



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: AN ORTHODOX WITNESS

This spring, *Road to Emmaus* spoke at length with Fr. George Ryabikh, assistant chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and co-moderator of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches. As one of Russia's younger generation of priests, Fr. George's assessment is a refreshingly open critique of the history and process of interfaith dialogue by an experienced Orthodox representative.

RTE: Fr. George, there is often criticism in the conservative Orthodox press and on the internet alleging that Orthodox representatives to interdenominational organizations pray with believers of other faiths, are assisting in the creation of a "super-church," and are sliding down a slope of increasingly liberal ethics. Rarely, though, do we hear from Orthodox representatives themselves. Can you answer some of the assumptions that drift through Orthodox circles, and explain what you are doing in the ecumenical movement and why?

FR. GEORGE: I would like to preface my remarks by saying that I prefer the terms "interfaith" or "inter-Christian contact, cooperation, or relations." If we say "ecumenical movement" we imply a relationship between Christian churches that is directed towards unity based on doctrinal compromise, which is not the case in today's interfaith contact. Inter-Christian dialogue means that we meet, we speak, we cooperate in areas of mutual interest, but church unity, here, is not the immediate purpose. Of course, as Orthodox Christians we hope that one day we will all be reunited as one Christian body, but this is a very distant goal, which can only be based on the teachings of the undivided Church. In the meantime, we discuss our differences and cooperate on projects that do not compromise our beliefs.

Also, I should say that my experience in interfaith relations is somewhat limited. I cannot give a picture of the worldwide movement, as I am not involved in the World Council of Churches (WCC), but in the Conference of European Churches (CEC). This is an assembly that represents European churches of Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and Old Catholic traditions. My perspective is European and this is why my experience in the interfaith movement might be different from someone in another part of the world.

Presently, I am involved in the Commission on Church and Society, one of the major structures of the Conference of European Churches. I am the co-moderator of the commission and I participate in its decision-making process. Our executive committee meets four times a year, and once a year there is a general commission gathering, when representatives of all the European member churches gather, about fifty people.

RTE: Why aren't the Roman Catholics involved?

FR. GEORGE: The Roman Catholic Church has had a policy from the beginning of the interfaith movement not to participate in these organizations, not because they don't want to be involved in the pan-Christian discussions, but because the Catholic Church is a very large world-wide body, and they do not feel that they can be fairly represented by only having one vote, as have the much smaller Protestant denominations.

Structurally, the Orthodox community is closer to the Protestant world because we have regional patriarchates, a family of autonomous Orthodox Churches in which each patriarchate or autocephalous church has a vote. So, for us Orthodox, it is easier to be adequately represented in such organizations. This parallels our participation in the WCC.

RTE: I assumed the reason that the Catholic Church didn't join these interfaith organizations was that, because they believe they are the true Church, they would not want to participate with other churches as equals. This is the same objection leveled by some Orthodox to our participation.

FR. GEORGE: Of course, the Catholic Church sees itself as the true Church, and the Orthodox define themselves in the same way, but this doesn't prevent either from participating in inter-Christian relations. The Catholic Church has always been involved in interchurch dialogue, but in other ways. For instance, they are a member of the WCC Commission on Faith

and Order. They participate here because this assembly existed *before* the founding of the WCC, and they were one of its founding members. They also have Vatican commissions in dialogue with individual churches on a one-by-one basis.

The Roman Catholic Church has always said that they are ready to participate in the WCC and the CEC, but that in fairness they cannot be represented by only one vote, and have suggested that they could have a vote for each archdiocese, which in one sense would be more balanced, as in many cases an archdiocese represents the same number of people as an entire small Protestant body. But since the Catholics are in almost every country of the world, they would have over 200 representatives. Protestants, of course, don't want this, because the Catholics would then have a clear majority. The problem has always been a question of balance. If decisions are taken by the majority, representation needs to be fair. This is the only reason that the Roman Catholic Church does not participate.

The Early Interfaith Movement

RTE: At an Orthodox conference in 2002 in Volos, Greece, Fr. Ioan Sauca, a Romanian Orthodox representative to the World Council of Churches, said: "The WCC doesn't make statements on faith." If it doesn't make statements on faith, what does it make statements on?

FR. GEORGE: To answer your question it is necessary to first speak a bit about the history of the interfaith movement. Of course, this idea of unity was born in the Protestant churches, and in the beginning it was the hope of some active Protestants to gather the different confessions into one "super-church." Much of their discussion before the Second World War centered around this possibility. Participating churches tried to find a doctrinal foundation for unity, but these initial meetings clearly showed that no one was willing to change or modify their doctrines. The gap was particularly large between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches on one side, and the Protestants on the other. It was quickly apparent that it was impossible to come to doctrinal unity.

From the beginning, everyone was engaged in this process of dialogue. The future Russian Patriarch, Tikhon, then a hierarch in America, was very interested in these ideas and talks, as were many other Russian hierarchs

before the Revolution. Hierarchs and clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church who were abroad after the Russian Revolution also participated in these encounters with other confessions, including, among others, Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky and Metropolitan Evlogy Georgievsky. They participated actively and had a very rich experience of dialogue with Protestants and Catholics.

RTE: What did they hope would result?

FR. GEORGE: None of the Orthodox foresaw a specific result. The talks began after centuries of conflict and confrontation between all the churches, so simply sitting down and talking together was a major step. In Europe, for example, the Reformation had been followed by decades of dispute, and then a long period of silence, a lack of contact. There were personal contacts, of course, particularly in the 19th century when Europeans began traveling, and discovered the “other side” as something new and interesting. In Russia, intermarriage with old European families created some sympathy towards Catholicism among our upper classes and nobility.

RTE: Tolstoy portrays that interest in *War and Peace*.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, it was something in the air. We Russians admired the French language and culture, in fact we spoke French at court. Also, at that time many of our artists went to Rome and adopted Italian styles of painting, as well as Enlightenment enthusiasm over classical Rome. Some of our nobility even converted to Catholicism. In addition, we had philosophers like Vladimir Soloviev who were interested in Catholicism. So, these contacts began in the early 19th century, and by the beginning of the 20th century this interest appeared in the hierarchy of the Russian Church.

RTE: I imagine that the contact would have been limited to Russians, as much of Eastern Europe, Greece, and the Christian Middle East were still under Ottoman control and unable to do much more than maintain themselves. It was only the Russian Orthodox who had the opportunity to reach outside their own borders and talk to Christians of other confessions.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, and this interest wasn't limited to Europe and European Christianity. In the 19th century, the Russian Church began ecclesiastical missions at certain neglected historical and archaeological sites in the Holy Land, and this was when they re-contacted the non-Chalcedonian

communities,¹ with whom neither Europe nor the Orthodox had been in touch for a very long time. But all of these contacts were seen as missionary work, a way to show Orthodox tradition, and hope was very strong that this witness would bring the non-Chalcedonian groups back to the fullness of the Church. This was also our hope in our relations with Anglicans. In the Protestant world, the Anglican Church was the closest to Orthodoxy in dogma and practice and many Anglicans and Orthodox had very high expectations of reunion. The Catholics also saw this time as an opportunity to bring Protestants back to Catholicism, so you had the Oxford movement in England, among others.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there seemed to be new openings for Orthodox, Catholics, and Lutherans to proselytize. As I said earlier, there was also a separate, much smaller movement of Protestants who hoped to form an ecumenical “super-church,” and they proposed the model of a



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Christian tree with different branches, of which no branch has the fullness, but that together embody the truth. But the position of every traditional church, Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, was, “We have the truth, and our duty is to witness that truth to the world.” At the beginning of the 20th century there wasn't a single Christian confession who would say, “We don't have the whole truth.” On the contrary, traditional churches used this opportunity of inter-Christian contact to present their own doctrine and vision of relations between Christians.

As for the minority of very conservative, even schismatic, individuals and groups within the Orthodox tradition who, as you mentioned, criticize *any* participation of Orthodox in these meetings, from my perspective these critics often create their own image of the interfaith movement and then try to battle it. It is necessary to have a more realistic picture of such contact,

¹ Non-Chalcedonian communities: Eastern Christian monophysite churches which do not accept the Council of Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council held in 451. The Fathers of the Council condemned the monophysite heresy and taught that there are two natures in Jesus Christ. The Non-Chalcedonian Churches are five: Syriac, Copt, Armenian, Ethiopian and Indian. On-going talks, pointing to past linguistic confusion and a willingness on the part of non-Chalcedonians to modify the expression of their beliefs, are promising.

as it is organized especially in the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.

Orthodox Participation in Modern Interfaith Dialogue

As you may know, all of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches were invited to join the World Council of Churches in 1948. The Orthodox organized pan-Orthodox hearings that were held in Moscow, and the outcome of these hearings was that the Orthodox did not join. In their refusal, they traced two distinct lines of what was then more truly an “ecumenical” movement, one from the Catholic Church and one from the Protestant confessions. The Catholic movement was identified as an attempt to unite other Christians with the Catholic Church, through such movements as uniatism². The Protestant branch of this movement, although already stating that they were not creating a unified “super-church,” was in fact trying to create an organ of opposition to Catholic influence in the world, to gather the Christians who were not Catholic into a powerful non-Catholic Christian body.

Today, Orthodox who oppose our participation in the WCC often say that this 1948 refusal was a result of Orthodox opposition to the Protestant aim of creating a super-church, but that is simply not true. Although the Protestants did use some phrases that seemed to point to their hope of a future ecumenical church, in the actual proposal to the Orthodox, they said, “All of our member churches acknowledge that at the present time it is not possible to create a dogmatic foundation for unity, and we regret this. The possibility for cooperation that we can offer is in the social and political spheres.”

So, from the beginning, when the WCC first invited the Orthodox to become members, this was not an invitation to move towards one church, it was a proposition to cooperate in the social and political spheres. The Protestant churches agreed that Christians did not have a basis for doctrinal unity and hoped to express what agreement they did have through common action in the world.

There was necessarily a faith foundation to the WCC, which proposed that each member church would have to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and the

² Uniatism: A missionary movement within the Catholic Church directed towards Orthodox which allowed Orthodox Christians to keep their outward customs, services, and even married clergy, while joining the Catholic Church and accepting non-Orthodox teachings such as papal infallibility. This caused confusion in the minds of many simple Orthodox, as little outward change was apparent.

Son of God. To this, the Orthodox responded that (and I must add that there was some humor in this response), “this foundation is not enough; such a conviction is also shared by demons.” According to the Apostle Paul, even demons have such faith. So, although it had a humorous side, their answer was a good reminder that this was not enough of a doctrinal foundation to cooperate on. The Orthodox answer was, “We cannot participate in the interfaith movement at the present time.” This was not a rejection of interfaith dialogue as a whole, but of that specific conception of the movement.

This situation changed only at the WCC assembly in New Delhi in 1961, when the member churches clearly declared that their aim was not to build an ecumenical church, but only to act together in the social sphere. They also ruled that member churches had to believe in the Holy Trinity. With such a change in purpose and with the insertion of Trinitarian belief, it became acceptable for the Orthodox churches to join the WCC, and to try to act together in those spheres in which we have common positions. At that time resolutions were passed calling for peace, against slavery, against racism and the violation of human rights, for the protection of children, etc.

Needless to say, the earlier interfaith movement was also very influenced by the political situation in the world, and the rivalry between the US and the USSR. The interfaith arena became a theatre of interplay of two superpowers who both tried to influence moods and policies through member churches.

RTE: Capitalism versus communism?

FR. GEORGE: I wouldn't reduce it to a battle of values. Values, yes, but also the possibility to influence minds, to create a certain image, to gain support in the religious sphere. I think that the Soviet Union made a real effort in this arena to portray a positive image to the world. Certainly, the influence of the Russian Church within the Soviet Union at that time was minimal. The atheist state had no interest in promoting the Church, but because this international movement existed, it had to be used. It was clear hypocrisy; the state affected an interest in developing religious affairs and pressured representatives to comply with this image.

But the Soviet Union was not alone in this. In western countries where religion was more widespread and influential, there were many instances when interfaith church representatives voluntarily supported government policy under the cover of religious organizations. You can find examples of

this in the interfaith assemblies of the 1960's, '70's and '80's. Fortunately, this is not the case today.

At the same time, I have to say that this political imaging was not the only reason for the participation of the Russian Church. Certainly, government policy and religion were mixed, as they were in the West, but the Church had, and still has, its own reasons for participating in such dialogues and movements. In the modern world you simply cannot remain isolated.

RTE: Before we go on, in conservative Orthodox circles, we often hear dissatisfaction over the mutual lifting of anathemas by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Pope that occurred around this time, as well as rumors of Orthodox priests and bishops giving Holy Communion in inter-faith settings to non-Orthodox. Do you have any comment on this?

FR. GEORGE: The mutual lifting of anathemas was a gesture of goodwill during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's. Both sides understood that it was not yet time for eucharistic communion, that our differences would have to be bridged before this could happen, and that this goal was still very far in the future. But the lifting of anathemas signaled a new willingness to talk to one another about the differences.

As for giving Holy Communion to non-Orthodox in inter-faith settings, if this was knowingly done by a priest or bishop, it was something he took upon himself. To my knowledge, no local church has ever sanctioned inter-communion. For a short time in the 1970's, the Russian Orthodox Church did make such an allowance for Catholics who were geographically isolated from any Catholic church, but this was soon rescinded, perhaps because of the confusion it caused for Orthodox in the face of uniatism.

In any case, after 1961, the Orthodox Churches and all of the member churches understood that when they joined the WCC they were not attempting to build a super-church, but that this organization would provide a physical space and organize times and agendas for discussions about Christianity in the modern world. It would also provide an opportunity to cooperate on various social projects.

Nevertheless, for Protestants, it couldn't remain as simple as that, because their ecclesiology is very linked to their teaching, and in spite of themselves and their declarations to the contrary, their ecclesiology naturally leads back to this idea of gathering the churches together in more than just social cooperation. For them, this tension is always there.

RTE: Would you say this is because they've splintered into hundreds of denominations, and miss the essential unity of Christianity?

FR. GEORGE: Yes, I believe so. When Luther declared that every Christian can interpret the Bible as he understands it, this, as you say, led to a great diversity of confessions. If your interpretation differs from that of your brothers and sisters, you have a right to form your own denomination. Here the Protestants lost their sense of catholicity, of the universality of Christian belief. For Catholics and Orthodox this universality is very important because it is part of the principle of the working of the Holy Spirit in the whole Church. For us it is important to have a common faith, a common tradition, and a common understanding of the Holy Scripture. For Protestants, the Church is not a supernatural reality, the work of the Holy Spirit, it is just a community of people. You can have many communities, and it isn't very important what dogmatic teachings a community has. This is why they tried to promote a kind of commonwealth of churches within the WCC, to create an artificial unity.

Common and Confessional Prayer

The Protestant hope of Orthodox participation was heavily influenced by the political aim I mentioned earlier – their desire to have a substantial weight to counter the influence of the Catholic Church. But there were also people who really wanted to find a common language with Orthodoxy and to heal the divisions. Protestants still want this, but the question is how they want to come to it. The minority of Protestants, who somehow still hoped to use the WCC as the vehicle for an ecumenical church, kept trying to raise doctrinal and structural questions, and of course, for Protestants, the main symbol of unity was common prayer. But from the beginning, Orthodox representatives never participated in Protestant eucharistic services and never allowed Protestants to participate in Orthodox sacraments. Our position was that eucharistic communion was possible only if they returned to the fullness of the Orthodox faith and tradition. Only in this case would it be a real communion.

The Protestant approach, however, was to start with the sacrament, not to move towards liturgical communion by adopting a common faith. Their pious, but mistaken, argument was that unity is not made by human beings; it exists in God, and if we want to unite we should begin with a shared sacrament so that we can receive His grace to reunite as the earthly church.

RTE: They would say that unity is already there in God and we just have to agree among ourselves to receive it?

FR. GEORGE: Yes, they believed that through inter-communion we would receive the grace of God to unite, and that until we had a shared communion service we wouldn't have the help of God.

RTE: It is interesting that they used communion as the unifying factor, because many of them don't believe that it is the Body and Blood of Christ.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, their faith is different than ours. Some Protestants make the presence of Christ in the bread and wine dependent only on faith. They don't believe in the real presence of Christ in the sanctified bread and wine; it is a distinct difference in belief about the nature of the sacrament.

In addition, Protestants tried to institute a kind of non-liturgical communion through common prayer. It is a fact that in the 1960's, '70's and '80's Orthodox representatives did participate in these common prayers, but for the Orthodox this was never seen as the beginning of a communion that would result in the formation of an ecumenical church. It was always a gesture of solidarity. The argument was, "If they are Christians and confess Jesus Christ, why can't we pray together in those terms in which we are close to one another?" Nothing more than that.

RTE: So, they would say the "Our Father" together, and perhaps a few spontaneous prayers and songs to begin and end meetings?

FR. GEORGE: Yes. The idea was to pray together only insofar as we were in agreement. To this extent, the Orthodox found it possible to have common prayer and a common reading of the Gospel. It was not only laymen, but ordained Orthodox clergy and even hierarchs who participated at this level. But the Orthodox never adopted the position of some Protestants who tried to interpret this cooperation as the beginning of an ecumenical church. The Orthodox saw it only as a gesture of openness towards other Christians, and not as a concession or a compromise of the Orthodox faith.

In time, however, Orthodox representatives saw instances when shared prayer was being misused by Protestants, who began introducing elements and formulas of prayer that were unacceptable for Orthodox.

RTE: Such as?

FR. GEORGE: I remember one dispute in 1998 at the General Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, when Protestants invited local shamens to pray with drums and ceremonial costumes. All of the Orthodox who were present, including some hierarchs, simply stood up and left. Common prayer had altered to the point that the Orthodox said, "This is no longer acceptable to us. We cannot continue because this involves us in spiritual practices that contradict our Orthodox faith."

RTE: I once heard an Orthodox representative to an interfaith group say, "I am uncomfortable even being in the presence of another's prayer service because I am participating in their lack of understanding."

FR. GEORGE: Yes. The Orthodox decision to stop participating in common prayer services was based on the personal experience of Orthodox representatives. When the practice began, people stayed within the bounds of the



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common faith, using the "Our Father," the "Glory be..." and so on. But when certain Protestant members began introducing innovations, the Orthodox felt that this common prayer had entered into a strange spirituality that was no longer non-confessional. Moreover, the practices they were evolving were very superficial, light-minded, and didn't reflect the fullness of Orthodox tradition.

That is why the question of common prayer was formally raised by the Orthodox at the World Council of Churches in 1998. The resolution to abandon common prayer was ratified by an official vote of the General Assembly of the WCC at Porto Allegre, Brazil in February of 2006, this past winter.

The experience of finding that Orthodox could not continue in common prayer and questioning our participation in these meetings was a position that the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) came to much earlier. As I mentioned before, after the Russian Revolution, the hierarchs of the Church Abroad willingly participated in interchurch dialogue and this opened up many new fields of activity for

them. This was during the '20's, '30's and '40's, when it was impossible for the Russian Church in the Soviet Union to have these contacts. For us these decades were a time of severe persecution. The opportunity to have contact abroad and to experience interfaith dialogue came for Russian hierarchs of the Soviet Union only after the Second World War, in the '50's, '60's and '70's. This was a gap of some thirty years' experience. ROCOR hierarchs had had the freedom to explore inter-Christian dialogue first-hand from its inception; our turn came later. Now, with our own decades of experience behind us, we have arrived at essentially the same position.

As I said, there is now no common prayer at all. There is only confessional prayer, that is, a prayer service – for example, at the opening or closing of a session – which is prepared in turn by differing confessions of the WCC. The other churches do not participate. If members of other churches are present, it is for the sake of “solidarity,” but each member is also free not to be present. The difference from the past is that in common prayer, all members were potentially involved in the service. You might be asked to read the gospel or to lead a prayer, so it was an eclectic mixture of different traditions and each participant brought something from his own tradition. But now, unless your church is doing the entire service, you are not asked to participate, you are simply an observer.

Of course, then we have to ask in what sense is one an observer – you can't simply be indifferent if you are present. From my point of view, the reason for observing is simply to become acquainted with another confession, because sometimes it is not enough to read about another belief from books. To understand a tradition you have to see their spiritual life, to see them worship, to watch how the services are conducted. From this point of view there is a reason to be present, because if you are in dialogue on different issues, it is important to know what spiritual background a person has. So, attendance is not a time for prayer for yourself, even privately. The Orthodox don't pray silently during another confession's service, we just observe. There is no participation.

RTE: What do the Orthodox do when their turn comes?

FR. GEORGE: Our turn is not only at general assemblies of the WCC and CEC, but also for interim gatherings and outside meetings under the sponsorship of the WCC. When it is the turn of the Orthodox, they may organize vigils or liturgy, and people of other confessions are invited to be present as

observers, just as a visitor would come to one of our parish churches. This doesn't contradict Orthodox tradition because in every church in the world, non-believers, even atheists, can come to watch.

RTE: There are some monasteries on Mount Athos, and now, oddly, a few in the U.S., that do not allow non-Orthodox to be present at services.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, but that is their unique position, it is not the common position of the Orthodox Church. We know from history that services are often a missionary outreach for people. For example, the Russian emissaries from Prince Vladimir to Constantinople were not convinced of the truth of Orthodoxy by reading or talking to church representatives, it was through attending services in Hagia Sophia. These were pagans, they were not even Christian, and they were permitted to be present. The Church Fathers understood that the Orthodox services, simply of themselves, have a missionary potential; they called it heaven on earth, and many people come to Orthodoxy after experiencing these services. These visitors are not permitted to participate in the sacraments as do baptized Orthodox, they are simply observers.

RTE: What is your own experience of prayer in these settings?

FR. GEORGE: As I said, I don't have personal experience with the WCC, but with the CEC and some other groups there are two instances where there is confessional prayer – first before a meeting, which involves a short prayer, asking God's blessing. The other case would be an organized prayer service that is more substantial, such as vespers or matins, with the reading of the gospel, perhaps a sermon. But with the earlier Orthodox decision to step away from common prayer, and the ratification of that non-participation by the WCC, there is a precedent for being present in a way that does not compromise our Orthodoxy.

However, this principle of confessional prayer, of non-participation, has not been adopted by every church, and some other interfaith groups do continue the practice of common prayer – the Orthodox simply do not participate except as observers. But the good thing about the 2006 WCC decision is that now there is a document of an international Christian body to which you can refer, which is important if you are invited to another interfaith group and are asked to pray with them.

In my experience, if you refuse to go to such prayers, this confuses many Protestants; they are very unhappy with this, and can even be deeply hurt. In dialogue and discussions I find that Protestants are almost always very willing to listen to you and to take your position into serious consideration, but absence from these common prayers is something else entirely. They become, not hostile, but in their eyes it is a sign that you don't consider them to be Christian or even human. It is very hurtful to them. Of course, in this case it is very important to explain why you can't participate in common prayer in a very friendly manner.

In my own case, I try to repeat in other words the position that the Russian Orthodox Church has in regards to the Eucharist, that we can't start our long journey towards unity with the Eucharist, but that we should finish with the Eucharist. I say, "I don't think it is honest to pray together because, for me, prayer is communication with God in a common faith. If we do not have a common faith but are praying together, we are not being quite honest. I have a very good attitude towards you, I want to discuss our Christian beliefs, but I cannot pray with you." Such a position has been politely received, and for us Orthodox it is very important to explain our position not by name-calling or saying, "You are heretics, you don't know the truth, you are not Christian..." These are judgements and we don't judge people. We only judge teachings, in the sense of comparing them with the apostolic faith and evaluating our attitude towards them.

RTE: Some conservative Orthodox would say, "You are just beating around the bush, and if you don't tell them the truth directly, you are betraying Orthodoxy in your attempt to 'dialogue' with them." How would you answer this?

FR. GEORGE: In this sphere of relationships with other Christians we must be very attentive and careful to make a distinction between teachings and people. In relationships with non-Orthodox Christians, it is very important to try to fulfill both of the Lord's two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor. This is why we must be very precise and accurate in representing our faith, and at the same time, very open and kind to people. If you are in dialogue, and want to be faithful to the commandment to love your neighbor, you cannot be hostile in your terminology or in your heart. This is why it is not appropriate to say "we are superior and they are inferior." Our faith is superior, not we as people.

We also have to differentiate between the faith of a certain confession and the faith of an individual, because an individual can have different beliefs than the church he belongs to and actually be closer to traditional Christianity than his denomination. We can't just assume that we know what he believes based on our theoretical knowledge of his denomination.

As I said, common prayer is happening less frequently, and confessional prayer, (one church at a time leading the service) is becoming very widespread. As co-moderator of our commission, I am often invited to give a prayer in the morning or the evening, but it is from beginning to end an Orthodox prayer. I pray Orthodox prayers and other people have a choice to be present as observers, to pray with Orthodox prayers, or not to be present at all. When Lutherans or other confessions are doing the service, I can choose to be present or not. The question of prayer has been resolved.

People who were pessimistic about the interfaith movement have always worried that this process of common prayer would lead to spiritual ties between churches without resolving faith issues. But now we see instead that we have prayer pluralism in the interfaith movement and this is a good development because these interfaith organizations can now honestly say that their aim is not to make a super-church but to provide a space for common action in the modern world.

RTE: Are the Protestants who had hoped for more also satisfied with this?

FR. GEORGE: Although we can say that the Orthodox churches have arrived at a very good position for themselves, some Protestant churches don't agree with this and they accuse the Orthodox of traditionalism and fundamentalism. Protestant churches, however, are not themselves united, theirs is a divided world and they range from being rather traditional to very liberal. The "traditionalists" might include groups like the Scotch Presbyterians, some of the more conservative Lutherans, Baptists, and in the Anglican Church, also, there is a conservative as well as a liberal stream. But certainly, the liberal Protestant world cannot accept the attitude of the Orthodox and they are always trying to influence and change us.

The Root of Separation: Ethics, Works, and Salvation

RTE: Then how can common action come about?

FR. GEORGE: This is an extremely important question. Although we've put aside the idea of an ecumenical church and common prayer, we have to ask if Christians can act together in the social and political sphere if they have different faiths. Today's situation is that they cannot, particularly if the dividing line is between traditional and liberal forces, as in ethics. Practically every Christian church now understands that we have no extra resources to battle each other because we have a more dangerous opponent: we live in a very secularized world, and people who don't like religion at all are often in positions of leadership and establish norms of public life. We have a potential here for common witness because Christians could stand together in facing this secular world, but unfortunately, those churches that embrace a liberal ethics are more likely to find consensus with this secularized world rather than desiring to oppose it.

The Lutherans proclaimed "Sola Scriptura" ("Only Scripture") in the 16th century, but now Protestants adopt ethics that contradict the Gospel, particularly in areas of human relations. With such attitudes we find that we often cannot witness to the same message, even in basic ethical questions. One example of such a divisive question is the priesthood of women in Protestant churches. This really only concerns the internal structure of each individual church, who are free to do as they wish, but if this question was to enter the realm of a joint social response, we do not have a joint message to give.

It is also impossible for us to come together on questions like same-sex unions. For example, in October 2005, the Lutheran Church of Sweden recognized and adopted a rite for the blessing of same-sex unions, which they view as similar to traditional marriage. Their argument was that homosexual "love" is also a manifestation of God's image in man. The reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church was immediate. On the 27th of December 2005, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church broke all relations with the Lutheran Church of Sweden. The Swedish Lutherans are still members of the WCC and the CEC, and for the moment the Russian Synod has made no decision about our relationship with them there. But if other Lutheran or Protestant churches are going to accept such things that contradict the Christian gospel, the Orthodox Church will simply not be able to have relations with them in this sphere of common social action.

Of course, we can, perhaps, continue to have some dialogue. Even if you disagree with a person, you can discuss your differences, explain your objections – but you cannot act together, you cannot say that you support common values. Unfortunately, I believe that these ethical dividing lines will only deepen because many Protestant churches are ready to recognize such unions and to institute a rite for blessing them. We are in a situation where the entire interfaith movement is in question.

RTE: Do you think these nontraditional views are a result of simply drifting into the 20th-century secularized mind-set or something built-in to their belief?

FR. GEORGE: These resolutions haven't come about because Protestant churches want to show that their message is "relevant" to the secular world, but are the result of ideas inherent in their doctrinal thinking from the Reformation. Theirs is an "ethical liberation" that not only embraces homosexual unions, but euthanasia, abortion, unacceptable forms of genetic research... things that are unacceptable to traditional Christians. The ease



In relationships with non-Orthodox Christians... we must be very precise and accurate in representing our faith, and very open and kind to people.

with which many Protestant churches follow this stream of thought are a direct result of the three postulates of Luther's teaching, "Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia" – "Only Scripture, Only Faith, Only Grace." These ideas necessarily bear this secularized fruit because to the Protestant mind there is a distinct separation between faith and action. Ethics, which is related to action, has an almost autonomous status, and can develop without any links to theology.

RTE: In a vacuum?

FR. GEORGE: Not in a vacuum, but in an autonomous sphere that has its own laws. If faith alone saves, it isn't important what you do, it is important what you believe. Grace will justify and save you; you have only to believe. This is

why your salvation is not linked to your actions, it is linked only with your mind and your heart.

RTE: Of course, the majority of Protestants wouldn't go to that extreme. They would say, "You can't kill, you can't steal..."

FR. GEORGE: No, of course, Protestants recognize sins which a Christian can't commit. The Ten Commandments are the basis of this, but they do not cover every detail. For Protestants, this autonomous standard of ethics developed under the influence of Immanuel Kant. It is a law of morality that is dependent neither on the Ten Commandments, nor on God, but on human discernment. Of course, they believe that a human being is created by God, in His image and likeness, but at the same time they think that man has this somewhat autonomous region in his developing nature. This idea was formulated by Kant in its purest form as "the moral imperative" – that you should only do to others what you can do to yourself.

RTE: So, you are saying that because they've divorced themselves from the tradition of the Church, they can interpret ethics under the mantle of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In other words, one can make up his own standards.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, this is roughly so. With homosexuality, for example, traditional Christians see clear warnings about it in the New Testament, and explicit condemnation of it in the Old. Of course, homosexuality is a sin that can be forgiven. The problem arises when it is considered to be a norm, natural to human nature, not a spiritual illness that should be repented of and healed by God's grace. This logic of autonomous ethics means that you don't kill, not because it is wrong, but because you wish to live; you care for old parents because you wish this for yourself. It is a thread that runs through natural ethics.

At our last meeting of the Church and Society Commission in Brussels we discussed these liberal streams in Protestantism, and Protestants in our executive committee asked me, "Why can't you accept a plurality of views? We aren't pushing you to adopt these points of view. If a church decides something for itself, why can't they hold to this?"

My reply was, "You see, for us, this is very important because ethics are bound up with salvation. The mode of life is very important on the path to salvation, and these ethical positions are not simply a matter of openness to

others, they are a question of salvation. The deeds of man and his labors are very important for salvation because, although it is God Who saves, He does not save without the will and labor of man.

"The Holy Fathers always understood that deeds and works are not what saves a person, but they are a manifestation of our will, a mark of our willingness to hear what God wants of us. This is very important because God does not save a person against his will. Our actions show the seriousness of our desire, our will to be saved. So, for Orthodox Christians, actions and deeds are not a force that saves, but they are very important in the synergy of God and man on the path of human salvation. Without this act of will on the part of the person, it is not possible to be saved."

In Protestant theology, the emphasis is on faith alone. Of course, we agree that without faith, our actions cannot be whole, they are impaired. For Orthodox, faith is the understanding and recognition of the existence of God and hope in the unseen heavenly realm, but faith is not all that is needed, and this is the root of the separation between the conservative and liberal Christian world.

In the not-so-distant future we will perhaps have two distinct Christian worlds – Christian liberals and conservatives, and structures to represent both. Everyone understood decades ago that it is not possible to found an ecumenical church before gaining a common faith. Now it is even difficult to organize common action because of these very different approaches to ethics. It is clear now that if we don't agree in faith, we can't totally agree in action.

RTE: As a hypothetical situation, let us say that a secular movement arose mandating painless medical euthanasia for anyone in an extended coma with no apparent hope of recovery. If the Church of Sweden, for example, stood up and said, "We oppose this," wouldn't other conservative churches, including the Russian Orthodox, join voices with them on that specific issue, although we are in strong opposition on others?

FR. GEORGE: We will have to decide in the future if we need dialogue or conversation about faith or social issues. My opinion is that of course we do need this, but we also need to clearly understand what we are doing. This was the problem earlier: many Protestants thought they were building a super-church while the Orthodox thought that they were only witnessing to Orthodox belief and tradition. In one organization we had two partners with different ideas about the goals of the project. Over time, these contra-

dictions and disagreements surfaced and widened, until the situation became unacceptable.

Preserving the Faith – Witnessing to the World

As I said earlier, our initial reason for joining in the interfaith exchange was that we saw the need for dialogue. In this world of very intensive communication, the only way to preserve your identity and your faith is to explain that faith to others. It is through communication that you elaborate arguments, that you preserve and defend your right to live as you believe you should.

The Church has two imperatives. The first is to preserve the faith. The Church could attempt to do this by isolating itself, but then it would be the truth for only a small fold. The second imperative is for missionary work, to witness the Gospel throughout the world. The Church cannot reject either of these imperatives; it has to respond to both of them, and this is a very difficult task. We are required to gather all of our forces, to be vigilant, and to work hard. For this we need dialogue, communication, but this doesn't mean that you just engage in continuous dialogue, no. It is a very difficult work involving the intellect, the heart, and continuous prayer.

If other Christian denominations adopt ethical positions that are contradictory to Orthodoxy, our position is clear: we won't act with or support them, even tacitly, in these questions. We will communicate our position very clearly. But, as you said, perhaps there will come a time when we will both need to protest against a specific wrong that we are in agreement on.

RTE: Since you see that as a possibility, why did the Russian Synod break all ties with the Swedish Lutheran Church, rather than saying, "We completely disagree with what you've done in sanctioning same-sex unions. It is not Christian, it is not ethical, and we want nothing to do with it." Wouldn't it have been better to have voiced the objection but keep the dialogue open?

FR. GEORGE: You see, sometimes the problem is that our position is not understood on the other side. Liberal Protestants think that they are right, and quite often they don't accept or consider our reaction and opinion. They can be very unyielding. This is when it becomes necessary to take drastic action to show that these things are very serious for us. It is not enough that we disagree: they must understand that it is such a serious point that it has

severed the relationship. Now we will have to wait and see how the Swedish Lutherans receive our response. I think that the most probable outcome, as I said before, is that two ethical Christian camps will arise. In the conservative camps we will have the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and some conservative Protestant churches.

RTE: And now we come to the objection that anti-ecumenists would raise, which is, why should we be in dialogue at all? Some people say that you are just wasting your time, that this is a diplomatic ploy, and that other churches don't really care what our position is. How would you answer this?

FR. GEORGE: I've seen many cases where representatives of other churches knew very little about the Orthodox tradition. Of course there are books, there are internet sites and people can find some theoretical information, but first people must want to find this information. As an interfaith representative you are in contact with many different confessions, not just one, with a great diversity of beliefs. It takes years to come to a real understanding of even the major confessions. In my experience, a desire on the part of other Christians to learn about Orthodoxy usually appears only after they meet Orthodox people. This personal contact and the beauty of the services often spark an interest.

For example, at one of these meetings organized by the CEC on globalization, I was seated next to a woman priest from the Lutheran Church of Hungary. We spoke and she told me about her life and her parish. I was curious if she was aware of the Orthodox attitude towards the priesthood of women. Without being confrontational, and with some humor, I asked her what she thought of the words of the Apostle Paul that a woman should keep silent in church. She said, "But why do you ask me about this?" I said, "Because it is linked to your service in the church and I wonder how you feel a woman can be a priest." She said, "I never linked these words with my service to the church. I just think that a woman can catechize and guide people in the faith." I said, "How was it that your community came to this decision?" She said, "It was just done, we didn't even think that it couldn't be done." I said, "You see, in the Orthodox Church we don't believe that a woman can be a priest, but I understand from what you are saying that our perception of the priesthood is different. You understand the priesthood as pastorship, so your emphasis, it seems, is on teaching and preaching the Gospel." She agreed with this.

RTE: Also, for many Lutherans, the communion service is more symbolic than the sacrament is for Orthodox.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, exactly, and I said, “From the Orthodox view, your symbolic communion service is not the same as our sacrament; you are more of a catechist, teacher, and counselor. In our church women can also do this, but for us the priesthood is another thing.” She was very attentive to this and said, “I’m hearing this for the first time, I never realized that there was another position on this.” For her it was a very interesting discussion, and I understood that it had never occurred to her that there could be another approach. If she hadn’t met a person – not me particularly, but anyone who could have explained the traditional apostolic teaching – she might never have thought about this.

Such contacts and conversations are very important, especially from the point of view of our missionary outreach. Our duty is to proclaim the Gospel. This doesn’t mean that in the places where we proclaim the Gospel it will always be accepted. Our ideal is to proclaim, but if people don’t accept it, this doesn’t mean that the Church has failed in its duty. The Church fulfills its duty – it proclaims – but it is up to the individual, who has free will, to accept it or not.

If we say that these interfaith conversations and dialogues don’t lead to conversions to Orthodoxy, we also have to remember that it is not always a given that *any* missionary work automatically leads to conversion. Our real task is to witness. If the seed doesn’t grow, it is not necessarily the fault of the Church, nor does it mean that the Church is not doing its work. I think it is our duty to speak, speak, speak about our faith, even if we don’t receive a response. At the Last Judgement it will not be our fault that we didn’t witness.

It is also very important to have this personal meeting, this living witness, at these interfaith meetings so that the other person can directly see how your beliefs work out in the framework of these issues that affect all of us. They can see your interest, your humanity, your warmth.

RTE: In the negotiations for reunion with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, did they make any conditions about your participation in interfaith contacts?

FR. GEORGE: Although I didn’t participate directly in the work of this group dealing with the details of reunion, I understand that we simply explained

our aims and methods of contact and that they accepted them. I don’t know the exact terms of the conversation because this was a closed commission and I wasn’t present, but there couldn’t have been any real problems for the Orthodox conscience. We only had to show the real situation, especially the decisions on common prayer and our Orthodox participation in the decision-making processes. For them it is now clear what is happening.³

The difficulty for the Church-in-Exile has been that they live abroad and they receive their information about these meetings from foreign sources. They themselves do not attend these meetings to witness first hand what is happening. These foreign news sources interpret what is happening at interfaith gatherings from the point of view of Protestants, who, of course, color this information through their own filter. We have always said that this view is not our view, that we don’t think as they do. We have our own understanding of Orthodox participation.



It is through communication that you elaborate arguments, that you preserve and defend your right to live as you believe you should... It is a very difficult work involving the intellect, the heart, and continuous prayer.

Moreover, in the Soviet times, it was the policy of the Russian Church Outside of Russia to find things to condemn in the Moscow Patriarchate’s participation in interfaith dialogue. As soon as they began serious discussion with us and saw the real situation for themselves, this was no longer a problem. The problem was only a myth, a result of misinformation believed by some of their members.

RTE: Speaking of misinformation, I remember hearing from a WCC Orthodox representative that every resolution the WCC passes by a majority vote has a counter-resolution, an objection, attached to it by whichever member churches disagree, explaining why they disagree. This is an integral part of the public document. But most people only see the headlines broadcasting the majority vote.

³ This interview was done prior to the May 11, 2006 resolution of the IV All-Diaspora [Clergy and Laity] Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia which states: “... From discussion at the Council it is apparent that the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in the World Council of Churches evokes confusion among our clergy and flock. With heartfelt pain we ask the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to heed the plea of our flock to expediently remove this temptation.”

These headlines have led Orthodox to assume that their representatives are betraying them, but in the many criticisms I've heard of Orthodox participation in the WCC, I have yet to find a single person who knew that these public objections are routinely filed by the Orthodox and read aloud in the WCC meetings if the majority vote goes against Orthodox opinion. Nor have I found anyone who has bothered to read the published resolutions. This seems rather unfair to the Orthodox representatives.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, this is true. What people also don't know is that in 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church adopted a document towards non-Orthodox confessions where we state very clearly that the Orthodox Church possesses the fullness of the apostolic faith and teaching, and that it sees interfaith relations as a platform for dialogue and the witness of Orthodoxy.

RTE: In your experience in the CEC, are the representatives of other churches really interested in the Orthodox view?

FR. GEORGE: They are interested, and they are interested especially when substantial subjects are being discussed, such as globalization or the role of women in modern society, when the conversations are often very long and lively. We try to find a common position that we can agree on and show to the world.

Orthodox Participation in the Conference of European Churches

RTE: Have there been times when you have had to vote against resolutions in the CEC that made you unpopular, such as women clergy, abortion, and so on?

FR. GEORGE: No, because in the CEC, documents that are unsatisfactory to one of the member churches cannot be adopted. Disputable passages are discussed ahead of time and either changed or omitted. A resolution cannot be adopted that contradicts the ecclesiology of any of the churches.

RTE: But I imagine that in some cases, you as an Orthodox representative may have been the dissenting voice that kept it from being adopted.

FR. GEORGE: Because we prepare the documents in advance, any objections are dealt with during the process of deliberation, not at the moment of the

vote. These kinds of issues aren't even raised in committee, they are never placed on the agenda because they know our reaction in advance.

RTE: Then what kinds of things do you deal with?

FR. GEORGE: As I said, I am on the Church and Society Commission, so we discuss the effects of globalization, integration within the European Union, the EU Constitution, the possible entrance of Turkey into the EU, things like this. The committee also develops positions on economic activity from a Christian point of view.

Any resolution or public statement is adopted by complete consensus, after working out the positions of different churches. For example, member churches may privately elaborate their individual position on an issue like homosexuality in a very liberal way, such as the Church of Sweden has done, but they would never push this issue in the CEC. They know it is impossible.

RTE: Are you an advisory body to the European Union?

FR. GEORGE: No, we are a non-governmental organization. The Conference of European Churches is an independent organ of coordination to which every church brings its agenda and we find common ground. It is useful to have such organizations, because if we didn't, we would have to organize a spontaneous meeting every time we wanted to discuss something of common interest.

RTE: Particularly with so many pressing issues facing secularized Europe. Can you give some examples of resolutions that you have passed?

FR. GEORGE: Yes, for example, when the draft of the European Constitution was prepared, the preamble stated that Europe had inherited "the classical Roman and Greek civilizations and enlightened philosophies." It was very, very strange that Christianity wasn't mentioned. All of the churches of Europe said that this was not right, that Christianity should be mentioned and that it is not just or honest to call it an "enlightened philosophy," and to mention pagan Roman and Greece while leaving out Christianity. In the final draft, they took out the reference to Rome, Greece and "enlightened philosophies" Instead, they wrote that Europe has a "secular and religious heritage." Of course, we were still very dissatisfied that Christianity was not mentioned, but this draft of the constitution has not been adopted. It failed

to pass in France and the Netherlands, so now this particular version will not be adopted at all. It was a very strong struggle, and Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants all worked on it together.

RTE: This is a good example of a pan-European Christian concern that you could speak together on.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, and we recently adopted a document that pointed out both positive and negative tendencies in globalization, and in economic, political and cultural life.

In the West, people are very interested in economic globalization, in terms of public welfare and problems involving poorer countries. Orthodox countries understand globalization more through its cultural effects. For example, they are against the universalization of overly-liberal values such as same-sex marriages and euthanasia.

RTE: In regard to these pan-European resolutions, I often hear rumors in Orthodox countries that the European Union plans to legislate the admission of women onto Mt. Athos, particularly since the monasteries have accepted EU money for reconstruction.

FR. GEORGE: No, this has been completely resolved. The tradition was explained and the EU now supports the Holy Mountain's monasteries in following the Athonite rule. It is no longer a question.

RTE: How does the CEC view the increasing Islamic population in Europe? A Catholic priest told me recently that in his tiny Austrian town, Islamic immigration has happened very quietly over a couple of decades, and that because the Moslems have a much higher birth rate than the Austrians, within a decade or two this small, provincial Austrian town will have an Islamic mayor.

FR. GEORGE: That was one of our points in dealing with the preamble of the Constitution. Of course Europe is open to people of different countries and cultures; nevertheless, the continent is predominantly Christian, and Europe must recognize this dominance of Christian values. This is why, in a pluralistic society, minority people should have full human rights, but they should also have a respect for the dominant culture and religion.

RTE: I have a news clipping here from *The Moscow Times*, December 5, 2005. For our readers, this is an English-language newspaper in Russia

that frequently runs articles on religion in the Russian Federation:

“Orthodox Church Bristles”

The Russian Orthodox Church on Tuesday bristled at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe⁴ saying its resolutions on religious issues could foment instability and conflict. The Church criticized the Assembly's “Women and Religion Resolution” passed in October, saying that “a call to fight religiously motivated stereotypes” of male and female roles represented “contempt for views shared by millions of believers.” It also assailed another assembly document endorsed in October, “Education and Religion” saying that its emphasis on comparative religious studies was unrealistic and potentially harmful.

This is interesting because on the one hand you are pilloried by conservative Orthodox for not keeping a “strict” Orthodox line, and when you do speak up, the western newspapers brand you as fundamentalist and reactionary.

FR. GEORGE: As I said, a secular liberal approach is the major news voice today. The specific documents adopted by the Council of Europe that are referred to in this article were perceived even by non-Orthodox Christians in Europe as interfering with the internal affairs of churches. The first document, on women and religion, was about the role of women in churches, and condemned those churches that don't allow women as higher clergy or hierarchs. Of course, this document was aimed at the Orthodox and Catholic Churches and some conservative Protestants. It was very interesting, because even though many Protestant churches agree in principle with this resolution, they understood that it was unacceptable for the state to interfere with church organization.

RTE: So even the churches that ordain women priests spoke out against this resolution?

FR. GEORGE: Yes, because it was not the business of government, particularly a government that proclaims separation between church and state. This is not a coherent position and it was widely criticized by even the most liberal churches.

⁴ Council of Europe: A pan-European organization made up of all European states including Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

RTE: So, although they may be pushing their own liberal ethics, they are holding the line in respecting the right to dissent?

FR. GEORGE: It was a deeper question than dissenting about the position of women, because it involved the relationship between the church and state and the question of whether the state can interfere in church affairs. It is also necessary to remember that even if it had not been contested by the CEC, this resolution did not take the form of a law, it was simply a recommendation.

Another area that the article mentioned is religious education in a secular society. Even secular Europeans support the idea of religion in public schools, but as a comparative study, giving equal weight to each religion. The Russian Orthodox Church insists on confessional religious education, where each child can attend a class of their own church, instructed by representatives of that church.

RTE: They already do this in Finland, where both Orthodox and Lutheran religion classes are part of the school curriculum.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, many countries in Europe have this model. Most liberal people, however, prefer classes that wouldn't teach something so concrete, that would be more comparative, taught by a teacher who isn't necessarily a believer. The CEC supports confessional classes, as does the Russian Orthodox Church.

RTE: Fr. George, what would you like to say in conclusion?

FR. GEORGE: I want to stress that interfaith dialogue is not artificial. It is a necessity in our contemporary societies. We belong to many Christian and non-Christian traditions, and every believer, even if he is not a theologian, has to decide how to interact with his neighbors of different faiths. Every modern Orthodox believer lives in his own situation of dialogue in daily life. What we church representatives try to do is to continue this dialogue on the organizational level.

We have to weigh the risks. If we don't support interchurch dialogue, what is the alternative? Simply that this dialogue will continue to its logical end without Orthodox input. We should study and be aware of the movement's direction, its methods, its culture. Our present need, I believe, is to elaborate

a culture of relations. These relationships will be the means by which we maintain a civilized dialogue about our very real differences, but also come to an understanding of how to live together. The dialogue is not always focused on articles of belief; it is equally a question of living together and, for us as Orthodox, how to preserve our faith and share it with others. ✦