

For the Life of the World: Conscience and Discernment

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For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church is a social doctrine statement prepared by a commission of Orthodox scholars appointed by His All-Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and chaired by Archdeacon John Chryssavgis.¹ The team of scholars who collaborated on the document included David Bentley Hart, George Demacopoulos, Carrie Frederick Frost, Brandon Gallaher, Father Perry Hamalis, Father Nick Kazarian, Aristotle Papanikolaou, Jim Skedros, Gayle Woloschak, Konstantinos Delikostantis, and Theodoros Yiangou. Nicholas Anton served as secretary for the group. Each scholar was responsible for specific sections of the document, and for regularly reading over and contributing to the entirety of the project over a period of three years. The planning and execution involved numerous meetings, conference calls, discussions, and drafts. A guiding principle for this work was careful consideration of the ever-widening gap between the ethos of the early Christian Church and that of the society in which the Church exists today.

The topics and content chosen by the group are those considered most important “for the life of the world.” After writing and editing in English, this document was translated into different languages (including Greek, Ukrainian, Serbian, Arabic, Italian,

Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Romanian) to facilitate its distribution in the Orthodox world and beyond. While the scholars are predominantly North American, the document attempts to consider perspectives from the world over and to avoid a uniquely Western orientation. In addition, the document was written not only as an offering to the Orthodox Church, but also as a means of communicating Orthodox perspectives on these social issues to the broader Christian community. It was endorsed and approved by the Ecumenical Patriarch, and he noted that the document was written “in the spirit and context of the decisions of the Holy and Great Council convened in Crete, with a view to developing, cultivating and disseminating its teaching.” The authors note this link to the Holy and Great Council at the end of the text: “It is the earnest prayer of all who have been associated with this document that what is written here will help to advance the work inaugurated in 2016 by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, and will further aid in fulfilling the will of God in his Church and in the world.” (82)

The document provides perspectives on aspects of Church life that interface with both public and private life. Topics include challenges the Church faces from many different directions: personal and national questions, is-

¹ *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, 2020, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos> (a printed version will be available soon from Holy Cross Orthodox Press). Subsequent citations given in text.



Members of the group present *For the Life of the World* to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople.

sues pertinent for family life, human rights, racial justice, relationships with other faiths, poverty, violence, and science and technology. The approach of the document is gentle and compassionate, emphasizing discernment and conscience as guiding principles to respond to the many social and ethical issues our world faces today. This is in marked contrast to the prescriptive and legalistic documents that have come out from numerous other sources within the Orthodox Church.²

It should be noted that members of the commission expressed concerns about releasing the document at a time when the world is greatly touched by the novel coronavirus pandemic. They worried that the commission might appear tone-deaf to the current tragedy. It should, therefore, be noted that the document was written before the pandemic had even been reported, rendering a response to this specific problem impossible.

This being said, a distinctive quality of the document is a clearly defined effort to decipher social and ethical questions posed by our contemporary

world and address them with balance and compassion. The sections of the document related to social issues such as wealth and poverty, care for those in need, and science and technology touch upon these COVID-19-related matters. The document's general approach to ethics is to insist on the necessity of discernment on a case-by-case basis, and in this way to try to avoid overdrawn formulaic responses that ignore lived experience. Ultimately, just as this document asserts that all humanity is one, this world-wide pandemic reminds us that we are all one species, one endangered body.

Conscience and Discernment

Several distinctions can be noted between this document and other such published documents. As noted above, the emphasis of the text is on conscience and discernment. This is perhaps best reflected in the section on "War and Violence," where the document notes:

Like a contagion, violence's effects spread throughout the "total Adam" and the whole world, often rendering love difficult or even impossible by corrupting human imaginations and severing the fragile bonds of love and trust that bind persons together in community. Every act of violence against another human being is, in truth, violence against a member of one's own family, and the killing of another human being—even when and where inevitable—is the killing of one's own brother or sister. (43)

At the same time, the document later puts forth the idea that there can be times when violent behavior is allowed, even though not necessarily endorsed:

² For example, *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, 2008, <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>. Also see some of the documents from the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in 2016, at <https://www.holycouncil.org/documents>.

And yet the Church knows that it cannot foresee every contingency to which persons or peoples must respond at any given moment, and that in a fallen and broken world there are times when there is no perfectly peaceful means of cultivating peace for everyone. While unequivocally condemning violence of any kind, it nevertheless recognizes the tragic necessity of individuals or communities or states using force to defend themselves and others from the immediate threat of violence. Thus the child facing an abusive family member, the woman facing a violent husband, the law-abiding citizen facing a violent attacker, the bystander witnessing an assault, and the community or nation under attack by a cruel aggressor may decide, in a manner consistent with their faith and with love, to defend themselves and their neighbor against the perpetrators of violence. Self-defense without spite may be excusable; and defense of the oppressed against their oppressors is often a moral obligation; but at times, tragically, neither can be accomplished without the judicious use of force. (45)

This paradoxical approach, stating an ideal and then acknowledging special mitigating circumstances that necessitate non-ideal behaviors or actions, is an approach that carries throughout the document. In each case consideration and contemplation are necessary before appropriate action can be discerned.

Reconciliation, Healing, Love

Reconciliation and healing is another major theme that resonates throughout the text, calling for compassion and understanding rather than legalism. There

is not one section of the text that does not include some discussion of the importance of healing. This is perhaps most evident in the section “Science, Technology, the Natural World”:

The Christian’s mission to transfigure the world in the light of God’s Kingdom is one that reaches out to all of creation, to all of life, to every dimension of cosmic existence. Wherever there is suffering, Christians are called to bring healing as relief and reconciliation. This is why the Church early in its history began founding hospitals open to all persons, and employing such therapies and medicines as were known in their day. (69)

This is true not only for physical healing, but healing and reconciliation of those who suffer mental and emotional anguish, those who’ve perpetrated violence, and those who have been victims of violence: indeed, healing for all those who suffer. The document recognizes that healing is not merely physical, but also has a psychological and spiritual dimension. We seek the healing of all that is broken—the body through illness, the person in relationships, and in all the errors and mistakes that accompany life.

[The Church’s] mission is to manifest the saving love of God given in Jesus Christ to all creation: a love broken and seemingly defeated upon the cross, but shining out in triumph from the empty tomb at Pascha; a love that imparts eternal life to a world darkened and disfigured by sin and death; a love often rejected, and yet longed for unceasingly, in every heart. It speaks to all persons and every society, calling them to the sacred work of transfiguring the world in the light of God’s Kingdom of love and eternal peace. (82)

Pastoral Perspectives

The attitudes reflected in the *Ethos* are not dogmatic nor authoritarian, but rather seek to be pastoral and practical. The document speaks to the problems of our age through a pastoral lens. The legalistic pronouncements of councils and canons, while not ignored, are made softer by loudly proclaiming the compassionate message of Christ's love for the world. The emphasis is on relationships rather than rules, insisting that those relationships should be upright, guided by conscience. It is a text that calls all of humanity to develop right relationships—with God, with ourselves, with each other, with our communities, even with our planet.

Another theme that rings throughout the document is the notion that the world is fallen, and therefore in need of continued transformation. Again, the emphasis is placed on the pastoral dimension, calling the faithful to recognize this fallenness but at the same time to work to change the world through transformative love:

On the path to communion with God, it is humanity's vocation not merely to accept—but rather to bless, elevate, and *transfigure*—this world, so that its intrinsic goodness may be revealed even amidst its fallenness. This is the special purpose of human life, the high priestly calling of creatures endowed with rational freedom and conscience. We know, of course, that this work of transfiguration will never be complete in this life, and can reach its fulfillment only in the Kingdom of God; still, however, our works of love bear fruit in this life, and they are required of all who would enter the life of the age to come (Matt. 25:31–46). (4)

Commentary and Controversy

Those involved in writing this document will all agree that there are aspects of the text that do not necessarily have their approval. To reach total agreement in a text of this type is nearly impossible, particularly with scholars coming from different backgrounds and perspectives. Criticisms have come from all directions and still more are likely to come; those based in dialogue are welcomed by the group. To date, some have expressed that in places the *Ethos* is too liberal and in others it is too conservative. While no document can be divorced from the time in which it is written, the group had no political agenda and indeed discussed the need to be non-political in all aspects.

The section on the right relationship of humanity with creation, particularly as it relates to ecological questions, has been noted by some as playing into political questions. The document is indeed based upon the life-long work done by His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew, who has also received much criticism for his teachings on this issue. This topic sadly remains controversial, even after decades of advocacy by the patriarch and the Church. Another example is a call to revitalize both the male and female diaconate, an issue that will no doubt be controversial in some circles.

Discussions of the relationship of the Church to political ideals have been interpreted by some as over-stepping of the Church's normative boundaries. Nonetheless, the document makes a strong case for the importance of the Church's influence in the public square. This will continue to be an important discussion point for the Church in years to come. The section addressing the relationship of the Or-

thodox Church to other faith traditions was controversial long before it appeared in this document and will no doubt continue to provoke discussion on all sides. Certainly, the discussions on family life, and of beginning-of-life and end-of-life issues, are difficult simply by virtue of the intimate nature of the concerns.

Still others will be disappointed that the document does not provide prescriptions on how to deal with specific questions facing the Church. In general, the *Ethos* as a whole does not seek to provide authoritative reflections on specific topics. Rather, it seeks to provide guidance on how to approach problems with the broad tools that the Church has used throughout its history: discernment, compassion, love, conscience. All of these can and should be applied to the problems of our age as much as they have been applied to all problems throughout the ages. Prescriptions for specific issues would betray this legacy and move the document into the realm of a legal guide to the ills of the world. There is no document that can please everyone, nor was that the intention of this work. The goal as the commission notes is provided at the end:

This commission humbly offers this document to all who are disposed to listen to its counsels, and especially encourages all the Orthodox faithful—clergy and laity, women and men—to engage in prayerful discussion of this statement, to promote the peace and justice it proclaims, and to seek ways in which to contribute in their own local parishes and communities to the work of the Kingdom. . . . The commission also asks Orthodox seminaries, universities, monasteries, parishes, and associated organizations to foster reflection upon this document, to excuse its deficiencies, to attempt to dilate upon its virtues, and to facilitate its reception by the faithful. (82)

It is hoped that continued commentary and dialogue surrounding this document will allow for an even more fruitful deliberation over the demands of the modern world that affect the Church—the difficulties, the common goals that we all desire, and the use of prayer, discernment, reconciliation and healing in service to the world. The Holy Spirit often acts through dialogue and conversation. ✱

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