

The Ever-Memorable Confessor Metropolitan
Philaret, First Hierarch of the Russian
Orthodox Church Abroad
(†1985)



Text II

Open Letter

To His Eminence, Archbishop Iakovos of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America*

Your Eminence:

In Church practice very much is based on precedent, and indeed the higher the position of him who sets the precedent, the more importance it may acquire. Therefore, the ways in which Orthodox Hierarchs act in their contacts with the representatives of other confessions and religions are of special significance, and in those cases in which they violate the order accepted over the centuries, they cannot leave us indifferent. Our silence might be construed as consent and consequently lead into error both our own flock and the heterodox, who assume that our actions, and especially the Divine services, are performed by all of us in conformity with our doctrines and Canons. Therefore, something incorrectly permitted by one Orthodox Bishop may be taken for something permitted by the whole Church, and those who are “without” may form a misconception concerning Orthodox doctrine itself. In an age such as this, when so much mutual interest is shown by rep-

representatives of various confessions in the doctrines of others, we would then be offering them a stone instead of bread.

For this reason, the latest actions of Your Eminence, invested as they are with the authority of His All-Holiness, Patriarch Athenagoras, have greatly perplexed not only us and our flock, but also many others.

1. We have in mind your recent participation in the religious services 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 in New York.

The very fact that these joint services were justly 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. What Church Canon, what custom, what tradition gave you the right to introduce such novelties?

Orthodoxy, by its very nature, is distinguished by its fidelity to the traditions and the examples of the Holy Fathers. It is not without reason that St. Vincent of Lérins in his *Commonitorium* indicated that what is truly Orthodox is that which is accepted by the Church "always, by everyone, and everywhere." A novelty which does not conform to that rule bears an implicit stamp of unorthodoxy.

Your Eminence must be aware of the Forty-fifth Apostolic Canon, which reads: "Let a Bishop, Presbyter, or Deacon who has only prayed with heretics be suspended; 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 prayer with the non-Orthodox "means that we not only do not strive for their conversion to Orthodoxy, but are wavering in it ourselves."

In this case Your Eminence has not only apostatized from an age-old tradition of the Orthodox Church founded on Canons (the Tenth and Forty-fifth Apostolic Canons; the Sixth, Thirty-second, and Thirty-third Canons of the Synod of Laodicæa), but also in your very deeds and words, following Patriarch Athenagoras, you have professed a teaching foreign to the Holy Fathers of our Church.

2. 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 joint prayer 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 whole tone of your sermon is not one of proclaiming the truth of the Church, but of seeking something new, even a new definition "of our relationship with the Triune God." The Holy Fathers, however, always regarded joint Church prayer as the culmination of the conversion of erring persons to the true Church—as the culmination of it, but not the means to it. 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 (the *Filioque*), the Most Holy *Theotokos* (the dogma of the Immaculate Conception espoused by Catholics; the absence of her veneration by Protestants), the Hierarchy (the dogma of Papal Infallibility espoused by Catholics; denial of the Mystery of Priesthood by Protestants), etc. It is especially important to note that the Roman Catholics and Protestants have an ecclesiology entirely different from ours.

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 in any way accept the teaching of His All-Holiness, Patriarch Athenagoras, expressed in his Christmas Message of 1968, that owing to a lack of love, "the Church which was established by Christ to be 'glorious, without spot or wrinkle' (Ephesians 5:27), perfect and holy, has been altered." If our Church has been altered and is now no longer the same Church that was established by our Savior, then the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of which Jesus Christ said "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (St. Matthew 16:18) exists no more, and instead there are several Churches, none of which is fully true and holy.

3. In a speech during his visit to Rome in 1967, His All-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 solid ground and as if before that time there existed no divisions. But in-

asmuch as the Patriarch and Your Eminence declare that you are still only on the way toward the restoration of this “Undivided Church,” then this means that for you the Church does not yet exist. The Protestant “branch theory” of the Church, which is accepted by the Patriarch and Your Eminence, unavoidably leads to the conclusion that, today, the One Holy Church, supposedly, no longer exists. According to that theory, the Orthodox Church is as guilty of divisiveness as the heretics and schismatics who have fallen away from her, and all of these communities that have separated themselves from her remain “branches” of the Church of Christ from which they have separated themselves. But if one can be part of the Church without sharing her doctrines, this means that doctrines are of only secondary importance. Precisely thus did Patriarch Athenagoras express himself when in his Christmas Message [of 1968] he spoke with praise of the movement of people towards the common cup, “not knowing the differences in their dogmas, nor being concerned about them.”

Such words could never have been uttered by the great predecessors of Patriarch Athenagoras: Saints Proclus, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostomos, Photios, and others. Moreover, even if through the sinfulness of human nature heresy has sometimes been preached from the height of the Ecumenical Throne under the guise of truth, there has never yet been any example of a Patriarch declaring that dogmas are unimportant....

How sad it is to read of such a rejection of Patristic teaching in a message of the Primate of the Church that was the Mother of our Russian Church.

In honoring that Primate, Your Eminence, unfortunately, organized an unprecedented “Ecumenical Doxology” in your Cathedral, thereby joining him in very deed in indifference to the Truth, in violation of the aforementioned Canons.

Your uniting there in joint Church prayer with Roman Catholics and Protestants was, as it were, an actualization of the call of Patriarch Athenagoras to move towards a general union with no concern for doctrines, in spite of the warning of the Apostle Paul against people who “would pervert the Gospel of Christ.” Do you not fear the further words 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” (Galatians 1:8)?

4. We therefore regard it as our duty to protest decisively against the distortion of the dogma of the Church so insistently declared by His All-Holiness, Patriarch Athenagoras and Your Eminence. We protest against your unorthodox “Ecumenical Doxology” and against the inclusion in the Diptychs by His All-Holiness, Patriarch Athenagoras of the Pope of Rome and of “all the confessions of the East and the West,” which was announced in His All-Holiness’ Christmas Message.

This inclusion in the Diptychs has always been testimony that a given person is recognized as Orthodox.

If the Fifth Ecumenical Synod ordered the name of Theodore of Mopsuestia stricken from the Diptychs when it acknowledged that his teaching was 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, openly continue to confess doctrines inconsistent with her dogmas?

You are uniting with the heterodox, not in truth, but in disdain for it.

We are not writing these lines in order simply to reproach or, still less, to offend Your Eminence or His All-Holiness, Patriarch Athenagoras: not in the least, especially as we have no ground for maintaining enmity towards you or His All-Holiness.

On the contrary, we see a duty of brotherly love in again indicating to His All-Holiness and you the ruinousness of the ecumenical path that you have chosen.

Oh! If instead of listening to the voices of interconfessional conferences and to the press, which is indifferent to religious truth, you would hearken to the calls of the Holy Fathers of the Church, who did not build the Church upon compromises but upon firm observance of traditions and every iota of the Divine dogmas! 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 Church.

We are writing this in an open letter, since your actions and statements are public in nature, and so that other Prelates of the Orthodox Church and the faithful might know that not all the Church agrees with the pernicious ecumenical direction that you have chosen. Let it

be clear to everyone that the concelebration with the heterodox that you have permitted is a lamentable, unique episode, which may not serve as a precedent or an example for others, but which provokes concern and resolute protest on the part of the faithful children of the Church as an action which is patently unorthodox and contradictory to the Holy Canons.

Your Eminence's devoted servant,
† Metropolitan Philaret
Sunday of Orthodoxy, 1969



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