

# Discontent in Worldwide Orthodox Christianity - A Rebuttal

By CHRIST STRATAKIS, Esq.

I have read with great interest Mr. George Matsoukas' article, *Discontent in Worldwide Orthodox Community* (Greek-American Review, September, 1998). I was troubled by several statements which he saw fit to include in the article. For the benefit of a more balanced and objective presentation of what is happening in our Orthodox Church today, I thought I might share some of my own thoughts about this most important part of our spiritual life.

Mr. Matsoukas appears "deeply concerned" about the ability of our Patriarchates in Jerusalem, Constantinople and Moscow "to adapt to the realities of a changed historical context". Evidently, these concerns arose as a result of his attendance at a meeting of the Task Force to Support Orthodox Christians in Jerusalem, as well as at the 34th Bi-ennial Congress in Orlando and in certain "reports" about the burial of the Romanov royal family in St. Petersburg last July. Based on these experiences, he concluded that there is indeed "turmoil" in all three Patriarchates; namely, in Jerusalem, Constantinople and Moscow. Let's look at each one separately and see to what extent Mr. Matsoukas' conclusions can stand scrutiny.

## "Turmoil" at the Jerusalem Patriarchate

Mr. Matsoukas argues that turmoil exists in Jerusalem because some 110,000 Arab Orthodox are neglected by the Patriarchate, which is siphoning off "millions of dollars" collected from the pilgrims and is selling religious property to the Jews, thereby contributing to the frustration of the Middle East peace process. All of the above were evidently allegations made during the Task Force meeting at Dearborn, Michigan, which Mr. Matsoukas appears to have eagerly embraced.

By pure coincidence, at the time the Dearborn Task Force convocation was taking place, my wife and I were visiting the Holy Places in Israel. We spent several days touring Jerusalem, the suburbs, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jericho and a host of Orthodox monasteries scattered all over those biblical areas. We met and spoke with several Orthodox hierarchs, priests and plain local folks. What we heard and saw were a far cry from the negative picture projected by Mr. Matsoukas. We were told that there are over 70 monasteries located in various areas where Christ and his disciples walked and taught, most of which are manned and guarded

by only a single Greek Orthodox priest. In Jerusalem itself, there are schools and a clinic funded by the Patriarchate, all of which tend to the needs of the Orthodox Arabs. About 100 Greek Orthodox Bishops, priests and deacons, assisted by several Arab clergymen, minister to the spiritual needs of thousands of Arab Orthodox in the Middle East. Money collected from the pilgrims is used to support the monasteries, churches and institutions of the Patriarchate and to pay the meager salaries of the bishops and the priests. Contrary to Mr. Matsoukas' reports, the divine liturgy is celebrated in a mixture of Greek and Arabic, not solely in Greek.

During our stay in Jerusalem, I was consulted by the Orthodox Hierarchs in charge of Church property, with regard to contractual matters arising with third parties. Based on my discussions with these clergymen, I ascertained that none of the Church property was sold to the Jewish State. Indeed, large, valuable tracts of land owned by the Patriarchate, remain undeveloped because of fear of antagonizing one side, if the Patriarchate decided to deal with the other. Several properties with long rows of stores, which are owned by the Patriarchate, are actually operated by Church officials; however, because of strict rent control laws, the income is only a fraction of what could otherwise be realized. One wonders, therefore, how any of these actions by the Orthodox Patriarchate would have any negative impact on the Middle East peace process.

There can be no doubt that there are some Arab malcontents who are opposing and criticizing the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate which has been tending and guarding the Holy Places for hundreds and hundreds of years. Only God knows what their motives might be. I wonder, however, how constructive it is for us, Greek Americans (including the OCL), to embrace the largely inaccurate allegations of this splinter group, instead of attempting to bridge the gap and try to bring together all of these Orthodox groups in the Holy Land. In any event, it would have been far more advisable for Mr. Matsoukas to have checked the allegations of the Dearborn meeting with the Greek Orthodox hierarchy in Jerusalem and obtain their version of the events taking place out there. This would have provided him with a more balanced and informed description of the facts.

## "Turmoil" in the Patriarchate and the Archdiocese of America

Despite the subtitle, the only "turmoil" Mr. Matsoukas attempts to project here is not at the Patriarchate in Constantinople, but at the American Archdiocese. Even there, however, some of his

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