

The Greek Orthodox View

On Ecumenism, Abortion, Amnesty

By CHARLES RANDISI

Father Robert Stephanopoulos, Ph.D., is an ecumenist. The director of Interchurch Relations of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, and general secretary of the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Churches in America, he spoke to a group of students and teachers at St. John Fisher College on Monday, March 19.

His topic was "An Orthodox View of the Ecumenical Movement," and he began by explaining the nature of the Greek Orthodox Church. "There is often some confusion," he said, "as to who the Orthodox are."

The Greek Church and the Roman Catholic Church are very much alike. "We are Christian, yes," he said. He described similarities between the Roman



FATHER STEPHANOPOULOS Catholic and Greek Churches as "about 99 per cent."

The major difference is over what Father Stephanopoulos called "the authority and place of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope)." Greek Orthodoxy also attempts to preserve "a close fusion of national and ethnic life with the Church."

There are 18 separate national Orthodox Churches, including the Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, and Albanian Churches. The Eastern Orthodox Church is not to be confused with the Eastern Rite, groups that celebrate a liturgy other than the Roman, yet recognize the authority of Pope Paul VI.

The Orthodox Church's identity in America has been hindered, said Father Stephanopoulos, because it is "largely an immigrant Church."

Each nationality within the Orthodox Church is separated by national differences, but, he said, "our underlying unity is in faith and doctrine."

Father Stephanopoulos then talked about his Church's involvement in ecumenical affairs, dating back to 1952, when it joined the National Council of Churches (NCC).

"Christians should be unified," he said. "It is the wish of Christ himself."

Yet, he was wary of the "new ecumenism" of the pentecostal and charismatic movements. He questioned whether these groups are "really theologically sound."

The best way to achieve unity, he said, is "through councils of churches." He praised the work of the late Patriarch Athenagoras, a man of "true vision" who was working to establish the first Pan-Orthodox convocation.

It was the Greek Church which kept the NCC from issuing a statement in favor of abortion, Father Stephanopoulos said. "We presented our testimony in terms of an either-or position." By "either-or," he meant that his Church would either stay in the

NCC, if the statement was not issued, or get out.

he said. He saw "no fundamental, doctrinal reasons" why amnesty should be supported.

On the question of amnesty for draft-evaders, Father Stephanopoulos said that Orthodoxy would have "serious difficulties" in accepting the idea.

"We're just simply new to this,"

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WORD FOR SUNDAY
Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R1) 2 Chr. 36:14-17, 19-23. (R2) Eph. 2:4-10 (R3) Jn. 3:14-21.

The theme of Sunday's Readings is "God's love for sinful man." Always, it is the same old story: man is faithless, God is faithful. Israel, for instance, adds infidelity to infidelity; yet after seventy years of exile, God inspires King Cyrus to let his people go (R1). We too are faithless — "dead in sin." But again, "God is rich in mercy" (R2). He sends His Son to save us (R3).

The Book of Chronicles is a theological reflection on the history of the Chosen People after they had lived through the purifying experience of the Exile. This Sunday's first Reading explains why the Temple was destroyed and why the land of Israel was left desolate. Unrepented sins were the cause — especially the breaking of the Sabbath rest because of greed. Significantly for us, so prone to commercialize the Sunday, the breaking of the Sabbath is given as the reason why the Exile lasted a sabbath of sabbaths (from 587 to 538 B.C.).

The second Reading is meditation on God's love for each man. He is rich in mercy. Mercy means having a heart for the miseries of others. But were it to stop there, mercy would become only mere sentiment. Real mercy leads to action. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that who believes in him may not die but may have eternal life.

The Gospel passage is John's reflection on the beautiful baptismal catechesis that Jesus had just given Nicodemus. The whole passage speaks of belief in Jesus as the way to eternal life. In the Book of Numbers (21:9), we read that the Hebrews were punished by a plague of poisonous serpents for murmuring against God and Moses. They immediately repented and begged Moses to intercede for them. Moses did and God ordered him to make a bronze serpent and hang it on a standard-pole where all could see it. Those who looked upon it with sorrow for their sin and with trust in God's mercy were saved.

John reflected that as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross and lifted up from the grave to glory at the Father's right hand. All who look on Him with faith as did the dying thief, shall also be saved.

If the bronze serpent healed, and gave earthly life, how much more lasting would be the healing and life given by the Son of Man — eternal life.

Somebody said that the test "God so loved the world" was "the Gospel in a nutshell." It tells us that God's love was the motive force behind the Incarnation and the Redemption. Sometimes Christianity sounds as if God had to be pacified, persuaded once again to love man who had sinned. Christianity sometimes sounds as if redemption were an action aimed at changing God's attitude toward man. Actually, God loves us with an eternal love. He never changes. All change is and has to be in us. He sent His Son, not for His sake, but for ours.

The Greek word which the New Testament uses for love is agape. Agape means to love another even if he is undeserving, unlovable, repulsive. The other Greek word for love is eros. Eros connotes a love that is evoked by the attractiveness of the object. Nowhere does the New Testament use this word! God's love is unmerited; it is grace: His graciousness toward us.

In the Hound of Heaven, Francis Thompson has God ask fugitive man: "Who would love you except Me?"

"Human love needs human meriting: How hast thou merited— Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?"

But God's great love requires a personal response of faith, commitment, and gratitude (Eucharist). The resulting relationship will be eternal life begun here and now.

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