



Metropolitan Alexander visits a classroom in 2006.

## LIVING TRADITION

# Mission and Culture

## Metropolitan Alexander of Nigeria

"I, John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches.'" (Rev. 1:9–11)

I begin with these verses from Revelation because in these verses I can trace the beginning of my journey from my own "Patmos," the place where I will be so bold as to say that I am certain that God, after first preparing me through a painful process, deconstructed me. He razed everything that

I took as a given or as self-evident, everything I considered sacred, and everything which, with great audacity, I thought that he and history had laid on my shoulders. He deconstructed me, and with the pieces, these stones, he refashioned me as he wanted and as I myself could have never imagined. He made me aware of what is meant by "I have become all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:22), a Jew to the Jews a Greek to the Greeks. At the risk of being labeled and pigeonholed, I would even venture to say that I now know that the ultimate meaning of my ministry as a bishop of the African Church is derived from my ecclesiastical identity and not from any of the various other identities that I inherited, which, without discounting them,

This address was first presented at the conference "Church and Culture" at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Greece, in May 2009. It appears in *The Wheel* by kind permission of Metropolitan Alexander and the Volos Academy. The English version of the conference proceedings is being prepared for publication by Volos Academy Publications.

have nonetheless been relativized. This *kenosis*, as painful as it may be, is the fruit of freedom, loving openness, and an attempt at participation in the *kenosis par excellence*, that *kenosis* which went so far as to take “the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), even unto the Cross.

That’s why I feel that these verses from Revelation capture something about me. It’s as if they were written by me or about me. They marked a new turn in my ecclesiastical journey toward my “real life.” They led me to a new homeland, or better, to the true homeland. Even if one is painfully called “to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11), it will always be true for him that “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that it holds, the world, and all who live in it.”<sup>1</sup>

The voice of the Lord, who said “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches,” is what has led me to write what follows. It is not a treatise with a plethora of references and a claim to authenticity, but an attempt to walk with you and to guide you to my own Patmos, so that you

can know it and feel it, and be convinced that you can fertilize its soil, in the hope that, if you really want to, or if you can bear it, you can taste its fruit. I write as a fellow bishop, a fellow presbyter, and as a fellow struggler, but first and foremost as an African. This is why my reflections will take the form of a narrative, which is what we use to express even the most exalted concepts.

\*\*\*

My place, Africa, is a part of creation. It was built by the same God who also created you. His Spirit, just as it did in the places you live, created people who speak, who converse, who communicate in their own languages and their own codes, which are different from yours. People who laugh, who cry, who worry, who express their feelings with words, music, dance, painting, and all that we call art. People who were organized from the beginning in groups with their own norms, their own moral values, and people who—with great respect for these principles—created communities. People who think, who deliber-

<sup>1</sup> Ps. 24[23]:1, *The Psalter*, trans. Monks of New Skete (Cambridge, NY: New Skete, 1984), 33–34.

Hierarchical Divine Liturgy in Anambra, Nigeria, 2007.



ate, who have an attitude toward life, people with a philosophy. People who preserved and transmitted the experiences and achievements of their ancestors by word of mouth, from generation to generation, with respect, a sense of responsibility, and reverence. People who created tradition. In other words, people who created cultures. Different from yours, but cultures nonetheless. People who believed deeply in God the Father and creator, and who expressed their faith in their own way, through rituals and interpreters of their own spiritual world, their own emotions, and experiences. People, that is, who worshipped the divine, who “performed a liturgy” to the divine, who “brought an offering,” who sacrificed, who lustrated and were lustrated through them. People who undertook a painstaking search for the truth hidden from the foundation of the world, having “this conviction [implanted in them] by innate ideas.”<sup>2</sup> These, too, were forerunners of the revelation that was to be given—“Christians in fact, if not in name,” just as Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius of Caesarea understood the Greeks as having had the “spark” of the divine word.<sup>3</sup> Also within these people, and within all their works, is the breath of God, God’s glory, His uncreated energies, which embrace every form of life and existence, inasmuch as “in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35).

And it also came to us “in the fullness of time.” Your own people—from which of your homelands did they come to our lands? They brutally assaulted our people, our souls, and all the things that we created over many centuries and which we had preserved with great reverence. They came to take whatever they

could, however they could. With them came missionaries, who spoke to us for the first time about some God, unknown to us, who said that he was the true God, and they called on us to believe. They came and brought with them different traditions, different ways of approaching things.

Finally, you Orthodox also came, very late, to our lands, bringing what you saw, what you heard, and what your hands had touched (1 John 1:1), the “real Truth,” a God incarnate in space and time, a particular space and time, in a specific historical and cultural environment. And we believed in him, in his cross, in his resurrection, and in his victory over death, in the life that sprang from his grave, like the rivers that gush from our mountains, quenching the thirst and rejuvenating those who are parched from the hot sun of the desert, as well as all creation.

And we are truly grateful for what you brought us, for what you have conveyed to us. The fact that we—the church which sojourns in Nigeria, represented in my person—are with you here today is only because you have now remembered, however belatedly, the forgotten commandment to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). How can anyone forget that handful of people who first ventured out on a heroic “exodus” and placed themselves at the mercy of God, who responded to his call to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12:1–4)? And now we are—together in one body, the Body of Christ—partakers of “one bread and one cup,” participants in the kingdom of God.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel* 2.6, trans. Edwin H. Gifford (Oxford, 1903), [https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius\\_pe\\_02\\_book2.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_pe_02_book2.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.4.6, trans. Kirsopp Lake (London: William Heinemann, 1926), 41–43; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.17, trans. in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 12:393.



But now our turn has come to preach to our people, those both near and far from the Truth. To manifest the Church, here and now, within the parameters of our own culture—that is, the continuing incarnation of God, the continuing assumption of the created into the manner [*tropos*] of existence of the uncreated. If the Church, as we believe, is the Body of Christ or Christ extended through the ages, this means that Christ is present in history, that he has flesh; “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Christ himself wants “to realize fully the mystery of his incarnation always and everywhere.”<sup>4</sup> If we accept the truth of these words, then we are led ineluctably to the conclusion that the truth and the life, Christ and his Church, must be clothed at every moment in the cultural flesh of the world, the characteristics of each people. The flame of Pentecost, which did away with linguistic, national, and cultural barriers, continues to burn. Every moment, every minute is a Pentecost. It is a new descent of the Holy Spirit, which does not belong exclusively to one culture or one people and their expressions.

The fact that the Gospel is clothed in the flesh of the world means that not only does it not reject any culture from the outset, but rather that it is grafted into the existing culture with the goal of transforming it, “Christifying” it and “Churchifying” it. Because what is not assumed is not healed and is not saved. Yes, there are some parts of culture that it will not be able to retain, that will not bear the light of the gospel, because they contain death and we are talking about resurrection and life. These parts of culture we ourselves are the first to reject, with whatever cost this entails.

You have lived in Christ, or at least you claim you have, for nearly two thousand years. You built a grand structure. You theologized, sang praises, worshiped, and created art. In the process, you even used parts of your culture, categories of thought and expressions unknown to the biblical language (John’s *Logos*, the fathers’ *homoousion*), and symbols and practices of worship taken from the rituals of your ancestors. You took them, transformed them, and then composed and created—and not always easily.

Today we face a new reality. The Church of God has opened itself up to the whole universe. This is the Church to which you belong, but also the same one to which we belong, along with Asians, Aleuts, Latin Americans, and many others. We are following in the wake of a change, a shift in Christianity’s center of gravity, from the rapidly de-Christianizing West to the countries you refer to as the Third World, a world which has recently emerged from the demonic domination of colonialism and is trying to regroup and rediscover—to the extent possible—its stolen identity, relying on its own inner strength to move forward.

This process—as well as a correct and unbiased reading of the gospel—make imperative a new incarnation of the Church, its re-expression in our own categories of thought. The time has come, I think, for us to move forward in creating a truly African Church. This does not imply distancing ourselves from the dogmatic teaching of the Church, from the truth, from the gospel, but rather that we can—and indeed must—depart from imported ways of *expressing* the faith, the truth, and the gospel. Many take exception to this; others remain reserved and skeptical. I would agree that the attempt, especially at the re-expression of theology, is particu-

<sup>4</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Περὶ διαφορῶν ἀποριῶν*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86) [hereafter PG], 91:1084c–d.



Metropolitan Alexander poses with families after a baptismal Divine Liturgy, 2007.

larly difficult and fraught with danger. However, we cannot understand this need at a theoretical level and then resist the renewing breath of the Holy Spirit, which wants and seeks new incarnations.

\* \* \*

The center of our ecclesiastical life is our worship. I could say a lot about this, but space does not permit it. So I will just say two things.

The manner of our worship, what we use today, are garments woven from your own cultural fabric. It is all yours: the architecture, painting, hymnography, music, vestments, services, prayers, symbols, attitudes; they are all yours.

What incarnation, then, can we Orthodox in Africa today talk about? Which parts of our culture or cultures are used in the garments of our own Church? Why can't the African Church have its own liturgical form, an expression of its own character? Did it not have one in the past, or is the creation of new liturgical forms

heretical? Why should it forever use the hymnography, which, while truly remarkable, was produced in centuries past, so far removed from our own souls, our own hearts? Why must Byzantine and Russian music be the music of our assemblies? Does it express us? Does it speak to our hearts? Is our character expressed in these?

Why do we import wine for the Holy Eucharist from Greece, considering it the most proper? Where is the offering of our gifts, our own gifts, which we made with our own hands to offer back to their creator? And what would happen if we didn't produce wine and instead produced other products? Why, at our memorial services, can we not incorporate something from our tradition of honoring the dead, our ancestors? You consider libations on the graves of the dead and in their memory to be a pagan custom. Your rituals in front of a tombstone, a statue, the unknown soldier—aren't these another libation?

Why does the marriage blessing not include parts of our own traditional African marriage? Can a traditional

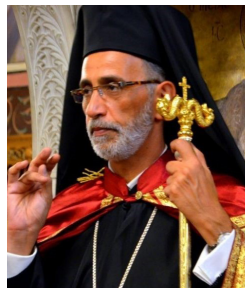
marriage not develop into an ecclesiastical service? Many traditional African weddings culminate in the partaking of wine, palm wine, from a common cup. The invocation of the presence of God (the divine) in the life of the couple is an integral part of these ceremonies. But let's stop there.

I will not shy away from saying plainly that we are suffocating under the pressure of this imported tradition, a tradition which is nevertheless respected by all and which we must thoroughly study so that we can proceed to the creation of our own tradition. Because we must move on. We will not allow the flame of Pentecost to be extinguished, but we will run the risk of being "burned" to the point that, out of our own ashes, a true African church can be born. And we must do it so that, at the time of judgment before the throne of God in the New Jerusalem at the eschaton, we, too, with all the other nations, can present our own glory (Rev. 21:24–26).

\*\*\*

Finally, let me make a personal comment. You are all charismatic people. God has endowed you with a sharp mind, prudent thinking, lively speech, inspiration, creativity, deep faith, love for him and his Church, humility, and simplicity. Give us your talents. "For coming into the universe, you helped us." What you are, what you do, what you say and write—please realize that it is not your achievement. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Do not be afraid to recognize that. Open yourselves up to the calls and challenges of God and history. "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches" today, here and now (Rev. 3:22)! Express the concerns of the new churches. Let your pens record our concerns. Let your steps blaze new trails for the theology of tomorrow. Perhaps you will be condemned, perhaps we will be condemned, for modernism. But don't forget the words of Gregory the Theologian: "Modernists are what the presumptuous call the prudent."<sup>5</sup> ✱

<sup>5</sup> Gregory the Theologian, "Περί τὸν ἑαυτοῦ βίον," PG 37:1152, lines 1760–61.



The Most Rev. Metropolitan **Alexander (Gianniris)** is Archbishop of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Niger. He studied agriculture at the University of Athens and theology at the University of Thessaloniki. Following his ordination in 1988, he served in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg and Pretoria. He was consecrated by Patriarch Peter VII of Alexandria in 1997 and has served the faithful of West Africa for the past twenty-four years.