

Address By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew At The Old Catholic Cathedral

(April 24, 2014)

Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Dear brothers and sisters,

Christ is Risen!

Orthodox Christians experience the Lord's Resurrection as the crowning event of the divine economy, as the ultimate revelation of the eschatological glory intended for humankind and creation in its entirety. Easter constitutes "an explosion of joy," as the late Father Dimitru Staniloae once described it, the indescribable joy for the triumph of life over death. The light of Christ's Resurrection illumines all aspects of life, infusing as it does the Orthodox faith and spirituality, divine worship, ministry, the daily life of the faithful people, the whole of Church life, and the entire creation. "Now all things are filled with light: heaven and earth, and the nethermost regions. So let all creation celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, whereby it is established."

It is far from accidental that Orthodox Easter, while having locally incorporated numerous external elements and popular customs, it maintains everywhere a brightness, an authenticity and an existential depth that are largely unknown in the West. Far from being merely a "remembrance" of Christ's resurrection, it is a "witness and guarantee" of our own resurrection in the Lord, "the feast of our participation in Christ's Easter," in the memorable words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. The human race ascends along with the Risen Lord, *to share in His Glory*, in His kingdom. Easter is what "has opened up the gates of paradise to us." Whenever Orthodox theology makes a reference to "theosis" as the ultimate aim of every human being, it presupposes that such a salvific prospect is afforded to humankind as a result of the Resurrection of Christ.

It is the Resurrection that reveals the ultimate meaning of the Incarnation of the Logos. The Cross of Christ becomes the symbol of victory against death, an expression of resurrectional joy. "Behold through the Cross, joy has come to the whole world." That is why in Orthodoxy, the Service of the Passion is not depressive and sad. For, here, the certainty of the upcoming Resurrection, which is a "ransom from sorrow," makes mourning joyful. "The universe was filled with joy in the experience of Your resurrection," says a hymn.

In the life of the Church, where the bitterness of the cross is inextricably intertwined with the joy of the resurrection, the faithful experience themselves as "citizens of heaven," namely as beings that "do not live by bread alone" (Mt. 4:4). Such an experience does not cut the faithful off from reality, nor does it render them indifferent to the misfortunes and travails of ordinary human life and co-existence in the world.

Orthodoxy is supremely eschatological, yet it is not a religion of the beyond. Any form of eschatology that ignores history is incompatible with the holy mission of the people of God. The Church of Christ is "in the world," and it is precisely here, in the world, that it is called to give its salvific witness. Christ's remarkable words, "My Kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36) strongly emphasize that the Kingdom of God bears no relation to the fallen, corrupt world. Nevertheless, the Gospel does not point to a fleshless, self-sufficient and uncaring Church, indifferent to the plight of humankind and the world. While being in the world, the Church's presence and orientation are sustained by its "out of the world" character.

Orthodoxy does not ignore the signs of the times, nor does it turn a blind eye to the challenges, the problems, or the constructive prospects of each era. Nevertheless, the Church approaches the world and history through the lens of its fidelity to Tradition. It faithfully guards the Trinitarian theology of the Eastern Fathers and all aspects of the patristic legacy: the theology of personhood, the Holy Eucharist as the nucleus of the Church and an icon of God's Kingdom, the office of the Bishop as head of the Eucharistic celebration and guarantor of Church unity, the synodic or conciliar ecclesiological model as the Church's permanent system of deliberation, its bright worship, the ascetic mindset as a witness of the eschata, the notion of human beings as priests and keepers of creation, philanthropy and charity, the spontaneous joy of its feasts which dispel the mist of worldly concerns, and last but not least, the unquenchable desire for eternity.

It is this selfsame faithfulness to the patristic legacy, which has set the Orthodox Church to the path of convening the Holy and Great Synod, now in its final stage of preparation. The stability of Orthodoxy, a matter of utter significance for the entire Christendom, constitutes one of our prime concerns. Orthodoxy is called to consistently apply its fundamental ecclesiological principles pertaining to the Church's catholicity and synodality, in a way that answers to reproaches of "orthodoxism" and "ethnocentrism" leveled against it. It must be remembered that the Orthodox Church issued a synodical condemnation of nationalism way back in 1872, and has done so in numerous occasions since then. The concept of the nation cannot become a determining factor of Church life or an axis of Church organization. Whenever an Orthodox Church succumbs to nationalist rhetoric and lends support to racial tendencies, it loses sight of the authentic theological principles and gives in to a fallen mindset, totally alien to the core of Orthodoxy.

This genuine Orthodox mentality is also expressed in the Church's participation in the Ecumenical movement. It is an indisputable fact that ecumenical dialogues have yielded moments of genuine and heartfelt contact, of mutual acquaintance and enrichment. The ensuing texts have only repeatedly confirmed our common Christian archetypes, our common root in the indivisible Church. If the main goal of the Ecumenical movement is the visible unity of the Church, ecclesiology owes to remain at the center of our dialogues. For, the attainment of this goal is not promoted by ecclesiological minimalism or by an ecumenism based on good intentions alone, but by an affirmation of the authentic content of unity and the Eucharistic aspect of the Church.

Alongside inter-confessional dialogues, we have also been active in inter-religious dialogue, particularly with Judaism and Islam, with positive results fostering our mutual understanding and the overcoming of prejudices. The reliability of religions is nowadays largely measured by their contribution to the struggle for reconciliation and peace. Peace among religions must serve as a pattern of inspiration for world peace.

We are grievously saddened by the recent unacceptable spate of violence in the Middle East, the cradle of faith in the one God, and all the more so by the fact that God's name is used as a war cry. Violence in the name of God and religion is giving faith and its humanitarian core a black eye. We appeal to everyone concerned, from this present occasion as well, as we have done all along, for the immediate termination of blood shedding and the beginning of the process of reconciliation.

A further sign of open-mindedness is Orthodoxy's keen interest in the problems and challenges of modern culture and its consequences for human personhood and the integrity of creation. The Church's openness to the world should not be confused for an absorption of the Church in it – openness does not amount to the secularization or modernization of the Gospel. How could the Cross, the Eucharistic ethos, Christian asceticism and the hope for a "common resurrection" be modernized?

Orthodoxy is not, of course, apprehensive of dialogue; on the contrary, it seeks and cultivates it. The same holds for dialogue with contemporary culture, the historic setting in which Orthodoxy is called to reside and offer its witness according to Christ.

Without denying the dazzling progress attained by science and technology, with all its beneficial impact in our lives, we should nevertheless be mindful as well of the dangers stemming from scientism and the excesses of technopoly, that is the complete surrender of culture to technology. Scientific progress is not capable, in itself, of answering the deep existential questions of humanity, nor can it eliminate them.

We have earnestly sought to promote an ecological culture, doing our best to sensitize consciences as well as to mobilize institutions, social groups, organizations and individuals to aid the cause of the threatened environment. In this spirit, we ceaselessly recall the cosmological dimension of sin and the devastating effects of the spiritual malaise afflicting modern man. Furthermore, we highlight the truth of the Eucharistic relationship with creation, wherein man stands as its "tiller" and "keeper."

Recent developments in the economy and the widespread social and individual preoccupation with material prosperity have been undermining social cohesion and solidarity. Certainly, we are neither politicians nor economists. Still, we know full well that the function of both politics and the economy must not be severed from the principles of justice and respect for the fundamental rights and needs of humankind. The Church listens to the cries of the victims suffering injustice, violence, and poverty. It resists man's exploitation and reification, whether these occur in the name of power, the market or other forms of expediency.

Life in the Church amounts to a liberation from the fortress of our self and its individual demands. It is synonymous with a turn toward the other, while the enclosure to one's own self is condemned as a sin. It is the absence of the other which is hell, and not the presence of the other.

In the midst of our modern, self-centered and materialistic culture, the message of Orthodoxy is that *homo clausus*, the closed man who only demands and never gives anything, the *man of having*, is the alienated being par excellence. It is indeed unfortunate for a human being to be revolving around his or her self, as their sole, ultimate point of reference.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

St. Paul describes the truth of the Cross and the Resurrection by recourse to the term freedom (*eleutheria*). In this context, freedom signifies, first, that the new mode of being is a gift from the grace of God, who is Himself the source of freedom, "He who yearns for the salvation of all people and craves their divinization," in the words of Saint Maximus the Confessor. Secondly, freedom as intended by St. Paul, indicates that salvation is a release from the law, death, the devil and sin. Thirdly, that freedom is inextricably bound up with love, and is expressed as love. All these aspects of freedom correspond to the ecclesial character of the life in Christ and its eschatological orientation. The truth of the "common freedom," as Nicholas Kabasilas called it, is made manifest in the liturgical life of the Church, in prayer and the ascetic struggle, in the charismatic theology of the Fathers, the bright splendor of the Church of Hagia Sophia, in the art of icons, in the philanthropic ministry of the Church, the antinomic life of the faithful hanging between the cross and resurrection, in popular piety and the ineffable joy of daily Pascha. Bearing all this in mind, we can see why Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, of blessed memory, has written that "the Church itself *is* freedom."

In concluding, we would like to remark that what is asked of our Churches today is to function as life and freedom, an alternative manner of life and freedom for modern humankind. They ought to provide vital answers to contemporary quests, and, more than just giving support and assistance, they must keep the gates of Heaven open, thereby making the Truth visible, which for us Christians is not *something* but *Someone*, Jesus Christ.

Of course, the Church witnesses to the Truth with its silence as well. But whether the church speaks or chooses to remain silent, it does so for the same reason, i.e. for the sake of God, as Abba Poemen once wrote: "Those who speak for the sake of God, do well; and those who keep silent for the sake of God, likewise" (as is recounted in the *Gerontikon*, a popular collection of the sayings of the Desert fathers). "For the sake of God" means for us Christians always "for the sake of humankind," inasmuch as our God is always *Emmanuel*, "God with us."