



The Church Embraces All People Address at the Commemorative Event Organized by the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, 28 January 2007

31.03.2007 | Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece

His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, recalls the defense and rescue of Greek Jews during the German occupation by his predecessor, Archbishop Damaskinos, as well as other Greek Orthodox Christians.

Church Embraces All People

Address of His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece

at the Commemorative Event organized by the Central Board of Jewish

Communities in Greece
before the statue of the late Archbishop

Damaskinos of Athens

in the square of the Cathedral of Athens

28

January, 2007

Thanks are due to the Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece and to the Jewish Community in Athens for their initiative to honour the late Damaskinos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece today, on the occasion of the national commemoration of the Holocaust. They prove their genuine feelings of gratitude vis-à-vis their fellow citizens, Greek Christians, for having stood by them during the inhuman ordeal of genocide, to which they were subjected by the Nazis in the Second World War.

I must stress right from the outset that Archbishop Damaskinos, whom we are honouring today, did nothing but his duty as a Christian and a chief shepherd. He applied what our religion teaches. Namely that love is the greatest of virtues, as Jesus Christ taught it also in the Parable of the Good Samaritan and as the Apostle of Nations Paul elegantly describes it in Chapter 13 of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. Moreover, justice, which was also demonstrated by Archbishop Damaskinos, is a very great virtue indeed. Our Lord emphasised in His Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". Moreover, David the Prophet King calls blessed that man who handles his affairs with righteousness and adds that the righteous will be remembered for ever (Psalm 111). Furthermore, in Salomon's Wisdom we read that the strength of God is the source of His righteousness and that He has taught people that the righteous man must be kind with his fellow men (Sal. Wisd. 12,16-19). However, in no way does the fact that the Archbishop did his duty diminish his contribution to the culture of our times, which in those days suffered from harshness and inhumanity but today from the estrangement of many from moral principles, the contempt of which stigmatises our own times.

The revolt of his conscience

Having lived the fruits of the spirit of love and justice, the late Archbishop Damaskinos embraced his suffering Jewish fellow citizens with affection during the dark period of the Occupation of our country by the German troops and saved many of them. Moreover, his heart did not bear the injustice and he protested vehemently to the Nazi authorities of Athens, thus putting his own life in immediate danger. Tellingly, in the very interesting volume “The Holocaust of Greek Jews” published in 2006 by the Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece in collaboration with the General Secretariat of Youth, we read:

“The Orthodox Church took an active stance in favour of Jews under the enlightened guidance of the Archbishop of Athens Damaskinos. In a confidential circular letter to all churches, he urged the priests and the faithful to offer every assistance to the persecuted Jews” .

In many areas, local hierarchs such as Gregorios of Halkis, Ioakeim of Demetrias, Ghennadios of Thessaloniki, acted together with their priests for the salvation of Jews and resistance fighters and hostages running the utmost danger.

More specifically, when the late Archbishop was informed of the beginning of persecutions against the Jews of Greece, he asked to see the Plenipotentiary of the Third Reich for Greece, Günther von Altenburg, to whom he expressed the discontent of the Greek people at those persecutions. As is known, the Nazi Occupation authorities decreed that all Jews of foreign nationality residing in Greece should move, within specified times, to the countries of their respective nationalities. However, as regarded Greek Jews, the measure provided for their mass transfer to Poland. Our great man of letters Elias Venezis has preserved the dialogue between them:

Archbishop: Why should the Jews of Greece who are Spanish nationals go to Spain, the Jewish Italian nationals should go to Italy and the Jewish Greeks cannot remain in Greece but should be transferred to Poland?

Altenburg: They go to work...

Archbishop: If they are sent to work, why are women and children and elderly people being sent as well?

Altenburg: Because it will be harsh on families to part... If they are together, they will live better..."

The Archbishop then appealed to the German Plenipotentiary and spoke to him in the name of humanism and of Christian civilisation. Altenburg offered vague promises, having previously admitted that the Jewish Issue was of capital importance and as part of the fundamental platform of National Socialism was regulated by the Centre, and so he himself could do nothing .

The late Archbishop Damaskinos was not content with his oral appeal to Altenburg. He then summoned the representatives of the highest intellectual institutions of our country and of the scientific and professional organisations to the Archdiocese and they all decided to address, under the protection of the Church, two memoranda, which remained historical. The one was addressed to the Prime Minister of the Greek Government under Occupation Logothetopoulos and the other to Altenburg. In the former dated March 23, 1943, it is stressed among other things:

1. In accordance with the spirit of the terms of the truce, all Greek citizens should enjoy equal treatment by Occupation authorities, regardless of race or religion.
2. Greek Jews not only proved themselves to be invaluable contributors to the economic performance of the country, but demonstrated loyalty and full understanding of their duties as Greeks.
3. When it comes to national consciousness, the children of the common Mother Greece show themselves inseparably united and equal members of the national organism, regardless of any difference religious or doctrinal.
4. The Christian Religion does not recognise any discrimination, superiority or diminution on the grounds of race or religion, teaching that «there is neither Jew nor Greek» (Gal. 3,28), thus condemning all tendencies to create any discrimination on the grounds of racial or religious difference.

Finally, interest in the luck of the 60,000 Greeks, Jewish in religion, was expressed. The other memorandum sent by the Archbishop and the representatives of the highest intellectual institutions and other personalities of Greece to Altenburg was written along similar lines. Let me note that in the aforementioned volume of the Central Jewish Board the action of drafting and signing the two memoranda required great courage on the part of the numerous and significant personalities of Greek public life, given the terrorising conditions inflicted by the SS. In her book *With nostalgia ... for a life just like that, without a schedule* (Athens 2000), the late journalist Maria Rezan wrote of her own and her family's salvation as follows:

“Of course, there was also Damaskinos, the Archbishop, who at some point during the Occupation, in its darkest hour, issued that unique communication, protesting at all that his fellow citizens of Jewish origin suffered. And who was the cause behind the following statement of the Rabbi of Athens, Barzilai: «He who can save himself, let him do so. As for me, I take the mountains...». And thus those of his co-religionists who could rise rose and each one hid where each one could...”.

The student of the history of that time will be astonished at the bravery of Greeks who, despite the threat of the military German authorities that anyone hiding Jews would be executed on the spot, developed a wide network for hiding the persecuted and for helping others flee, while, by means of lawlike tricks such as that of identity cards that will be described below, they surpassed all precedents.

The false identity cards

The Archbishop, in collaboration with the brave Chief of the Police of Athens, Anghelos Evert, and the equally brave General Director of the Administrative Services of the Municipality of Athens, P. Haldezos, saved hundreds of Jews by “baptising” them Christians on paper and by asking Haldezos to issue municipality certificates and Evert to sign false identity cards, on which the indication “Orthodox Christian” misleadingly appeared as the religion of the Jewish applicants.

In relation to this, Venezis writes that the Archbishop invited Haldezos to the Archdiocese and said to him:

“I have crossed myself, have spoken to God and have decided to save as many souls of Jews as I can. Even if I put myself in danger. So I shall be ‘baptising’ the Jews and you will be issuing certificates of the municipality for them to obtain identity cards as Christian Greeks...”

In relation to this, the Central Board of the Jewish Communities mentions in its dedicatory volume that, thanks to the procedure of fake identity cards conceived by the Archbishop, 560 Athenian Jews, and others from different towns that had taken refuge in the capital, were able to survive until the end of the war, pretending to be Orthodox Christians. The inscription of the individual's religion on Greek identity cards proved salutary for Greek Jews. In no other occupied European country was it possible to apply such a trick, since religion was not shown on identity cards in them. Let us Greeks reflect what and how much we lose, instead of gaining, when we erroneously and superficially take pebbles out of the precious mosaic of our spiritual and cultural character.

His soul for the sheep...

The Archbishop's action in favour of his fellow men and of the liberation struggle of the Greek people caused the wrath and hatred of Occupation forces and more specifically of the SS men, who sought to assassinate him. His friends and advisers asked of the Archbishop Damaskinos to flee abroad, but he answered:

"I am at the disposal of the nation and shall never abandon my people. And if I should ever leave Athens, I would do so only to take the Greek mountains and never to go abroad".

The Chief of the Police of Athens Anghelos Evert was the Archbishop's guardian angel. The late Professor Ioannis Gheorgakis, secretary of the Archbishop Damaskinos at that time, wrote that he himself and Evert were informed that the Gestapo men were looking in the underworld of Athens for the man who would undertake to assassinate the Archbishop. This is why they convinced him temporarily to move houses from Psychikon to 1, Demokritou Street, in the city centre. Gheorgakis and his family lived on the floor above. Gestapo, who were following the Archbishop's moves, saw that he did not return to his house in the evening and started looking for him. Gheorgakis then realised that Damaskinos was in danger and notified Evert. The latter sent four policemen outside the residence on Demokritou Street, for any eventuality. At dawn the Gestapo cars arrived and the Greek policemen were ordered to move away... The Gestapo officers knocked violently on the door and forcibly entered the house. They asked of the Archbishop Damaskinos to follow them but he refused. The head of the Gestapo was at a loss and read out to him a house confinement order in complete isolation until his transfer to Auschwitz. Evert, Dinos Doxiadis, the family of Konstantinos Tsatsos, the Swiss ambassador, the International Red Cross and the allied wireless in Vilia of Attica broke the embargo.

Evert and Doxiadis studied the possibilities of his escape, but the Archbishop refused again and said:

“How is it possible for me, the chief shepherd, when the flower of Greek resistance is transferred to concentration camps, to go away of my own will and not share their luck?”

In this manner the issue of the Archbishop's escape was closed. Nonetheless, such was the prestige of the Archbishop both in the Greek people and in the international public opinion that even the SS agents did not dare to murder him or to take him to a concentration camp. In his recently published book entitled Anghelos Evert: his activity during the Occupation through witnesses (Athens 2007, p. 163), Mr Miltiades Evert, former Chairman of the New Democracy party and former Minister, notes that the Archbishop was one of the “protagonists” in the nation's struggle against the Germans and with regard to the relation of his father, Anghelos Evert, to the Archbishop, he writes:

“The Archbishop’s relation to Anghelos Evert was close and the two men’s cooperation in resistance and counter-espionage was constant throughout the Occupation”.

Archbishop Damaskinos’ explosive Christ-centred and nation-centred character always pushed him to daring acts, albeit consistent with his principles, whereby he placed himself under the interest of the Church and of the nation, in the good sense of the term. Indeed, his authentic answer to Altenburg, who threatened him that, if he took to the mountains to lead the Resistance of the Greek people, Altenburg would order his arrest and referral to the Court Martial, was a brave, honest and historical answer, worthy of the traditions of the Orthodox Greek clergy, and can be encapsulated in eleven words: “Greek Hierarchs are not shot down; they are executed by hanging”.

This historical answer we are placing today, at the initiative of the Central Jewish Board, on a plaque at the pedestal of the statue of the chief hierarch who vindicated the Greek-Orthodox ethos, our history and tradition.

The recognition

Archbishop Damaskinos' activity in favour of the Jews did not go unnoticed. On the contrary, Jews and Israelis have shown, and still show, up to this day, by this simple though important event and by this plaque that is being placed on his statue, their gratitude and humanism in every way, since they do not forget those that helped them in the difficult times of the genocide.

Archbishop Damaskinos' name has been inscribed in the Golden Book of Israel among those of the Just of Nations, next to the names of other heroic Greek Hierarchs, clergymen and laymen, Orthodox Christian by religion, who, by their acts, saved many Jewish Greek citizens from certain death. The Chairman of the European Jewish Council Théo Klein stressed, among other things, that the Archbishop of Athens and the Orthodox Church together with Anghelos Evert opened their doors to save several Jews.

Moreover, the Ambassador of Greece to Washington Alexandros Philon, in his letter dated April 10, 2006 to Miltiades Evert, informed him of the honorary diploma and the medal awarded posthumously to the father of the latter, Anghelos Evert, by the Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, and noted that the same medal was awarded jointly in memory of the Archbishop Damaskinos and also in memory of the late Chryssostomos, Metropolitan of Zakynthos, and of the late Lukas Carrer, Mayor of Zakynthos, who, by their attitude, contributed to the rescue of the Jews of Zakynthos. The incident is not widely known. Lukas Carrer, Mayor of Zakynthos at the time, was summoned by the German commander of the Guard of Zakynthos and was asked to prepare a list of the names and addresses of the Jews of the island. The Mayor resorted to the late Metropolitan, Chryssostomos Demetriou. The two men talked and one day went together to the Kommandatur, where the Metropolitan handed in a sealed envelope to the German commander. The latter opened it, hoping that it contained the much-desired list, and changed colour when he found a sheet of paper inside, on which only two names were written: Chryssostomos, Metropolitan of Zakynthos, and Lukas Carrer, Mayor.

The restitution

My dear ones,

The dynasts of this world think that, if they wrong, torture or kill thousands or even millions of people, they will change history, they will impose their will, they will rectify the plan of God, they will rule the world and they will wipe out anyone, whom they qualify as their enemy, judging him or her on ideological grounds. In the course of the 20th century mankind witnessed the most inhuman regimes of this nature in its history. Nevertheless, these regimes have passed, have sunk, have collapsed loudly and now constitute the most tragic and worst memory and example to be avoided. That nightmare is gone and mankind carries on its course, with traumas but also with good hopes. Has it learnt from its sufferings? Has it made its decisions? Has it realised that men with no moral restraints or inner defences, without faith or fear of God, without principles, are dangerous when they acquire power? Has it seen what its interest is?

Allow me, at this moment, to refer to the Doxology, that was performed on October 12, 1944, that is on the day of the liberation of the capital of Greece from the Nazi troops of Occupation, here, in this Cathedral Church of Athens, with Archbishop Damaskinos officiating and with the participation of thousands of Greeks, whose souls vibrated with national and religious enthusiasm. Venezis has preserved the Hymn that was sung by the Choir of the Cathedral on that day, with the Archbishop's approval. It was made of verses freely inspired by the Psalms of David and specially selected for the occasion. Here are some:

“Thy right hand is glorified in might, O Lord, and thine arm has pushed down our enemies, and in the abundance of thy glory thou hast tread them under that rise up against us”. “Thou hast saved

us from our enemies, and hast put them to shame that hated us". "We are killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter". "They break in pieces thy people, O Lord, and afflict thine heritage". "They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen, and stand upright". "O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God".

Then Archbishop Damaskinos, with a voice that was trying in vain to hide his emotion, prayed on the occasion of the liberation of Greece:

"Praise the Lord, angels of the Lord and choirs of the just and the sun and the moon and the stars". "The earth and the mountains and the hills and the nations living in them, praise the Lord". "The sources and the seas and the rivers and all waters of nature, praise the Lord". "The shadows of dead heroes and the crowds of the living heroes and the myriads of victims and the ranks of the tombs and the multitudes of the bereaved, praise the Lord in tears of joy". "The triumphant columns of the liberators and the clang of weapons and the trumpets of victory and the paeans of glory, praise the Lord". "Houses of the Lord and sweet bells and flags in the air and the free system of unenslaved servants, praise the Lord with hymns and thanks". "Lord our God, strengthen our Nation and turn the thorns of bitter martyrdom into laurels and crown the victors with glory and honour".

And Venezis concludes: "So said the Archbishop. And the crowd thanked the God in tears".

I have said earlier that inhuman regimes collapsed and now constitute the worst memory. Nevertheless, we should all be on the alert, so that mankind may never again know such horrors and so that we may make society even more humane and tolerant. To us, the prerequisites for a peaceful and prosperous society are the love of God and of every fellow man, regardless of race or religion, and justice; also, the love for one's homeland, the honour for the heroes, the living historic memory. Peoples that do not wish to remember the past have no right to a future. We all of us have to preserve History unfalsified for ourselves and for our youth, without applying Procrustean methods on it. And, to the extent of our abilities, each one of us should never allow small extremist, racist, terrorist or totalitarian groups to impose their inhuman ideologies on society.

We believe in tolerance towards all differences of our fellow men, in the respect for all views of others, in the abolition of capital punishment and of tortures, in freedom of expression and in human rights. As Christians, as men with an upright conscience, and as free and responsible citizens, we have likewise stood for resistance against terrorism, racism, xenophobia, the disappearance of differences, the homogenisation of everything into a syncretistic view of life. In Greece we have put these principles into practice: the joint, peaceful and harmonious co-operation of Jews, Christians and Muslims in our country constitutes a tangible example and a model of smooth living together of people pursuing different religions for the other peoples of the Earth.

So let our firm decision be heard out to the oecumene from this holy place today, that we will continue, together with all good-willed men and women around the world, the struggle for our alertness and others' sensitisation to the ideals of human dignity, love and justice, in order to avert a new slippage of mankind into inhuman and barbaric practices that risk undoing civilisation and invalidating progress.

[Translation from Greek by Dr Nikolaos C. Petropoulos, M.St., D.Phil. (Oxon).]

