

Now is the time to discern the "signs of the times". Discernment, while often subtle, requires a clear, active and courageous response to the will of God. In being accountable to this process, we also discover for ourselves what is depicted in the gospel story: that "the signs of the times", including our own times, point to the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Terres des Femmes, 1995, cited in *MaryMartha*, Vol. 4, no. 1, Winter 1995, p.23.
- <sup>2</sup> This refers to the "experience of God" usually called theosis in Greek, rendered in English by such terms as "deification", "glorification", "sanctification".
- <sup>3</sup> Gennadios Limouris, ed., *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, Katerini, Greece, Tertios, 1992, p.29. About one-third of the participants invited to this consultation in 1988 were Orthodox women theologians.
- <sup>4</sup> *The St Nina Quarterly*, Vol. 1, no. 4, Fall 1997, p.20 (italics added); thanks to Tarek Mitri for the English translation of these decisions.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church*, p.28.
- <sup>6</sup> On relations between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, see for example, Thomas FitzGerald, "Toward the Reestablishment of Full Communion: The Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox Dialogue", *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 36, no. 2, 1991, pp.169-83.
- <sup>7</sup> It should be noted here that this meeting did not choose to address a statement to the World Council of Churches as such, although invited to do so. The delegates seemed to feel deeply the urgency of time constraints and preferred at this first meeting of such a diversity of Orthodox women to maintain their focus as Orthodox women on pressing matters affecting the church which they believed had to be directly communicated to their own communities.
- <sup>8</sup> Prayers from the rite used by the Coptic Orthodox Church include versions of the ancient ordination prayer for the woman deacon from the Apostolic Constitutions, and prayers from ancient and other sources. Even though presently modified, ancient versions of the ordination rite designate ordination (*cheirotonia*); cf. K. Fitzgerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross, 1999.

## Address to the Istanbul Meeting

*H.A.H. ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW*

*Christ is risen!*

Beloved children in Christ:

We welcome you very warmly to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to this historic centre of Orthodox Christianity. It is a great joy for us to host this important inter-Orthodox conference for Orthodox women on the topic "Discerning the Signs of the Time". At this time we should like to express our appreciation to the World Council of Churches for providing so much support for this conference.

Our risen Lord and Saviour is the one who richly blesses us. And you have been blessed by him with the opportunity to come to this special city and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate not simply as participants in a conference, but as holy pilgrims, always seeking out those sacred centres of inspiration and spiritual nourishment which enable you to more fully serve the Lord and others in his name.

As you know, this city and the Church of Constantinople is rich in Christian history. Tradition tells us that St Andrew the Apostle and the First-Called preached the gospel of salvation in this region in the years following the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Since the earliest days of the church, faithful Christian women and men have lived in this city. Here some of Christianity's greatest theologians and our predecessors on the venerable throne of Andrew, such as St Gregory the Theologian and St John Chrysostom honoured God both with their lives and their words. Here at the great church of Agia Sophia, a number of devoted women, such as St Olympias, served as deaconesses. Here, in this city and in the nearby cities, many of the great councils of the early church were held. At these councils, the fundamental convictions of our faith were affirmed and defended for the sake of our salvation. And it was from the Church of Constantinople that dedicated missionaries, such as St Cyril and St Methodios, whose memories we celebrated yesterday

[11 May], went out to preach the gospel to many peoples and to guide them to salvation.

Here we also remember the example of the countless martyrs and saints who bore witness to Christ. When you visit the patriarchal cathedral of St George the great martyr, you will find the sacred relics of three women saints: Euphemia, Theophano and Solomone. These pious women lived in different periods and different places. They had different stations in society. Yet they are united in their faith in Christ and in their devotion to his holy gospel. To both women and men, to both clergy and laity, these women saints continue to be a source of inspiration, for it is written: "God is revealed in his saints!"

Indeed, this city is well known for its historic churches as well as for its great treasures of Byzantine architecture and iconography. But most importantly, we honour the Church of Constantinople as the centre of Orthodox Christian life and witness. It is a church of saints and martyrs, a church of missionaries and theologians, a church with a history, but one with a future too. The examples of holiness and of service continue to guide us and to nurture us as we seek to serve our Lord in this day and age and in the dawning millennium.

Today it is our duty and honour to serve the few thousand faithful Christian men and women who live here in this city. Like the generations before them, the faithful stewards here continue to bear witness to their faith by keeping lit the *phanar* which is the beacon of Orthodoxy, by honouring their sacred heritage and by serving others in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask that you remember in your prayers, especially this week, all the faithful of the Church of Constantinople.

Trusting in God's grace, it is also our responsibility as Ecumenical Patriarch to be a servant of the unity of our holy Orthodox church throughout the world. While always respecting the dignity and rights of all the holy patriarchates and autocephalous churches, the archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch is the "first among equals" of all the bishops of the church. Because of this we, humbly occupying the venerable throne of St Andrew, have a particular ministry through which we encourage and strengthen the unity of the holy Orthodox church. We seek to strengthen the "bond of peace" among the sister churches. We do not do this for our own honour and glory. Rather, we do this for the sake of the church's mission and witness in the world. We do this for the glory of God!

We are especially happy that your conference has brought together official delegates from both the autocephalous Orthodox churches and the Oriental Christian churches. As you know, our churches are presently engaged in official theological dialogue. The goal of this dialogue is to

restore communion between our two families of churches. Although we have been divided for many centuries, our theologians have clearly affirmed that we share the same apostolic faith.

We pray fervently that the two families of churches will soon be able to resolve all outstanding differences and to act formally and in a canonical manner to restore ecclesiastical communion. We believe that this is the will of our common Lord. With God's grace, your conference and the previous one in Damascus will contribute in a very important way to the process of reconciliation and unity.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has received with much appreciation the report of the conference of Orthodox women held in Damascus under the leadership of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius of Antioch and all the East, our beloved brother and co-celebrant. The report is a positive and inspiring one. It reminds all of us of the devotion and the piety of the many faithful who serve their church and society in the name of our Lord. It expresses faithfulness to the Orthodox tradition and the desire to respond to the challenges of today.

Among the many important recommendations of the Damascus conference is the call for the full restoration of the order of women deacons. This recommendation echoes a similar one coming from the inter-Orthodox consultation in Rhodes in 1988. The order of women deacons is an undeniable part of the tradition coming from the early church. Now, in many of our churches, there is a growing desire to restore this order so that the spiritual needs of the people of God may be better served. There are already a number of women who appear to be called to this ministry.

Beloved in the Lord:

Yesterday, you began your conference by participating in the divine liturgy offered at the historic shrine and monastery of the Life-Giving Fountain. There in that holy place we gathered together on the Sunday dedicated to the memory of the holy Myrrh-Bearing Women. The reading of the holy gospel reminded us once again of those devoted women whose names were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Disheartened and troubled, they went to the tomb to anoint the body of Christ on the first day of the week. Upon reaching the tomb, their sorrow was changed to joy when they learned that the Lord had risen from the dead. From the place of the dead, they rushed to Jerusalem to proclaim the life-giving message of the resurrection. They became, as our hymns say, the "apostles to the apostles". They were the proto-evangelists of the good news.

The example of the Myrrh-Bearing Women is important for all of us. Throughout the world, many people desire to hear the good news of sal-

vation. There is a desire among many people to come to a deeper relationship with the living God. There is a longing for spiritual growth and an even greater longing for salvation. There is a desire for holiness and healing and forgiveness which comes from God alone.

Truly, the Orthodox faith has much wisdom to offer to all people. Like the Myrrh-Bearing Women, we are called to proclaim the living Lord who is risen from the dead. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ continues to offer us the love, the healing and the mercy of the heavenly Father. Because of Christ, we know that we belong to God, and that he loves each of us and that indeed we are his daughters and sons. Because of Christ, we know that we are most fully human when we live our lives in communion with him. Salvation is communion with God and with his people.

Through his gospel, our Lord also teaches us that we cannot grow in our relationship with the triune God apart from one another. We are bonded together through the mystery of God's goodness. And because of this, the followers of our Lord are obliged to oppose all forms of injustice, discrimination or abuse. As women and men of faith, we must not only pray for one another, we also must do all that we can to honour, preserve and protect the dignity of the human person who is created in the "image and likeness" of God.

Finally, we must remember that we grow closer to God and to one another in the midst of creation. Creation comes to us as a blessing and a gift. It is our common inheritance which is entrusted to us by God. Because we are stewards of this creation, we also have an obligation to honour and to preserve all that we have received from the Creator of heaven and earth.

Beloved in Christ:

We pray that your conference is one filled with all the blessings of the risen Lord and that your pilgrimage to this city and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate will be a source of blessing for your life and for our churches. We further pray that our risen Lord, through the intercession of his mother and the holy Myrrh-Bearing Women, will always guide you and protect you.

To him be glory, honour and worship, together with the eternal Father and the all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

## Address to the Damascus Meeting

*H.B. IGNATIOS IV*

I am pleased that this meeting is being held here in Syria. From this part of the world, the cradle of apostolic mission, Christianity extended to Turkey and Greece; and the Western world was subsequently Christianized. Christianity is an Eastern reality. We interpret it here in its Eastern context. It is not bound to a Western identity.

Ecumenical dialogue is rooted in an understanding of Christianity which takes the plurality of our cultures and historical experiences very seriously. The search for such dialogue motivated our participation in the World Council of Churches since its early history. Our church expresses its ecumenical commitment in many different ways. Our openness to others is part of our being as Christians. We cannot isolate ourselves nor accept being isolated. As someone who for many years was involved in the life of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organizations, I can bear witness to this spirit of openness prevalent in our church. Together with sister churches in the region, we founded the Middle East Council of Churches. We are also involved with the Catholic Church and other churches in various bilateral dialogues.

The encounter of Christians in dialogue does not mean that we are in agreement. We do disagree, but we are called to love each other. Christianity in the East tries to be faithful to its apostolic tradition. We have rediscovered together with our non-Chalcedonian Orthodox sister churches what brings us very close to each other. We are not seeking only an agreement on Christian doctrines, for we are called to be witnesses of the one faith. Our faith cannot be reduced to belief in the Book. We often say to our Muslim neighbours that we are not a religion of the Book. We are a community of faith, a faith in a person. Scriptures are a way that leads us to the person of Christ, true God and true man.

I am also very pleased to see this women's meeting held in Syria. We are proud of our women, of the riches they have offered and continue to offer to the church. There is no discrimination against women in the

church. There may have been failures in recognizing the role of women. We are aware of many questions which invite a serious effort of interpretation. We need to be faithful to the true Tradition and discern what is essential. We have to reconsider critically ideas that may absolutize traditional norms and practices. Such an effort is incumbent not only on women in the church but on us all. Your meeting as Orthodox women has, I am sure, much to contribute in this respect. May God bless your lives and your encounter.

## Report of the Damascus Meeting

We are grateful to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the special opportunity we have had to meet together as Orthodox women. The theme of our conference was "Discerning the 'Signs of the Times' (Matt. 16:3): Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church". We met together in Damascus, Syria, from 4-10 October 1996.

Most of the 65 participants were official women delegates sent by their churches at the invitation of the World Council of Churches. This meeting took place in the context of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women. It focused especially on the concerns of women from the Orthodox churches of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. A small number of lay and ordained Orthodox men also attended the conference. Their support and encouragement of our efforts were a welcomed resource.

We benefited greatly from the rich hospitality of His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. He graciously received the participants and opened the conference with an address. He affirmed that the church in Syria wanted this event to be an important one, a significant one, so that we can understand more and do more for women.

We were also graciously received by His Beatitude Ignatius Zakka II, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. He also offered the closing message for the conference. In his presentation, he affirmed the many important ministries women have had and continue to have in the life of the church.

The fact that we were so warmly greeted by both patriarchs not only greatly enriched our meeting, but also reminded us of the growing reconciliation between our two families of Orthodox churches. Since our meeting included participants from both families of churches, we believe that we have also made a contribution to this reconciliation.

We gathered in a land rich in Christian history. In addition to our regular opportunity for worship, we visited the women's monasteries of

Saydnaya and Maaloola, the men's monasteries of St George and St Ephraim, as well as the famous site of the Krak des Chevaliers. During our stay here, we were reminded of St Paul's baptism in the city and the witness of so many saints, especially St Thekia and St John of Damascus.

Our conference focused on a variety of topics about women in the life of the Orthodox church. Each day had its own theme, which was articulated in the presentations and panel discussions. Among our topics, we reflected on "The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church", "Discerning the Tradition Today" and "Reflecting on *Orthopraxia*".

### The good news

We have been richly blessed by our time together. As we prayed, discussed the themes and met together, we recognized that we serve the same Lord and share the same Orthodox faith. It is our common faith which has guided our reflection and which has inspired us to deepen our service to the Orthodox church and our witness in the world.

We were very happy to learn from each other about the many forms of ministry in which women in our churches are already engaged. We witnessed to a wide range of ministries from the women present at our meeting. Some women, for example, are active in monastic life. Others are active as single women, wives or mothers. A number are serving within their local parish or diocese, other participants are active in the ecumenical movement. Some are involved with the study or teaching of theology, and many are involved in philanthropic, medical or educational service in association with either the church or a respected regional or national institution.

Undergirding this variety, we observed a high level of competency, intelligence, dynamism, commitment and, most of all, a deep love of the church and of God. This range of ministries manifested among us was truly inspiring. This variety reminded us how, throughout the history of the church, women have been active in many forms of ministry in response to the same Lord, in the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, we came to see that the church continues to need the service of faithful women as well as men, who feel called to serve the Lord and his church. These women, as well as men, deserve the support and encouragement of our church leaders. These women, as well as men, deserve to receive appropriate theological education and spiritual formation which will assist them in their ministry. These women, as well as men, deserve to have their vocations recognized and blessed.

In our discussions together, we also came to appreciate more deeply the ministry of the wife of the priest. We believe this ministry is tanta-

mount to the ministry of the priest himself. The wives of priests especially deserve the recognition of the church, as well as our encouragement and support. This support is necessary so that the ministry of priests' wives may continue to be life-giving to their communities and families.

### Concerns

Through the intercessions of the Holy Theotokos, who is our role model, we recognize that all Christians are invited to emulate her example as a person of faith. We are all, women and men, called by the Lord himself to grow in our relationship with him and others, so that there is integrity between our faith and our actions.

In our discussions we came to affirm the importance of the witness of the church in today's world. We also came to sense the challenge of relating more directly our theology with our church practice.

Through our discussions together, we recognize that some of our churches have made a concerted effort to involve women in the different ministries in the church. Others have indeed made significant progress in this direction. Yet, there are still some churches who have not yet considered the needs of their women and therefore the whole church itself.

We are concerned that some women have expressed deep disappointment that they have not had the chance to study theology in a formal setting such as a seminary or theological school. This hinders our role and work within the church. Furthermore, we feel that we must encourage Orthodox women theologians especially to study the interpretation of the Scriptures so as to be able to discern their meaning more fully.

We also recognize there are sacramental practices which need study in depth by both men and women, as they appear to run contrary to our theological affirmations regarding the dignity of women. We specifically call to mind here certain liturgical practices which need immediate attention, as we believe they do indeed diminish the dignity of women. We note, for example, the practice of churching female babies differently from male babies, and the practice of depriving women of the eucharist during their period of menstruation, which continues to exist in some of our churches.

We note as well, with tremendous sadness, how easy it is for the presence of women to be forgotten. From our discussions together we realize that there are some occasions when the role and presence of women, as well as their work, is not always validated for the value it has in the everyday life of the church. Rather, women may be seen by some as more readily dispensable. Women have also been easily dismissed in

other ways as well. We recognize with deep concern how social injustices such as poverty, illiteracy and invisibility may affect both Orthodox women and women in general in our part of the world. Wherever possible, we must strive to assist them and open our lives and our hearts to them, as our Lord would have us do.

This conference also recognizes the important ministry of deaconesses as a response to the Holy Spirit for various needs of this present age. Nevertheless, we must emphasize that we still wait for the application of the recommendations from the 1988 inter-Orthodox consultation in Rhodes, on "The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church", to rejuvenate this order of ordained ministry.

### Recommendations

In light of the above, we prayerfully recommend to the leadership of our churches:

- that our leaders encourage women's involvement and participation in the everyday decision-making process of our local churches; we note this after having recognized the differing practices regarding women among the various Orthodox churches;
- that efforts begin which will raise the theological and spiritual awareness among women concerning their role in the church, their families and society – through spiritual retreats, ongoing study groups, seminars, lectures and workshops;
- that women receive both spiritual and financial support in order to pursue studies in theological education; relatedly, that more informal opportunities to study and grow in the theology of the church be created;
- that more research, presentations and community-wide discussions on the Theotokos be encouraged, so that we will grow in authentic relationship and appreciation of her;
- that the sacramental practices which appear to diminish the dignity of women be studied in depth and changed whenever necessary, in order to reflect the fuller Orthodox understanding regarding women;
- that lay theologians (women and men) be encouraged to direct Bible studies in local parishes, as this form of adult education may help inspire confidence to witness to the Orthodox faith;
- that a space in the life of the church be provided where Eastern and Oriental Orthodox women may regularly come together, so they may learn from each other; perhaps they may also be invited to attend some of the suggested activities listed above;
- that our leadership encourage women's informal and formal ministries in pastoral care, so as to reach out to others who may be spir-

- itually isolated, in material need, grieving the loss of a loved one, survivors of abuse or violence, etc.; these persons deserve particular attention, as they require the healing presence and assistance of the church through prayer, counselling and support;
- that our leadership develop more ways for the wives of priests to come together for support and opportunities for enrichment;
- that more frequent dialogue take place, both formal and informal, with our surrounding societies, as this will facilitate more focused and appropriate pastoral care and witness; this dialogue also involves taking seriously the presence of Orthodox Christian women who are engaged in various forms of work and service in the world; we desire the ongoing support and encouragement of our leadership in this effort; similarly, as society changes, we recommend that extra care must be paid to understanding the concerns of our young people;
- that a qualified woman spiritual advisor and/or canonist be included as an advocate on the spiritual courts of all our churches;
- that our church leaders discern prayerfully and courageously the presence of the Holy Spirit in those many places where the ministry of ordained deaconesses, as well as other forms of ministry, is needed;
- that more opportunities for ecumenical dialogue and relationships be encouraged; this would be both beneficial for Orthodox witness and for the strengthening of our relationships with other Christian women in our common work;
- that more clergymen (and male lay leaders) be encouraged to attend these conferences in order to increase their pastoral awareness regarding women's concerns;
- that valuable conferences such as "Discerning the Signs of the Times" be sponsored, making participation open to all women in our churches.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we affirm that holding and participating in this conference on "Discerning the Signs of the Times" is a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit and our response to his call. We understand that through baptism and chrismation (confirmation), women also are called to be a vital part of the church. Women also are called to communion with God, and women also have the vocation of manifesting the presence of the kingdom even in this life. The church comprises both men and women called to continue the saving acts of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity and the whole of creation. "There is one body and Spirit... but to each one of us grace was given, according to the measure

of Christ's gift. And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...; every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:4, 11, 16). Therefore, we believe we have a responsibility to fulfill our calling as disciples and apostles, which is to communicate the gospel to the whole inhabited earth and strive towards the sanctification and well being of the Body.

Finally, we bear witness to the fact that each member of the Body of Christ is essential for the proper functioning of his church. We hold fast to the holy Tradition of our Orthodox church in which clergy and laity have constituted an organic whole since the time of the apostles. Throughout the history of the church, we have the testimony of countless women saints who responded to Christ in many ways, such as apostles, evangelists, confessors, martyrs, ascetics and nuns, teachers, mothers, spiritual and medical healers and deaconesses. We Orthodox women of today, inspired through the prayers and example of these women saints, now endeavour to continue in their footsteps, as we too strive to respond to our Lord's call: "Follow me". *Amen.*

## Report of the Istanbul Meeting

You have destroyed death by your Cross  
You have opened Paradise to the thief.  
You have changed a lamentation of the Myrrh-Bearers into joy,  
and you have commanded your apostles to proclaim  
that you, O Christ our God,  
Have risen and granted the world the great mercy.

(Troparion, Tone 7)

Christ is risen!

We thank our God, the life-giving Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the opportunity to celebrate this joyful season of the resurrection with our sisters from Europe, North and South America, Australia and the Middle East.

We gathered together in Istanbul, Turkey, for this conference on women in the life of the Orthodox Church entitled, "Discerning the Signs of the Times". Over 50 women and men from the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches met from 10-17 May 1997 as participants officially delegated by their churches, as observers and as resource people to represent the concerns of Orthodox women from Eastern and Western Europe and North and South America, coming from Albania, Armenia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, the Republic of Georgia, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland and the United States of America. This meeting took place within the context of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women.

It has been a tremendous blessing to meet and get to know one another, learning more about each other's histories and traditions. We have rejoiced in the commitment to seeking God's will in loving and costly service which has so often been clear in presentations and conversations. While at times we differed in thinking and acting, we have learned that the respect and love which exists among us, which is a gift

from Jesus Christ, is one of the most important characteristics of this conference. We have come to realize more deeply the importance of committing ourselves to a community united in diversity.

This is the last of three WCC-sponsored meetings within the Ecumenical Decade for Orthodox women (the others being Crete 1990 and Damascus 1996). We realize the need to deepen our reflection on many topics and themes, and we are grateful for this conference in that it has helped us to continue this reflection.

We had the opportunity to visit and worship at some of the most historic and ancient Christian sites of this city. We toured Agia Sophia, the Great Church of Constantinople, the monastery at Chora, where we were inspired by the beautiful iconography of the 11th century, and the Theological School at Halki, where we felt as if we had entered a modern-day garden of Paradise. Also, we had the honour of attending the divine liturgy celebrated by His All-Holiness Bartholomew I at the monastery of Zoodochos Pege, the burial site of the ecumenical patriarchs, and drank from the spring whose water has been known for centuries as a source of healing. We believe Christ, who is the place (*chora*) of Life, revealed himself through the deep spiritual and prayer experiences of our daily worship at Holy Trinity Church, and throughout the entire week. The name of Mother Maria Skobtsova came up repeatedly during the conference, and we felt as the week progressed that she was very close to us. Her utter self-giving for the care and salvation of everyone who came her way in France during the second world war was especially inspiring: Russian students needing a mother, homeless women needing a place to stay, Jews and many others fleeing persecution needing shelter and a hiding place – all came under the wing of her love and compassion. In the end, she gave her life for her friends. She is a holy woman of our day, a model for us, one who lived in our century and in a culture and under conditions that are familiar to us.

### Thanksgiving

*We thank you, O Lord our God, for bringing us together in this holy city and granting us the opportunity to worship and partake of your heavenly blessings. We thank you for bestowing your divine grace upon us for these few days and ask to keep in our hearts the desire to live for you, our Lord and Benefactor. We thank you for this time together, for being the silent partner in every conversation and the ever-present guest at each meal.*

We are exceedingly grateful for the generous hospitality of the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, Archbishop of Con-

stantinople and New Rome. In his opening address, the Ecumenical Patriarch spoke of the desire on the part of many people to achieve a more meaningful relationship with the living God; there is a deep longing for spiritual growth and an even greater longing for holiness, healing and forgiveness, which come from God alone. He blessed not only our conference but our pilgrimage to this holy city, a centre of inspiration and spiritual nourishment, and asked us to keep the local community in our prayers.

We were also very warmly received at the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople by His Beatitude Patriarch Karekin II. We took part in morning prayers and were encouraged to take the initiative in the important ministry work of our church, given the many gifts women offer. His Beatitude mentioned that the Armenian Apostolic Church has taken the initiative in ordaining women to the order of the diaconate, an order in which both men and women are ordained and perform similar duties.

Both patriarchs addressed the current official theological dialogue taking place between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, and both eagerly anticipate the final reconciliation and restoration of ecclesiastical communion between the two families.

It is equally important to thank the World Council of Churches' women's programme for sponsoring this historic event. This conference and so many that have gone before are of vital importance for Orthodox women, the Orthodox church and worldwide ecumenical dialogue.

Finally, we must thank all who have gone before us, women and men, laity and clergy, who have initiated and contributed to the inter-Orthodox dialogue, without whose dedication and love for our church we would not be here today. Their work, specifically over the last twenty years, has been a source of encouragement and hope for many of us. The consultations of Agapia (1976), Rhodes (1988), Crete (1990) and Damascus (1996) have laid the foundations for the work we are doing here.

### Concerns

This consultation studied the statement that emerged from the Damascus consultation and has affirmed many of the concerns there. In addition, we offer the following:

There is a need to stimulate a desire in our people to take an active role in the life of the church. This may happen with the realization on the part of Orthodox Christians of their own royal priesthood.

There is a need for new workers in the church, including children and young people, to be nurtured and educated to play a more active role in the various ministries. We must call upon all people to bring their gifts forward, the gifts which have been bestowed upon the laity through the

Holy Spirit for the life and growth of the church. We must stimulate the interest of lay people who feel that they have been excluded in the past and remind them of their individual responsibilities as members of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9).

In some of our churches, Orthodox Christians have lost interest and have joined social, cultural and para-church organizations. We are looking for ways to bring Orthodox Christians back to the church.

### **Recommendations**

As members of the church we feel ready to carry out our responsibility to promote the welfare of the church, particularly by encouraging the various ministries of women.

#### *1. Theological education*

A. Many women seek deeper knowledge of the church through theological study. In families and schools, women are the primary educators. Women share this task and learn well from one another. Thus, theologically-educated women have a particular ministry in teaching our faithful. For these reasons, Orthodox theological education for women is a priority and should be facilitated on all levels.

B. We recommend that the churches encourage the present efforts of women who are engaged in producing journals, both academic and for the community, in order to inform and educate women and men on the Orthodox faith. There is a real need on the part of women for the creation of a forum where women are able to reflect upon their experiences and engage in theological research. Women need to be notified of publications, theological seminars and other events and materials that are of benefit to them.

C. There is a tremendous need for resources and materials in the following areas:

- for church schools;
- in multiple languages to address the increasingly multinational nature of our churches;
- on how to live one’s faith daily;
- providing up-to-date translations of ancient Christian liturgical and patristic texts specifically dealing with the Theotokos and other women saints.

#### *2. Liturgical life*

A. The perception and interpretation of some of the practices pertaining to liturgical life need to be addressed. We ask for a re-evaluation of certain liturgical customs, for example, the presentation of infants and

the 40-day rule for childbirth, the prayer for miscarriages, abortions and post-partum mothers, and expectations pertaining to the reception of communion. Some of us feel these practices and prayers do not properly express the theology of the church regarding the dignity of God’s creation of women and their redemption in Christ Jesus. We realize that the practices in the various local communities may differ.

B. We recommend the incorporation of the lives of the martyrs, both women and men, and the new experiences of the people in this century into the hymnography of the church. While this may be happening in some churches, we recommend a universal incorporation of the new martyrs of this century into the life of our church. Perhaps the best forum for such a recommendation is the upcoming Great and Holy Council.

#### *3. The diaconate*

A. Many of us believe the incorporation of deaconesses in the life of the church will help contribute to the atmosphere of love and learning in the church. Deaconesses are able to work as helpers to the priests and counsellors to the people, providing an important link and thereby strengthening relationships within the body of the church.

B. In our discussion we realized we came to this conference with differing assumptions regarding the role of the deaconess. While some see the diaconate for women as a sacramental ministry which takes place by ordination, for others this ministry is not sacramental and described as a church ministry. This question has become for some more academic than practical. Therefore while some may affirm the work of our sisters from the previous meetings of Orthodox women regarding the importance of the re-emergence of the order of the deaconess, for others there is still work to be done in order to come to a fuller understanding.

C. With the re-emergence of the order of deaconesses, we would not want this ministry in any way to diminish the other ministries of the laity in the church. Rather, vocations to this ministry may be experienced as another response to the Holy Spirit who fills and guides the church. We call to mind the words of St Paul: “It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ, until we become one in faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son” (Eph. 4:11-13).

#### *4. Priests’ wives*

The ministry of the priest’s wife is very specific and unique. We recommend the church offer a special blessing on women who undertake this ministry and provide instruction and guidance for their role.

*5. Spiritual life*

A. There is a thirst for spirituality in many of our countries and a rediscovery of the Orthodox living experience. We recommend the development of materials and programmes to help our people grow in their spiritual lives. We feel that the gifts of women may be of service to the churches specifically in this area. Women need concrete teaching in Orthodox spirituality which includes biblical reflection and study.

B. We encourage the development of monastic vocations for women. Historically, Orthodox monastic communities have been a source for theological education and spiritual life. The very presence of monastics witnesses to "the one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42) to which all are called.

C. We recognize that the churches have been helping one another by sending missionary teams and providing materials in local languages. We recommend that the churches incorporate the experiences of women in their teaching materials. These experiences will enrich the spiritual life of the people.

D. Women benefit from sharing spiritual experiences with one another. Opportunities for such sharing should be provided and supported by our churches. This has begun with meetings organized by the WCC for Orthodox women, such as the present one in Istanbul. Networking and sharing should continue on international, national and parish levels. We recommend the appointment of women delegates as representatives of the Orthodox church to the various gatherings and bodies of the ecumenical movement, whether on the international, national or local level.

*6. Community life*

A. We feel that women, quite naturally, are peacemakers. Therefore we recommend that our churches make a greater commitment to support sister Orthodox churches in crisis situations, for example, during natural disasters, and to support refugees and those in war-torn countries. Often in these situations women and children suffer most.

B. We recommend that our people support, spiritually and materially, the Christians of our churches who are still suffering in various ways, socially, politically and economically. We are also aware of the current climate of increased religious fundamentalism, which is affecting the lives of people in all our countries. Some churches need educational materials to help develop programmes for the faithful to combat erroneous teachings.

C. We recommend that the issue of sexism be seriously considered. The church would benefit from theological and soteriological reflection

on this issue, especially through the medium of consultations, workshops and informal study.

*7. Youth*

A. We recommend the development of programmes for the spiritual growth of the youth, the hope of our churches. Because we are one body, their concerns affect the entire church and their spiritual well-being is vital to the health of our church.

B. We recommend the development of youth and church school exchange programmes between our churches through national or regional councils of churches.

*8. Church polity*

A. As stated in previous meetings of Orthodox women, we recommend that the role of the laity in the decision-making processes be evaluated. There is a variety of practices in the Orthodox church regarding this process, and this recommendation pertains only to churches in which voting takes place. In those circumstances where there is a need to determine change in church polity or practice by voting, each man and woman should have an equal opportunity. Women are able to and should be invited to offer guidance to the church on issues that specifically concern them, for example, family life, social needs, education and charity. Women have unique gifts to offer with regard to these issues.

B. With the advent of a more technologically oriented society, we are finding that our world is changing at a very rapid pace. It is important for our churches to become aware and stay abreast of these changes, because at times they can contribute to the life of the church. Women must also find a way to become better informed and learn to cope with these changes. We believe this will happen with better educational opportunities.

C. With regard to the various offices within the churches we recommend the churches encourage the participation of women on the local and higher levels.

*9. Inter-Orthodox concerns*

A. We recommend that our churches continue the theological dialogue regarding the restoration of communion between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches.

B. We support and look forward to a resolution to the calendar differences among all Orthodox churches. We realize that the differences which exist are a result of certain historical difficulties. However, we await the day when our churches will celebrate the liturgical year together.

*10. And the future...*

A. We ask our churches to consider seriously the request by the World Council of Churches for 50 percent participation by women at its upcoming assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in December 1998. We also ask our churches to bestow their blessings on the women planning to take part in the Ecumenical Decade Festival which takes place a few days prior to the Assembly.

B. We recommend the establishment of a resource centre where theological research and writings by Orthodox women and the reports from conferences such as this will be made available for all.

C. We hope and pray that Orthodox theological institutions which have been closed, such as the Theological School at Halki, will shortly be re-opened, and we ask that women be able to participate in theological studies and research at all theological institutions.

D. Some participants at the consultation welcome the idea of organizing an inter-Orthodox conference on the ordination of women to the priesthood. We realize that for some this question is not an issue and will not be discussed. Any study and examination of the issue in no way presupposes a commitment to move in this direction. This would simply provide the opportunity for women and men to examine this topic in greater depth from both the theological and spiritual perspectives. This conference would include attendance by clergy, laity and monastics.

E. Many recommendations have emerged from previous meetings of Orthodox women. While some recommendations have been addressed, others have not. We are concerned about the reception of this document and recommend that our churches make this statement available for women either through general publications or correspondence to parishes.

F. We have gained considerable knowledge and great benefit from the present conference. It is our hope from now on and into the coming millennium that our churches will continue to sponsor conferences for women where we can come together to enjoy fellowship, share our concerns and learn from one another.

**Conclusion**

We began our consultation with the celebration of the Holy Myrrh-Bearers at the women's monastery at Balukli. The spirit of these missionary women, which is the same spirit that has inspired the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women, comforted us and accompanied us in our prayers and work during this week.

Our spiritual experience was enriched by our visit to the important monuments of the Orthodox heritage, St Sophia and the monastery at

Chora. The mosaic of the Incarnate Word of God, which is the embodiment of living human beings, reassured us of the spiritual reality that salvation is for all.

Finally, the fresco of the resurrection depicting the risen Christ pulling both man and woman from the grave shows us, once again, that our common faith and expectation is the central theme of this consultation on "Discerning the Signs of the Times".