

A Discussion with Father George Kohdre
(Metropolitan George)
Upbeat
v.2, n.4-5, 1969

Father Kohdre began by describing the state of the Church in the Middle East in the period between and inclusive of the two world wars, a necessary historical perspective on the inception and later development of the Youth Movement. Fr. Kohdre is the founder and leader of the Orthodox Youth Movement in the Patriarchate of Antioch.

You cannot imagine the state of the Church of Antioch as it was then if you judge by any of the churches you know here in America. Our priests were very ordinary peasants and workers with no religious instruction. There were no theological schools and practically no books. It was a period of emptiness.

We ourselves, the founders of the Movement, had not been educated in Orthodox schools. Our families had maintained only certain pieties and traditional devotions. Our minds were empty of Orthodoxy. It was in the midst of this desert that we were awakened to life and in such an atmosphere that the movement was born. Because it was an utterly new creation, so totally unprepared by anything, we firmly believed in its providential character and that we were mere instruments of a divine visitation.

From the very beginning, some 26 years ago, while we were just entering the university, we realized one thing very clearly: that to be at all effective, we realized one thing very clearly: that to be at all effective we ourselves had to become totally committed to the Movement. We could not rely on anyone but ourselves, not on priests, bishops, schools, books, pamphlets – nothing. Neither could we hope that some one would come from abroad, for we were in a state of war, 1941-42. Nor could we expect the conversion of others, or that our priests would suddenly become more learned and theologically minded, or more fervent. One does not rely on such miracles.

As a result we had to become better trained religiously, more zealous, more morally and ethically serious, more prepared for the apostolate. It was only in this way that a new light would appear in the country and people would experience a new reality. This surge for a new spiritual depth, towards a transformation of the whole being, led us above all, to frequent communion. Not that we consciously planned it this way; rather, we were lead to it by our study of the New Testament and of the words of the liturgy. It was a discovery as indeed was everything we did. We found that Orthodox Christianity is essentially in the Bible and that it is expressed through the Liturgy.

In time, as we ourselves were changed, so too we began to change the people around us. Like a prophetic breath we came to challenge the ecclesiastical establishment. Very few people in this world are prepared to think; I mean thought is so disturbing for human beings. And we forced people to think. We began by forming groups in two of the universities in Beirut, and soon afterwards centers in almost all of the cities in Syria and Lebanon, and even in the villages. People gathered to read the New Testament, to meditate on the Liturgy and to consider commentaries by the Fathers.

Our aim was to convey the ancient heritage of our Church to our contemporaries in a language that they could understand, something of their own time. So, we invented a new language. In contrast to traditional literature which was so much mere repetition of pious expressions, our new language was something that could be grasped and loved by youth. It was a new presentation of Christianity because there was a new spirit, a new life for us all. Many things proceeded as a consequence of this regeneration – books, a publishing house, two monastic communities, more trained priests.

There are, of course, many different aspects of the Movement. You cannot imagine, for example, the situation in our country some 25 years ago in regards to the relationship between the sexes. We had a separation of sexes where boys and girls almost did not even speak to one another. The atmosphere today is quite different, although we did not deliberately strive to be modern; rather, through our reconversion to Christ we discovered the other sex as normal beings. From this discovery many new families were born into the Movement – couples building their lives with Christ as the center.

As an organization ours is still a youth Movement although some of the leaders are no longer young. But we prefer to be together, youth and adult alike, working along democratic lines with no distinction between clergy and laity. So often people are not nourished by their families and acquaintances but in the Movement each member has found a home, a true home because all feel they are loved and accepted as they are and are not judged. In general, it amounts to a new way of life—prayer, study, fellowship – practicing Christianity and thinking and doing in a new way. The official Church is more or less slowly being renewed itself; we hope someday that an entire renewal will penetrate the Church.

Question: I heard you mention yesterday in a talk with seminarians about the danger of preaching “movement” instead of preaching Christ. I sense that we here in America face that danger and I wonder whether or not you had likewise, and if so, what you did about it?

Fr. Kohdre: Yes. The Movement in itself has no content, is nothing per se. That is certain. We must try to become free of Movement fanaticism. There might be and there surely are people more Christian outside the Movement. There is always the temptation of youth Movements to think that they are the Church and all other people are not. Of course, we committed errors. When you are 18 year sold you cannot but commit errors. Or at 25... Yes, you could possibly expect humility from people creating something utterly new.

I remember once I was speaking on the virtue of humility to a group of fourteen year old boys. After a half hour of talking I felt that they understood nothing of what I had said. My conclusion was that a boy is not tempted against humility. One acts proud when one has achieved something, when one has been successful in love or at the university – it is then that one is tempted against humility.

But for tactical reasons, for any measure of success, it is absolutely necessary that a movement have its one identity. One must feel that one belongs to a group, that it is our testimony and it is we who say so. Otherwise everything is diluted and confused. It is a sociological law. But, because this is necessary for tactical reasons only, after a time one has to abandon this approach. The key lies in the leaders of the movement.. They must be aware of the danger inherent in any group to worship itself and that, with Christ along as its content, the movement is at the service of the Church.

Question: What aspect of the Movement in Syria and Lebanon appealed most to the college youth?

Fr. Kohdre: In our time it was the Eucharist. Liturgical life and reading the Gospel were the two pillars of the Movement. Today there is an increasing involvement in social work. There are also people involved today with national problems in response to the tension that exists in the Middle East. Always and permanently attractive is the fellowship. To know that you are accepted by somebody and loved as you are is absolutely important in life. Only true Christians accept people as they are. This atmosphere of belonging, of being at home, this fellowship is eternally attractive.

Question: I was particularly interested in your comment about language. You said you invented a new language to express what you had discovered for yourself. Could you describe how this came about?

Fr. Kohdre: Perhaps you are familiar with a certain kind of pious literature which speaks in stereotyped phrases taken from Christian antiquity about “goodness” and “holiness,” and so forth, all in a very sweet manner. And there are people themselves who express this in their pious style and manner, and who use many religious words that amount to nothing at all. It is cheap because it hasn’t cost them anything, they haven’t gone through the spiritual fire which is experience that stands behind these words. We wanted nothing to do with that ecclesiastical language which stood by itself in an ivory tower. So we spoke in the language of the time, as it was in 1942 and as it is today in 1969. It is the same language used by poets and writers through which we express the message of Christ. Our vocabulary is new because it expresses a new spirit.

Question: Do you have Christian writers and poets?

Fr. Kohdre: Yes, and we even have songs that we ourselves have created.

Question: Behind your desire to speak in the language of the times must have been a new attitude to the modern world. Could you comment on this and possibly relate it to the situation in America?

Fr. Kohdre: I don’t know enough about America to speak knowledgeably to the situation here, but there does seem to be one temptation: to identify Orthodoxy with the Old Country. Probably for many Orthodox who were born here, but whose parents were born abroad, their home is a place of nostalgia, a place of certain folklore, where a little bit of Greek or Arabic or Russian is spoken more or less correctly, all of which taken

together is not American. From this might proceed a temptation to withdraw from the world, although I admit that I cannot speak with any certitude.

I would say that anyone living in this country should embrace the whole reality of this continent and assume it completely. We are not against technology but rather for it because it could liberate man from his needs. Either man is free from the bondage of civilization or he is the slave of his own achievements. This is determined by his inner, spiritual life. I don't see why a man of the middle ages was necessarily more religious than modern man. He had his own temptations to overcome as we have ours. We live in this world. "I do not pray Thee, Father," said Christ, "to withdraw them from the world but to keep them from evil."

This is the real question: How to be kept from evil without leaving this world? How not to become idolatrous, for instance, of the American way of life? I have encountered people here who are completely convinced that they are a superior nation because they have huge things, that theirs is the highest civilization from which all nations must learn. A nation which has accomplished wonderful things could feel herself to be the servant of humanity and not the master of humanity. But one cannot aim to destroy a civilization nor say that it is completely corrupt. Instead, we should fight in this society for Christ and Christian values. To do this we must start with a sense of belonging to this country, freeing ourselves from the idea that we are a remnant of an émigré people.

I don't think that the problem of jurisdiction is the problem of youth in America. Although this inner-Orthodox tension is a poison in your life, it is not possible to overcome by trying to convert clergymen to a better understanding of themselves and for more brotherly relations among themselves. This is not your task, nor shall you ever succeed in accomplishing it. Instead, you ought to impose upon them a new situation of youth. Now, this means that the youth themselves must assume completely the civilization of the continent, with one reservation: that as Christians we must also criticize this country, we must judge everything about it. A spiritual man, says, St. Paul, judges over everything and is not judged by anybody. We judge everything freely as children of God.

It is my dream, it is the dream of many Orthodox people abroad, that Orthodox youth of America become full participants in the racial problems of this country. Are we or are we not against discrimination? Have we some stand on Vietnam? All these things must be clear in our minds. There must be participation in all aspects of life – social, political and cultural. Are we necessarily against abstract art? Must all artists paint icons? I think a movement here could reflect upon these problems but in light of the Gospel and Orthodox life in general, nurtured by Orthodox Fellowship among themselves.