Orthodox Diakonia
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Introduction
Orthodox theologians often speak of the historical limitations of Orthodox social and pastoral work. Fr Georges Florovsky declared that ‘there was no important movement of social Christianity in modern Russia,’ and Fr John Meyendorff notes that the reputation of the Christian East is its detachment from historical realities and its dedication to mysticism and contemplation. However, a vigorous social and charitable engagement was far from foreign to the Orthodox tradition, despite historical interruption. The same may also be said for Orthodox social thought. Although the forms were often different from the West, and the development was often limited due to the historical contexts, there are notable examples of a remarkable social witness and service of the Orthodox Church, which are inspiring a remarkable social revival in the Orthodox world.

SOCIAL WITNESS IN ORTHODOX CHURCH HISTORY

Biblical and patristic approaches to riches and poverty
From the outset, the Church has always upheld an ideal of diakonia, or service, as an integral component of the Christian life, alongside liturgy and martyria, or witness. The Old Testament is imbued with examples of service to the other as pleasing to God, and the prophets are often advocates of the widows and orphans. Poverty is understood as a virtue. Riches are an obstacle to the Kingdom of God. The parables and beatitudes of Christ provide a powerful framework for social justice and engagement with the poor. The task of the Church’s diakonia was to bear witness to the mercy (eleos) of God, and to proclaim a transformed social order.

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor: He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’

The early Church in Jerusalem practised a form of ‘communism,’ as those with possessions sold them to benefit those who were in need. The money thus collected was used to feed and bury the poor, to support orphans, the elderly, and prisoners. Solidarity was not only local: Paul encouraged the gentile churches to contribute to the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8). Salvation and social cohesion were connected. The Church fathers upheld philanthropy as an essential Christian quality. Saint John Climacus regarded charity as ‘the wings of prayer’. According to him, prayer fails in its goal when it is not accompanied by charity.

With the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem and Palestine to the Greco-Roman world, the forms and manifestations of Christian diakonia began to differ from those of the early Apostolic communities. Though common property, communal life and shared meals could no longer be practised in the large cities

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Cambridge Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies in 2003.
of the Greco-Roman world, the same apostolic principles of the early Christian *diakonia* and *agape* were observed in the post-apostolic times.\(^4\) Tertullian confirms that the diaconal service of the Christian communities seems to have been one of the most impressive aspects for pagan observers.

Liturgical celebration in the early church was not disconnected from service to the broader community. From the earliest period the role of the deacon and deaconesses were linked to both liturgical and charitable activity. Deacons in the Eastern Church were responsible for social care, liturgical and pastoral service, teaching, administration and burial diakonia. The Liturgy was simultaneously the culmination and the source of all social activity. In Constantinople we know that the people brought bread and wine with them to the Eucharistic celebration, and this was collected near the entrance of the church. The deacons then took what was needed for consecration to the altar for preparation – an action that would later evolve into the Great Entrance in the Orthodox Liturgy\(^5\). The remaining portion was distributed to the poor by the deacons.

However, as one historian\(^6\) of the Early Church points out, the principle of charitable giving as practised by the Early Church must have been viewed by Graeco-Roman society at large with some suspicion. Despite imperfections, and tensions within the emerging Church communities, it attempted to build a new model society, by addressing real need and ignoring social divisions. The strategies for caring were quite different to the existing patronage or guild systems of the Roman Empire.

The Church’s social action rapidly became organized. In Jerusalem there was a daily and weekly distribution of food and clothing, especially for the widows and orphans who were the most vulnerable. Relief was in kind rather than in cash and was coordinated from a central point. Institutional social care seems to have first developed in Syria and subsequently spread over the Byzantine world. For example, one bishop in Syria ran a hostel for women in need, under the care of specially-assigned female deaconesses. By the 3\(^{rd}\) century, the church at Rome had over 1,500 registered recipients of alms, mainly widows\(^7\). The city was divided into units under the care of seven deacons. In the 4\(^{th}\) century Saint Basil the Great in Cappadocia played a central role in developing charitable institutions. Around 372 he founded the first major general philanthropic centre, known as the ‘Basilias’, which had a hospital, rooms for the care of lepers, voyagers, and had a permanent staff of doctors and monks. The system that developed was praised by Saint Gregory Nazianzus as ‘a new city, a storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy’\(^8\) and similar institutions developed in other major cities of the Empire.

Attitudes to the poor were not limited to practical assistance, but were part of a vision of a transformed and just society. Saint Basil developed social themes in his writings. Saint John Chrysostom, the ‘golden-mouthed,’ in Constantinople tells us much about the responsibility of the Church for both the spiritual and social welfare of its people. He was a powerful advocate of social justice, and did not avoid hard words on the subject of wealth and poverty, and his sermons can seem challenging and even radical to us today:

‘You venerate the altar of the church when the body of Christ descends there. But you neglect the other who is the body of Christ, and remain indifferent to him when he dies of hunger.’\(^9\)

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\(^4\) Vitalii Borovoy, ‘Diakonia as a Manifestation of Christian Witness in the Life of the Faithful and the Preaching of the Church’, Russian Orthodox Church Round Table on Diakonia (unpublished text).
‘The rich hold the goods of the poor even if they have inherited them from their fathers (…) when we do not show mercy we will be punished just like those who steal (…) For our money is the Lord’s (…) if we provide for those in need we shall obtain great plenty.’

The Byzantine period
Following the adoption of Christianity as the state religion, organized social welfare was developed throughout the Byzantine Empire. Philanthropy, or ‘love of mankind’, was regarded as an essential quality of the Christian who could imitate Christ by ministering to the poor, the sick, the aged, the homeless and the imprisoned. The state supported the responsibilities of the Church in the social domain, thereby ending some of the spontaneity of the early Christian communities. Byzantine Emperors frequently characterized and justified their legislation as philanthropic. The most striking manifestation of this approach was in the elaborate provision of public welfare institutions for specific groups in need. Although such institutions existed in the antique world, their evolution may be seen as a direct result of the establishment of Christianity after the 5th century. The responsibility of the Emperor was no longer just to please the people through ‘bread and circuses’ but, rather, to stress the spiritual welfare and salvation of both the giver and the beneficiary. Some institutions depended directly on the Emperor, while some were lay-sponsored – a pattern which will be repeated in history. After the 10th century new charitable institutions were usually attached to monasteries, which played a central role in social work by that time.

Throughout the Byzantine era, Christian almsgiving was a social function consistently praised by saints and theologians. The scope of such activity was significant: one record speaks of 7,000 poor persons supported by a programme in Alexandria. Saint John Chrysostom counted 50,000 people in need of the Church’s material assistance in Constantinople. However, charitable activity did not forget the pleasures of the circuses altogether: special tokens were distributed by the state authorities to the poor for the theatre and for the bathhouses until the 7th century.

Until the medieval period, there is relatively little which distinguishes diaconal practice in the Eastern and Western churches, although the role of the deacon had evolved in different directions. Medieval church art, particularly in the Western Church, demonstrates how the widespread charitable activity was structured around the seven spiritual works of mercy (Matt. 25:34-46). Some specialized diaconal orders emerged in the West, such as the Hospitallers, and perhaps most importantly the followers of Saint Vincent de Paul. Calvin, and even more so Luther, emphasized the social responsibility of deacons, although by this time, the social role of Orthodox deacons was all but lost, and no specialized charitable orders developed as in the West.

The Byzantine system of Church-State partnership in social welfare, centred around the growing importance of the monasteries, served as a model for many other Orthodox contexts. However, the advances of Islam in Egypt and the Middle East after the 7th and 8th centuries, and the fall of Constantinople and the advance of the Ottoman Empire in South-East Europe in the 15th century, the historical development of much of Orthodox Church life, including her social witness, was profoundly interrupted.

Historical captivity of diakonia during Ottoman period
The Ottoman expansion brought a radically new experience for the Orthodox Christians in Europe and the Middle East. The Ottomans accepted the internal administrative structures and basic rights of Christians –

11 Several articles have been written on this subject by Rev. Demetrios Constantelos, the leading specialist on this period.
albeit with regular local periods of persecution – but the Church’s public role was strictly limited. The majority Christian population in the Balkans had more limited rights than their Muslim neighbours, and this situation was to have a considerable impact on reducing the social role of the Church. Although Islam gave a high priority to welfare and almsgiving, the Christian churches were essentially obliged to look after their own flock, and priority was given to education and the preservation of property. One episode reveals that Christians were able to do much more in terms of social action when outside Ottoman dominion. In the mid-17th century, Patriarch Makarios of Antioch visited Georgia, over which it had at least partial jurisdiction.\(^\text{13}\) There he struggled to improve the spiritual and material well-being of the Georgians, by a range of pastoral actions and ecclesial reforms, many of which were not possible in his native Syria. Most notably, he condemned the flourishing slave trade in the region, paid ransom for the release of Christian captives, and even excommunicated one bishop who sold some of his own people. He sought to address the roots causes by developing alternative sources of income for the people through the cultivation of silk. For the Patriarch, the Christian life was intimately related to social order, and to cultural and economic prosperity.

As Ottoman dominion spread throughout the Balkans and Middle East, the Orthodox Church was pushed into an ecclesial introversion from which it would only slowly emerge in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was in Russia, the only large Orthodox Church which was not under outside domination at this time, that historical continuity of the Church’s social action was preserved, and where Christian \textit{diakonia} would develop new forms, but also where significant controversy about the social role of the church would emerge.

**Church and social welfare in Russia**

When the medieval Russian principalities adopted Byzantine Christianity, the social responsibility of the Church was received as an integral component. Monasteries developed social institutions, as in Byzantium, but above all personal almsgiving was upheld as an integral part of Christian life. Special efforts were made to care for the elderly and poor in the Kievan State. As in Byzantium, the emphasis tended to be on the personal and spiritual quality of the social action, and not on the transformative role of the Church. The great Russian historian Kliuchevsky leaves us with a remarkable, and perhaps idealized, view of this early Russian social welfare:

> ‘Ancient Rus' understood and valued only personal, direct, almsgiving - charity given from the hand of one to the hand of the other. Such charity was hidden from the eyes of bystanders. The poor man was his benefactor's best petitioner before God, his intercessor, his spiritual benefactor. In ancient Russia it was the practice of the Tsars on the eves of great feast days, to go early in the morning to the prisons and almshouses and, with their own hands, distribute alms to those under care or under arrest.’\(^\text{14}\)

**Saint Nil Sorsky and the ‘Non Possessors’**

One of the most important, and painful, episodes in Russian Church history developed precisely around the role of the monasteries in relation to society and to poverty. Saint Sergius of Radonezh had sought to unite the mystical and social role of the Church, and advocated for a politically active Church in response to external threats. Under his spiritual descendents, these aspects became separated. In the early 16th century, Saint Nilus of Sora and his ‘transvolga hermits’ as they became known, attacked the ownership of land and property by the monasteries, which at that time managed around one third of the land. The Non-Possessors argued that a monk’s primary task is to help others by example, poverty and prayer, and that charity is the duty of the laity. On the other hand, their opponents, ‘the Possessors’, led by Saint Joseph of

\(^{13}\) Information given by Dr Hilary Waardenburg-Kilpatrick, independent researcher, Switzerland.

Volokolamsk, defended the property of monasteries, and emphasized the social obligations of monasticism: monks have a responsibility to assist the sick and the poor, and to do this effectively they must own land and manage resources. Joseph put his words into action, and during one great famine he is reputed to have fed over 70,000 persons. The controversy also touched on the relations of the Church and State, and on liturgical issues. The eventual victory of the Possessors, with their emphasis on authority, formal prayer and close relations with the State, would have a decisive impact on Russian Church history. The Russian Church has canonized both men, and recognizes the complementarity and truth in both their positions.

The dominant social role of the Church did not always enjoy the support of the Imperial authorities. When Peter the Great abolished the Patriarchate and introduced his new ‘Spiritual Regulation’ in 1721, he sought to eliminate the Church’s role in social work. Catherine the Great suppressed almost half of the monasteries, and severely limited the number of monks. This had a disastrous effect in rural Russia, where the monasteries provided virtually the only cultural and charitable centres. But the social activity of the Church by no means ceased, and by the 19th century, Russian Christian charitable efforts developed in new ways. As in other contexts, much social activity was carried out by wealthy philanthropists, in the absence of any organised state response.

**The revival of Orthodox brotherhoods**

Throughout the 19th century, the charitable and teaching activity of the Russian Orthodox Church grew in importance, with a growing social awareness encouraged by the great literary revival of this period, and under a sense of pressure from the dynamic pastoral efforts of other faiths. As in much of Western Europe at this time, Christians felt a moral responsibility to respond to the critical situation of the urban workers of the industrial revolution flooding the Russian cities, as well as to the victims of the Napoleonic and Russo-Turkish wars. Traditional almsgiving was no longer an adequate response to need, and a renewal of the traditional forms Orthodox brotherhood and sisterhoods was soon apparent.

The brotherhood tradition may be seen as a specific and characteristic form of Orthodox diaconal work, which evolved mainly in the Slavic churches. Originally founded as spontaneous unions of clergy and laity to counter Latin proselytism in defence of Orthodoxy in the 16th century, these brotherhoods combined a remarkable range of charitable and evangelistic activities to counter the actions of the Catholic churches in the Western provinces of the Russian Empire. At least one historian suggests that a form of deaconess existed in Russia in the pre-Mongol period, but the flourishing of women’s movements in the Church would come later. In the 19th century, interest in these lay movements was revived, and a number of charitable brotherhoods and especially sisterhoods were founded throughout Russia. The scale and scope of Orthodox charitable organizations expanded rapidly. For example, it is estimated that almost every parish in the capital St. Petersburg maintained a charitable activity by the end of the century. One organization, the Alexander Nevsky Society, claimed over 75,000 members by 1905, and ran schools, public lectures and diaconal institutions. The focus of these efforts was in the first place medical work and health care, but important work developed with soup-kitchens, orphanages, and also to counter the major problem of drunkenness. Some parishes even established their own mutual-credit societies to provide health insurance to their members.

16 Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, ‘Moscow and St Petersburg’, in *The Orthodox Church*, London, 1975.
18 Alexander Kopirovsky claims the existence of brotherhoods in Rus’ from the 12th century in *Bratsvov Pravoslavie*, Sretenie, Moscow, 1993, p.80.
Saint Elizabeth and the Mary and Martha Sisterhood

In the coming decades, several personalities would be associated with a revival of social work in the Orthodox Church. One of the most remarkable examples of Orthodox service was established in Russia by Grand Duchess Elizabeth Romanova. Of German Lutheran origin, Elizabeth developed an Orthodox equivalent of an organized order of deaconesses, responsible for the care of the very poorest in society on a scale that Russia had not previously known. The grand-daughter of Queen Victoria of England, the young German princess of Hesse-Darmstadt married the Russian Grand Duke Sergei, uncle of the last Tsar, in 1884, and on her own initiative converted to the Orthodox faith seven years later. In 1905 she witnessed her husband’s murder in a bomb blast as he left their home, an event that was to transform her life. Renouncing her aristocratic lifestyle, in 1909 Grand Duchess Elizabeth founded the Martha and Mary Convent and sisterhood of the same name in one of the poorer areas in the south of Moscow, and quickly developed a thriving spiritual and charitable centre. Her vision was a simple one: to develop an order of women from all strata of society who would serve God and their neighbour, tirelessly. The sisterhood she founded had a monastic vocation, although with a rule that combined contemplation and practical service, faith and love, in a radically new way, inspired by example of the sisterhood’s patrons.21

The sisterhood founded by Elizabeth was understood as a renewed form of non-ordained deaconesses known to the early Church. According to Grand Duchess Elizabeth’s own description, ‘the primary obligation of the sisters is to visit the poor’. The focus was on the local area, in ‘the corners’ of Moscow city, where rapid industrialisation was accompanied by often appalling misery and crime. According to Elizabeth, ‘the sisters serve the Church and for this reason in times of war do not serve as Red Cross sisters. Their place is to serve the sick and suffering of Moscow.’22 Around the central church and daily liturgical life of the community, the convent or hospice ran a hospital and medical clinic for the poor and unemployed, which also served as a base for medical visits in the surrounding community. Providing free medical consultations and care, the clinic treated eleven thousand appointments in 1913 alone. A pharmacy provided medicines at free or low cost, and a ‘social canteen’ provided up to 300 free meals daily, while food was delivered to the families of single or working mothers. An orphanage was established which prepared girls to enter the sisterhood or to undertake medical service. A library, Sunday School and regular public lectures, usually of a spiritual character, manifested the educational dimension of the convent. By 1914, the convent counted 97 tonsured nuns, who had to be under 40 years old and committed to a life of service to the poor.

In 1918, Grand Duchess Elizabeth and her closest friend were arrested by the Bolsheviks, and in the following year she was brutally murdered along with other members of the Royal Family. Her convent was disbanded, the sisters were exiled and the church was converted into a social hall and later an archive. However, in the early 1990s, her legacy would be revived in an extraordinary way. In 1988 the Russian Orthodox Church canonized Elizabeth as one of the first ‘new martyrs’ of the communist period.

Nevertheless, for some Orthodox clergy, charitable assistance was not an adequate response to the social injustice of the Russian Empire, and they turned to more overt political engagement. Father Georgii Gapon and others led workers’ movements and discussed political reform, and were actively involved in the dramatic events of the 1905 Revolution. The political reaction that followed was suspicious of any Church social engagement. Charitable activity continued, especially in response to the suffering of the First World War. The Local Church Council of 1917-18 sought to renew the role of the laity, the eventual restoration of deaconesses, and the social engagement of the Church, but this was all brought to an abrupt end with the Russian Revolution and the atheistic fury which was unleashed.

22 Ibid, p. 49.
Pearl of Great Price: Mother Maria
A second notable 20th century witness to Orthodox social action may be found in the Russian emigration, in the person of Mother Maria Skobtsova. Mother Maria was recently proclaimed as a saint by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. She was a talented theologian and writer who saved many from the Nazi terror, and finally died as a martyr in Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1945. Above all, Mother Maria devoted her life in exile in France to social work and writing. In 1935, Mother Maria along with other leading intellectuals of the Russian emigration, including Nikolai Berdaev and Fr Sergei Bulgakov, founded the charitable organization ‘Orthodox Action,’ which was at the origin of a wide range of initiatives in favour of those most in need, including homes, camps, hospital work and assistance to the elderly. Her vision was expressed in many articles, but may be captured in one simple quotation:

‘If Orthodoxy, owing to historical circumstances, occasionally adopted tendencies that are foreign to it, a somewhat excessive emphasis on the path of self-salvation more characteristic of the religions of the East, even through them we always see that the fundamental covenant of Christ was never forgotten or set aside. The commandment of love for one’s neighbour, the second and equal in value to the first, calls mankind in the same way today as when it was first given.’

In France, Orthodox movements continue to draw inspiration from the martyred nun and her social vision of the ‘liturgy beyond Church bounds’ (внехрамовая литургия) of the Russian emigration in the 1930s.

THE CONTEMPORARY REBIRTH OF SOCIAL WITNESS IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH
The ‘Great Captivity’ of the Orthodox churches under the Ottoman Empire was succeeded, almost immediately, by the ‘Great Persecution’ of the Orthodox churches for much of the 20th century, under the official atheism of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Following the often brutal closure of church institutions and the killing of clergy and monks in the early post-revolutionary period in Russia, the official ban on any type of Church activity beyond a limited liturgical life was formalized in the Soviet Constitution under Stalin. Similar legislation would later be introduced throughout the communist bloc. Although the situation varied to some extent across the region, in the USSR no Christian social activity of any kind was permitted, and the active charitable engagement of the Church became part of a distant history, known only to a few.

The extraordinary liberation of the Orthodox churches that has taken place since the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe has been accompanied by images and impressions of an institutional and spiritual renewal. The reconstruction of splendid church buildings, the revival of theology and liturgy, public pilgrimage, flourishing monasteries and church arts have all become accepted aspects of life. Most of all, perhaps, the period has been marked by the return of the Orthodox churches to the ‘public sphere’, as important political and cultural actors in their societies. However, relatively little has been said about the accompanying charitable and diaconal revival which has marked the past decade, and which remains a distinct and remarkable dimension of Orthodox Church life during this period.

25 There are some examples of Christian brotherhoods that survived in Russia and Ukraine until the Great Purges of Stalin after 1950. See comments of Alexander Khorkov in Bratstvo v Pravoslavie, Sretenie, Moscow, 1993, p.99.
The churches of Central and Eastern Europe found themselves largely unprepared for the dramatically new situation that accompanied the gradual opening of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev after 1985. Importantly, it was primarily in the area of diaconia that Orthodox Christians began to manifest a newly-found freedom and presence in the society. From the mid-1980s onwards, groups of Christian volunteers began to be visible in hospitals, psychiatric clinics and homes for the elderly. The appalling conditions of most Soviet medical institutions could be partially alleviated by the human warmth and personal contact that Christians provided. The word ‘miloserdie’ or ‘mercy’ began to be used in the media, whereas it had previously been excised from the Soviet dictionary. The word itself has a much more Christian and holistic meaning than the Latin word ‘caritas.’

The ban of the Soviet government on religious charitable activities was more officially relaxed during the Millennium of the Baptism of Rus’ in 1988 when Gorbachev first met with church leaders. Even after this date, the authorities tried to limit the influence of Christians in society, by assisting only the mentally ill, old people and handicapped, and several communist leaders continued to resist the new visibility of Christians. However, it was soon clear that the presence of volunteer workers in hospitals and clinics was a welcome response to the chronic shortage of medical workers: in one newspaper report it was noted that there was only one nurse for 30 children in a major city hospital.

The socio-economic conditions throughout Eastern Europe would worsen considerably over the coming years, and many would turn to the Church as the unique institution capable of providing some relief, which proved to be life-saving for many during the terrible winters of the early 1990s.

However, the difficulties of charitable action soon became apparent to believers. In an interview, Metropolitan Vladimir of Rostov points out that the Church had lost the habit of charitable work: ‘We still have to educate people in the spirit of mercy. A few believers, coming into contact with living reality, with the difficult – and because of that even more necessary – service to mankind, could not endure it and left.’

Despite these obstacles, these years were marked by an unprecedented revival of diaconal activity in the Russian Church. The first church hospital named after Saint Xenia was opened in St. Petersburg in 1990, and several soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless were opened. Work in prisons started immediately, and in 1994 military chaplaincies were reintroduced. After 1988, hundreds of brotherhoods and sisterhoods were founded or revived throughout Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and neighbouring Poland. Usually a brotherhood would be formed around a parish, under the guidance of a particular priest, often with reference to a particular spiritual elder. The members of the brotherhood (both men and women) were in the first place a worship community, and would develop activities in response to the immediate needs that they identified. Sometimes this would be direct and local: the rebuilding of a church, the establishment of a Sunday school, the organization of a pilgrimage. Soon, many brotherhoods developed more elaborate responses to the critical needs of the Church. In Moscow, for example, the Brotherhood of the All-Merciful Saviour founded the St. Tikhon’s Theological Institute, headed by Fr Vladimir Vorobiev. This Institute rapidly grew to become one of the largest in Russia, counting over 1,000 male and female students in a variety of subjects. The Brotherhood also developed a publishing house, bookshop, summer camps, pilgrimages, an ambitious research project on the new martyrs, and multiple social activities. Some of the charitable activities developed were remarkable in their creativity: a parish with liturgical and educational activities for the deaf in Moscow; psychiatric assistance; pastoral outreach to aids victims; visits to prisons and hard labour camps (to the great surprise of some of the prison guards); family-style shelters for small groups of street children, and hospital spiritual and physical care of the terminally ill. In 1990, an All-Church Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods was founded with the blessing of Patriarch Alexis. However, the leadership of this Union, backed by a number of brotherhoods, began to develop an overtly

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28 Izvestija, 29 April 1988.
nationalist political agenda, and challenged the Church leadership. The Union was disbanded after a few years. This episode illustrates some of the tensions that existed among organized brotherhoods, which usually remain beyond the direct control of their bishops.

In this context, the revival of the sisters of charity should be highlighted. The revival of sisterhoods in the 1990s perpetuated and developed the pre-revolutionary traditions. The Sisterhood of the Saint Tsarevich Dimitri in central Moscow was granted permission to renew its work in the former Golitsin hospital, where their predecessors had worked at the turn of the century. Here a busy hospital church provides a focal point for an impressive range of activities: professional nurse training programmes; catechism courses; publishing; and a pharmacy. Building on the legacy of Saint Elizabeth, organized groups of women, dressed in the traditional headscarves with a red cross, provide voluntary care in hospitals and homes. The sisterhood was founded under the spiritual guidance of Fr Arkadii Shatov. In the mid-1990s, the original site of the Mary and Martha convent (‘obitel’) was re-opened to serve its original purpose.

**Diaconal renewal in other contexts**

Although Russia has been at the centre of the Orthodox diaconal renewal, similar developments may be found in other Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe, and the examples are numerous. In Romania, the monastic life of the Orthodox Church was more preserved than in neighbouring countries, and the tradition of social outreach was never completely lost. Dozens of diaconal activities developed as local initiatives after 1989, in response to the urgent needs of children, the elderly, and others in post-communist Romania. In 1993 the Romanian Patriarchate founded *Diakonia*, which has become the most important charitable institution. It activities include charitable and social projects, cultural-educational work, and medical services. Two other important associations should be mentioned here: *Vasiliada*, a joint project of the Romanian Patriarchate with the Bucharest College of Chemistry runs free medical centres and distributes medicines to those in need. ARCA was founded with the involvement of the Church to respond to the needs of refugees and migrants in Romania. Many dioceses have also developed diaconal assistance structures that run their own initiatives, or provided voluntary and material support to State institutions in need. A diaconal network involving all dioceses has been established. The Orthodox Church has also co-founded AIDRom, an ecumenical association for education, humanitarian assistance and diakonia. Through this structure, many hundreds of local diaconal initiatives, especially with abandoned and street children, have been developed. One important and specific aspect of the Romanian situation has been the integration of social and diaconal training as an option in the theological faculties. Students, especially women, have been able to obtain a diploma in theology and social assistance that enables them to work in state institutions. There is no equivalent diploma in other Orthodox contexts, although similar proposals are being developed in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Serbia.

The situation in Serbia has been dominated by the experience of the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and more recently the drama of Kosovo in the 1990s, and the immense social upheaval and refugee crisis that it has engendered. Serbia today hosts proportionately one of the highest refugee populations in the world. The response has primarily been one of spontaneous response at the local level, as priests and diocesan authorities sought to alleviate human suffering. In practice, most local assistance has been given on the basis of an ethnic solidarity. A dynamic Orthodox pastoral counseling centre was founded in Belgrade. By the end of 1994 *Covekoljubje*, (Philanthropy) the official humanitarian organization of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate was founded as a national coordination and implementation structure. ‘Philanthropy’ was restructured in 2000, and has developed into a dynamic and respected church NGO working throughout the country. However, the debate about the social (and political) role of the Church in Serbia remains complex and there are divergent views in the Church hierarchy about the proper role of Christians in promoting justice and political change.²⁹

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²⁹ For an extensive discussion of these issues see Miroslav Ruzica, *Orthodox Christianity, National State, Philanthropy*, Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University (unpublished text).
In Belarus, the churches have mobilized to respond to the dramatic health impact of the Chernobyl catastrophe, and the largest social centre of the Russian Orthodox Church was opened near Minsk. In Bulgaria, the Pokrov Foundation is a respected Orthodox organization active in the fields of education, publishing and church diaconal projects, with a high professional quality.

An exceptional example of an Orthodox Church that presents itself as primarily a diaconal, serving community is the Church of Albania. Albania proclaimed itself the first totally atheist state in 1967, and all forms of religious life, including the Orthodox Church (representing around 30% of the population) were outlawed. In 1991, Archbishop Anastasios was sent to reestablish the Autocephalous Church of Albania, and today he heads a thriving local community. One of his first initiatives was to establish a diaconal and humanitarian arm of the Church in the form of ‘Diakonia Agapes’, a dynamic and professional structure which has developed programmes of humanitarian relief, agricultural development, health care and micro-credit – primarily with non-Christian communities in Albania. When the Kosovo crisis erupted and half-a-million refugees flooded into Albania, the Orthodox Church, through Diakonia Agapes was among the first to respond, and managed several refugee camps and other programmes in collaboration with UNHCR. A major diagnostic and medical centre, the best in the country, was opened in Tirana in 1999. Archbishop Anastasios understands diakonia as part of the healing and reconciling ministry of the Church: ‘the oil of religion must not be used in order to intensify the fire of the conflict or of the hatred but in order to calm the souls, to heal the wounds, to seal the peace.’ Here and in other contexts, the World Council of Churches and other Christian organizations have actively encouraged and supported the revival of an active social responsibility of the churches.

In the Church of Greece, there are multiple institutions for the elderly and for children, mainly organized at the diocesan level. The Archdiocese of Athens runs a reintegration centre for migrants returning from abroad. Notable have been the international mission efforts that the Church has undertaken in Africa and more recently the Balkans. These efforts, many of them driven by Apostoliki Diakonia, have often included practical diaconal and humanitarian dimensions with a lasting impact.

An older and also remarkable example of contemporary Orthodox diakonia may be found in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. In 1962, this ancient Oriental church founded a special Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services (BLESS) to take a role in development and diaconal programmes with the poor and marginalized. In addition to agricultural development, micro-credit and health care, the Church is involved in advocacy work, and in education throughout the country.

One common characteristic of all of these efforts has been the leading role of the laity in establishing organized diaconal outreach, often through associations and brotherhoods. Many diaconal projects remain essentially responsive and local in character. The legislative environment, and the possibilities of partnership with the state, are also important elements in defining the nature and scope of this charitable work.

Mention should also be made of the social work in the Orthodox diaspora communities in the West. Freed of political domination, many communities developed programmes and organizations of solidarity with Christians in their ‘home’ countries. Major assistance has also been channelled to Christian communities and to church diaconal projects in Russia through organizations such as ‘Aide aux Croyants en URSS’. In London, a drug rehabilitation project for single mothers has been founded by Russian Orthodox women. In Switzerland, the Orthodox diocese runs its own philanthropic foundation to respond to a variety of needs here and abroad. Most Orthodox parishes in the West have their own traditional collections of funds to

30 Unpublished text read to the WCC Round Table Meeting with the Religious Communities of the Republic of Macedonia, Morges, June 2001.
offer support and solidarity to worthy church projects in other countries. In many places, Orthodox lay women and men are drawn to social commitment in their professional lives, as doctors, social assistants or humanitarian workers, and conferences and networks of specialists are regularly organized.

In North America, where there is generally a stronger culture of voluntarism than in Europe, many Orthodox communities are involved in running soup kitchens and caring for the homeless and the orphans. It is also in the USA that the first major international Orthodox humanitarian organization was founded. International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) is an established and recognized international aid agency, working mainly in complex situations in the Balkans and the Caucasus, as well as in Ethiopia and Palestine. While the organization has developed a strong professional profile, it has sometimes proved difficult to establish an authentic Orthodox content of social engagement, and one that is fully owned by the local church.

TOWARDS AN ORTHODOX SOCIAL THEOLOGY

Just as Orthodox history has known periods of intense social action, the same may also be said for Orthodox social thought. Although the forms are different from the West, and the development was similarly stunted due to the historical context, there are notable examples of a remarkable and challenging social theology throughout Orthodox history, rooted in biblical and patristic experience, which cannot be adequately covered in this paper.

We have already seen the importance attached to philanthropy in the early Church. Special canons were promulgated by Church councils for the uplifting of diakonia and the good administration of philanthropic institutions. Later, theologians and especially the lives of Saints continued to uphold charitable practice as a central value for Christians. Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom are the best known of several Church fathers that developed a real theology of philanthropy, as a manifestation of the connection between the earthly and heavenly life, and as a means of repentance and salvation. For Saint John Chrysostom, there is a ‘liturgy of the poor,’ or ‘liturgy of the brother,’ which is based on a theology of the Body of Christ, who is present in the Eucharist, and in the suffering of the poor who share in His passion. Diakonia is not simply a social action, but also a theological and sacramental event.

A critical moment in defining Christian and Orthodox attitudes to social welfare occurs in the 4th century. Until then, Christian social witness was primarily directed to alleviating those in need, and primarily to the broader Christian community. A great famine devastated much of Cappadocia in 368 and the Church leaders were faced with an unprecedented situation of need. Bishop Basil of Caesarea and his fellow theologian Gregory of Nazianzus were obliged to address the issue of the stockpiling of grain by landowners and merchants who were seeking to inflate prices. Basil intervenes by addressing the root causes of the injustice – by obliging the grain to be distributed to the hungry, according to their individual rights. By appealing to the social responsibility of each for all, by referring to a person’s right to life and dignity, and by identifying community with society at large, Basil transformed the nature of the Church’s social witness in the world. These principles would define the Church’s role in social welfare for the coming centuries.

Russian Orthodox Church social thought

Russian religious philosophers, from the 19th century onwards, were among the first to develop a modern Orthodox social thought. Some would say that in no other Christian country the social nature of

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31 For example, the fifty-ninth apostolic canon states that bishops and priests must be concerned with social problems and demonstrate public acts of philanthropy.

32 Ysabel de Andia, Liturgie des pauvres et théologie du Corps du Christ chez saint Jean Chrysostome (unpublished text).

Christianity, expressed in efforts to save 'the kingdom of this world', was perceived as profoundly as it was in the Russian religio-philosophical and theological thought.\textsuperscript{34}

Thinkers such as Khomiakov and Soloviev understood the Christian as an active co-worker of God in His economy, not a passive contemplator of God's glory, while Christianity was perceived as not only a personal reflection on God but common action. Dostoevsky was convinced that the ultimate goal of social action is the Universal Church of all people. From this follows his 'Christian socialism' in which the Church is regarded as the social ideal. True Christianity, he believed, cannot be reduced to one's home or parish, but should seek social action. Nikolai Federov developed the doctrine of the Trinity as not only a doctrine of faith, but also a doctrine of integrated knowledge and action, which would create a new world centred on resurrection. The religious philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev called people to take part in the creation of the universe, continuing the creation of the world by God. Humanity is called to be not only an active participant in God's action, but also His co-creator. This perception of the social nature of Christianity and the task of the salvation of the world so profoundly, and sometimes politically, espoused by Russian thinkers made it sometimes too radical for government and the church hierarchy at an institutional level.

One of the first and most ambitious attempts to elaborate a social doctrine was made by the Romanian Orthodox Church. Between 1950 and 1960, Patriarch Justinian and his successors published several volumes of the ‘Apostolat Social’. This document is of particular value as it is the only example of an Orthodox social doctrine from a communist country, and was written in the context of acute suffering of parts of the population following the Second World War. Despite some clear Marxist characteristics, the document outlines the theological basis for Christian engagement in history, and calls upon clergy and laity to act in response to social concerns of the people.\textsuperscript{35}

More recently, and in a very different context, the Russian Orthodox Church published a major social statement, ‘The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,’ that was adopted by the Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in August 2000.\textsuperscript{36} The comprehensive document deals primarily with the fundamental theological and ecclesio-social issues, as well as those aspects of the life of state and society. The document is identified as reflecting ‘the official position’ of the Moscow Patriarchate on relations with state and society, although it draws on the experience and teaching of the Orthodox Church beyond the experience of the Russian Church. Following an opening theological and Biblical analysis, the document goes on to deal with a range of issues including Church and politics, labour, property, war and peace, morality, health, bioethics and the role of the mass media. Significant attention is given to the responsibilities of the Church for the spiritual and physical health of persons, and the extensive medical work of the Church is emphasized, without denying the primary responsibility of the State for healthcare. Importance is also given to strengthening Church assistance and pastoral care for prisoners.

**Contemporary thought**

A number of contemporary Orthodox leaders and theologians, for example Olivier Clément in France, Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk in Russia or Metropolitan Georges Khodr in Lebanon have articulated Orthodox positions on issues of the Church’s engagement ‘in the world’, and on issues of urgent social and political concern. The outstanding Indian Orthodox theologian Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios, speaking from a third world context, has developed a stimulating Biblical analysis of poverty, diakonia

\textsuperscript{34} Vitalii Borovoy, ‘Diakonia as a Manifestation of Christian Witness in the Life of the Faithful and the Preaching of the Church,’ Russian Orthodox Church Round Table on Diakonia (unpublished text).

\textsuperscript{35} For an extensive analysis of the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church during the communist period see A. Webster, The Price of Prophecy: Orthodox Churches on Peace, Freedom and Security, Washington, 1993.

and social commitment. He speaks of the ‘threefold ministry’ of Christ, as high priest, prophet of the world, and as shepherd. The task of the Christian is to enable the Church to fulfil this ministry of justice and peace. At the international level, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, especially Patriarch Athenagoras and more recently Patriarch Bartholomew, have strengthened the role of the Orthodox Church as an advocate of social justice. In his widely-publicized interventions at the European Parliament and at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Patriarch Bartholomew has positioned himself as a leading religious spokesman on such diverse social issues as ecology, peace and the global economy. In North America, Archbishop Iakovos (Ecumenical Patriarchate) was renowned for his courageous encyclicals on questions of injustice, and the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has not hesitated to intervene in the political processes of Serbia when the interest of the population was at stake.

**Orthodox diakonia and the ecumenical movement**

In this context it is important to underline the pivotal role of the modern ecumenical movement and of the World Council of Churches in stimulating and enabling Orthodox churches to develop a theological framework for social and diaconal issues. From the outset, and especially after the majority of the Orthodox churches joined the WCC in 1961, Orthodox theologians from the ‘mother churches’ as well as leading spokesmen took an active role in numerous international conferences and consultations. Diakonia as understood in Orthodox Eucharistic theology, and the concept of ‘liturgy after liturgy’ as the basic vision of Christian social commitment, are perceived as a lasting contribution of the Orthodox to the ecumenical movement. This theology of sacramental diakonia was later developed into a theology of ‘liturgical diakonia’ by Prof Alexander Papaderos in a pioneering paper. The Eucharist is the source of Christian action in the service of humankind. He distinguishes between ‘microdiakonia’ of the individual and the community, and ‘macrodiakonia’ which develops structures of fellowship and confronts the roots causes of injustice and poverty. Beyond this, the WCC has also assisted many Orthodox churches to develop their own diaconal capacities and programmes.

**SOME CONCLUSIONS**

Orthodox social thought and witness merits a more critical analysis than is possible in this paper. Frequently the Orthodox approach to society tends to express a dualism, in which the sacred and the secular are presented in opposition, and where the Church and Christians are called to be ‘above’ the profane affairs of this world. This is expressed by the emphasis in the Church on the ascetic-monastic life as opposed to a broader social and political responsibility ‘in the world.’

The historical manifestation of Orthodox social witness, despite notable exceptions, remains limited when compared with that of other churches. Orthodox charitable activities tend to remain local in outreach and reactive in character, primarily based on the parish structure. There are very few examples of ‘macrodiakonia,’ or international solidarity or commitment to development in the Orthodox churches, with the exceptions that we have seen. The Orthodox churches tend to have difficulty in analyzing the root political or structural causes of injustice, poverty or marginalisation. The Orthodox churches have, however, developed a unique and valuable form of holistic diaconal response in the form of brotherhoods and sisterhoods, integrating worship, education and service in an inspiring and effective way, and this is one of the key contributions to worldwide Christianity.

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But what does this all mean for us in our situation today? To complete this brief survey of the role and evolution of diakonia as experienced in the Orthodox Church, I would like to offer some thoughts and questions that may serve to stimulate reflection and discussion.

We have seen that diakonia was an integral and essential part of Church community life in the early centuries. The same cannot be said for the contemporary situation in the Orthodox world. A review of basic theological literature and seminary courses confirms the relative marginalisation of the social and diaconal dimension in the Orthodox Church. While this situation is being remedied in some contexts, the basic importance of ‘liturgy after liturgy’ in education and catechism needs to be rekindled and revived.

More generally, the role of the laity needs to be strengthened. Our Orthodox theology is clear that, while clergy have a special ministry, the laity must assume responsibilities and take initiative. In our Church today I believe that an ‘over-clericalisation’ is one reason for our restricted social efforts.

In the context of a globalizing economy, and a seemingly ‘tired’ debate on North-South development cooperation, what can the Orthodox Church and Her theology contribute to reflection on international solidarity? What can be authentic Orthodox forms of international aid and professional development? What new synergies with the modern world and with secular organizations can the Church offer?

It seems to be that the Orthodox Church may need to revive its understanding of the role of the deacon. In the early Church the deacon had a specific and broadly diaconal role, whereas today the deacon has an almost purely liturgical role (with some notable exceptions) and the diaconate is often perceived as a temporary stage in preparation for priesthood. Fresh thought on the authentic role of the diaconate as a ministry of the Church in the world may also facilitate reflection on an eventual restoration of deaconesses which existed in the Eastern Church during the first centuries.

It is appropriate to end this paper with the stark reminder of the social responsibility of all Christians, in the words of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew:

> ‘At the Last Judgement you and I will not be asked how strictly we fasted, how many prostrations we made in our prayers, how many books we wrote, how many speeches we made at international conferences. We shall be asked: Did you feed the hungry? Did you give drink to the thirsty? Did you take the stranger into your home? Did you clothe the naked? Did you care for the sick and the prisoners? That is all we shall be asked. Love for Christ is shown through love for other people, and there is no other way. Notice how, concerning everyone who is in need and distress, Christ says 'I': 'I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, sick, naked and a prisoner'. Christ is looking at us through the eyes of all who suffer. Is that not frightening?’

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40 Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Ecumenical Patriarch, sermon during the opening worship of the CEC 12th Assembly, 26 June 2003, Trondheim, Norway.