LOI CONSULTATION

St.Vlash, Albania

OPENING REMARKS : Grace Mathews

Your beatitude, Archbishop Anastasios, Your Graces, Bishops from Albania, Egypt and India, Evangelical and Orthodox clergy, leaders and friends. It is a great privilege to be here in the beautiful surroundings of St.Vlash. The fact that we have met again is testimony of the deep desire in our midst to birth into reality that which we have spent much time preaching, mainly the reconciling love of the Triune God in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is my fervent prayer and hope that over the next several days as we pray, study, discuss and talk with one another, that the walls of ancient hostilities, differences and hurts will crumble under the force of the prayers of God’s saints, who have dedicated themselves to a new chapter in the relationship of our ancient communities.

The theme of the Lausanne Cape Town 2010 Congress (CT 2010) was, “ Christ in God Reconciling the World to Himself.” Out of CT 2010, came many initiatives, which emphasize a broad sense of unity and partnership – the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative (LOI) being one of them. The goal of the LOI, “ Is to reflect constructively on the history of relationships between Orthodox and Evangelicals in order to work towards better understanding, and encourage reconciliation and healing where wounds exist. Through this process Evangelicals and Orthodox will be mutually enriched and strengthened in the work of mission, working towards mutual respect, support and cooperation, in the spirit of our Lord’s Prayer for His Church, in John 17."

The question has often been raised as to what kind of unity is envisaged for the church. As far back as the 1920s among the plethora of denominations and missions activities, the question of church unity was brought to the fore. Perhaps it is time again to go back to that passage of Scripture in John 17: 21 which formed the core of much of the biblical search for a definition of church unity.

(John 17:20-23 –NIV).

“My prayer is not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

In this passage, Jesus sees the perfecting in oneness of the disciples as proof that the Father has sent the Son and that the Father loves the disciples in the same manner as the Father loves the Son. The unity between the Triune Godhead and the disciples is a unity that reveals God’s own being. It is a unity of ‘doing’ that is ultimately expressed in the Cross. The Father and Son share one purpose. Likewise, Christian unity is a unity of purpose. We are different but one in the life He gave us. As part of God’s family we share God’s purposes. When there is unity, we share one purpose, agenda and mission.

This unity is one that also reveals God’s glory in the incarnation of the Son. The disciples witnessed this glory and now it is intended for us to bear witness to this glory and to share it with the world. Those who hear and believe now, also come to live in this unity. The essence of the ‘oneness’ between the Triune Godhead and the believing community in the Gospel of John is love (agape), which manifests itself in the ultimate expression of love –the sacrificial, reconciling death of Jesus on behalf of those who believe. Thus, the oneness/unity witnessed to by the believing community is the presence of the reconciling, redemptive love of Jesus, which forms the heart of the ‘sending’ of the Son by the Father.

From this understanding of John 17: 20-23, we may venture to say that organizational, ecclesiastical or denominational unity is not what is being considered in this passage. Rather, the emphasis is on the divine activity (love/agape) of the Father through the Son to make known the Father’s will and purpose to be achieved through the redemptive, reconciling death and resurrection work of the Son. This ‘work’ in turn spurs redeemed, reconciled believers to show forth the love of God in community and to proclaim Jesus as Lord God. Thus, believing communities that exemplify and commit to this dual dimension of love, and who confess and proclaim the Triune God, form the basis of the ‘unity’ that our Lord prayed for. ‘Love’ in both its vertical and horizontal dimension is the key to unity. Mission should therefore encompass both Discipleship and reconciliation.

In the Conclusion of The Cape Town Commitment, we read:

‘Discipleship and reconciliation are indispensable to our mission. We lament the scandal of our shallowness and lack of discipleship, and the scandal of our disunity and lack of love. For both seriously damage our witness to the gospel.

We discern the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ in these two challenges because they correspond to two of Christ’s most emphatic words to the Church as recorded in the gospels. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus gave us our primary mandate – to make disciples among all nations. In John’s gospel, Jesus gave us our primary method – to love one another so that the world will know we are disciples of Jesus.

When Christians live in the reconciled unity of love by the power of the Holy Spirit, the world will come to know Jesus, whose disciples we are, and come to know the Father who sent him.’

The Lausanne Covenant emphasizes this understanding when it states, “We affirm that the Church's visible unity in truth is God's purpose. Evangelism also summons us to unity, because our oneness strengthens our witness, just as our disunity undermines our gospel of reconciliation.”

In a recent visit to Rwanda, I witnessed firsthand of the redeeming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ when lived out in the midst of the witnessing communities of the church. We all watched with horror in 1994, in the genocide that gripped Rwanda how the church was caught up in the evil of the violence. An institution, which was to be the sanctuary for the oppressed, turned out to be the very furnace for their destruction! Twenty years later it is heartening to see how the church, having coming back to its senses, has again become the transforming agent that our Lord envisaged.

But this is not a solitary example. In Bosnia- Herzegovina, Macedonia, Africa, India and in many places we have seen the church fall prey to such divisiveness. In a day when every misstep is splashed across our TV screens and newspapers in gory detail, it is time for us to again search our consciousness and in repentance seek forgiveness for our misadventures. For too long we have withdrawn into the safety of our historic traditions and been blinded to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So much so, that today vast swaths of countries in Europe and America and the West see religion as part of the problem rather than the solution. In the light of this experience we should not be surprised that Atheism itself has now a militant face!

In Ezekiel chapter 23, God calls his Watchmen to be responsible for announcing the danger they see approaching and to raise their voices in warning to those who slumber or are indifferent. When such Watchmen fail to raise the alarm, God declares that he will hold them responsible for the blood of those on whom his judgment has fallen.

Amidst these tranquil surroundings, we recall again ancient traditions of monks and others who left all to seek comfort and solace and solitude in the vast regions of the desert. Many shed their blood to make a stand for truth of the gospel. Of them it could be said as the writer of the book of Hebrews says, “Who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of he flames and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging whilst still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat skins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

What more shall I say, I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barack, Samson, Jephtha, David, Samuel and the prophets, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Thomas Cranmer, William Tyndale, John Knox and others.

These were all commended for their faith yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Perhaps this is the season that God has chosen to call his church to become ‘perfect’. Perhaps it is fallen to us to complete the great work to which he has called his saints. Perhaps it is the inauguration of the period of Jubilee when we are called again to bind up that which is broken and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. When we are called again to preach good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, release from darkness for the prisoners and comfort all who mourn.