

ORTHODOX DIAKONIA, INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE SOCIAL  
WITNESS AND SERVICE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES

Archimandrite Sergei  
Head of the Monastery of New Valamo  
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Your Eminence Archbishop Leo, reverend bishops, reverend fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ is Risen!

I have especial pleasure on behalf of the brethren of the Monastery of the Transfiguration of Christ at New Valamo of welcoming you all to this historic meeting, the first international conference on the social witness and service of the Orthodox Churches. It is a great honour for our monastery and the Lay Academy that we have been able to act as hosts for this conference. Throughout the world it is the monasteries that have always played a major role in social work and witness of the Orthodox Church, providing material assistance for the poor and distributing money, clothing and food to those in need.

Diakonia is one of the fundamental duties of the Church and a monastery. At the last judgement it is precisely acts of charity of this kind that Our Lord will ask of us: have we provided food for the poor, have we visited the sick and those in prison, have we clothed those who are naked? Social work is thus something that is central to the salvation of our souls and to efforts to lead a Christian life.

As St. John Chrysostom said, "In church Christ is dressed in silver and gold, but outside he wears a beggar's rags". The Orthodox Church is sometimes criticized for the fact that while it spends a great deal on its church buildings and their beautification, it does not pay enough attention to helping the poor. It is natural that we should want to offer the very best and most beautiful things that we have to God and to his worship, but at the same time we must not neglect to help the poor and those in need.

There are many countries in which the Orthodox Church is the principal religious group where society does not have the necessary resources to take care of the poor, for instance, and these present a major challenge for the whole Orthodox community in the field of social work, especially since the Church's opportunities in this respect were severely limited in former times in communist states such as the Soviet Union. In many western countries such as Finland, on the other hand, society has to a large extent taken on the responsibility for human needs that earlier fell to the Church, although we are living at a time of far-reaching changes in this respect and it would seem that even in our welfare states new tasks are appearing for the Church's social work and society is beginning to have new expectations of it. We should be able to foresee all these challenges and respond to them.

I sincerely hope that this conference will mark a new beginning in Orthodox social work and witness, and it is an excellent sign that representatives of the relevant organizations in so many churches have been able to gather here to consider the new opportunities and challenges that are presenting themselves in our times. A very warm welcome to you all!