

Ecumenical Conference “Parables of Communion” - 21.10.2016

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (Matt. 3:2)

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

With these simple yet piercing words, Saint John the Baptist introduced a fundamental principle for all those seeking greater understanding, access, and communion with God. *Repentance* represents the central magnet that joined lepers to physicians, harlots to preachers, kings to subjects, apostles to the world. And this calling to repentance, present throughout the pages of the law and the prophets, takes on flesh in the second Person of the Trinity, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

However, through the salvific message of the Gospel, repentance is stripped away of any and all elements of judgment, shame, and legality, and is shrouded instead with freedom and joy. Repentance, for the early Christian community, is not a legal issue but an invitation to grace through communion with one another and with God. The words of Saint Paul, the great Apostle to the nations, that *the world was once without hope and without God, but now in Christ Jesus, those who were once far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ* (Eph. 2: 13). And the salvific Blood of Christ has granted access in one Spirit to the Father, thereby rendering once strangers and sojourners, fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Eph. 2: 19).

For centuries, the disciples of Christ have shared this *good news* with the world; from her early days, the Church has invited *those near and far off at sea* to experience their full potential through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. However, these disciples also knew that the only way that this *message* could ever truly resonate in the world is if the *messengers* themselves actually experienced this truth. In other words, dear friends, the most authentic way a Christian to invite others into communion is to actually be bearers of communal life with each other and with the world. Without unity, or better, in disunity, an invitation to communion and membership of the Body of Christ is, at best, a paradox, and hypocrisy, at worst.

Centuries after the Great Commission, that great mandate of Christ to the Apostles to make disciples of all nations, given the numerous fragmentations and divisions within the Christian household, the spirit of repentance is even more critical. Without repentance, how can sisters and brothers claim to worship the same Lord when they are divided by centuries-old controversies, animosities, and theological differences? Theological consultations and commissions, while fundamental and useful tools, alone cannot bridge the differences that separate us. Only the gift of repentance can bring us to Christ; Jesus personally raises this point when he admonishes his critics, reminding them that he *did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance* (Luke 5:32).

Our gathering this evening not only gives us the chance to give thanks to the Lord for the great gift of the ascetical life, but to also draw from its various expressions, especially since the root of *ascesis* is *metanoia*. And both *ascesis* and *metanoia* lead to communion not to isolation.

The great monastics throughout history understood that *ascesis* leads to metanoia and that metanoia presupposes that one makes room in his or her heart for the other. There is, in other words, no such thing as personal repentance; metanoia is by nature communal!

Certainly, our Churches have learned from the mistakes of the past. Our spiritual leaders have made concerted efforts, especially during the past fifty years, to find ways to constantly *make room* for each other. The Orthodox Church is firmly committed to advancing the reconciliation that may lead to the full communion between our Churches, and prays for this gift each time the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. The challenge to draw closer to Christ and to each other is received with great joy and with awe; it is received locally by our parishes, monasteries, local synods, and most recently by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which affirmed Orthodoxy's centuries-old vision of Christian unity. Local pastors, abbots, and abyssees, as well as hierarchs and Patriarchs have devoted their lives to Christian reconciliation. Among the first is the great Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, whose courage and vision assisted the Churches of Rome and Constantinople to embrace each other and to begin the dialogues of truth and love following the lifting of the Anathemas in 1965. And following in his footsteps, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has supported inter-Christian dialogue during his twenty-five years as Ecumenical Patriarch. We are blessed to have Patriarch Bartholomew as our father and leader for he has ushered a period of tangible acts of charity and love between Orthodox, Catholic and Reformed Churches.

Dear brothers, as we continue our prayer this evening, let each of us contemplate how we can be used as God's instrument of peace and reconciliation. Let us recommit ourselves daily to the spirit of truth, the spirit of love, the spirit of reconciliation, thereby making room for each other. After all, what else can we do but pray for repentance? For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Amen.