

HOLY METROPOLIS OF DEMETRIAS & ALMYROS

The responsibility
of the Church
towards diversity

Address

by His Eminence Metropolitan Ignatius of Demetrias and Almyros
on the National Day of Remembrance for the Greek Jewish
Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust, Larissa 27/01/2015

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Translated by Fr. Gregory Edwards

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I would like to begin by expressing my deep gratitude to the Jewish Community of Larissa for inviting me to be the keynote speaker at this year's memorial event for the Greek Jewish martyrs and heroes of the Holocaust. Although some 70 years have passed since the tragic events of the Jewish genocide at the hands of the Nazi regime of the Third Reich, the memories remain—and must remain—particularly fresh and vivid. The deep human solidarity with the Jewish people and its millions of victims contributes toward this end, but unfortunately, this solidarity coexists with an ever-increasing anti-Semitism that has been festering across Europe, including here in Greece, a country affected like few others by the Nazi atrocities. In my talk today, I would like to offer a few thoughts, primarily from my perspective as an Orthodox bishop of the Church of Greece. I will highlight some basic theological criteria for approaching the issue, while also offering the his-

torical experience of our humble Diocese of Demetrias, which I am blessed to serve over many years now, and which, as we all know, was to play an important role throughout the period of occupation in protecting our fellow Jewish citizens.

Before proceeding, however, it is helpful to note the following: All of us who are present at this beautiful commemorative event today in Larissa accept that the Holocaust is, without a doubt, the event that divided the history of the troubled 20th century in two, sealing the long history of persecution of European Jews with its abysmal violence and brutality. With Hitler's Nazism, the inhuman spirit of anti-Semitism reached its apex in the heart of enlightened and civilized Europe.

Herein precisely lies the great lesson that we must learn from the tragedy of the Holocaust: atrocities are committed not only by uncivilized, primitive, and perverse monsters, but also by "normal" people, civilized and educated, affectionate fathers, good husbands and conscientious professionals, just like the German Nazis, who actually belonged to Europe's most civi-

lized country, the land of music and philosophy, of classical and biblical studies, art and literature. We are experiencing a similar situation today with the rapid spread of similar racist attitudes, which find fertile soil in various regions—including, lately, in our country, which until recently seemed unthinkable.

To begin, then, I would like to mention briefly the following fundamental parameters that express the faith and consciousness of the Orthodox Church. The theology of the Church is not simply an intellectual exercise and preoccupation, but above all a liturgical doxology and expression of the experience of the divine-human community, as that community lives it at both the personal and communal levels of the lives of its faithful. Taking this clarification as our starting point, one needs to bear in mind the following:

A. The starting point of Christian theology and the ecclesial experience is none other than the self-revelation of God Himself. This self-revelation takes place within the history of humanity in the person of the Son and Word of God. It is a manifestation of God to man, with-

out discrimination and restriction, which aims to create a free and loving relationship of dialogue and reciprocal interpenetration. The revelation of God is a quintessentially public act, which reveals God's concern for the salvation of His Creation. It is to this end that He established His covenant with ancient Israel and, later, renewed it with all of humanity in the person of Christ, an event that highlights the catholicity of the Christian message of salvation.

On the one hand, the common Abrahamic origins of Jews and Christians—which ultimately underscore their “fraternal” roots— together with the universal character of God's salvific action within history, combine to completely preclude any tolerance for—much less collusion with—inhuman phenomena such as the ideology of anti-Semitism. God “wants all people to be saved” and this refers to the whole of humanity. In this plan of Divine Providence for the salvation of man, the Old Testament between God and Israel, though fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ, has never ceased to maintain its soteriological importance and role, inasmuch as God would never retract the initiative

that He once took toward humankind.

B. At the same time, the event of the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God within history reveals something equally important. Christ assumed the whole of human nature, man in his entirety. He was in no way limited by the constraints of gender, race, color, religion, social class, etc. but rather, through His teaching and actions, highlighted the uniqueness of the human person, far from attitudes and conceptions that darken, even to the slightest degree, God's image in man. It suffices for us to recall the parable of the Good Samaritan, which highlights the uniqueness of human existence and dignity, as well as the unconditional solidarity with each and every person.

Christ gave humanity the priceless gift of the personal mode of existence, the mode in which God Himself exists, a mode of being and life based on unconditional love and openness to every other person, which makes man a quintessentially relational being, who cannot live without constant, genuine encounter with each and every other, without racial, social, or religious differences hindering a peaceful and fra-

ternal coexistence among people. The life of the Church and of Christians, when based on the example of Christ Himself, cannot but reflect and express this concise manner of approaching others, of witnessing to the irreducible and unique value of every human being, since, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28 NRSV). In this context, it is unthinkable for Christians to adopt any form of racism, and especially anti-Semitism; nor can it ever express the consciousness of the Church. In this context, we often forget that Christ Himself was born a Jew according to the flesh, first addressing His message of salvation to His fellow Jews (“salvation is from the Jews”), who never ceased, like all of humanity (“Jews and Greeks, slaves and free...”) to comprise part of the plan of Divine Providence—instruments of salvation, according to the manner of God.

C. The quintessential place wherein this ethos takes concrete shape—or at least ought to become reality—is none other than the Holy Eu-

charist. Such is the mystery that constitutes the Church, the expression par excellence of its self-consciousness and identity, which offers—if only momentarily and partially—a real foretaste of the personal mode of existence of the Triune God, which will be fully revealed in the coming Kingdom, in God’s future final salvific intervention. One of the fundamental features of the Eucharistic identity of the Church is that it is the place where every kind of exclusion based on natural traits—such as race, gender, social, religious, or other differences—is relativized to the point that the only thing that matters is the unique and unrepeatable nature of the human person as the image of God and as God’s creation.

Is it possible, therefore, for a Christian, as a member of the Eucharistic body of Christ, to embrace—consciously or unconsciously, for whatever temporal, political, or broader ideological reason—any racist or other inhuman ideology such as anti-Semitism, which from the outset rejects the unique character of each and every person? Whenever we celebrate the Divine Liturgy in our churches, we pray “for the

union of all,” a prayer that refers to the unity and salvation of all humanity, not only of a certain class, race, or group—religious or other. Consequently, when the ecclesial consciousness is alive and expressed in specific manifestations of ecclesiastical life, it witnesses to the example of Jesus Christ Himself, who drew close to those who were suffering, persecuted, socially and ethnically outcast as the “cursed” of the earth, giving a clear example of how we, His disciples and ministers, ought to live together if we truly desire and look forward to eternal life. You cannot love God Whom you cannot see and hate your fellow man, with whom you must share your daily life and the earth’s resources, to paraphrase John the Evangelist.

Is it possible, then, to claim, as the Church or as individual believers, that we are following the sacrificial example of our Founder and practicing His salvific message, when we embrace inhumane ideologies that are contrary to all of the above? Anti-Semitism is not about some economic theory, which can lead to individual social injustices, but rather a threat that invalidates the very definition of man as such, inas-

much as it turns him into an object, de-humanizing him and invalidating his personal otherness, which is a non-negotiable truth of the Christian faith, with roots that spring from the life of the Holy Trinity and the Kingdom.

This timeless faith and consciousness of the Church, as already described briefly, has been incarnated and expressed very often throughout the course of its history, as in the examples of great hierarchs such as Archbishop Damaskinos of Athens, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Zakynthos, and our ever-memorable predecessor Metropolitan Joachim of Demetrias, each of whom, in his own way—motivated by genuine Christian sentiments—contributed to saving thousands of Greek Jews. I would like, therefore, at this point to speak about the life and work of my predecessor, the late Metropolitan Joachim (Alexopoulos) of Demetrias, who, through his actions, realized the theological criteria we have described, thereby contributing to the salvation of thousands of our Jewish compatriots during the difficult years of Nazi occupation.

We will not refer here to the multifaceted role

that Metropolitan Joachim played in the resistance movement against the German yoke. We will focus only on his contribution in saving hundreds of Jews, who lived in his diocese, from Nazi brutality. According to official data from the Central Jewish Council of Greece, at that time (1943), the Jewish community of Volos had approximately 872 members, which, led by Chief Rabbi Simeon Pesach, had developed a very dynamic social and economic life.

In September of the same year, when German forces asked the authorities in Volos for information on the Jewish citizens of the region, the Chief Rabbi turned immediately to Metropolitan Joachim, requesting his assistance in order to counter the perceived risk. As the Metropolitan himself later related, in an account that has been confirmed by many different sources, he enjoyed excellent relations with the Chief Rabbi.

As soon as the latter informed him of his fears, the Metropolitan asked the sympathetic German consul of the region, Helmut Sefel, about the occupiers' intentions. The Metropolitan then immediately advised the Chief Rabbi

that all Jewish citizens in the area should leave as quickly as possible. To this end, the ever-memorable Metropolitan composed a handwritten letter of recommendation, which still survives, directed to all priests of the villages in the diocese, as well as to leaders of the resistance and all other Greek citizens, asking them to assist in any way possible with the Chief Rabbi's effort to save the Jews. At the same time, without any second thought and despite the obvious risks that such a move entailed, Joachim safeguarded, at the request of his Jewish compatriots, many valuable objects that belonged to their community; he also did not hesitate to later publicly implore the people of his diocese to return any valuable objects that belonged to Jewish families before they fled the area, "so that they too can live now that all of us have attained the liberation of our country."

In the context of the same account, Metropolitan Joachim expressed his gratitude that God had given him the strength to contribute to the rescue of his Jewish compatriots, thus also demonstrating in practice his true and deep sentiments towards them, without being se-

duced by the stereotypes of religious prejudices, but rather inspired by an eminently humanitarian solidarity for the salvation of every human being created, as we have seen, in the image of God.

In the years following the occupation (1949), in the same spirit and as a result of various expressions of misconduct by certain residents of the city of Volos, who attacked the Jewish synagogue or sang inappropriate songs against the Jews on Holy Friday, the ever-memorable Joachim invoked “the true Christian spirit of tolerance and love for Jews as our fellow citizens,” thereby expressing on the one hand the genuine ethos of the Gospel and the ecclesial self-consciousness of the Body of Christ, and on the other his radical opposition to and explicit condemnation of every form of inhuman racist behavior, which stands in stark contrast to the very identity of the Christian.

According, again, to official statistics from the Central Jewish Council of Greece, 26% of the Jews in Volos fell victim to the Nazis, the lowest number in Greece. This testifies in the clearest and most unequivocal way to the crucial role

played by our predecessor Metropolitan Joachim's general attitude and behavior in saving our Jewish fellow citizens during those difficult circumstances. In concluding our remarks about Metropolitan Joachim's contribution to saving the Jews of Volos, we should emphasize the following:

1. Chief Rabbi Moses Pesach generally acted in the best possible way for the salvation of his flock, especially by appealing for help to the Orthodox bishop, whose timely and trustworthy advice for a Jewish "exodus" from the city of Volos he accepted with absolute confidence.

2. Metropolitan Joachim undertook the grave responsibility of advising Chief Rabbi Pesach to convince some 900 Greek Jews of Volos to swiftly abandon their homes, shops, jobs and property, in order to take to the mountains even as winter approached, dragging along with them the needy elderly, young, sick and disabled. The Christian trustworthiness, integrity and charity of both the Metropolitan and his secret confidante, German consul Helmut Sefel, saved the Jewish Community of Volos.

3. Despite the Nazis' clever ruse simply to

seek a directory of Jewish citizens, their surprise attack failed.

4. The Jewish Community of Volos could conceivably have had zero losses. As it was, they lost 130 individuals, predominantly Jewish poor laborers, vendors and family men who could not afford to live in the surrounding villages and therefore fled to the city. On the night of 24th-25th March 1944, they were captured by the S.S. and led to Nazi crematoria.

The significance of Metropolitan Joachim's contribution is also evidenced by the fact that the Yad Vashem, the appropriate authority on Jewish victims of the Holocaust, posthumously included the late Metropolitan Joachim among the "Righteous of the Nations" in recognition of his special contribution to the unprecedented rescue of the Jewish population of Volos.

Admittedly, representatives of our Church have not always maintained the same stance against racism and the persecution of innocent people, protecting all classes of marginal and persecuted people, such as the victims of Nazi atrocities and anti-Semitic hatred. Unfortunately, such distasteful behavior has found fertile

ground as a result of—or, rather, on the pretext of—the dire financial crisis experienced by our people today. Those waxing nostalgic for Hitler-like policies and advocates of the most inhumane ideologies have seized the opportunity to exploit the problems and fears of our fellow citizens, attempting to sow hatred and intolerance toward anyone who is different and ultimately anyone who passionately resists the dehumanization of the human person. Many times, even we representatives of the ecclesiastical body and many of our faithful have not risen to the challenge, instead adopting an often incendiary and above all anti-Christian rhetoric, that in no way can find analogies in the bright and shining example of our blessed predecessor Joachim.

As aptly noted, “the Church’s responsibility lies not only in the fact that it embraces and stands in solidarity with those in need—irrespective of racial, ethnic or religious origin—but that, with all its pastoral, theological, and practical powers, it publicly testifies that it will not consent to or tolerate, even through its silence, any fascist and nationalistic practices, but will

cast out from the Church the fear-mongering rhetoric and slogans of hatred toward other people ...,” such as, in this case, our Jewish brothers and fellow citizens.

In concluding this short address, I would like to refer to the renowned words of a Jewish woman who became a Christian and lived a truly holy life, Simone Weil, who used to say that there is nothing worse for a Christian than “not keeping Christ’s commandments, not honoring His Name, and not being prepared to die for Him.” These three negatively formulated exhortations by Simone Weil—the keeping of Christ’s commandments, the sanctification of His Name, and readiness to die for Him—are inconceivable without our vibrant advocacy against racial hatred and anti-Semitism.

Thus, whenever we hear anti-Semitic cries—even from within ecclesiastical circles—with the pretext of patriotism for Greece and love for the Greek people, it is imperative that we oppose them vehemently not only on the basis of the foundational principles of the Gospel, but also on numerous examples of the contemporary self-consciousness of the Church, which have

proclaimed with no uncertainty that racism and anti-Semitism—from wherever and whomever they may arise—in no way express the faith and consciousness of the Church.

The immutable conscience of the Church is expressed through the example of great hierarchs, such as Archbishop Damaskinos, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Zakynthos, and our aforementioned predecessor Joachim, as well as countless anonymous clergy and laity, each of which—in his or her own way, and motivated by genuine Christian sentiments—contributed to the salvation of thousands of Greek Jews. This is the tradition of the Orthodox Church in Greece, and it is this tradition that we will continue to maintain, despite the many self-proclaimed judges.

