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Metropolitan Cleopas of Sweden: “Stop Talking About Missionary Work Already”



On the heels of the feast of the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles, the Metropolis of Sweden was blessed to welcome yet another new member into the Eastern Orthodox Church through the sacrament of Chrismation. Our newest brother in Christ is a native of Sweden, whose self-sacrifice, scientific knowledge, and support with technological issues that have preoccupied our Church in Scandinavia – in other words, the utilization of and offering of his talents for the common good – stand as a living testimony of “orthopraxia” (right practice), which has now received the seal of Orthodoxy, to reaffirm St. Gregory the Theologian’s classic adage that “right praxis leads to right thinking.”

From the very first days of my archpastoral ministry in Scandinavia, I realized that the Metropolis of Sweden is a unique eparchy of the Ecumenical Throne, with its own particular set of circumstances, among which the element of missionary work and ministry is predominant. In our instance, the words of His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës, and all Albania represent a distinct reality: “A Church

without missionary work, is a Church without a mission."

Naturally, the inspiration behind all missionary work lies in the Risen Lord's commandment to His disciples to "Go forth and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This is the "evangelization" of the people. However, aside from the "evangelization" – namely, the preaching and spreading of the Gospel – the "re-evangelization" of the already existing members of the Orthodox Church – that is, the need to catechize them on all levels, from the simplest to the most complex – is also necessary.
St. Paul the Apostle reminds us of this in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians (9:26-27): "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus, I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."

I cite this particular passage to show that Christian life has one goal. Some people, at the start of their lives, "boast" that they have the privilege of being born into "the true faith," and by the time they reach the end of their lives, most of them still haven't managed to learn what exactly "they believe!"

Some other faithful see God as a judge, a sort of "bogeyman" God who keeps a tab of their sins in order to punish them on the day of judgement. In other words, they view things "legalistically" and suppose that the goal of faith is merely for us to become better individuals.

The Christian faith was once referred to as "the Way," and as St. John Chrysostom would say: "We don't stand still, because we are moving." We are in a constant state of motion. A "way" presupposes the act of walking, and if someone walks along "the Way," what is the goal to which they are heading? These are frightful questions for those poor souls who unsuspectingly spend their lives failing to ever comprehend the grandeur of the Christian path and its true goal!

For some people, who have grown complacent in the security of their familial safe haven and the comfort of their couch, which serves as their own personal judgement seat, it is easier to hold on to obsolete stereotypes, uttering or writing harsh words against the clergy each time that the latter's decisions or actions do not meet with their approval. As they walk their wayward path and engage in all sorts of deception, they don't hesitate to don the "Christian" cloak and cite passages from Holy Scripture or even the Fathers of the Church, although the only thing they succeed in doing is scandalizing and tearing down instead of edifying, literally committing "assassination!"

They believe that Christ and His Church is their personal privilege and property, which they shouldn't have to or are afraid to share with others, which is why in their "view," the Church has a national or nationalistic nature; in other words, it is purely and exclusively Greek, with no room for "all the nations."

I often wonder, if such an outlook and false vision is incompatible with the Gospel and the commandments of our Lord, then what exactly is the place of people who wear such ideological "blinders" and are possessed by such fear-mongering ideas in a Body that "has no stain or wrinkle, but is sacred and without blemish"?
We glorify God because ever since the Church militant was established, the Body of Christ has never ceased to serve as a workshop of sanctity and continually produce new saints despite our weaknesses, errors, and sinfulness.

In our missionary Church, we have been blessed to have been served and continue to be served until today by priests who cultivate the Metropolis' vineyard with a missionary mindset and a spirit of self-sacrifice. It is worth noting the righteous personage of the ever-memorable Elder Eusevios Vittis, a humble and good-hearted clergyman, intellectual and author, who "tilled" the land of Scandinavia for 15 years in the face of many adversities. His presence and priestly ministry were always imposing and inviting, enabling Christ to take form in the hearts of the people who were drawn in by his words and frugal ascetic lifestyle. They had a living Gospel walking among them!

Elder Eusevios "bequeathed" his theological writings – the essence of his life in Christ – to the native inhabitants of this land in Swedish, and this represents his missionary work on their behalf. Meanwhile, he left his hermitage dedicated to St. Nicholas – his personal place of prayer – to us.

Therefore, we continue our path today holding as our model clergymen like him, who sacrifice everything for Christ and the preaching of His Gospel, as we make our

way in times that are filled with many and manifold difficulties, which serve as the spiritual crucible in which we are called to be tested, so that our offering may be pleasing to God and our missionary zeal and work may become the springboard for our spiritual achievement.

Nonetheless, we must not associate the term “missionary work” solely and exclusively with external missionary work, which undoubtedly is taking place in countries marked by a low standard of living, thanks to the tireless efforts, many sacrifices and privations of missionaries so that the Gospel of Christ may be preached to all creation. This is but one aspect of missionary work.
The other, equally important, aspect is internal missionary work; namely, the ability to empirically come to know the essence of the faith and proceed with our re-evangelization by moving past the superficial elements and external rites to that which Orthodoxy truly is – not in appearance, but in essence.

Recalling the parable of the Sower, the word of God is bearing fruit here in Scandinavia, the northernmost Eparchy of the Ecumenical Throne. I glorify God each and every day, because for the past seven years of my humble archpastoral ministry, throughout the entire region of our Holy Metropolis we have celebrated 70 chrismations and 58 adult baptisms. These 128 people approached the Orthodox Church with humility and sincere interest, and having become members, although they are not of Greek heritage, they have become the finest ambassadors of our Traditions, inspired by a model and enthusiastic desire for volunteerism and selfless contribution to our ecclesiastical life.

It must be noted that the ministry of our local Church is based largely on their good and kind intentions, inasmuch as they represent a living cell in our ecclesiastical body. Without the ministry and utilization of the talents of our new members, our local Church would today be deprived of many important ministries.

And yet, there are people who, despite the importance and significance of this missionary work, which is not a hobby, but a central ministry and sacred mission, do not hesitate to wonder, from time to time, how it is possible to speak of missionary work in a developed country like Sweden, and tell me in a disparaging tone to “stop talking about missionary work already.”

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