

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

from Jesus Christ, is one of the most important characteristics of this conference. We have come to realize more deeply the importance of committing ourselves to a community united in diversity.

This is the last of three WCC-sponsored meetings within the Ecumenical Decade for Orthodox women (the others being Crete 1990 and Damascus 1996). We realize the need to deepen our reflection on many topics and themes, and we are grateful for this conference in that it has helped us to continue this reflection.

We had the opportunity to visit and worship at some of the most historic and ancient Christian sites of this city. We toured Agia Sophia, the Great Church of Constantinople, the monastery at Chora, where we were inspired by the beautiful iconography of the 11th century, and the Theological School at Halki, where we felt as if we had entered a modern-day garden of Paradise. Also, we had the honour of attending the divine liturgy celebrated by His All-Holiness Bartholomew I at the monastery of Zoodochos Pege, the burial site of the ecumenical patriarchs, and drank from the spring whose water has been known for centuries as a source of healing. We believe Christ, who is the place (*chora*) of Life, revealed himself through the deep spiritual and prayer experiences of our daily worship at Holy Trinity Church, and throughout the entire week. The name of Mother Maria Skobtsova came up repeatedly during the conference, and we felt as the week progressed that she was very close to us. Her utter self-giving for the care and salvation of everyone who came her way in France during the second world war was especially inspiring: Russian students needing a mother, homeless women needing a place to stay, Jews and many others fleeing persecution needing shelter and a hiding place – all came under the wing of her love and compassion. In the end, she gave her life for her friends. She is a holy woman of our day, a model for us, one who lived in our century and in a culture and under conditions that are familiar to us.

Thanksgiving

We thank you, O Lord our God, for bringing us together in this holy city and granting us the opportunity to worship and partake of your heavenly blessings. We thank you for bestowing your divine grace upon us for these few days and ask to keep in our hearts the desire to live for you, our Lord and Benefactor. We thank you for this time together, for being the silent partner in every conversation and the ever-present guest at each meal.

We are exceedingly grateful for the generous hospitality of the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, Archbishop of Con-

stantinople and New Rome. In his opening address, the Ecumenical Patriarch spoke of the desire on the part of many people to achieve a more meaningful relationship with the living God; there is a deep longing for spiritual growth and an even greater longing for holiness, healing and forgiveness, which come from God alone. He blessed not only our conference but our pilgrimage to this holy city, a centre of inspiration and spiritual nourishment, and asked us to keep the local community in our prayers.

We were also very warmly received at the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople by His Beatitude Patriarch Karekin II. We took part in morning prayers and were encouraged to take the initiative in the important ministry work of our church, given the many gifts women offer. His Beatitude mentioned that the Armenian Apostolic Church has taken the initiative in ordaining women to the order of the diaconate, an order in which both men and women are ordained and perform similar duties.

Both patriarchs addressed the current official theological dialogue taking place between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, and both eagerly anticipate the final reconciliation and restoration of ecclesiastical communion between the two families.

It is equally important to thank the World Council of Churches' women's programme for sponsoring this historic event. This conference and so many that have gone before are of vital importance for Orthodox women, the Orthodox church and worldwide ecumenical dialogue.

Finally, we must thank all who have gone before us, women and men, laity and clergy, who have initiated and contributed to the inter-Orthodox dialogue, without whose dedication and love for our church we would not be here today. Their work, specifically over the last twenty years, has been a source of encouragement and hope for many of us. The consultations of Agapia (1976), Rhodes (1988), Crete (1990) and Damascus (1996) have laid the foundations for the work we are doing here.

Concerns

This consultation studied the statement that emerged from the Damascus consultation and has affirmed many of the concerns there. In addition, we offer the following:

There is a need 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.

There is a need for new workers in the church, including children and young people, to be nurtured and educated to play a more active role in the various ministries. We must call upon all people to bring their gifts forward, the gifts which have been bestowed upon the laity through the

Holy Spirit for the life and growth of the church. We must stimulate the interest of lay people who feel that they have been excluded in the past and remind them of their individual responsibilities as members of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9).

In some of our churches, Orthodox Christians have lost interest and have joined social, cultural and para-church organizations. We are looking for ways to bring Orthodox Christians back to the church.

Recommendations

As members of the church we feel ready to carry out our responsibility to promote the welfare of the church, particularly by encouraging the various ministries of women.

1. Theological education

A. Many women seek deeper knowledge of the church through theological study. In families and schools, women are the primary educators. Women share this task and learn well from one another. Thus, theologically-educated women have a particular ministry in teaching our faithful. For these reasons, Orthodox theological education for women is a priority and should be facilitated on all levels.

B. We recommend that the churches encourage the present efforts of women who are engaged in producing journals, both academic and for the community, in order to inform and educate women and men on the Orthodox faith. There is a real need on the part of women for the creation of a forum where women are able to reflect upon their experiences and engage in theological research. Women need to be notified of publications, theological seminars and other events and materials that are of benefit to them.

C. There is a tremendous need for resources and materials in the following areas:

- for church schools;
- in multiple languages to address the increasingly multinational nature of our churches;
- on how to live one’s faith daily;
- providing up-to-date translations of ancient Christian liturgical and patristic texts specifically dealing with the Theotokos and other women saints.

2. Liturgical life

A. The perception and interpretation of some of the practices pertaining to liturgical life need to be addressed. We ask for a re-evaluation of certain liturgical customs, for example, the presentation of infants and

the 40-day rule for childbirth, the prayer for miscarriages, abortions and post-partum mothers, and expectations pertaining to the reception of communion. Some of us feel these practices and prayers do not properly express the theology of the church regarding the dignity of God’s creation of women and their redemption in Christ Jesus. We realize that the practices in the various local communities may differ.

B. We recommend the incorporation of the lives of the martyrs, both women and men, and the new experiences of the people in this century into the hymnography of the church. While this may be happening in some churches, we recommend a universal incorporation of the new martyrs of this century into the life of our church. Perhaps the best forum for such a recommendation is the upcoming Great and Holy Council.

3. The diaconate

A. Many of us believe the incorporation of deaconesses in the life of the church will help contribute to the atmosphere of love and learning in the church. Deaconesses are able to work as helpers to the priests and counsellors to the people, providing an important link and thereby strengthening relationships within the body of the church.

B. In our discussion we realized we came to this conference with differing assumptions regarding the role of the deaconess. While some see the diaconate for women as a sacramental ministry which takes place by ordination, for others this ministry is not sacramental and described as a church ministry. This question has become for some more academic than practical. Therefore while some may affirm the work of our sisters from the previous meetings of Orthodox women regarding the importance of the re-emergence of the order of the deaconess, for others there is still work to be done in order to come to a fuller understanding.

C. With the re-emergence of the order of deaconesses, we would not want this ministry in any way to diminish the other ministries of the laity in the church. Rather, vocations to this ministry may be experienced as another response to the Holy Spirit who fills and guides the church. We call to mind the words of St Paul: “It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ, until we become one in faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son” (Eph. 4:11-13).

4. Priests’ wives

The ministry of the priest’s wife is very specific and unique. We recommend the church offer a special blessing on women who undertake this ministry and provide instruction and guidance for their role.

5. *Spiritual life*

A. There is a thirst for spirituality in many of our countries and a rediscovery of the Orthodox living experience. We recommend the development of materials and programmes to help our people grow in their spiritual lives. We feel that the gifts of women may be of service to the churches specifically in this area. Women need concrete teaching in Orthodox spirituality which includes biblical reflection and study.

B. We encourage the development of monastic vocations for women. Historically, Orthodox monastic communities have been a source for theological education and spiritual life. The very presence of monastics witnesses to "the one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42) to which all are called.

C. We recognize that the churches have been helping one another by sending missionary teams and providing materials in local languages. We recommend that the churches incorporate the experiences of women in their teaching materials. These experiences will enrich the spiritual life of the people.

D. Women benefit from sharing spiritual experiences with one another. Opportunities for such sharing should be provided and supported by our churches. This has begun with meetings organized by the WCC for Orthodox women, such as the present one in Istanbul. Networking and sharing should continue on international, national and parish levels. We recommend the appointment of women delegates as representatives of the Orthodox church to the various gatherings and bodies of the ecumenical movement, whether on the international, national or local level.

6. *Community life*

A. We feel that women, quite naturally, are peacemakers. Therefore we recommend that our churches make a greater commitment to support sister Orthodox churches in crisis situations, for example, during natural disasters, and to support refugees and those in war-torn countries. Often in these situations women and children suffer most.

B. We recommend that our people support, spiritually and materially, the Christians of our churches who are still suffering in various ways, socially, politically and economically. We are also aware of the current climate of increased religious fundamentalism, which is affecting the lives of people in all our countries. Some churches need educational materials to help develop programmes for the faithful to combat erroneous teachings.

C. We recommend that the issue of sexism be seriously considered. The church would benefit from theological and soteriological reflection

on this issue, especially through the medium of consultations, workshops and informal study.

7. *Youth*

A. We recommend the development of programmes for the spiritual growth of the youth, the hope of our churches. Because we are one body, their concerns affect the entire church and their spiritual well-being is vital to the health of our church.

B. We recommend the development of youth and church school exchange programmes between our churches through national or regional councils of churches.

8. *Church polity*

A. As stated in previous meetings of Orthodox women, we recommend that the role of the laity in the decision-making processes be evaluated. There is a variety of practices in the Orthodox church regarding this process, and this recommendation pertains only to churches in which voting takes place. In those circumstances where there is a need to determine change in church polity or practice by voting, each man and woman should have an equal opportunity. Women are able to and should be invited to offer guidance to the church on issues that specifically concern them, for example, family life, social needs, education and charity. Women have unique gifts to offer with regard to these issues.

B. With the advent of a more technologically oriented society, we are finding that our world is changing at a very rapid pace. It is important for our churches to become aware and stay abreast of these changes, because at times they can contribute to the life of the church. Women must also find a way to become better informed and learn to cope with these changes. We believe this will happen with better educational opportunities.

C. With regard to the various offices within the churches we recommend the churches encourage the participation of women on the local and higher levels.

9. *Inter-Orthodox concerns*

A. We recommend that our churches continue the theological dialogue regarding the restoration of communion between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches.

B. We support and look forward to a resolution to the calendar differences among all Orthodox churches. We realize that the differences which exist are a result of certain historical difficulties. However, we await the day when our churches will celebrate the liturgical year together.

10. And the future...

A. We ask our churches to consider seriously the request by the World Council of Churches for 50 percent participation by women at its upcoming assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in December 1998. We also ask our churches to bestow their blessings on the women planning to take part in the Ecumenical Decade Festival which takes place a few days prior to the Assembly.

B. We recommend the establishment of a resource centre where theological research and writings by Orthodox women and the reports from conferences such as this will be made available for all.

C. We hope and pray that Orthodox theological institutions which have been closed, such as the Theological School at Halki, will shortly be re-opened, and we ask that women be able to participate in theological studies and research at all theological institutions.

D. Some participants at the consultation welcome the idea of organizing an inter-Orthodox conference on the ordination of women to the priesthood. We realize that for some this question is not an issue and will not be discussed. Any study and examination of the issue in no way presupposes a commitment to move in this direction. This would simply provide the opportunity for women and men to examine this topic in greater depth from both the theological and spiritual perspectives. This conference would include attendance by clergy, laity and monastics.

E. Many recommendations have emerged from previous meetings of Orthodox women. While some recommendations have been addressed, others have not. We are concerned about the reception of this document and recommend that our churches make this statement available for women either through general publications or correspondence to parishes.

F. We have gained considerable knowledge and great benefit from the present conference. It is our hope from now on and into the coming millennium that our churches will continue to sponsor conferences for women where we can come together to enjoy fellowship, share our concerns and learn from one another.

Conclusion

We began our consultation with the celebration of the Holy Myrrh-Bearers at the women's monastery at Balukli. The spirit of these missionary women, which is the same spirit that has inspired the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women, comforted us and accompanied us in our prayers and work during this week.

Our spiritual experience was enriched by our visit to the important monuments of the Orthodox heritage, St Sophia and the monastery at

Chora. The mosaic of the Incarnate Word of God, which is the embodiment of living human beings, reassured us of the spiritual reality that salvation is for all.

Finally, the fresco of the resurrection depicting the risen Christ pulling both man and woman from the grave shows us, once again, that our common faith and expectation is the central theme of this consultation on "Discerning the Signs of the Times".