

## Mission, nature & current challenges

*Part II of the letter from Emmanouil Koumbarelis (former President of SYNDESMOS), written in January 2001 to all SYNDESMOS member movements and their youth*



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For part I see last issue of SYNDESMOS News (Volume XV / 1)

### **I. Mission**

*"Provincialism, abuse of the principle of Autocephaly, differences in languages and race, conflicts between churches and jurisdictions, are the plague of the Orthodox world. Phyletism seems to be our practical heresy. The Church always allies with the state, the nation or the race. The Church cannot fulfil its mission on earth as long as the unity of the Orthodox is not achieved. Only when Orthodoxy is one, it may witness its faith before the heterodox. We should vigorously fight against the evils from which ecumenical Orthodoxy suffers."* [Extract from a letter of George Khodre, SYNDESMOS co-founder, 1947]

*"What are we, the Orthodox, going to do to avoid our sickness, namely, our indifference to one another, the one Orthodox Church to the other? What service can our youth offer today to the Orthodox Churches? This was our pain and yearning: How can we co-operate more effectively in our local Orthodox Churches, to help their work for the youth and to build brotherly contacts with the other Orthodox Churches?"* [Extract from a report of Nikos Nissiotis, SYNDESMOS co-founder and vice-president, 1949]

**Divisions of nationalistic or political origin still exist in the Orthodox Church and very often lead to indifference, mistrust and even hostility among local Orthodox Churches and their faithful. Still there is no worldwide permanent Body other than SYNDESMOS within the Church to feel real "pain" and to "fight against these evils". The consciousness of the catholicity of Orthodoxy is an indispensable part of Orthodox Christian identity. It is SYNDESMOS's task to spread further this consciousness within the whole ecclesiastical Body through the youth. An administration responsible for little more than organizing successful inter-Orthodox youth gatherings is insufficient to fulfil**

**SYNDESMOS's mission and respond to the challenges of a world more fragmented than ever. Only when those who serve SYNDESMOS prioritise pan-Orthodox Unity very high in their lives will it be possible to make a difference. A true SYNDESMOS will never be absorbed by the spirit of apathy of our time.**

## **II. Nature**

*"Mission is a consequence of unity. In short, if there is one Truth, we must be united in believing in this Truth. And if there is one Truth, we must let others know about it and not keep it selfishly to ourselves. In spite of all handicaps, the Orthodox Church has always carried out missions and is at present doing so. This is our chance to serve the Church. All initiative of course belongs to and will come from the Church; but at present we are the only existing pan-Orthodox body - a manifestation of the spirit of unity, which is the source of missions. We are left no choice, we must simply do it. The [missionary] Churches need material help, but [also] mainly devoted men. Not necessarily theologians and preachers, but doctors and social workers and any inspired men. What can we do to meet this need of our brethren?" [Extracts from an introduction of John Meyendorf, SYNDESMOS co-founder, secretary and president, in the General Assembly (1958) in Thessaloniki, Greece]*



*"It is impossible to offer Orthodoxy separately in a world which is becoming a neighbourhood. The problem is not merely to create a few missionary groups. The question is how the whole Church can be mobilised by this worldwide missionary vision. The whole perspective of the ONE Church and its total needs is what should always be before our eyes...Selfish absorption in "our own" denotes that our belief in ONE Church is reduced to a mere verbal formula.*

*The Orthodox missionary should follow the footsteps of the first One sent by God: «who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many» (Mark 10: 45).*

*Our supreme concern must be not what we should DO, but how should we BE a living witness to the presence of the Lord in the world.*" [Extracts from a lecture of Fr Anastasios Yannoulatos, SYNDESMOS vice-president and present Archbishop of the Church in Albania, in the General Assembly (1964) in Finland]

*"It was sorrowfully recognized that many young Orthodox are deeply frustrated by internal conflicts, which divide the Church of the Diaspora. Sometimes the youth lose interest in the life of the Church and leave the Orthodox community. Too often, those who want to join the Orthodox Church find an obstacle in these conflicts and divisions...*

*[Our] ultimate goal... [should] be the elaboration of canonical structures, which would reflect on the one hand the fundamental demands of organic unity, realized locally, and on the other hand the reality of languages and traditions, which do not contradict this fundamental unity...*" [Extracts from the statement produced by SYNDESMOS (1967) in Chambesy, Switzerland]

*"SYNDESMOS does not belong to you or to me, to the Executive Committee, nor to our member movements. It belongs to the Church, to God, and has been given to us to be used for His Glory. Let us continue to manifest His Glory, in and for the world, in and for our Church."* [Extract from the address of Fr Rauno Pietarinen, SYNDESMOS secretary general, in the General Assembly (1983), in Crete, Greece]

The above extracts mark a history of 50 years that teaches us what the characteristics of SYNDESMOS are and how it is called to offer its service to the Church and the world. In the following lines emphasis is given to some of these characteristics questioned today.

### **1. SYNDESMOS of givers, not of takers**

In the late 1950s and in the 1960s, a priority of SYNDESMOS was to help the new missionary churches. Initially none of the members of SYNDESMOS came from these churches. But they did not ask the very common questions that many members ask today: "What we will get from SYNDESMOS, what will be our benefit from becoming members?" And their youth did not ask: "Where shall I go this summer?" Nor they whispered in their heart: "Isn't it a good opportunity for me to improve my curriculum vitae by taking a position in the Board of SYNDESMOS". What they asked in the words of Meyendorf was: "What can we do to meet this need of our brethren?" In the 1970s membership in SYNDESMOS was extended to Theological Institutions in order to allow the youth of Eastern Europe, where the existence of youth movements was prohibited, to participate in SYNDESMOS life. The Fins, to give another example, although not having brothers and sisters from the Oriental Orthodox Churches amongst themselves, were fighting the most for their rights. Western Orthodox initiated in the 1990s youth leadership training courses in Eastern Europe, recognizing the urgent needs of the local Churches. All this happened because these people were asking themselves: "What can we do to meet this need of our brethren?" Because this is surely how the Christian thinks in whatever state he is.

### **2. SYNDESMOS functions with the blessing of the local Churches, not under their control**

**SYNDESMOS by nature may not be controlled by any one of the local Orthodox Churches because it includes members coming from all of them. SYNDESMOS is of the Orthodox Church. Its ecclesial basis derives from the fact that it continuously seeks to receive the blessing of all local Orthodox churches, that its membership includes exclusively youth organizations and theological institutions that function with the blessing of their local Bishop, and that wherever SYNDESMOS organizes an activity this is done with the blessing of the local Bishop. However, a careful reader of the historical texts above will clearly recognize that nowhere is SYNDESMOS identified with the local Churches.**

Everybody knows that there are differences between the local Orthodox churches. They do not even agree on the same catalogue of Orthodox Autocephalus churches worldwide. If the participants of SYNDESMOS events or Board meetings were always expressing the official opinion of their local church then SYNDESMOS would not exist. After their election, the members of the Board no longer represent their movement, country or local church. They should strive to represent all the Orthodox youth they know throughout the world.



### **3. SYNDESMOS serves the worldwide vision of the ONE Church**

For four decades SYNDESMOS organized very few events each year. However, these were organized by the Board as a whole, by people coming from different countries and jurisdictions. All these events preserved the pan-Orthodox nature of SYNDESMOS. Nobody saw himself or herself as a guest in another's event. Everybody was both guest and host everywhere in the world knowing that "here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Hebr. 13: 14).

In recent years, we have started organizing a lot of events each year. Very often, however, several of these events preserved a strong local character. At the same time, Orthodox people, and soon SYNDESMOS members, developed a regional self-consciousness (for example, in the Balkan peninsula, North America, the Middle East, Western Europe and Northern Europe).

**Initially this seemed to be a positive development, but soon it proved to threaten seriously the very existence of SYNDESMOS by introducing a new mode of division that is all the more dangerous for its seeming harmlessness. In 2000 only 3 out of 16 members of the Board of SYNDESMOS participated in and organized events outside of their own region. In many cases our youth fulfils its need for living pan-Orthodox Unity by participating in a regional substitute for SYNDESMOS life, decorated by a few guests from other regions.**

**There is an urgent need to return to the experience of the ONE worldwide SYNDESMOS family. This is a call to the youth from all over the world to experience the authentic vision of SYNDESMOS, in which they will be deeply inspired and will dedicate themselves to inspire other youth in their local churches towards the same vision. Only then people will be sensitive enough to understand the problems of their brethren everywhere in the world. "What comes upon me daily: the deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not burnt with indignation?" (2 Cor. 11: 28-29)**

#### **4. SYNDESMOS works in neglected fields of Church life**

**When in the 1950s and 1960s SYNDESMOS worked on "external mission", the local Orthodox churches were doing very little in this field. SYNDESMOS contributed significantly to moving things forward and today several local churches have organized structures that constantly support the missionary churches. When SYNDESMOS spoke openly in the 1960s against the canonical irregularity of jurisdictions in the "Diaspora" nobody was officially accepting to discuss the issue. Today it is a core part of an official, permanent dialogue among local Orthodox churches. Furthermore, official dialogue between the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches was also initiated long after SYNDESMOS introduced the participation of youth from the Oriental Orthodox churches into its life. Today, we are called to interpret the spirit of the SYNDESMOS tradition and not just to try to imitate its past. International events that may be organized by a member movement are highly valued and should be promoted by SYNDESMOS. But they are not true SYNDESMOS events. SYNDESMOS should always seek to identify new needs, not prioritized by the local churches, and to take initiatives by showing ways to meet these needs. When this is done and once local churches themselves begin to meet these needs, the role of SYNDESMOS finishes. This is SYNDESMOS's service to the Church. Otherwise it risks becoming a para-ecclesiastical organization.**

#### **5. SYNDESMOS, a prophetic voice, a voice of freedom and independence**

**At a glance, one understands that SYNDESMOS was never hesitating to touch burning issues. Its word is bold and clear. There is no hesitation to "put the finger into the print of the nails" (John 20:25). There is no compromise. Of course, what we say is extremely important, but how we say it is important too, if we want our word to be constructive.**

**Lately we pay too much attention to be smooth and pleasant. SYNDESMOS should always continue working under the blessing of the Church, but should also retain its freedom and independence. I dream of a SYNDESMOS who acts in the Church like a mature teenager within a family. Challenging everything with respect. Making small revolutions. Struggling for renewal.**

**One may say that SYNDESMOS is too old for this. If SYNDESMOS is or has become 'of this world' then it grows old, it partakes in the corruption of the world, it tastes with pleasure the sinful power of this world and will soon die. If it is part of the Body of the Church, then it partakes in the mystery of the Church that is always kept new and youthful. Times change, challenges change, our responses change, our activities change, but "Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebr. 13: 8). So is the Church and so too should be SYNDESMOS. God has entrusted to us the responsibility of SYNDESMOS. Let us pray that His mercy will not allow us to be proved unworthy of this trust.**

#### **6. SYNDESMOS of humbleness**

**SYNDESMOS was always humble, powerless and poor. But Lord's "strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12: 9). This was the price of freedom and independence, and a price that is worthy to pay. Several administrations in the past have tried to change this, as it is difficult to resist the temptation of the easier life of an established organization. But thanks to God they failed. Lately, this temptation has come back more strongly. Some people who have a great estimation of high status try to achieve such status for SYNDESMOS. In several cases a false witness of the SYNDESMOS spirit is given to young people who experience SYNDESMOS life for the first time. SYNDESMOS should remain humble. Otherwise it will lose its spiritual value and its existence will become meaningless.**

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