

A Syndesmos summer

Hildo Bos, SYNDESMOS acting President

When we came together as Board in Athens last November, we found ourselves facing a paradoxical task. We could look back at a successful summer, with events involving nearly 300 Orthodox youth from all over the world. Yet at the same time, our principal task was to respond to the difficulties that urged SYNDESMOS President Manos Koumbarelis to withdraw from office a year ago. It was the first time that we were meeting since his resignation, so it was imperative to analyse and respond to this unprecedented move. We were very thankful to have his resignation letter as a guide for our exploration.

We owe much to our ex-President. Much of the success of last summer is his accomplishment. Manos had drafted a three-year action plan that served as the framework for the events in 2001. He sought funding for several events and helped to find venues and speakers. Upon his request, the Head of an Autocephalous Church, Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, agreed to spend three days with the youth at the Festival in France. He also agreed to lead the event on Trikeri Island. In withdrawing from office, Manos has remained faithful to the Fellowship.

A successful summer?

A lot has happened this summer. Three hundred youth from nearly all continents and local Churches met through SYNDESMOS. But what do these activities mean for the Orthodox Church, its unity and its youth? How is SYNDESMOS doing? When Manos resigned, he wrote: *'If I were to continue as the head of this administration until 2003, some good programmes would doubtless be reported to the next Assembly and everybody would be more or less satisfied. I believe that this can happen without me.'* So has anything been achieved besides 'some good programmes'?

First of all, last summer's events were youth movements' events. Most participants were active members of SYNDESMOS member movements or other Orthodox youth groups. There was much enthusiasm, too. For most events there were so many applications that we had to select! Most participants were not just individuals. They could witness about what they had experienced in their local movements and Churches and. This, in its turn, has widened interest in SYNDESMOS, pan-Orthodox co-operation and youth work.

Also, more movements sent participants. It is a hopeful sign that more youth movements are interested to meet each other through SYNDESMOS. This also indicates that our events coincide with the interest of member movements. Active non-member youth groups were attracted as well. 25% of the movements that sent participants to SYNDESMOS events were not members! This may be a first result of the concerted effort of the General Secretariat to communicate better with the members. Staying in touch with a fellowship of 126 movements up-to-date is no small task! Building the network will be one of the main tasks of the Secretariat and the Board in 2002.

A third significant result regards the people who organised the events. Over the past years, SYNDESMOS had great difficulties finding volunteers to organise international exchanges of Orthodox youth. By inviting young people to contribute to the life of SYNDESMOS, and by carefully listening to their ideas, the organisers of this summer's events have stimulated new leaders to appear. It is heart-warming to see how many people are willing to contribute to the life of SYNDESMOS! When SYNDESMOS was established nearly 50 years ago, one delegate said: *'We have given birth to our common child, SYNDESMOS. May it be so loved by us that it will unite all of us together.'* ¹ Today like then, young men and women are full of love for the Church, full of desire to serve and act. For the first time in several years, a new generation of active SYNDESMOS workers is appearing.



...before...

SYNDESMOS Festival 2001

Apart from SYNDESMOS events, there are many fruits, too. Every year we see more exchanges between youth groups that have met through SYNDESMOS. Following last

year's pilgrimage to Romania, a youth pilgrimage was organised by Romanians and French youth this summer. Recent exchanges between Finnish, Lebanese, Greek, French and English youth all originated from first contacts at SYNDESMOS events. This shows a deepening fellowship among Orthodox youth groups.

A last fruit worth mentioning is awareness about SYNDESMOS itself. The withdrawal of our President did not go by unnoticed. At the Festival in France, there were several informal discussions about SYNDESMOS and the challenges facing it. Many participants preferred discussing this to spending free time at the terrace. From these discussions, several things transpired: a deep love towards our Fellowship, the desire to preserve its unique role as a witness to Orthodox unity, and above all: commitment to its vision. More important than the direct outcome (the Statement of the Festival) was an increased consciousness about SYNDESMOS' vision of the Church based on the Orthodox *'way of life founded in eucharistic communion, in the Gospel, and in patristic teaching, for witness and service to the world.'*² A new generation of youth workers is willing to see through SYNDESMOS, *'the whole perspective on 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'*.³



...and after...

Challenges

So is all well with SYNDESMOS and its activities? No. Links between our movements have grown stronger, but SYNDESMOS is not the strong network it has been in the past. More member movements took part in summer events, but still only 42 out of 126 were represented. Two out of three SYNDESMOS movements have not sent anyone to this year's events. The picture becomes even more distressing when we look at cross-regional exchange. When events are organised in a certain region, few people (less than one out of three participants) travel to other regions. Likewise, few Board members organise events outside their own region.

There are many explanations for this. There is of course the financial factor, which prevents many students from travelling and paying participation fees. There are linguistic and political factors, such as visa restrictions. But there are deeper factors as well. We discover that deeper co-operation at a regional level - which we welcome - has unexpected effects on the 'whole perspective of the ONE Church' in SYNDESMOS. Manos analyses this as follows:

'Influenced by a recent secular trend of strengthening international bonds among neighbouring countries with common social characteristics (regions), Orthodox people, and soon SYNDESMOS members, developed a regional self-consciousness. 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 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. A fragmented SYN - DESMOS (= bond of Unity) is nothing but a self-contradictory organisation with no long-term perspective.'

This analysis is important for two reasons. First, it indicates that an exaggerated emphasis on regional co-operation may damage SYNDESMOS as a world fellowship. This is paramount to our ecclesial identity. Even though the Church lives locally, she is ever aware of her universal identity. 'Locally, we proclaim our belief in 'one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. Cross-regional co-operation will be a central concern of the SYNDESMOS Board in 2002 and 2003.

Secondly, there is the notion of a secular trend influencing the Fellowship. As Manos says, 'The world wants to absorb SYNDESMOS.' As a Church organisation we must take this statement seriously. Of course, SYNDESMOS experiences global trends touching the youth in its network. In a society of consumption and self-centeredness, voluntary service ('Freely giving,' Mt. 10,8) is less and less considered a virtue. Often, youth work may be rather associated with salaries and positions.

There is another 'worldly' factor with a serious impact on SYNDESMOS: the place of youth organisations in society. A recent European study indicates a 'disaffection in terms of traditional forms of participation in public life... Youth organisations are feeling the pinch and perceive the need to reinvent themselves.'⁴ In the European Union, only 7% of youth belong to youth organisations. Many SYNDESMOS member organisations struggle with lack of interest and commitment from their members. At the same time, other structures for youth work have appeared that don't fit well into the SYNDESMOS

structure. In many countries, youth work has been fully integrated into parish, diocesan and even patriarchal life. How can SYNDESMOS respond to the wish of parish or diocesan youth centres to take part in its life?

Yet the real challenge of secularisation concerns the nature of SYNDESMOS. Indeed, SYNDESMOS has many characteristics of a worldly organisation. It has members, an office, two paid staff; it is recognised by many secular structures. It has worldly positions such as "President" and "regional Representative". It organises events and publishes books. However, if the essence of its action ceases to be the service of the Church, and if the spirit of the fellowship ceases to be ecclesial, SYNDESMOS will be like 'salt without flavour' or a 'tree without good fruit' (Mt. 5,13; 7,19).

It is not the first time that external, 'worldly' factors threaten the life of SYNDESMOS. In 1968, SYNDESMOS President Albert Laham wrote:

'Jesus Christ claims that his mission is to cast fire upon the earth. This fire has come and it is burning. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of grace and truth, of peace and joy, of justice and all embracing love. This Spirit has come. And where He breathes, there is freedom. "For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

The organisation SYNDESMOS exists to be a "bond" which binds together many men and movements in the single unity of the one divine Spirit, in the single burning flame of the one divine Fire. As a World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, SYNDESMOS takes its name from the apostolic words: "be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond (- syndesmos -) of peace" 5

The world is not in peace. Neither is it in unity. The spirit of this world, which burns from the black ghettos of Chicago to the streets of Paris, from the Holy Land in the Middle East to the jungles of Africa, this spirit is not the Spirit of unity and peace. It is not a bond which can pacify and unite. It is a barrier which can only divide and destroy.

But the firm belief of SYNDESMOS, and its only reason for existence, is that there is a Spirit, not as this world gives, which is a power, a unity and a peace. There is a Spirit which can burn in men and movements and can empower them to go beyond every spirit of this world. This is the Spirit which Christ gives, the fire which He has cast upon the earth. And SYNDESMOS desires, as its only consuming desire, to be alive and burning with this spiritual fire.'

The way ahead

'May SYNDESMOS be so loved by us that it will unite all of us together.' SYNDESMOS is not a bureaucratic institution. SYNDESMOS is a fellowship of youth organisations that wish to work together out of love of the Church and her youth. Our administrative structure serves to consolidate our bond of peace : *'Ours is not a God of confusion, but of peace.'* 6

Over the coming two years, the SYNDESMOS Board and Secretariat will work to the best of their capacities to strengthen the fellowship among our member movements. In 2002, every single movement will be contacted personally. Special emphasis will be

made to visits to regions where few movements participate in SYNDESMOS. We will also ask member movements how they see their participation, and whether their absence from SYNDESMOS indicates that they no longer wish to belong to it. We will also work to make the General Secretariat a more efficient nucleus of pan-Orthodox communication, by increasing staff capacity, maximum use of the web page and by progressively disclosing the treasures of our archives.

In our activities, the thematic emphasis will be on areas where the Churches or our member movements alone find it hard to advance. Central, as always, will be Youth and Orthodox Unity. The programmatic emphasis will be on quality, involvement of youth movements and preparation of a new generation of leadership.

At our Board meeting in Athens, studying Manos' concerns and evaluating our fellowship, we discovered that we all share a common wish. We dream of a XVIIth General Assembly that will be a spiritual highlight, a joyous encounter of Orthodox youth from all over the world, a solid forum where the real issues facing the Church may be addressed. We hope for a 50th anniversary that will be celebrated by a new generation of young Orthodox, well prepared and ready for their task. We believe that God will protect the continuous miracle of SYNDESMOS, as He has for fifty years. We know that SYNDESMOS will always remain youthful:

*'Unchanged is the thirst of our youth for honesty, for meaning in their life and for an aim and hope in their daily labour. Always is a time for recollection. This moment is a time for recommitment. All SYNDESMOS members need dedication, but for the board of administration self-denial is required.'*⁷

We hope that our Board will bring some fruits of this self-denial to our next General



Assembly!

- 1 Fr **Erkki Piironen**, **Sevres 1953**
- 2 **Art. 2.d, SYNDESMOS Constitution**
- 3 Fr. **Anastasios Yanoulattos** at the **6th SYNDESMOS General Assembly, 1964**
- 4 **EC White Paper on Youth, Brussels 2001, p.10**
- 5 Eph. 4,3
- 6 1 **Cor.** 14, 33
- 7 **Ioannis Lappas**, a participant in the 1949 meeting where **SYNDESMOS** was prepared, 1999