

Introductory speech by Mister Jyrki Härkönen, Project Manager of Ortaid – Humanitarian Organisation of the Orthodox Church of Finland, Valamo, April 30, 2004

Dear brothers and sisters!

Long periods of totalitarian regimes emphasize still in many places the governance of Orthodox churches and the traditional universal character of Orthodoxy and its engagement to diakonia is not accentuated as it should.

Present in a pointed way one can say that you find modern Orthodoxy at two levels. The official church structures are usually conservative and very outspoken. On the other hand there are thousands of Orthodox communities (parishes, humanitarian organisations, monasteries, brotherhoods, sisterhoods) which are creative and open.

Ortaid finds its vocation in supporting the latter trend.

It would be very important for us as representatives of diakonia organisations to encourage orthodox humanitarian actors monasteries, brotherhoods, sisterhoods to influence official church structures in diakonical initiatives.

In Europe the main question of the integration process is the gap between the standards of living in Eastern and Western Europe. The Orthodox have in general a certain distrust of economic integration. This usually leads the Church authorities to condemn economic powers as purely western phenomena.

This criticism could be fruitful, and we should see integration as a new chance for orthodoxy. It should be emphasized that Orthodoxy could promote traditional Orthodox values of self-control or placing limits on the material greed rampant in Europe. This is a new time of new challenges of orthodox diakonia.

Orthodox humanitarian organisations today should devote itself with the practical work, follow the debate of social justice, understand where world is moving and thus, make networks of orthodox humanitarian actors on these developments.

Orthodoxy has its weak points in its political history. At the same time our tradition of social justice and charitable work has influenced the European society as a whole. It was through early Byzantine Christianity that human equality first became a cornerstone of European social policy.

To conclude let me refer to His Eminence Stefanos, Metropolitan of Tallin, who reminds often that we Orthodox usually talk beautifully but act weakly.

It is my dearest wish, that our gathering will be more an debat and exchange of views than just a traditional conference with theological monoloques.

Let me suggest that here in Valamo our cooperation should draw on two sources of wisdom.

One, historical and theological articulation, will be given profoundly by the keynoters of this conference. The second, practical strategy and goal setting, is usually neglected. Let us correct this and transfer our social theology implementing it in practice by starting a fruitful and worldwide cooperation.

On behalf of the Humanitarian Organisation of the Orthodox Church of Finland I wish you all welcome to this interactive conference on diakonia.

Thank you.