

Greeting By

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

At the Opening of the Seminar On the Social Dimension of the Monotheistic Religions

Organized by the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy

Istanbul, March 3, 2013

Your Excellency Cemil Çiçek, Speaker of the Parliament of greater Turkey,
Venerable Hierarchs,
Honorable and beloved Orthodox Members of Parliament, participants of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, together with your distinguished colleagues,
Esteemed seminar attendees,
Brothers and sisters in the Lord,

We welcome and greet all of you with great joy and hope...

Religious freedom is a concomitant of the Christian teaching and an achievement of modern civilization, which all Orthodox are called to defend. Nonetheless, the other two monotheistic religions also fundamentally accept religious freedom, and many accomplishments have been attained in this respect. However, we still require much struggle, great effort, and above all love toward the "impartial" God and His constantly "partial" creation, humanity.

Third, with regard to the enjoyment of material goods.

As a result of their human attributes alone, all people are entitled to enjoy the God-given material goods in accordance with their needs. Unfortunately, humanity has not yet managed to embrace this principle in all its dimensions. We are characterized by an unconstrained greed and led sometimes to seemingly licit and at other times clearly illicit acquisition of material goods through the exercise of power. This results in the provocation of miserable economic and inhumane crises, such as the one currently experienced by human beings everywhere.

Of course, the material goods are certainly and evidently more than sufficient to cover the needs of our world. However, the unequal distribution and waste create problems. Our effort to resolve this issue will require much time, but it must commence urgently. Nevertheless, since we cannot foresee any human improvement in this greedy mindset in the immediate future, we addressed the charitable emotions of those, who irrespective of religious convictions, are distinguished by a spirit of solidarity and altruism, issuing our Message last Christmas and declaring this year, 2013, as "The Year of Global Solidarity." We are all called to experience this concept of universal solidarity not merely through words but through actions, not just superficially but substantially, not simply with our lips but with our hearts.

This is precisely the approach and subject of your seminar. This is clearly the "social dimension of the monotheistic religions." In other words, humanitarian aid is not – and cannot for any reason or pretext – considered a legal regulation but a humanitarian obligation, which emanates from the religious convictions of adherents (or faithful) of the various faith communities.

Personally, we feel qualified to speak about the social dimension of our own faith, the Orthodox Church, and we are prepared to listen gladly to the articulation of the social dimension within the other two

monotheistic religions.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who as God knew how difficult it was for humanity to change its mindset, proclaimed the need for voluntary philanthropy, which should be exercised as an obligation and commandment. As we are aware, those who believed in Him were known through the centuries for their commitment to charitable works. As we observed this morning at the Patriarchate, when we addressed the members of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, names such as Basil the Great and St. John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria, as well as many emperors and rulers in the Eastern Roman Empire, such as John III Doucas Vatatzis, have left their mark on history for their charitable service. Even today, many philanthropic organizations, including state and international agencies, but particularly the numerous unseen individuals and missionaries, who live "in mountains and caves," practice philanthropy in the narrower and broader sense. These are achievements, which require support and expansion.

We believe and proclaim that one of the primary goals and targets of states is to provide for their citizens to live in peace, tranquility and dignity, free from fear, deprivation and disease.

As Orthodox Members of Parliament, you are called to work for the public promotion of the beauty and benefit of all these principles and guidelines for all people. Indeed, you are also called to realize these principles and guidelines inasmuch as, in our days, violence regrettably prevails, while inhumanity triumphs over philanthropy, war over peace, passion over dispassion, hatred over love, hypocrisy over honesty, falsehood over truth. The result is that, beyond the multitude of other evil consequences, the unemployed and poor, who live beneath the poverty level, are increasing instead of decreasing. Here, therefore, lie the obligation and responsibility, the struggle and provocation for all of us as church and religious leaders, as members of parliament, as clergy and laity.

The social dimension of the Orthodox Church provides a model and clashes with the harsh individualistic ideal of some – or should we say many or perhaps most – of our fellow human beings. We must work together to promote this model for the benefit of humanity. All Orthodox must work together to promote this model throughout the world, while at the same time of course working so that the regulations of our states might be inspired by philanthropy, solidarity, welfare and concern for the weakest, respect for freedom of conscience, and equality among all people. This would be the expression of the theological foundation of our faith. Only then shall we be consistent with our principles, when we experience the solidarity of all people as a demand of our faith in the Trinitarian nature of our God, which in turn results in a conviction about the diversity and at the same time the unity of humanity. Such a vision clearly rejects both individual and collective or ethnic exclusiveness.

Individualism or exclusiveness generates conflict and destruction. If only a small part of the amounts spent to harm inimical groups were shared for the common good, there would be no poor people on our planet.

This is why the Orthodox Church, following in the footsteps of its Teacher and Lord Jesus, namely the way of love toward God and humanity that transcends individualism, always strives to assist our needy and suffering fellow human beings so that social equality and justice may prevail, while peace, dialogue and cooperation may be promoted. However, these goals are not ends in themselves; nor is the reason for our existence merely the improvement of human society. We do not overlook these things, but we also recognize that the aim and goal of our Church is and always has been the theosis (or divinization) of humanity, our union (or oneness) with God by fulfilling His commandments through victory over our passions and the increase of virtues, namely the practice of the Gospel principles of love, patience, and righteousness. The Lord said and continues to say: "I give you my peace; but I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14.27) Undoubtedly, our struggle to achieve these virtues also results in the improvement of society and reveals in practice the social dimension of our faith.

This is why the Orthodox Church does not neglect human needs; but at the same time, it is not merely confined to resolving them. God is able to transform all poor people into wealthy people and all the sick people into healthy people in a split moment. Nonetheless, this is not God's way. His way is the way of the cross, the acceptance of suffering and tribulation as means toward sanctification, the pursuit of labor and

toil. Perfection in Christ is achieved through suffering, by rejecting the "ego," with love. Then, all social, personal and humanitarian problems are resolved and settled.

"All those who do right will be rewarded with glory, honor and peace, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. God does not demonstrate any favoritism." (Romans 2.10-11)

"Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you." (2 Thessalonians 3.16)

Amen.