

## **EXCLUSIVE Interview with Archbishop Nikitas: “The only real hope and solution is Christ.”**



How did you feel when you were informed that the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate elected you to be the next Archbishop of Thyateira and Great Britain?

I was called in the middle of the night and was told that I was elected Archbishop of Thyateira and Great Britain. At first, I thought I was dreaming. As reality set in, I called my brother and slowly made a few other phone calls. After the initial shock wore off, I called the Fathers of Mount Athos and asked for their prayers. I asked one of them to go to the icon of the “Axion Estin” and to ask the Theotokos to guide my steps on the path of truth and love.

As I sat thinking, I began to understand the enormous task that was being offered me. I thought about my unworthiness and wondered how to begin. Of course, I also was moved by the fact that I was selected by the Ecumenical Patriarch for this great honor. It is, indeed, a great honor but also brings great challenges.

As you prepare for your next ministry in the service of the Church, what are your top priorities and points of importance that you plan on addressing following your

enthronement?

I think the top priority is education – on many levels. First, we need to help the clergy and better prepare them to serve the people. We need to offer them the proper resources to meet the growing and pressing needs of the community. We face so many new and developing issues these days – we need to be able to respond to them and offer an Orthodox answer – an answer grounded in the tradition of our faith.

We also need to educate our people, so they know what we actually believe. Too often people think they know what we believe, but they do not have a clear understanding of our doctrines. I have already spoken to the clergy on beginning a program of “adult religious education”.

Through the existing schools for the children (both the Catechetical and Greek-language schools), we can also share the truths entrusted to us. We must look to raise the level of education of our community, so they understand who they are as Orthodox Christians.

I also believe it is necessary, if not critical, to educate the general public about the Orthodox Church. Many people have heard of us, but they know nothing about us. We need to open the doors and share what we have.

You have previously served in Asia and in the United States; how have those experiences prepared you for serving the needs of the Orthodox faithful in Europe?

Asia was a very special opportunity for me, as I was able to serve as a missionary clergyman. This was a clear reminder to me that the Church must always have a missionary vision. Too often, we sit in the comfort of our communities and parishes and do not come into contact with or remember the challenges of a missionary church. At times, one has to develop a new and different “language” to communicate the faith. It must be done in a means for people to understand and accept its truths. The experience of being in Asia, along with what I lived in the United States (as a clergyman and as an educator), has made me see the world and life in a different manner. When you live outside your own “comfort zone,” you learn many things, especially respect for the other and his/her ways and patterns of life.

As some know, I have a good ear for language and am able to serve in several languages. This has been a great resource for me over the years, not only in Asia but also in the United States. At times, this allows for creating a sense of belonging and draws people closer to us. After all, the Church is our family.

Society is experiencing many changes and challenges, some would say upheavals; what do you see the role of an Orthodox hierarch to be in the twenty-first century?

Society is, indeed, changing and the Church must take a leading role in helping society heal. It is necessary that I, as a hierarch and representative of Christ, stress the importance of family and community. I think that young people and society, in general, focus on individualism — me, mine, and the self. The Church is a community and we have to remind people of that. And, that there is a place for everyone in the Church, for it is in the Church that we are healed, restored and sanctified. The Church must be the ballast in the storms of life. I believe that my time in Berkeley and my conversations with the young people there have helped prepare me for the challenges ahead of me. Our young people, like others, are looking for answers to their questions and problems. Some want hope, while others need comfort. It is through loving and comforting words that we can guide people and slowly change the path the world is taking. I often say – look at our political leaders – they all promise us answers and solutions to all the problems of life. And yet, their promises never become realities. The only real hope and solution is Christ. If we live according to His word, many of the problems would disappear. My role is to try to live this message.

Together with your election, the recent enthronements of Archbishops Elpidophoros (United States) and Makarios (Australia) have breathed new life into the Church and especially the Ecumenical Patriarchate. How do you see these hierarchal changes affecting the Church, intra-Orthodox relations, and the future of the Phanar?

It is interesting to note that the three elections were for English-speaking eparchies. While we may each have our own challenges, we share many things in common, especially on issues surrounding the younger generations, the use of language, translations, and much more. Hopefully, we can address their needs in a language they understand. By this I do not mean English, I mean that we must use the tools of language – expressions, idioms, means of communication, social media, and much more to which they relate and use every day.

I come from a land where we are familiar with intra-Orthodox relations, ecumenical

activities, even inter-faith dialogue. I believe my familiarity with these will serve as a great resource for me in my new ministry. I can use my experience and these resources to embrace and work with other Orthodox Christians and people of other traditions. The United Kingdom is a society of various peoples, identities and traditions – they need to learn about us and we need to learn about them. I have done some things on behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, especially in the area of human trafficking and modern slavery, with the Anglican Church and know the Archbishop of Canterbury. This is an outreach on our part and a sign that we have something to offer in this ministry. We have established and built a partnership – we all plan to build more.

I believe that the Ecumenical Patriarchate selected us (the new Archbishops), hoping that we can expand our ministries and bring a message of hope to the world. We are the voice of the Phanar outside of Turkey.

Nikodemos

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