

"Open Letter to Archbishop Iakovos, Greek  
Archdiocese" 1969: Met. Philaret



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OPEN LETTER TO HIS EMINENCE  
ARCHBISHOP IAKOVOS,

GREEK ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA  
YOUR EMINENCE:

Many practices of our Church are based on precedent, and indeed the higher the position of him who sets the precedent, the more important it is. Therefore the ways in which Orthodox bishops act in their contacts with the representatives of heterodox confessions or religions are of special significance, and in those cases in which they deviate from the order accepted over the centuries, they cannot leave us indifferent. Our silence might be construed as consent, bringing consequent confusion to our own flock as well as misunderstanding to the heterodox, who expect our actions, especially in matters of public worship, to be performed by all of us in conformity with our doctrines and canons. Therefore, an incorrect action made by one bishop may be taken for something permitted by the whole Church, and those who are "without" may form a misconception in regard to Orthodox doctrine. At a time such as this, when so much mutual interest is shown by various confessions, we may be found offering them a stone instead of a loaf of bread.

For this reason, the latest actions of Your Eminence, invested as you are with the added authority of His All-Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras, have greatly perplexed not only us and our flock, but also many others. We have in mind your recent participation at St. Patrick's Cathedral in the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," and the "Ecumenical Doxology" in the Greek Cathedral of the Holy Trinity.

The very fact that these services were publicized by the press as novelties without precedent is indicative of their being introduced into the life of the Church as something extraordinary and not properly pertaining to her nature. Which canon, what tradition gave you the right to introduce such novelties?

Orthodoxy by its implicit nature is marked by its fidelity to the tradition and example of the Holy Fathers. It is not without reason that St. Vincent

of Lerins in his *Commonitorium* gave the criteria that what is truly Orthodox is that which is accepted by the Church " . . . always, by everyone, and everywhere." A novelty which does not conform with that rule bears an implicit stamp of unorthodoxy.

Your Eminence must be aware of the 45th Apostolic Canon which reads: "Let a bishop, presbyter, or deacon who has only prayed with heretics be excommunicated, but if he has permitted them to perform any clerical office, let him be deposed." The renowned canonist Bishop Nikodim of Dalmatia, in his interpretation of this canon, remarks that participation in such a prayer with heterodox " . . . means that we not only do nothing for their conversion to Orthodoxy, but are wavering in it ourselves."

In this case Your Eminence has not only violated an ancient tradition of the Orthodox Church founded on canons (Apostolic 10 and 45, Laodicea 6, 32, and 33), but also in your actions and statements conforming to those of Patriarch Athenagoras, you have expressed a teaching foreign to the Fathers of our Church.

In your sermon at St. Patrick's Cathedral, you said that Church Unity should be understood as a call "that through such ecumenical practices and experiences as praying and working together we arrive at the full knowledge of the truth that frees the faithful from the sin of false and ungodly apprehensions." The pathos in your sermon is not in proclaiming the truth of the Church, but in seeking something new, even a new definition "of our relationship with the Triune God."

The Holy Fathers, however, always regarded common public prayer as the culmination of the conversion of erring persons to the true Church—the achievement of it, not the means to it. Common church prayer is a manifestation of an already existing unity of faith and spirit. We cannot have such unity with those who teach otherwise than the Orthodox Church about the Holy Trinity (Filioque), the Mother of God (immaculate conception by Catholics, lack of veneration by Protestants), the hierarchy (Papism by the Roman Catholics; denial of the sacrament of priesthood by

Protestants), etc. It is of further importance to note that the Roman Catholics and Protestants differ with us regarding the dogma of the Church.

Orthodox ecclesiology has always been based on the understanding that there is only One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and that schismatics, heretics, and persons of other religions are outside of Her. We therefore cannot accept the assertion of His Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras which was made in his Christmas Message of 1968 that, owing to a lack of love among brothers, ". . . the Church which was established by Christ to be glorious, without spot or wrinkle (Eph. v. 27), perfect and holy, was altered." If our Church was altered and is not the same that was established by our Savior, then the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church against which Jesus Christ said "the gates of hell shall not prevail" (Matt. xvi. 18) exists no more, and instead there are several Churches, none of which is fully true and holy.

In a speech during his visit to Rome in 1967, His Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras publicly declared in the Basilica of St. Peter that the Church should ". . . return to the solid ground on which the undivided Church was founded," as if since 1054 the Church has lost this foundation and as if before that time there existed no schisms. If, as Your Eminence and His Holiness declare, you are proceeding toward the restoration of this "Undivided Church," then this means that for you the Church is at present non-existent. We are also inescapably brought to the conclusion that Your Eminence and the Patriarch accept the "branch" theory. According to that theory, the Orthodox Church is as guilty of divisiveness as the heretics and schismatics who separated themselves from the Church, and all these separated communities remain "branches" of the Church from which they fell away. But if one can belong to the Church without sharing her doctrines, then doctrines are of only secondary importance. This concept is clearly seen in Patriarch Athenagoras' Christmas Message of 1968, when he speaks with praise of the movement of people to the common chalice ". . . not knowing the differences in their dogmas, nor being concerned

about them." Such words could never have been said by the great predecessors of Patriarch Athenagoras: SS. Proclus, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, St. Photius and others. Moreover, even if through the sinfulness of human nature heresy has sometimes been preached from the steps of the Ecumenical Throne under the guise of truth, there has never existed the precedent of a Patriarch who would regard dogmas as unimportant!

How sad it is to read of such a rejection of the teachings of our Fathers in a message of the Primate of the Church which was the Mother of our Church of Russia! Honoring that Primate, Your Eminence organized an "Ecumenical Doxology" in your Cathedral, thereby joining him in indifference to the Truth in disregard of the aforementioned canons. Your joining there in prayer with Roman Catholics and Protestants was an actualization of the call of Patriarch Athenagoras to move toward union with no concern for doctrines, heedless of the warning of the Apostle Paul against people who "would pervert the Gospel of Christ." Do you not fear the further warning of the Apostle, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed!" (Gal. i. 7-8)?

We therefore regard it as our duty to protest strongly against the distortion of the dogma of the Church so insistently made by His Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras and Your Eminence. We protest against the "Ecumenical Doxology" and against the inclusion in the Diptychs by His All Holiness Athenagoras of the name of the Pope of Rome and of "all the confessions of the East and West," which was announced in His Holiness' Christmas Message. This inclusion in the Diptychs has always been testimony that a certain person is recognized as Orthodox. If the Fifth Ecumenical Council ordered the name of Theodore of Mopsuestia stricken from the Diptychs when his teaching was found unorthodox, then how can any Patriarch or Bishop now include in the Diptychs those who do not even nominally belong to the Orthodox Church, and who, on the contrary, continue to proclaim doctrines inconsistent with her dogmas?

*You are uniting with the heterodox not in truth but in indifference to it.*

We are not writing these lines in order simply to reproach or offend Your Eminence or His Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras: not in the least, especially as we have no reason for personal animosity toward you or His Holiness.

On the contrary, we see our indicating to you and the Patriarch of the perils of Ecumenism, which you have chosen, as the duty of brotherly love.

Oh! If you would hearken to the calls of the Holy Fathers of the Church who did not build on compromises but on firm adherence to the traditions and every iota of the divine dogmas, instead of to the voices of interconfessional conferences and the press, indifferent to religious truth! Their true love toward the heterodox consisted in their zeal to enlighten them with the light of truth and in caring for their genuine reunion with the Holy Church.

We are writing this in an open letter since your statements have been made public, and so that other Bishops and the faithful might know that not all the Church agrees with your pernicious ecumenical ventures. Let it be clear to everyone that your concelebration with the heterodox is a unique episode which may not serve as a precedent or an example for others, but which causes concern and resolute protest on the part of devoted members of the Church as an action which is clearly unorthodox and in violation of the Holy Canons.

I am,  
Your obedient servant,

+ Metropolitan PHILARET  
Feast of Orthodoxy, 1969