



## CONFERENCE ON WORLD MISSION AND EVANGELISM

*COME HOLY SPIRIT - HEAL AND RECONCILE*

Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities

**Athens (Greece), 9-16 May 2005**

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# PLEN 10 May

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### WELCOMING ADDRESS

**Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and of All Greece**

*Aghios Andreas, Athens, 10 May 2005*

1. On behalf of the Orthodox Church of Greece, and at the same time on behalf of all the people of Athens and of all Greece, it is with great joy and fraternal love that I welcome here in Athens all the participants of the XIII Conference on World Mission and Evangelism of WCC. In this Paschal period, almost ten days after the celebration of the Holy Easter and the Resurrection of Christ allow me to greet you all with the ancient and existential greeting which constitutes the core of our identity and witness as Christians: XPICTOC ANECTH, Christ is Risen!

2. Our joy is even greater because this event has gathered in the same place sisters and brothers from all over the world and from a Christian constituency much wider than the WCC. This place is Athens, the capital of Greece, a country especially privileged by God's love. Our country was indeed privileged by the grace of our Lord to receive the Gospel in our mother tongue. In fact, the entire New Testament, the very heart of our Bible, was originally written in Greek. We are grateful and quite honoured that Athens was selected to host this important and timely conference. Our Church, which historically is a result of Apostolic mission, is to this very day deeply committed to witness and evangelism, focusing on the same aspect underlined by the Apostle St Paul in his historic speech to the Athenians at Areopagus (Acts 17:23-31), namely on the Resurrection. Our mission, the mission of the Orthodox Church, the mission of spreading the Gospel all over the world, in the spirit of the forthcoming Pentecost, starts from our Divine Liturgy, the eucharistic synaxeis of the people of God, in which the Resurrection of our Lord, the ontological and existential foundation of our hope that is in us (I Pe 3:15), is Sunday after Sunday and on any other occasion, doxologically re-enacted, thus becoming in our tradition the springboard for mission to the end of the inhabited world (*oekoumene*).

3. The Church of Greece has responded from the first moment, more than a year ago, both to the invitation and to the challenge extended to her by the WCC to be the hosting Church for this conference on the general theme «Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile.» The decision of the Holy Synod to host such a major ecumenical event, the first ever in an Orthodox setting, despite our past bitter experience from aggressive missionary activities and hostile actions against our people (Crusades, uniatism, and more recently activist proselytism), was based on three reasons:

- a) on our determination to join our forces with other Christians in, dialogue and common witness, especially nowadays, when, from one end of the world to the other, the human person is tortured at the social and political level, because of urbanisation and globalisation which annul any difference between personalities and make invalid the unique character of each individual person;
- b) on the positive developments within the WCC, evidenced in the recommendations of the Special Commission; and
- c) on the holistic understanding of mission, being developed in recent years within WCC. Especially we considered this conference important and providential among other world mission conferences of this kind, because of its new shift in mission paradigm, which makes it resonate with the theology, spirituality and contextual realities of our Orthodox Churches. We Orthodox do not only benefit from the ecumenical encounter and dialogue but also bring challenges coming from our history long mission experience and our mission theology with echoes from the time of the early Christian communities.

Especially with regard to the Orthodox Church of Greece, I would like to stress that our Church, without foresaking her traditional achievements, is characterised by a visibly extrovert tendency to make new "openings" to the world, in the spirit of Pentecost, within the frame of mutual understanding and cooperation with every constructive agent to man's profit, and by the need for direct contacts and relations among people. This tendency results from the fact that our Church acknowledges the vital importance of the values of friendship, respect, freedom and love for the person itself, independently of religious, cultural and social differences. Within this context of the Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit plays a specific role, the Church of Greece welcomes members of the WCC from different countries of the globe, emphasizing the significance she gives to the world fellowship of Churches "which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures... to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". After the successful organization here in Athens of the Olympic Games, almost a year ago, the Church of Greece is willing to offer the possibility to the member-Churches of WCC for a fruitful exchange of missionary experiences.

4. You are all well aware of the constant complaints, concerns, and even objections of the Orthodox concerning a number of issues (from the decision-making procedures, and the forms of common prayer, to ecclesiology); you may have even experienced, or heard of, the vocal reactions of a segment of our Orthodox community against our decision to host this event. For the last forty years or so there were reasons, some justified and some unjustified, that made the Church of Greece, though one of the founding members of the WCC, to limit her participation to it to the least necessary point. The recent developments with the "Special Commission on the Orthodox Participation in the WCC" have convinced us that a new era in WCC-Orthodox relations is about to be inaugurated. We are grateful to the organizers of this conference that for the first time the agenda of a World Mission Conference was set with Orthodox sensitivities in mind.

5. All these, as well as our determination to witness our Orthodox faith to the world in a visible manner, will hopefully result in the awareness that Orthodoxy has an important role to play within the wider Christian community, faced with a growing hostility against our faith. Our Church has never denied dialogue; on the contrary, she seeks dialogue along the line of St Markos Evgenikos of Ephesus, the bastion of our faith, who stated that "when some differ from others and do not enter into dialogue, the difference between them seems to be greater. But when they enter into dialogue and each part listens carefully to what the other is saying, their difference is found to be much smaller".

6. Allow me to reflect from our Orthodox theological perspective on some very important aspects of your conference. First of all I rejoice on the liturgical dimension, quite evident in the title or theme of the conference which is shaped in a prayerful manner, i.e. as an invocation of the Holy Spirit to heal and reconcile. In post-modernity the importance of liturgy, and of the experience in general, are significant elements for our Christian witness, equally significant as the proclamation of the Gospel. Almost all Christian missionaries recognize today that the exclusive emphasis on the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and the rational comprehension of truth dangerously diminishes the effective reception of the Gospel. Many people nowadays remind us that we have to open our mind towards knowledge--science, development, finance, profit.

However, the same people forget that these are not enough for hope to be reborn. Hope is only asserted when we empathise with Resurrection. The Resurrection of the Lord is the crack through which we gain a deeper look into our eschatological horizon. We might feel pain for last century's historical calamities, where some Christians by name were the protagonists, but we are not imprisoned in historical time, we do not render it absolute, we do not worship the idolised aspects of ourselves, those of knowledge or technology. And we do not seek to solve every problem completely "here and now", we do not live under the illusion that everything depends on us. Within the light of the Resurrection neither the world nor the individual is condemned to a hopeless freedom, which in the last century was praised as the breakthrough of liberating humanism. In our Orthodox tradition what constitutes the essence of the Church is not her mission in the conventional sense, but the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy; the mission is the meta-liturgy, the *Liturgy after the Liturgy*.

That is why mission is understood not only as «going out», as proclaiming the Gospel, but also as a *silent* witness. Despite all the hardships and difficulties in oppressive and/or minority contexts our Church preserved her faith and transmitted it not as an ideology but as a way of life defined by the values of the Gospel. And the contribution of our liturgy and our monastics in this respect was tremendous.

7. It is for the first time, as I could recall, that a mission conference adopts a more humble ethos and language, renouncing the over optimistic tones and messianic programmatic missionary agendas of the earlier years; its theme is not an activist and programmatic statement, but a prayer, a prayer to God to heal, reconcile, strengthen and make all God's people living witnesses to the Risen Lord, and powerful examples of reconciling and healing communities. By this, it is acknowledged that mission is inherent to the Church, to all the people of God, not only to some specialized ministries; it is also recognized that the missionary responsibility of all Christians consists in being living witnesses in word and deed; and above all it is underlined that the conversion of the people does not stay within the responsibility or the power of the missionary but rather of God (*missio dei*). From the very beginning it was God who added new people to the number of the early Christian communities and not the Apostles themselves (Acts 2:47). We as co-workers of God (*synergia*) pray, witness and act with humility; but God, through Christ in the Holy Spirit is doing the conversion.

8. My second comment is also taken from the slogan of the conference. The very fact that the Holy Spirit takes the initiative in mission is a very sound theological foundation of any acceptable missionary activity. The emphasis of course on Pneumatology, at least as it is evidenced in Orthodox theology, does not by any means de-centre Christ, who is «the way, the truth, and the life» (Jn 14:6), and the sole Saviour of humanity (Acts 4:12). To put it in a slightly different way: an authentic Christian missiology must not attempt to replace a Christocentric universalism, despite all its shortcomings, with a Spirit-centred universalism. Rather, a Pneumatology that is conditioned by Christology (and vice versa) provides a balanced missionary activity, since it relocates both Christology and Pneumatology within the traditional Trinitarian framework. This is quite

evident in the full title of your conference, since the pneumatological nuance of the above mentioned slogan is perfectly supported by the Christological emphasis of the title proper: «Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities».

9. This takes me to my third point: the mission as a «ministry of reconciliation» (II Cor 5:18). We rejoice that the central focus of the conference is healing and reconciliation. In our ages long Orthodox theology the concept of sin was always perceived as breaking and alteration of relationship and estrangement of the human race from God, from one another and with the whole of creation; never, or rather very seldom, as a legalistic guilt. It was on these grounds that salvation is understood as a process of healing and reconciliation of humanity with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. Healing and reconciliation is a fact which has been achieved in Christ, the Incarnated, Crucified and Risen Son of God and which is to be appropriated by all of us in the Church, through the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation, as ontological healing and restoration of the fallen humanity and creation, brings about transformation, transfiguration, renewed relationships with God, the source of life and existence, with one another, and with the cosmos around us. Christ has died for us, has raised our fallen humanity and has ascended it to heaven and seated it at the right hand of the Father. However, what Christ has done for us once and for all (*ephapax*) has to be appropriated by each of us in a personal (but by no means individualistic) way in the Church. Each of us is also called to die to the «old man» in order to rise again into a new being in Christ. God in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit has the initiative, but each of us has to respond to God's call and to engage synergistically in working out his or her salvation and in bringing about the Kingdom of God «on earth as it is in heaven» (Mt 6:10).

10. It was for this reason that our Orthodox Church has given healing and reconciliation a sacramental dimension. The Holy Unction (*εὐχέλαιον*) is a communal liturgical service, a *Sacramentum* that bestows the gifts of Divine Grace and renews in each person the eschatological reality of wholeness, glorification, love and immortality in Christ. As such it heals human and spiritual pain and rehabilitates the communion and communication of the faithful with God. Healing and reconciliation actually permeate all the worship services of our Church. However, the sacraments are not magic rituals. Sickness and death, the inescapable indignities that plague and limit human life, are not forms of divine retribution but rather a result of the world's alienation from, and broken relations with, God. Christ, who took on our infirmities and bore our diseases, has liberated life from its brokenness through his resurrection. By overcoming the world, Christ has given humanity peace, joy and access to imperishable life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

11. And now I will come to the practical consequences of the above very sketchy theological reflection. Your conference is an important and timely one, because of the many and difficult challenges which confront all Christians today. The world we live in today, in many cases, is no longer the same with the world our Church lived in the past and developed her mission theology and praxis. The growing effect of globalisation, (as a cultural and not as a financial phenomenon any more), the opening of the national frontiers and the increase move of populations from one place to another put our Christian witness in a totally different situation than that of the past. Traditionally and historically mono-religious societies are becoming multi-religious, and faithful Christians live together with people of other faiths, other races, traditions, languages, share the joys and the pains of the same society, engage in mixed marriages or other social or family events. We have to try hard to preserve our traditional Christian values, our spiritual identity, our faith, our individuality, despite the fact that no contemporary society could claim to be Christian per se. More and more people of other faiths live together with Christians and struggle with the same challenges of atheism, agnosticism and anti-religious secularism. In such situations, there is a need for a new articulation both of our Christian identity and of our mission, without of course compromising our faith. In such new contexts we are called to be signs of healing and reconciliation.

The historical wounds between Churches, nations, smaller communities, even families, have to be treated in a spirit of humility and in an attempt of healing them and reconciling people, as we look to the future. This is even more urgent now, in the post-September 11 situation, than in earlier times.

12. The consequences which globalisation, terrorism and the war on terror bring about require that Church rediscover her prophetic voice. When peoples are more and more impoverished while the rich are becoming richer and the modern economists and politicians motivate their decisions and actions (both on war and on economy) as "historically unavoidable", the Church has to raise her voice and to be on the side of peace, the poor, the marginalized, and the powerless. It has to be a powerful witness to the values of the Gospel, to reaffirm that our Lord is the «prince of peace», and the earth and all of it belongs to God. As the Fathers of our Church so eloquently declared in their time, all the resources of the earth have to be shared by all. Peace without justice is a chimerical pursuit.

13. In a time, when the secular states, disturbed by the values of the Gospel, try to push the faith and its social and moral values into the private sphere, the Church is called to witness to the values of the Kingdom and not to conform herself to what pleases the politicians and the businessmen of this world. The Church does not exist in order to follow powers that oppose God's will, but in order to give witness of faith, strength and truth. The Christians, who are also citizens of modern societies, should not give up witnessing to the values of the Gospel and should not remain silent in front of the contemporary tendencies of some modern secularized states that try to impose on their people standards and values which are foreign to them. In such cases, while looking for healing and reconciliation, the Church should position herself in a counter-culture attitude and dare to tell «the rulers» the will of God, as the Prophets did in the past and the Fathers of the Church in their time.

14. Last but not least, our missionary attitude should be always supported and nourished by love. Christ has won the world, has destroyed the gates of hell by perfect love, that love which led him to die on the cross. Love is the secret weapon which brings about remorse for the sins of the past, leads to healing of memories and reconciliation among estranged people. «Who will separate us from the love of Christ?» asks rhetorically St. Paul the Apostle. «Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord» (Rom 8:35-39). The key and the way to healing and reconciliation are humility and love towards God and towards one another.

15. In the cradle of democracy, in the main entrance to Europe, that St. Paul the Apostle preached, in the country that creatively assessed the human centric culture and respect of the ancient Greeks, and received the Gospel in the mother tongue of its inhabitants, our Church of Greece is extremely happy and honoured to welcome you all and host the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism of the WCC.

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the «healing and reconciling» communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all and empower us on our common journey to witness to the Gospel in an authentic holistic way. I wholeheartedly wish you success to your work.