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*A bride without a bridegroom:  
Can there be a Church without mission?*

28 (27-30) May 2022. UK Deanery Conference, High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire

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A Deanery conference is a really important matter. I firmly believe that it is extremely important to experience the Church in all her dimensions: as a *worshipping* community, as a community *in dialogue*, as an *itinerant* community.

All three of these dimensions (*worship, discussion, itinerant*) are together of vital importance and no one of them should be absolutized at the expense of the others. I'd rather say that the Church has been invited by her Master *to worship and discuss en route – as an itinerant community*, together with her itinerant Master to the ends of the earth and until the end of time. There is no autopilot on this journey. Believers have a tremendous responsibility. The disciples are urged to fight back sleepiness, to constantly listen to their Lord (not only to have listened to him), to accommodate the surprises which their Lord has been working out, and finally to be willing to examine their own pace and adjust if need be.

One may say that all this is self-evident. Personally, I am not so sure. It may be self-evident in theory, but I doubt whether it is really self-evident in lived religious life. You see, a crucial problem (which we meet in the narratives of the Gospels as well as in the history of the Church through the centuries) is the paradoxical behavior of the disciples: the difficulty the disciples have in accepting Him, whom they acknowledge as their own Master!

In order to understand this difficulty (and contradiction), let us consider a great feast of our Church, the feast of the Transfiguration of the Savior, celebrated on August 6.



The Gospels tell us that Christ took three of his disciples (Peter, James, and John), climbed a mountain (in other words: *withdrew* to a mountain) and there revealed his divine glory to them. In response to the miraculous event of the Transfiguration, the only one who spoke was Peter: “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles; one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” That is, Peter, caught up in this extraordinary experience, asked to remain there, on the mountain, on a higher spiritual level, out of society and everyday life. So very often we hear preachers and theologians praising Peter as a model for all believers, as a model of the person who seeks the spiritual.

But is this really the spirit of the Gospel? Is Peter really a role model? Or is he—quite the opposite—an example of what *not* to do?

Luke's narrative of the Transfiguration features a laconic and enigmatic phrase that warrants our attention. The evangelist says that Peter made this suggestion "**not knowing what he said**"! Why did Peter not know what he was saying? What did he do wrong?

We will find the answer if we think about how Christ answered Peter. He did not answer him in words. Instead, he answered him with an action: he descended from the mountain. Christ rejected Peter's request and, instead of remaining forever in this theophany on the mountain, they returned to society and history, i.e., they returned to Christ's work. It is no coincidence that, according to the Gospels, as soon as they came down from the mountain a liberating act took place: a miracle in which Christ freed a suffering child from demonic possession.

So Peter was wrong. Despite his zeal and good intentions, he espoused a wrong theology. He took the experience of the Transfiguration as an end, as a way out of the messiness of history, as a mysticism that aims at personal purification and experience. But no event and no experience within the course of history can be the end. The only end, the only literal end will be the *Eschaton*, the Resurrection of all, the renovation of all creation, the fullness of the Kingdom of God. Christ's Transfiguration was not the end. It was a sign that revealed what the end would be. In the Vespers of the feast, we sing:

"Oh Lord [...] your desire was to show your disciples the splendor of the Resurrection." "He made them sharers in His joy, foretelling His death through the Cross and His saving Resurrection." "... Showing the exchange mortal men will make with your glory at your second and fearful coming".

It is striking how many Church Fathers interpreted Peter's suggestion as a mistake. For example, Timothy of Antioch (6th c.) imagines Christ addressing Peter and saying: "What are you thinking, Peter? Should I please you? Or save the world? Do you care only about yourself and not about the whole world?" And St. John of Damascus (8th c.) also argues with Peter: "Our Lord did not appoint you to take care of tents, but to care for the one universal Church."



Let us also pay attention to the Creed that we recite during every Divine Liturgy as a prerequisite in order to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. In the Creed, we Christians declare that we believe in the Triune God as well as "in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." The adjective "one" has to do with the entire Church, not only with some of her members. The adjective "holy" has to do with the entire Church, not only with some of her members. The adjective "catholic" has to do with the entire Church, not only with some of her members.

But what about the meaning of the fourth term "apostolic"?

Typically it is said that the Church is called “**apostolic**” because she was founded on the twelve apostles, and the bishops are the apostles’ successors. This interpretation, however, is terribly insufficient. It’s wrong to apply the Apostleship only to some members of the Church, namely the bishops. Apostleship coincides with God’s very work in history. The adjective “apostolic” derives from the Greek verb “apostellein,” which means “to send out” (in Latin, “mittere,” hence the noun “mission”). Apostle means *he (or she) who is sent*. So, God the Father *sent* the Son into the world and then Christ, the apostle par excellence, *sends* his disciples to the world. He himself said to his Father, “**As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world,**” and clarified to his disciples, “**As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.**”



All this means that the Church is truly “apostolic” insofar as (and provided that) it is being *sent* and *sending*, sent by Christ and sending her apostles “to all creation.” *Being sent* (that is, the Church’s mission) is not something additional to her own self, but a constituent of her own self, of her very nature.

“A theology of mission,” Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said, “is always the fruit of the total ‘being’ of the Church and not a mere specialty for those who receive a particular missionary calling.” Similarly the Holy and Great Synod (2016) declared: “The Orthodox faithful are and ought to be Christ’s apostles in the world”.

Let us also recall the title by which our ecclesiastical tradition has honored the women who preached the gospel (such as St. Mary Magdalene, St. Nina of Georgia, and others): “**Equals to the Apostles**”! This is a very bold claim, which I think our current ecclesiastical leaders would refrain from giving to lay people in general, but especially women.



So, what is the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God? The Church is not the Kingdom. The Church is the sign, the foretaste, and the herald of the Kingdom. That means that **the Church not only has a mission, but –more than that– she is mission**. The 20<sup>th</sup> c. Church father Fr. Georges Florovsky explicitly affirmed: “The Church is essentially a missionary institution.” “The proclamation of the Gospel, the preaching of the Word of God, obviously belongs to the *esse* [to the very being] of the Church. The Church stands by its testimony and witness.”

In other words, the Church does not exist for her own sake. She exists “for the life of the world.” As St. Maximus the Confessor put it, Christ “**desires the mystery of his incarnation to be effectuated in every place and time**”. This means that Church communities have to encounter the totality of the human reality in order to transform life into the “flesh” of Christ. The Church divests herself of her missional nature to the degree that it allows Christ to divest from His own incarnation.

Having reviewed these basic theological principles, let us now turn our gaze to the Western European context, and the need for witness there.



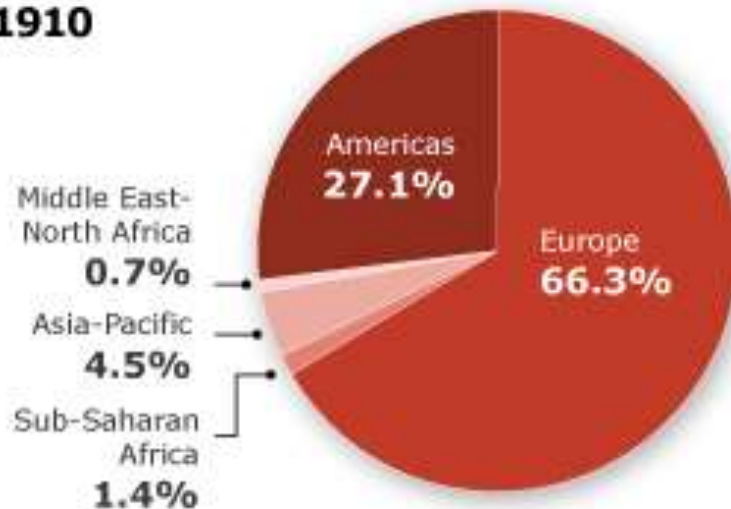


## 1) The decline of Christian congregations and the witness to the public square

A century ago, more than 66% of the world's Christian population lived in Western Europe. Today only 26% of the world's Christian population lives in Western Europe. The demographic center of gravity for Christianity has shifted from the Western world to the Global South: Africa, the Far East, and Latin America. For the time being, Christianity remains the largest religion in Western Europe; however, it is in the process of decline. So there is a wide-spread feeling among many Europeans that their societies are post-Christian.

### Regional Distribution of Christians

**1910**



**2010**



At the same time however, religion has been present in the European media, in politics and in everyday life, as a subject of interest and discussion. The reason is a growing anxiety that the immigrant religious minorities —Muslims in particular— cannot share the European values of liberal democracy. So there is a “religious concern,” which does not have to do with the metaphysics of the faith, but with the future of European identity and secularization.

In addition, the so-called "return of God" has been taking place in Europe since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Western societies remain secularized, but there is increasingly recognition that religion is not only a private affair (*laïcité*, as the extreme French version of secularism argued), but also plays a role in societal life, inspiring citizens to a vision for life, and laying out criteria for decision-making not only for private matters, but also for the general orientation of society. Not only faithful Christians but also important (and often atheist) sociologists, philosophers and political scientists argue that religion should be in the public sphere. This does not mean theocracy. It does not mean that religion has to be invested with state authority. It means that religion must be recognized as one of the partners in public discourse and deliberation.



For the Church, participation in the public square means witnessing to her faith, while however using the current language of the current society that is, “**translating**” her **message** in the current language. Many secular scholars, interested in the public character of religion, emphasize the need for this “translation” as a condition for participation in public deliberation. However for Christians, the “translation” or re-articulation of the Gospel in every language is neither a novelty, nor only a task dictated by secularization.



The re-articulation of the Gospel into every language is a mission inherent to the core of the Church event. And I mean every kind of language: verbal language, symbols, language or art, worldview, etc. It is a fundamental Christian axiom: Whenever God talks to a human, God does not speak a language of his own. He speaks the language of his interlocutor. So there is no sacred language for the Church. Rather, every language is invited to express the Gospel – to give new flesh to the message. Therefore, when we address the current society using a specialized theological jargon, understood only within the Church (or, even worse, understood only by a theological elite inside the Church), then our ecclesiastical communities fail to respond to the very reason for their existence.

## 2) The feeling of guilt and the rejection of mission

Western Europe has a unique problem in that it is haunted by the infamous “feeling of guilt” for the colonialist missions that took place until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the 1960s, the majority of Europeans, in repudiating colonialist missions (which is the right thing to do), have negated the very notion of mission, which has created confusion and a hybrid of churches without a reason to exist. We are therefore obligated to clarify things and highlight mission as a witness to freedom; as an anti-colonialist, liberating invitation based on the right to the free exchange of ideas.

And here emerges the issue of personal conversion. The call to personal conversion lies at the heart of the Gospel and of course conversion is something totally different from proselytism and colonization of consciousness. We have to elucidate the importance of conversion using a commonly understood language. I mean that we have to argue for the anthropological basis of conversion, a basis which can be understood by post-modern people. The capacity to convert is a manifestation of our fundamental capacity as humans to choose our own spiritual orientation. Without the capacity to convert, the human subject degenerates into an object; into a mere product of randomness or determinism—biological, cultural, and ethnic.

Conversion into membership in the Church is one kind of conversion. But there is also another aspect of the invitation to conversion. Christians need to acknowledge that God himself (the missionary *par excellence*) constantly invites people to convert to love and to the Kingdom. God himself acts unceasingly in unseen, mystical ways everywhere, even outside the canonical boundaries of the Church. So an integral part of Christians' mission is to discern the mystical traces of God in every good deed and disposition in each particular context, even in religious and cultural contexts alien to the Church. Christ's mystical activity ("spermatikos," like a hidden seed) and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in every human context (even beyond the canonical boundaries of the Church) is itself an invitation to Christ's Kingdom.



Christian communities, therefore, have to acknowledge this theological truth and become the herald of the Kingdom. In other words, the Church has to function not as the proprietor of salvation (salvation is God's work), but as the "foretaste" of the Kingdom in history, through both her life and word.

It is crucially important to understand that witness and mission is not merely to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The crucial thing is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Jesus Christ's way. The way of Jesus Christ is self-emptying — not bigotry, not aggressive proselytism. When the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed not in Christ's way, then we have the tragic case of the scribes and Pharisees who truly toiled in order to win a single convert, but when they succeeded, they made him twice as much a son of hell as they were (Mat. 23:15).



I should add here that the invitation to personal conversion also includes an Orthodox mission to Orthodox people themselves. I mean that invitation to personal conversion challenges the collectivism that so often lurks in traditionally Orthodox societies, and which maintains that one “is born” Orthodox, or that Orthodoxy lies in the DNA of the people. These concepts are, in reality, the antithesis of the Gospel, which insists that no one is born a Christian but is personally invited to become a Christian.

### 3) This leads us to a fatal disease in the body of the Church: NATIONALISM

For a long time now, our theology has clearly demonstrated that nationalism is the cancer of the Orthodox Church. Remember, for instance, the pointed remarks of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. And yet this cancer is unimaginably resistant! It makes the Church a miserable sect without a universal mission, and therefore without an apostolic or an ecclesiastical ethos! And we're surprised that our communities are shrinking! As long as Orthodox communities are essentially ethnic clubs, the only possible outcome is to wither.

I recall the inspired words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann:

“To recover the missionary dimension of the Church is today's great imperative. We have to recover a very basic truth: that the Church is *essentially* Mission [...]. A Christian community that would lose this missionary zeal and purpose, that would become selfish and self-centered, that would limit itself to "satisfying the spiritual needs of its members," that would identify itself completely with a nation, a society, a social or ethnic group - is on its way to spiritual decadence and death, because the essential spiritual need of a Christian is precisely that of sharing the life and Truth with as many men as possible and ultimately with the whole world. Mission thus is the organic need and task of the Church in the world, the real meaning of the Church's presence in history between the first and the second advents of her Lord”.



One of the major problems is that many today formally condemn nationalism, but in practice perpetuate it. They may not be talking about a superior race, but they are talking about a superior culture. And so the problem is perpetuated in a disguised form!

To properly deal with the nightmarish problem of nationalism, I believe that the members of our church communities must play a decisive role. Believers need to build communities that transcend competition between traditionally Orthodox churches. We urgently need to break free from the mentality of empire that still permeates the structure of the Orthodox Churches. Fr. George Florovsky highlighted the crucial change in Christian consciousness beginning in the 4th century with the acceptance of the imperial, pre-Christian ideology of eternal Rome. In imperial ideology, Rome is *urbs aeterna* – the eternal city. This, of course, is completely unacceptable from a Christian perspective, since nothing created can be eternal. Only the Kingdom of God will be eternal, the real and unique end.

It may sound disturbing or subversive, but the Church must remember her **apostolic** and **itinerant** character in today's complicated world. Just as the Church responded in the past to the social and political realities of each time and place, and built ecclesiastical structures that corresponded to those realities, the Church is called, in the same spirit, to build structures that correspond to today's globalized (and at the same time multi-polar) world. The criterion for this is the *truth* above all, even above the historical past. As Saint Cyprian of Carthage wrote, "The Lord said, 'I am the truth.' "He did not say, 'I am the custom.'"



#### 4) Having said all the above, we now come to the crux of a very difficult issue: The problem of “CHURCHIANITY”

We all recognize that Christ is the head of the Church. But from this we often draw a conclusion that paralyzes the Church and wizens her mission. Specifically, many claim that since Christ is the head of the Church, then everything in the life of the Church works correctly, automatically. But this kind of view resembles magic more than the Christian faith. Nothing is automatic in authentic church life. Christ is **the head of the Church**, but at the same time he is also **her bridegroom**, and even **her judge**. And the Church must prove herself faithful to her bridegroom. A Church that does not imagine itself accountable to her judge is like a bride who wants to exist without her bridegroom!

Nevertheless, Christ’s disciples often forget which spirit directs their lives. Christ himself warned his disciples of precisely this when they asked him to send down fire from heaven and burn up the ungodly Samaritans. Too often, Christ’s disciples forget that He is able even to move a lampstand from its place, even though (according to our systematic theology) the lampstand exists in the form and place of Christ himself! (Rev. 2:5).



If we think that the institutions and the sacraments of the Church *alone* ensure salvation, then (as contradictory as it is) we replace the living God with idols, and in fact with the worst kind of idol: with Christian, ecclesiastical idols. It is tragic: What often comes between a believer and the living God like a fence is not the atheistic rage to de-sanctify life. It is tragic that what comes between the religious believer and the living God like a fence is our own holy institutions. Remember how Dostojevski presents the religious Ivan Satov, who fervently declares himself an Orthodox, believing in his “holy” motherland and in the Church, but... eventually he finds out that in reality he does not believe in God as a living person!

The bishop and eminent theologian Anthony Bloom cauterized such mentalities by speaking boldly about "**Churchianity vs Christianity**". He took the neologism “Churchianity” from the Anglican C. S. Lewis in order to underline: "**There is a difference between being a churchgoer, loving the Church, serving the Church, proclaiming the gospel, and being a Christian.**" Bloom commented that in the Gospel account of the barren fig tree, the fig tree was neither dry nor dead. If it were dry and dead, Christ could not demand fruits from it! On the contrary, it was full of wonderful elements (branches and leaves), but not of fruits! It was, I would add, the ghost of a fig tree—a tree that had the name and form of a fig tree, but had ceased to be a real fig tree! This is like an ecclesiastical community that is full of beautiful imperial symbols, of brilliant vestments, of high ecclesiastical art, of beauty, but does not bear fruit today!

## 5) Speaking of fruits, let us touch upon a special and necessary dimension of bearing fruits, that is **SOLIDARITY**

The mission of the Church and the invitation to the Kingdom must also to be accomplished in a special way: as solidarity with the victims of history.

The understanding of mission as incarnation implies a twofold movement. It implies both *annunciation* and *denunciation*; an affirmation of life on the one hand and a clash with the powers of death on the other hand. Resurrection refutes death, all kinds of death: biological death, spiritual death as well as social death imposed by social Darwinism, neo-liberal inequalities, and exclusion. Here we must emphasize: Social engagement and solidarity are neither the opposite of liturgical life and the sacraments, nor their by-product. **Solidarity is an integral part of sacramentality!**

The divorce of solidarity from sacramentality is perhaps one of the reasons of the concession of Christianity in Europe, because for many people social security stripped of any metaphysical implication cannot feed their existential quests. So, many are seeking spirituality in New Age, in esoteric distortions of the Christian faith or even in Islamic devotion.

So, for us Orthodox, the Divine Liturgy cannot be celebrated in an isolated cluster, or on the top of the mountain, as in Peter's misunderstanding. The social engagement (the so-called *liturgy after the liturgy*), is not a contingent consequence. It is a condition for the very validity of the sacrament. If Christians do not respond to the ethical responsibility which the Bridegroom (their own Lord) demands from them, then they themselves invalidate their worship and perform it as an act of witchcraft which is carried out in an automatic manner regardless of the way of actual life.



In order to argue in favor of the sacramental (or prophetic) character of Christian solidarity, let me relate three examples.

### First:

The fourth Gospel (the Gospel according to John) was composed after the three other Gospels. John also speaks about the Last Supper and the establishment of the holy Eucharist by Jesus. But he did it in a really special way: John does not mention Christ's exhortation "Take and eat..." (the so-called "words of institution"). Instead of these words, he mentions an *action*: Christ's washing of his disciples' feet. In this way St. John the Evangelist intentionally clarified that service (*diakonia*) lies at the very heart of the sacrament.

### Second:

While mainstream theologians in our days identify the Eucharist as the only icon of the future Kingdom, St. Nicolas Cabasilas (14<sup>th</sup> c.) pointed out that not only the Eucharist but also solidarity constitutes an icon of the Kingdom. This is true because acts of unconditional love manifest God's love and God's invitation to the Kingdom of this love.

### Third:

St John Chrysostom was daring enough to declare that, while the altars in the churches are sanctified by the Eucharist celebrated on them, the outcast and the unprivileged are themselves living altars, sanctified by the very fact that they are images or icons of Christ.

**Coming to the CONCLUSION**, I would like to draw your attention to one more special point from the Gospel: Christ was resurrected in Jerusalem. The disciples were already in Jerusalem. But they did not meet Christ in Jerusalem. The risen Christ asked them (through the myrrh-bearing women) to meet him almost 200 kilometers away from Jerusalem: in Galilee.

Why did Christ ask for this unnecessary move?

Let us consider this answer: They did not meet in the "holy city" because the Resurrection is not the property of a place, of a sacred center. In Christianity such a center (such a Mecca) does not exist. The only center is Christ himself. So the Resurrected Christ made an appointment with his disciples outside the "holy city": in Galilee. What was Galilee? Galilee was (as the Gospel tells us) the “**Galilee of the nations**”; multicultural Galilee. When the disciples arrived in Galilee, they found Christ already there. They met him in the thick of globalization.

Here, as we are, in the thick of globalization, we need to hear the testimony that "**Christ is Risen**", and the greeting of the risen Christ: "**Do not be afraid!**".

*Thank you very much.*