

**Metropolitan of Demetrias Ignatius**

“Consultation on Theology and Disability in Orthodox perspective”

Volos, September 28-30, 2015

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this International Consultation on *Theology and Disability in Orthodox perspective*, organized by the *Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network* (EDAN) and the *Volos Academy for Theological Studies*.

It is true that over the centuries, disability was not addressed in the best possible way by societies and Christian Churches. Persons with impairments were ridiculed and bullied, and even without such degrading responses they were treated as incapable of living a fully human life, in other words they were almost de-humanized. Overall these people were excluded from interacting with other people on equal terms, even in their churches, since it was considered that disability was a punishment for a person's sins, or a sign of being possessed by demons that calls for exorcism.

In recent decades however, things have more or less changed. Modern Western societies, provided rules and created various social structures that have greatly improved the standard of living of these people, while diverse efforts were made towards their active inclusion in various aspects of daily life, as for instance in the field of work, in sports (cf. Special Olympics) etc. Despite these positive developments however, the Christian Churches and especially the Orthodox, has not yet responded adequately or successfully, both on the theological and pastoral level, to the needs and challenges posed by the presence of persons with impairments.

In order for the Orthodox Church and theology to offer a useful discourse in the midst of such reality, leading subsequently to the corresponding practice, and taking into account the current reality away from various past excesses and failures, it needs to take seriously into consideration the following basic theological assumptions:

- a. The very event of the Incarnation of the Word of God in history: It is true that Jesus Christ assumed the whole human nature, the whole man. At the same time, he was not prevented or limited by the constraints of gender, race, color, religion, social class, etc. but by his teaching and work he praised the uniqueness of the human person away from attitudes and understandings that often undermine the image of God in human being. In this context it is important to remember the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the unique and unrepeatable human existence and dignity is emerging as well as the unconditional love and solidarity towards the other. Christ gave to humanity the priceless gift of the personal way of existence, that is the Trinitarian God's very way of being, a way of being and life that is based on unconditional love and openness to any other person, which renders human being a relational being *par excellence*, who cannot live unless he/she is in a constant relation and communion with each other.

- b. The place *par excellence*, where this new ethos becomes reality, is the Eucharist: this is the mystery that “makes the Church” and expresses its self-consciousness and identity while at the same time it offers even momentarily, and partially a real foretaste of the personal mode of existence of the Triune God, which will be fully revealed in the future coming Kingdom of God. One of the key features of this Eucharistic identity of the Church is that it is the place where any kind of exclusion based on natural qualities, such as race, gender, social, religious or other differences, must be relativized, insofar as what really matters, is the unique and unprecedented nature of human personhood, as the image of God. Is it possible then for a Christian, as a member of the eucharistic body of Christ, to follow consciously or unconsciously any inhuman (in other words racist) perception that invalidates and discards at the outset and in practice the unique character of every other person? This ecclesial ethos when it remains alive and is experienced in the various aspects of church life, witness the very example of Christ himself, who was identified with the suffering, persecuted the disabled people, the social and national outcasts, all sorts of "cursed", giving a clear example of how we ought to treat the other persons if we desire and look forward to eternal life. You cannot love God, who you do not see, and hate your neighbor with whom you share the daily life and all the goods of the earth, to paraphrase a quote from the Gospel of John.

These brief theological observations, upon which we all agree, challenge our assumptions here and now, (not yesterday or tomorrow) and call us to treat the persons with impairments, as people with *special abilities* to recall the words of a Professor of pastoral theology at the University of Athens. They are people who are endowed with special gifts and have every right as “children of God” to be active members of the family of God, where the otherness of each person is considered as a *sine qua non conditio* of human identity. Therefore the dignity of each human being is not based on its seeming deficiencies but on its own talents with which embodies the unique gift by which he/she has been endowed by God the Father.

With these humble thoughts in mind, I welcome you to the beautiful and hospitable city of Volos, and I wish you every success in this conference and the invaluable work of your *Network* in its effort to finally awaken the Christian communities on the issue under discussion.