

REPORT ON THE DEANERY CONFERENCE AND FESTIVAL, 24-27 MAY 2019

At our first session **Dr Mary Cunningham** introduced the theme: Let your light so shine; Living and bearing witness in Britain today. Looking to the year ahead, how do we let the light shine? It is easy to feel we are in no position to proclaim the Gospel. But we are, as Metropolitan Anthony said, 'The vanguard of Heaven'. How do we explain the different roles of men and women? We need to equip ourselves, to educate ourselves.

Dr Elena Narinskaya spoke on *Women in Church and Society; The Women's Ministry Initiative and Ways to go forward*. She began with a video of Metropolitan Kallistos who looked at women's ministry in creation, at women in the sacraments – women and men receive the same baptism and chrismation. Why is there a distinction over which gender is carried into the altar? The fact is that women are not ordained as priests. What other ministries can they perform? For example, a ministry of spiritual counsel. Look not just at the fact but at the reasons why women are not ordained. The Metropolitan hopes for a revival of the order of deaconesses.

Dr Narinskaya explained how the Women's Ministries Initiative works through networking, creating a safe and respectful environment, educating and communicating including feeding an Orthodox view into the wider discussion. So far there had been a number of study days and two pilgrimages with both male and female, Orthodox and non-Orthodox participants.

We need to consider the place of women, or rather of humans in the Church and life. What are the right questions to ask? What has God in mind for his Creation? Men and women are equally in God's image, receive the same Baptism and Chrismation. Look at the theological and anthropological matters that lie behind the non-ordination of women. Rejoice in what we have. Look also for the gifts of men. Do we recognise the gender or the gifts?

Next day **Fr Dragos Herescu** spoke on *Receiving and reflecting Christ's Light in a secular world*.

A secular world is one in which unbelief is dominant, faith moves to the periphery, the world is disenchanted and what Christians say does not make sense to others. 'Religion' is on the decline but 'spirituality' is on the increase, a self-defined and self-referential spirituality. Secularisation has been a long process beginning after the 14-18 war. It has a variety of lights, allowing people to find their own niche and making it difficult for Christ's gentle/gladsome light to enter.

What is Christ's light? Is it the Gospel, or the Eucharist, or the Canons, or works of charity, or unconditional love for others? We should have a sense of urgency, for while we think we are walking in light we may be walking in darkness e.g. when we exclude others or think that the light shines only on us. Christ's words 'Let your light shine' are used twice in our Liturgies, at Baptism when the candle is given and when a bishop is given the trikirion and dikirion. The same calling is given to each Christian as is given to a bishop. In Orthodoxy we tend to institutionalise so we see showing light as the job of clergy but we are all to be vessels of light. We confuse the Church with the Source of light when it is the recipient of light.

Saint Maria of Paris spoke of us being swaddled in our traditions. We need a more creative agenda. What questions are on the agenda? Questions like; why do we go to church?, what are the practical implications? Why is our Orthodoxy defined by what we cannot do? (Here Fr Dragos cited the difficulty of getting three parishes of different jurisdictions to hold a joint service.)

It is our own behaviour that pushes us into irrelevance, that obscures and distorts the light. Start by living sacramentally, by being healing in the world. The sacrament of relationship is fundamentally the light of Christ, making visible a Person, reflecting our own relationship with Him.

Fr Christopher Knight spoke on *Defending the Faith in an age of science*. Against whom are we defending the faith? Against sceptics, or those who are interested but do not want to commit intellectual

suicide, or against ourselves when we have 'difficulties'. We must avoid fundamentalism and scientism. There are four ways of relating science and faith, conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. Fr Christopher cited writers who represented these.

What does science do? It tells us how the world works, not what it consists of. The Orthodox apophatic tradition tells us that what we can say cannot fully comprehend that of which we speak. So can we understand 'matter' in a purely materialistic way? Authors from Gregory of Nyssa through Bishop Berkley to Neils Bohr give ways of answering this. From an Orthodox perspective matter is sacramental, transparent to God. God is always immanent, not just occasionally.

For Maximos the Confessor, as understood by e.g. Andrew Louth, evolution is not a problem.

We cannot separate grace and nature; there is no 'pure nature' to which grace is added to produce the 'supernatural'. We believe in panentheism not pantheism, because the Essence of God is totally transcendent but His Energies are totally immanent. St Maximos speaks of the logos within each of us as a manifestation of the Logos/Word within us drawing us to the Logos. Does the universe similarly have a predetermined end, are there potentialities within it, what Augustine calls seeds, which develop towards that end? There are scientific ideas that relate to this, e.g. the Anthropic Cosmological Principle, the idea of Evolutionary Convergence and Evolutionary Psychology.

Is there a cosmic process through a series of goals following what Augustine called 'higher laws of nature' as evident in miracles. What is our natural state? Is the world sub-natural? Can we believe in the Fall? Death and pain pre-exist humans. Is 'Eden' a memory of the future? Were Creation and Fall simultaneous?

Fr Christopher has a book forthcoming, *God and Science*, which will unpack all what he said more fully and at less speed.

Building up the Church was the title of a panel presentation.

Anne-Marie Angus spoke of her experience as a cradle Orthodox. Supposed to learn by experience she found that being an Orthodox child involved a lot of hanging around and she did not feel welcome. Camp was a revelation of the Liturgy's beauty. Now the Redbourne community sings Vespers once a month in the playroom in her house (the toys are covered up). Fr Alexander celebrates the Liturgy on 25 December, so much better than the post Christmas, school term time, of 6 January she remembers from childhood. Again she *emphasised* the Camp with its sense of community and belonging, which are vital for any church. How do we make people welcome? It is important to welcome children.

James Heywood read the statistics of Anglican, RC, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu state schools in England. In the Byzantine empire and under Turkish rule schools were important for building the church. Now each of the listed religious groups outnumbers the two Orthodox schools, one primary, and one secondary, both in different areas of London. This is not enough. James went on to suggest a curriculum for an Orthodox school. As for his own formation when he became Orthodox, he was told to read the Liturgy.

Fr Julian Lowe told us of his many years listening to people as a Samaritan. Now he has been accepted as an university chaplain, because he told the selection panel he wanted to listen, that he is about people not about church. Listen, love, support. By listening we will grow the church, we will show the light of Christ.

Fr John and Presbytera Jenny Musther spoke on *Living Witness and Local Saints*. They listed 20 representative saints who had witnessed in the North of England and in Scotland. There was a long history of Christian presence; an apsidal chapel dating from c385 has been found in the headquarters area of the Roman fort at Vindolanda. The faith was spread by itinerant bishops such as Mungo/Kentigern and hermits like Herbert. They wished to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In the Shetlands 34 monasteries have been identified as sited on seastacks, looking outwards to whatever lands are beyond the horizon. The principles of life for all these saints can be seen as 'Live

by faith, by mercy and compassion.'

The parish room of the Keswick parish has icons of these saints and information about their lives so that everyone can come to know them. Importantly they are at a height where children can see and read them.

The Conference meets as a **worshipping community**. Each day we prayed together morning and evening, with the Liturgy on Sunday morning the highlight. A debt of gratitude is owed to the members of the choir who sang brilliantly with minimal time to practice and to those who took it in turns to act as choir leader.

In the activity groups and workshops and in conversations over meals and drinks we confirmed existing friendships and made new ones. Our parishes are scattered across the country but at the conference it is clear that we are one body.