

PASTORAL HEALTH CARE OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

Concluding Thoughts of the 1st International Conference for Pastoral Health Care of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

Upon decision of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the first “International Conference for Pastoral Health Care of the Ecumenical Patriarchate” was successfully organized in Rhodes, Greece, between the 8th and the 12th of October 2008. President of the Coordinating Committee was His Eminence, Kyrillos, Metropolitan of Rhodes. Abundant and generous hospitality was offered to the participants by the Rodos Palace Hotel, who hosted its guests at its Convention Center.

There were one hundred seventy participants in the Conference from throughout the world. They were priests, doctors and others who provide care in the sensitive area of health. They came from Metropolises which belong, spiritually and administratively, to the Patriarchate. There were also representatives from the Churches of Cyprus, Greece and Albania, and organizations related to pastoral, medical and hospital care. Also in attendance were the Deans of the Schools of Theology of Athens, Thessalonica, Boston, and representatives from Ecclesiastical Academies and the Theological School of Munich. Official representatives also participated from the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, the Church of England and the Committee of Scottish Chaplains of the Churches of Scotland.

The Conference provided the participants with an opportunity to discuss the difficulties in pastoral health care, both on a theoretical and a practical level.

The theoretical level was centered on the “theological” identity of our ministry. The presentations and the discussions reconfirmed the significant position that philanthropy, and especially the care for the sick, held throughout all of the history of the Church, before and after

the Fall of Constantinople. Prime examples are the monasteries of the “Pantocrator”, that of the “Life Giving Spring” (“Zoodoxo Pygi”) and the Hospital of Baloukli. Philanthropy is not an obligation to be practiced. It is to be accomplished as a prophetic act, an act which reveals an *other way* of understanding things, a way of existence that is inspired by the philanthropic Incarnation of Christ (i.e. to have the other’s affliction become an element of your life), and, the Triunity of God (i.e. the communion of persons as being unique and precious (ὡς μοναδικῶν καὶ πολύτιμων). This *way* springs out of the expression of Love, as it is lived within the Eucharistic Community. Because of this, each therapeutic effort should not be based on a “spirituality” that is utilitarian, and especially individual in character, but should call all the members of the community to a healthy physical (σωματική) and spiritual (ψυχική) relational communion within the love of the Holy Spirit. It was emphasized that pain and suffering can not be confined to any definition, as well as to any objective evaluation. It is not possible to express the meaning of pain with language, as its limits are always confined to our tangible world and to scientific authentication. The witness of the experience of the Church proclaims the good news that the answers regarding pain are obtained within the knowledgeable experience of a loving relationship in conjunction with the struggle for human freedom.

On a practical basis, the need for special education and further training of the priests who minister to the sick was discussed. This need arises from the fact that illness is a multidimensional and complex human condition that requires sensitive management by those that provide pastoral health care. It was emphasized that the Theological Schools can take on a leading role in this direction, finding new methods of implementing practical training. It was also emphasized that there is a need to have more clergy meetings which center on themes that are related to pastoral work among the sick.

Additionally, the participants in the Conference were apprised to international developments in caring for the sick on a medical and pastoral level. They also discussed the need for all who are involved in pastoral care to form a close working relationship with doctors, nurses, social workers and other health care providers. Views were exchanged regarding the role of the priest in the hospital and the problems that he

encounters in his ministry. The participants of the Conference examined the tendencies of medical care today regarding the cancer patient, those that suffer from neurological illnesses, together with the child who is sick, and the elderly. All of these discussions verified the fact that the sick person, (due to the way of life of post-modern society and the way medical and hospital care is developing) is becoming even more isolated in his or her home environment. Thus, they are in need of more attentive care, that they not become detached from the ecclesiastical community.

One of the themes with which the participants dealt was the challenges of bioethics in relation to theology and the practice of pastoral care in the Church. During the deliberations, there was a great interest in matters regarding child bearing and birth. Further, the participants expressed the desire to explore end of life issues at the next conference.

A special session was devoted to the problems resulting from psychological exhaustion and stultification (“burn out syndrome”) of healthcare providers (priests and laymen). Those attending the conference sought more effective ways in offering support to those who serve in this area.

Lastly, the participants expressed the wish for His-All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to bless the formation of an Orthodox “network” of pastoral care. This network will afford the opportunity to all who participate:

- To support on another in the care they offer to the sick
- To share their difficulties
- To benefit from each others knowledge and experience
- To promote and develop high quality pastoral health care

It was decided that the results of the Conference be submitted to His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, who blessed the Conference and stressed its importance in his Patriarchal Salutation. Thus the Mother Church may evaluate and utilize them as she sees fit.

All the participants in the Conference expressed their appreciation and gratitude to His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for blessing the convening of the Conference. Parallel to this, they also spoke of their enthusiasm for this pioneering effort, which was most profitable in a variety of ways, and asked that the blessing for such future conferences again be granted.

Rodos,
October 12, 2008