

14 Σεπτεμβρίου 2013

By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew At the Ecumenical Gathering In the Lutheran Cathedral of Espoo (September 11, 2013)

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Your Eminence Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland,

Your Eminence Archbishop Kari Makinen of Turku and All Finland,

Your Excellency Bishop Teemu Sippo SCJ of Helsinki, President of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Finland,

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord,

Our visit to the beautiful country of Finland for the celebration of the historical anniversary and milestone in the life and witness of our local Autonomous Orthodox Church, provides the opportunity on the one hand to become acquainted and communicate with you in this historical church and its unique architectural sensitivity, where the Lutheran Diocese of Western Suburbs and neighborhoods of Helsinki has been accommodated since 2004, and on the other hand the occasion for fruitful exchange of thoughts and opinions on diverse practical matters of relevance for the daily life of Christians today. So, we shall not make mention here of the theological dialogues between the various churches and confessions.

As you all know from its historical witness and especially its initiatives over the last century, the Ecumenical Patriarchate that we represent today, always advocates dialogue and reconciliation among Christians, seeking to cultivate relations of mutual understanding and cooperation in the context of modern impasses within the Christian world, in the certainty and conviction that the Orthodox Church possesses the truth, such as this was proclaimed by our Savior Jesus Christ, inscribed in the sacred Gospels in the “canon” of Holy Scripture, defended in the Ecumenical Councils, witnessed by the Fathers, and experienced and entrusted to this day and to the ages, as inspiringly recorded and confessed “with hearts and lips” in the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith.

The time that we live in today presents, as we know, many particularities, which render mandatory this cooperation among Christians, in order to confront serious issues that now appear on the global level.

One of these crucial challenges is undoubtedly the rise of so-called religious fundamentalism, culminating in unjustifiable acts of violence and destruction as a result of religious hatred. The image that is particularly critical and lasting in our minds is the example of persecution endured today by Christians, irrespective of confession, in the wider region of the Middle East, where even the simple

admission of Christian identity places the very existence of our faithful in daily threat. These exceptionally extreme and expansive occurrences of violence and persecution against Christians cannot leave the rest of us – who are blessed to leave peacefully and in some sense of security – indifferent and inactive. As Christians and as human beings, we are obliged to suffer with, support and protest on behalf of those who are persecuted – for their peace, for the freedom of religious belief, and for the protection of the victims and vulnerable, in each minority. If we do this, we are not only standing up for the persecuted; we are standing up for ourselves. For, violence and religious fundamentalism unfortunately have no borders or boundaries; thus, in the future, they could be at our own doors, enter our own countries – no matter how distant such a danger or instance might feel to us.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate and thereby the entire Orthodox Church has condemned such phenomena in Panorthodox declarations and formal conferences, in Panorthodox consultations, Interorthodox and Interchristian assemblies, as well as in the special Synaxis of Primate of Orthodox Churches in the region of the Middle East, which we organized at our See in the Phanar for this very purpose in 2011. We recognize and reject them, like the Good Sower in the gospel parable, in an effort to uproot the “chaff” from the “field”, so that the world may discover the peace that is forever proclaimed but never achieved.

As Ecumenical Patriarchate and personally, we shall never cease to proclaim everywhere that hatred, violence, inhumane conduct, deprivation of freedom for our fellow human beings, denial of freedom to worship, loss of human rights – solely because they do not conform to our own opinions and positions – are incongruous with God’s spirit and unrelated to God. On the contrary, they estrange us from God. “God is love,” as the Evangelist John preaches. God was revealed to us, to all humanity, as love; and those who wish to know God truly, and to become like God genuinely, must acquire and cultivate love, without which “no one shall see the Lord” – and especially we hierarchs, church leaders, and clergy. Love and humility are the two characteristic features, which render us like God; indeed, the virtue of love is complemented and fulfilled in the virtue of humility.

Beloved friends, when the Lord comes in glory to judge the world, we are taught that He will seek the reflection of His person in each one of us. So we ask: How is it possible for the humble and meek Jesus to recognize Himself in those who hate and persecute their fellow human beings, especially when He spent His earthly life loving and healing all people? How can He support the death penalty for people’s wrongdoings, especially when He came to save the lost, and desires “that all may

be saved and come to the knowledge of truth”? How can life possibly embrace death? Violence and hatred, then, against other people, are only a perversion; they do not express the divine will.

As Christians, we are obliged to offer to those around us – both near and afar – a model and example of obeying the divine commandments; our life should conform to Holy Scripture, which clearly teaches that “those dwelling on earth must learn righteousness.” For us Christians, the Gospel is a law of life. Every distortion or attempt to misinterpret the Gospel that aims at justifying or excusing our human passions or weaknesses, estranges us from God’s spirit and becomes occasion for His name to be blasphemed among the nations. (cf. Rom. 2.24) After all, we should never forget that “every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution.” (Heb. 2.2) Our human passions are “hostile to God” (Rom. 8.7) and prevent us from approaching Him. Indeed, the essence of passion is the sin of our estrangement from God, and the resulting desire to control others.

For the Fathers of the undivided Church, sin is non-existent; it has no entity or hypostasis, which is why it cannot prevail upon human will. However, when human beings proclaim themselves to be divine, and replace the just Judge, then sin becomes their breath. Then sin is espoused, adorned, admired, and worshipped. But it should not be so, with us Christians; we should not be “like those who have no hope”, because we are not “tombs covered in dust” before our responsibilities and before those who supposedly grieve us.

Therefore, all of us are called to follow and adhere to the law of God, the “light yoke” of Jesus, being attentive and careful not to give cause for scandal to others, not to be irresponsible by “condemning the righteous”, but to become worthy of God’s compassion. Our troubled world has great expectations of us as Christians, and especially of us as church leaders. Let us never forget that all of us will be judged. Political and social structures are judged on a global level; ideologies collapse; human beings and leaders of nations pass; we only look at the present and overlook people’s souls, which are created by God and yet despair, thirst and hunger for the truth of divine knowledge. Over ninety years ago, there prevailed – in your neighboring country of Russia as well as in other countries of Eastern Europe – an atheistic regime, which persecuted values; or, more precisely speaking, it persecuted the singular Value, our Lord Jesus and the Church of Christ. Today it has vanished. It collapsed within a short period of time, although it was previously almighty and all-powerful. This is why we Christians, and especially those of us called and ordained by God to hold up “the light,” must never bring despair to those who look to us with great hope.

It is our prayer that the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Finland on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary since the bestowal of autonomy on the Orthodox Church of your country by our blessed predecessor Meletios IV Metaxakis, who “paved the way for Christian cooperation and reconciliation,” will prove an occasion and opportunity to strengthen the bonds between Christians here and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which offers its own witness throughout the world and strives to spread the Gospel message in all corners of the earth, from Europe to America, and from the Far East to Oceania.

As we have already noted, the Orthodox Church loves, embraces and advocates dialogue among the Christian Churches, as well as the prevalence of a spirit of endurance and reconciliation among them. At the same time, however, it does not ignore the fact that, in order for Christians to come to the one truth and achieve genuine communication, there are three preconditions if this communion is to transcend the level of mere exchange of opinions:

First, the return to the study, knowledge and adherence to the doctrines of the Church. The study of the doctrines as these were defined during the first Christian centuries and the decisions of the seven Ecumenical Councils, but also as they were formulated by the Church Fathers, provides the security and assurance for the common faith, which constitutes the prerequisite of Christian communion.

Second, the ascetic discipline as a personal struggle and way toward sanctification,

by means of the cutting off of one's personal will, as well as the abstinence from worldly senses and material pleasures. The more our desires are directed toward this world, the more we are estranged from heaven and God. Abstinence, constant vigilance, fasting, attentiveness to our senses: all of these are the means granted to us by God for us to know Him, and for Him to be revealed to us. Let us remember that, whenever God spoke to Moses, He demanded prayer and abstinence.

And third, No one can be saved alone. We live within the Church and for the Church. *Extra ecclesiam, nulla salus*. Our life in the Church is a social life, a life to be shared with others, a life of sacrifice for our brothers and sisters. By contrast, isolation as a selfish turning within, and indifference toward others, manifests our estrangement from God.

When we cultivate these three preconditions, then we Christians shall surely have the opportunity to approach one another and gradually achieve the unity that we seek. Until that time, we call everyone - ourselves and one another - to constant prayer and struggle for the peace of the whole world and the development of relations of dialogue, peace and reconciliation among all Christians.