



Opening sermon by Archbishop Dr Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania

Opening prayer

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I

The Triune God's transformative interventions

1. The formulation of our Assembly theme assumes the form of a prayerful petition, if you like, it is a mystical cry, which reveals a sense of profound weakness and intense expectation. It is a contemporary variation of the prayer placed on our lips by Christ Himself: "... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." It is based on the recognition that, for the transformation of the world, our human thoughts, ideas and abilities are insufficient. Yet, at the same time, it is founded on the conviction that the God, in whom we hope, is not indifferent to human history. God is immediately interested and is able, through His grace, wisdom and power, to intervene and transform the entire universe. God takes the initiative, taking action and assuming the decisive role in universal events.

The faith and experience of the Church with regard to the mystery of God are summed up in the phrase: "The Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit" creates, provides, and saves. God is incomprehensible and inaccessible in His essence. Nevertheless, His presence is perceived in the world through His grace and the manifestation of His glory. Such is the dynamic, creative and transforming energy of the Trinity that is beyond all essence. Grace is the unique gift, which contains all other gifts. It is revealed in all the divine energies. Eastern Christian thought clearly distinguishes between the created universe and the uncreated energies of God. The superessential God is not identified with any created understanding or idea, like the philosophical concept of essence. That which in the final analysis humankind is able to assume is the grace of God.

2. The most surprising transformative intervention occurred in human history when the Word of God was incarnated and assumed human nature – not only human spirit but also matter and, thereby, all of creation, since humanity is its crown. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (*John 1:14*). All the stages of Christ's life comprise expressions of divine grace as well as of divine glory. During His Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, Jesus revealed the original beauty of humanity created "in the image" of God as well as the concluding splendid glory of humanity "in the likeness" of God.

The sacrifice on the Cross and the resurrection of Christ complete the salvation of the human race by divine grace. "But God, who is rich in mercy ... raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (*Eph. 2:4,6-7*). Amazed before this astonishing gift, St. Paul professes: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (vv. 8-9). Since that time, what took place ontologically within human nature in the person of Jesus Christ continues with the ongoing presence and energy of the Holy Spirit.

The closing pages of the New Testament illumine the eschatological vision of the Church, describing a universal transformation, "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1). The One seated on a throne proclaims: "Behold, I make all things new." (Rev. 21:5)

As to what form the transformation of the world will ultimately assume in the future remains a secret of the God of surprises. After all, this is what happened in the past. If human creativity – this divine gift, which we have received – has reserved so many surprises for us, the grace of God holds incomparably more and entirely superb surprises.

The word "grace" was employed by the Seventy in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the rendering of diverse Hebrew terms. In Greek, the original language of the New Testament, grace "denotes firstly the radiant attraction of beauty, secondly the inner radiance of goodness, and finally the gifts which bear witness to this generosity."¹

As the energy of the Trinitarian God (*Acts 13:43, 14:26; Rom. 5:15; 1 Cor. 1:4, 3:10, 15:10; 2 Cor. 6:1, 8:1, 9:14; Eph. 3:2, 7:7; etc*), grace is referred to in the New Testament sometimes as "the grace of God", other times as "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," and at other times as "the grace of the Holy Spirit." In the conscience of the united Church, grace is the energy of the entire Holy Trinity. As St. Athanasius the Great emphasizes: "Grace is singular, deriving from the Father, proceeding through the Son and fulfilled in the Holy Spirit."² . And elsewhere, he writes: "They have this grace with the participation of the Word, through the Spirit and from the Father."³

II

We are coworkers in the transforming energy of divine grace.

In our petition "God, in your grace, transform the world," the immediate response that we receive is: But I want you to be with me! Your place is not to be spectators of divine interventions and actions, but coworkers. This is a direct consequence of my Incarnation, of the constitution of the Church, of my "mystical Body," where you have freely accepted to become members. All of us, then, who belong to Him have both the privilege and the obligation to share actively in the transformation of the world.

1. Beginning with ourselves. The life in Christ, to which we have been called, is a continuously transformative journey. St. Paul advises: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (*Rom. 12:2*) "Renewing the mind" is precisely what repentance is about. And it may come through contemplative silence, which leads to the awareness of our nothingness and worthlessness. It is the result of self-criticism regarding the degree of our estrangement from the ideal determined by His will.

What is demanded is a continual gaze upon and search for God. It is not a matter of change once-for-all but of an ongoing transformation by the grace of the Spirit. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, ... and all of us ... seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (*2 Cor. 2:17-18*) We are speaking of a transformative process, from purification to purification, from repentance to repentance, from virtue to virtue, from knowledge to knowledge, from glory to glory. This is a dynamic movement of unceasing renewal in the grace of the Holy Spirit. As St. Gregory of Nyssa explains: A Christian "is ever changing for the better and transforming from glory to glory through daily growth, by always improving and always becoming deified and yet without ever reaching the end of perfection. For true perfection means that one never ceases to grow toward that which is better and never reduces perfection to any limit."⁴

The grace of God shapes the apostolic "being" – as St. Paul explains: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (*1 Cor. 15:10*). And this grace in turn becomes an inexhaustible source of action (*Acts 14:26, 15:40*). The disciples do not remain satisfied with their personal enjoyment of grace: "And His grace toward me has not been in vain." Grace becomes service, a creative struggle for healing, reconciliation, the spreading of the Gospel for the transformation of all. Yet, St. Paul again corrects himself: "Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." (*1 Cor. 15:11*)

2. The struggle for inner transformation, in accordance with the example of Christ, takes place in the Church. The faithful Christian struggles and is sanctified as a member of the Body of Christ. Consequently, personal renewal and transformation is reflected within the entire community of the Church. "Jesus Christ, who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (*Heb. 13:8*), is the head of the Church, which is His Body, sustained by the Holy Spirit, and in this sense the Church cannot sin. Therefore, we do not ask for the 'transformation of the Church.' However, if we are referring to 'the churches', specifically in the sense of communities of believers in history, we know full well that believers sometimes fail to actualize the true being of the Church. It is we sinners, personally and in community, who require transformation".⁵

The transformative journey of our church communities cannot occur on the basis of criteria occasionally proposed by fashion and vogue, but through the guidance of "the Gospel of grace." We have in practice often ascertained the substitution of many of God's commandments by the mentality of the world, by a demonic reversal of the evangelical principles. Instead of the primacy of service, we have craved the primacy of authority; instead of the power of love, the love of the power of this world; instead of respect for others, we have demanded their submission to our opinions and desires. The Church is obliged to

remain at every time and in every place what its essence is: namely, the Body of Christ, "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (*Eph. 1:23*), word, light, the witness of whom embraces all things with His love, transforming them. All other social and cultural actions are incidental; they are the historical expression and incarnation of love in specific circumstances and conditions.

3. Obviously, however, we cannot become a closed community "of saved ones," isolated from events on the planet. Our responsibility extends to the universe, to the journey of the entire world.

a) Since our Assembly is taking place in Latin America, *the issue of poverty* assumes absolute priority for all of us who worship and follow Him, who was born and died stressing the dignity of the poor and their inalienable value before God, who came "to bring good news to the poor" (*Luke 4:18*) In the face of all the poor – the hungry, estranged, and refugees – we are obliged to discern the face of Jesus. Woe to us if, in the 21st century, we again relinquish the initiative for social justice to others, as we have done in past centuries, while we confine ourselves to our opulent rituals, to our usual alliance with the powerful. Woe to us if we permit other forces, with different religious ideas and ambitions, to assume leadership in the struggle to overcome poverty in our world.

In our age, a globally interdependent society is taking shape, and our most fundamental problem is how we might become conscious as Christians of our obligation toward those who are deprived of the most basic goods, as well as our practical solidarity with these people within our cities and our nations, from country to country and from church to church. We can no longer claim ignorance or indifference before the millions of children that live in miserable conditions, before the one billion fellow human beings that are undernourished while another three billion survive on less than two dollars a day.

Before the challenge of economic globalization, which is solely concerned with broadening the market, while leveling cultural and popular diversities, we are called as Christians to respond with enlightened initiatives for a society of understanding, healing, reconciliation and fraternization, based on respect for each human person and each people, promoting mutual understanding and solidarity throughout the planet. We are called to promote daring initiatives and just social struggles, commencing with our own immediate environment, the family, our parish and city, our diocese and region. We are called, moreover, to practice our immediate responsibility within our specific circumstances, keeping the entire world in mind as our broader horizon.

b) On our planet, *peace* continues to be injured on a daily basis. The peace proclaimed by the New Testament is multidimensional: it is personal and social, yet at the same time it is sanctifying, holistic, and eschatological. With God's grace, we are obliged to struggle so that the visible and invisible conflicts may be transformed and peace may prevail in our immediate and wider environment. St. Basil the Great states: "Nothing is more characteristic of a Christian than peacemaking; for that, the Lord promised us the greatest reward"⁶; that is to be called "sons of God".

Of course, peace cannot develop of itself. It is related to other significant values in life. Above all, it is related to justice. An unjust, unlawful world cannot expect peace. Genuine longing for peace on a global, local, or personal level, is expressed through struggle for justice. Nevertheless, today, peace and justice have yet another name: development. And all of us, who yearn and pray for the transformation of our world, have a duty to contribute to the development of poorer nations.

c) However, even in nations that appear secure and peaceful, every now and again one observes *outbreaks of violence*. As a rule, those who are more powerful are also more liable to violence. This is because they have the possibility to impose their self-interested plans in a variety of means, with authoritarian methods, through the violation of information, by electronic and human brainwashing, by use of threat and blackmailing of conscience. Yet violence is not only found where powers are great, nor only where the mass media turn our attention. It is also detected in smaller nations, cities, villages, communities – even religious ones – and indeed wherever people live. Aggression is concealed within every human heart. In beseeching, then, for the transformation of our world, let us make a firm decision to struggle, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to overcome violence wherever we possibly can: in our family and society, as well as in the political and international community.

d) Finally, the ecological destruction provoked by the irrational exploitation of the earth's natural resources is creating serious concerns for the future of our planet. Therefore, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew points out "whenever we narrow religious life to our own concerns, we overlook the prophetic calling of the Church to implore God and to invoke the Divine Spirit for the renewal of the whole polluted cosmos. Indeed, the entire cosmos is the space within which transformation is enacted."⁷ All our efforts in this domain will be productive when they take place in the Holy Spirit, "from whom grace and life come to all creation"⁸ as we sing in the Orthodox Church. For "through the Holy Spirit spring the sources of grace, watering and reviving the entire creation."⁹ St. Gregory Palamas defines the duty and ethos of every faithful with regard to nature, when he states that the heart of a person illumined by the eternal uncreated light "embraces the whole of creation".

III

Inspired by the "Gospel of grace"

1. The manner in which Christ came into the world never ceases to amaze. The Savior's entire life and preaching revealed the mystical power of humility. Our Lord "emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:7-8)

Naturally, the ways of modern society are completely contrary to the spirit of humility. What attracts the attention of most is normally what most impresses, whatever is related to glamour, money, and illusion. Even within church circles, in spite of much talk about humility and similar things, people's ways of thinking and patterns of behavior often betray pride and arrogance. Yet humility in Christ reveals the secret of the spiritual radiance and the transforming power of the Church. The authentic witness of the Church is borne through the centuries by the sincere humility of those dedicated to God. "For great is the might of the Lord; but by the humble He is glorified." (*Sirach 3:20*) In fact, Holy Scripture insists: "The Lord opposes the proud, but to the humble He shows favor." (*Prov. 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5*) When, therefore, we pray: "God, in your grace, transform the world," let us not overlook for a moment that the magnet for God's grace is humility. As a way of life, humility nourishes our thought and creativity.

2. What is able, above and beyond all else, to transform everything in the world is the sacrificial offering of love. With the entrance of the divine Word into the historical march of humanity, God's love was revealed in the most shattering manner: it was incarnated. This truth remains the root of Christian revelation, which nurtures every other Christian value and proposal. "For God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him." (1 John 4:8-9)

The fundamental mission, then, of the Church is to reveal and make manifest God's love in the here and now, in each moment and every place where it is and acts. In this way, it contributes essentially to the transformation of the world. Otherwise, it resembles "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," even if it possesses the gifts of prophesy, knowledge, and faith; even if it understands all the mysteries; even if it is known for great and impressive actions (*cf. 1 Cor. 13:1-3*).

Each cell of the visible Body of Christ, every Christian, is called to incarnate with his or her entire being and work God's love in the particular circumstances of their life. By denying ourselves and assuming the cross (*cf. Matt. 16:24*) in our daily life, by supporting those around us in their sorrow, their loneliness, and their need. Whoever is "in God" endeavors to love like God. God's love takes daring initiatives, knows no boundaries, and embraces all things. The conviction that "God is love" comforts us and liberates us from multifaceted fear, from fear of the other, from fear of the different, or from fear of human developments that often appear threatening. Furthermore, God's love comforts us and liberates us from fear of our failure and from fear of the abyss within our soul. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18)

Many of those who deny or resist the name "God" indirectly accept His other name: Love. The fact that love constitutes the supreme value of life, the mystical force of the world, is becoming increasingly acceptable even by people of other religious persuasions through diverse experiences and ways of thinking. Love becomes the mystical passage which leads people – perhaps without their even knowing it – closer to the God of love. Ultimately, it comprises the secret to the transformation of the world.

3. Finally, both our prayer and our participation in the transformative evolution of the world must take place within an atmosphere of *joy and doxology*. Joy is the distinctive fruit of the Holy Spirit (*Gal. 5:12*). It is the characteristic of those who belong to the kingdom of God (*Rom. 14:17; 1 Thess. 1:6*). The radiance of essential love calmly triumphs over sin, pain, and contempt. It was, from the outset, the definitive feature of the Christians. With the joy of selfless love, the joy of the perpetual presence of the Risen Christ in the Holy Spirit, the Church proceeds triumphantly amid the world. And it loses the world when it loses this joy. Christ offered us a "joy in fullness," (*John 16:24*) which no one can remove from us. The experience of this joy determines our daily life. St. Paul incites us: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (*Phil. 4:4*) And St. Peter also insists: "Believe in Him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy." (1 Peter 1:8)

Our theological reflection and our prayer concerning the transformation of the world are developed more fully within the context of doxology. With the institution of the Eucharistic gathering, the Church chose from the very first moment a doxological stance to implore God's grace and proclaim "the Gospel of grace" (*Acts 20:24*), Christ's "Gospel of glory" (*2 Cor. 4:4*). Through doxology, in a harmonious synthesis with the beauty of liturgical worship, the Church powerfully expresses the acquisition of the divine grace and the appropriation of the divine glory.

This doxology of the Church is a foretaste and prelude of the eschatological hour, when the universe will be transformed within the absolute manifestation of God's glory. Each creative effort and participation in this – every ministry in the Church, every expression of love – constitutes a ray of God's loving grace and glory. It signifies a sharing in the renewal of the whole of creation.

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By way of conclusion, I would like to remind you that term "grace" in Greek denotes, among other things, the brilliance of beauty and goodness. I often recall the expression of a contemporary computer scientist, who said that just as the laws of physics support the theory that gravity, weight and mass were not distinguished in the first moments of the universe, in a similar way, I think, God did not create the world with truth, beauty and goodness separated from one another.

And I, too, believe that, in the future, this "classical triad of the beautiful, the true and the good, which has itself played a significant role in the history of Christian thought"¹⁰ will contribute to the transformation of the world.

With our gaze firmly set on Christ, our Lord, who is the absolute truth, the boundless beauty and the incarnate love of God in the world, let us contribute, to the best of our ability, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, to the transformation of the world.

Eternal and infinite God! As we behold in ecstasy the boundlessness of the macrocosm that surrounds us and the boundlessness of the microcosm that we inhabit, we kneel humbly before You in prayer. Through Your grace, incarnate in the person of Your Son and unceasingly active through Your Spirit, transform our existence; transform our world into a world illumined by Your truth, by Your beauty, and by Your love.

Notes:

1. *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, publié sous la direction de Léon Dufour et alia, 3ème ed. Cerf, Paris 1974, 1.
2. Epist. ad Serapion, 1:14, PG 26.565B.
3. Orationes tres adversus Arianos, PG 25.29A.
4. To Olympios, About perfections, *Greek Fathers of the Church, Gregory Nyssa*, vol. 8, Thessaloniki 1980, 422.
5. Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima (Ed.), *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Porto Alegre (Final Report)*, WCC, Geneva 2005, 4.
6. *Epist.* 113, PG 32.528
7. "Transformation calls for metanoia", Address on the theme of the WCC 9th Assembly.
8. *Paraklitiki*, Sunday Matins (Orthros), Third Tone.
9. IbidJ. Pelikan: *Jesus through the centuries*, Yale University Press 1985, 7., Fourth Tome.