

**SERMON
OF HIS ALL HOLINESS
ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW
AT THE OPENING WORSHIP
OF THE 12TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES**

Trondheim (Nidaros Cathedral), 26 June 2003

Your Majesty,
Your Excellency the Prime Minister,
Your Eminences,
Dear Presiding Bishop of the Church of Norway,
Your Excellencies,
Brothers and sisters in Christ,
Friends,

It is for us a joy and a notable privilege to address you at the inauguration of the twelfth Assembly of the Conference of European Churches. May He who alone can heal and reconcile, Jesus Christ our Saviour, be with us throughout our discussions. May He give us courage, generosity and imaginative vision.

In 1979, the Ecumenical Patriarchate gladly welcomed the 8th General Assembly in its Orthodox Academy of Crete, the South of Europe, and the island where both St. Paul and his disciple Titus brought the gospel. It is a pleasure today to be welcomed at the 12th Assembly in the north of Europe, in the presence of your Majesty and in the shadow of your predecessor and martyr, St. Olaf, evangelizer of this beautiful and hospitality country.

Our task is not an easy one. At a time when the European Union is rapidly expanding, when Europe is seeking to understand and define itself anew

– at a time, moreover, when many would wish totally to exclude Christ and the Christian Church from their definition of what constitutes Europe – how shall we succeed in bearing effective witness? How shall we convey to contemporary Europe a message that is humble yet prophetic, kenotic yet challenging? How shall we carry into practice the Beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mat 5,9), and yet at the same time be faithful to Christ’s teaching that He comes to bring “not peace but a sword” (Mat 10,34)? How shall we heed God’s warning spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “They have healed the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace’, where there is no peace” (Jer 8,11)?

At the outset, let us be clear about one thing. Christ says to us, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15,5). It is a striking fact that in The Philokalia, the classic Orthodox collection of spiritual texts, there is no verse from Scripture that is quoted more often than this.

“Apart from me you can do nothing”. All is gift; all is grace. If we are to speak to Europe a word of healing and reconciliation, then, that word has to be God’s word and not our own. What, as Christian communities, we have to offer to the world, is not a programme, not an ideology, but a person: the Theanthropos (God-man) Jesus Christ. Healing means salvation; and salvation means Christ the Saviour. “My eyes have seen your salvation”, Simeon the Elder said to God as he welcomed Christ in the temple (Luke 2,30); to Simeon salvation meant, not a set of ideas, but precisely and specifically this young child that he saw before him, this forty-day-old infant, that he held in his arms. “I am the truth”, Christ insisted (John 14,6). Saving truth is not a series of propositions, but a living person.

Salvation is Jesus Christ the Saviour: but what does Christ mean to us? As a guiding image to inspire us in our conference, let us call to mind the meeting of the risen Christ with His disciples on the evening of Easter day (John 20,19-20). His first word to them, “Peace be with you”, is a word of healing and reconciliation which brings them joy. But His next action, is to show them His stigmata, His wounds, the marks of the Passion that He bears on His hands and His side.

Why should Jesus do this? We may answer: for the sake of recognition, to show the disciples that it is indeed He Himself; to convince them that the one whom they saw shortly before hanging on the cross, is now once more alive, present among them, in the selfsame body in which He suffered and died.

Yet surely our Lord’s action means more than this. These wounds that the risen Christ shows to His disciples, are His credentials to a suffering humankind. These same wounds are our healing and our hope. They make it plain that, though He has risen victorious from the dead – though He is soon to ascend into heaven in glory –, yet in His perfect being, there is still a place for our pain and anguish. The wounds of the risen Christ underline the truth, of what is said in the Epistle to the Hebrews (and in the whole of the New Testament there is perhaps no Christological text more important than this): “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested and tempted as we are, yet without sinning” (Hebrews 4,15).

These words lead us to reflect upon the double way in which Christ acts as our healer and Saviour. He is our Saviour, first, because He is – in the words of the Nicene Creed – “True God from True God”. Salvation is a divine act; a prophet cannot be the saviour of the world, for the death of a mere man does not

destroy death. If, then, Christ is to save us, He must be God. He cannot just be one of us.

But, in the second place, as the Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear, salvation has to reach the point of human need. Christ our God heals us, not from a secure distance, not in an exterior manner, but by Himself becoming what we are, by making Himself totally vulnerable, by accepting into Himself all our pain and grief. “In every respect tempted as we are”, suffering with us, and for us, in His compassionate love, He is in very truth the wounded healer. Although He is not one of us, He is one with us.

As Saint Gregory of Nyssa affirms in his Catechetical Oration, the true greatness and glory of God are to be seen, not in any act of overwhelming power, such as the creation of the universe, not in any cosmic miracle, such as the stilling of the storm, but rather in the Kenosis whereby He has chosen to share in all our fragility and brokenness, becoming obedient to death, even death upon the Cross. His total sharing in our humiliation, is the true summit of His divine omnipotence. God is never so strong as when He is most weak.

Such is the way in which Jesus Christ heals and reconciles. Such is the message that we are called to bring to Europe.

In speaking of Christ as healing and reconciliation, there is something else, that we have to add. Salvation is personal, but it is not solitary. No one is saved alone. We are saved in the Church, as members of it and through our communion with all its other members. Healing and reconciliation in Christ have an ecclesial dimension. We are saved through our incorporation into the Body of Christ, by means of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

Here precisely we are brought face to face with one of the challenges that we cannot avoid at this assembly. Our unity is genuine, but it is still incomplete. Despite all the progress that has been made in our quest for visible unity – and for this we glorify God – we Orthodox remain convinced that the time has not yet come for us to share together at the Lord’s table in His sacramental Body and Blood. There continue to be serious doctrinal questions over which, as Churches, we are still in disagreement; and so, according to our Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist, it would be unrealistic, and even untruthful, for us to share together in Holy Communion. Because sharing in the Eucharist while still divided, is not a means towards unity; this sharing in the common chalice is for us the visible sign of our full unity in faith and therefore it is our final goal.

When discussing this painful and disputed issue, all of us need to consistently respect the good faith and spiritual integrity of all who differ from us. Those who believe that the time has not yet come to share in Communion, should not accuse the opposite side of treating the Holy Mysteries in a casual and lightminded manner. At the same time, those who believe that at this very moment we can and should receive communion together, must not suggest that anyone who says “Not yet” is lacking in openness and love. God alone knows who among us shows the deepest reverence for the Eucharist, and who among us feels the greatest love.

We would like to conclude with two final suggestions. Let us be practical, and let us be silent.

First, then, in all our deliberations let us seek to be practical and realistic. Healing, signifies the removing of specific wounds; reconciliation means the overcoming of particular divisions. It is not enough to formulate theories; we must resolve on concrete action.

As we learn from the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25, 31-46), at the Last Judgement we will not be asked how strictly we fasted, how many prostrations we made in our prayers, how many books we wrote, how many speeches we made at international conferences. We shall be asked: Did you feed the hungry? Did you give drink to the thirsty? Did you take the stranger into your home? Did you clothe the naked? Did you care for the sick and the prisoners? That is all we shall be asked. Love for Christ is shown through love for other people, and there is no other way.

Notice how, concerning everyone who is in need and distress, Christ says “I”: “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, sick, naked and a prisoner”. Christ is looking at us through the eyes of all who suffer. Is that not frightening?

Almost everywhere in the wealthier cities of Europe, our streets are full of the hungry and the homeless, full of young women – all too often from the poorer countries – who have been trapped in vice and prostitution. What are the European Churches doing about that?

One of our tasks at this assembly will be to speak to each other about these problems, to tell each other about the projects of social aid and reconstruction, on which our church communities are engaged. If there were time, we would have liked to tell you today something about the efforts of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to confront the ecological crisis, to explore the dilemmas of bioethics, and to assist the street children in the district

of the Phanar. All of us here at this service have our own stories to tell. But, as we listen to each other and learn from one another's experience, let us also search our conscience and repent. How much more there is, that we could and should have done!

Let us, then, be practical; and in the second place let us also sometimes keep silent. Let us allow some space in this congress for the dimension of hesychia or creative stillness. "Be still, and know that I am God" the psalmist says (Psalm 46,10). As well as listening to each other, let us also listen to the Holy Spirit.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Christ as "the Word that came out from silence". If our words at this meeting do not spring from silence of heart, then we shall prove to be, in Saint Paul's phrase, "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13, 1). But if the words that we speak to Europe at this congress are indeed words that come out from silence, then by God's grace and mercy they will prove to be words of fire, liberating, and life-creating.