



## **AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CHURCHES AND THE WORLD**

*“The present pandemic is a period of spiritual renewal and of hope for a meaningful storm for a liturgical and overall renewal of the Church; it is a powerful experience of the authentic nature of the Church and manifests a longing for a return to the traditional status of the priesthood of all believers and to a wider permanent ministry of the Diaconate for men and women.”*

This was the general conclusion and recommendation of an international web-seminar on “Religious Communities and Church in a Period of Pandemic,” organized from April 6 to April 11, 2020, by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological, and Environmental Studies (CEMES), within the framework of the inter-Orthodox Master Program on “Orthodox Ecumenical Theology” (MOET) of the International Hellenic University (IHU).

The seminar was encouraged by the bold statement of an Orthodox hierarch, that “we the clergy are responsible for the fact that our faithful people have no idea what the Eucharist really means. The time has come to look at our mistakes and to repent.” It also recalled what half a century ago the late Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said of another crisis, which he described as “a meaningful storm” for ecclesiological renewal in the Orthodox diaspora. Therefore, the seminar envisioned the present COVID-19 pandemic as a meaningful and providential storm for overall renewal in the Orthodox Church and beyond.

The seminar brought together scholars from all over the world (fifteen countries from all five continents: USA, Russia, UK, Canada, France, Italy, Germany, Syria, Ukraine, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil, Turkey, Georgia, and Greece) with the electronic facilities of IHU to reflect in real time on the present pandemic and the way it affects the Churches. It provided an open forum to reflect collectively on various aspects of ecclesiastical life throughout the world by sharing information and scholarly views on the subject.

The seminar’s five sessions covered almost all areas of the theological discipline (Biblical, Liturgical, Historical, Theological, Ecclesiological, Ecumenical, Inter-Faith, Missiological, and Pastoral) and was attended by over 200 participants, with short papers presented by almost all (17) teaching staff of MOET, renowned scholars from abroad (10), and from other scholarly disciplines (Law and History), one bishop, 7 academic

priests and younger researchers as well as Ph.D. and Master's holders. All presentations were discussed and evaluated by participants on the final day.

The seminar humbly addresses the following appeal to the Orthodox Churches for a thorough reconsideration of the ecclesiological, liturgical, and missiological expression of our Church:

- (1) Now is the appropriate moment (*kairos*) to enhance our Eucharistic ecclesiology with our Baptismal theology that will revive the priesthood of all believers while at the same time leading to a missionary and witnessing awareness.
- (2) A Liturgical renewal has become an urgent task so that all worshipers understand the rich tradition of the Church and once again function as co-celebrants in the sacramental life. Moreover, it is crucial that biblical readings be provided in translation.
- (3) The Holy Eucharist, as the *mystery par excellence* of the Church, should be cleansed from all ritualistic, quasi-magical elements experienced in the early stages of the present pandemic. A careful critical study and theological consideration of the Church's history in similar crises will be important and beneficial.
- (4) Our witness to the Gospel in the current modern and post-modern society must include care for God's creation as an integral part of our mission, the restoration of the order of deaconesses as a vital part of our ministry, as well as other aspects of social teaching of our Church, as expressed and highlighted in the recent document "For the Life of the World."
- (5) The present pandemic situation has brought our divided Churches into closer cooperation and rendered more urgent our Church's quest for the visible unity of the Church of Christ.
- (6) Finally, the use of new technological opportunities, as cautiously adopted during this critical period, are valuable tools for the revival of the priesthood of all believers.

The theological, biblical, and liturgical material supporting these considerations suggested above will be available by CEMES both in electronic audiovisual form and as a hard copy published book.

The final communiqué on the seminar proceedings along with a short report on the papers presented and discussed is available at [cemes-en.weebly.com](http://cemes-en.weebly.com) and <https://www.scribd.com/document/457172908>