

Economic Crisis - The Role of the Church (Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania addressed the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches which met in September 2012 at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, in Hania, Crete. As always, he spoke with a clear message, on this occasion undertaking a pointed examination of the causes and results of the economic crisis.



Speaking of “the freedom of the individual [which] has given way to emphasis on the freedom of the market”, His Beatitude Anastasios, did not pull any punches even as regards the Church and its members, accusing them of “an attitude which is inconsistent with the Gospel principles, for their participation, to a great or lesser extent, in injustice and social corruption”.

Later, when he had concluded his address, under the hail of questions from foreign the journalists who were attending the proceedings, he did not hesitate to speak in

greater detail and with even more clarity about these responsibilities, which are not the same for all, nor even for all Churches. As he noted characteristically “the responsibility of the Churches in countries where they borrow at 1% and then lend at 6% is different from that in countries where people have learned to live on borrowed money, forgetting their values”.

From the podium of the meeting- which was held under the aegis of the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Vartholomaios and is preparatory for the large-scale conference of the Central Council of Churches which will take place in Korea in 2013- His Beatitude spoke about money merchants who were responsible for the subjugation of entire peoples.

Peoples slaves to anonymous merchants

“From being a society of free persons, we have reached the point where entire peoples are candidates for enslavement to impersonal groups, anonymous money traders, who are basically regulating the economies of entire peoples, who are known as ‘markets’”, he emphasized in characteristic fashion.

The Archbishop criticized the “virtual economy, [which is] beyond the control of any state or other political institution. On the other contrary, decisions by these nameless dealers, whose identity is carefully hidden, can devastate states and nations, condemning millions of people to unemployment, and society to squalor”, he noted.

Global inequalities and responsibility

He also observed that injustice on a global level culminates in the fact that “20% of the population of the planet, who live in the rich countries, consume 80% of the earth’s wealth”.

But His Beatitude also made the point that self-criticism is not a good enough attitude on the part of the Church regarding the crisis. Nor can the role of the Church be restricted to descriptions which “pillory culprits in a vague manner”.

On the contrary, as he emphasized, the Church’s “prophetic utterances, must, quite bluntly, call for *repentance*. For many people today, repentance sounds too religious, obsolete. And yet, over the years, it has always remained current and radical, from the time when Our Lord Jesus Christ made it the core of His Gospel”.

There follows the text of the Archbishop’s speech in full:

World Council of Churches

Central Committee

Crete, 3.9.2012

by Archbishop Dr. Anastasios (Yannoulatos) of Tirana and All Albania

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FINANCIAL CRISIS – THE ROLE THE CHURCH CAN PLAY

1. The financial crisis we are experiencing in many countries in the world, especially we in Southern Europe, has brought millions of people to depression and often to despair. It is being increasingly recognized today that this financial crisis is the result of a wider social crisis, a crisis of values. It is the result of a theoretical concept related to people and nature, which, in the era of self-indulgence, has moved in a direction completely different from that of Christianity. Expelling faith in God, the God of truth, justice and love from the human conscience and society, people today have reached the conclusion that, since there is no God, everything is allowed.

Respect for the human person has been replaced by the high-handedness of impersonal institutions and forces. Stress on the freedom of the individual has given way to emphasis on the freedom of the market. So, from being a society of free persons, we have reached the point where entire peoples are candidates for enslavement to impersonal groups, anonymous money traders, who are basically regulating the economies of entire peoples, who are known as “markets”. These give money an independent existence as an abstract “accounting” value and trade it. Among the complex mazes of globalization, new structures of the financial system of a “virtual economy” have been created, which are beyond the control of any state or other political institution. On the other contrary, decisions by these nameless dealers, whose identity is carefully hidden, can devastate states and nations, condemning millions of people to unemployment, and society to squalor. So the whole global economy is now living through a dreadful structural crisis of the financial system, which is the most cogent proof of the crisis of values in society.

Injustice on the global level is most glaring in the fact that 20% of the population of the planet, who live in the rich countries, consume 80% of the earth’s wealth. At

the same time, economic delinquency, corruption, injustice and insensitivity, which flourish no matter which economic model is imposed- capitalism or socialism- have meant social marginalization and, to a great extent, a life of misery for millions of people.

2. In this painful financial crisis, the Church cannot remain a mere spectator. It has to be outspoken in giving prophetic utterance directed at three issues:

a) Bold criticism of the members of our Churches for an attitude which is inconsistent with the Gospel principles, for their participation, to a great or lesser extent, in injustice and social corruption. Mobilization, with creative initiatives, of the parishes, the various ecclesiastical groups and organizations, for the immediate relief and assistance of the weakest members of our society. Thank God, in this area there is already serious Church activity.

b) The expression of resolute criticism of the materialistic ideals and systems that are producing injustice generally and the financial crisis in particular. An effort to influence the political leadership. An invitation to eminent scholars and economists to work out solutions which would include respect for persons and the identity of peoples, and solidarity with them. The general concept of the human being and creation has been radically subjected to notions of self-indulgence. The Church is being called upon to defend the dignity of the human person as an image of the personal God, and also the sanctity of creation as God's handiwork. The way of thinking that has people as masters of creation who therefore have the right to abuse the natural environment is not simply mistake, but, from an Orthodox standpoint, sinful. According to the Christian faith, people are an organic part of creation and ought to treat it with respect.

c) Local Churches have the opportunity to demonstrate mutual support, with a greater impact on the societies in which they live. For example, influencing the peoples of Northern Europe towards understanding and solidarity with the struggling societies in the South of the continent. And, vice versa, restraining the feelings of bitterness and frustration of the economically weaker peoples of the South at the arrogant behaviour of some of the economically more robust European states. Examples could multiply, clearly, because of the disparities which exist all over the globe between the economically powerful and weak states. The Churches in the rich societies have no right to keep silent- sometimes, indeed, to concur- and leave room for the chorus of dismissive voices insulting the peoples who are in trouble.

3. But to return to our own, familiar social sphere Our prime duty is serious *self-criticism*.

Unfortunately, this crucial word has been transformed. It is normally used to point out the mistakes of others. But, together with the undoubted mistakes of the political and economic leadership, it is imperative that we become aware of the mistakes the we, as citizens, have made. Certainly, it is not true everybody, en masse, shares the same responsibilities. A lot of ordinary people are victims who benefitted not at all from the prosperity created with borrowed money. But if we look keenly, we'll see personal errors and oversights among the majority. Instances where we did not stand up to widespread unaccountability and outrageous criminality.

If all we do is repeat the phrase "crisis of values", we risk becoming lost in vagueness. The Church, "again and again", is called upon to name, emphasize and point out these enduring values which have global validity: justice, in the clear sense of "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them" (Matth. 7, 12); also truth, self-determination, the importance of moderation; efforts towards reconciliation; love in all its expressions and dimensions.

4. But self-criticism is not enough. Nor does the role of the Church allow it to restrict itself to descriptions that pillory culprits in a vague manner. Its prophetic utterances, must, quite bluntly, call for *repentance*. For many people today, repentance sounds too religious, obsolete. And yet, over the years, it has always remained current and radical, from the time when Our Lord Jesus Christ made it the core of His Gospel: "Repent" (Mark 1, 15), change your mentality, your behaviour, the way in which you look at life, He repeats. Only with a change of mentality and heart can we overcome the habits and passions that are making our society sick. The financial and moral crisis which is affecting the majority of peoples and states is linked to clear causes which have a name and come in a variety of forms. I shall restrict myself to indicating three root causes of the corruption that lies at the heart of the financial crisis:

a) Covetousness. According to Saint Paul, this is idolatry (*Col.* 3, 5), a rejection of the worship of the true God. People who covet are indifferent as to the legality of their methods. Their cupidity increasingly takes on new, uncontrolled forms. In an expressive way, the Apostle to the Gentiles notes: "But they who wish to become rich fall into temptation and a snare, and many mindless and harmful desires, which sink people in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil" (*I Tim.* 6, 9). The virus of avarice in modern society has mutated and infected all social levels. What we call the consumer society has reached proportions of hysteria. The ideal and aim of people today, of every class, has become the reckless accumulation of material goods, often superfluous, with no

thought to the natural environment.

This greed, which is the cause of today's ecological crisis, was condemned 16 centuries ago by a great theologian, Father, and teacher of the one, undivided Church, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who stressed: " Make use, not misuse. Let yourself enjoy, but in moderation. Don't become destructive for all the animals that live on earth and in the sea" (Homily on Beneficence, 383 A.D.).

b) The next root of corruption is lying. The first chapter of Scripture (*Gen. 3, 1*) tells us that the fall of the human race came about by lying, while the last (*Rev. 22, 15*) insists that "anyone who loves and practices a lie" will stay outside the kingdom of God. In the end, lying undermines the most important thing: our ability to love. This may seem paradoxical. But Dostoevsky explains in a penetrating manner, putting this advice into the mouth of Staretz Zosima: "And most importantly, don't tell lies... Above all, don't tell lies to yourself. People who lie to themselves and believe in that lie reach the point of not seeing any truth, either within themselves or in others- and so they lose all respect for others and their own self-respect. Since they don't respect others, they stop loving. And without love, they begin to fall prey to the passions and promiscuity... People who lie to themselves are the first to take offence. Because sometimes it's very pleasant to feel offended. Isn't that right?". (*Brothers Karamazov*, vol. I).

c) But the greatest danger is self-love, egocentricity, enslavement to our ego, worship of our individual interests, those of the family, the locality, the nation. The antidote to this is justice, together with mutual support and self sacrifice. The secret of finding one's self is to offer it. Emphasis on and the experience of this value remains the Church's greatest contribution: support for the grieving, even if they are themselves responsible for mistakes and omissions. No other institution can offer love and self-sacrifice. To the classic "cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am), the Church, drawing on the best pages of its history, adds : "I love therefore I am", based on the model of the existence of the Holy Trinity in love and interpenetration.

5. After the critique and the stress on personal responsibility, the Church should offer a message of optimism and hope. The crisis can become a special opportunity for spiritual renewal. The fever of the financial crisis, as well as the ecological one, demonstrate that there is a more general sickness threatening the survival of mankind.

Despite the pain and mortification that today's financial crisis has inflicted on millions of people both in under-developed and developed states, it also presents

an unrivalled opportunity for corrective changes in crucial sectors of global, national and personal life. We Christians are called upon to take the lead in these efforts, as we did (with the WCC to the fore) in the cases of racism and violence. Certainly these have not disappeared as a result of our activities. But we have achieved a greater awareness of the need to combat them.

This is not the first time the Church has been faced with crises. The tragic conflicts and experiences of the world wars in the 20th century awakened consciences and led to the abolition of colonialism, of the fascist systems and of racist ideologies. In the course of great trials, when societies reach the end of their tether, rare virtues arise in people's hearts, such as love of the truth, bravery, tolerance, forgiveness, self-denial, justice and altruism. Today, too, they are precious antibodies to the vertigo afflicting the body social. And it is these that the Church, patiently and systematically, should activate today.

It is our immediate duty to bolster the hope and stamina of our members and our peoples, and with genuine respect for the worth of every human person and every nation, to fight for a just resolution to the financial crisis, for real mutual support within our society and among the peoples of the world.