

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

Saydnaya and Maaloola, the men's monasteries of St George and St Ephraim, as well as the famous site of the Krak des Chevaliers. During our stay here, we were reminded of St Paul's baptism in the city and the witness of so many saints, especially St Thekia and St John of Damascus.

Our conference focused on a variety of topics about women in the life of the Orthodox church. Each day had its own theme, which was articulated in the presentations and panel discussions. Among our topics, we reflected on "The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church", "Discerning the Tradition Today" and "Reflecting on *Orthopraxia*".

The good news

We have been richly blessed by our time together. As we prayed, discussed the themes and met together, we recognized that we serve the same Lord and share 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.

We were very happy to learn from each other about the many forms of ministry in which women in our churches are already engaged. We witnessed to a wide range of ministries from the women present at our meeting. Some women, for example, are active in monastic life. Others are active as single women, wives or mothers. A number are serving within their local parish or diocese, other participants are active in the ecumenical movement. Some are involved with the study or teaching of theology, and many are involved in philanthropic, medical or educational service in association with either the church or a respected regional or national institution.

Undergirding this variety, we observed a high level of competency, intelligence, dynamism, commitment and, most of all, a deep love of the church and of God. This range of ministries manifested among us was truly inspiring. This variety reminded us how, throughout the history of the church, women have been active in many forms of ministry in response to the same Lord, in the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, we came to see that the church continues to need the service of faithful women as well as men, who feel called to serve the Lord and his church. These women, as well as men, deserve the support and encouragement of our church leaders. These women, as well as men, deserve to receive appropriate theological education and spiritual formation which will assist them in their ministry. These women, as well as men, deserve to have their vocations recognized and blessed.

In our discussions together, we also came to appreciate more deeply the ministry of the wife of the priest. We believe this ministry is tanta-

mount to the ministry of the priest himself. The wives of priests especially deserve the recognition of the church, as well as our encouragement and support. This support is necessary so that the ministry of priests' wives may continue to be life-giving to their communities and families.

Concerns

Through the intercessions of the Holy Theotokos, who is our role model, we recognize that all Christians are invited to emulate her example as a person of faith. We are all, women and men, called by the Lord himself to grow in our relationship with him and others, so that there is integrity between our faith and our actions.

In our discussions we came to affirm the importance of the witness of the church in today's world. We also came to sense the challenge of relating more directly our theology with our church practice.

Through our discussions together, we recognize that some of our churches have made a concerted effort to involve women in the different ministries in the church. Others have indeed made significant progress in this direction. Yet, there are still some churches who have not yet considered the needs of their women and therefore the whole church itself.

We are concerned that some women have expressed deep disappointment that they have not had the chance to study theology in a formal setting such as a seminary or theological school. This hinders our role and work within the church. Furthermore, we feel that we must encourage Orthodox women theologians especially to study the interpretation of the Scriptures so as to be able to discern their meaning more fully.

We also recognize there are sacramental practices which need study in depth by both men and women, as they appear to run contrary to our theological affirmations regarding the dignity of women. We specifically call to mind here certain liturgical practices which need immediate attention, as we believe they do indeed diminish the dignity of women. We note, for example, the practice of churching female babies differently from male babies, and the practice of depriving women of the eucharist during their period of menstruation, which continues to exist in some of our churches.

We note as well, with tremendous sadness, how easy it is for the presence of women to be forgotten. From our discussions together we realize that there are some occasions when the role and presence of women, as well as their work, is not always validated for the value it has in the everyday life of the church. Rather, women may be seen by some as more readily dispensable. Women have also been easily dismissed in

other ways as well. We recognize with deep concern how social injustices such as poverty, illiteracy and invisibility may affect both 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.

This conference also recognizes the important ministry of deaconesses as a response to the Holy Spirit for various needs of this present age. Nevertheless, we must emphasize that we still wait for the application of the recommendations from the 1988 inter-Orthodox consultation in Rhodes, on "The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church", to rejuvenate this order of ordained ministry.

Recommendations

In light of the above, we prayerfully recommend to the leadership of our churches:

- that our leaders encourage women's involvement and participation in the everyday decision-making process of our local churches; we note this after having recognized the differing practices regarding women among the various Orthodox churches;
- that efforts begin which will raise the theological and spiritual awareness among women concerning their role in the church, their families and society – through spiritual retreats, ongoing study groups, seminars, lectures and workshops;
- that women receive both spiritual and financial support in order to pursue studies in theological education; relatedly, that more informal opportunities to study and grow in the theology of the church be created;
- that more research, presentations and community-wide discussions on the Theotokos be encouraged, so that we will grow in authentic relationship and appreciation of her;
- that the sacramental practices which appear to diminish the dignity of women be studied in depth and changed whenever necessary, in order to reflect the fuller Orthodox understanding regarding women;
- that lay theologians (women and men) be encouraged to direct Bible studies in local parishes, as this form of adult education may help inspire confidence to witness to the Orthodox faith;
- that a space in the life of the church be provided where Eastern and Oriental Orthodox women may regularly come together, so they may learn from each other; perhaps they may also be invited to attend some of the suggested activities listed above;
- that our leadership encourage women's informal and formal ministries in pastoral care, so as to reach out to others who may be spir-

itually 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 prayer, counselling and support;

- that our leadership develop more ways for the wives of priests to come together for support and opportunities for enrichment;
- that more frequent dialogue take place, both formal and informal, with our surrounding societies, as this will facilitate more focused and appropriate pastoral care and witness; this dialogue also involves taking seriously the presence of Orthodox Christian women who are engaged in various forms of work and service in the world; we desire the ongoing support and encouragement of our leadership in this effort; similarly, as society changes, we recommend that extra care must be paid to understanding the concerns of our young people;
- that a qualified woman spiritual advisor and/or canonist be included as an advocate on the spiritual courts of all our churches;
- 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, is needed;
- that more opportunities for ecumenical dialogue and relationships be encouraged; this would be both beneficial for Orthodox witness and for the strengthening of our relationships with other Christian women in our common work;
- that more clergymen (and male lay leaders) be encouraged to attend these conferences in order to increase their pastoral awareness regarding women's concerns;
- that valuable conferences such as "Discerning the Signs of the Times" be sponsored, making participation open to all women in our churches.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we affirm that holding and participating in this conference on "Discerning the Signs of the Times" is a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit and our response to his call. We understand that through baptism and chrismation (confirmation), women also are called to be a vital part of the church. Women also are called to communion with God, and women also have the vocation of manifesting the presence of the kingdom even in this life. The church comprises both men and women called to continue the saving acts of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity and the whole of creation. "There is one body and Spirit... but to each one of us grace was given, according to the measure

of Christ's gift. And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...; every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:4, 11, 16). Therefore, we believe we have a responsibility to fulfill our calling as disciples and apostles, which is to communicate the gospel to the whole inhabited earth and strive towards the sanctification and well being of the Body.

Finally, we bear witness to the fact that each member of the Body of Christ is essential for the proper functioning of his church. We hold fast to the holy Tradition of our Orthodox church in which clergy and laity have constituted an organic whole since the time of the apostles. Throughout the history of the church, we have the testimony of countless women saints who responded to Christ in many ways, such as apostles, evangelists, confessors, martyrs, ascetics and nuns, teachers, mothers, spiritual and medical healers and deaconesses. We Orthodox women of today, inspired through the prayers and example of these women saints, now endeavour to continue in their footsteps, as we too strive to respond to our Lord's call: "Follow me". *Amen.*

Report of the Istanbul Meeting

You have destroyed death by your Cross
You have opened Paradise to the thief.
You have changed a lamentation of the Myrrh-Bearers into joy,
and you have commanded your apostles to proclaim
that you, O Christ our God,
Have risen and granted the world the great mercy.

(Troparion, Tone 7)

Christ is risen!

We thank our God, the life-giving Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the opportunity to celebrate this joyful season of the resurrection with our sisters from Europe, North and South America, Australia and the Middle East.

We gathered together in Istanbul, Turkey, for this conference on women in the life of the Orthodox Church entitled, "Discerning the Signs of the Times". Over 50 women and men from the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches met from 10-17 May 1997 as participants officially delegated by their churches, as observers and as resource people to represent the concerns of Orthodox women from Eastern and Western Europe and North and South America, coming from Albania, Armenia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, the Republic of Georgia, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland and the United States of America. This meeting took place within the context of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women.

It has been a tremendous blessing to meet and get to know one another, learning more about each other's histories and traditions. We have rejoiced in the commitment to seeking God's will in loving and costly service which has so often been clear in presentations and conversations. While at times we differed in thinking and acting, we have learned that the respect and love which exists among us, which is a gift