

# The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World

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## SYNAXIS OF ORTHODOX PRIMATES

**Chambéry, 21-28 January 2016**

## THE MISSION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD

### DECISION

*\*The following English text is a working translation. An official English translation is forthcoming.*

*The contribution of the Orthodox Church in realizing peace, justice, freedom, fraternity and love between peoples, and in the removal of racial and other discriminations.*

The Church of Christ exists *in the world*, but is *not of the world* (cf. Jn 17:11, 14-15).

The Church, as the sign and image of the Kingdom of God in history, proclaims the good news of a *new creation* (II Cor 5:17), of *new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (II Pt 3:13); news of a world in which *God will wipe away every tear from people's eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain* (Rev 21:4-5).

Such hope is experienced and foretasted by the Church, especially each time the Divine Eucharist is celebrated, bringing *together* (I Cor 11:20) the *scattered children of God* (Jn 11:52) without regard to race, sex, age, social, or any other condition into a single body where *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female* (Gal 3:28; cf. Col 3:11).

This foretaste of the *new creation*—of a world transfigured—is also experienced by the Church in the countenance of her saints who, through their spiritual struggles and virtues, have already revealed the image of the Kingdom of God in this life, thereby proving and affirming that the expectation of a world of peace, justice, and love is not a utopia, but the *substance of things hoped for* (Heb 11:1), attainable through divine grace and spiritual struggle.



Finding constant inspiration in this expectation and foretaste of the Kingdom of God, the Church cannot remain indifferent to the problems of humanity in each period. On the contrary, she shares in our anguish and existential problems, taking upon herself—as the Lord did—our suffering and wounds, which are caused by evil

in the world and, like the Good Samaritan, pouring oil and wine upon our wounds through a *patient, comforting* (Rom 15:4; Heb 13:22), and loving word (Lk 10:34). The word addressed to the world is not primarily meant to judge and condemn the world (cf. Jn 3:17; 12:47), but rather to offer to the world the guidance of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God—namely, the hope and assurance that evil, no matter its form, does not have the last word in history and must not be allowed to dictate its course.

Drawing from these principles and the accumulated experience and teaching of her patristic, liturgical, and ascetical tradition, the Orthodox Church shares the concern and anxiety of contemporary humanity with regard to fundamental existential questions that preoccupy the world today. She thus desires to help resolve these issues, allowing the *peace of God, which surpasses all understanding* (Phil 4:7), reconciliation, and love to prevail in the world.

### **1. The Dignity of the Human Person**

1. The human person's dignity, which stems from being created in the image of God and from our role in God's plan for humanity and the world, was the source of inspiration for the Church Fathers, who delved into the mystery of divine *oikonomia*. Regarding the human being, St. Gregory the Theologian characteristically emphasizes that: *The Creator makes a sort of second world, which is great in the small, he places on earth another angel, a worshipper composed of various natures, a contemplator of visible creation, a witness of the mysteries of creation as comprehended by the intellect, a king over all that is on the earth who is subject to the heavenly kingdom...a living being, prepared here and transported to another world and (which is the culmination of the mystery) who attains deification through striving for God* (Homily 45, On Holy Pascha, 7. PG 36, 632AB). The purpose of the incarnation of the Word of God is the deification of the human being. Christ, having renewed within himself the old Adam (cf. Eph 2:15), *made the human person divine like himself, the beginning of our hope* (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstrations on the Gospel*, Book 4, 14. PG 22, 289A). For just as the entire human race was contained in the old Adam, so too, the entire human race is now gathered in the new Adam: *The Only-begotten One became man in order to gather into one and return to its original condition the fallen human race* (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Book 9, PG 74, 273D-275A). This teaching of the Church is the endless source of all Christian efforts to safeguard the dignity and majesty of the human person.
2. On this basis, it is essential to develop inter-Christian cooperation in every

direction for the protection of human dignity and of course for the good of peace, so that the peace-keeping efforts of all Christians without exception may acquire greater weight and significance.

3. To help foster such broader cooperation, it is essential to maintain a common approach to the preeminent value of the human person. Orthodox Churches are called to contribute to inter-religious understanding and cooperation, whereby she may contribute to the efforts to eradicate fanaticism of every kind, establish reconciliation among peoples, as well as help freedom and peace prevail throughout the world in order to serve humankind, irrespective of race and religion. Of course, such cooperation excludes both syncretism and the attempts of one religion to impose itself over others.
4. We are convinced that, as *God's fellow workers* (I Cor 3:9), we can advance to this common service together with all people of good will, who love peace that is pleasing to God, for the sake of human society on the local, national, and international levels. This ministry is a commandment of God (Mt 5:9).



## **2. Freedom and Responsibility.**

1. Freedom is one of God's greatest gifts to the human being as a specific bearer of the image of a personal God and member of a community of persons, which, through the unity of the human race, reflects by grace the life and communion of the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity. *He who created man in the beginning made him free and autonomous, limiting him solely by the laws of the commandment*

(Gregory the Theologian, *Homily 14, On Love for the Poor*, 25. PG 35, 892A). Freedom renders the human being capable of progressing toward spiritual perfection; yet, it also includes the risk of disobedience as independence from God and consequently the fall, which tragically gives rise to evil in the world.

2. The consequences of evil include those imperfections and shortcomings prevailing today, including: secularism; violence; moral laxity; negative phenomena such as the plague of drugs and other addictions in the lives of certain youth; racism; the arms race and wars, as well as the resulting social catastrophes; the oppression of certain social groups, religious communities, and entire peoples; social inequality; the restriction of human rights in the field of freedom of conscience—in particular religious freedom; the misinformation and manipulation of public opinion; economic misery ; the disproportionate redistribution of vital resources or complete lack thereof; the hunger of millions of people; forced migration of populations and human trafficking; the refugee crisis; the destruction of the environment; and the unrestrained use of genetic biotechnology and biomedicine at the beginning, duration, and end of human life. These all create infinite anxiety for humanity today.
3. Faced with this situation, which has degraded the concept of the human person, the duty of the Orthodox Church today is—through its preaching, theology, worship, and pastoral activity—to assert the truth of freedom in Christ. *All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being...for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?* (I Cor 10:23-24, 29). Freedom without responsibility and love eventually leads to loss of freedom.

### **3. Peace and Justice**

1. The Orthodox Church has diachronically recognized and revealed the centrality of peace and justice in people's lives. The very revelation of Christ is characterized as a *gospel of peace* (Eph 6:15), for Christ has brought *peace to all through the blood of his Cross* (Col 1:20), *preached peace to those afar and near* (Eph 2:17), and has become *our peace* (Eph 2:14). This peace, *which surpasses all understanding* (Phil 4:7), as the Lord Himself told His disciples before His passion, is broader and more essential than the peace promised by the world: *peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you* (Jn 14:27). This is because the peace of Christ

is the ripe fruit of the restoration of all things in Him, the revelation of the human person's dignity and majesty as an image of God, the manifestation of the organic unity in Christ between humanity and the world, the universality of the principles of peace, freedom, and social justice, and ultimately the blossoming of Christian love among people and nations of the world. The reign of all these Christian principles on earth gives rise to authentic peace. It is the peace from above, for which the Orthodox Church prays constantly in its daily petitions, asking this of the almighty God, Who hears the prayers of those that draw near to Him in faith.

2. From the aforementioned, it is clear why the Church, as *the body of Christ* (I Cor 12:27), always prays for the peace of the whole world; this peace, according to Clement of Alexandria, is synonymous with justice (*Stromates* 4, 25. PG 8, 1369B-72A). To this, Basil the Great adds: *I cannot convince myself that without mutual love and without peace with all people, in as far as it is within my possibilities, I can call myself a worthy servant of Jesus Christ* (*Epistle* 203, 2. PG 32, 737B). As the same Saint notes, this is self-evident for a Christian, for *nothing is so characteristic of a Christian as to be a peacemaker* (*Epistle* 114. PG 32, 528B). The peace of Christ is a mystical power that springs forth from the reconciliation between the human being and the heavenly Father, *according to the providence of Christ, Who brings all things to perfection in Him and who makes peace ineffable and predestined from the ages, and Who reconciles us with Himself, and in Himself with the Father* (Dionysius the Aeropagite, *On the Divine Names*, 11, 5, PG 3, 953AB).
3. At the same time, we are obligated to underline that the gifts of peace and justice also depend on human synergy. The Holy Spirit bestows spiritual gifts when, in repentance, we seek God's peace and righteousness. These gifts of peace and justice are manifested wherever Christians strive for the work of faith, love, and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thes 1:3).
4. Sin is a spiritual illness, whose external symptoms include conflict, division, crime, and war, as well as the tragic consequences of these. The Church strives to eliminate not only the external symptoms of illness, but the illness itself, namely, sin.
5. At the same time, the Orthodox Church considers it is her duty to encourage all that which genuinely serves the cause of peace (Rom 14:19) and paves the way to justice, fraternity, true freedom, and mutual love among all children of the one heavenly Father as well as between all peoples who make up the one human family. She suffers with all people who in various parts of the world are deprived of the benefits of peace and justice.



#### **4. Peace and the Aversion of War**

1. The Church of Christ condemns war in general, recognizing it as the result of the presence of evil and sin in the world: *Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?* (Jm 4:1). Every war threatens to destroy creation and life.

This is most particularly the case with wars with weapons of mass destruction because their consequences would be horrific not only because they lead to the death of an unforeseeable number of people, but also because they render life unbearable for those who survive. They also lead to incurable diseases, cause genetic mutations and other disasters, with catastrophic impact on future generations.

The amassing not only of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, but of all kinds of weapons poses very serious dangers inasmuch as they create a false sense of superiority and dominance over the rest of the world. Moreover, such weapons create an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, becoming the impetus for a new arms race.

2. The Church of Christ, which understands war as essentially the result of evil and sin in the world, supports all initiatives and efforts to prevent or avert it

through dialogue and every other viable means. When war becomes inevitable, the Church continues to pray and care in a pastoral manner for her children who are involved in military conflict for the sake of defending their life and freedom, while making every effort to bring about the swift restoration of peace and freedom.

3. The Orthodox Church resolutely condemns the multifaceted conflicts and wars provoked by fanaticism that derives from religious principles. There is grave concern over the permanent trend of increasing oppression and persecution of Christians and other communities in the Middle East and elsewhere because of their beliefs; equally troubling are the attempts to uproot Christianity from its traditional homelands. As a result, existing interfaith and international relations are threatened, while many Christians are forced to abandon their homes. Orthodox Christians throughout the world suffer with their fellow Christians and all those being persecuted in this region, while also calling for a just and lasting resolution to the region's problems.

Wars inspired by nationalism and leading to ethnic cleansing, the violation of state borders, and the seizure of territory are also condemned.

## **5. The Attitude of the Church Toward Discrimination**

1. The Lord, as King of righteousness (Heb 7:2-3) denounces violence and injustice (Ps 10:5), while condemning the inhumane treatment of one's neighbor (Mt 25:41-46; Jm 2:15-16). In His Kingdom, reflected and present in His Church on earth, there is no place for hatred, enmity, or intolerance (Is 11:6; Rom 12:10).
2. The Orthodox Church's position on this is clear. She believes that God *has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth* (Acts 17:26) and that in Christ *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28). To the question: *Who is my neighbor?* Christ responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). In so doing, He taught us to tear down all barriers erected by enmity and prejudice. The Orthodox Church confesses that every human being, regardless of skin color, religion, race, sex, ethnicity, and language, is created in the image and likeness of God, and enjoys equal rights in society. Consistent with this belief, the Orthodox Church rejects discrimination for any of the aforementioned reasons since these presuppose a difference in dignity between people.



3. The Church, in the spirit of respecting human rights and equal treatment of all, values the application of these principles in the light of her teaching on the sacraments, the family, the role of both genders in the Church, and the overall principles of Church tradition. The Church has the right to proclaim and witness to her teaching in the public sphere.



## **6. The Mission of the Orthodox Church as a Witness of Love through Service**

1. In fulfilling her salvific mission in the world, the Orthodox Church actively cares for all people in need, including the hungry, the poor, the sick, the disabled, the elderly, the persecuted, those in captivity and prison, the homeless, the orphans, the victims of destruction and military conflict, those affected by human trafficking and modern forms of slavery. The Orthodox Church's efforts to confront destitution and social injustice are an expression of her faith and the service to the Lord, Who identifies Himself with every person and especially with those in need: *Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me* (Mt 25:40). This multidimensional social service enables the Church to cooperate with various relevant social institutions.
2. Competition and enmity in the world introduce injustice and inequitable

access among individuals and peoples to the resources of divine creation. They deprive millions of people of fundamental goods and lead to the degradation of human person; they incite mass migrations of populations, and they engender ethnic, religious, and social conflicts, which threaten the internal cohesion of communities.

3. The Church cannot remain indifferent before economic conditions that negatively impact humanity as a whole. She insists not only on the need for the economy to be grounded upon ethical principles, but that it must also tangibly serve the needs of human beings in accordance with the teaching of the Apostle Paul: *By laboring like this, you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35).* Basil the Great writes that *each person should make it his duty to help those in need and not satisfy his own needs (Moral Rules, 42. PG 31, 1025A).*
4. The gap between rich and poor is dramatically exacerbated due to the financial crisis, which normally results from the unbridled profiteering by some representatives of financial circles, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, and perverted business practices devoid of justice and humanitarian sensitivity, which ultimately do not serve humanity's true needs. A sustainable economy is that which combines efficiency with justice and social solidarity.
5. In light of such tragic circumstances, the Church's great responsibility is perceived in terms of overcoming hunger and all other forms of deprivation in the world. One such phenomenon in our time—whereby nations operate within a globalized economic system—points to the world's serious identity crisis, for hunger not only threatens the divine gift of life of whole peoples, but also offends the lofty dignity and sacredness of the human person, while simultaneously offending God. Therefore, if concern over our own sustenance is a material issue, then concern over feeding our neighbor is a spiritual issue (Jm 2:14-18). Consequently, it is the mission of all Orthodox Churches to exhibit solidarity and administer assistance effectively to those in need.
6. The Holy Church of Christ, in her universal body—embracing in her fold many peoples on earth—emphasizes the principle of universal solidarity and supports the closer cooperation of nations and states for the sake of resolving conflicts peacefully.
7. The Church is concerned about the ever-increasing imposition upon humanity of a consumerist lifestyle, devoid of Christian ethical principles. In this sense, consumerism combined with secular globalization tends to lead to the loss of nations' spiritual roots, their historical loss of memory, and the forgetfulness

of their traditions.

8. Mass media frequently operates under the control of an ideology of liberal globalization and is thus rendered an instrument for disseminating consumerism and immorality. Instances of disrespectful—at times blasphemous—attitudes toward religious values are cause for particular concern, inasmuch as arousing division and conflict in society. The Church warns her children of the risk of influence on their conscience by the mass media, as well as its use to manipulate rather than bring people and nations together.
9. Even as the Church proceeds to preach and realize her salvific mission for the world, she is all the more frequently confronted by expressions of secularism. The Church of Christ in the world is called to express once again and to promote the content of her prophetic witness to the world, grounded on the experience of faith and recalling her true mission through the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the cultivation of a sense of unity among her flock. In this way, she opens up a broad field of opportunity since an essential element of her ecclesiology promotes Eucharistic communion and unity within a shattered world.
10. The yearning for continuous growth in prosperity and an unfettered consumerism inevitably lead to a disproportionate use and depletion of natural resources. Nature, which was created by God and given to humankind to *work and preserve* (cf. Gen 2:15), endures the consequences of human sin: *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now* (Rom 8:20-22).

The ecological crisis, which is connected to climate change and global warming, makes it incumbent upon the Church to do everything within her spiritual power to protect God's creation from the consequences of human greed. As the gratification of material needs, greed leads to spiritual impoverishment of the human being and to environmental destruction. We should not forget that the earth's natural resources are not our property, but the Creator's: *The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world, and those who dwell therein* (Ps 23:1). Therefore, the Orthodox Church emphasizes the protection of God's creation through the cultivation of human responsibility for our God-given environment and the promotion of the virtues of frugality and self-restraint. We are obliged to remember that not only present, but also

future generations have a right to enjoy the natural goods granted to us by the Creator.

11. For the Orthodox Church, the ability to explore the world scientifically is a gift from God to humanity. However, along with this positive attitude, the Church simultaneously recognizes the dangers latent in the use of certain scientific achievements. She believes that the scientist is indeed free to conduct research, but that the scientist is also obliged to interrupt this research when it violates basic Christian and humanitarian values. According to St. Paul, *All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful* (I Cor 6:12), and according to St. Gregory the Theologian, *Goodness is not goodness if the means are wrong* (1st Theological Oration, 4, PG 36, 16C). This perspective of the Church proves necessary for many reasons in order to establish proper boundaries for freedom and the application of the fruits of science, where in almost all disciplines, but especially in biology, we can expect both new achievements and risks. At the same time, we emphasize the unquestionable sacredness of human life from conception to natural death.
12. Over the last years, we observe an immense development in the biological sciences and in corresponding biotechnologies. Many of these achievements are considered beneficial for humankind, while others raise ethical dilemmas and still others are deemed unacceptable. The Orthodox Church believes that the human being is not merely a composition of cells, bones, and organs; nor again is the human person defined solely by biological factors. Man is created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and reference to humanity must take place with due respect. The recognition of this fundamental principle leads to the conclusion that, both in the process of scientific investigation as well as in the practical application of new discoveries and innovations, we should preserve the absolute right of each individual to be respected and honored at all stages of life. Moreover, we should respect the will of God as manifested through creation. Research must take into account ethical and spiritual principles, as well as Christian precepts. Indeed, due respect must be rendered to all of God's creation in regard to both the way humanity treats and science explores it, in accordance to God's commandment (Gen 2:15).
13. In these times of secularization marked by a spiritual crisis characteristic of contemporary civilization, it is especially necessary to highlight the significance of life's sacredness. The misunderstanding of freedom as permissiveness leads to an increase in crime, the destruction and defacement of those things held in high regard, as well as the total disrespect of our neighbor's freedom and of the sacredness of life. Orthodox Tradition, shaped by the experience of Christian truths in practice, is the bearer of spirituality

and the ascetic ethos, which must especially be encouraged in our time.

14. The Church's special pastoral care for young people represents an unceasing and unchanging Christ-centered process of formation. Of course, the pastoral responsibility of the Church also extends to the divinely-granted institution of family, which has always been and must always be founded on the sacred mystery of Christian marriage as a union between man and woman, as reflected in the union of Christ and His Church (Eph 5:32). This is especially vital in light of attempts in certain countries to legalize and in certain Christian communities to justify theologically other forms of human cohabitation that are contrary to Christian tradition and teaching.
15. In our times, just as throughout history, the prophetic and pastoral voice of the Church appeals to the heart of humankind, calling us, with the Apostle Paul, to embrace and experience *whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report* (Phil 4:8)—namely, the sacrificial love of the Crucified Lord, the only way to a world of peace, justice, freedom, and love among peoples and between nations.

Chambésy, 26 January 2016

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† Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria

† Metropolitan Isaac  
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