

# “And Who Is My Neighbor?”\*

Mercy and love transcend race, nationality,  
and religious affiliation

*Metropolitan Cyprian*  
President of the Holy Synod

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*Editor’s Note:* The following article, while it addresses the phenomenon of resistance to burgeoning foreign immigration in contemporary Greece, is certainly apropos of America, a country which—though built on the labor and toil of immigrants—has also seen, in recent times, the unfortunate emergence of a spirit of inhospitality towards more recent immigrations.

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• *Ideologizing a disdain for foreigners.* The recent mass influx of refugees into our country, particularly from Afghanistan, has occasioned great confusion and has also demonstrated that those “Greek Orthodox” who are opposed to the new identity cards [which do not indicate one’s religious affiliation and are, for this reason, viewed by a vocal faction in Greece as an attempt by the state to undermine the Orthodox identity of the country—*Trans.*] and who have organized public protests over the matter, with certain laudable exceptions (such as the residents of Zakynthos), do not evidence a Christian heart and have failed to keep in mind what it means to be a Christian.

We are not merely addressing, of course, the issue of the *legal obligation* of the government, which—on the basis of international conventions—is prevented from expelling any refugee who declares that he has been persecuted and that his life is likely to be in danger if he returns to his homeland.

Nor, in addition, are we only distressed by the shamelessness of the police authorities [in violation of the foregoing international conventions—*Trans.*], one agency of which even went so far as to issue a deportation order to a new mother with her twenty-day-old baby...! (To go where...?)

What is, in our view, by far more alarming is the fact that a disdain for foreigners is being turned into an ideology—in the name of Orthodox tradition, no less!—, to the unbelievable extent that a well-known clergyman has been vehemently condemned for providing free relief to hundreds of children of illegal immigrants, very few of whom are Orthodox (the majority of them being Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants), and that the following truly shocking question has been posed: “*Are we going to allow a few clergy who are ignorant of our Orthodox Tradition to save their souls while they destroy Greece?*”

• *Love is Christocentric.* The ethos of the Orthodox Church is

Christocentric. It is the teaching of the Fathers, proclaimed in *deed and word*, “always, everywhere, and by all,” that

the members of the Orthodox Church are called to function as the active hands of Christ. As the eyes of Christ, which are filled with understanding. As the attentive ears of Christ. As the heart of Christ, which is filled with love for all mankind, in all of its needs and all of its concerns, demonstrating, by their deeds, that they are members of the Body of Christ. They are called to show this love and understanding towards mankind, not only theoretically, but also in concrete terms and in practice. For, it is precisely their bodies, through which love towards humanity is manifested in specific and practical ways, that have become members of Christ. Love should be extended towards other people in a corporeal way, since it is in their bodies that Orthodox Christians have become, or can become, members of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The “neighbor” in the parable of the Good Samaritan is embodied in the person of our fellow man, regardless of race, nationality, or religion.<sup>2</sup> The aim of our Lord’s astonishing reply to the question posed by the lawyer in that parable was precisely to demolish the exclusive “boundaries” of love established by the Hebrews, who regarded as their “neighbor” only those who were of the same nation and religion as themselves.

Our Lord and God Jesus Christ, Whose Divine heart becomes our own heart through the Holy Mysteries of our Church, was, and lived as, a “refugee”: He descended from Heaven to earth, took refuge in Egypt, lived as a “stranger,” and has continued, throughout the centuries, to knock on our doors as a “stranger,” in the person of our “neighbor.”

Now, in view of this, what racial, national, or religious “walls” are capable of preventing exuberant waves of love from pouring out of our hearts—the very heart of Christ—in all directions?

• *St. Akakios and the Persians.* On April 9, we celebrate the memory of St. Akakios, who was Bishop of the Armenian city of Amida at the beginning of the fifth century.

During the war between the Romans and the Persians (421-422), the Byzantines had captured seven thousand prisoners, whom they refused to feed or to release.

So, St. Akakios summoned his clergy and addressed the following words to them, among others:

Our God needs neither dishes nor cups, for He neither eats nor drinks.... Since our Church possesses many gold and silver vessels, which derive from the generosity of the Faithful, it is our duty to ransom the prisoners with these and to feed them.

And that is what happened: the treasures were melted down, the prisoners were ransomed, given food, and sent back to their king with the necessary provisions for the return journey.

King Baranos V of Persia was so amazed by this magnanimous act of St. Akakios that he asked to meet the most holy Hierarch in person.<sup>3</sup>

• *St. Gregory Palamas and the Turks.* The very splendor of Christian love and “mercy”—over and above race, nationality, and religious affiliation—expresses, in addition, the “œconomy” of God, as St. Gregory Palamas wrote to his Church flock with regard to his captivity under the Turks (March 1354-Spring 1355):

It seems to me that, because God has ordained things in such a way that Christians and Turks are intermingled, and that I am a prisoner of the Turks, that God’s Providence and the works of our Lord Jesus Christ...are being made manifest to them (the Turks) as well..., such as to be without excuse before His future and most dread Tribunal.<sup>4</sup>

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Woe to us, if our “national identity” should continue to adulterate the Christocentrism of our Orthodox ecclesiastical ethos, which rises above nationality!

Woe to us, if the dust of the “statistical triumph” (!) of “signatures” [on petitions submitted to the Greek government by those protesting against the new identity cards—*Trans.*] continues to prevent the inscription, in the hearts of Christians, of the “New Name,”<sup>5</sup> which is unceasingly inscribed by the Holy Spirit and which renews our identity through the “New Commandment”<sup>6</sup> of love for our neighbor without conditions, limits, or boundaries!

\* St. Luke 10:29. Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (2002), pp. 7-9.

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## Notes

1. Dumitru Staniloae, *Γιὰ ἓνα Ὁρθόδοξο Οἰκουμενισμό* [*Towards an Orthodox Ecumenism*] (Piræus: 1976), p. 103.

2. St. Luke 10:25-37.

3. Socrates Scholastikos, *Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. VII, ch. 21 (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXVII, cols. 782B-784A); see also the *Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ Ἡθικὴ Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια*, Vol. I, col. 1169. Unfortunately, the memory of St. Akakios is passed over by the standard *Synaxaristai* and calendars of Saints.

4. St. Gregory Palamas, “Epistle to His Church,” §3, in *Συγγράμματα* [*Writings*], Vol. IV, p. 121.

5. Cf. Revelation 3:12.

6. St. John 13:34.