

# Introduction

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“Discerning the ‘Signs of the Times’ (Matt. 16:3): Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church” was the theme for two international Orthodox women’s conferences in 1996 and 1997. The first, in Damascus from 4-10 October 1996, brought together Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox women representing churches in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Most of the 65 participants were official representatives of the churches. The host of the gathering was His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. Participants also enjoyed the hospitality and active participation of His Beatitude Ignatius Zakka II, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople hosted the second conference, which was held in Istanbul, from 10-17 May 1997. It brought together women representing the churches from North and South America, Eastern and Western Europe and Russia; again, most of the more than 50 participants were delegates officially appointed by their churches. His Beatitude Patriarch Karekin II of the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople also extended his hospitality and participated actively in the conference.

The delegates to both conferences were sent by their churches at the invitation of the World Council of Churches. The conferences were organized and sponsored through the WCC’s office of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women.

The two official statements which resulted from these proceedings are presented at the beginning of this volume. Here we should underscore the seriousness with which these texts and the meetings which produced them were taken by church leadership. Four patriarchs, as noted above, and a number of regional bishops were actively involved in the progress of the work. They were very committed to learning more about what Orthodox women had to say. Furthermore, there is an official quality to these statements, as they reflect the concerns of formally appointed

delegates from the regional Orthodox churches. The representatives were appointed by their presiding hierarchs, who themselves were acting on behalf of their regional synods.

To be sure, these results only reflect preliminary considerations. Nevertheless, we have now for the first time in history a consensus regarding some of the most important issues which concern Orthodox women – and this global consensus is discerned *from the perspective of Orthodox women*. It is hoped that the information presented here regarding who Orthodox women experience themselves to be, as well as their concerns, may prove helpful both in the life of the Orthodox churches and in ecumenical dialogue.

In addition to the two final texts, this volume includes a selection of the presentations and study papers offered to the delegates for their consideration and discussion. These appear with no additional commentary, as they speak for themselves and solely reflect the perspectives of the authors. Nevertheless, the variety of expertise and experiences reflected in all of the presentations assisted tremendously in both formal and informal exchanges and made an obvious impact on the final formulation of the statements.

It is appropriate at the outset to offer thanks. First of all, we thank and give glory to God for the miracle of these two conferences. Because of this, profound appreciation and gratitude is expressed to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Patriarch Ignatius IV for their kind and even enthusiastic invitations to host these events. Each manifested his commitment to our efforts by delegating personnel and making available resources which facilitated the success of these conferences. Deepest thanks are also expressed to Patriarch Ignatius Zakka II and Patriarch Karekin II. The personal openness and thoughtful generosity demonstrated by these four presiding hierarchs was not only a wonderful expression of the Orthodox ethos and Eastern hospitality but also bore witness to their commitment to our collaboration together as Orthodox women.

Sincere gratitude is expressed to the regional synods and the presiding hierarchs who appointed the delegates to the conferences. The formal and informal discussions and the deep commitment to setting priorities made it obvious that some of the best regional representatives of the church had been sent. It also indicated that church officials cared deeply about discerning and responding to the real issues which affect Orthodox women. The delegates were not afraid to engage some very difficult challenges with other Orthodox sisters.

Heartfelt thanks for initiating and supporting this effort is expressed to the World Council of Churches, especially to the director of its

women's programme Aruna Gnanadason, to Nicole Fischer, who extended herself personally, professionally and administratively for the Damascus meeting, and to Claire Tierney for her expert administrative collaboration and support at the Istanbul meeting.

Aruna Gnanadason was kindly available to offer advice from her vast experience in the difficult art of balancing content and practical logistics in international conferences. Sensitive to the need that these conferences reflect and address the concerns of Orthodox women, she was always accessible to offer constructive advice and criticism but entrusted all final decisions concerning the theological content of the programme to me as Orthodox theological consultant.

Profound appreciation must be now extended to the consultants and official observers invited by the WCC as well as the local visitors who participated in these programmes. The consultants and observers represented a diversity of experience and opinion. A small number of delegates from the Damascus conference were also invited to serve as consultants to the meeting in Istanbul, providing an extra measure of continuity between the two meetings.

### **The context**

Planning the programme was indeed challenging. The WCC women's programme was strongly committed to respecting the regional contexts in designing these two meetings. My additional concern as an Orthodox woman was to strive to offer "a singular event in two different contexts". Within the limited resources available, we attempted to develop such a programme. We intentionally worked without pre-conceptions about the type of final statements the representatives would produce at each meeting.

The theme for the conferences – "Discerning the Signs of the Times" emerged during the official visit to the Geneva offices of the WCC by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in December 1995. During a news conference the patriarch was asked about the possibility of rejuvenating the ministry of women deacons. After displaying openness to the possibility, he concluded by stating:

It is important to watch for "the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3) and to fine-tune our ears to the stirring and calls of the Spirit as recommended in the Apocalypse, "he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7).<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, the Ecumenical Patriarch believes that the ministry of women is an important issue which merits "discerning" during our present "times". Furthermore, the source of this process is not male or

female human persons, central as they may be, but rather the “*calls of the Spirit*”.

In Matthew 16:3, the biblical story associated with this theme, Jesus confronts the religious hypocrites of his day after they try to trap him by asking for a sign from heaven. Within his response, he also exposes their pride, malice, inertia and profound *lack* of authority by simply revealing their unwillingness and inability to discern the “signs of the times” in which they lived. Orthodox Christianity teaches that the “signs” of our own times, just as of those times, point to the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The sub-theme, “Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church”, was intended to encourage the delegates to consider deeply the nature of their own presence and participation in the life of the church. Orthodox theology and spirituality teach that we are responsible for discerning the will of God for our own circumstances. The ancient Christian liturgical greeting “Christ is in our midst” affirms that in each generation every aspect of life is called to reflect this reality with integrity.

Discernment is an ongoing task. The Greek term *diakrisis* connotes an often subtle and sometimes virtually imperceptible dynamic which requires a clear and lasting division in cutting through a crisis. *Compromises fail miserably when diakrisis is necessary*. According to Orthodox spirituality, discernment in its fullness occurs among persons who “know God”, who live in communion with God.<sup>2</sup> They are the holy ones, the saints, both male and female. No matter how short of this the vast majority of us fall, we are called to discern to the best of our ability, even as we acknowledge our limitations.

This call is to an ongoing, life-long process, marked by increasing congruency, integrity and ultimately transparency between personal “interior” experience and “external” expression. Accounts from the lives of the saints attest to the value this congruency gives to the unique situation of every human being. God respects our personal circumstances, and loves us from where we are. On the basis of these assumptions, Orthodox spirituality asserts that how we live, act and relate with others is somehow expressive of our innermost relationship with God. At the same time, how we live, act and relate with others offers countless opportunities to experience the mercy, love and presence of God outside our own selves – provided that we are ready and open to this.

For these reasons, we cannot be passive, letting others live our lives for us. There are innumerable choices to make within the context of our own lives. We are accountable to God for each of these choices. Like the wise bridesmaids in Jesus’ parable (Matt. 25:13), we are called to “keep awake”, consciously awaiting the presence of the Bridegroom within the

context of daily events, relationships and responsibilities. Like the good servants entrusted with a gift of talents (Matt. 25:14-30), we are called judiciously and creatively to use and even increase the good we have been given. And, like the faithful followers at the second coming of our Lord, we too are to discern the presence of Christ in the needs of our neighbours (Matt. 25:31-46). In this manner and as part of a living, “holy” people, Christians are continuously compelled faithfully to “discern”.

### **The outcome: unity in diversity**

While this summarizes the theory, belief and hope undergirding the rationale for these meetings, there was no way to know what would actually transpire. We did not know whom the churches would send or how they would work together.

In fact, the churches sent a rich variety of devoted women. And they came ready to work. We did not anticipate the remarkable amount of congruency which would emerge between the final texts of the two conferences. The Orthodox participants came from countries, cultures and regions which are vastly different from each other. Many of them had never before left home.

In general, the delegates did not identify their unity solely in terms of a gathering of women from numerous contexts. Rather, the unity experienced within each conference seemed to be based on a deeper foundation. This was shown by the profound level of interest, patience and active listening which the participants extended to each other in both formal and informal discussions. This quality of compassionate, focused attention is too rare a commodity in theological and ecumenical settings. This concentrated discipline perhaps assisted in the mysterious process of discerning the “one Orthodox faith” in the other. Once the delegates experienced the “orthodoxy” of their sister representatives, they appeared to encounter “the one church” in each other as well. Once “the church” was discerned in the sister delegate, enthusiasm about the nature of the work to be accomplished emerged almost immediately. Within this indispensable overarching contact, participants could turn readily to the immediate concerns of the church, differing regional practices and personal experience.

At the same time, each meeting displayed its own unique personality. Despite the vast diversity of regional, cultural and social settings and the abundant variety of personal histories, the delegates to the Damascus meeting appeared to be fairly homogeneous regarding their experience of and concerns for the church. They accomplished their work in a fluid manner and quickly approved the draft of their statement with a unanimous and resounding voice.

The Istanbul meeting began more slowly. At first a number of the representatives seemed tentative about who their Orthodox sister was. Trust had to be earned. Nevertheless, a powerful bond of love and collaboration was soon forged among participants and generated an almost electric energy and enthusiasm in the writing of the statement. The delegates experienced the document as theirs and devoted undivided attention to it. By the end of the conference, several delegates were speaking of the meeting as a personal miracle for them. It marked a process of discovering who their Orthodox sisters truly were and the importance of expressing their concerns together as women of the church.

Both final documents reflect the fact that the delegates regarded themselves as full members of the church. There is even an apparent ease and comfort about their identity as Orthodox women. But this way of taking their membership for granted also created a deep sense of responsibility among the participants "to speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) in the formal and informal discussions. This sense of accountability compelled them to call attention to certain practices in the church which compromise the gospel and impede the mission and witness of the church. The ramifications of sexism as a sin were discussed at both conferences. The text from Damascus, for example, states:

We note with tremendous sadness, how easy it is for the presence of women to be forgotten... There are some occasions when the role and presence of women, as well their work, is not always validated for the value it has... Rather, women may be seen by some as more readily dispensable...

Women have also been dismissed in other ways as well. We recognize with deep concern how social injustices such as poverty, illiteracy and invisibility may affect Orthodox women and women in general in our part of the world. Wherever possible, we must strive to assist them and open our lives and our hearts to them, as our Lord would have us do.

The Istanbul text takes this a step further to suggest that sexism be taken up programmatically by the church, observing that "the church would benefit from theological and soteriological reflection on this issue, especially through the medium of consultations, workshops and informal study".

Almost ten years earlier, the inter-Orthodox consultation on the place of women in the Orthodox church in Rhodes emphasized the need to

confess in honesty and humility that, owing to human weakness and sinfulness, the Christian communities have not always and in all places been able to suppress effectively ideas, manners and customs, historical developments and social conditions which have resulted in practical discrimination against women. Human sinfulness has thus led to practices which do not reflect the true nature of the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Both the Damascus and Istanbul discussions and documents also voiced concern about certain liturgical practices associated with the presentation of infants, particular prayers related to miscarriage, abortion, post-partum mothers, and the assumptions which in some places still prohibit women from receiving communion for biological reasons. These concerns were discussed openly, yet with great sensitivity. The delegates recognized the need to examine more thoughtfully the relationship between theology and praxis. Indeed, a focus on *orthopraxis* as the theologically correct application of practice, was reflected in the discussions at each conference.

The Synod of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, under the leadership of Patriarch Ignatius IV, immediately responded to these issues, which had also been identified a few weeks earlier by a regional meeting of Orthodox women from the Middle East. The Synod "affirmed the God-given value of women in the church and ordered that liturgical texts which imply otherwise be corrected". Furthermore,

The Holy Synod discussed certain matters which touched the lives of women and decided that women and men should be treated equally concerning their participation in divine services and receiving sacraments. *Whatever references are in the liturgical books that women are unclean and tainted should be abolished...* This necessitates a new look at liturgical texts.<sup>4</sup>

Thus a beginning was made on implementing the recommendation from the Rhodes consultation that the Orthodox

are bound to affirm in the strongest possible way the dignity of the human person, both the female and the male. Any act which denies the dignity of the human person and any act which discriminates against women and men on the basis of gender is a sin. It is therefore the task of the church to affirm before the world the dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26).<sup>5</sup>

This essential discussion was seen within the context of an even deeper issue: commitment to the unity of the church. Just as the practices mentioned above may distort the relationship between men and women and thus threaten the unity between male and female members within the same Orthodox family, so, too, the absence of eucharistic communion between our two Orthodox families, despite more than 30 years of unofficial and official dialogues, discussions and agreements, was viewed as a scandal and a threat to the unity of the whole church. A commitment to unity between the two Orthodox families seemed to be the highest priority among the delegates.<sup>6</sup>

The Damascus meeting stated quite powerfully that "as we prayed, discussed the themes and met together, we recognized that we serve the

same Lord and share in the same Orthodox faith. It is our common faith which has guided our reflection and which has inspired us to deepen our service to the Orthodox church and our witness in the world." The Istanbul meeting also echoed the concerns they heard from church hierarchs, who "eagerly anticipate the final reconciliation and restoration of ecclesiastical communion between the two families". The vast majority of delegates seemed painfully aware that it was not the will of Christ which is impeding the restoration of full communion between the two Orthodox families.

The participants at both meetings were also well aware that most of their recommendations had been expressed by others before them in some manner. Two previous conferences – in Agapia, Romania, in 1976, and in Crete in 1990 – had been sponsored on behalf of the Orthodox churches at the invitation of the WCC. Much of what these two consultations called for was also recommended by the Rhodes consultation. The lack of enthusiasm for and commitment to applying these earlier recommendations was experienced as a source of frustration and even embarrassment by many from within the churches. Noting that some recommendations from previous meetings of Orthodox women have been addressed and others have not, the Istanbul text says: "We are concerned about the reception of this document and recommend our churches make this statement available for women either through general publications or correspondence to parishes." Speaking of the expansion of the scope of the ministries of women, the Damascus meeting similarly emphasizes "that we still wait for the application of the recommendations" from Rhodes. In part perhaps due to these concerns, participants in both meetings affirmed the importance of Orthodox spirituality, which serves to deepen one's relationship with Christ and others. Because of this spiritual foundation, the delegates demonstrated a strong commitment "to stimulate a desire in our people to take an active role in the life of the church. This may happen with the realization, on the part of Orthodox Christians, of their own royal priesthood" (Istanbul). The participants in Damascus acknowledged with gratitude the chance "to learn from each other about the many forms of ministry in which women in our churches are already engaged".

Whether in the aftermath of the cataclysmic changes in Eastern Europe or, more generally, in the face of the onslaught of challenges raised by modernity, a new concern was articulated for the lapsed Orthodox. "In some of our churches, Orthodox Christians have lost interest and joined social, cultural and para-church organizations," Istanbul said. "We are looking for ways to bring Orthodox Christians back to the church." Some women attending the Istanbul meeting came from areas which have

recently experienced the tragedy of war. With this in mind, the delegates spoke of women as "peacemakers" and called on all the churches to make "a greater commitment to support our sister Orthodox churches in crisis situations... and to support refugees and those in war-torn situations. Often in these situations, women and children suffer most."

A particularly strong desire was expressed for more communication among Orthodox women regarding theological, spiritual and practical concerns which affect them in particular. There was a strong call for more resources and materials which can be used in church schools throughout the Orthodox world to help Christians live their faith from day to day. Some delegates from Eastern Europe stressed that in addition to receiving food and clothing there is a deeply felt need to be fed spiritually and theologically. They looked to Orthodox Christians in other parts of the world for assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Both meetings placed a surprisingly strong emphasis on the serious lack of opportunity for women in far too many situations to study Orthodox theology. Noting that "in families and schools, women are the primary educators", Istanbul said that "theologically-educated women have a particular ministry in teaching our faithful", making "Orthodox theological education for women... a priority". Damascus expressed "deep disappointment" that many women "have not had the chance to study theology in a formal setting", which "hinders our role and work in the church". The statement added that women should receive both spiritual and financial support to pursue studies in theological education. At both meetings those women present who have pursued formal studies in Orthodox theology were publicly recognized and encouraged. Both meetings also benefited from the presence of a number of participants who have experienced the spiritual and theological formation afforded by monastic life; and appreciation was often expressed for the importance of the gift of monasticism to the life of the church, both historically and today. Istanbul in particular encouraged the development of monastic vocations for women.

Both conferences echoed earlier meetings in stressing the importance of the role of the laity within the church. On this point, it is evident that the practices of Orthodox communities vary widely. In some churches laymen and laywomen are actively involved in various forms of leadership and influence in a virtually analogous manner; elsewhere, this is clearly not the case. The Istanbul delegates stated that "women are able to and should be invited to offer guidance to the church on issues that specifically concern them". The Damascus representatives recommended "that our leaders encourage women's involvement and participation in the everyday decision-making process of our local churches".

Both meetings expressed a desire for the development of ministries in theology, education and mission, ecumenical relations, and pastoral care. The latter was a particular focus at the Damascus meeting, which called on church leaders to

encourage women's formal and informal ministries in pastoral care, so as to reach out to others who may have been spiritually isolated, in material need, grieving the loss of a loved one, survivors of abuse or violence, etc. These persons deserve particular attention, as they require the healing presence and assistance of the church through her prayer, counselling and support.

The participants recommended that the churches take more positive actions in affirming and supporting the various vocations to which women may be called. Many examples of women serving the church actively were shared by the participants, a number of whom were themselves involved in such ministries as spiritual direction, pastoral counselling, Christian education, theological education, hospital visitations, medical missions, philanthropy, and caring for orphaned children, the destitute and the elderly in their communities.

### Questions about ordination

Discussions about the rejuvenation of women in the diaconate occurred at both conferences. The participants at Damascus recognized "the ministry of deaconesses as a response to the Holy Spirit for various needs of this present age" and recommended "that our church leaders discern prayerfully and courageously the presence of the Holy Spirit in those many places where the ministry of ordained deaconesses, as well as other forms of ministry, are needed". The Istanbul delegates stated: "Many of us believe the incorporation of deaconesses in the life of the church will help contribute to the atmosphere of love and learning, and to the life of the church."

While not all participants were familiar with this tradition of ministry, encouragement to reflect on it came in the welcoming address at Istanbul of Patriarch Bartholomew. He reminded the participants that "since the earliest days of the church, faithful Christian women and men have lived in this city... Here, at the Great Church of Agia Sophia a number of devoted women, such as St Olympias, served as deaconesses... 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!'" Contemporary discussions about the ordination of women deacons in the Orthodox church have their origins in the early 1800s. This is not, as some have claimed, a new issue initiated from "outside", though the pastoral challenges of the contemporary world have certainly

renewed a sense of urgency about it among many Orthodox Christians all around the world. The 1988 Rhodes consultation said that the rejuvenation of the ancient ministry of the order of women deacons would "represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres. This would be all the more true if the diaconate in general (male as well as female) were restored in all places in its original manifold services... in response to the increasing specific needs of our time."

That the women deacon has been ordained through the laying on of hands has been well established. The eucharistic context of the woman deacon's ordination was central, reflecting an ecclesiology which is built on active participation in the life of the Triune God. Especially during the Byzantine period, deaconesses were ordained within the sanctuary and in front of the holy altar. The rite occurred during the celebration of the eucharist and began at the same time as the ordination of the deacon.

As is characteristic with Byzantine ordinations to the "higher orders", this rite included the ancient proclamation of "the divine grace", two ordination prayers and the diaconal "Litany of Peace". The deaconess was vested with the diaconal stole and received communion with the clergy.

From the perspective of Orthodox ecclesiology, the ordination service and prayers for the woman deacon testify to the genuine ordination she received. Furthermore, both the rite and prayers witness to the fact that all ordinations are a gift to the worshipping church community from the living God. Ordination is neither a "right" to be demanded nor a "commodity" anyone can "possess". Rather, it is a profound mystery to be humbly and joyfully received by the church. Like the mysteries of baptism and chrismation, which mark the process of Christian initiation, ordinations are "Pentecostal" events. For this reason, ordinations are not to be hidden from the living Christian community.

The Byzantine ordination rite is part of a larger tradition of the church which bears witness to the existence of women deacons and their ministry in the life of the early church, especially in the Christian East. Exegesis of St Paul's reference to women deacons was done by Origen, St John Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus. Mention of women deacons can be found in the *Syriac Didascalia* and *Apostolic Constitution* as well as in the canons of the early Ecumenical Councils. Several stories of women deacons appear in the magnificent collection known as the *Meterikon*, a rich hagiographical series edited by Prof. Dimitrios Tsamis of the University of Thessaloniki.

Historically, the ministerial activities of woman deacons could perhaps be summarized into three broad expressions. First, women deacons

often had a dynamic, evangelical ministry of *teaching the Christian faith* – instructing believers in the faith, guiding others in their growth in holiness, leading pagan and heretical women and men into the church. Because of their gift of discernment, many women deacons were renowned as spiritual mothers whose intercession, advice and guidance were sought by both women and men, even ranking members of the clergy.

Second, many women deacons had a dynamic, evangelical ministry in the areas of what would be called today *pastoral care and social work*. Some devoted their efforts to providing food and shelter for the poor; others attended to the physically ill and disabled; still others had a ministry of providing a safe haven to foreign travellers. Women deacons ministered to the homeless and hospitalized, the orphans and the prisoners, both Christians and non-Christians. People from all walks of life would come to these holy women seeking hope, inspiration and assurance of the love of God during times of trouble and need.

Women deacons would also bring holy communion to those members of the community who were unable to participate in the eucharist. Acting as the ambassador of the bishop, they became the vehicle of the church's care for the needy and those who appeared to be on the edges of society.

Finally, a number of women deacons exercised a dynamic, evangelical ministry directly related to the life of *monastic community*. The order of women deacons became associated with monasticism especially during the middle ages. Some women deacons founded monastic communities; others were elected abbesses of an established community.

The contemporary rejuvenation of the ministry of deaconesses has been strongest within the Oriental Orthodox family. In the Armenian Orthodox Church of Constantinople, for example, *the same prayers of ordination are employed for both the male and female deacon*. While other prayers are used for the blessing of a deaconess in the Coptic Orthodox tradition,<sup>8</sup> the Coptic Church has begun to enjoy the ministry of deaconesses to a greater extent than many other parts of the Orthodox world which are actively engaged in academic debate about deaconesses.

The ordination of women as presbyters (priests) and bishops was not brought up at any of the discussions. But even if this is not an issue for many Orthodox women, there was a common appreciation expressed by the delegates that this has become an important ecumenical issue coming from traditions originating in the West. For this reason, the findings of Constantine Yokarinis, a member of the theological faculty of the University of Athens, were included for consideration during one of the

panel discussions at the Istanbul meeting. (He was one of three men to have offered presentations at either of the conferences.)

Of their own accord, participants organized extra discussion time in order to consider his research more carefully; and more than a third of the delegates attended this meeting. This may indicate that Orthodox women are comfortable considering and discussing this issue – at least with other Orthodox women – even when they are not themselves proponents of the ordination of women as presbyters and bishops.

### **The church must be the church**

These statements from these two meetings reflect a number of global concerns relevant to Orthodox women. They also demonstrate that Orthodox women see themselves as full members of the church. For them, this experience of church is more than a mere intellectual affiliation. A subtle yet pervasive sense of “the one faith” and “the one church” seemed to saturate their being, as well as undergird interpersonal exchanges. This may be an indicator of what Orthodox refer to in Greek as the living *phronema* of the faith. It may have been this deep, almost palpable sense which grounded the delegates' ease when discussing inconsistencies, shortcomings, sins and abuses which have occurred within the contemporary life of the church. And it is from this foundation where they offer their written observations and recommendations. Because of this living foundation in the *phronema* of the faith, these statements offer a focused and resounding call for “the church to be the church”.

Sadly, inertia threatens the application of *orthopraxia*. These conferences have also demonstrated that Orthodox women from around the world are still waiting – for the implementation of proposals from previous conferences, for the application of recommendations which seek to reflect better the theology of the church (some of them now over 20 years old).

“The church must be the church” on issues related to women. The longer inertia dominates, the more the integrity of the church's mission in the world is compromised. At some level, every Orthodox Christian is affected. The witness of laymen and laywomen, and especially that of hierarchs, clergy and those in leadership, is seriously undermined whenever we fail the church in this manner.

Now is the time aggressively to apply the lesson taught in Matthew 16:3. We too must avoid the temptation to which the Pharisees and Scribes succumbed, the temptation of looking the other way instead of to Christ. Now is the time for us as members of the church to seek out the will of God and respond.