

**ADDRESS BY HIS EMINENCE
METROPOLITAN CLEOPAS OF SWEDEN AND ALL SCANDINAVIA
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*The feast of the Three Hierarchs
and the Orthodox Christian worldview on society*

Reverend Fathers,

It gives me great pleasure to join you today and share a few words with you at this Orthodox Forum. Allow me to begin by thanking the Reverend Fr. Olav Lerseth, Coordinator for Orthodox Churches in the Norwegian Christian Council, for the kind invitation he extended to me, thus enabling me to spend this precious time with my Orthodox brethren here in Oslo.

With today's gathering being so close to the celebration of the feast of the Three Holy Hierarchs, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, and Gregory the Theologian, I thought it well to spend a few minutes discussing the timelessness of their message and recognizing how current their teachings and message remain in our time. Undoubtedly, their enormous contribution lies not only in matters of doctrine, but also encompasses education and culture; although some would say – and I tend to agree – that these areas are not independent of each other and cannot be compartmentalized, contrary to the tendencies of post-industrial revolution thinking. The feast of the Three Hierarchs is always a wonderful opportunity to think about not only Hellenic paideia (education), but also the Orthodox Christian worldview on society. Both aspects are significant for studying and serving the human condition, and they remain ever timely. Unfortunately, neither gets the attention it deserves and we must undertake great initiatives on our end to correct this.

Whichever of these three Church Fathers one were to focus on, it becomes evident right from the onset that they had extremely progressive social ideas. Whether discussing the “Basiliad” – the great philanthropic institution established by St. Basil –, St. Gregory’s eloquent appeals to Roman imperial officials to support the poor and his inspired sermons, which combined poetry and prose, lending the Church some of its most renowned hymns, and St. John Chrysostom’s high-minded homilies and exhortations to embrace the destitute, there is no room for misunderstanding that the Three Hierarchs revolutionized the concept of serving humanity and advancing society.

Through their teachings and ministry, a new standard for philanthropy was set by reinforcing the Hellenic concept that individualism should not triumph over community. The poor and destitute were no longer considered to be under God’s curse and unworthy of any assistance, but rather, became a perfect opportunity for man to emulate God, live communally, and exercise philanthropy. For the Three Hierarchs, stealing was no longer understood as the act of taking something that did not belong to you, but rather, not sharing the goods which God has given you together with others.

But the Three Hierarchs were also great patriots, much to the disappointment of those who argue today that the Church should not have a voice in public affairs. Each of them pleaded and fought not only theological battles, but also civic ones. Basil the Great repeatedly protests over imperial redistricting and the decision to divide Cappadocia into two provinces. Similarly, Gregory the Theologian pleads to the local prefect for the salvation of his home city of Nazianzus. Speaking as if he was the city itself, he writes: “Give a hand to me that lie in the dust: help the strengthless... It is more honorable to you to raise up cities than to destroy those that are distressed. Be my founder, either by adding to what I possess, or by preserving me as I am. Do not suffer that up to the time of your administration I should be a City, and after you should be so no longer: Do not give occasion to after times to speak evil of you, that you received me numbered among cities, and left me an uninhabited spot, which was once a city, only recognizable by mountains and precipices and woods.” Nor can one

overlook the stinging criticism exercised by St. John Chrysostom against the political elite, which landed him in exile twice.

If only the shapers of today's policies in our globalized world could hear the words of these holy fathers. But then, that is probably what separates the Orthodox Christian worldview from the Western, or globalized, one...

If our education level was where it should be, we would be much more sensitive to social issues and more willing to fight for a better tomorrow for our local communities, host countries, homelands, and world as a whole. No one says it better than St. Gregory the Theologian: "I take it as admitted by men of sense, that the first of our advantages is education; and not only this our more noble form of it, which disregards rhetorical ornaments and glory, and holds to salvation, and beauty in the objects of our contemplation: but even that external culture which many Christians ill-judgingly abhor, as treacherous and dangerous, and keeping us afar from God... from secular literature we have received principles of enquiry and speculation ... We must not then dishonor education, because some men are pleased to do so, but rather suppose such men to be boorish and uneducated, desiring all men to be as they themselves are, in order to hide themselves in the general, and escape the detection of their want of culture."

Here again, we have a clear example of the significance of discernment in the Church and the loving tolerance it displays. While the Church is often falsely accused of inflexibility or fanaticism, it is evident that this is not the outlook of the saints and Church Fathers. Rather, by taking a quick look at the intransigence of many modern-day institutions and schools of thought, from economics and politics to the hard sciences, I would say that it is others who are guilty of "throwing out the baby with the bath water."

On all counts, we must espouse the message of the Three Hierarchs today more than ever. It has stood the test of time and its universal qualities will not only heal the wounds plaguing the world today, but also speak to members of other cultures, forging friendships and weakening existing animosities.

Dear friends, remember to always have the courage of your convictions and be mindful of the fact that you are representing a faith that has weathered all sorts of terrible tumults and tempests, and has persevered. St. Basil the Great is famously recorded as standing up to the imperial prefect Modestus, who threatened him with deposition, confiscation, exile, tortures, death if he would not espouse the heresy of Arianism – which was being advocated by the emperor at the time. St. Basil courageously resisted, and when the impetuous Modestus expressed his amazement at St. Basil’s bravery, the latter replied “that is because you have never before fallen in with a true bishop.”

Similarly, when St. Gregory the Theologian was elected Archbishop of Constantinople, the Arians controlled all the churches, leaving him compelled to serve in a tiny house chapel. From ever standpoint, he was a minority in his own see. From his tiny chapel, he began to preach his famous five sermons on the Holy Trinity, called the Τριαδικά (Triadica). Two short years later, the Arians did not have one church left to them in the city.

St. John Chrysostom equally never shuddered from denouncing offenses – regardless of how powerful the adversary; even if it meant clashing with the empress herself, whom he publicly rebuked on several occasions. The power of his preaching was so strong that it earned him the wide acclaim of the masses, but the enmity of the privileged, ultimately resulting in his banishment, but not before leaving a lasting mark on the Church and shaping many of its practices. He famously noted that “it takes only one man burning with zeal to reform an entire city!”

The Three Hierarchs, mentioned above, whose memory we honor on January 30th, represent the timeless paradigm of Orthodox phronema that clergy and laity alike should seek to emulate. Together with their faith, they are heralded for their love of learning and charity. Their use of the Greek language and culture, which had in centuries past been associated with polytheism, allowed them to turn it into a vehicle for the propagation of the faith, ultimately saving the culture and broadening the audience of their salvific message – considering that it was the lingua franca of their era. In the face of the growing challenges affecting our

communities, the example and intercessions of the Three Hierarchs can be the difference-makers in restoring our phronema and rediscovering the grandness of our cultural legacy, which is threatened by the temptation of today's ultra-materialistic society and an affluence that we must learn to manage wisely, before it impoverishes our communal existence.

In the early 1990's, an American academician by the name of Samuel Huntington published a landmark article that became a lightning-rod for controversy, entitled "The Clash of Civilizations." In it, he speculated that in the not too distant future, wars would be fought not by individual nation states with ever-shifting allegiances, but by a handful of large blocs containing groups of nations that are bound by shared culture, which he termed major civilizations. In his analysis, Huntington created a separate category for the "Orthodox" civilization, which at the time unnerved many pro-Western leaders in these Orthodox nations, who viewed the categorization as an attempt to realign those nations' geostrategic allegiances and exclude them from Western institutions.

However, Huntington's characterization need not be viewed in a threatening manner. The fact remains that during the Middle Ages – especially the period around the time of the Great Schism and in the subsequent centuries, the East and West differed markedly on questions of theological doctrine, understanding of philosophy, social structure, political hierarchy, and aesthetics. Of course, nowadays, in a pluralistic society that has turned our planet into one giant "global village," the things that unite us are far more than the things that separate us, however, it is important to remember that our cultural "otherness" need not be viewed as a cause for hostility, but rather, as a contribution. The Three Hierarchs, who so eloquently developed the concept of personhood, laid the groundwork for the understanding that our uniqueness is what allows us to love and be loved. It represents our indelible mark in history, with which others can commune long after our earthly presence has passed, and allows us to endow the world with the perspective of our people; to understand our hierarchy of needs, our

prioritization of values and the metaphysical connections that we were able to draw as a result.

For instance, a quick study of the home of an ancient Athenian in its simplicity and minimalistic design, would yield a sharp contrast when compared to the Parthenon. Clearly, the engineering capabilities were present, so why did citizens not wish to build a “little castle” for themselves, as is commonly the dream today in most Western nations, but preferred instead to live in rather shabby housing, concerned only with beautifying their citadel and temple? Moreover, it’s worth asking ourselves why it is that during ancient and Byzantine times, both cities – the “glorious city,” Athens, and the “Queen City,” Constantinople – both identified their polities inextricably with their characteristic temples – the Parthenon and the Hagia Sophia? This organic connection between polities and divine worship are quite different from modern nation states which presuppose separation of Church and state in most instances. The Hellenic/Orthodox perception of this role might enlighten modern government scholars on our traditional worldview. Similarly, Aristotle’s concept of democracy, which consists of the distribution of offices of the state by its citizens through lot (a lottery - in other words chance - thus equalizing all the players and ensuring that everyone has a share in managing the power, not just choosing those who will do so) is quite different from the modern take on this form of government. Might this be a cause of the modern-day democratic deficit many nations are experiencing and the frightening rise of extremism? Let us compare our impersonal governmental structures with the parish-centered community of persons, which is so central in the Orthodox experience.

Similarly, the experiences and relationship that Orthodox faithful have with holy icons and the distinction between worship – due only to God –, and reverence – offered to icons, as images of sanctified men and women, whereby the reverence passes on to the archetype of the image –, would be useful in discourse with iconoclasts, whose outlook has extended beyond the closed doors of their religion into matters like shaping the nature and institution of states.

Inevitably, this would also allow expansion into the hesychastic tradition, which is so closely associated with our faith. The discernment

between God's essence and energies, although both are understood as uncreated, is a critical element of our Orthodox faith, and misunderstandings on this subject have contributed to longstanding points of contention with other faiths, such as the Filioque, purgatory, papal primacy, and other issues which our Church rejects on the basis of its empirical knowledge.

The West's emphasis on Christ's sacrifice upon the Cross as a means to appease divine anger differs radically from Orthodoxy's embracing of Christ's Resurrection as the fundamental event enabling the salvation of mankind, or teachings on Ancestral Sin, as so eloquently expounded upon by the late Fr. John Romanides, are fundamental differences that affect the discourse that our Churches have with the faithful and society-at-large.

Lastly, we cannot overlook the major emphasis placed on the preservation of the environment as a testament to our faith and respect for God's creation – a legacy that His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is imparting upon the world. This initiative, which he embarked upon 25 years ago, at the onset of his patriarchy, is yet another demonstration of the cultural contribution that our Church can make to all humanity. To quote His All Holiness encyclical, issued on September 1, 2016:

We need to have constant vigilance, information and education in order to understand clearly the relationship between today's ecological crisis and our human passions of greed, materialism, self-centeredness, and rapacity, which result in and lead to the current crisis that we face. Therefore, the only way out of this impasse is our return to the original beauty of order and economy, of frugality and askesis, which can guide us toward a more careful management of the natural environment. In fact, the voracious need to satisfy our material needs assuredly causes spiritual poverty, which in turn culminates in the destruction of the environment: "The roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical, inhering within the heart of each man," as the same Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church emphasized in

addressing the contemporary world, adding that “the yearning for continuous growth in prosperity and an unfettered consumerism inevitably lead to a disproportionate use and depletion of natural resources.” Accordingly, then, beloved brothers and sisters, as we commemorate today the feast of St. Symeon the Stylite, that great pillar of our Church, whose monument – like other wonderful archeological sites in Syria and the whole world, such as the famous region of ancient Palmyra that are listed among the foremost global monuments of our cultural heritage – experienced the barbaric consequences of war, we would like to underline another equally significant problem, namely the cultural crisis, which has also become a global issue of our time. After all, environment and culture are concepts and values that are parallel and interconnected. As the environment of humankind, the world was created through the single-worded divine command: “Let there be!” (See Gen. 1.3, 6, and 14)

Therefore, emboldened by the grace and blessings of our fathers among the saints, The Three Hierarchs, and inspired by the leadership of Ecumenical Patriarch, let us serve as beacons of Orthodoxy in this globalized world, projecting the light of Christ and the guidance of the lived experiences of our ancient faith to all those who travel on the sea of life, endeavoring to guide them to the safe harbors of salvation. And when the seas turn stormy and the winds reach gale force, it is then that we must project this light all the brighter, standing up to the elements and persevering, because this is our charge and our calling.

And if it happens that we are a minority in the host nations that have so generously taken us in and offered us a second home, let us remember that the rules of hospitality state that guests should typically bring with them a gift for their host. I can think of no greater gift to offer than our millennia-old culture and theology. Therein, our fellow citizens will find the answer to many of the burning questions that plague them because the human condition is cyclical and the problems that existed very long ago continue, largely, to exist even today. Let us then never miss an opportunity to pass these blessings on and to commune empirically with

one another. What we may lack in financial resources we more than make up for in spiritual treasures.

As I conclude, the question I pose to this Orthodox Forum is to consider the ways in which to best spread this message and engage in dialogue with our fellow men and women. What institutions can we establish, what events can we organize, what venues can we set up in which to facilitate this cultural diffusion which represents a genuine and authentic opportunity to invite our brethren, our children, and our neighbors to “come and see.” (John 1:46).

Thank you for receiving me in Christian fellowship. I look forward to the opportunity of receiving each and every one of you at our Metropolitan Church of the Annunciation here in Oslo and at the seat of our Metropolis, the St. George Cathedral in Stockholm, often.