

AN ENCYCLICAL TO THE FLOCK

To the Beloved and Pious Priests, Deacons, Monastics,
and Faithful Flock of our Holy Orthodox Christian Church
In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My beloved brethren and children in the Lord,

It was with great sorrow that we read the Summit Message of the “Primates of the Orthodox Churches” who gathered in the Phanar in Constantinople, on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the 15th of March, 1992.

This was an unprecedented meeting, in which virtually all of the heads of the autocephalous churches were gathered.

We read the *Summit Message* with grief because we saw that a great opportunity to witness to the unadulterated and Holy Orthodox Faith was lost. In these days, despite the fact that our society holds truth and morality to be relative, many are searching to find an absolute criterion of what is true and false, and what is right and wrong. But the message that most hear today is that truth, if it exists at all, is a matter of personal opinion. Thus, one will hear such sentiments as, “It does not make any difference what one believes, just as long as one is a good person.” Yet, it is here, exactly, where we find a very great fallacy in this train of thought: One’s beliefs are precisely what determine for each person what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong.

One acts according to what one believes is right or wrong, truth or falsehood. Another believes that there is no right or wrong, truth or falsehood, and therefore he acts accordingly. Our society reflects this “private interpretation” of morality (or amorality): “abortion rights,” “pro-choice,” “gay rights,” “euthanasia rights”. If truth is relative, then morality — which is the reflection of the truths we uphold — is also relative. As Dostoyevsky writes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “If there is no God, then all things are permissible.” If it does not make any difference what one believes, then belief — or unbelief — is irrelevant. Yet, beyond all expectation, we see that the *Summit Message* promotes this very mentality, this notion of a multiplicity of “truths”.

How so? Let us examine this document carefully, so that we may discover its true import.

One significant paragraph of the *Summit Message* reads as follows:

We remind all that every form of proselytism — to be distinguished clearly from evangelization and mission — is absolutely condemned by the Orthodox. Proselytism, practiced in nations already Christian, and in many cases even Orthodox, sometimes through material enticement and sometimes by various forms of violence, poisons the relations among Christians and destroys the road toward their unity. Mission, in contrast, carried out in non-Christian countries and among non-Christian peoples, constitutes a sacred duty of the Church, worthy of every assistance. Such Orthodox missionary work is carried out today in Asia and Africa, and is worthy of every Pan-Orthodox and Pan-Christian support.

The *Summit Message* clearly distinguishes between proselytism and mission. Mission, it says, is “carried out among non-Christian peoples . . . in Asia and Africa.” This type of missionary work “is worthy of every Pan-Orthodox and Pan-Christian support.” Proselytism, on the other hand, which is practiced “in nations already Christian and in many cases even Orthodox” is “absolutely condemned.”

Both proselytism and mission involve converting people of one faith to another faith. Why is one “worthy of every support” and the other “absolutely condemned”? The *Summit Message* itself answers this question: Mission involves converting “non-Christian peoples” to Christianity. This type of work, which is carried out in Asia and Africa, is a “sacred duty of the Church.” Proselytism, on the other hand, practiced “in nations already Christian and in many cases even Orthodox” involves converting Christians of one denomination to another denomination. Why is this wrong? Because it “poisons the relations among Christians and destroys the road toward their unity.”

However, as Orthodox Catholic Christians, we have always been taught that the Church *is* already one, and that the Holy Orthodox Church *is* the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. She is the undivided “Body of Christ.” Unity has always been understood as meaning that people of other religions and denominations would unite themselves to the Orthodox Church of Christ. This, in fact, is precisely what the Orthodox delegates pointed out at the World Council of Churches “Faith and Order Conference” in Oberlin, Ohio, in September of 1957:

Unity from the Orthodox standpoint means a return of the separated bodies to the historical Orthodox and Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Elsewhere in this statement the delegates affirmed that:

The Orthodox Church teaches that the unity of the Church has not been lost, because she is the Body of Christ, and, as such, can never be divided.

This statement is clear and unambiguous: The Orthodox Church — i.e., the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Body of Christ — is not divided, and “unity” means the return (i.e. conversion) of the separated bodies to this one, undivided Church of Christ.

The *Summit Message*, on the other hand, teaches us that proselytism — that is, the conversion of Christians belonging to “separated bodies” — is “absolutely condemned.”

What has happened?

It is obvious that the *Summit Message* signals an official change in doctrine.

The Orthodox delegates at Oberlin — and indeed, all the Saints and Confessors of the Church of Christ in ages past — identified the Holy Orthodox Church with the Body of Christ: both are one and the same. The primates that gathered in Constantinople, in contrast, evidently believe that *all* Christians, no matter what they believe and to what denomination they belong, are members of the Body of Christ.

This new theology has already been articulated elsewhere, though not on the level of an official statement as that found in the *Summit Message*. For example, the well-known academic theologian, John Karmiris, of the University of Athens School of Theology, wrote the following in his book, *Ecclesiology*:

Even as there is one God the Father, and one Christ, and one Holy Spirit, in like manner, by the power of this unity, the Church also is one, and unique, and united in the presence of the Triune God, in Whose name all her members are baptized, thereby gaining justification for themselves, *regardless of what confession [of Faith] they belong to*, united with Christ and with one another in one body, which cannot be divided into many bodies.

(*Ecclesiology*, Athens, 1973, p. 241)

Two years later, in 1975, at the World Council of Churches General Assembly in Nairobi, the Orthodox delegates were already overturning the earlier Oberlin Statement of 1957, and hinting at their disapproval of proselytism:

The Orthodox do not expect that other Christians be converted to Orthodoxy in its historic and cultural reality of the past and the present and to become members of the Orthodox Church.

Even more recently, the disparagement of the practice of converting those of other Christian denominations has become more explicit. In the Athenian newspaper *Bema* (March 1, 1992), Metropolitan Nektarios, the new calendar bishop of Kalymnos, wrote the following:

Even when hundreds of Roman Catholic priests abandoned the priesthood and their Church during the past three decades, the Orthodox Eastern Church systematically avoided receiving them into her bosom in order to avoid poisoning her relations with the elder Church of Rome. And when whole parishes in Europe, in Italy, for example, wished to embrace Orthodoxy, once again, we discreetly shut the door to them. Since Orthodoxy is persuaded that she does not need proselytism, she preferred to leave these thousands of former Roman Catholics by themselves and without guidance . . .

Our faithful in America have informed us of yet another development that pertains to the matter of our concern. In January of 1986, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders met in Boston, Massachusetts, in the United States of America and jointly signed “The Greater Boston Church Leaders’ Covenant,” an agreement among thirteen local church bodies “to manifest more clearly the oneness of the Body of Christ.” Among the clergymen who signed this “Covenant” were the new calendar Bishop of Boston, Methodios, the local Roman Catholic cardinal, the Lutheran, Methodist and Episcopalian bishops, ministers of the United Church of Christ, the Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Salvation Army, an executive from the Massachusetts “Council of Churches,” and the Unitarian minister.

We know that the above-mentioned denominations espouse many divergent teachings. Some even reject many basic Christian doctrines, such as the Virgin Birth, the bodily Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ, to mention only a few. Yet, no matter what they believe, or do not believe, they are all esteemed “Christian” members of the Body of Christ, and, as such, we must not proselytize them, that is, strive to convert them to the Orthodox Faith, according to the principles laid down by the *Summit Message*.

What is especially noteworthy is that the Unitarians were included in this Boston Covenant, in spite of the fact that a recent survey prepared for the Unitarian Universalist Association in America found that only 15% of the Unitarian membership considered themselves Christians. According to one newspaper report, another Unitarian minister stated that his work as a clergyman was not impeded by the fact that he is an atheist! This, indeed, is something new and unheard of: non-Christians and even ministers who do not believe in God can now be considered members of the Body of Christ!

The inclusion of the Unitarians into the “Body of Christ” reveals the true nature of the new theology that is now emanating from those Orthodox who are so deeply involved and committed to the heresy of Ecumenism. This new theology also explains the “absolute condemnation” of proselytism expressed in the *Summit Message*.

The only reason we try to convert another person to our faith is because we believe that our faith is true and his is erroneous. But the *Summit Message* “absolutely condemns” this practice. This can only mean one thing: the beliefs of the heterodox — no matter how divergent, or contradictory, or erroneous they may be — are somehow pleasing to God, or, at least, they are not so serious as to warrant our concern; therefore, we *must not* try to convert these people to Orthodoxy. In fact, it is *wrong* for us to do so.

But is this not a renunciation of what Saint Paul the Apostle proclaimed to the Ephesians: “*One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*”?

This brings us inevitably to the next conclusion: if there are many divergent “Christian” truths and traditions — all of them of

value, no matter how contradictory they may be — then there is no one, absolute Christian truth: truth is relative. It is all a matter of personal preference, and if it is “meaningful” to one. Yet, my beloved, as we observed earlier, if truth — including Christian “truths” and “traditions” — are a matter of personal preference and opinion, then this immediately spills over into the matter of morality, into the question of what is true and false, right and wrong, good and evil. This, too, becomes a matter of one’s personal preference and opinion, and of how “meaningful” it is to one. There is no longer a single criterion of truth; therefore, there is no longer a single criterion of what is right or wrong.

This, precisely, is the type of mentality that has brought our society to the lamentable state in which it finds itself today, and this, too, is the type of thinking that is cultivated and promoted — unwittingly perhaps — by the *Summit Message*.

Some have tried to interpret the *Summit Message* in the light of recent events in Russia and the Ukraine, where Uniatism, and the Roman Catholics and Protestants have begun to make inroads into the Orthodox flock. The *Summit Message* laments that the Orthodox Churches had “expected brotherly support” from the Roman Catholics and others. Instead, both Rome and Protestant fundamentalists now consider Orthodox countries as missionary territories, and the *Summit Message* mentions in particular the Ukraine, Romania, East Slovakia, the Middle East and elsewhere.

This lament of the *Summit Message* is not justified, however. Instead of complaining against the Protestant fundamentalists or the Roman Catholics (who, after all, believe that their denomination is the *Una Sancta*), the primates who composed the *Summit Message* should rather become more earnest in teaching their flocks the truths of the Holy Orthodox Faith, so that their people will not be tempted to convert to these other religions. The Roman Catholics and Protestants are doing what they think is right, after all, and they are acting according to their convictions. In this they are to be commended.

But why are these primates complaining against their Roman Catholic and Protestant “brothers”? Are not the Orthodox doing the same thing elsewhere? Are they not also proselytizing other Christians in “Christian countries,” such as America? A pamphlet published recently in the United States by the Carpatho-Russian “Christ the Saviour Seminary” (under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate) states explicitly that the purpose of the Seminary is to “train future priests to bear witness to the light, bringing America to Orthodoxy!”¹* But the majority of Americans are *already* “Christians,” as surveys show. Furthermore, *Again*, the official publication of the “Antiochian Evangelical Orthodox Mission” in America, announces very clearly on its front cover that its purpose is to issue “A call for the People of God to return to their roots in historic Orthodoxy once again.” Who are these “people of God” that are called to return to historic Orthodoxy? The publication itself answers this question: Every issue is filled with testimonies of Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and Protestants who have “returned,” that is, converted to Orthodoxy.

This is proselytism.

Is proselytism evil and “absolutely condemned” only when it is directed against the Orthodox, but perfectly in order when it is directed against the Roman Catholics and others from whom, in other lands, we expect “brotherly support”? If one were to be objective, one would be forced to observe that the authors of the *Summit Message* are here applying the double standard: “What is mine is mine, and what is yours is debatable.” Is this honorable?

As we mentioned above, the inclusion of diverse denominations into the “Body of Christ” — including even non-Christian or unbelieving Unitarian ministers — reveals the new direction in theology that has been adopted by these innovating bishops and the jurisdictions they lead.

What is, indeed, even more grievous is that this new theology is evolving into a New Age Theology. The *Summit Message* affirms that “mission, carried out in non-Christian countries and among non-Christian peoples, constitutes a sacred duty of the Church. . . . Such missionary work is carried out today in Asia and Africa.”

But only a short time ago, one of the leading Patriarchs of “World Orthodoxy,” Parthenios of Alexandria, publicly affirmed that

The prophet Mohammed is an apostle. He is a man of God, who worked for the Kingdom of God and created Islam, a religion to which belong one billion people. . . . Our God is the Father of all men, even of the Moslems and Buddhists. I believe that God loves the Moslems and the Buddhists. . . . When I speak against Islam or Buddhism, then I am not found in agreement with God.

If we are “not in agreement with God” when we speak against Islam or Buddhism, then what has happened to the “sacred duty” of mission to these non-Christian peoples in Asia and Africa?

In addition, the authors of the *Summit Message* affirm that they are working for Christian unity, and this is why they are against proselytism. But what sort of unity are they seeking? Archbishop Iakovos, the primate of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, provides the answer. “The unity we seek,” said the Archbishop, “cannot be Orthodox, Roman

¹ * Emphasis in the original.

Catholic or Protestant. It has a wider dimension, that of Catholicity.”^{2**}

But if this future unity will be neither Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Protestant, then what will this as yet unformed religion believe? This new denomination, affirms Archbishop Iakovos, will have a wider dimension, “that of Catholicity.” Yet in the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, used by all the Orthodox Churches throughout the world, the sacred text states clearly in the Litany of the Catechumens:

Ye faithful, let us pray for the catechumens. . .

That the Lord may have mercy on them. . .

That He may unite them to His Holy, *Catholic*, and Apostolic Church.

Is it possible that for all these centuries the faithful have been praying that the Lord may unite the catechumens to a Church that does not yet exist? Again, we ask: what sort of unity is this?

My beloved, as Orthodox Christians, we believe that truth is from God alone, that love is from God alone. And God alone is Way to the acquiring of these Heavenly virtues. Nothing is more ennobling than God. Therefore, the truth and the virtues that ennoble mankind cannot exist independently of God.

There is no worldly or human substitute for these Heavenly gifts, no worldly alternative or worldly re-definition possible. As Christians, we know, for example, that the love of fallen man is not really love at all, for the love of God is selfless, whereas the “love” of man is self-seeking. When God loves us, it is for the purpose of uniting us to Himself in an eternal bond, transcending this mortal existence and the aspirations of an earth-bound commonwealth.

Since we are mortal, when we love each other it is for the sake of uniting ourselves with some other mortal human being for “immediate purposes” — happiness, self-satisfaction, worldly joys and pleasures. When we love God, it can only be done by beginning with a change of heart, a putting down of our fallen selves in humility, a setting at naught of our pride, and then, a genuine out-pouring of selfless love for Him Who loved us in extreme humility, taking on our nature and our mortality in order to give us the opportunity to love Him eternally in an attitude of extreme humility. Human love and truth cannot be compared with the Divine love and truth of our Saviour, because He alone is the source of this love and truth. If we long for this love with which to love Him and each other in truth, we have to look to Him alone in order to receive it. This is why He said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

This way of love, this truth of God, is the rock upon which we must build the house of virtue during our lifetime. The multiple, constantly shifting sands of human and personal opinions cannot support this house, nor will it be able to withstand the mighty waves of temptations and afflictions that will inevitably assault it.

In the Orthodox Christian soul, truth and love cannot be parted one from the other. We are called upon to fulfill both commands: to love both God and man, and to know and cleave to the truth that He has given us. In his *Twentieth Hymn on Faith*, Saint Ephraim the Syrian writes:

Truth and Love are wings that cannot be separated,
for Truth cannot fly without Love
nor can Love soar aloft without Truth;
their yoke is one of amity.
The eyes’ two pupils see and move together;
although the nose separates them,
they are not divided;
for not even the slightest blink of one eye
can escape the other’s attention.
Nor were the feet ever divided
so as to travel in two different directions. . .
A man’s feet and eyes reprove him
for being thus divided.

My beloved faithful, let us ever cleave to the concord of truth and love, for both have been bestowed on us by our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we stand firm in the holy Orthodox Faith of Christ, and in the love of God and in repentance, humility, and unceasing prayer, partaking of the Holy Mysteries with faith, fear and ardent love, then, even though we may be buffeted by the waves of false beliefs and worldly pleasures, they will not be able to hurt us or deprive us of our rightful inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven, through the never-failing love of God.

^{2 **} *Orthodox Observer*, March 15, 1988.

If we remain faithful in this love and truth that God has bestowed on us in the Holy Orthodox Faith, then, together with the Saints of all ages past, we the unworthy ones will be counted worthy to hear our Saviour's blessed voice, saying to us: Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

(Matt. 25:34)

My beloved children, may this be our portion in the age to come. Amen.

Your fervent suppliant before God,
✠Ephraim, Bishop of Boston

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