

A Brief History of Orthodox Mission

Anastasios Yannoulatos,

A Twenties Century Missionary Worker

By Victor Beshir

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a new wave of evangelism, which started in the late 1950s by a group of young Orthodox believers gathered at an international Orthodox youth conference held in 1958. The conference concluded that evangelism is not an act of the past but it is the responsibility of the contemporary church as well. The leader of this group was Anastasios Yannoulatos, a young Orthodox theologian from Greece.

This young man exhorted great efforts to promote evangelism. Here are some of his activities:

- 1- He established a missionary movement to awaken the missionary Orthodox conscience of the Orthodox Church
- 2- The movement published a journal in Greek and English to promote evangelism awareness among Orthodox people.

His Life:

1- He was born in 1929 in Greece. In his teenage years, he experienced a close relationship with God. After his personal experience of surrendering his life to God, he wrote the following statement: **"It was not enough for me to give something to God, I had to be given totally to Him. I wanted to live with my whole being in Christ."**

He then entered the Theological School of Athens University and graduated with honor in 1951.

A good lesson here for each of us is that the beginning of any service to the Lord should start with a deep personal experience with Him first. This would surely lead us to give all our lives to Him, to live for Him, and to let Him be the center of our lives.

2-Upon graduating, he joined a movement whose goal was to invoke a spiritual renewal of the church in Greece. This movement did a great job of

awakening the church, similar in many ways to the Sunday School movement in Egypt, which occurred during the same time period.

The lesson here, even though he was a young man, he had a vision for the church that evolved from his spiritual fullness in Christ, regardless of his age. This reminds me of St. Paul's words to Timothy: "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Tim 4:12).

So, please allow Christ to fill your heart and then start consecrating your life on Him.

- 3- He became the leader of student movements and youth camps, where he worked hard to make spiritual life a concrete foundation for other youth.
- 4- During those years he discovered the significant impact of missions on the lives of youth, and consequently on the church as a whole. He realized the great need for missions and that without them, the church in the West would become weaker.

The lessons here are golden ones. Through the Holy Spirit's directions, he realized that **behind any church awakening there should be a concrete spiritual revival among the youth, a revival that is established upon the foundation of an actual personal spiritual experience.**

The other significant lesson is the importance of involving youth in evangelism. It has its impact on their spiritual lives and eventually on the entire church, especially for churches in the West. In my personal opinion, which I communicated years ago, **Coptic youth involvement in evangelism is the greatest method of keeping them within the church. There is nothing else that could match the spiritual impact of evangelism on youth.** I based my opinion on practical results from our Coptic history and other churches' history.

- 5- He realized that the church should not abandon the apostolic mission entrusted to her by the Lord himself. Listen to the fiery words he wrote in 1965 A.D. **"Church without mission is a contradiction in terms...If the Church is indifferent to the apostolic work with which she has been entrusted, she denies herself, contradicts herself and her essence, and is a traitor in the warfare in which she is engaged. A static Church which lacks vision and a constant endeavor to proclaim the Gospel to the world could hardly be recognized as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church to whom the Lord entrusted the continuation of His Work."**

- 6- After his ordination as a deacon in 1960, he founded the inter-Orthodox mission center to educate the church members concerning evangelism, and to send missionaries throughout the world.
- 7- To setup himself as an example, he left to Uganda. However, he contracted Malaria, which forced him to return to Greece. The doctors ordered him not to return to Africa, something he grieved greatly.
- 8- Through his research, he concluded, **"It is impossible to truly be Orthodox without having an interest in missions."**
- 9- It took the church of Greece more than 12 years to begin to hear and respond to the voice of this bold visionary. In 1968, the church agreed to Yannoulatos' idea of establishing a missionary organization within the church. In response to the fruits of this missionary organization, the church ordained him as Bishop Anastasios and put him in charge of the "Apostolic Diakonia"
- 10- Along with his ecclesiastical duties, he continued his academic endeavors. He started and directed a center for missionary studies at the University of Athens.
- 11- A mission of his life was to continue his 'wake-up' call to the church. He wrote in 1968: **"It is unthinkable for us to speak of "Orthodox spirituality," of a "life in Christ," while we stay inert as to mission..."**
- 12- Another time he said: **"Apostolic church, apostolic does not refer only to apostolic succession. More importantly, it implies having an apostolic fire and zeal 'to preach the gospel to every creature' (MK 16:15)"**
- 13- In 1979, he wrote: "The Gospel is addressed to all peoples, and therefore the work of the church remains incomplete as long as it is restricted to certain geographical areas or social classes...Missions are not a duty that was only expected of the first generation of Christians, it is rather the duty of Christians of all generations."
- 14- In 1972, he established the Covenant of St. John the Forerunner in Kareas, Greece. This is the first Orthodox covenant in the world to emphasize external missions and to allow its nuns to participate in missionary work throughout the world.
- 15- In 1980, he was invited to resolve problems in the Greek Orthodox Church in East Africa. Through his great vision, he reorganized the need for the church there to be led by local leaders, with whom he consequently spent a long time preparing and educating. This is what

he said to explain his vision: **"The 'incarnation of God's Word' in the language and customs of a country has been and must be the first concern of all Orthodox missions. Its intent is the planting and growth of a native church, self-powered and self-governing, able to turn to account all the genuine strands of national tradition, transforming and hallowing them in harmony with the people's nature to the glory of God."**

The following is my personal opinion, which might be in disagreement with the opinion of others:

The above statement conveys one of the most fundamental attitudes towards the establishment of new indigenous churches. This statement, in my opinion, is supported by **the practices of the apostles themselves, when they preached the Gospel everywhere. In every place they ordained bishops, priests, and deacons from the local community. Then, these churches added from the heritage of the community to their own churches. A great example is our Coptic Orthodox Church. St. Mark did not impose on Egypt any hymns from Israel, where he grew up and learned to praise with his fellow apostles, but rather he left the Egyptians to take from their musical heritage and culture to add to the church. The same lesson was repeated when our Coptic Church evangelized in Ethiopia in the third century during the time of St. Asthanasius. The Copts taught the Ethiopians the faith, however, they let them use the African melody and African musical instruments in the church. Again, this is a very essential lesson in evangelism, which we need to comprehend as we start to evangelize. We need to spread the 'Word of God' incarnate in the hearts and minds of the faithful of the indigenous church using the flesh of the society (its culture and heritage), not by using a foreign culture and heritage.**

- 16- He** encouraged short- term missions from Greece to Africa. When those missionaries went back to Greece, they helped in spreading the awareness of evangelism within the church.
- 17- He** led a great movement of **translation and publication of service books and other books into the local languages**, so the indigenous could pray in a language they understand.
- 18-** One of his great missionary accomplishments took place in Albania in the 1990s, when he **opened dialogues and bridges with people of other religions and even atheists. The result was a flux of converts from young Muslims and atheists.**

19- He added another dimension to evangelism when he said: **'Mission is an essential statement of the Orthodox self-conscience, a cry in action for the fulfillment of God's will on earth as it is in heaven... Indifference to mission is a denial of Orthodoxy.'**

20- He departed in 1991, but only after he succeeded in helping the church rediscover who she really is and see the mystery of the one holy apostolic in its fullness.

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Next lesson would be about the efforts of the contemporary Coptic bishop, H.G, Bishop Antonius Markos in Africa. If you are one of those who traveled to Africa or you know about his missionary work, please write to me about it (my email address is: vbeshir@hotmail.com).

At the time when I wrote these lessons, about ten years ago, I couldn't find any references that describe the service of H.G. Bishop Paul (Anba Bolus). If you have references or you can write about his service and his personality, please pass it to me.