

1ST ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH OF THE HOLY DIOCESE OF BRAZZAVILLE AND GABON

With the paternal blessings and prayers of His Beatitude Theodoros II Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa the 1st Conference of Orthodox Youth of the Holy Diocese of Brazzaville and Gabon took place successfully in Dolisie, Congo, under the title of "The youth of the Congo actively participate in the life of the Church".

Thirty-two young people participated in the conference, aged 18-30, who already have some responsibility in the realm of youth pastoral work, representing all the Parish Communities of the Congo. Note is also made of the equal participation of women in the deliberations of the Conference.

The theme units which the youth themselves presented were:

- A. "Organization of Parish Youth Committees – How they Operate – Formation of Operation Rules"
- B. "Youth Participation in the social and philanthropic work of the Church"
- C. "Youth participation in the missionary and catechetical work of the Church"
- D. "Participation of women in the structure, life and activities of the Church"
- E. "Youth participation in the liturgical life of the Church"

Proposals were also developed by the Reverends Protopresbyter Maximos Oumba, Parish Priest of the Holy Cathedral of St Dimitrios in Pointe-Noire, Protopresbyter Bernard Diafouka, Parish Priest of the Holy Church of the Resurrection of the Lord in Brazzaville, Presbyter Silouan Nkoukou, Parish Priest of the Church of the transfiguration of the Lord in Nkayi and Presbyter Dimitrios Otomba Parish Priest of the Holy Church of St Irene in Dolisie.

The opening of the Conference was blessed by His Beatitude Pope and Patriarch Theodoros II, who sent the following message:

"My dear and blessed children in the Lord,
This Patriarchal letter serves to greet the opening of the deliberations of the "1st Conference of Orthodox Youth of the Holy Diocese of Brazzaville and Gabon". Youth are essentially receptors of messages. They are people who constantly receive message as far as life is concerned, ideals, principles, visions, human relations, social structure and so much more. At the same time, young people have the genuine will and the indomitable energy for a promising future.

I hope and pray that this capacity, the will and energy of the young people, in the framework of the various activities of the Parish Communities of the Congo, will take root in the evergreen tree of Orthodoxy and become communicators of the eternal values of life in Christ, which is the illumination and sanctity, as the product of love, peace, prayer and participation in the Liturgical and social life of the Church.

I paternally urge you all to work with the best intentions and a constructive spirit, under the wise guidance of His Grace Panteleimon, Bishop of Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon, so that your problems, your concerns and your proposals can become action, with the measure of contribution of the Orthodox Church to the present and the future of the youth of the country.

With these paternal thoughts I congratulate His Grace the Bishop on his inspired

initiative, I bless the deliberations of your conference and I incite all of you to contribute to its success with your youthful heartbeat, your pure visions and especially with your unadulterated love for Christ the Saviour.

With paternal prayers and Patriarchal blessings

THEODOROSII

Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa”

A message was also sent from Paris from His Excellency Seraphim Bhalat, who is there on official business, and who is the Advisor for the President of the Congo Republic, Director of Public Affairs and President of the Church Council of the Parish of the Resurrection of the Lord in Brazzaville.

Also present were representative of state, military, judicial and religious leaders of the Niari District.

In declaring the deliberations of the 1st Conference of Orthodox Youth of the Holy Diocese of Brazzaville and Gabon, His Grace Bishop Panteleimon said:

“Reverend Fathers, Your Excellencies, my beloved children,

With the Grace of God and the Paternal blessings and prayers of His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, I welcome you today with great joy to the Holy Church of St Irene, the Parish Community of Dolisie, so that we can begin the deliberations of the “1st Conference of Orthodox Youth of the Holy Diocese of Brazzaville and Gabon”.

The word “Conference” generally defines any gathering of specialists or commissioned people to a meeting in order to make decisions or for discussion of topics or examination of issues. This is exactly what our aim is too. This conference, without claiming recognition as a scientific deliberation on a high level, is a meeting of representatives of the Orthodox youth of the Congo, the future of our country and our Church, who have positions in the Parish Communities to which they belong and are called on to openly state their positions and proposals, regarding the co-ordination of the pastoral efforts of the youth. It is these positions you hold, together with your proposals – which must always be according to Orthodox teaching – that we are called on to discuss here, to examine and to pass them on to the rest of the Orthodox youth of the Parishes, in local conferences which will take place in each city, following the end of the long holidays.

At the same time we are looking to systematically organize the Parish Youth Councils, so that they can all co-ordinate their efforts under the guidance and responsibility of the Bishop, so that they can go forward together effectively to the glory of God, for the spiritual progress of the youth and their creative presence within the noble society of the Congo.

My beloved children,

The theme of the Conference is “The youth of the Congo actively participate in the life of the Church”. But what is the Church? The Church is the Body of Jesus Christ which has as its head Christ Himself. Members of this body are all baptized Christians, who are in a relationship with and are dependent on both their Head, Christ, and between themselves. The common aim of the members of the Church is the sanctification which comes through their participation in the sacramental life, the centre of which is the Divine Eucharist, and the practical expression of love which stems from it in those relationships.

The overall responsibility for the life, the organization and the activities of the

Church is the Bishop's. St Ignatios the God-bearer, Bishop of Antioch, one of the greatest Fathers and Teachers of Orthodoxy, who lived in the first century A.D. in Asia, said to the citizens of Smyrna: "You must all follow the Bishop, as Christ did His Father, as must all the clergy, as did the Apostles.....No-one who belongs to the Church should do anything apart from the Bishop. A sure Eucharist is the one that comes from the Bishop... Wherever the Bishop appears, that is where the faithful should gather, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, that is where the Church is in its entirety...". Therefore, it is apparent that without a Bishop there is no Church.

However, with the passing of the ages, due the increase in the numbers of faithful and their geographic proliferation, the Church decided to create Parishes, under the pastoral guidance of the Priests.

However, the Parish, under the guidance of the Parish Priest, is not an autonomous Eucharistic community, but an extension of the Eucharistic Synaxis under the Bishop. That is why the presence of the Bishop in the Eucharistic gathering of a Parish, even when he is absent, is declared by the commemoration of his name and especially with the antimimension which is always on the Holy Altar and bears his signature.

So you can see that the centre of the Church is always the Divine Eucharist, as it is there that all the faithful are united with the Saviour Christ and between themselves, through His Body and Blood, aiming at the sanctification of all people, through the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

But because we need to be aware of all the above truths of our faith, we need catechism, which is the knowledge of our faith, and then the implementation of the principles of our faith in our daily lives. As St Paul says in Galatians 5:19-26 : " The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other".

This is the reason why together we decided on this topic for our Conference! Because it is not enough that we participate only in the life of the Church, but we should participate correctly, rightly, as genuine Orthodox Christians.

For our Conference we chose the following thematic units together: (...) By developing these topics, which cover the entire spectrum of Ecclesiastical activity, you will express your opinions and you will suggest how you will participate. Also, the clergy of our Diocese will give you their pastoral experience in the above areas.

There are also women participants in this 1st Youth Conference. This is self-explanatory, as Christ Himself preached equality between the two genders, overcoming the social prejudices of the time and of all eras after Him. I remind you of the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians : "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Salvation is not only for men. As in every distinction, whether it be between nationalities, or between religions, or between social and class, as it has been abolished in the Kingdom of God, so distinction between genders does not exist.

Woman and man operate as "one person" in Christ Jesus. And this is achieved through faith, the tradition of life both of man and of woman in Jesus Christ, through their faith in Him.

That is why the Church, when it commemorate the memory of a special female Saint, reminds the faithful of this unity which exists in faith, without distinction of gender, nationality or language. At the same time it reminds us that Christ was born of a woman. In the person of the All Holy Virgin, woman is honoured in the highest position which mankind could have before God. Woman is mankind's gift to God, because through the motherhood of the Theotokos Christ came into the world.

In concluding my address, I would like to stress that this year I preferred that your voices be heard clearly in the Church of the Congo. With God's help, a cycle of relative separate synaxes will follow, for the Priests, for the catechists, for all those responsible for all the areas of Church activity. I thank all those who worked for the organization of our Conference, as well as the Priests and the Church Councils of our Parishes, while I greet with deep honour and gratitude, the representatives of the authorities of Niari who are with us today.

In praising the Most Holy Name of God I declare the deliberations of our Conference open and wish great success in its aims. Thank you".

In the days that followed the young men and women, in exemplary conduct, discretion and responsibility participated in the deliberations of the Conference, and developed constructive activities with the young children of the adjacent Orphanage of the Diocese, entertained them and took part in the liturgical life.

Finally, on Sunday 28th July, a Hierarchal Divine Liturgy was conducted by His Grace Panteleimon of Brazzaville in the Holy Church of St Irene, Dolisie, by which the afore-mentioned pastoral activity of the local Church for its youth came to a productive end.