gods-love-us-fr-dumitru-staniloae/?amp=1>.

⁴ Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea, *Confessing the Truth in Love* (Bucharest: Basilica, 2008), 16–17; Stăniloae, *The Cross Is the Proof*.

and the Son, we call Christ “Lord” (Rom. 8:15). Therefore, the indivisible Trinity is the model and source of Church’s unity due to its absolute communion in love: “That they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11), prayed the incarnated Son for his disciples to the Father. One can see clearly that this image of the divine Trinity rules out all selfishness, whether individual or collective—all life-destroying division or subordination. It invites all humanity to make this world a permanent Eucharist of love, a feast of life full of justice, peace, and harmony.

Life, in humanity and even in material creation, is a sign of God’s love and presence, which gives itself in the form of a relationship to humanity. It is the epiphany of God’s Spirit, the personal and living manifestation of the Creator, Pantocrator. The life of the creation flows from its relationship with the living God. The cosmic Logos became the incarnated Logos: “this life was revealed” (1 John 1:2). Therefore, life is not just a relationship but the ontological exchange between God and humanity through the incarnation of the Son of God. The incarnated Logos visibly brings the life of the Holy Trinity itself, which means perfect communion in love (John 10:10). That is why Jesus Christ is the life of the world in both creation and incarnation, thus achieving the restoration of life in its fullness.

We could say that life is a matter of fellowship in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), so that the church is nothing other than the sacramental integration into the world of Christ himself through the living and visible witness to the resurrection. He himself gathers Christians as a church by the power of the Holy Spirit, who makes us a new creation. It is the Spirit who is involved when the bread and wine become the Eucharist. The Spirit prolongs in us the Son’s love for our Father and the Father’s love for us. In every action, the Spirit sanctifies and consecrates persons in fellowship.

Therefore, we could say that life is a matter of love, but also of freedom and sacrifice (John 13:34). It is the eruption of that divine love for all humankind when God’s love has been poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). That is the richness of Christians, as well as their eternal freedom and possession, which may be shared without frontiers. Love is the criterion for testing the value of everything in our life. The beauty and usefulness of life depend on openness to others in love and solidarity. Sharing our love means surrendering our life to others: we have fellowship with one another (John 15:5). Life implies simplicity and readiness to meet the suffering Christ in our midst.

Concerning the meaning of eternal life, I would like to say that this is a new reality which penetrates into the present created order through the incar-

nation and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 1:2). Life in this tangible universe, bound by the laws of time and space, is not at the same level with the life of the kingdom of God. That is because our Lord lives at the level of God both as the Son of God and Son of Man, the eternal future of humankind.⁵

Confessing the Truth as Love in Celebrating the Glory of God

The manifestation of the glory of God in Christ is accomplished primarily by self-emptying crucified love. This remains permanently as the revolutionary aspect of divine love, which differs decisively from common expression of human glory. With our thoughts polluted by the conventionalities of the world, we have a hard time reconciling humility or humbleness with glory. Love for the glory of humanity stands in opposition to love for the glory of God (John 12:43); whoever desires human glory cannot work authentically in a missionary way to manifest the glory of God.⁶ Therefore, the more one becomes familiar with and receives the light of the divine glory, the more he or she is liberated from the fascination of worldly recognition, fame, power, and authority.⁷

The hour par excellence for the glory of God is the time for the free acceptance of the passion of Christ. We remember the words used by the Lord during the mystical/last supper, as a festive prelude and summary of what he would reveal about love, the way to the Father, the coming of the Spirit, the meaning of this martyrdom: “Now the Son of Man has been glorified . . . If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him” (John 13:31-32).

The glory of God can be lived and revealed in no other context except that of crucified love. This is the deep conviction of the saints. This is how St Symeon the New Theologian expressed it:

We should also glorify our heavenly Father Who accepted to be called Father, and be glorified by this with the glory of Jesus, which He had with the Father before the world was created. These things are the cross, that is the death of everything worldly, sorrows, temptations

⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1997), 93–94.

⁶ Archbishop Anastasios, *Mission in Christ's Way: An Orthodox Understanding of Mission* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), 169–70.

⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Witness through Holiness of Life,” in *Martyrial/Mission: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, ed. Ion Bria (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1980), 48–49.

and whatever other sufferings of Christ. By enduring these with much patience, we imitate the sufferings of Christ, the source of love.⁸

So, we realize that the free and willing acceptance of suffering in the name of love and righteousness is not opposed to the life of doxology. On the contrary, it supports it, and we experience a true eschatological dimension (2 Cor.3, 17).

Blessed are those who can see the glory of God with participation in the suffering of humanity; in the poverty of the poor of this world; in the tribulations caused by wars; in the weakness of the weak; in the thirst for justice and peace.

Doxology, Spirituality, and Reconciliation

Therefore, the doxological stance and way of life does not mean a hymnological escape into some closed idyllic environment. Rather, it means a universal openness, participation in the problems of the whole of humanity in a very dynamic way.⁹ The brilliant shining lives of the saints reflect such a living doxology of the humility and the love of Christ, preserving a missionary conviction that is timely for every person, every age, and every society. That is why the doxological movement of the believer and of the church is an uninterrupted dynamic development; it is a continuous journey from glory to glory, as St Gregory of Nyssa writes: “Let the believer be changed from the better by being transformed from glory to glory through daily growth, always advancing toward perfection.”¹⁰

Mission, ministry, and unity

The mission of the servants of God and his church is to make the ecclesial community and the ordained person relational not only to each other and the world but also with regard to the other communities that exist or have existed in the world. The sin of individualism, which is overcome in the *koinonia* of the Spirit, is no less serious if applied to a community than when it is applied to individual Christians. Just as an old Latin saying expresses,

⁸ St Symeon the New Theologian, “Theological and Practical Chapters,” in *The Philokalia of the Holy Neptic Fathers* (Thessaloniki, 1983), vol. 19A, 524.

⁹ Anastasios, *Mission in Christ’s Way*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2010), 173–74.

¹⁰ St Gregory of Nyssa, “To Olympias on Perfections” (Thessaloniki, 1980), vol. 8, 422.

unus christianus nullus christianus, in the same way a eucharistic community which deliberately lives in isolation from other communities is not an ecclesial community. This is what renders the church “universal” (catholic), not only on the level of “here and now,” but also on that of “everywhere and always.”¹¹

Now, the realization of this relation and unity in time and space must take place in such a way as to not destroy the unity of the local community. This reason for this is that once this unity is destroyed, individualism again makes its appearance.

Holy Trinity: Expression of communion of love

The mystery of the cross of Christ and of his resurrection is the window and light through which the church experiences the mystery of the divine Trinity as eternal love and sees the inner coherence and unity of the otherwise apparently diverse biblical witnesses related to the mystery of the triune God. This life and activity of the Holy Trinity is an eternal and perfect communion of love, a permanent movement of mutual and fully self-offering of each person to the others and of all of them to the world (John 10:17; 17:4; Phil. 2:6-11). The Trinitarian revelation shows that ultimately, the truth, life, and unity in God are identical with *koinonia* (communion). In this way, we think in terms of ecumenical affirmation of the Holy Trinity. To promote an ecumenical ecclesiology of communion based on an ecumenical reflection on the very nature of the church appears today to continue to be one of the most urgent ecumenical tasks.¹²

Considerations on the European context

It is well known that Europe is characterized by an increasingly secular and pluralistic society. We must have the courage to recognize that many of the European churches encounter religious illiteracy and ignorance among decision makers and politicians. That is why many churches in Europe, including the Orthodox churches in countries belonging or not belonging to the European Union, express their concerns and think of enhancing religious education at all levels. The affirmation of the role of churches and faith communities in society should be the main preoccupation of the European

¹¹ St Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechesis Mystagogy,” 18, 23, PG 33:1044; Vincent of Lerins, *Com. 2 PL*, 50: 640.

¹² Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea, *Confessing the Truth in Love: Orthodox Perceptions of Life, Mission and Unity* (Bucharest: Basilica, 2008); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM, 1991), 35–37.

churches. The European region should “claim and safeguard faith as a legitimate element in a European social and political discourse.”¹³

Europe is home to many refugees from all over the world, particularly from the Middle East and lately from Ukraine, due to bloody conflicts and wars. Our duty today is to struggle for a sustainable peace while intensifying our effort for peace and reconciliation. We should realize that for biblical theology, peace is much more than the mere silence of arms. It is a state of spiritual harmony, a state of fulfillment, both personal and relational. We should also realize that under no circumstances are wars to be considered blessed or holy. Any conflicts must be solved by dialogue and diplomatic negotiations. In the struggle for peace, it is not enough to work for the resolution of conflicts: we must also dialogue and work to heal wounded memories, knowing that wounded memories are the seeds of tomorrow’s conflicts. To achieve a lasting peace, we must know that in many places on the European continent—but also within the European society as a whole—such past wounds remain and need to be healed. So, when we make a common sincere Christian analysis of those wounds, it allows memories to be healed, and thus we convert the silence of arms into lasting peace.

We should also be aware that a lasting peace without justice is not possible. Speaking of Europe, we should remember that the 1989 Basel Ecumenical Assembly stressed that wonderful lesson which is still valid today for our European continent: there is no peace without justice, and no justice without care for creation. As churches, we must be concerned with justice, working together continually to take into account the legitimate aspirations of individuals and nations, particularly in the areas of health, education, employment for refugees, recognition of fundamental freedoms, security, and respect for individual and collective identities. These should be our goals of a Europe beyond the pandemic. Our churches should meet the challenges of secularization, pluralization, and globalization; at the same time, we should learn to welcome and accompany the aspirations of our contemporaries in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, let us be convinced that where human hatred and terrible violence undermine peace, we should build our Gospel message for achieving reconciliation in all those who are seized by mistrust and suspicion. Let us strengthen our hope in salvation by our Triune God.

¹³ Joint Committee Declaration, Conference of European Churches / Council of European Bishops’ Conferences, Bratislava, 2022, <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CEC-CCEE-Joint-Declaration-EN.pdf>.

Commitment to the struggle for reconciliation, solidarity, and unity

The biblical, traditional, and ecclesiological perspective of the message of life is not isolated from people's struggle for freedom, justice, food, peace, or solidarity in times of dreadful conflicts, nor is it removed from action to confront powers which are denying people basic rights and a peaceful existence. The issues of violence, oppression, and human survival in some parts of the world must be approached from a more realistic perspective by understanding the causes of injustice and violence. The theology of peace and the ethic of social justice and solidarity are essential parts of our Christian commitment, particularly today.

Since we strongly believe that Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity, we should try to challenge directly our understanding of the relationship between unity, common witness, solidarity, and warm hospitality, especially with the multitude of refugees in Europe and other parts of the world.

We should continue to remind to our sisters and brothers of our ecumenical fellowship that the church, by its very being, is a eucharistic community. We consider that communion is not a matter of compromise or lack of respect for the essentials of Christian faith and ecclesiastical structure. One test of the ecumenical life today would be to renew our efforts to affirm our faith teachings toward the fuller communion.

The theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches indeed has great significance: for reconciliation in our troubled world, for the unity which we so much desire, and for continuous witness and service for all Christians, including very much for the Orthodox. We should strongly believe that we must come out of the assembly greatly strengthened in our faith and in the love of Christ, who continues to reconcile and unite us.

Concluding Remarks

In concluding, referring to the unity of the church, I would like to say that what the Orthodox expect from the ecumenical endeavour is that one day, all churches may find one another within the full *koinonia* and witness of the integrity of the apostolic faith while keeping a plurality of particular identities and expressions, as experienced today even among the many Orthodox churches. In this creative process, we may rediscover or recover each other while we witness, challenge, assist, support, and help, so that together we may transform the world with the power of Christ's love.

It gives me great joy to recall a brief text from the WCC assembly in New Delhi in 1961, when all the Orthodox churches became members of the WCC:

No static restoration of all forms is anticipated, but rather a dynamic recovery of perennial ethos, which only can secure the true agreement “of all ages.” Nor should there be a rigid uniformity, since the same faith, mysterious in its essence and unfathomable adequately in the formulas of human reason, can be expressed accurately in different manners. The immediate objective of the ecumenical search is, according to the Orthodox understanding, a reintegration of the Christian mind, a recovery of apostolic tradition, a fullness of Christian vision and belief, in agreement with all ages.¹⁴

The question is whether the assembly will debate the dialogue of love and truth or the emphasis will be of a conflictual nature, exploring issues of personal and social ethics only.

The assembly in Karlsruhe has a very old and yet new and dynamic theme, love, coming from biblical and Christological roots—that is, the love of Christ. In other words, by invoking love, we have an ecumenism of the heart. In our time, full of the COVID-19 pandemic, injustice, and war, we need to assure the world of our embracing love in Jesus Christ, the healer of humanity. It is, indeed, a prophetic term in difficult times and therefore represents a message full of love and hope.

Finally, we could say that the term “unity” expresses the traditional line going back to the very foundation of the ecumenical movement, since working for the unity of the churches is the very basis of all ecumenical work.

¹⁴ See *Orthodox Vision of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports of the Ecumenical Movement 1902–1992*, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 30–31.

Affirming the Wholeness of Life

Metropolitan Dr Geevarghese Coorilos Nalunnakkal

Introduction

We live in a world where life is imperilled. The dominant civilisation today appears to be one that is life denying and life threatening. The COVID-19 pandemic has already taken away millions of lives and the threat has not receded as yet. The virus challenges us as a “summons to faith.”¹ The pandemic has raised a number of questions about the fragility of life and its ethical ramifications for our faith. War being a threat to all forms of life continues to be a contemporary reality as we confront it in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflicts. With fascist and totalitarian regimes and rulers in power in several countries, nuclear threats loom large. Ever growing economic disparity and the consequent impoverishment of the poor, caused mainly by the elitist and pro-rich neo-liberal market economy continues to pose challenges to human lives worldwide. Unjust systems of hierarchies and domination based on caste, colour, creed, race, gender and so on, expressed these days through xenophobia and a politics of fear and hatred, lives of many, especially those of socially marginalised and minority communities are constantly under threat. Perhaps, the most serious of all threats to life today is being caused by the phenomenon of climate change, itself a consequence of human greed and indiscriminate exploitation of nature and its resources. In short, life in its manifold forms is in peril- on all counts and at all levels. It is in this context of life being threatened by various global forces of injustice that these Biblical and theological reflections on life, “life in its fullness” or “wholeness of life,” particularly in the setting of the upcoming 11th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Germany, are offered here.

“Life” in the WCC Events

The theme of “life” has featured directly and otherwise in several major events of the World Council of Churches. To cite a couple of examples, the 6th General Assembly of the WCC had “Jesus Christ: The Life of the World” as its main theme. The Orthodox theological reflections on this

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Virus: A Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*, (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2020).

theme are available in the form of a publication². Similarly the theme of the 10th Assembly of the WCC was also “life” centric and theo-centric. “God of Life, Lead us into Justice and Reconciliation” was the theme of the 10th Assembly held in Busan, South Korea. An Orthodox Pre-Assembly was held prior to the Busan Assembly and offered Orthodox theological reflections on the Busan Assembly theme. The new Mission Statement of the WCC, “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes,” again has “life” as its central and permeating theme. In other words, “life” as a theological theme has been at the heart of WCC’s thinking over many decades. The theme of the 11th Assembly that we are here to prepare for, particularly from an Orthodox theological perspective; “Christ’s love moves the world to unity and reconciliation” is also related to the theme of “life” mainly because life and love are essentially one and the same. Both life and love are attributes of the Trinitarian God. God is Life and God is Love. Both are very much part and parcel of the very being of God. In Orthodox theology, life is basically a gift of God and therefore a gift of love (agape).

Life: Some Biblical and Theological Perspectives

The two most popular Greek terms that the Bible engages to refer to life are “bios” and “zoe.” Whereas the former implies the given life, the latter indicates the assigned life. J. Robert Nelson³ discusses three Greek words vis-à-vis life; “bios,” understood as life at the very subsistence level, “psyche,” perceived as life at a slightly higher plane than mere subsistence, and “zoe,” meaning life as the Creator intends it to be. Konrad Raiser offers an extensive survey of the various perceptions of life as they are portrayed and interpreted in the Bible and in various confessional and theological traditions⁴. St. John, the Evangelist emphasises that in Jesus Christ, “the eternal Word of God became a human being” (John 1:14) so that whoever believes in Him will have everlasting life” (John 3:16, 10:10). This is what is meant by “wholeness of life” or “fullness of life.” Life in its fullness is meant for all; not reserved as a special privilege for a select few. For St. Paul, righteousness is a pre-requisite for life—wholeness of life. In other words, Paul highlights the ethical components and consequences of life in Christ.

² See Todor Sabeer (Ed.), *The Sofia Consultation: Orthodox Involvement in the World Council of Churches, Orthodox Task Force*, (Geneva: WCC, 1982).

³ Quoted in Konrad Raiser, “Jesus Christ- The Life of the World” in *The Ecumenical Review*, (PDF version), p. 125.

⁴ Raiser, “Jesus Christ – The Life,” pp. 118-126.

Paulos Mor Gregorios offers a theological reading of the concept of life from an Orthodox perspective and speaks about various levels of life⁵.

1. God's life which is self-derived and self-sustaining and therefore eternal and everlasting.
2. Angelic life which is created life but not mixed with evil.
3. Human life which is created but mixed with evil/ affected by sin.
4. Non-human life
5. Anti-God life which are forces of life that are in rebellion against the purpose of God.

All these levels of life, according to Mor Gregorios, are interconnected, influenced and affected by the historic event of incarnation through which Jesus Christ has united levels one and three, that is, God's life and human life. Eventually all forms of life will be united in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Such a holistic perspective that accords value and worth to all forms of life and affirms their interrelatedness needs to be upheld.

From this perspective, two concerns are lifted up here:

Wholeness of life as fullness of humanity

"Together Towards Life," the Mission Statement of the World Council of Churches (hereafter referred to as TTL) affirms that the Triune God is the Creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life and therefore any denial of life would amount to God of life being rejected. It further states that God is constantly inviting us to a mission of life affirmation and "empowers us to bear witness to the vision of "abundant life for all in the new heaven and new earth"⁶.

This implies that the Trinitarian life is expressed and characterised by Trinitarian values of mutual love, sharing, justice, equality and integrity of creation. However, in today's context, wholeness of life is being denied to many when they are marginalised economically, socially and otherwise. For instance, the fullness of life in the Holy Trinity is in clear contradiction with the "abundant" or luxurious life that is being offered by the neo-liberal market economy. Trinitarian life is derived from a Trinitarian econ-

⁵ Paulos Mor Gregorios, "Nuclear War and Human Life" in Robin Gill (Ed)., *A Textbook of Christian Ethics*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Limited, 1985), pp. 400-408.

⁶ Jooseop Keum (Ed)., *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, (Geneva: WCC, 2013), p. 4.

omy, an “economy of life” which fosters mutual sharing, equity and justice; not privatisation and accumulation of wealth and resources by a minority elite. Put differently, Trinitarian life—wholeness of life—challenges all forms of discrimination and exploitation and affirms human life with dignity and intrinsic worth. When human life is devalued, hierarchicalised, and trivialised, it amounts to violation of the image of God in humanity and therefore to rejection of the God of life.

Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics” is of pertinence here. Mbembe defines “necropolitics” as “the use of social and political power to determine how some people may live and how some must die.”⁷ This has particular relevance in contemporary context where for instance, vaccine injustice in the face of COVID pandemic continues to account for innumerable number of human lives in the Global South. Racism, war, imposition of economic sanctions and climate injustice are other contexts where “necropolitics” can be applied today. Mbembe introduces the notion of “death worlds” which he explains as a “new and unique form of social existence in which vast population are subject to conditions that confer upon them the status of “living dead.”⁸ Mbembe identifies racism as the prime mover and driver of “necropolitics” which systematically cheapens the lives of racialised people. Movements such as “Black Lives Matter” need to be understood in the context of “necropolitics” which is about “the “right” to expose people and nature to mortal danger and death.”⁹ Life, both human and non-human, especially that of the marginalised, is subjugated to the powers of death. It is in this context where systems of necropolitics are in force that we address “wholeness of life.”

Giorgio Agamben is another contemporary theorist who has problematised the notion of “life” in a way that speaks meaningfully to the realities of our times. In his seminal work, “Homo Sacer,” he introduces the concept of “bare life” by which he refers to a certain people who find themselves outside the protection of the state and law.¹⁰ These are the slaves, refugees, migrants, racially marginalised, the unborn and so on. The life of these sections of people are taken for granted. Mbembe argues along the same lines

⁷ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” (PDF) in *Public Culture*, 15(1), (Duke University Press), pp. 11-40.

⁸ Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

⁹ Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006, p. 11.

when he delineates what he calls “phenomenology of violence”¹¹ by which sovereign power assumes its “right” to torture and even to do away with the “bare life”—those whose body possesses no materiality and value. These people and their bodies are treated as “things” and commodities. Contemporary contexts of racism, sexism, casteism, and other forms of xenophobia are breeding grounds for “necropolitics” and “phenomenology of violence.” The Trinitarian life—wholeness of life—and the God of life challenges us to confront these evil forces of death and its “necropolitics” and supplant it with an alternative vision of “zoe politics,” a politics that affirms life in its fullness.

For Mbembe, resurrection of Jesus Christ is the source and inspiration for such a politics of life because as he argues, in the event of resurrection, Jesus Christ disclosed the materiality of the crucified and wounded body and transformed it into a different level¹². People with disability have also acknowledged the significance of the “woundedness” of the resurrected body of Christ and used it to develop liberation theologies of disability.¹³

Orthodox theology with its focus on the resurrection of Jesus Christ therefore has so much to offer in affirming life in its abundance, wholeness of life. As indicated earlier, the interconnectedness of life and love is of great pertinence here.

Moltmann makes this connection between life and love in his *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*¹⁴. He defines love as the name we give to the most intense expression in life. Where God is, love is. Likewise, where God is, life is. Where God is experienced, love and life are experienced in its wholeness. Moltmann quotes the Latin saying:

“Ubi amor caritas gaudet, ibi Deus ist.”¹⁵

(Where love rejoices, God is)

What love does is to make us “other centric,” oriented towards our neighbour. As already articulated, it is the Trinitarian God that is the ultimate

¹¹ Achille Mbembe, *On the Post colony*, (London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 234-236.

¹² Mbembe, *On the Post colony*.

¹³ For example, Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberation Theology of Disability*, (BNDP - Abingdon Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fulness of Life*, (WCC: Geneva, 2016), pp. 129-149.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *The Living God*, p. 129

expression of life and love in its fullness and of their reciprocity. This Trinitarian dynamics of perichoresis, the Trinitarian trajectory of love and life is something that we must not lose sight of.

Wholeness of Life as Integrity of Creation

According to Mor Gregorios,¹⁶ all life without any exception is a gift of God and that there is no distinction that is absolute between biological and eternal life. Without one, the other is not possible. In other words, Orthodox theology does not glorify eternal life at the expense of physical/biological life. Biological, social, human, non-human, ecological and eschatological/eternal life are all integrally interconnected. It is, therefore, the failure to recognise this interrelatedness that is the root cause of the environmental crisis.

Life, when seen and approached as a gift of God, assumes ethical and theological ramifications.

Reflecting on Jn. 1:14, St. John Chrysostom says:

“The term “life” used here, refers not only to the creation but also to the concern to preserve what was once created.”¹⁷

The moral imperative to take care of God’s creation is implied here. According to the Biblical creation narratives, God created humanity as part of a web of life and thus all life was accorded intrinsic worth and dignity. TTL picks it up when it states:

“the creation’s life and God’s life are entwined.”¹⁸

Orthodoxy captures this life-centric theology and spirituality particularly through the sacraments.

Nicholas Cabasilas puts it thus:

“The life in Christ begins in this life and is united to Christ through the Holy mysteries.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Mor Gregorios, “Nuclear War and Human Life,” pp. 406-407.

¹⁷ Quoted in William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Vol. 1*, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1987), p. 51.

¹⁸ Jooseop Keum (Ed.), *Together Towards Life*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Konrad Raiser, “Jesus Christ- The Life of the World,” p. 120.

Through the Eucharist—sharing of the bread of life—we are assimilated into the life of Christ. There is hardly any dichotomy between the human and the non-human life here. Elizabeth Theokritoff brings home this affirmation when she states that the bread that we use in the Eucharist is the same bread that sustains our daily life. According to her, when Jesus raises, the God incarnate raises a loaf of bread in his hands and proclaims “this is my body,” a theological statement is being made- that God is indeed present in creation²⁰. Metropolitan Gennadios puts it across in a poignant manner thus:

“When we partake of the body and blood of Christ, God meets us in the very substance of our relation with creation and truly enters into the very being of our biological existence.”²¹

The Orthodox cosmotheandric vision, the interrelatedness of God, humanity and creation is so beautifully expressed in these words.

Thus, the Eucharist becomes the ultimate expression of Orthodox ethos and earthly spirituality. This wholistic understanding of life in Orthodox theology leads us to an organic life style. This is in contradiction with the consumerist and elitist life style which is also environmentally unfriendly and unsustainable. The Orthodox thrust on asceticism and monasticism is an example of this counter cultural way of life. It does challenge the dominant consumerist culture that is one of the root causes of ecological destruction today. Asceticism or monasticism is not understood as escapism or running away from this world but as voluntary and deliberate staying away from the world of greed and over consumption. Monastic mode of living and ascetic life style are about being freed of the fallen state of humanity, the proclivity to “destroy and kill.” It is about living out a new life of freedom from bondage to greed and egoism²². Through this self understanding, humanity here assumes the role of a communicant rather than a consumer. Stated differently, the Orthodox spirituality replaces the spirit of consumerism with a spirituality of “communion of love.” To quote Theokritoff again:

²⁰ Elizabeth Theokritoff, “God’s Creation as Theme of Missionary Witness” in Lukas Vischer (Ed), *Witnessing in the midst of a Suffering Creation*, (Geneva: John Knox Series, 2007), pp. 116-117.

²¹ Gennadios Limouris, “New Challenges, Visions, Signs of Hope: Orthodox Insights on JPIC” in Preman Niles (Ed), *Between the Flood and the Rainbow*, (Geneva: WCC, 1992), p. 118.

²² Theokritoff, “God’s Creation as Theme”, p. 133.

“In this living, matter and material things become means of “communion,” not consumerism.”²³

This theological and spiritual ethos in Orthodoxy will go a long way in affirming and safeguarding the intrinsic worth of creation—wholeness of life.

Conclusion

Trinitarian theology which is the defining feature of Orthodox theology affirms life—wholeness of life. The Triune God is the source of all life. Life as a gift of God and an expression of divine love is a permeating theme in Orthodox theology. This Trinitarian trajectory of life-love dynamics has theological and ethical ramifications. It reminds us about the ethical imperative to respect and take care of life, all life that is. In a world where life in its fullness is being denied to people on account of caste, race, creed, colour, gender and so on; where systemic forces of death are in force (necropolitics), the Orthodox theology of wholeness of life is of great significance and contemporary relevance. The challenge of climate change and its consequences pose a grave threat to life in all its dimensions. Again, the Orthodox theology of wholeness of life where all aspects of life are valued and their interconnectedness affirmed has the potentials to address the challenges of our times in a meaningful manner.

²³ Theokritoff, “God’s Creation as Theme”, p. 133.

Affirming Human Dignity and Our Common Humanity

Prof. Dr Julija Naett Vidovic

Introduction

At the opening of the roundtable on elucidating Christian perspectives on human dignity and human rights, held on 11 April 2022 in Wuppertal, Germany, Rev. Dr Ioan Sauca, acting general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), recalled an important fact: in 1948, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the WCC was founded that same year. Since then, the ecumenical movement has actively promoted international human rights law as an instrument for the protection of the human dignity given by God to every human being.

Although scholars have demonstrated the lack of direct influence of Christian churches on the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as such, it is recognized that the Christian tradition is part of the long tradition of human dignity and human rights. It is also clear that religious traditions are seen as important in maintaining and supporting fundamental human and societal values that a secular state cannot provide. As French philosopher Chantal Delsol recently put it, “A society does not change morals as it changes governments.”¹ Indeed, moral revolutions are very rare phenomena. Today, our societies are going through one of them. It is therefore not surprising that such a phenomenon produces the uneasiness felt within many churches and Christian communities.

I would like to begin by offering a brief historical contextualization of the Christian–Orthodox tradition regarding human dignity, human rights, and their interrelationship and then look for aspects that can contribute to contemporary discussions of human dignity.

Although Christian theology and secular thought consider human dignity as universal, they treat it in very different ways. This also means that human dignity and human rights in their modern sense are not identical to what we can find in a tradition that goes back more than 2000 years. Thus, before addressing a Christian, and particularly Orthodox, perspective on human

¹ Chantal Delsol, *La fin de la chrétienté* (Paris: Cerf, 2021), 45.

dignity and human rights and its relevance to societal, philosophical, ethical, and, no less, pastoral discourse, we must begin by asking: What are the main concerns in contemporary discussions of human dignity?

Four Hermeneutical Keys to Understanding Contemporary Debates

To identify the main concerns in contemporary discussions of human dignity, human rights, and their interrelation, I will mainly rely on various articles that appeared in 2014 in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*.² They allow us, in effect, to identify four dominant dimensions that arise whenever the topic of human dignity is discussed. These four dimensions are distinct but deeply connected.

First, human dignity is understood as an *anthropological* principle signifying the intrinsic value of every human being. The main idea is that human beings have an ontological quality with moral implications that are inseparable from the definition of the human being. It consists of a value that is an intrinsic characteristic of each individual human person, often explained in relation to the special position of human beings in relation to non-human creatures.

Second, human dignity is understood as a *moral* principle, that is, as the foundation of morality, moral rights, and duties. In this context, it designates a moral quality that gives humans the right to be treated by others with respect (*passive dimension*), which finds its expression in negative moral rights, such as the right not to be deprived of one's life. On the other hand, there is a corresponding moral duty to act in accordance with one's dignity, which means respecting the rights of others, such as their right to life (*active dimension*).

Third, human dignity is understood as a *legal* principle, that is, as a formal or material basis for human rights legislation. This presupposes that human dignity is intrinsically linked to moral rights and that from these moral rights certain fundamental negative legal rights can be deduced. For example, the right to life presupposes the right not to be tortured or held in slavery. These rights are included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

² Marcus Düwell, Jens Braarvig, Roger Brownsword, and Dietmar Mieth, eds, *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Finally, human dignity is a *practical* principle. In other words, it can be understood as the object and goal of virtue ethics or practice-oriented normative ethics (such as bioethics). This implies that human dignity must be put into practice in everyday life (which was strongly emphasized in the conference organized by the WCC).³ This dimension is a further specification of the *active dimension*. Whether human beings can live in dignity depends, to a large extent, on many personal and social factors and in the way we construct social relationships. In this sense, promoting the dignity of others is a goal of personal practice; this practical goal focuses on the potential effects of human dignity in shaping social structures and considering the impact of concrete actions.

All these dimensions are at the heart of broad philosophical and social debates and merit careful study from an Orthodox perspective. For the time being, we will use them in this presentation as a hermeneutical starting point to elucidate similar ancient and current concerns of Christian churches and communities.

The Indispensable Historical Contextualization

It is only through a historical rereading that we can fully grasp the ins and outs of the many rich theological, philosophical, political, economic, social, legal, and other concepts that are essential to a proper study of this subject. Here we will limit ourselves to the major theological developments.

We will begin by noting some key elements laid down in the Old Testament. We will continue our analysis with the great turning point marked by the incarnation and resurrection of Christ—the good news of the new covenant. Then we will consider the formation of the Christian anthropological paradigm by the church fathers within the framework of the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, we will not be able to address the important developments that marked the Middle Ages through the rich and complex dialogue between philosophy and theology, or the period of the Renaissance, which left a considerable impact on the understanding of the relationship between theology and science. An Orthodox reading of these two periods of history concerning the anthropological paradigm remains to be done. Therefore, we will move immediately to modernity with a focus on non-religious formulations of the concept of human rights.

³ Christian perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights, held on 11 April 2022 in Wuppertal, Germany.

Biblical Foundation of the *Imago Dei* Paradigm

Human dignity as an anthropological principle is usually identified with the biblical understanding of the *human being as created in the image and likeness of God (imago Dei)*. This statement, of fundamental importance for the further development of Christian theology, is found in three closely related passages in the book of Genesis (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6). These three passages do not specifically define what human dignity is; some interpretation regarding semantics and ancient context is necessary.

According to the oral Torah, without which the written Torah remains unreadable, Adam's unique position in creation gives him an extraordinary responsibility. The human being is responsible for the universe because he is the soul of life.⁴ This means that Adam's thoughts (linked to his divine soul, *neshama*), his words (linked to his breath, *ruah*), and his actions (linked to his vital soul, *nefesh*) have a meaning far beyond what he believes.⁵ He can never say that his behaviour affects only him. Therefore, no details of his actions, words, and thoughts are lost. This also implies that there is an essential solidarity between all creatures, from the humblest to the most complex, from the closest to the most distant: the human being plays a decisive role in this solidarity because he can never free himself from the consequences of his thoughts, words, and actions on other creatures, including plants and animals, considering that they do not concern him, that he is not responsible for them.

Thus, from the beginning of the Old Testament, we perceive the existence of a universal and particular sharing of dignity and responsibility that belongs to humans. According to this vision, it becomes evident that the earth is not thought of simply as a neutral place but as a true partner in the covenant between God and man. Regarding the human being as such, it becomes evident that the paradigm of the *imago Dei* refers to the human being in his or her totality and not to certain specific properties, including external appearance or mental capacities such as freedom of will and intellect. The ultimate vocation of the human being, according to the book of Genesis, is to add strength, light, and holiness to creation. In this sense, we can say that the protection of the life of every living being, and of the human per-

⁴ See Rabbi Haïm de Volozin, *L'âme de la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1986), 11.

⁵ See Catherine Chalié, "Une solidarité très ancienne !" in Institut Supérieur de Pastorale Catéchétique and Institut Supérieur d'Études Œcuméniques, *Responsabilité chrétiennes dans la crise écologique. Quelles solidarités Nouvelles ?* (Paris: Cerf, 2022), 83–84.

son in particular, is the logical consequence of the paradigm of the *imago Dei*, which also excludes natural hierarchies among human beings. Thus, without using the term “dignity,” the biblical text already highlights some elements of our contemporary understanding of human dignity. We should remember these three points:

a) The text refers to its universal, anthropological, and ontological dimensions, which express that all human beings, all members of the species, enjoy a privileged position in the hierarchy between God and the rest of creation and equality among them.

b) From this privileged position derives a moral right and duty of mutual respect and protection of life. Human beings are to exercise their personal freedom and responsibility in their relationships with each other, taking into account the whole of God’s creation.

c) The text could also be interpreted as stipulating the creation of laws and possible ethical aspects applied by referring to the stewardship of human beings toward non-human creation.

In the biblical understanding, all these elements are linked and cannot be separated from each other. The text thus confirms the fundamental equality of all human beings in their ontological dignity and emphasizes their responsibility for common rights and duties. It is therefore consistent with the intention of the text when used to support philosophical and political claims for the universality of human dignity and basic human rights and duties.

Christ as a Revelation of the Paradigm of the *Imago Dei*

In the New Testament, a major shift occurs regarding the paradigm of the *imago Dei*. This paradigm finds its full revelation in the specific role that Christ plays in the relationship between human beings and the revealed triune God.

In the New Testament, there are seven passages where the word “image” is used to refer to the relationship between human beings and God. They are all found in the letters attributed to St Paul. Christ is referred to as the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4 ; Col. 1:15) to which Christians are to be conformed. They are the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), or they are transformed into the image of God (Col. 3:9-10) or into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Christians are created from dust, as are

all human beings, but through faith in Christ, they are created as spiritual beings in his image (1 Cor. 15:49). Human beings are recreated anew through baptism, performed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and conferred by the church community and for the life of the church as the Body of Christ. Therefore, in their earthly life, they are called to transfiguration in order to reach the “perfect stature of Christ,” which is the image of God par excellence. Thus, according to the holy apostle Paul, the expression “image of God” also implies an eschatological quality that human beings will acquire through the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:49; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18).

According to Paul’s testimony, every human being is sacred because he or she is created in the image of the proto-image that is Christ. Therefore, every human being, regardless of gender, race, age, colour, physical condition, marital or social status, ethnic or social origin, sexual orientation, language, culture, religious beliefs, and so on is in the image of Christ. But, at the same time, every human being is also called to the likeness of God. This means that he or she is called to act in God’s way, which is fully revealed by Christ. In other words, the idea of the image and likeness of God does not say much about the specific conditions of “image” or “likeness,” for they are beyond any cataphatic definition. It describes more the act of realizing the given image by acquiring the divine likeness through our conformation to Christ. Father Sergei Bulgakov, a Russian Orthodox theologian, philosopher, and economist, puts it this way:

The image of God in man is not merely a “resemblance” or a “property.” It is a higher reality, a spiritual reality, an energy of God-likeness and God-likening. The union of “image and likeness” is the realization of the image in life, the transition from statics to dynamic, from potentiality to energy. But at the same time the character of the image creates an indissoluble connection between it and the Proto-image, whose copy it is. The image in this sense is not original but derivative. Its whole reality is conditioned precisely by this connection; the image is this connection itself *in actu*.⁶

Having said this, we can deduce that the very concept of relationship, when applied to human persons, implies responsibility and obligation. Human beings are not monads closed in on themselves—that is, individuals without relationships with others. To be created in the image of the triune God

⁶ Sergei Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 202.

and called into the likeness of God does not mean to become an identical copy of God or to merge with the divine substance but to act, live, and create in God's way. In other words, to become God's partner in creation. Therefore, human dignity is not an autonomous good to be enjoyed outside of the relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to this biblical perspective, which will be further developed by the fathers of the church, human freedom, contrary to modern ideas, does not reflect an autonomous "chooser" ("me and my rights") but a responsible human person with a sense of duty. Therefore, human freedom itself is not only a "freedom from" but above all a "freedom for." And the "freedom for," associated with "duties," testifies to the fundamentally relational and not individualistic and egocentric character of the human person.

Thus, when it comes to affirming our human dignity and our common humanity, from the perspective of the New Testament, we can recognize three types of universality.

First, universality is primarily about the universal relationship of all human beings to God. As in the Old Testament, the paradigm of the *imago Dei* reveals that universality is necessary because it is based on the monotheistic God who enters into relationship with all human beings. With Christ, this relationship is open to all humanity. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Therefore, in the paradigm of the *imago Dei*, we can understand the equality of all human persons through their common condition as creatures called to enter into relationship with God. The incarnation of Christ testifies that humans have not lost their dignity as the image of God, even after the fall, for the image of God remains indelible, which means that there remains a possibility for each of them to restore their human life to the fullness of their original calling.

Second, universality concerns universal moral capacity and obligation. The dignity given by God is confirmed by a moral principle present in each person and discerned in the voice of conscience. In Paul's epistle to the Romans, we read: "what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Rom 2:15).

Finally, universality concerns universal salvation. Christ, in his resurrection, offered salvation to all humanity and, through humanity, to all creation.

This eschatological vision also allows us to say that only God can judge the one who acts righteously. In this sense, we believe that the end and purpose of the human person's freedom will be revealed in the age to come, when humanity and all creation will meet their Creator. At the same time, this means that our moral actions should be inspired not only by our immanent condition but also by the age to come.

The Christian Experience of Human Dignity in the Light of the Church Fathers

The experience of Christians in the political and social context of the Roman Empire was an important factor in the development of the notion of human dignity in Christianity.

During religious persecution, Christians felt that even if they risked losing their physical life, they would save their soul and have eternal life if they remained faithful to their conscience and religious beliefs. They recognized that human dignity had an inner character and contrasted it with the outer, social honour to which the Latin term *dignitas* referred. This would gradually change throughout the Constantinian era, involving the creation of a Christian civilization. Following important political, social, and economic changes that have progressively distanced Western societies from Christian civilization, today we perceive the cracks in the moral foundations that have carried this civilization throughout the centuries, and we find ourselves at a loss. In other words, we are changing civilization and, in this sense, Christianity is reclaiming its status as the community of the early church. This may not be so bad in itself. Time will tell. So, what can we learn from this early period of Christianity?

Christians did not create separate cities but lived “where they were.”⁷ They were not political opponents of the existing empire, even if they were sometimes considered as such. This does not mean that they readily approved of the status quo, but that they did not hatch revolutionary plots and even prayed for the state, emperors, peace, and so on. Like all ancient nations, Christians also believed that the state had some “divine” origin.⁸

Thus, even though they felt like strangers in this world, and therefore also in the state (in any state in the world), precisely for this reason, Christians were

⁷ *Ad Diognetum* 5, PG 2, 1167–86.

⁸ See Georges Florovsky, “Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert,” in Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture* (Belmont: Nordland, 1974), 67–100.

not political opponents of the authorities of this world. But this did not mean they were always ready to respect and follow meekly all the decisions of the state. On the contrary, loyalty to the state authorities only went so far, as the decisions of the state did not affect purely ecclesiastical matters. In such cases, the state generally met with strong resistance. This happened not only in the periods of persecution but also in later times, when the Christian religion had begun to be recognized and accepted by the state. As Father Georges Florovsky points out, the Roman Empire did not consider itself competent only for state or secular affairs but also for religious affairs. “The Roman Empire was, in fact, a political-ecclesiastical institution. It was a ‘Church’ as well as a ‘State’; if it had not been both, it would have been alien to the ideas of the ancient world.”⁹ This idea of eternal Rome as a single politico-religious community, whose ultimate goal was the well-being of humans and even their salvation, was adopted in both East and West throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Let us now consider some of the semantic shifts that took place at that time, as they will allow us to better understand our problem.

In classical Latin, the term “dignity” does not refer to an inner quality of the human being, nor is there a universal concept in the sense that dignity is a characteristic of all human beings. In a single remark, Cicero refers to it in the sense of a property of all human beings.¹⁰ The experience of Christians has thus inaugurated a change in the meaning of the term.

In the life of the Christian communities, inspired by the example of Christ, equality of status and disregard for social differences were important values. These communities were open to all social classes and thus expressed their belief in the equal dignity of human beings. The faith encouraged equal treatment of all but did not demand legal guarantees. For example, in his apologetic for Christianity, the *Divine Institutes*, the Roman rhetorical teacher Lactantius proposes to the emperor Constantine and educated Romans an ethical approach based on the concept of universal humanity, which means a humanitarian attitude. Because of his ethics, Lactantius writes lines against the death penalty and the killing of newborns, arguing that human beings are made in the image of God.¹¹

⁹ Florovsky, “Antinomies,” 70.

¹⁰ See Cicero, *On Duties* I, 106.

¹¹ See Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* VI, 10, 1 and VI, 20, 17.

In Greek, “human rights” and “God’s commandments” are rendered by the same word: *dikaionomata* (see Ps. 119:5). Human freedom and human rights are ultimately informed by the justice, truth, and love of God. He who realizes this truth thus recognizes the mystery of God in every man: “The divine Word is mystically present in every commandment . . . Thus, the one who fulfills it also receives the Word that it contains,” affirms St Maximus the Confessor.¹² According to him, the human person is a *microtheos*, an icon of God, but is also, according to St Nils of Ancyra, a *microcosm*, “a world in the world,” an icon of the world. In truth, the role and vocation of the human person consists precisely in reconciling these two icons: God and the world. The final destiny of humanity is to make God present in humanity, in society, and in the world.

By referring to the human being as a person created in the image of God, the fathers of the church made a substantial contribution to anthropology. According to them, being in the image of God is not a purely natural fact, in the sense of having an intrinsic value as a member of the species. It refers more to the personal side of the human, in the sense of a being capable, free as a person to enter into communion with a God who is equally personal: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The relationship of communion is only possible on the level of persons and not on that of natures. Created in the image of God, as persons we are endowed with a spiritual intellect—*we*, which is characterized more concretely as the dynamic of free self-determination (*autexousion*).¹³ A tension between the capacity to be an image of God and the moral challenge of living up to one’s capacity becomes evident.¹⁴ In his book *On the Creation of Man*, St Gregory of

¹² Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Theology* II, 71.

¹³ See Julija Vidovic, *Synergy between Divine Grace and the Will of Man* (Paris: Cerf, 2018).

¹⁴ St Maximus the Confessor notes: “According to that God’s first plan was that man should be ‘in the image and likeness of Himself’, the ‘in the image’ is incorruptibility, immortality, invisibility, which represent the divine, and He gave them to the soul, granting it also with independence (αὐτοδέσποτον) and self-determination (αὐτεξούσιον), which are marks of the divine essence. The ‘according to His likeness’ is impassivity, gentleness, mercy, and everything by which God’s goodness is recognized, all of which are expressions of the action (ἐνεργεῖα) of God. Those aspects of His essence which correspond to ‘in image,’ He gives to the nature of the soul; those of His action He places at our disposal (γνώμη), awaiting the end of man [to see] whether in any way he establishes himself in the likeness of God by the imitation of that by which God is recognized by virtue” (*QD*, III, 1, *CCSG* 10, 170, 5–19).

Nyssa writes: “If the Deity is the fullness of good, and this is his image, then the image finds its likeness to the Archetype by being filled with all love.”¹⁵

From this perspective, we can say that people have rights both as persons and as individuals. As individuals, they have the rights that flow from their natural condition as created beings and that, by intention, protect them (as individuals) from the state and society. These are human rights in the classical sense of natural rights. As persons, they have the right (if possible, within the state and thanks to the state, and if not possible, then outside the state and even despite it) to reach the full realization of their dignity and rights by fulfilling the Christian categorical imperative: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).¹⁶

Medieval and Renaissance philosophers drew on these arguments while emphasizing human capacities and achievements.¹⁷ Our understanding of human dignity is still based on this biblical and patristic input today.

The Non-religious Use of the Concept of Human Dignity in Modernity

During the transition to modernity, several elements contributed to a separation between the fields of theology, law, and philosophy. For various reasons, which are mainly related to the conflicting relations between state and church during these centuries, the Christian churches did not play a pioneering role in the modernization of national states and did not participate in the development of the modern understanding of human rights. These developments showed that human dignity as a moral category and the possibility of deriving human rights can be discussed in public in political, legal, and philosophical contexts without considering that of theology. This means that religious ideas were accepted but not used in the public sphere. Indeed, Reformation theology led to a division between the public sphere, in which it was important to reason and act righteously, and the personal and private relationship to God, where dignity was interpreted as a free gift

¹⁵ St Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Creation of Man*, ch. XVI.

¹⁶ See Vladan Perisic, “Personhood and Nature: An Orthodox Theological Reflection on Human Rights,” in *Theological Disambiguations: An Unconventional Handbook of Orthodox Theology* (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2012), 255.

¹⁷ See Piet Stenbakkers, “Human Dignity in Renaissance Humanism,” in Düwell, Braarvig, Brownsword, and Mieth, eds, *Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*, 92.

from God.¹⁸ In this way, aspects of human dignity related to the *imago Dei* paradigm and natural law were dismissed as relics of history. These developments may explain why human dignity is not present in the classic human rights declarations of the 18th century or in many important treatises based on natural law.

On this point, it seems important to us to make a distinction between the French and the Anglo-Saxon (or American) conception of human rights, which will have an impact on the contemporary understanding of human dignity and human rights and their interrelations. It can be shown that the Anglo-Saxon–American vision of human rights expressed in the American Bill of Rights (1776) has its origin in the Christian reading of the natural law tradition, while the French version—the French Declaration of the Rights of the Individual and of the Citizen (1789)—can be explained as stemming from rationalist anticlericalism, for which human rights (or natural or pre-political or moral or subjective or inherent or innate rights) are opposed to the so-called divine rights of monarchs and popes. The former could be called “secular humanism of Western liberalism” and the latter “the anti-theistic tradition of the French human rights tradition.”¹⁹ This differentiation should be kept in mind when discussing human rights issues.²⁰

It is after the Second World War that the term “dignity” enters the preamble and article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948). The moral disasters of the two world wars and the totalitarian

¹⁸ See Oswald Bayer, “Martin Luther’s Concept of Human Dignity,” in Düwell, Braarvig, Brownsword, and Mieth, eds, *Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*, 102–104.

¹⁹ See Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Christianity and Human Rights,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 14, no. 2 (1999–2000), 579–600.

²⁰ Stanley Harakas noted: “The Eastern Orthodox Church locates human rights in God alone as the source of moral good, recognizing that the true nature and dignity of humanity is revealed in the Trinity. In communion with the triune God, each person comes to an understanding of his or her true humanity. In relationship with others, we in turn recognize the dignity of humanity which is created in the image of the Godhead. For Orthodoxy, this God is above all a triune God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit find their being in the fundamental relationship between them. Created in the image of this (triune) God, relationships are seen as the basis of a spiritual imperative for human beings to live in mutual respect and community with one another. It is this theological basis, rather than the secular humanism of Western liberalism or the anti-theistic tradition of the French human rights tradition, that inspires the Orthodox commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the documents.” Stanley Harakas, “Human Rights: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19 (1982), 21.

regimes of the 20th century allowed the international community to draw two major lessons: first, the concept of human dignity must be supported by international laws (for example, enshrined and expressed through human rights), and second, the normative concept of human dignity must be justified by each individual nation, culture, and religion. It states, for the first time, the fundamental human rights that are to be universally protected by law. The preamble says: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” All human beings are considered to be born free and equal in dignity and rights but also in duties. Therefore, the three terms—human dignity, human rights, and human duties—are not only conquering the public domain but also are reconquering theology. Christian theology will be called to bring together moral obligations and duties toward the family, the state, and the church on a porous and undermined field of the anthropological principle of dignity. This reality creates several challenges, as yet unresolved.

The Christian Reappropriation of the Modern Concept of Human Rights

French Protestantism interpreted the introduction of human rights as a secular expression of the Protestant idea of human dignity and, at least initially, welcomed the concept. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, initially condemned the idea of human rights and religious freedom because they did not respect the Catholic Church’s claim to truth; however, the positions converged and eventually, with Vatican II, it incorporated the idea of human rights into its own position.²¹ The Second Vatican Council’s declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae* (On the Dignity of the Human Person), is an expression of this.²² The Declaration affirms that religious faith is founded on a free decision based on a personal search for truth, analogous to the freedom and judgment of conscience. This freedom, which

²¹ See Valentine Zuber, *The Religious Origin of Human Rights* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2017).

²² *Dignitatis humanae* (1965), no. 1: “The sense of the dignity of the human person has become ever more deeply imprinted on the conscience of contemporary man, and there is a growing demand that men act according to their own judgment, enjoying and using a responsible freedom, not under compulsion, but animated by a sense of duty . . . To this end he delves into the sacred tradition and doctrine of the Church—the treasure from which the Church constantly brings forth new things in harmony with the old.” For an overview, see David Hollenbach, “Human Dignity in Catholic Thought,” in Düwell, Braarvig, Brownsword, and Mieth, eds, *Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*, 250–59.

belongs intrinsically to the human person, is therefore a prerequisite which the state must accept and which obliges it to refrain from any interference in religious affairs.

In the Orthodox world, recent official documents have shown an awareness and understanding of the function that a concept of human rights can perform in promoting Christian values. Seeing the need to address this challenge, the Moscow Patriarchate published a document on social teaching in 2008 entitled *The Fundamental Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*. In this text, it states:

From the point of view of the Orthodox Church the political and legal institution of human rights can promote the good goals of protecting human dignity and contribute to the spiritual and ethical development of the [individual]. To make it possible the implementation of human rights should not come into conflict with God-established moral norms and traditional morality based on them. One's human rights cannot be set against the values and interests of one's homeland, community and family. The exercise of human rights should not be used to justify any encroachment on religious holy symbols things, cultural values, and the identity of a nation. Human rights cannot be used as a pretext for inflicting irretrievable damage on nature.²³

The importance of this passage lies in its clear presentation at the heart of today's debates: how to remain faithful to the state, the church, and the family when their moral obligations differ or are in conflict (such as the issue of gender or surrogacy). While we do not want to romanticize the past, and we do not want to encourage toxic nationalist and neo-fascist movements, it is nevertheless very important to emphasize the value of social cohesion, culture, and shared values, which should not be transformed into exclusive racial and ethnic chauvinism. That being said, liberal approaches do not seem to be immune to this type of disease either.

One of the most obvious examples of these positions can be seen in the way Daniel Borrillo, an influential French jurist and legal sociologist, presents

²³ *The Fundamental Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*, 2008, <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/87597--prava-cheloveka-v-khristianskom-miroponimanii-i-v-zhizni-obshchestva>; English translation at https://nanovic.nd.edu/assets/17001/seminar_ii_russian_orth_church.pdf.

the family as a simple political contract of alliance and kinship.²⁴ According to him, the family gradually appears as an instrument of self-realization of its members rather than as an end in itself. The contractualization by the state of these different new forms of families (nuclear, single-parent, reconstituted, homoparental, made up of biological, adopted, or medically assisted children) would make it possible to accompany this process of self-realization, which inscribes the family fact only in private life. The questions remain: Is contractual freedom the only rule that governs human relations? And is freedom an autonomous freedom in the face of non-contractual obligations? Therefore, what is due in the formation of a family is determined by rights that are not generated by contracts or the positive laws of the state but by the demands of human dignity itself, which precede both and must be respected by both. These sensitive issues are addressed today when we think about the rights of the child and the rights to the child. Thus, by avoiding a form of violence present in some “traditional” families, and by wanting to preserve this avoidance of violence through the implementation of human rights, are we not creating another form of violence with these same rights? Of course, we will begin to think about how to harmonize these different rights, but how do we do that when the fundamental moral paradigm is changing? As we said at the beginning, the moral values inspired for so many years by Christianity are now evolving in another unknown direction, which is the source of the present malaise.

Recognizing a similar need, and in the spirit of the Council of Crete in 2016, the Ecumenical Patriarch thought that a document outlining the Orthodox viewpoint on social issues would be beneficial. To this end, in 2017 he appointed a commission of theologians, who sought input from the bishops of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The commission produced a document entitled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, which received the approval of the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in late 2019 and was promulgated by the Ecumenical Patriarch in January 2020.

Regarding the issue of human dignity and human rights, we can read in this document the following statement:

Orthodox Christians should support the language of human rights, not because it is a language fully adequate to all that God intends

²⁴ Daniel Borrillo, *La famille par contrat: La construction politique de l'alliance et de la parenté* (Paris: PUF, 2018).

for his creatures, but because it preserves a sense of the inviolable uniqueness of every person, and of the priority of human goods over national interests, while providing a legal and ethical grammar upon which all parties can, as a rule, arrive at certain basic agreements. It is a language intended to heal divisions in those political communities in which persons of widely differing beliefs must coexist. It allows for a general practice and ethos of honoring each person's infinite and inherent dignity (a dignity, of course, that the Church sees as the effect of God's image in all human beings). Orthodox Christians must recognize that a language of common social accord, one that insists upon the inviolability of human dignity and freedom, is needed for the preservation and promotion of a just society; and the language of human rights has the power to accomplish this with admirable clarity. Neither, certainly, should Orthodox Christians fear the reality of cultural and social pluralism. Indeed, they should rejoice in the dynamic confluence of human cultures in the modern world, which is one of the special glories of our age, and take it as a blessing that all human cultures, in all their variety and beauty, are coming more and more to occupy the same civic and political spaces. The Church must in fact support those government policies and laws that best promote such pluralism. More than that, it must thank God for the riches of all the world's many cultures, and for the gracious gift of their peaceful coexistence in modern societies.²⁵

This text is important because it captures and conveys well the main ideas of the rich theological tradition of the Orthodox Church. It also reveals the presence of another socio-cultural milieu. It would therefore be of great interest to compare this document with that of the Moscow Patriarchate in order to note the resonances of different socio-cultural impacts on a common theological background. This study would allow us to better grasp the dynamics of theological language and the exercise of translating the Christian message in our world, which is both global and pluralist.

Having said this, a brief remark could be made about the passage we have just read. By wanting to follow closely the language of human rights, does not the text too quickly evacuate the differences that exist between this language and that of the church? This does not mean that the two are systematically in opposition but that the differences that remain between these

²⁵ *For the Life of the World.*

two languages cannot simply be swept aside. This position, in fact, does not allow for clarification and discussion of these differences, which would be more than beneficial to both.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The idea that the Christian churches should strongly support human dignity and human rights entails many different tasks and challenges. Among the churches and denominations, it requires, as we have just seen, a broad interconfessional effort in which the aspects of human dignity that dominate various Christian approaches to biblical interpretation and tradition can be discussed and brought into a complementary relationship.

This brief historical overview allows us to identify some major problems.

A first challenge concerns the idea that human rights represent a legal consequence of one of the main concepts that define human dignity in the Christian tradition. The historical overview shows that the equality of human beings is an important contribution of the Judeo-Christian anthropology of the human person created in the image of God (*imago Dei* paradigm). The question arises whether this vision of human dignity can be fully embodied in all relevant human rights requirements. And how should we proceed when discrepancies between the two appear?

A second challenge is to translate the Christian understanding of human dignity into concepts of human rights. This takes time, as it presupposes an evolving and renewed interpretation of its own doctrine. The slowness of these interpretations reveals the difficulties of reconciling the main messages of the two concepts: the universal equality of human beings and the dignity of the human person. For example, a justification of human dignity without a convincing understanding of the human condition could hardly cope with ongoing scientific developments, which tend toward natural determinism, eugenics, and racism. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the unravelling of the democratic fabric of the social order to which the defence of human rights is ultimately subordinated.

It follows that what is fundamentally human—that is, what it means to be human (and, by deduction, what it means to have human rights)—is revealed to us progressively by God (beginning with the Old Testament and continuing with the New Testament and the fathers of the church up to the present day). (Un)fortunately, it took God himself to teach us what it means to be (truly) human. Therefore, the deepest mystery of human

dignity is not reached only by the human intellect: it is mainly revealed by God in fullness in the incarnation of Christ. With the incarnation of Christ, it becomes clear that every human being has a great, unique, and equal value, and that the origin of this must be sought exclusively in the fact that the human being is made in the image of God, so that the so-called natural human rights are rooted in the inherent (God-given) value or dignity of every human being. For this reason, no one can claim to make a final moral judgment on another person or another person's action. Given our own human limitations, we can perceive only one or at most a few aspects of the people around us. We can never fully perceive these people or their actions. We can never exhaust our knowledge of other people, whose hearts will always remain a mystery to us. There is always something new to discover in each of us, whose lives are freely evolving in God.²⁶ Having said this, we should not conclude that the Orthodox Church would be in favor of relativism and liberalism in the implementation of human rights and duties.

As in the early days, the Orthodox Church still prefers a direct, intimate, and warm human relationship to any *prima facie* perfect program whose realization should at all costs lead to the well-being of humanity. Even if such perfect programs exist, and even if the intentions of their inventors and implementers were honest, Orthodox Christians do not believe that the world can be changed for the better by changing its external order. Therefore, the Orthodox Church is primarily concerned with changing the hearts and minds of people ("repentance," originally "change of mind" = *metanoia*), so as to change the world from within and not from without. In other words, the Orthodox Church believes that one can and should have an essential impact on society and the human community outside of political, economic, media, and other influential groups. This does not mean that the Orthodox are indifferent to politics and that they do not care about the political system in which they live, but it does mean that the Orthodox are principally convinced that the church should not participate in a political struggle and should not enter into coalitions with political parties.

However, leaving aside the question of the proper basis for human rights, for the sake of common action (of theists and atheists), we can conclude that, whatever that basis may be, believers as well as atheists or agnostics (who may disagree on the question of why human beings have rights) can still

²⁶ See Le Patriarche œcuménique Bartholomée, "Foi et liberté. Conscience et droits de l'homme," in *À la rencontre du mystère. Comprendre le christianisme orthodoxe aujourd'hui* (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 172.

unite and come out together when those rights are violated. They should react together with the awareness that there is no purpose on earth or in heaven that is so sacred that a human being should be used as a means to achieve it. By doing so, they will stand firm in defence of inalienable human dignity.²⁷

This implies, however, that the Christian must be an integral being who fully applies himself or herself to discerning the spirits of the times and not someone who is divided between the so-called spiritual and secular domains. Witnessing is the ascetic practice that takes on its full meaning here. The subtle Christian truth about the Church being in this world but not of this world has failed to find a positive historical realization until today. We must admit this openly. But is this a reason to stop seeking it? May Christ's call to love one another inspire us on this path of reconciliation and unity.

²⁷ See Vladan Perisic, "Interpretation of Human Rights in the Light of the Church Fathers," in *Bartholomée, À la rencontre*, 266.

A View from Orthodox Ecclesiology on the theme of the WCC 11th Assembly

Prof. Dr Marina Kolovopoulou

The theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity,” is inspired by 2 Corinthians 5:14: “For the love of Christ urges us on.” Tracing the meaning of this love, we end up with the intense plea of the Lord that “If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love,” addressed to his disciples and apostles, as well as the ones who will follow them, in the church herself. And what are these commandments? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-39).

The Relation between Commandment and Love

At first glance, the relation between commandment and love seems contradictory. Is it possible for somebody to be commanded to love? Is love dependent upon a commandment? The contradiction is solved as soon as it is clarified that the meaning of the divine commandments does not have the form known in the context of human relations. It is not about the demand of a superior to his inferior or of a lord to his servant. They are not rules of a moral and legal type—Orthodox spirituality does not correspond to any kind of codices or imperatives—but rather a call and an invitation that reveal the way of truth leading to salvation.¹ They are the corroboration of the divine will according to the commandment given to Adam in paradise.² Thus, Christ’s commandments are “a law of freedom; because through the holy baptism he freed us from the law of sin and death,” according to St Gregory Palamas.³ They constitute a *modus vivendi*, which connotes the living of the faithful according to the truth and reflects the divine goodness. They are the voice of the good shepherd. Hence, whoever wishes to belong to his flock listens to his voice, not to the voice of the “thieves and bandits” (John 10:8-9, 11). They are “light . . . and

¹ Basil the Great, *Sermo Asceticus*, PG 31, 881B.

² Athanasius the Great, *Oratio I Contra Arianos*, P.G. 26, 120ff; 305ff.

³ Gregory Palamas, *Homilia XXXVIII*, PG 151, 480C.

life,”⁴ leading humankind to the light and the real life that is Christ himself. Thus, keeping the divine commandments is not an external coercion but a free movement stemming from the need of a spiritual experience that is, in its turn, a sign of the soul’s transformation through the energy of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, they are the needed steps to be taken for approaching God: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (Jam. 4:8). In the end of this freely chosen spiritual course, God does not wait to receive from humankind but rather to give and offer to humankind.

Loving God

John Chrysostom notes: “That is the reason of Moses saying ‘What does the Lord our God require of us but to love Him and be ready to follow Him? Thus when He commands you to love Him, then he shows with the most plain way that he loves you. Because the greatest consistent of our salvation is to love Him.’”⁵ Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes that “we have to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and senses,”⁶ while St Basil the Great names the love for God as “needed depth” and its want “the worst of all misfortunes.”⁷ The free choice of this love denotes the change of our attitude, the alienation from a profane spirit, the distance from our worldliness which lead to idolatry and selfishness. In this case, a person will love whatever is related to this world—glory, richness, lust, himself or herself included—but not God. That is why the apostle James names as adulterers those who choose loving the world, something that makes people an enemy of God.⁸ The Lord’s saying “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21) signifies this danger of a wrong orientation of our love. Thus, human beings have to have a constant memory of God, not only to keep unreduced the love of God but also to increase and perfect it day by day. This movement is understood as the responsive attitude toward God. Incarnation was the movement that revealed the love of God to the world, as phrased in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only

⁴ Symeon the New Theologian, *Capita Theologica*, Chapter 1, 20; J. Darrouzès, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, Chapitres théologiques, gnostiques et pratiques* [Sources chrétiennes 51bis] (Paris: Cerf, 1996).

⁵ John Chrysostom, In Secundam ad Corinthios Epistolam Commentarius, “Homilia XXX,” PG 61, 608.

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum, 4, PG 44, 845D.

⁷ Basil the Great, Regulae Fusius Tractatae B’, 2, PG 31, 912AB.

⁸ James 4:4: “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

By this action of the divine love, God called humans to be participants in the love that does not divide but unites, that embraces not only the beautiful but also the disfigured, not only the perfect but also the imperfect, not only the world of angels, blessed by heavenly bliss, but also the world of damned, the world of pain, the realm of death. This love is both joy and pain. It is universal love. It rejoices with anything that is existence and suffers with what is existence. It rejoices with the eternal elements and suffers with mortals.

Therefore, the path to joy, to bliss, is simultaneously a participation in pain. The great glory of Christianity is that in its love it includes compassion, mercy, even to sin. This love that leads to forgiveness and with forgiveness destroys sin can indiscriminately embrace the universe, which is why every concept of evil cannot stand its appearance. This love does not rule but ministers; it is not served but serves. It is God’s gaze on the world that evokes not fear but gratitude, evokes the infinite nostalgia of the creature for the Creator and the immeasurable desire of constant communion with him. As long as God moved in that way toward human beings, then they in their turn have to move toward God, toward the loveable one, in order through this love to be transformed and spiritually perfected.

As Gregory of Nyssa describes, “When the soul . . . finds the true, simple, and immaterial good, it adheres to that which alone is truly lovable and desirable thanks to the movements and activities of this love, conforming itself to that which it learns and continually discovers.”⁹ He explains, “we become that which we love, either the good odor of Christ or a bad odor. In fact, the person who loves the beautiful will also be beautiful, in so far as the goodness of that which is in them, transforms the person who has received it into itself.”¹⁰

Loving Our Neighbour

This transformation in Christ leads to the second great commandment: loving your neighbour. This kind of love has nothing in common with all the causes of love known in our human experience. Its nature is not sentimental, due to an enthusiasm or a type of interest; it is not a creature of imag-

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione*, PG 46, 93C.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten Omiliae*, GNO V, 422,21-423,6.

ination or a simple desire of the other but, as the perfection of love, goes beyond all these, having a catholic character. It is addressed to all human beings no matter whether they are friends or enemies, agreeable or disagreeable to us. It does not make choices. The perfection of love encompasses the freedom of the passions that cultivate selfishness and all kinds of divisions in the conventional relations of human society. The one who truly loves in the above-mentioned perspective, according to Maximus the Confessor, is referred to the one human nature without permitting discrimination between faithful or unfaithful, free or slave, man or woman.¹¹ Any kind of inequality is excluded from true love because if it is otherwise, then this love is far from perfect love. And this is because Christ “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). If, then, the great love of Christ is manifested through his desire for the salvation of the world, it is not possible for genuine love to be different from Christ’s love. Those who do not love all humans with this pure sincerity of the heart cannot be named friends of God but are friends of the world. Friendship of the world has weaknesses and vices, interests and deceits, hidden purposes and flattery; it becomes and it faints away,¹² increases and decreases, exists today but not tomorrow, depending always on human disposition and personal interests. To those who follow this type of love, considering it genuine love, the Lord is explicit: “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers” (Matt. 7:23).

It becomes apparent, then, that love of neighbour stems from the love of God; the quality of the first depicts the genuine nature of the second. That is why Basil the Great, when mentioning these two forms of love, notes that through the first it is possible to achieve the second, and through the second you come again straightforward to the first.¹³ He adds that loving your neighbour reflects the perfection of loving God. The image of the circle with its centre and its circumference, used in the patristic tradition, clarifies further this understanding of love. The circle is the world and God is at the centre of the circle. Saints, with their whole conduct and their own persistent endeavour to cultivate the virtues, travel from the edge of circle toward the centre, getting closer and closer to God. However, the more they approach the centre of the circle, which is God, the closer they come to

¹¹ Maximus the Confessor, *Capitulum de Charitate Centuria II*, 30, PG 90, 993 B.

¹² Gregory Palamas, *Qui Sacrae Indulgent Quietudini*, 2, 3,20, ed. P. Christou, vol. I (Thessaloniki, 1962), 556.

¹³ Basil the Great, *Regulae Fusius Tractatae*, 2, PG 31, 917B.

each other. In a similar way, one can also conceive of separation. The more a person moves away from the centre, the more the distance separating him or her from another person increases. Distancing oneself from God entails distancing oneself from one's neighbour, and distance from one's neighbour leads unavoidably to distance from God.¹⁴ In relation to this example, Abba Dorotheos refers to the character and nature of love: "This is the very nature of love. In as far as we are outside and do not love God, each one of us is also distanced from his neighbour, but if we love God, the more we approach Him through love for Him, the more we are united to our neighbour through love, and as much as we are united to our neighbour, we are united to God."¹⁵ That is why love of neighbour has a doxological character: because it is again addressed to God, as long as "whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Knowledge of the Faith

For this love to be achieved, knowledge of the "lovable and desirable" is presupposed. God reveals this knowledge, according to St Athanasius the Great, in a form of a scale: first, by the creation of the world and the creation of humankind according to the image and likeness of the Word of God, and second, through the prophets and the righteous of the Old Testament, through whom is communicated the Word of God. Owing to the fact that humans could not become conscious of the presence of the Word of God in the world, a third step was needed: this was the handing over of the Word through the law of Moses.

Nevertheless, again humans failed to discern the Word of God, due to his attachment to the world, replacing him with the traditions of human beings. In this human weakness to recognize the revealed God, the love of God did not abandon humanity in the darkness of ignorance, which would make the source of life unapproachable to the world, and the fourth and major step was taken. The Word of God himself became incarnate, assumed the human nature and, having the familiarity of human form, he lived and walked among the people. Jesus Christ himself, addressing God the Father, reassures this divine revelation in the world: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world" (John 17:6), which consists

¹⁴ Abba Dorotheus, *Ascetic Teachings*, lesson 6, 78.

¹⁵ Abba Dorotheus, *Ascetic Teachings*, lesson 6, 78.

in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the true Son of God whom God the Father sent into the world due to his love for his creation.

This knowledge is the content of faith in the one God in Trinity and in Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son and Word of God, the Saviour and redeemer of the world, who voluntarily was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended in glory to heaven. This is treasured in the teaching of the Church.

This knowledge—this faith and this commandment par excellence “that we should believe in the name of his Son” (1 John 3:23)—is expressed in the second commandment, “we should . . . love one another, just as he has commanded us” (1 John 3:23). This love, as it comes from God, becomes “incarnate.” It is realized in the rebirth of the faithful in Christ and denotes the knowledge of God, presupposes faith and the confession that a person states during holy baptism when he or she is “clothed . . . with Christ” (Gal. 3:27).

In this perspective, faith is a foundational virtue and spiritual prerogative, as without it there cannot be any spiritual building.¹⁶ Of course, talking about faith is not meant as a mere intellectual acceptance of the existence of God or even of the basic articles of faith; it involves the absolute trust and self-giving of the faithful to God, according to the example of Abraham and the Theotokos, that permits the faithful to be known by God (1 Cor. 8:1-3). It is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). As John of Damascus describes it, “faith is the undoubting and unambiguous hope alike of what God has promised us and of the good issue of our prayers.”¹⁷ In other words, it is the unmoved power that has the certainty that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). The content of divine revelation that is salvation and theosis is appropriated by the human person only through faith, hope, and love that are freely offered to God.

Faith, Hope, and Love

Hence, the bond among these three virtues and the analogy in their relation becomes clear. The increase of the one increases the others. The increase of faith day by day brings us closer to the love of God while living according to his will, testifies the love to God, and has as a result spiritual progress from

¹⁶ Basil the Great, *De Fide* 1, PG 31, 677C-680A.

¹⁷ John of Damascus, *Expositio Fidei*, book IV, 10.

glory to glory.¹⁸ These virtues are so interconnected that each one of them depends on the other and vice versa; none of them can exist autonomously without the others. Like the sun, the ray, and the light, the three together give one and the same brilliance and brightness. Nevertheless, loving God, which results in loving others, is often considered as the roof of spiritual progress,¹⁹ which cannot exist unless it is founded on faith and hope!

This faith transmutes humans to sons of God, forming not a supranational society but a “holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9) in which humans belong no matter their origin, language, gender, or race, being defined only by their sonship in Christ.

Unity

This building up of faith denotes the confession of faith in one spirit, because one is the Lord. After his resurrection from the dead and before his ascension to heaven, Jesus Christ instructed his disciples, in the teaching on baptism, to “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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus Christ, being the unifying principle for Christian faith, is the cornerstone on whom the spiritual construction is fitted together, to whom we are assembled, becoming the habitat of God in spirit. Thus we “Come to him, a living stone . . . and like living stones, let [ourselves] be built into a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

St Cyril of Alexandria clarifies this reality explicitly:

In order, then, that we ourselves also may join together, and be blended into unity with God and with each other, although, through the actual difference which exists in each one of us, we have a distinct individuality of soul and body, the Only-begotten has contrived a means which His own due Wisdom and the Counsel of the Father have sought out. For by one Body, that is, His own, blessing through the mystery of the Eucharist those who believe on Him, He makes us of the same Body with Himself and with each other. For who could sunder or divide from their natural union with one another those

¹⁸ Symeon the New Theologian, *Orationes Theologicae*, “Oration 1,” 200; Darrouzès, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien*.

¹⁹ Gregory Palamas, *Homilia IV*, PG 151, 56D.

who are knit together through His holy Body, Which is one in union with Christ? For if *we all partake of the one Bread*, we are all made one Body; for Christ cannot suffer severance. Therefore also the Church is become Christ's Body, and we are also individually His members, according to the wisdom of Paul. For we, being all of us united to Christ through His holy Body, inasmuch as we have received Him Who is one and indivisible in our own bodies, owe the service of our members to Him rather than to ourselves. And that, while Christ is accounted the Head, the Church is called the rest of the Body, as joined together of Christian members . . . those who partake of His holy Flesh do gain therefrom this actual physical unity, I mean with Christ, Paul once more bears witness, when he says, with reference to the mystery of godliness: *Which in other generations was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed unto His holy Apostles and Prophets in the Spirit; to wit, that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ*. And if we are all of us of the same Body with one another in Christ, and not only with one another, but also of course with Him Who is in us through His Flesh, are we not then all of us clearly one both with one another and with Christ? For Christ is the bond of union, being at once God and Man. With reference, then, to the unity that is by the Spirit, following in the same track of inquiry, we say once more, that we all, receiving one and the same Spirit, I mean the Holy Spirit, are in some sort blended together with one another and with God.²⁰

Nothing is greater than this gathering that make those who are far away and those close to us one body, where the one in Rome considers the one in India a member of the one body, with Jesus Christ as the head.²¹ In a powerful manner, St Epiphanius of Salamis states: "To us this is the faith, and this is the pride, and this is our mother, the church, that saves through faith, that is strengthened through hope and that is perfected through Christ's love, in the one confession, in the sacraments, in the purificational power of holy baptism . . . This is the faith, this the reality of our life, this is the foundation of truth"; and again, "this is the life and the hope and the assurance of immortality."²²

²⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, IV, 550ff.

²¹ John Chrysostom, *In Matthaicum Homilia XVI*, PG 57, 251.

²² Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Vol. 3, 519, ed. K. Holl, *Epiphanius, Ancoratus und Panarion* [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller, 37] (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 193).

In this organic unity²³ founded on the one common faith and experience activated by love, Christ is both the cornerstone and the roof, compelling and urging the whole structure as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. This new creation exists due to the love of Christ and stays in existence by loving Christ. Thus, unity at the same time is the fruit of God's love and flourishes in loving God. Through the love of God, through the divine Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, those

who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ . . . in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . [so that] he might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross . . . So he came and proclaimed peace . . . [and] through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2:13-18).

He united earth to heaven and placed human beings on a royal throne, transforming them from slave to friend and by grace, son of God.

The Condition of the World Today

Yet, in our everyday reality, we Christians are still on the quest of unity, living in conditions of injustice, conflict, hatred, inequality, exploitation, persecution, claiming even the lordship of God upon humanity and the earth, claiming that death still exists while he is already a discharged and non-existent enemy. Trying to identify the reason for all these outside of us proves our faint and sick vision. If the tangible sun sometime in the future will set the Sun of justice, as uncreated, being beyond corruption and time will never cease to send his rays of mercy to the world. How, though, are we responding to his eternal light? Where and which is our synergy?

The world, the whole creation, has come into being due to the superabundance of divine goodness, exists due to the superabundance of divine goodness, and is saved by the same superabundant divine love. From our side, we are talking about love, we are comforted by love, we state our strong belief upon love, but is this indeed God's love? Is it Christ's love, or it is an imitation of his love, according to our will, to our standards, to our interests and purposes in order to satisfy our passions or selfishness or egomania? Have we ever considered that we might be the contemporary Jerusalem, to which is

²³ It is clear that for the Orthodox understanding, and according to the teaching of the tradition of the church, the meaning of unity is not relevant to union or to uniformity.

addressed the word of the Lord: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37).

Conclusion

Perhaps the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches is the great *kairos*, the great moment to look deep in our hearts, deciding to see not ourselves but Christ himself and to give voice to the greatest prayer: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21). Perhaps the 11th Assembly of the WCC is the great moment to motivate our response to Christ’s thoughtful question, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8), to motivate our crying out: Here we stand, we want to be your faithful (Luke 9:24), we want to be one with you; we believe, help our unbelief. Help us to be disciples not of the world but true disciples of yours. Help us to love each other in your love; help us taste your unity.

Additional Resource

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

**Report of the Eastern Orthodox and
Oriental Orthodox Women's Consultation**

Hosted by

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

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 Vlasi - 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 Tziovanni - 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 Vlasi 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 Vlasi 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 laboured 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 labour 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 behaviour 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 counselling 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 labours 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 neighbours.

(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.

Contributors

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian has been the Ecumenical Director and Diocesan Legate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) since 2000. In 2007, he was elected as president of the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCC) in the USA and served his term from 2008 through 2009. Now he sits on the executive board of the NCC, as well as on the board of the World Council of Churches, where his involvement has been extensive and continuous since 1985, including positions on the WCC's Mission and Evangelism Unit 2 (1991-1999), its Orthodox Task Force (1982-1992), and membership on its Central Committee. As Diocesan Legate and Ecumenical Director, Archbishop Aykazian is a prominent representative of the Armenian Church and a spokesman for Armenian causes in the United States.

Metropolitan Prof. Dr Hilarion Alfeyev is a bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan of Budapest and Hungary. He served as the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, permanent member of the Holy Synod, chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, and as Rector of Sts Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies. He is the author of more than 1000 publications, including monographs on the New Testament, patristics, dogmatic theology and church history. He also translated works of Church Fathers from Greek and Syrian and is a composer and author of many musical works.

Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima (Limouris) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has been a vice moderator of the central committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) from 2014 until his passing on 1 June 2022. He has been a member of the WCC Executive and Central Committees since 2002. From 1983-1993, he was a staff member of the WCC's Faith and Order secretariat in Geneva. Metropolitan Gennadios was a professor of Orthodox theology and canon law in various universities. He was a vice-moderator of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission from 1998-2006. His Eminence was co-president of the Joint International Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Lutheran, co-secretary and member of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, co-chairman of the Orthodox and Methodist and Baptist theological preparatory committees.

Prof. Dr Marina Kolovopoulou is Professor of History of Dogma at the Department of Theology of the Theological School of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. As a representative of the Church of Greece, she has been a member of the Central Committee of the European Council of Churches (CEC) and the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Currently, she is a member of the Central Committee of the WCC, a member of the Permanent Committee on Consensus and Collaboration of WCC and vice-moderator, representing WCC of the Joint Consultative Group for the dialogue of WCC with the Pentecostals.

Metropolitan Prof. Dr Nifon Mihăiță belongs to the Romanian Orthodox Church and is professor of Missiology at the Faculty of Theology of Târgoviște University. He is a member of the executive and central committees of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the co-moderator of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC. In June 2022, the WCC Central Committee has appointed him as vice moderator, fulfilling the service of the late Metropolitan Gennadios. Metropolitan Nifon is President of the Commission for foreign communities, inter-orthodox, inter-Christian and inter-religious relationships of the Holy Synod of Romanian Orthodox Church. He is also a member on International Board for the Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue; president of the Ecumenical Association of Churches of Romania, AidROM, Bucharest; Patriarchal Exarch for foreign relations of the Romanian Patriarchate with international Christian organizations and European Institutions; and member of the Romanian Academy of Science of Romania.

Prof. Dr Vasile-Octavian Mihoc is the programme executive for Ecumenical Relations and Faith and Order at the World Council of Churches, Geneva, and a professor at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. He studied Orthodox Theology in Romania, holds a PhD from the Faculty of Protestant Theology, University of Göttingen, and taught at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Münster between 2013 and 2019. His research and teaching interest are systematic theology, ecumenical theology, and inter-religious dialogue.

Metropolitan Dr Geevarghese Mor Coorilos Nalunnakkal from India is the Metropolitan of Niranam Diocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Mor Coorilos is currently serving as Moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC. He also serves the World

Student Christian Federation (WSCF) as its Chairperson. Metropolitan Coorilos is Chairperson of India Centre for Social Change, which is an NGO that works with mentally challenged people in India. Authored several books and articles in the areas of Mission and Evangelism and Christian Social Ethics.

Prof. Dr Julija Naett Vidovic is a Serbian Orthodox Scholar. She is Professor of Patristics and Bioethics at the St Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris and a deputy director of the Institute for Advanced Ecumenical Studies of the Catholic Institute of Paris. She served on the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) from Lyon to Novi Sad. Today, she is moderating the Working Group of CEC on Scientific, New Technologies and Christian Ethics.

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca is acting general secretary of the World Council of Churches and belongs to the Romanian Orthodox Church. He has served as Professor of Missiology and Ecumenical Theology at Bossey since 1998 and as its director since 2001. He has been a WCC deputy general secretary from 2014 until 2020. In that capacity, he oversaw a variety of WCC programmes in the areas of unity, mission, ecumenical relations, youth, interreligious dialogue and cooperation, worship and spirituality, as well as ecumenical formation. Prior to joining the WCC, he taught mission and ecumenism at the faculty of theology in Sibiu, Romania, and later served his patriarchate as head of the newly established Department of Press and Communication, with additional responsibility for the Department for External and Ecumenical Church Relations and of religious education in public schools.

ORTHODOX REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY TO KARLSRUHE

Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity



Representatives of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches gathered in May of 2022 in Paralimni, Cyprus, as part of their preparation for the World Council of Churches' Eleventh Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. The preparation included reflection on the Assembly theme "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity" and on the themes of the thematic plenaries as well as discussion on the participation of the Orthodox Churches in the fellowship of the WCC. In addition to the theological contributions, this Orthodox resource book contains the official report reflecting the thoughtful deliberations, which occurred during the consultation. The Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation has proven to be an important exercise of coming together, praying together, and deliberating in times of turbulence and war affecting the Orthodox family and the entire world. Above all, a great spirit of fraternal love and communion prevailed among participants, who are looking forward to a common Orthodox witness during the Assembly in Karlsruhe, and beyond.



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