Missions: Declaring the glory of God to all nations

*Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns.”* (Ps. 96:1-5)

Since the Prophet-King David wrote these verses three millennia ago, the world has lived through a spiritual transformation: “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (Jn. 1:17) While historical events changed the world as we know it, the words of the Psalmist remain timeless and eternal: the Lord’s glory is to be proclaimed to “all the earth”, to say “yes” to His command.

The various historical events that shaped the world, which we live in, together with this great spiritual truth, bring us to today’s reality.

According to a United Nations report, the world will reach a population of 7.2 billion this year. Projections are that we will reach approximately 8.9 billion inhabitants on earth by 2050 (United Nations Population Division, 2000). The non-profit think tank Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life estimates that, as of 2011, there were approximately 2.18 billion Christians of all faith traditions. (Hackett, Grim et al., 2011) Of that number, Orthodox Christians are around 300 million adherents, which is roughly 12% of the Christian world. A respectable number, no doubt, but we still only make up about 4% of the total population on earth. (List of Christian denominations by number of members, 2015)

We know Orthodox Christianity is the Church, founded by the Apostles to be “the ark of salvation” to all nations. Yet, saying “we have a lot of work to do” as we face these facts is a gross understatement.

Yet, the term *mission* is one that many 21st-century North American Orthodox Christians rarely refer to. We usually think of the missionary activities in parts of the world that are going through economic hardship, such as parts of Africa and South America. We are reminded of the various commercials and public service announcements on television and online, with pictures of children trying to guilt people into giving “only $35 a month to bring a smile to this child’s face”.

As Christians, there should be no need for advertisements. The Great Commission, where Christ speaks to His Apostles in Matthew 28, should be enough: “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” (vv. 19-20) This command to spread the Gospel is, of course, not
limited to the Apostles during the time of Christ; rather, it is a call to every Christian to be involved in missions and spread the Good News.

Saying “yes” to missionary work is saying “yes” to Christ and to His commandment of loving God and our neighbour. Anyone that replies “no” to this command is, quite simply, not following the Gospel. Clergy-Laity is a time to set long-term goals (and not merely aim for short-term success), all for the glory of God. It is a time to start a paradigm change. This is what needs to happen with ἱεραποστολή, the Holy Mission we are all charged to undertake.

To declare the glory of God to all nations, we need to say “yes” in having a ‘global approach’ in embracing all nations (as Christ), go out into the world and preach the Gospel in foreign lands (like St. Paul), all the while never forgetting to witness for Christ in our own country (like St. Kosmas Aitolos).

**Christ: Embracing all nations**

For "all the earth" to sing the praises of God, we must look to the perfect example: the Good Shepherd, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Throughout His ministry on earth, our Lord did not restrict His teaching and healing to the Jewish people of His time. There are countless examples of His outreach to the Gentiles, such as His interactions with the Samaritan Woman (cf. Jn. 4:4-42), the Canaanite Woman (cf. Mth. 15:21-28), the Greeks who sought Him (cf. Jn. 12:20-26), the Roman Centurion (cf. Mth. 8:5-13) and more. Moreover, the “yes” in declaring God’s glory was also in bridging the gap between men and women, such as His accepting women followers (cf. Lk. 8:1-3), with the myrrhbearers being the first witnesses of the Resurrection (cf. Mk. 16:1-8). Jesus did not push people away merely because of their differences; rather, He sought to make all peoples one flock under one Shepherd (cf. Jn. 10:16).

Emulating the “yes” that Christ showed throughout His ministry to all peoples, we are called to live this example of embracing all nations in our call to missionary work. Our first step in this journey, therefore, is to identify our neighbour. They are not merely the one we know, a family member or friend. In the New Testament, we can see that our neighbour also extends to the complete stranger – just as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk. 10:25-37). The “yes” of the Good Samaritan in the parable (that is, his mercy to the stranger who was left for dead) is not because it was the ‘right’ thing to do in the worldly sense. This “yes” transcends the worldly and enters the heavenly. This parable is a simple example of how our neighbour is everyone who is made in the image of God; thus, our neighbour is every man and woman who surrounds us.

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom says characteristically:

> Every one of us is in the image of God…. For, Christ looked at everyone He met, at the prostitute, at the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps damaged, but it was beauty none the less, and what he did was to call out this beauty.
To identify with our neighbour will enable us to say “yes” to the Lord in our missionary work, whatever way it may manifest itself. It will consequently make us say “no” to certain things, just as Jesus did. We need to say “no” to the xenophobic mentality that some people espouse to, making bigotry their version of a “Golden Dawn”-type gospel. If Christ acted in this way, there is no chance He would have visited Matthew in his home full of sinners (cf. Mth. 9:9-13), nor saved the woman caught in adultery (cf. Jn. 7:53-8:11). There can be no marriage between Orthodox Christianity and prejudice.

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, a hierarch who has been involved in missionary work for many years, says characteristically,

... no nation has [God's] exclusive love. [This belief] does damage to the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. The fact that Orthodoxy has been accepted by and incorporated into the life of one or several nations in no way justifies the belief that it is their exclusive property. Problems such as racism, inequality between classes, nations, or the sexes, and disregard for human rights all clearly constitute deviations from humanity's true nature, for they deny the basic principle that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female...' (Gal. 3:28; cf. Rom. 2:11). That is, they deny the principle that the human race is one and that the entire 'lump' of human existence is redeemed in Christ. Ultimately, they impede God's basic plan for a koinonia of love. (Yannoulatos, 2001)

In the end, our faith is one to be preached to all nations – and not merely a gospel preached to ‘a certain group of people’. Those who fall into this way of thinking (that is, the gospel is meant for ‘the elect’) fall into one of the tenets of Gnosticism, only wanting the Truth for “their kind”. This is not Orthodox Christianity, but heresy – a παρασυναγωγή next to the Church of Christ. In missionary work, saying “yes” to God means having an ecumenical approach to our preaching the Gospel – and not an ethnocentric one. It is a universal affair, rather than a national one, having us, “transcend our personal ‘I’ and our national ‘we’, so that we can join with all human beings and all peoples and nations in understanding and love.” (Yannoulatos, 2001)

Once we see Christ Himself in the face of our neighbour, we can then make the next step into proceeding with missionary work (abroad or at home). If we do not achieve this, the spirit of the missionary work will not be rooted in the Gospel. It will be a “yes” to ourselves and not to Christ – one that is rooted in our ego rather than in faith. Only by seeing the Lord in our neighbour will be able to go further in missionary work, since every Christian should obey the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbour as yourself (cf. Lk. 10:27).

**Going to foreign lands: St. Paul the Apostle**

In 2013, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) calculated that approximately 400,000 missionaries of all Christian confessions were sent throughout the globe. While it is a great number, only a small portion of them are Orthodox Christians. More disturbing, Christian missionaries of all denominations were fifth in sending out missionaries – behind those who
follow the Baha’i faith, Islam, Sikhism and Jainism. (Steffan, 2013) It is no understatement to repeat words said before: *we have a lot of work to do.*

Going into a foreign country can be quite intimidating – even dangerous – for many people. It is a new experience for everyone at one time or another. However, most North American Orthodox Christians have been exposed to this opportunity in a limited capacity. If we are to have successful results for the Church of God, every potential candidate for missionary work must go through a series of steps that will guide their journey.

The first step is the *call to missionary work.* Just as certain Christians of the first century had the call to missionary work as St. Paul, certain people have a call to be missionaries for the Gospel abroad. Having said that, all of us as *Christians* are called to assist our brothers and sisters in missions, since they are the ones "on the front lines" of this important ministry of the Church. A system must be put in place to train and prepare all missionaries for what awaits them.

One of the keys to success is *proper education.* Sending a person in a proverbial "lion's den" without this essential tool can yield extremely negative results - both for the mission and for the person themselves (with the possible results being a failed attempt at preaching the gospel and the missionary becoming disenchanted, respectively). On the one end, dogmatics and catechism in faith need to be more than just "Sunday School education". This religious education should be coupled with broad life skills, so that their opportunity to teach others is not merely limited to the faith. St. Paul is a perfect example of this: while his primary task was to bring people to Christ through his preaching, he also made use of his talent as a tent-maker to help sustain him.

Our missionaries that go abroad have said 'yes' to bringing people to Christ. As their brothers and sisters in the Lord, we should say 'yes' to their education - intensive advanced catechism, skills that will help them in their new environment (e.g. language classes), along with practical things such as First Aid. Instruction in the aforementioned categories should lead them to establish relationships with the members of the specific missionary team, their local communities and the hierarchy. Without this support, all the education in the world cannot be of use. If we are united with our missionaries in all parts of the globe, they will have support through our prayers to strengthen them when they encounter both difficulties and joys.

St. Paul had present with him during his missionary journeys the Lord Himself, together with all the clergy and lay leaders of each individual church he visited.

Just as having growing partnerships with many fellow Christians makes things easier during missionary work, any hardship becomes significantly less when there is financial support. St. Paul raised money for the Christians in Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 2:10, 1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8–9, Rom. 15:25-33) due to a famine. When one Christian suffers, we all suffer – no matter how far away we are from them. Saying “yes” to financially supporting the missionary work of our Church emulates Byzantine Emperor Michael III who sponsored the missionary work of Sts. Cyril and Methodius – all the while being supported spiritually by the Ecumenical Patriarch of the time, St. Photios the Great.

Since tithing is usually the exception rather than the rule, many different fundraisers should be organized to promote and assist missionaries in all our communities. Our brothers and sisters in missions have varying help and resources. While we don't believe "money makes the world go 'round", we should all concede that our monetary assistance, along with our prayers, will allow any missionary journey to be successful and safe.

In our present day, we find many doors opened by the generous support of our fellow men and women. Charities in general receive such support through telethons, online donations and other means for their cause (especially after their respective marketing campaigns). Through the Missions Department, our Metropolis is in contact with the local Metropolis/Diocese of the area to offer the following programs:

- **Build a Church**: helping Orthodox priests and congregations in the developing world with their place of worship
- **Canister of Love**: money collected in various churches and businesses are used to provide food, clothing and medical care
- **Dig a Well**: Clean water provided to a community (approximately $3000)
- **Little Angels Program**: $30/month sponsors a disadvantaged child in the Philippines (with 100% of the money going to the child)
- **Precious Eyes**: Old eyeglasses are recycled and used by people in destitute communities. So far, 675 pairs of eyeglasses have been donated.
- **Support a Mission Priest**: Usually, a priest helps to serve many faithful in the surrounding area. Donations can help them in their ministry.
- **General donations**: Subsidizing individuals participating in Missions Teams, producing the canisters for the Canister of Love program, etc.

On a more global scale in the Orthodox world, the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) provides through the donations of countless people the following programs:

- Community Development and Mobilization
- Refugee Return and Assistance
- Youth Development and Services
- Business Development
It should also be noted that our Metropolis always comes into contact with the local Hierarchs of areas that have suffered emergency situations.

Other Orthodox jurisdictions have programs for children and youth, primarily education, along with helping disabled people learn trades to help them in their search for employment. An example of this was found in Jordan, under the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, with the Very Reverend Archimandrite Innokentios being the principal of a school with around 1300 students from Kindergarten through to Grade 12. The school is in great demand, with both Orthodox and non-Orthodox students attending. It became a hub for inter-faith contact, bridging gaps and helping all people see the *filoxenia* of Orthodoxy.

Yet, no matter how good the worldwide ministry we cultivate is, there will be situations like those of St. Paul. The Apostle of the Nations suffered much because of his truly "universal ministry": he and those with him were "burdened beyond measure" (2 Cor. 1:8), arrested (cf. Acts 16:19-24, 21:30), suffered various difficulties (cf. 2 Cor. 11:20-32) and finally died a martyr's death at the hands of Nero around 62 AD. We do not want to see anyone go through hardships during missionary work - a time the participants can possibly see as life-changing and bringing them closer to Christ. On a practical front, we should be in contact with the local ecclesiastical authorities, consulates and embassies at all times.

The "yes" we hear when bringing up St. Paul's example is not just from his lips, but from the lips of so many that were fellow travellers (συνοδοπόροι) on The Way (Ἡ Οδός, cf. Acts 19:9). The First-of-the-Apostles brought so many people to journey on The Way because of his Christian *phronema*. So many of his disciples became bishops, deacons and led the church through other ways. After his martyrdom, the churches he helped establish lived on and flourished. If we want to flourish on the international stage, we need to support our Metropolis' Missions Program in a serious way. This is not about promoting our communities or a specific program - in the end, it is about spreading the Gospel throughout the world.

**St. Kosmas Aitolos: Evangelizing “your own backyard”**

While the world is vast, all of us can see our own backyard. It cannot be emphasized enough that missionary work that extends to the ends of the earth always begins at home. If there is no missionary work done for our own communities, how can we succeed overseas? If there is no catechism here, how can the teachers of the Faith go abroad and teach others? If our children have never heard the word “mission” in the context of the Orthodox Church, how do we expect them to carry on what the Apostles have started? In short, *what is each church’s plan for missionary work each year?*
St. Kosmas Aitolos had a plan. Although a monk on Mount Athos in the 18th century, he was called by God to do missionary work throughout Greece during the time it was occupied by the Ottomans. The Ecumenical Patriarch at the time blessed his efforts “to travel wherever needed, for however long, with complete independence, to breathe life back into Christianity in Greece,” especially “in remote areas where there was a lack of churches and priests for the many unbaptized adults.” (OrthodoxWiki, 2014) Throughout his ministry, St. Kosmas travelled throughout Greece and Albania, founding over 200 schools, churches and charities for the spiritual edification of the faithful. He could not see his fellow countrymen fall into apostasy or spiritual malaise, and sacrificed everything, to the point of martyrdom, to see his Greek Orthodox brothers and sisters be spiritually free.

St. Kosmas Aitolos said the great “yes” to Christ in not forgetting his neighbour – not one that was located far away in other countries, but his literal neighbour who needed spiritual guidance. In “missions”, we tend to overly emphasize the need for missionary work abroad, and thus forget about any type of mission work to our fellow Canadians – people that we find in Church, at our places of work, at our childrens’ schools and online (Facebook, Twitter and Skype).

We really are a global family; therefore, evangelizing in our backyard includes ministry to the unchurched, the suffering and the everyday parishioner.

The unchurched are people that were baptized but, somewhere along the way, they lost touch with the Church. If we think of the Church as a beautiful mosaic, these people “missing in action” is as if an entire part of the mosaic was ripped off and discarded. This part of missionary work is very important, but a part that is probably the most difficult. Why? There is not a lot of support for people that leave the Church. There is no “A.A. meeting” they can go to, no person that will usually call and say “I haven’t seen you at church for a while.” Studies show that if a parish representative makes no effort to contact the unchurched within two to three weeks, you usually have lost them from the fold, only coming back for the ‘high holidays’.

The important thing with the unchurched is not to pass judgment on them. It is easy to sit back and condemn them as “sinners”. The unchurched are people that God also wants to see in His Kingdom. The power of prayer and our humble example can move mountains! If we want them to come back to the Church, we have to be the Church! The Lord said it best: “let your light shine before all people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven.” (Mth. 5:16) If we reach out to them, we should be prepared to receive a mixed reaction: questions, judgment, interest. Each situation should be dealt with accordingly, always keeping in mind our goal is for them to come back and be a living member of the Body of Christ.

The Suffering are people that may be poor and destitute, they could be part of the so-called “middle class”, or even the very well-off. The suffering are not contained in a single ‘pay
‘Let Your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’ be ‘No’” (Mth. 5:37)

They are not one particular race, creed, gender or faith. One thing is certain: every single one of these people needs someone to reach out to them and guide them to the Truth.

Where are these people guided from? Where do these people begin their journey? They are guided from the difficulties of depression, isolation or rejection from their peers. They are guided from the dark alleys of prison, drugs and alcohol abuse. They are guided from the bed of illness, or the problem-filled house or workplace. Some people have physical suffering due to illness (either afflicting them or those close to them), while others suffer due to abuse (physical, sexual, mental or emotional). Others still experience suffering after emotional trauma, such as a death, a break-up, an impending divorce. There is no ‘set list’ of reasons that people suffer, but we can always feel the effects.

Missionaries for Christ’s Gospel need to remember that these are individuals that need to be ministered to and cared for by us! If Jesus calls us, as Christians, “the salt of the earth... [and] the light of the world” (Mth. 5:13, 14), we are called to reach out to those people in pain and do the simple things. We would never let our family suffer alone; so, we shouldn’t let a brother or sister in Christ suffer alone, either. As we minister in our local community to these people, we not only build a relationship that could blossom into a great friendship; rather, we are helping people remember that God loves them.

Spiritually, the programs we should offer must begin with a renewed look at the spiritual relationship with the Church. If missionary work has, as its aim, to bring people to Christ, the Sacramental life of the community (the Eucharist, Repentance and Confession, etc.), along with initiatives like Re-Catechism, Bible studies and other sessions on the Faith are paramount.

The “yes” to missionary work is one that is very difficult and complex. It is simple to say “no” because that would be the easy way out. However, Missions is not an optional ministry – it is a necessary one. We say “yes” to Christ by acknowledging that our brothers and sisters are in His Image. We say “yes” to the example of St. Paul by preaching to the nations, not excluding people because of things that divide us (such as language or background). We say “yes” to the phronema of St. Kosmas Aitolos, who never gave up on those in his hometown and sought his countrymen to embrace their faith. Indeed, “mission is the breath of the Church” (as His Eminence Metropolitan Ambrosios of Korea said during the Conference on the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Toronto).

Saying “yes” here is not merely “being a great example” – it’s being the Church. It’s singing a new song to the Lord in every language of the globe. It’s saying to all the nations “the Lord reigns” – now and forevermore.

Thank you.