

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

church. There may have been failures in recognizing the role of women. We are aware of many questions which invite a serious effort of interpretation. We need to be faithful to the true Tradition and discern what is essential. We have to reconsider critically ideas that may absolutize traditional norms and practices. Such an effort is incumbent not only on women in the church but on us all. Your meeting as Orthodox women has, I am sure, much to contribute in this respect. May God bless your lives and your encounter.

## Report of the Damascus Meeting

We are grateful to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the special opportunity we have had to meet together as Orthodox women. The theme of our conference was “Discerning the ‘Signs of the Times’ (Matt. 16:3): Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church”. We met together in Damascus, Syria, from 4-10 October 1996.

Most of the 65 participants were official women delegates sent by their churches at the invitation of the World Council of Churches. This meeting took place in the context of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women. It focused especially on the concerns of women from the Orthodox churches of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. A small number of lay and ordained Orthodox men also attended the conference. Their support and encouragement of our efforts were a welcomed resource.

We benefited greatly from the rich hospitality of His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. He graciously received the participants and opened the conference with an address. He affirmed that the church in Syria wanted this event to be an important one, a significant one, so that we can understand more and do more for women.

We were also graciously received by His Beatitude Ignatius Zakka II, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. He also offered the closing message for the conference. In his presentation, he affirmed the many important ministries women have had and continue to have in the life of the church.

The fact that we were so warmly greeted by both patriarchs not only greatly enriched our meeting, but also reminded us of the growing reconciliation between our two families of Orthodox churches. Since our meeting included participants from both families of churches, we believe that we have also made a contribution to this reconciliation.

We gathered in a land rich in Christian history. In addition to our regular opportunity for worship, we visited the women’s monasteries of