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Forgive them, For They Know Not What They Do”



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by Archimandrite Alexandros Loukatos

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of the Annunciation of the Theotokos in Oslo, Norway

I take this opportunity to join in taking up the Cross, as another Simon of Cyrene, bearing witness to the truth, to support the written account of a beloved brother Fr. Bartholomew Iatridis, Parish Priest of the St. George Cathedral of Stockholm, who, with his meaningful words, and without guile I am certain, responded, as best as possible, to those who have recently – especially in the midst of Holy and Great Lent – scandalized, in their own way, the consciences of the faithful living in the outermost part of Europe, through their writings and deeds.

I have been serving at the Metropolitan Church of the Annunciation of the Theotokos in Oslo as of March 22, 2015, just a few months following the election and enthronement of His Eminence Metropolitan Cleopas, so as to humbly contribute, with all my might, to the ministry of our local Church, under the guidance of our inspired Bishop.

I know from many private conversations with our Most Reverend Metropolitan that he does not wish to respond to those who appear from time to time to judge everyone and everything around them, however, perhaps on certain occasions, it is necessary to offer not necessarily an answer, but the other side of the story. It too must exist and be heard.

Indeed, the stones cry out in support of Metropolitan Cleopas’ ethos, diligence, vision, perseverance, and contribution throughout his years as a prelate in this truly Missionary eparchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

As for me, I have spent six (6)-plus years near him, and I must confess that he is neither an iconoclast, as stated by some, nor hostile to the saints.

From June 2014 up until today, ten (10) new ecclesiastical communities were established and added to the already existent six (6) parishes of the Holy Metropolis. Five (5) of them are in Sweden – St. Cleopas the Apostle in Kalmar, the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple in Borås, Sts. Constantine and Helen in Jönköping, the Transfiguration of Christ in Överkalix, and the St. Nicholas Hermitage in Rättvik –, three (3) are in Norway – St. Nectarios of Pentapolis in Stavanger, St. Chrysostomos of Smyrna the Holy Ethnomartyr in Bergen, and St. Gerasimos the of Cephalonia in Trondheim –, one (1) in Denmark – St. George the New Martyr of Ioannina in Roskilde –, and one (1) in Iceland – St. Bartholomew the Apostle in Reykjavik.

Our bishop promoted the Greek Orthodox tradition and emphasized the Orthodox Christian mindset through the appointment and ordination of twelve (12) new clergyman, considering that until then, in 2013, there was only one (1) priest serving in the entire Holy Metropolis. The Holy Metropolis of Sweden borrowed churches from the Lutheran Church so that the clergy could celebrate holy services in areas of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, that an Orthodox clergyman had never before visited, to provide spiritual support to our brethren, who were indeed forgotten – and that is the truth.

Particularly regarding the issues that I am in a position to have knowledge about and experience personally, it was our Bishop's encouragement that provided me with the inspiration to travel across all of Norway, while he spearheaded the establishment of our three (3) parishes in Norway and the elevation of our Church to Metropolitan status, visiting the entire realm of our local Holy Metropolis by every mode of transportation.

In regards to Norway in particular, he visited our Metropolitan Church from the first week that he took up residence in Stockholm. Since then, he has visited Oslo another fifteen (15) times, we traveled to Bergen on two (2) occasions, to Stavanger once (1), and to Trondheim on two (2) occasions. The Christians who lived there didn't know us. They had never seen their Bishop. I am certain that if not for the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, these pastoral visits would have increased further and been added to the list of the previous ones.

So why the title of iconoclast? Did His Eminence compel us to remove the icons? On the contrary, we saved whatever we found, our churches were enriched with icons, oil lamps, holy vessels, and all that is necessary for the proper operation of our parishes and for their comeliness.

When I first arrived in Oslo, the same coverings for the Holy Altar were being used for twenty-five (25) years. Should we not have replaced them or bought new ones? Or did we not put up whatever icons we found laying around, adding new ones to the walls of our churches as well?

Are our critics aware that our churches were borrowed from Protestant communities and in the countries where we reside, any interventions to make them more "Orthodox," as some people understand the term, must be approved by the state?

One wonders if all these critics would ever help construct a Byzantine-style church in some area of Scandinavia? Probably not, just like they remained idle regarding every effort aimed at improving the existing churches and facilities, casting stones instead.

And so, truth be told, we are struggling by ourselves to maintain these churches – not to change them – and to establish the Orthodox faith and tradition in our parishes in the face of many difficulties.

As I have been serving more years here as a clergyman, where I have come to know our Bishop, I can say with certainty that these "well-wishers" are the same so-called "enlightened zealots," who serve as guardians (of what, per say?) from the convenience of their couch. Viewing themselves like some sort of modern-day Messiahs, they place themselves above Synods, Bishops, and Priests.

The walls of our Metropolitan Church in Oslo are adorned with icons, while our Holy Altar has oil lamps. The same holds true for the Icon Screen. Is there some other Bishop here? One Bishop here and another one at the Cathedral in Stockholm? The restoration works taking place after 130 years bothered some people. I wonder why?

Where were all these people when the St. Nicholas Hermitage in Rättvik was being completely renovated? Weren't they there? Didn't they see the icons and iconography on the walls, the Crucifix and the oil lamps in the Holy Sanctuary, the chandeliers, the Icon Screen with its icons? Wasn't the formation and renovation of the Hermitage that was destroyed in a fire an initiative undertaken by our Bishop? Did their demonic egotism blind them on the day of the dedication service?

Where were all our critics when we spent months preparing the holy vessels and articles for the Church of St. George of Ioannina, which was granted to us? What support did certain individuals among them provide when we traveled by car for two (2) entire days, transporting all the necessary items to convert the church into an Orthodox one? There, the first thing that our Bishop requested of the other

parishes was to offer icons, oil lamps, vessels, books, veneration stands, an Epitaphios and a Crucifix. Are all these things not there?

Have these newfound accusers perchance “lifted up their heels against their benefactor?” Perhaps the reason lies elsewhere?

Prior to the election and enthronement of our Metropolitan, how exactly did these people live out their Orthodox faith? What did they leave behind for all of us who arrived? What was their ministry? Probably an Orthodoxy locked away in a cage, resembling more a sect than a Church.

And they accuse our Metropolitan, who has visited all the parishes in his eparchy time and time again, of being a heresiarch? The one who encourages us to show support to every person who comes to us? The one whom I have seen become teary-eyed when speaking of contemporary saints of our era that he met? The one who has spent himself studying and writing about their ministry? The one who took it upon himself to ensure that there are relics of saints in our Metropolis? The one who is the first in line to perform every sort of work that needs to get done? The one who inspires us to maintain our churches, to equip them with everything that is necessary for our worship services, who issued special publications on holy services to ensure that all those who do not understand the service being celebrated can participate and that the text and our tradition can become fertile soil for all? The one who is concerned for the youth? The one who guides us during the pandemic to ensure that we may retain the traditional manner of distributing Holy Communion?

St. John the Evangelist does in fact tell us to “come and see.” Did they come? Did they see? Did they help us or only cast stones? Still, that’s fine too; these stones became the foundation for all the ministry taking place during this period, and I truly feel pride and am at ease with my priestly conscience that I too partake of this effort. Indeed, from these very stones that they cast at us, miracles have sprung up. Besides, I too have experienced the same thing when I was on the receiving end of similar accusations and slander.

The project – whatever project is being undertaken – has not yet been completed. It is ongoing. Let them judge our Bishop when it is completed. I am in a position to know that when the time comes and the project is completed, the icons will be put in place, and so much more will be added to what is already existing and seems strange (or is hard to swallow) for some; but now is not the time to discuss this. Let them not worry, we haven’t betrayed anything. Do you betray when you preserve something? When you showcase something? Hardly!

Now, the only thing they are doing is seeking to make an impression. “Don’t judge something from its surface.” And for all those who reproduce such news, it would be advisable if they asked us before doing so. They ought to ask before picking up their pen against our Bishop; to inquire what sort of difficulties we are up against as we attempt to preserve the sacred and righteous things that they accuse us of abandoning.

It is worth questioning why many people who reproduced whatever “news” this is supposed to be, didn’t take the time to ask our Bishop to offer his opinion on the matter as well. Didn’t they adhere to the ancient adage “strike if you will, but hear?” Haven’t they heard of it? On account of this, I took up the courage to offer a few thoughts in defense of the truth. I haven’t read one comment be published or be requested from our Most Reverend Metropolitan. Probably because we live in the age of fake news and effortless criticism.

I could testify to many experiences regarding the period of our Metropolitan’s episcopal ministry up until now. If “silence is better than words” I may have overdone it, but for the sake of the truth we ought to speak. I leave these few random thoughts here, along with the wish “forgive them, for they know not what they do!”

Oslo, 6 April 2021

Metropolisofsweden

