

SEVEN YEARS OF PATRIARCHAL SERVICE IN THE AFRICA OF THE 21st CENTURY

«The life of a Patriarch, his sacrifice, his will to love, to give of himself to the people of God, is a great thing and is the key to happiness. The Grace of the All Holy God made us communicants, protectors, guardians, spiritual guides, fathers, brothers, with a will to learn and to travel together with our brothers and sisters who want to believe in Christ; to believe in the Gospel of love, peace and justice».

Turning back time to seven years ago, I recall these words from my Enthronement speech and I think of why 9th October 3004 is a distinct point of reference as well as a defining cutoff point relative to what preceded and what followed. Turning back time seven years, I remember these words and recalculate the burden of my mission: to carry on with the continual Patriarchal service and contribution to the Christians of the Alexandrian Church.

From the beginning, this mission held a double challenge: the preservation of the historic continuance as well as the promotion of missions. On the one hand the focus was on anxiety and on the other hard work was the order of the day to guard promote and express today the heritage of the Second Throne Church, as it was bequeathed to it by the first Bishop of Alexandria, the Apostle and Evangelist Mark, as it has extended over the ages as a principal and stand in life.

The products of this sacred tradition are the works of people who, even though they were often ridden by terrible blows, even though they often suffered adverse harshness, worked hard to maintain the material and spiritual independence of the Alexandrian Church at all costs.

Some may wonder at the feasibility of undertaking renovation works and the uplifting of the Patriarchal See, the Patriarchal Library, the Holy Patriarchal Monastery of St Savvas in Alexandria, the Holy Patriarchal Monastery of St George in Cairo, the Greco-Roman Aqueducts in the basement of the Patriarchal Mansion. They will need to consider that history will judge our negligence if we do not preserve the experiences, the knowledge and the skills of the past, as they were imprinted on the monuments which are being renovated. They will need to consider that future generations will judge us on our improvidence if we do not preserve the first materials which they will use to transform their particular profiles.

It is true that the difficulties and the struggles were and are many: evaluation of priorities, securing of necessary funding, issuing of necessary permits, supervision of the work as it develops, maintenance of the patina of time from the onslaught of modernization. However, nothing can compare with satisfaction one feels when seeing a restored manuscript, an icon maintained, a place of worship returned to its rightful beneficiary, the flock of the East.

The flock which, despite the dramatic change in historic parameters, does not lower the banner of Orthodoxy. My flock, despite the overthrow in population data, does not deliver the keys to Orthodox tradition. The flock which, amid the sweeping changes of an Arab spring, maintains its active mark on the local communities.

And if the flock of the East reflects through its presence the historic continuance which powerfully intersects the present, the flock of Africa reflects through its missions the powerful opening of the present towards the future. On this field the challenge was already known to me from my service in Cameroon and

Zimbabwe and it was none other than how, within a different cultural environment one can transform a viable, self-administrating, self-sustaining expanding indigenous ecclesiastical organization on the standard of the first Apostolic Churches. On this field anxiety had already been experienced; it simply took on other dimensions and these were how the seed of the Word of the Gospel would be productive on a continent which in the past suffered a great deal from the enforcements of colonialists and imperialistic politicians.

Having the great privilege of always being surrounded by elite Hierarchs, sacrificially dedicated to their valuable service, I worked towards establishing in the African conscience that the Church is the Body of Christ and not just another philanthropic organization. For this reason, during my travels throughout Africa, immediate priority was given to the deepening of the message of Orthodoxy wherever there are willing ears and open hearts, even in simple grass huts or under the shade of trees.

It is true that insurmountable issues arise with the organization, funding and staffing of missions, the education of executives, translation into local dialects of holy and liturgical texts and underlying comparisons. These issues have always existed and will always exist, because mission means contribution through the administration of a viable and above all fluid and mutable reality in all 55 countries which make up the African continent.

That is why our efforts were not centred solely on existing structures, but also on their extension and multiplication where new needs are created. To this end the Episcopal Constitution of the Alexandrian Church is being transformed in order that the pioneers can work more effectively to contribute to the healing of post-civil war wounds in Rwanda and Sierra Leone, or to the flourishing of the Orthodox message in the fertile ground of the resurgent South Sudan.

In every instance the condition was set and is constant – the removal of the contracts of the developed world and immediate contact and communication through terms of respect with the particular African psychology. Another condition set and continually being set is the surpassing of the social and cultural barriers, without this implying the removal of our African brothers and sisters from their cultural particularity.

Naturally the objective aim was and remains the presentation of Orthodox faith in a comprehensible manner, with the hope that those approached, as individuals or as an entirety, will freely and consciously choose to embrace Orthodoxy as the way to salvation. As such, Orthodox mission was and remains simultaneously a parameter for broader changes because Orthodoxy does not forget that Africa includes the overwhelming majority of the poorest people globally.

That is why existing created missionary cells, over and above the sowing of the Gospel truth, also strives towards the creation of structures to promote economic development, alternative productive agricultural agents, literacy, education, hygiene care, the creation of charitable institutions and giving humanistic aid discreetly.

An inflexible point over the past years was the principle that under no circumstances was coming to Orthodoxy a prerequisite. And this is because it is a common point for missionary workers that easing human distress and human pain is an expression of the unselfish love of the living image of God, which is man.

Completing the thoughts which are in my mind on this day on which I contemplate the seven years which have passed since 9th October 2004, I conclude that hope and vision, even if their path is filled with difficulties and obstacles,

will always find ways to express and realize, even under the most trying of circumstances. Hope and vision can be summarized in the triptych: total preservation of Orthodox Apostolic heritage, its organized implantation into the African earth which thirsts for spiritual regeneration and through it a transformation of the lives of the African people.

Reefs and rocks will always lie in wait along life's journeys. They do not frighten us; on the contrary they intensify the ability to overcome them. My sole concern remains, from that moment that Divine Providence reserved for me the responsibility of continuing the witness as Supervisor of the Alexandrian Church of St Mark, the safe steering of her ship into the constantly changing world of the 21st century.

† Theodoros II of Alexandria