

ADDRESS
by His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
to the Plenary of the World Council of Churches'
Commission on Faith and Order

"CALLED TO BE ONE CHURCH"

Unity as Calling, Conversion and Mission

(Crete, Greece, 7 October 2009)



It is with great joy that we accepted the gracious invitation of our beloved Faith and Order Commission to address this auspicious plenary gathering. We would also like to welcome you all – academics and pastors, ministers and lay leaders from diverse regions of the world – to our Orthodox Academy on this uniquely beautiful island.

The theme of this plenary session is: *“Called to be One Church: that they may become one in your hand.”* It should be recalled that it was on this blessed island of Crete that the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in June 2005 revised and finalized the statement on ecclesiology, that later was received at the 9th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Porto Alegre (February 2006). This text constitutes

the culmination of a long development and maturing perspective – through numerous phases, stages and interpretations – of member Churches, that began as early as 1927, at the First Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne, if not earlier, in an earnest search for the visible unity, for which we all yearn and to which we are all called. Let us, then, together renew our commitment to dialogue and unity as a way of reflection and renewal. And let our deliberation be a prayerful offering to God in our sincere desire that we “may be one” (John 17.21) in response to our Lord’s command and call.

1. Unity as Calling

In this commitment, let us begin with thanksgiving and praise that impose upon us what in Orthodox thought and spirituality we call the “apophatic approach”. The teaching on the apophatic way pertains to the conviction that, by nature and by definition God is beyond human understanding; otherwise, if we could comprehend and grasp God, then God would not be God. This is the teaching of the great mystics, such as St. Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century and St. Gregory Palamas in the 14th century, who underlined the radical transcendence as well as the relative immanence of God. Basing their theology on sound Scriptural principles, according to which “no one can see God” (Exodus 33.20; John 1.18 and 1

John 4.12), the above mentioned Church Fathers proclaimed God as profoundly unknowable and yet personally known; God as invisible and yet accessible; God as distant and yet as intensely present – the infinite and incomprehensible God, who becomes intimate and incarnate to the world. God’s unknowability and inaccessibility ultimately oblige us to a spirit of humility and worship.

If the apophatic attitude is our starting-point, then we may appreciate how the unity of the Church, like the unity of God, is also a never-ending search, an ever-unfolding journey. As St. Gregory of Nyssa would affirm, even in the age to come, growth in the divine life is without end and with endless perfection; it is, indeed, constant progress through continually refining stages. This mindset demands from us a sense of forbearance rather than of impatience. We should not be frustrated by our human limitations, which unfortunately determine our disagreements and divisions. Our ongoing and persistent pursuit of unity is a testimony to the fact that what we seek will occur in God’s time and not our own; it is, by the same token, the fruit of heavenly grace and divine *kairos*.

2. Unity as Conversion

If unity – as our own ongoing and persistent goal – is indeed a gift of

God, then it demands a profound sense of humility and not any prideful insistence. This means that we are called to learn from others as well as to learn from time-tested formulations. It also implies that imposing our ways on others – whether “conservative” or “liberal” – is arrogant and hypocritical. Instead, genuine humility demands from all of us a sense of openness to the past and the future; in other words, much like the ancient god Janus, we are called to manifest respect for the time-tested ways of the past and regard for the heavenly city that we seek (cf. Heb. 13.14). This “turning” toward the past and the future is surely part and parcel of conversion.

Thus, it is crucial that we learn from the early Fathers and Mothers of the Church, that we embrace the mind of the early Church by immersing ourselves in the spirit of the Christian classics. In a word, Orthodox theology refers to this as “tradition.” This in no way signifies a sentimental attachment to the past or an intellectual fascination with Patristic literature. Rather, we should learn from those who – in each generation – maintained the integrity and intensity of the Apostolic faith. The Church in our age must be marked by such continuity and consistency with the past, which forms an intrinsic part of the contemporary Church. In this regard, at least for Orthodox Christians, Saints Basil and Gregory are very much alive, vividly present – not only in our liturgy, but also in our teaching and practice.

At the same time, however, we should turn our attention to the future, to the age to come, toward the heavenly kingdom. Orthodox theology adopts the term “eschatology” in order to appreciate this attitude. Nevertheless, by the term “eschatology,” we do not imply a sense of escapism or other-worldliness. Focusing on the “last times” or the “last things” is a way of envisioning this world in light of the next. An eschatological vision offers a way out of the impasse of provincialism and confessionalism. It urges us to “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.” (Rev. 1.10-11) It allows us to believe that God’s light is stronger than any darkness in this world and that the Alpha and Omega is working in us and through us for the salvation of the world and for the unity of the Church. And so we pray with conviction: “Come, Lord Jesus.” *Maranatha*. (Rev. 22.20)

3. Unity in Mission

Finally, the sense of calling and the urgency of conversion permit us to discern the areas of our common ministry and united mission. As individual communities we are “fragile sticks,” according to the words of the biblical passage of our conference taken from the Prophet Ezekiel (chapter 37, verses 15-28). Together, however, we can become one people under one God, neither divided among ourselves nor defiling the covenant of the Lord.

Indeed, the conditions of this new way are the avoiding of idol-worship (verse 23) and the making of peace (verse 26). In modern terminology, it is the preservation of creation as the proper way of worshipping the Creator and the promotion of tolerance and understanding among religions and peoples in our world. Working closely together on issues of ecological awareness and ecumenical dialogue is a crucial reflection of the “everlasting covenant” (verses 25-26), whereby Ezekiel’s God proclaims: “I will be their God and they shall be my people ... forevermore” (verses 27-28).

For the Prophets, just as for the Apostolic community, justice and peace are closely linked to the preservation and balance of the land as God’s creation. This means that our Churches are called to a common ministry and mission, proclaiming and promoting a worldview in which God’s authority – the authority of the kingdom – guides our ways and determines our actions. We must never forget that this world is inherited; it is a gift from above, offered as a means of communion with God.

If, then, we are to submit to the authority of God, the authority of the kingdom, then we must be authentic and prophetic in our criticism of the world’s consumerism. We must remember and remind our faithful that the land – and all the fullness thereof – belongs to the Lord (cf. Psalm 24.1), that the world’s resources must be oriented toward others. We must recall the

Lord's beatitude, according to which "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5.5). For the meek person is the one who reverses the world's attitudes to power and possessions; otherwise, the land becomes a place of division and violence. Meekness is ultimately a way of caring, a way of sharing. And it stands as a contrast and correction to the desecration that we have brought into God's creation.

* * *

Beloved brothers and sisters, the unity that we seek is a gift from above, which we must pursue persistently as well as patiently; it is not something that depends solely on us, but primarily on God's judgment and *kairos*. Nevertheless, this sacred gift of unity is something that also demands of us radical conversion and re-orientation so that we may turn humbly toward our common roots in the Apostolic Church and the communion of saints, but also so that we may entrust ourselves and submit to God's heavenly kingdom and authority. Finally, however, unity obliges us to a common purpose in this age as we expect the age-to-come; for it commits us to a sacred ministry and mission in realizing that kingdom, as we declare in the Lord's prayer, "on earth as in heaven." Such is the sacred gift that we have inherited. This, too, is the sacred task that lies before us. Therefore "Let us go forth in peace"¹ to proclaim the good news to the world.

¹ *From the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*

As we conclude, let us remember all those ecumenical pioneers who served this Commission with competence and deep commitment in the past thirty years, either as Moderators, Directors and staff, and with whom we had the privilege and the opportunity to work with on so many important themes, but now are no longer among us. In particular, we would like to mention the renowned Greek theologian Prof. Nikos Nissiotis and Prof. John Deschner, who served as Moderators, without forgetting Rev. Prof. John Meyendorff who had served earlier. We would also like to mention Rev. Dr. Lukas Vischer and Bishop Dr. William Lazareth who served as Directors as well as Protopresbyter Vitaly Borovoy, Deputy Director. May their memories be eternal and may they continue to rest peacefully in the refreshing hands of our Merciful God. Let us continue to honor their memories by imitating their dedication and zeal.

We would also like to thank Dame Dr. Mary Tanner and Bishop Dr. David Yemba Kekumba, who served as Moderators, and the Rev. Dr. Günther Gassmann, Rev. Dr. Alan Falconer and Rev. Dr. Thomas Best, who served as Directors, for their immense contributions to the Commission.

We also do not want to forget those elements of the Ecumenical Patriarchate who served the Commission as staff for several years from our Church, namely H.E. Metropolitan Prof. John of Pergamon, Member of the

Academy of Athens, and H.E. Metropolitan Prof. Dr. Gennadios of Sassima, who for ten years served as a staff member and later on replaced us as Vice-Moderator and consequently became Moderator of Faith and Order. We would like to thank and congratulate both of them for their dedicated service to the Commission.

May the grace, peace and love of God be with all of you!