

FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church

Executive Summary

Abstract

A statement on the social doctrine of the Orthodox Christian Church will be published during Great Lent 2020. This document was composed by a special commission of Orthodox scholars appointed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (who ranks as first-among-equals among the hierarchs that comprise the Orthodox Church) and blessed for publication by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

It will be highly significant, and not without controversy, because it addresses contemporary social issues in a sustained manner that is unusual for the Orthodox Church, including poverty, racism, human rights, reproductive technology, and the environment. The purpose of the document is to offer a reference on vital issues and challenges in the world today in ways that are consistent with living as Orthodox Christians.

Background

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew appointed a special commission of theologians in 2017, and the commission, with the input from the different provinces of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, drafted a document for submission to and approval by the synod, which was granted synod in late 2019. The document, *For the Life of the Word: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, is now being released in over a dozen languages as Orthodox Christians around the world experience Great Lent, a season of contemplation and preparation for Easter.

The document was prompted in part by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held 2016, which endeavoured to address issues of the contemporary world. The Ecumenical Patriarch understood the continued need, in the spirit of the Council, to further this effort.

Significance

The special commission itself is notable because it is not comprised of the hierarchs of the church or even exclusively clergy. Instead, it is also composed of laity, including two women. The commission includes a range of theologians and scholars from Europe and Asia, as well as the United Kingdom and the United States.

The special commission's mandate was unique in that rarely are comprehensive social statements composed and presented by the Orthodox Church. While the document is not envisioned as a dogmatic decree or prescriptive doctrine, its purpose is "to serve as a solid foundation for reference and conversation on vital issues and challenges facing the world today" (Preface). To cite the opening words of the text: "Our spiritual lives, therefore, cannot fail also to be social lives" (Intro 3). This is the foundation for a social ethos of the Orthodox Church and the foundational tenet of the document.

Outline of Document

Letter from His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

- Published in Greek and English, includes the formal endorsement and approval of the text.

Preface

- Written by the Chair of the Special Commission, Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis & a member of the commission, Orthodox scholar and theologian Dr. David Bentley Hart.
- Explains hopes for document as it being a preliminary step to "more expansive theological dialogue" and an "aid to spiritual growth for the Orthodox faithful" (Preface).

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Note: The Document, in keeping with the spirit of its theology, follows the liturgical celebration of the Orthodox Church; each section begins with a line from the liturgy.

Section of document cited in parenthesis.

I. Introduction

It is time to serve the Lord

- Lays out the theological foundation for the document, in short: Humans are created by God and are made for freely-chosen and loving

communion with God. Through loving communion with God, we are called into loving communion with our neighbor and the whole cosmos.

II. THE CHURCH IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Let us commend our whole life unto Christ our God

- Addresses the Orthodox Church's thinking about the relationship between church and state; addresses public sphere issues such as racism, nationalism, pluralism.

III. THE COURSE OF HUMAN LIFE

Sanctify our souls and bodies, and grant that we may worship you in holiness all the days of our lives

- The section broadly follows human life, from the womb to the grave, addressing all manner of both enduring and uniquely contemporary issue facing the faithful. It recognizes three paths in adult life (marriage, monasticism, and single life) and affirms the possibility of love of God and neighbor in each.
- It contains a strong statement on sexual abuse of children (§16) as well as clear statements on the role of women (§29), the reality of divorce (§22), the issue of abortion (§25), and the challenge of reproductive technology (§24).
- No offense against God is worse than is the sexual abuse of children, and none more intolerable to the conscience of the Church (§16).

IV. POVERTY, WEALTH, AND CIVIL JUSTICE

Remember, Lord, those who are mindful of the poor

- This section stresses that the Church must follow Christ and place "this absolute concern for the poor and disadvantaged at the very center of its moral, religious and spiritual life (33)." It examines several facets of the contemporary global economy and suggests ways that the Church might express this concern in the world today (§§37–41).

V. WAR, PEACE, VIOLENCE

For the peace of the whole world...

- This section articulates an Orthodox understanding of peace as "the true 'grammar' of creation as God has uttered it in his eternal Word" (§42), in contrast to one of violence as "the most terrible manifestation of the reign of sin and death in all things (§42)." It also calls for the abolition of the death penalty (§48).

VI. ECUMENICAL RELATIONS AND RELATIONS WITH OTHER FAITHS

Let us pray for the unity of all

- This section describes the Orthodox Church's self-understanding as apostolic and complete (50–56) and its commitment to relationships with other Christian churches and other religious communities. It also clearly condemns anti-Semitism (§57).

VII. ORTHODOXY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

You have created us in your own image and likeness

- This section acknowledges that while the language of human rights is, in many ways, a minimal language, it is helpful to shape and secure rules of charity, mercy, and justice, and so the Church supports its use in the modern world (§§63–64). It also contains a condemnation of modern forms of slavery and defends the dignity of dignity of refugees (§§66–67).

VIII. SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Your own of your own we offer to you

- In this section, the Church celebrates the sciences and arts, while cautioning discernment regarding the integration of technology into human life (§§70–72). The document also champions a devout care of the earth in all its dimensions (§§74–75).

IX. CONCLUSION

Let us the faithful rejoice, having this anchor of hope

- This section concludes the document on a note of hope and joy, stating the document's limited nature and offering it up for discussion and for the benefit of congregations.