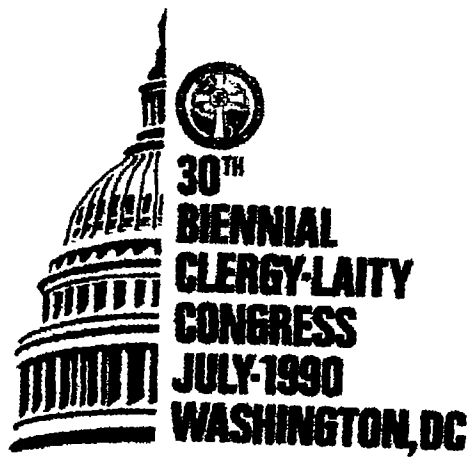


Report to His Eminence
ARCHBISHOP IAKOVOS
Concerning the Future
Theological Agenda of the
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese



*"Walk as children of Light;
For the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth."*

(Eph. 5:8-9)

**THE 30TH BIENNIAL CLERGY-LAITY CONGRESS
OF THE GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE
OF NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**Report to His Eminence
ARCHBISHOP IAKOVOS**

By

**The Commission
Appointed to Establish
the Theological Agenda
for the Future of the
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese**



**HOLY CROSS ORTHODOX PRESS
Brookline, Massachusetts 02146**

THE FUTURE OF ORTHODOXY
IN THE GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF N. & S. AMERICA:
A REPORT OF THE ARCHBISHOP'S COMMISSION FOR
AN ARCHDIOCESAN THEOLOGICAL AGENDA

Prologue

In his keynote address to the 1986 Clergy-Laity Congress in Dallas, Texas entitled "Rekindling an Orthodox Awareness," His Eminence Archbishop IAKOVOS addressed the issue of a present crisis of identity in the Orthodox Church due to a weakening of ethnic, ecclesial, and spiritual bonds in a secular, pluralistic society. Calling for a Christ-centered rekindling of the Orthodox awareness, the Archbishop challenged the parishes, dioceses, and all departments of the Archdiocese to work toward strengthening the Orthodox identity by a) "growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pt. 3:18, the theme of the Dallas Clergy-Laity Congress), b) maturing corporately as members of the Body of Christ, and c) leading knowledgeable and conscious Orthodox lives wherever God has placed Orthodox Christians.

The Archbishop's Commission for an Archdiocesan Theological Agenda, appointed by His Eminence after the Dallas Clergy-Laity Congress, and chaired by His Excellency SILAS, Metropolitan of New Jersey and President of Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, was assigned the task of reflecting on the factors behind the identity crisis, formulating clear responses and offering recommendations pertaining to the priorities of the Archdiocese. The present report represents the labors of this Commission meeting during 1986-88, based on three fundamental questions: a) What are the abiding goals of the Church? b) What is the present reality of the Church? and c) By what priorities and means can the Church be guided from the present reality toward its goals? This report adopts a wholistic and positive approach. Given the strength and stability of our Archdiocese, the identity crisis should not be taken in an alarmist sense but as an opportunity for the Church's continued growth and mission in the world.

I. The Faith Crisis

1. The Abiding Goals of the Church

An assessment of the Church's contemporary situation must be anchored on a clear perception of the abiding goals of the Church. The all-inclusive goal of the Church is God's call to theosis--the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God and the transfiguration of the whole cosmos in divine glory. The Church itself is the "first fruits" of

salvation of the world from the domination of the devil, sin, and corruption, by the redeeming work of Christ and the sanctifying operation of the Holy Spirit, being concretely manifested as new quality of life, the new creation. The process of theosis may be seen as taking place in three inter-related spheres:

a) The Goal of Personal Transfiguration concentrates on the life of each Orthodox Christian. There can be no realization of the kingdom unless there is a personal response and a personal appropriation of God's saving, redeeming, and sanctifying grace. This goal is realized by a personal faith commitment, by personal and conscious participation in the Liturgy, worship, and prayer, by personal obedience to the will of God, by personal growth in love, by personal development of the image and likeness of God within each of us toward Christ-likeness.

b) The Goal of Corporate Life in Christ concentrates on the shared life of the Church, where each person is an integral part of the body of Christ, and clergy and laity alike live their lives in relationship to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, obtaining the meaning of life and actualizing the life of the kingdom of God within the common life of the Church. In this context the personal element is no longer individualistic or private, but finds its own fulfilment in membership in the body of Christ, the Church. The central means by which the corporate goal is achieved are the sacraments, especially the Eucharist; the governance and guidance of the Church in the spirit of Christ; the preaching and teaching ministries; and the life of mutual love, forgiveness, care, help, and acts of fellowship.

c) The Goal of Outreach concentrates on the loving concern of God and His Church for the life of the world and for all creation. This loving concern takes three forms: mission, so as to evangelize the world and bring it into the saving realm of the Church; philanthropy, so as to address the needs of individuals, peoples, and nations, suffering from immediate ills or from lack of urgent necessities; and social concern, so as to address the structural and environmental aspects of societies and nature which act as vehicles of good or evil. The Church always seeks to strengthen those forces which support the values and ways of God, and to struggle against those forces which promote the demonic and dehumanizing.

The above goals are inseparable. None can be completely fulfilled without the others. The personal life in Christ cannot be realized outside the corporate reality of the

Church, which it does not live for itself alone but for the salvation of the whole world. In each generation the Church effectively fulfils its mission to the degree that it achieves the above goals. Therefore, the Church must ask itself time and again: How do our actual priorities reflect the above goals? What social forces and cultural factors impede the realization of these goals? What spiritual and practical strategies can the Church set in place to counteract the negative forces and to fulfil its goals in positive ways?

2. The Contemporary Crisis of Faith

As we reflect on the present and future situation of our Church in the Americas, we recognize that the cultural environment of the Greek Orthodox in this hemisphere is without historical precedent. We are an ethnic and religious minority in an open, secular society with powerful claims upon all, especially the young. Long-standing historical and sociological forces (secularization, the technological revolution, pluralism, the impact of the media and entertainment industries, and other) have during our generation brought about rapid and radical changes in personal and social values (selfish individualism, family instability, divorce, promiscuity, abortion, substance abuse, consumerism, pornography, and other). The results have been breakdown in community, breakdown in commonly accepted ethical principles, and breakdown in personal integrity. Despite the resurgence of some religious affiliations, western society is on the whole marked by a cultural crisis of faith, that is, a wholesale drifting away from traditional religious and moral values which now has become a sociological condition affecting all religious groups. Barring unforeseen dramatic changes in the course of history, this process is likely to continue. Consider, for example, how the public is divided over the issue of abortion, how public education is not able to address the question of values, and how an average young person is minimally influenced by his or her religious community as compared to society at large.

In this free, pluralistic society the Orthodox Church itself must take upon itself the prime responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the Orthodox identity among its members both as an intrinsic goal as well as a presupposition for effective mission in the world. Up to now ethnicity has played a major role and has given strength and cohesion to the identity of the Greek Orthodox Church. But with the weakening of ethnic ties due to various factors of sociological assimilation, most notably interfaith marriages, changes have occurred and problems have been created. The offspring of interfaith marriages, of converts, and of others

already culturally assimilated, will continue to drift away unless they become linked to the Orthodox Church with clear ecclesial and spiritual bonds. In a similar way traditional attachment to religious customs and forms (formalism) has contributed to the perpetuity of the Church, especially in homogeneous social environments. But in the modern, open, and radically changing world, where novelty rather than tradition seems to capture the imagination of people, the formal faith and loyalty of religious adherents cannot be taken for granted. The contemporary crisis of faith can be countered at its roots by raising the consciousness of the whole Church to the abiding goals of the Church and by placing these goals at the center of our thinking, deciding, and planning for the future. A new spiritual vision must be set to work among clergy and laity alike, not by means of high-sounding promotional statements or radical institutional changes, but by means of a conscious, deliberate, and consistent focusing on the true goals and priorities of the Church.

The fundamental response to the cultural crisis of faith must begin with a full acknowledgment of the principle that the faith commitment has more and more become a matter of personal choice than of social or cultural heritage. This means that Orthodox Christians must be both challenged and helped to move beyond religious nominalism to a conscious choosing of the Orthodox way of life based on personal knowledge of the Orthodox Faith and personal experience of its value amidst the problems of everyday life. In this perspective three inter-related objectives are crucial:

a) Clarification of the Truths of the Orthodox Faith. Clarifying the Orthodox Faith means lifting up the fundamental truths of Orthodoxy, including the centrality of Christ, the unique understanding of God and salvation, the wholistic view of humanity and nature, the meaning of the Eucharist, the insights of Orthodox spirituality, and all those elements which constitute the fulness of Christian truth and on which the Orthodox Church takes its stand. These truths, serving as the guideligh in all our thoughts and actions, must become the conscious focus of preaching, teaching, meetings, conferences, clergy-laity congresses, administrative polity, Church departments, and parish life.

b) Nurture of Living Faith. The task of rekindling the Orthodox awareness cannot be accomplished simply by dry, academic, and formal procedures. The clarification and application of the Orthodox truths must be accomplished in the context of living faith--a personal faith inspired by prayer, enlivened by a mystical sense of communion with the risen Christ, and communicated with an evangelical spirit as a heralding of the good news. The true evangelical spirit

keeps alive the horizon of living faith by which we apprehend that the risen Christ is present in the Church guiding us in our education, spiritual formation, liturgical life, moral and social concerns, youth programs, administration, and finances.

c) Creation of Supportive Environment. People need not only to be stirred to a positive decision of faith and commitment, but also to be helped and supported in that decision by a network of Christian relationships. They need a Christian social environment and concrete ways by which to live their Orthodox faith in counterbalance to the pervasive secular milieu of jobs, schools, media, recreation, and the like. People must be taught how to pray, to come to the sacrament of Holy Confession, to read the Scriptures and edifying books. They also need to establish personal relationships with one another through parish activities, organizations, conferences, camps, service projects, and support groups, all guided by an Orthodox vision of faith and life.

The overall answer to the cultural crisis of faith is a personal approach to the truths and values of the Orthodox faith. By personal is meant an internalization of these truths and values so that they may be held with a conscious personal conviction. To sustain the Orthodox identity we can no longer count on the spiritual investments of the past, that is to say, simply on the power of tradition and formal habits. We must also generate new spiritual investments ourselves in this secular but thirsting society by means of a spiritual rekindling of Orthodox souls with the grace of love of Christ.

II. The Parish

Studying the nature of our communities and why people become or cease to be members of them, requires that we describe the Parish, not only theologically, but sociologically, as well. It is necessary, together with the doctrinally and spiritually founded understanding of the parish to understand it, as well, as a complex and diverse collection of interacting groups and individuals who have as a common denominator commitment to the Orthodox Christian faith, and to a greater or lesser degree a commonly shared cultural heritage. Within this complex social reality, the centrality, influence and significance of parish life varies from group to group and from individual to individual.

The character of the Parish is voluntary because people determine the depth and extent of their participation in its organized life. The voluntary nature of the Parish demands that we must carefully attempt to relate revelation and Christian tradition to people's experience by being sensitive to their diverse needs. This, however, cannot be done unless we succeed to activate the ministry of the laity by which the whole church through a variety of approaches will contribute to the upbuilding of the parish. The thrust of preaching and teaching in the parish must be toward the meaningfulness of faith in today's life. Our Presbyters should be encouraged and helped to shape their ministry so as to personalize belief and encourage the ministry of all to all.

1. An Empirical Assessment of Our Parish Life

Parishioners find meaning and respond positively to parish life on the basis of the following factors:

- liturgical life and preaching;
- the success of the parish in helping members deal practically with their concerns, especially their concerns about their children;
- a participatory style of leadership;
- an active quality to the parish, i.e. "there is much going on."

The reality is that there are many parishioners who do not find their parishes helpful or meaningful in their lives. They are unhappy with the liturgical life of the parish, dissatisfied with the quality of preaching, they do not find much assistance in addressing personal issues, find the

administrative life of the church often authoritarian or closed, and parish life frequently limited in activities. As our people become more educated and more cosmopolitan, they are looking for more persuasive preaching and more prayerful liturgy than they once needed. It is an interesting phenomenon that just when Presbyters have become more sophisticated and sensitive in their pastoral ministry, the laity have raised their levels of expectations.

This calls for an assessment of our parish life on the basis of the social realities we now face as a Church.

a) Parish Relationships are a major and increasing problem in the local Church. Like other relationships, they are undergoing serious changes. From a cultural perspective, it is a fact that we are not any more as homogenous as we used to be. This, however, must be seen as a challenge that invites us to use the diverse experience of our people for the enriching of our parish life, since in Christ all historical, natural and physical differences are overcome. A parish must be prepared to deal with the many changes that take place in the church, the country and the local area. This does not mean that crises in the future will not occur, but a community that devotes time to attending to relationships among its members will not as easily be thrown by these crises. Ours is a theology and ecclesiology of persons in relationship. That vision of truth must be consciously practiced in our parish life.

b) Age Distribution influences the nature of our parish life. There is a shift in the age distribution of the general population. It is a fact that ever since the mid-sixties the birthrate has been falling off. How does this affect our parishes? It is likely that people will continue to have fewer children. The largest percentage of the people will be in their forties and fifties.

Persons in certain age categories are more likely to become involved in parish functions than those in other age groups. Young people between the ages of 7 and 18 tend to have a high level of group participation whether in school, parish, or club. If the parish does not provide opportunities for involvement, young people will look for other outlets since the drive "to belong" is strong in this age group.

People between the ages of 18 to 30 are in a low group-participation category. It is difficult for them to become involved in any group or organization, whether religious or secular. Because of the many demands made on their time, the type of parish involvement that will prove most successful is the one that asks only limited and temporary commitment.

The next age group is between the ages of 30 to 50. This age group is most likely to volunteer for parish organizations and assume leadership positions.

In the next 20 years more people will be in this 30-50 age bracket than ever before. This will influence parish life. If a parish has nothing to offer these people, they will go elsewhere. Once they get involved in other organizations, perhaps elected to office in these groups, it will be difficult to entice them back to parish functions.

Finally, there are the older parishioners, those over 50 years old. What is unique about this age group is that they usually join only those groups they belonged to in their earlier years. They are still willing to belong to groups but not become leaders or join new groups.

As the percentage of older people continues to grow, the parish leaders will have to figure out ways of utilizing their rich resources and experiences. This then, will probably be the complexion of the typical parish in the years ahead - fewer young and more middle age and older people. This change in age distribution will influence parish life, and leaders must become aware of some of the implications so they can plan for them well in advance: a) Competition may arise among parishes or parish groups; b) Conservatism: because of an older membership, parishes in the future may tend to stress traditions more than changes; c) Educational shift: with fewer children and young people, the educational emphasis may shift toward adults. Here we must work hard because adults want more than a child's understanding and experience of their faith, one that relates a growing knowledge of the Lord found in prayer to a growing sense of concern and care for the needs of other people. Adult people are looking for a religious experience that speaks to the needs, crises, and desires of their adult life.

c) Marriage Patterns are changing and this severely impacts on parish life. People are choosing to marry later in life, if at all. Once married, they are likely to have one or two children at the most. The consequence for the parish is to be composed of more single adults, more older parents with small children and more extended families. Many couples will have children later in life, after both mother and father have completed their schooling and have become established in their careers. This means that these couples will be better equipped not only to participate in parish groups but to lead them. But that will happen only if the parish speaks to their needs and expectations. Since both parents are likely to be working full-time, the little time left over from the job and family will be more jealously apportioned. The enormous increase in mixed marriages is the most significant reality to face our Church life. It will be

discussed in detail below, in part four of this report. It is the most significant social reality impacting on our parish life and must be addressed honestly and realistically.

d) The Changing Spirit of Parish Leadership is an important factor in parish life. Any authoritarian exercise of leadership in our communities contradicts the essential democratic spirit of our society and consequently produces tension or even alienation of people from the faith community. The desired leadership must be a facilitating one which implies that it provides the place, the occasion and the motivation for authentic Christian worship and service by activating the gifts of all God's people and providing a framework for their unceasing active presence in the life of the Parish.

Our churches must become personal and intimate communities sustained by the grace of God and growing in faith through acts of love for God's creation and humanity at large. Some of our parishes are suffering from the syndrome of 'anonymity', i.e., people feel alone and unrecognized in these communities.

A remedy against this serious problem is the development of small, more familiar worshipping and sharing groups within the parish. People need the support and friendship of others they know personally if they are going to remain active members of the parish. In small groups it is easier for people to express themselves more intimately and trustingly, to make connections between common tradition and their very particular situations, and to feel more personal support for their commitment and for living out the life of faith.

Our Churches with their strong ethnic cultural heritage and values, served this need of our people for belonging and personal involvement, well in the past, but the increasing diversity of our faithful and the impact of the surrounding culture have begun to loosen the ties that formerly bound the parishioners together. We must recapture and nurture the spirit of "belongingness" in our parishes. We must find and utilize additional new ways to reunite our people by recognizing that persons with common interests like to spend time sharing with others of the same mind or experience. Without a common interest or shared concern, people will not come together in small groups.

However, the effectiveness of these groups presupposes the training of their leaders so that they may assure full participation, avoid domination by some members and keep the groups from becoming aimless. In addition, we urgently need good printed materials that will touch on matters of importance, offer necessary information, and open up possibilities of prayer, discussion and action.

