

An Interview with archimandrite Fr. Meletios Kouraklis¹

By Efstathios Kessareas*

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Archimandrite Fr. Meletios Kouraklis is Head of the Chaplain Service of the Greek Armed Forces General Staff. He holds a PhD in Theology from the University of Athens and he is the author of the book “The Institution of Military Chaplains in the Periods of Ioannis Kapodistrias and King Otto on the Basis of Unpublished Archival Material” [In Greek] (Athens 2019).

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Reverend Fr. Meletios, thank you very much for this interview, which launches a series of similar interviews within the context of the research program “*The Challenge of Worldliness to Contemporary Christianity: Orthodox Christian Perspectives in Dialogue with Western Christianity*”, under the responsibility of Prof. Vasilios N. Makrides at the University of Erfurt, Germany.

My thanks go to you for honoring and choosing me for this interview.

I would like to begin the interview with reference to your double position: You are archimandrite and head of the chaplain service of the Greek Armed Forces having the military rank of a brigadier. Have you ever felt a sense of role conflict? How can the Christian value of *love* be reconciled with the *violence* that structurally defines the military field?

No, I have not felt a role conflict for the simplest reason that the mission and duty of the military chaplains is the exercise of pastoral care [*diakonia*] for their brothers in the army. It is therefore a special aspect of the ecclesiastical work that has historical, holy-canonical, and pastoral foundations because of the specific practical conditions often prevailing in military life. The aim is to provide the military staff with access to the salvific mysteries even in places, where they cannot have a normal parish life like the other members of the Church. In other words, it is a *diakonia* of love *par excellence*, during which the priest is called to be part of the difficulties and adversities that exist in a military environment, in order to support his brothers who serve in the army. In addition, the priest does not exercise authority and the more so violence, since he has no military role; he only functions as a spiritual father, as a minister of the mysteries of the Church and as an advisor in spiritual issues. As regards the potential moral and spiritual dilemmas, which may indeed emerge during the exercise of the military duties of the army staff – particularly during periods of war –, these should always be approached by the priest with theological criteria and in harmony and cooperation with the respective Church hierarchy, which in fact bears responsibility.

¹ The interview was conducted in Greek and was afterwards translated into English.

Based on your experience from both fields, does the emphasis of Orthodox tradition on the concept of hierarchy as well as the hierarchical organization of the Church facilitate the adjustment to the military reality of hierarchy and duty?

Indeed, they facilitate it, in the following sense: When a priest has embraced the ecclesiastical ethos [*phronema*] of sacrificial love and of conscious commitment to a high purpose, then he subjugates his ego, transcends any selfishness and whims. In this way, he adjusts quickly and easily to every environment, becoming a positive factor for the resolution of problems and for the overcoming of difficulties. In addition, his presence becomes necessary and essential. This does not mean that he has a servile spirit or that he executes orders blindly and without judgment. It simply signifies that having been trained in difficult and demanding tasks, he can easily cope with any difficulties that emerge during the exercise of his duties, without seeking comforts or honorary recognitions.

The Orthodox Church, especially in Greece, has close ties both with the state and the nation. It is often called “Ark of the Nation”. Do you think that this connection poses risks for its religious and especially eschatological mission? Is there a danger of secularization of the Church through its nationalization?

The Orthodox Church in Greece, both as a whole and individually each of its priests, should be inspired in its decisions and actions from the genuine ecumenical spirit of Christianity, which does not know race, language, sex and other discriminations and considers the salvation of every human being as its mission. At the same time, the Church in its historical existence knows how to empty and incarnate itself in imitation of its head, Jesus Christ, and is not indifferent to the problems of the peoples that it serves [*diakonia*]. It does play an active role within history, but without adulterating its criteria and perspectives. This is exactly what the Orthodox Church has at times accomplished specifically for the Greek nation. When the dignity, the freedom, and even the survival of the nation were in peril, the Church supported its oppressed flock. For this reason, the latter acknowledges this self-sacrificing companionship of the Church and with gratitude calls it with the aforementioned expressions (e.g., “Ark of the Nation”). Beyond that, it is left to every Church hierarchy across time to delineate the mission of the clergy within society according to clear ecclesiological criteria, so that the sacred dimension of its pastoral work is not transgressed and its preeminent salvific prospect is not adulterated.

I would like now to come to the difficult reality we are all currently experiencing. How did you cope practically and spiritually with the coronavirus crisis? Have you experienced cases of denial of the protective measures (e.g., use of masks, vaccination) on behalf of the faithful and how did you deal with them?

Indeed, I have met with cases of people who refuse to accept the measures and resort to negative propaganda against vaccination. In these cases and according to the degree of closeness that exist between us, I try with patience and love, and by respecting the freedom of the other, to ease his/her fears, radical (conspiracy) opinions or inflexibility. To this purpose, I always invoke the paradigm and the decisions of the Synods of almost all the Orthodox Churches as regards the consistent observance of the measures in dealing with the pandemic, and particularly the Christian duty of love

and concern for the health and integrity of the other. The sad thing is that the Coronavirus crisis has revealed a great deficit of knowledge [*paideia*] and of genuine ecclesiastical ethos [*phronema*] among the strata of the Church's body [*pleroma*]. Without doubt, this was at the cost of the Church's witness and image within Greek society.

Within the conditions of this pandemic, there has been much discussion about the distribution of Holy Communion with a single shared spoon. Should the Church think of alternative modes of providing Holy Communion or such a development would be a dangerous innovation that could question the Divine presence and activity itself during the Mystery?

The first remark about this issue relates to the fact that many things in the Church – both in liturgy and in theology – occurred as a response to an emerging pastoral need. In other words, a specific need is usually a great generator of liturgical practice, of pastoral action and of theological thought. The truth of the Church is always here, but the manifestation of an aspect of the whole Truth or the establishment of a new mode of pastoral care should fulfill the presuppositions of the right ecclesiological criteria. According to one such criterion: Wherever the essential and the inviolable part is not jeopardized (namely, the core of the mystery that the consecrated bread and wine are the Body and the Blood of the Lord), then new transmission modes and forms of the mystery can be implemented through the principle of *oikonomia*, depending on the emerging needs and pastoral demands of each period. However, any change or adjustment cannot be decided by individual clerics, but should be a decision of the entire Church.

Can or should the Church move more boldly towards new forms of ecclesiastical organization (e.g. digital possibilities of worship and communication) or this is not possible due to the emphasis that Orthodox tradition places on the concept of community with the physical presence of the faithful?

Indeed, Orthodox tradition places primary importance on the concept of community, because the Church is visibly hypostasized in the liturgical assembly [*synaxis*] of the faithful with the physical presence of its members during the performance of the mysteries. The importance that the Church ascribes to this is not theoretical or idiosyncratic, but it is intrinsically connected to the whole essence of Orthodox tradition. The latter comprehends the Church as the Christ's Body, where all members are essentially interconnected and a loving mutual indwelling/co-inherence [*alleloperichoresis*], having as model of coexistence and of communal life the unity and the relations of interpenetrative [*perichoretic*] love of the persons of the Holy Trinity. This is not an ideological, emotional or abstract issue. It also presupposes the corporeality of the faithful, since all the mysteries also presuppose the bodily participation, as they are all also oriented towards the body of each believer. In other words, the Church cannot degenerate into a kind of virtual reality. At the same time, the Church, as it opens up to the world, should take advantage of the available technological means of the modern world, of course in a way that will not violate the major and essential elements of the Orthodox ecclesiology, theology and anthropology, as well as of the Orthodox tradition in general.

In your opinion, is there solely one Orthodoxy or multiple ones depending on the various currents of thought that exist within its ranks?

Orthodoxy is one in its theology, ecclesiology, sources, ethos, and common authentic tradition, yet it is also true that one can trace various versions of its interpretation and comprehension, both in history and at present. Such differentiations are mostly observed in the mode of reception of the contemporary reality with the many moral dilemmas that this reality generates (bioethical, ecological, anthropological, social, educational, etc.) and in the pastoral way that these dilemmas should be addressed. However, the ideologization and personalization of the different opinions and versions should be avoided, because this leads to situations of seclusion and hostile divisions that do not contribute to a sober and creative formulation of a modern pastoral proposal and response to the problems of the modern world. With regard to the latter issue: Here the role of the Church hierarchy is crucial, which through its synodical institution should examine the contemporary pastoral challenges, creatively synthesize the submitted theological positions and enlighten the people about the proposed solutions.

At this point, I would like to ask you two questions on the part of professor V. N. Makrides.

It is often argued that the Church should open up to the world. What should this opening include in order to avoid the secularization of the Church? Could the Orthodox Church benefit in a critical way from the experience of Western Christianity on this issue?

It is a structural and fundamental mission of the Church to open up to the world and preach the truth of the Gospel to all nations to the ends of the earth, following the commandment of its founder, Jesus Christ. The opposite would have been a betrayal of its mission. What does this mean? It means that the Church has to become here and now the interpreter of the great challenges that human beings have been constantly facing by displaying the prophetic aspect of its *diakonia*. It has to bear witness to its truth for human beings, both on the theoretical and practical level, by mobilizing the genuine criteria of its theology and anthropology that are inspired from the divine-human archetype, Jesus Christ; on the theoretical level, by dealing with the enormous spiritual dilemmas of modern humans; and on the practical level, by demonstrating at the local parish level another way of life for its members, where their course of life will be a constant “come and see” (John 1: 39) for the tormented and tottering human. On this mission, it has a lot to learn from Western Christianity, avoiding its mistakes in one case, while in another learning from its accomplishments.

What are the main challenges that the Church will face in the near future, and what does it need to do?

In my view, the main mission of the Church in the world comprises its theoretical and practical resistance to the cataclysmic diffusion and dissemination of a primitive and eudaemonic egoism equated to animalistic barbarity – a resistance accomplished through a creative spiritual production at the theological level and through empowering and forging closer links among the different ecclesiastical communities.

In other words, it is a resistance to whatever opposes what the Church is and what it represents in every theological and practical aspect of its life, namely the spirit and the life of the loving community. Besides, the Gospel declares in various ways that evils of whatever kind will appear in eschatological times because the love of many people will grow cold (Math. 24: 12). The Church should not pursue the temporary and groundless worldly popularity, succumbing to the demands of a non-spiritual and, from a Christian viewpoint, superficial rightsism, but should rely on its acclaimed theological and holy-spiritual treasures to become the messenger of words of eternal life and the bearer of another mode of life. To put it simply, the Church ought not to lose the role that its Lord has vividly ascribed to it, namely to be the *light* and the *salt* of this world (Math. 5: 13-14): the light, which – with the Church’s divine-human truth – will light up the depths of human existence as well as the ups and downs of history; and the salt, which will make life enjoyable and will prevent decay. Otherwise, the Church will degenerate into a kind of a museum with a folkloristic character without any value and, more importantly, without any essential and creative intervention in the life of human beings. In this way, it will fall into disrepute and will become unnecessary.

Once more, thank you very much for your time, and I wish you every success to your liturgical and pastoral duties.

I warmly thank you and fully accept your wish, which pertains to liturgical and pastoral (namely, ecclesiastical) duties, for this is exactly what we – as priests – represent within the armed forces.

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