

Remembering Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (1886-1972)

Patriarch Athenagoras I was born in the province of Ioanina, Epirus on March 25, 1886, at that time still apart of the Ottoman Empire. The son of the village doctor, his mother died when he was only 13. In 1903, he entered the Halki Theological Academy near Istanbul. In 1910, he graduated with his degree in theology, was tonsured as a monk and ordained as a deacon. In December of 1922, while still a deacon, he was elected as the Metropolitan of the island of Corfu. In



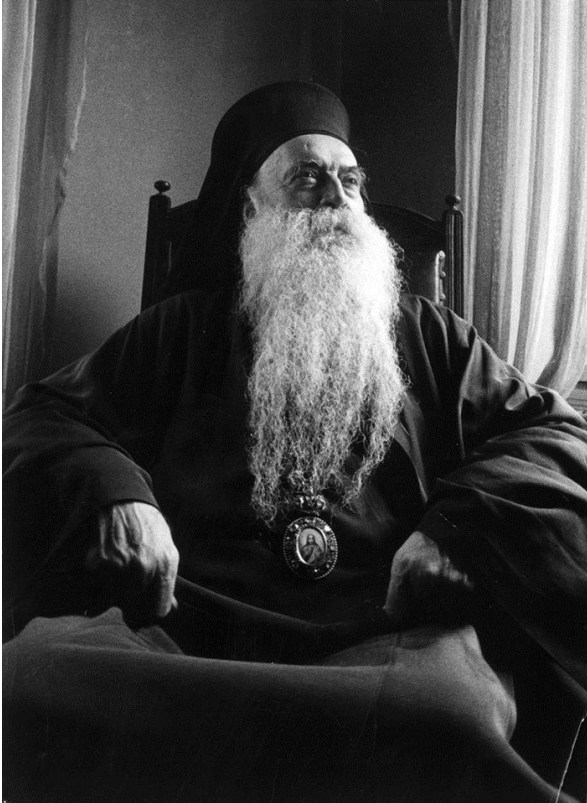
1930, he was elected the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of North and South America and served as our Archbishop until 1948. During his 18-year tenure, the women's Philoptochos, the philanthropic arm of the Church was established. He also established an orphanage, St. Basil's Academy, and a seminary, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. Elected the 268th Patriarch of Constantinople in 1948, Athenagoras was active in the ecumenical movement, seeking to establish better relationships among Christians. Perhaps most notable was his meeting with Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1964, which resulted in the mutual lifting of the anathemas that had separated Orthodox

and Roman Catholic Christians since 1054 AD. This symbolic gesture opened the possibility of authentic dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches for the first time in centuries. Patriarch Athenagoras died on July 7th, 1972.

The excerpts below are taken from the book, *Conversations with Patriarch Athenagoras* written by the French Orthodox theologian and writer, Olivier Clement (1921-2009), and published in Paris in 1969.

DIALOGUE AMONG CHRISTIANS

"I do not deny that there are differences between the Churches, but I say that we must change our way of approaching them. And the question of method is in the first place a psychological, or rather a



spiritual problem. For centuries there have been conversations between theologians, and they have done nothing except to harden their positions. I have a whole library about it. And why? Because they spoke in fear and distrust of one another, with the desire to defend themselves and to defeat the others. Theology was no longer a pure celebration of the mystery of God. It became a weapon. God himself became a weapon!

I repeat: I do not ignore these difficulties. But I am trying to change the spiritual atmosphere. The restoration of mutual love will enable us to see the questions in a totally different

light. We must express the truth which is dear to us – because it protects and celebrates the immensity of the life which is in Christ – we must express it, not so as to repulse the other, so as to force him to admit that he is beaten, but so as to share it with him; and also for its own sake, for its beauty, as a celebration of truth to which we invite our brothers. At the same time we must be ready to listen. For Christians, truth is not opposed to life or love; it expresses their fullness. First of all, we must free these words, these words which tend to collide, from the evil past, from all political, national and cultural hatreds which have nothing to do with Christ. Then we must root them in the deep life of the Church, in the experience of the Resurrection which it is their mission to serve. We must always weigh our words in the balance of life and death and Resurrection.

Those who accuse me of sacrificing Orthodoxy to a blind obsession with love, have a very poor conception of the truth. They make it into a system which they possess, which reassures them, when what it really is, is the living glorification of the living God, with all the risks involved



in creative life. And we don't possess God; it is He who holds us and fills us with His presence in proportion to our humility and love. Only by love can we glorify the God of love, only by giving and sharing and sacrificing oneself can one glorify the God who, to save us, sacrificed himself and went to death, the death of the cross.

But I would go further. Those who reproach me with sacrificing truth to love have no confidence in the truth. They shut it up, they lock it up like an unfaithful woman. But I say, if the truth is the truth, we must not be afraid for it; let us give it, let us share it, let us show it in its fullness, let us welcome all that there is of light and love in the experience of our brethren. If we continue in this attitude, then truth will become clear of itself, it will conquer all limitations and inadequacies from within, on the basis of the common mystery of the Church. Let us enlarge our hearts, "let each one of us, as the apostle says, look not to our own things, but rather to the things of others" (Phil. 2:4). We have a sure criterion – life in Christ. Faced with a partial expression of the truth, let us ask in what measure it conveys the life in Christ, or in what measure it is liable to compromise it.

Orthodoxy, if it goes back to the sources of its great tradition, will be the humble and faithful witness to the undivided Church. The Orthodox Churches, in coming together themselves in mutual respect and love, will set a movement of brotherhood going throughout the Christian world, giving the example of a free communion of sister Churches, united by the same sacraments and the same faith. As to the Orthodox faith, centered as it is on liturgical praise and worship, and on holiness, it will bring the criterion of spiritual experience to ecumenical dialogue, a criterion which will allow us to disentangle partial truths from their limitations so that they may be reconciled in a higher plenitude of truth.

But we Orthodox: are we worthy of Orthodoxy? Up till the efforts we have made in recent years, what kind of example have our Churches given? We are united in faith and united in the chalice, but we have become strangers to one another, sometimes rivals. And our great tradition, the Fathers, Palamas, the *Philokalia*: is it living and creative in us? If we are satisfied to repeat our formulas, hardening them against our fellow Christians, then our inheritance will become

something dead. It is sharing, humility, reconciliation which makes us truly Orthodox, holding the faith not for ourselves – if we did that we should simply be affirming yet one more historic confession of faith – but for the union of all, as the selfless witnesses of the undivided Church.”

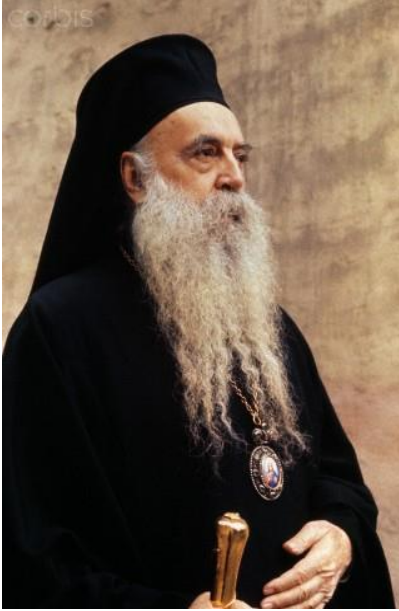
COMMUNION AND FORGIVENESS

“To those who reduce the Eucharist to a mere brotherly meal one must say that such a meal, even when shared in love, will not prevent us from dying. The Eucharist is first and foremost union with the Risen Christ, who raises us up. It is the bread of heaven which even now imparts eternal life to us. And that is why it is, at the same time, the only meal of total brotherhood, indeed of more than brotherhood, for Christ makes us “members one of another,” as St. Paul says, and He identifies us in his flesh.



But people do not forget the evil they have done and the evil they have suffered, above all when those who have committed the wrong are men or collectivities that are still alive. People don't forget. And you can't force them to forget. But if you lay down your arms, if you dispossess yourself, if you open yourself to the God-man Jesus Christ who makes all things new, then the evil past is done away with, and He grants us a new time, in which all things are possible. Forgiveness; it is God himself who takes flesh, dies on the cross and rises again. He forgives us, and allows us to forgive, for He renews time, even the past. This is the mystery of repentance.

As to the future, we cannot dictate it. We only know that in our lives, as in history, the Resurrection will be the last word. That is why we have no fear; we turn our eyes to God and put absolute trust in him for the events of the future. So we can welcome the present and live in it as intensely as possible. Every day I get up, thankful to be alive,



and I receive the new day as a blessing. And every promise of life which comes from the past and is turned towards God's future, I try to make grow today, as I live the moment in its fullness.

Nothing troubles me. Nothing can trouble me. I am in the hands of God. In suffering and in troubles there always remains for us the naked faith that God loves us with an infinite love. There always remains for us the blood of Christ, and the tenderness of His most holy Mother. I know those moments when the situation is quite beyond you, when you can no more do anything. Then I altogether let go of the weight of my

weakness, and abandon myself in trust. And peace comes to me, that peace which the Lord gives us, which passes all understanding."

REPENTING OF OUR SINS AS A CHURCH

"What have we done? What have we done? Christ has left us. We have driven him away. Our hatreds, our pride, our pharisaical self-sufficiency have driven out the Spirit of the Gospel. And Christ has gone. Christ has gone. Oh, how satisfied we are with ourselves! We are the pure, we possess the truth, and we condemn others! But life and history go on. They are knocking at the doors of the Church, and putting ultimate questions to us. Everything is changing. The scientific revolution is advancing, it is modifying and not only man's environment, but man himself, his education, the relationship between the sexes, his psychology, and tomorrow perhaps his heredity and character as well. Not that science and technology necessarily build a world without God, as is sometimes said. But they force man, and they will force him more and more to ask where all this is going, what is the meaning of it all, what is the meaning of his own life.

What is most lacking among men of the Church is the Spirit of Christ: humility, selflessness, an open welcome, the capacity of seeing the best in others. We are afraid, we want to hang on to what is over and done with, because we're used to it. We want to be right over against the others, and under a language of conventional humility we hide the spirit of pride and power. We carry on apart from life. We have made the Church into an organization, just like all the other ones. We have

put all our energy into setting it up, and now we put all our energy into keeping it going. And it works more or less; rather less than more, but it works. Only it works like a machine, and not like life.”

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

“All the peoples of the world are good; all the races. All must find their place in the unity of mankind. I belong to all peoples. Christian unity must be the ferment of human unity. The unification of mankind is at once the expression and the search for our perfect unity in Christ, where we are all members one of another. There is only one Church, the Church of Christ; only one theology, the proclamation of Christ risen from the dead who raises us up and gives us the power to love. Soon men will be going to the moon, but they no longer know the meaning of life. We Christians ought not to be afraid of anything. We have nothing to ask of others, nothing to impose on them; but we must bear witness that life has a meaning, that life is boundless, that it opens onto eternity. For God exists, God exists; and He, the Unknown, is our friend.”



Following is the text of the joint Catholic-Orthodox declaration, approved by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I that was read simultaneously at a public session of the Second Vatican Council in Rome and at a special ceremony in Istanbul on December 7, 1965.

This declaration lifts the exchange of mutual excommunications in 1054.

1. Grateful to God, who mercifully favored them with a fraternal meeting at those holy places where the mystery of salvation was accomplished through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and where the Church was born through the

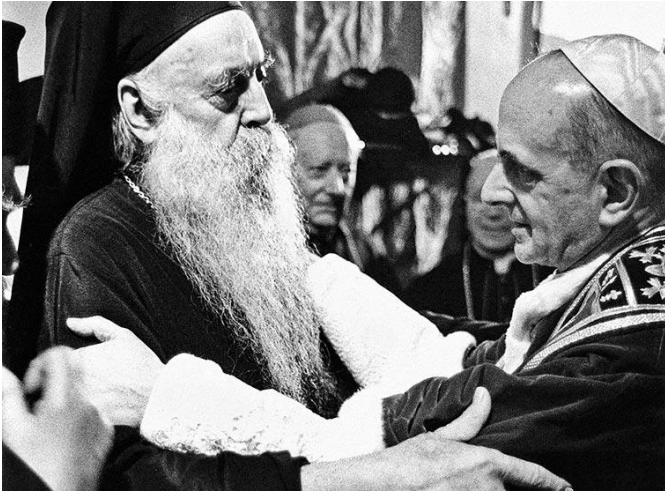


outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I have not lost sight of the determination each then felt to omit nothing thereafter which charity might inspire and which could facilitate the development of the fraternal relations thus taken up between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Constantinople. They are persuaded that in acting this way, they are responding to the call of that divine grace which today is leading the Roman Catholic Church and the

Orthodox Church, as well as all Christians, to overcome their differences in order to be again "one" as the Lord Jesus asked of His Father for them.

2. Among the obstacles along the road of the development of these fraternal relations of confidence and esteem, there is the memory of the decisions, actions and painful incidents which in 1054 resulted in the sentence of excommunication leveled against the Patriarch Michael Cerularius and two other persons by the legate of the Roman See under the leadership of Cardinal Humbertus, legates who then became the object of a similar sentence pronounced by the patriarch and the Synod of Constantinople.

3. One cannot pretend that these events were not what they were during this very troubled period of history. Today, however, they have been judged more fairly and serenely. Thus



it is important to recognize the excesses which accompanied them and later led to consequences which, insofar as we can judge, went much further than their authors had intended and foreseen. They had directed their censures against the persons concerned and not the Churches. These

censures were not intended to break ecclesiastical communion between the Sees of Rome and Constantinople.

4. Since they are certain that they express the common desire for justice and the unanimous sentiment of charity which moves the faithful, and since they recall the command of the Lord: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brethren has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go first be reconciled to your brother" (*Matthew 5.23-24*), Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I with his synod, in common agreement, declare that:

A. They regret the offensive words, the reproaches without foundation, and the reprehensible gestures which, on both sides, have marked or accompanied the sad events of this period.

B. They likewise regret and remove both from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer relations in charity; and they commit these excommunications to oblivion.

C. Finally, they deplore the preceding and later vexing events which, under the influence of various factors--

*among which, lack of understanding and mutual trust-
-eventually led to the effective rupture of
ecclesiastical communion.*

5. Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I with his Synod realize that this gesture of justice and mutual pardon is not sufficient to end both old and more recent differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

Through the action of the Holy Spirit those differences will be overcome through cleansing of hearts, through regret for historical wrongs, and through an efficacious determination to arrive at a common understanding and expression of the faith of the Apostles and its demands.

They hope, nevertheless, that this act will be pleasing to God, who is prompt to pardon us when we pardon each other. They hope that the whole Christian world, especially the entire Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church will appreciate this gesture as an expression of a sincere desire shared in common for reconciliation, and as an invitation to follow out in a spirit of trust, esteem and mutual charity the dialogue which, with Gods help, will lead to living together again, for the greater good of souls and the coming of the kingdom of God, in that full communion of faith, fraternal accord and sacramental life which existed among them during the first thousand years of the life of the Church.

