

Now is the time to discern the “signs of the times”. Discernment, while often subtle, requires a clear, active and courageous response to the will of God. In being accountable to this process, we also discover for ourselves what is depicted in the gospel story: that “the signs of the times”, including our own times, point to the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself.

NOTES

- ¹ *Terres des Femmes*, 1995, cited in *MaryMartha*, Vol. 4, no. 1, Winter 1995, p.23.
- ² This refers to the “experience of God” usually called theosis in Greek, rendered in English by such terms as “deification”, “glorification”, “sanctification”.
- ³ Gennadios Limouris, ed., *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, Katerini, Greece, Tertios, 1992, p.29. About one-third of the participants invited to this consultation in 1988 were Orthodox women theologians.
- ⁴ *The St Nina Quarterly*, Vol. 1, no. 4, Fall 1997, p.20 (italics added); thanks to Tarek Mitri for the English translation of these decisions.
- ⁵ *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church*, p.28.
- ⁶ On relations between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, see for example, Thomas FitzGerald, “Toward the Reestablishment of Full Communion: The Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox Dialogue”, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 36, no. 2, 1991, pp.169-83.
- ⁷ It should be noted here that this meeting did not choose to address a statement to the World Council of Churches as such, although invited to do so. The delegates seemed to feel deeply the urgency of time constraints and preferred at this first meeting of such a diversity of Orthodox women to maintain their focus as Orthodox women on pressing matters affecting the church which they believed had to be directly communicated to their own communities.
- ⁸ Prayers from the rite used by the Coptic Orthodox Church include versions of the ancient ordination prayer for the woman deacon from the Apostolic Constitutions, and prayers from ancient and other sources. Even though presently modified, ancient versions of the ordination rite designate ordination (*cheirotonia*); cf. K. Fitzgerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross, 1999.

Address to the Istanbul Meeting

H.A.H. ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW

Christ is risen!

Beloved children in Christ:

We welcome you very warmly to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to this historic centre of Orthodox Christianity. It is a great joy for us to host this important inter-Orthodox conference for Orthodox women on the topic “Discerning the Signs of the Time”. At this time we should like to express our appreciation to the World Council of Churches for providing so much support for this conference.

Our risen Lord and Saviour is the one who richly blesses us. And you have been blessed by him with the opportunity to come to this special city and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate not simply as participants in a conference, but as holy pilgrims, always seeking out those sacred centres of inspiration and spiritual nourishment which enable you to more fully serve the Lord and others in his name.

As you know, this city and the Church of Constantinople is rich in Christian history. Tradition tells us that St Andrew the Apostle and the First-Called preached the gospel of salvation in this region in the years following the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Since the earliest days of the church, faithful Christian women and men have lived in this city. Here some of Christianity’s greatest theologians and our predecessors on the venerable throne of Andrew, such as St Gregory the Theologian and St John Chrysostom honoured God both with their lives and their words. Here at the great church of Agia Sophia, a number of devoted women, such as St Olympias, served as deaconesses. Here, in this city and in the nearby cities, many of the great councils of the early church were held. At these councils, the fundamental convictions of our faith were affirmed and defended for the sake of our salvation. And it was from the Church of Constantinople that dedicated missionaries, such as St Cyril and St Methodios, whose memories we celebrated yesterday

[11 May], went out to preach the gospel to many peoples and to guide them to salvation.

Here we also remember the example of the countless martyrs and saints who bore witness to Christ. When you visit the patriarchal cathedral of St George the great martyr, you will find the sacred relics of three women saints: Euphemia, Theophano and Solomone. These pious women lived in different periods and different places. They had different stations in society. Yet they are united in their faith in Christ and in their devotion to his holy gospel. To both women and men, to both clergy and laity, these women saints continue to be a source of inspiration, for it is written: "God is revealed in his saints!"

Indeed, this city is well known for its historic churches as well as for its great treasures of Byzantine architecture and iconography. But most importantly, we honour the Church of Constantinople as the centre of Orthodox Christian life and witness. It is a church of saints and martyrs, a church of missionaries and theologians, a church with a history, but one with a future too. The examples of holiness and of service continue to guide us and to nurture us as we seek to serve our Lord in this day and age and in the dawning millennium.

Today it is our duty and honour to serve the few thousand faithful Christian men and women who live here in this city. Like the generations before them, the faithful stewards here continue to bear witness to their faith by keeping lit the *phanar* which is the beacon of Orthodoxy, by honouring their sacred heritage and by serving others in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask that you remember in your prayers, especially this week, all the faithful of the Church of Constantinople.

Trusting in God's grace, it is also our responsibility as Ecumenical Patriarch to be a servant of the unity of our holy Orthodox church throughout the world. While always respecting the dignity and rights of all the holy patriarchates and autocephalous churches, the archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch is the "first among equals" of all the bishops of the church. Because of this we, humbly occupying the venerable throne of St Andrew, have a particular ministry through which we encourage and strengthen the unity of the holy Orthodox church. We seek to strengthen the "bond of peace" among the sister churches. We do not do this for our own honour and glory. Rather, we do this for the sake of the church's mission and witness in the world. We do this for the glory of God!

We are especially happy that your conference has brought together official delegates from both the autocephalous Orthodox churches and the Oriental Christian churches. As you know, our churches are presently engaged in official theological dialogue. The goal of this dialogue is to

restore communion between our two families of churches. Although we have been divided for many centuries, our theologians have clearly affirmed that we share the same apostolic faith.

We pray fervently that the two families of churches will soon be able to resolve all outstanding differences and to act formally and in a canonical manner to restore ecclesiastical communion. We believe that this is the will of our common Lord. With God's grace, your conference and the previous one in Damascus will contribute in a very important way to the process of reconciliation and unity.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has received with much appreciation the report of the conference of Orthodox women held in Damascus under the leadership of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius of Antioch and all the East, our beloved brother and co-celebrant. The report is a positive and inspiring one. It reminds all of us of the devotion and the piety of the many faithful who serve their church and society in the name of our Lord. It expresses faithfulness to the Orthodox tradition and the desire to respond to the challenges of today.

Among the many important recommendations of the Damascus conference is the call for the full restoration of the order of women deacons. This recommendation echoes a similar one coming from the inter-Orthodox consultation in Rhodes in 1988. The order of women deacons is an undeniable part of the tradition coming from the early church. Now, in many of our churches, there is a growing desire to restore this order so that the spiritual needs of the people of God may be better served. There are already a number of women who appear to be called to this ministry.

Beloved in the Lord:

Yesterday, you began your conference by participating in the divine liturgy offered at the historic shrine and monastery of the Life-Giving Fountain. There in that holy place we gathered together on the Sunday dedicated to the memory of the holy Myrrh-Bearing Women. The reading of the holy gospel reminded us once again of those devoted women whose names were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Disheartened and troubled, they went to the tomb to anoint the body of Christ on the first day of the week. Upon reaching the tomb, their sorrow was changed to joy when they learned that the Lord had risen from the dead. From the place of the dead, they rushed to Jerusalem to proclaim the life-giving message of the resurrection. They became, as our hymns say, the "apostles to the apostles". They were the proto-evangelists of the good news.

The example of the Myrrh-Bearing Women is important for all of us. Throughout the world, many people desire to hear the good news of sal-

vation. There is a desire among many people to come to a deeper relationship with the living God. There is a longing for spiritual growth and an even greater longing for salvation. There is a desire for holiness and healing and forgiveness which comes from God alone.

Truly, the Orthodox faith has much wisdom to offer to all people. Like the Myrrh-Bearing Women, we are called to proclaim the living Lord who is risen from the dead. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ continues to offer us the love, the healing and the mercy of the heavenly Father. Because of Christ, we know that we belong to God, and that he loves each of us and that indeed we are his daughters and sons. Because of Christ, we know that we are most fully human when we live our lives in communion with him. Salvation is communion with God and with his people.

Through his gospel, our Lord also teaches us that we cannot grow in our relationship with the triune God apart from one another. We are bonded together through the mystery of God's goodness. And because of this, the followers of our Lord are obliged to oppose all forms of injustice, discrimination or abuse. As women and men of faith, we must not only pray for one another, we also must do all that we can to honour, preserve and protect the dignity of the human person who is created in the "image and likeness" of God.

Finally, we must remember that we grow closer to God and to one another in the midst of creation. Creation comes to us as a blessing and a gift. It is our common inheritance which is entrusted to us by God. Because we are stewards of this creation, we also have an obligation to honour and to preserve all that we have received from the Creator of heaven and earth.

Beloved in Christ:

We pray that your conference is one filled with all the blessings of the risen Lord and that your pilgrimage to this city and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate will be a source of blessing for your life and for our churches. We further pray that our risen Lord, through the intercession of his mother and the holy Myrrh-Bearing Women, will always guide you and protect you.

To him be glory, honour and worship, together with the eternal Father and the all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Address to the Damascus Meeting

H.B. IGNATIOS IV

I am pleased that this meeting is being held here in Syria. From this part of the world, the cradle of apostolic mission, Christianity extended to Turkey and Greece; and the Western world was subsequently Christianized. Christianity is an Eastern reality. We interpret it here in its Eastern context. It is not bound to a Western identity.

Ecumenical dialogue is rooted in an understanding of Christianity which takes the plurality of our cultures and historical experiences very seriously. The search for such dialogue motivated our participation in the World Council of Churches since its early history. Our church expresses its ecumenical commitment in many different ways. Our openness to others is part of our being as Christians. We cannot isolate ourselves nor accept being isolated. As someone who for many years was involved in the life of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organizations, I can bear witness to this spirit of openness prevalent in our church. Together with sister churches in the region, we founded the Middle East Council of Churches. We are also involved with the Catholic Church and other churches in various bilateral dialogues.

The encounter of Christians in dialogue does not mean that we are in agreement. We do disagree, but we are called to love each other. Christianity in the East tries to be faithful to its apostolic tradition. We have rediscovered together with our non-Chalcedonian Orthodox sister churches what brings us very close to each other. We are not seeking only an agreement on Christian doctrines, for we are called to be witnesses of the one faith. Our faith cannot be reduced to belief in the Book. We often say to our Muslim neighbours that we are not a religion of the Book. We are a community of faith, a faith in a person. Scriptures are a way that leads us to the person of Christ, true God and true man.

I am also very pleased to see this women's meeting held in Syria. We are proud of our women, of the riches they have offered and continue to offer to the church. There is no discrimination against women in the