

¹⁷ Ethna Regan, remarks at Mater Dei Institute, Dublin, Ireland, June 8, 2010, at a launch event for her book, *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights*, <http://www.materdei.ie/index.cfm/page/newsarchive/id/61>

I have focused in this essay on human rights because it is the most controversial. Happily, this is not always the case, and human rights—both ESC rights and civil and political rights—play a crucial role in many faith-based NGOs. But where they do exist, such tensions over the use of human rights language may aggravate an already tragic alienation between polarized but

well-meaning people or service groups. I suggest that precisely because human rights ideals—described as “rights”—have a legitimate place within patristic and biblical tradition, Christians who care about these issues may take up such language fearlessly, albeit with a listening spirit of humility, to engage in synergies with global partners for the health and healing of body and soul. ✱

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LOOKING AHEAD

The Orthodox Church Facing Up to Its Own Challenges

Metropolitan Stephanos of Tallin and All Estonia

Translated by Michael Berrigan Clark

Note: What follows is the transcript of a talk, translated from the original French. Met. Stephanos was speaking to a group of Orthodox publishers in Paris, in April 2014. The conference was organized by Les Mutuelles Saint-Christophe and the website orthodoxie.com. Met. Stephanos' remarks have been abbreviated here to fit within our

I come to you from the far north of Europe, from the shores of the Baltic that were until very recently “beyond the iron curtain,” in order to share some ideas with you on the theme: “The Orthodox Church facing up to its own challenges” in today’s world.

What indeed will become of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church which, by the grace of God, will meet in Constantinople in 2016, which is already nearly upon us?

In order for the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church to clarify the great questions which have troubled, preoccupied and even divided the Orthodox world for fifty years, it is essential that the council address frankly the Church’s greatest internal challenge, which is its unity. A unity to which a certain “but” is attached, concerning which one must engage in an open, direct, and if possible, loyal debate on the governance of the Church and territorial churches in particular.

To introduce my topic, I would like to cite a significant passage from the speech of the archbishop of Cypress to the Synaxis of the Orthodox Primates in Constantinople from March of this year [2014]:

We have a presiding bishop.¹ It is the life of the Orthodox Church through the centuries that has established him in his place. If one or another from among us thinks that he has taken the wrong path, we have the duty to point it out to him with sincerity in order to find a solution and to call him back, if necessary, to good order. If certain reactions are in order due to the difficult circumstances the Ecumenical Patriarchate is experiencing presently, I recall the words of the Apostle Paul: we carry this treasure in earthen vessels... so that it may appear that this exceptional power comes from God and not from us (2 Cor. 4,7). The power is derived neither from context nor from the exterior. It comes from God, whose power is made known in weakness. Furthermore we must recognize the rapid changes and the instability of the things of this world. ... We are all witnesses of our incapacity to overcome our nationalism, our ethnophyletism. We cannot in this matter imitate either the Roman Catholics or the Muslims. So, for example, the agreement we have concluded for the episcopal assemblies of the "diaspora" is not the best, ecclesiologically speaking. This agreement is a reflection of our attachment to our national churches. I do not want to lecture anyone. ... I am only pointing out the problem with sadness, all the while recalling the anguished question of the Apostle Paul: is Christ divided?

The holy canons, the primacy, ethnophyletism... to which could be added—let's not hide from it—for a certain number of our autocephalous churches, the nature and degree of their integration with the public powers, often the heritage of history, but also today a posture taken with respect to very concrete situations.

It is therefore absolutely imperative for the Orthodox Church to put its own house in order, without which how will the Church claim to convince the world that its word is a word of true life, a message of peace, a principal of authentic love? Today, "the image that we give," according to the words of Patriarch Bartholomew to the Synaxis of Primates, "is an image of disintegration... It is time for us to place a priority on unity, unity within each of our churches as well as among them."

The Church exists simultaneously in history and outside of history in an eschatological fashion. The Church's existence is at the same time synchronic, in other words part of our time, and diachronic, that is to say continuously through time and up to the end of time. This is what some orthodox clergy, theologians, and others seem to forget when they support the idea that the canons of the Church possess neither rules nor ad hoc expectations for the new canonical questions of the second millennium and today due to the fact that the canonical tradition of our Church took form during the first millennium.

In other words, we must decide whether these canons, which have held their authority up to our day, have conserved a sufficient dynamic vitality to respond to the needs of an ever-changing world.

The calling into question of the canons has led to some impasses. Some have ended up questioning the substantive fundamental institutions of the Church (such as the territorial church and the synod, with its functional consequences) as well as its canonical systems (for example, the current difficulty in defining autocephaly, which constitutes a very serious canonical problem in the regions erroneously referred to as the "diaspora"). Put another way,

space constraints; the omissions consisted entirely of background information on the Church in Estonia and detailed remarks about the challenges of publishing Orthodox material in the European context.

¹ Translator's note: the term "presiding bishop" or "presider" has been chosen to render the French "premier" when used as a noun referring to a Church hierarch.

one reduces comprehension to intellectualizing as soon as one loses sight of the fact that the Church has not only the right, but also the vocation and the duty to intervene, to show its *eschatological orientation* (this is the perspective of the divine liturgy), and to prepare the ground for the human journey (this is the function of the *ecclesial canons*)—a journey that has as its goal to set right the difference between existence inside of history and the eschatological existence of humankind.

² Alexander Schmemmann, "Église et organisation ecclésiale," *Le Messager Orthodoxe* 146 (2008): 1.

As soon as one refuses to admit the diachronic character of the canons, one quickly loses sight of their *theological plenitude*. Some claim a so-called "canonical void" in various contemporary ecclesio-canonical questions, while others brandish the argument that the canons belong to *another* age, said to be ancient; to another, culturally *different* age.

"The canons," wrote Father Alexander Schmemmann, "are not juridical documents, nor simple administrative rules, to be applied in a purely formal manner. The canons encapsulate directions on the manner of manifesting and making real in specific circumstances the eternal and unchangeable essence of the Church. This eternal truth expressed in the canons, regardless of the historical situation entirely different from our own in which they were formulated, constitutes the eternal and unchanging content of the canons and makes them an integral part of the Tradition of the Church... Fidelity to the canons is fidelity to the totality of Tradition, and this fidelity, according to Father Georges Florovsky, *does not mean fidelity to the exterior authority of the past, but a living connection to the plenitude of the Church*. References to Tradition are not just historical arguments, and Tradition cannot be reduced to ecclesiastical archeology."²

Rather than having a sterile debate on this question, capable of generating perpetual confusion or leading to the unjustifiable rejection of the canons, it seems necessary to approach our theological point of departure from an entirely different perspective. More analytically and with a goal of clarifying matters, it would be useful to separate precisely the historical data from the *diachronic theology* that flows from the canons, in such a way that today's world can recognize this theology's true value, as well as its consequences for the life of the Church, the world, and each one of us.

Then it will be clear that for the canonical Tradition of the Church there are no impassés, because the Tradition possesses axial means to overcome them and to find a way out, provided the "builders" of whom the Gospels speak agree to coordinate their efforts so that they can "see in common" instead of rejecting the rock, which finally, in spite of them and because God alone wills it, will become the chief cornerstone (Matt. 21:42, Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, 1 Pet. 2:7).

The greatest challenge in our day, one that is truly shaking Orthodoxy, is the challenge of its unity. But whoever says unity must also speak of "a presiding bishop." In the Orthodox Church, only the bishop of each ecclesiastical structure can assure its unity in his role as its first in rank. It is the case for each diocese where the bishop alone has the privilege of presiding at the Eucharist (the priest can only act in this capacity if he is mandated to do so by his bishop); it is the case as well on the level of a metropolitan eparchy where the guarantor of the unity of the local churches that constitute that eparchy is the presiding bishop, whether he is metropolitan (according to the ancient *taxis*), patriarch or archbishop. Such is the meaning of the 34th canon of the

apostles, that deals with the relation of the presiding bishop with his other bishops and vice versa, and which, throughout the centuries, has preserved in the bosom of our Church the notion of synodality. In no case can the presider be an impersonal presence, an interpersonal collective, or an abstract thought. Synodality does not suppress hierarchical order, since the form of governance of the Church is synodally hierarchical and hierarchically synodal. Otherwise, it is just chaos. It is in this manner that our Church has been able to avoid, institutionally as well as in its practical life, falling into what could have been either a form of centralization of the “Roman” or “papal” sort, or a form of anarchical ecclesial behavior of the Protestant variety.

What is valid for each territorial Orthodox church is also the case on the inter-orthodox level. The Ecumenical Patriarch, in his role as presiding bishop, is not simply an honorific president, without authority, for Pan-Orthodox Councils, contrary to what the expression *primus inter pares* might leave one to suppose... as soon as one doesn't take the trouble to deepen one's knowledge theologically and ecclesiastically... as soon as one forgets that the primacy is part of the structures of the Church. It is indispensable that a presiding bishop be able to address himself to the heads of the territorial churches in the name of the universal Church, “not to dominate,” as Patriarch Athenagoras said, “but to serve the fullness of each local Church by reminding it of its responsibilities toward Orthodoxy as a whole.” And besides, as far as the primatial service ministry is concerned: “The primate, who belongs to no national church, finds himself liberated from ethnic limitations, from national pride, which, even legitimate, shrink the horizon. His mission is to care for the universal character of

orthodoxy and this is indeed what the qualifier ecumenical means.”³

The fact that at the last two Synaxes of the Primates—in 2008 and 2014—two primates, Ignatius of Antioch of blessed memory and Chrysostom of Cyprus, intervened to remind all very clearly that “we have a presiding bishop and we know where he is”; the facts of the recent arbitrary suppression of the qualifier “Ecumenical” from the title of the Patriarch of Constantinople by the Church of Moscow and the return in force of the myth of the third Rome—formally condemned by the Council of Moscow of 1666–1667 but popular again on the pretext that, since the Church of Russia has the largest number of faithful, it is to this church that *leadership* naturally falls, the primacy of the ecumenical see being reduced recently to an honor without content; the fact that the territorial church aims first to be identified with the national church, reinforced by the application of the notion of autocephaly to that same national church (ethno-phyletism, nationalism)—all these factors, considered all together, have resulted in a state in which autocephalous churches consider themselves as totally independent from one another, defining Orthodoxy as a sort of *confederation of sister churches* and not as *one Church*. The Western media, when they speak of us, use the expression “the Orthodox churches” more easily than “the Orthodox Church.”

As long as universal orthodoxy does not recognize unanimously the existence of a *presiding bishop* at the very highest level of the ecclesiastical structure—as a reminder, the holy canons of the Second and the Fourth Ecumenical Councils, of Constantinople (381) and of Chalcedon (451) accorded to the Patriarch of Constantinople privileges equal to those of the Roman Pontiff—then the Church will only go from di-

³ Olivier Clément, *Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athénagoras* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), 526–527.

vision into division. One example: in ecumenical dialogues, we know all too well that we can no longer convince our interlocutors of our ontological unity. Let's recognize it: we are very concerned with a synchronic union of our churches and hardly at all any more with our diachronic unity.

Orthodoxy has totally forgotten that the sign of divine election is neither in number, nor in force, nor in the power and the riches of this world but in a certain historical weakness... As long as the mentality of taking power according to the conceptions and behaviors of this world has a part in the thoughts of our churches, it will be practically impossible to find enough wisdom and humility to come back to what is essential: in other words, how to express concretely our unity and our universality.

The opening of the Pan-Orthodox Great and Holy Council is planned for Pentecost of the year 2016, unless some major obstacle intervenes before then to place it in jeopardy. What will be the contribution of the Fathers who will take part and with what intentions will they assume their contribution?

On this topic, a little anecdote. During the Second Vatican Council, seventy outlines had been submitted in debates with the bishops in a system that the Roman curia thought to have carefully sealed shut. But a grain of sand made it all implode. From the first session, only a few minutes were needed—and the quiet boldness of Msgr. Liénart, progressive bishop of Lille—for the people of God to reappropriate this council and all the hopes that had been placed in it. . . . And now the lesson for us who await our Council: what can seem insurmountable, God can overcome and unleash an immense tsunami so that Orthodoxy can finally reclaim, at the

level of that famous “sobornost” that the Church proclaims with such pride to all passers by, its true spiritual and ecclesiological characteristics, which will cause it to turn entirely and exclusively toward the essentials of its mission whose ultimate feature is the salvation of the world.

What witness to Christ will we Orthodox bear in the future?

What comprehensible responses will we give not only to our own faithful but to the immense number of those who are searching?

How will we render the Word of Christ accessible?

How will we accompany those seekers of light in their professional work or in unemployment, in family life, in the education of children and our youth in general, in the trials and the divisions that make their mark on every life?

These are the fundamental questions that I would like to see addressed by the media and, specifically, here in this Orthodox publishing house, through the printed word, in all of its aspects and in all its genres: from comic strip to novel, from theological and philosophical treatises to art books, from paperback editions to the rebinding of precious antiquities.

I would like to share with you the thoughts that I pondered during my travels from Tallinn to Paris, on the incongruities of Providence.

My parents were Cypriots, but I was born in Congo [francophone Africa]; I was happy there, and then it came time for me to pursue my studies in Paris. I was a young intellectual eager for knowledge, and then I found myself launched into a pastoral func-

tion. Finally, fulfilling my duties as bishop in Nice until a certain Sunday in March of 1999, I found myself in Tallinn the next Sunday as head of a church that some categorized as a “phantom”! Today I look at all the work accomplished and I say to myself: God always manages to come full circle with a great deal of humor. Providence is not so bad!

You must understand that these multiple experiences are a great encouragement to gain perspective on contingencies from a distance, and to measure the insignificance of our quarrels—quarrels that the world might describe as “Byzantine.”

The truth is that those who question the meaning of their lives, the powers of the mind or spirit, the need to open oneself to others, those persons ask us to be *credible* in the affirmation of our faith. But how are we to be *credible* if we are not *readable*? I mean *visible* and *readable*, in France, in Europe, everywhere in the world, along side the Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, and non-believers.

We are not *visible* as Christians for the “gentile of the outer courtyard” who believes in a supreme being, but not in eternal life.

We are not *readable* as Orthodox for the one who claims to be Christian and believes in God, sometimes in a trinitarian God, but knows of us only from our icons, our chant and our incense.

We are hardly *credible* at all, especially here in the “diaspora,” except in the sense of being highly instructed in arcane matters. ... The Orthodox people as a whole are lost in ethnic jurisdictions, patriarchates, exarchates, the subtleties of ritual, liturgical languages and languages of common use, the control of a parish by such an association and of some other parish by another association.

We are walking in a thick fog and yet we are surprised that no one recognizes us.

I conclude: my wish, for the benefit of the preparation of our Great and Holy Pan-Orthodox Council, is that this fog might dissipate so that we might be really *visible*, *readable*, and *credible*. This Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church ought to be the affair of us all.

You can be sure, all of you here in the publishing world, on social networks and with the media, you have your own part in it. ... How impenetrable are the ways of the Lord, even in Orthodoxy. I thank you all. ✨

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