XENOS AND PHILOXENIA IN GREEK ORTHODOX TRADITION[1]

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The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia introduced in 1995 a new cultural institution known as the 'Greek Orthodox Cultural Forum'. The main purpose of this very demanding initiative was, and always remains, to contribute substantially to the praiseworthy effort of the Australian Government for more than 25 years to give the possibility for 'reconciliation' between the various ethnic groups comprising the population of modern Australia.

No one can ignore the significance of the policy known as 'multiculturalism', which is even better expressed through the term 'cultural diversity', proudly enjoyed by all as an everyday reality, and not merely as a political slogan.

For the first Forum, we had chosen as the general theme: 'The Person in Ancient Greco-Roman Literature and in Christian Tradition'. We were prompted to this very general formulation of the theme by our wish to identify and promote the 'common denominator' among people of every race, religion and ideology, living together in a modern pluralistic society. Clearly, this common denominator could not be found so successfully in any article of Faith of the Christian Church, as in the Biblical teaching of the creation of the human person 'in the image and likeness of God' (Gen. 1:26).

By developing at length the theme of 'person', both in Greco-Roman literature and thought and, especially, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we believe that we showed sufficiently the sacredness and uniqueness of the human person, quite apart from any more specific characterisations of a racial or ideological nature.

Today, five years later, the 2nd Cultural Forum is changed in title from 'Greek Orthodox' to 'Greek Australian', in order to avoid being perhaps misunderstood in the sense of 'confessional' narrowness or

exclusivity, and so that it may have the broadest possible participation. So while the 1st Cultural Forum was limited to speakers representing only Christian confessions, we have this year a range of speakers representing the Jewish, Moslem and Aboriginal traditions as well.

A further point that we need to clarify by way of introduction is the general theme itself. In choosing the general theme of 'Xenos and Philoxenia through the Centuries', we have tried to remain faithful to the theme of Person. Moreover, an organic continuation of the research area of the previous Forum is maintained. For, given the uniqueness and sacredness of the person, we now turn to complement this by seeing the degree to which the manifestations of its inestimable value have been taken seriously in practical terms in the transference of the human person into geographical areas which are no longer its 'natural homeland'.

In researching the stranger and hospitality in different traditions, periods and countries, both before and after the time of Christ, we shall try to see how the human person is appreciated and accepted, from place to place, and from people to people, while unknown and foreign. Furthermore, we shall also endeavour to see in particular, regarding the question at hand, to what extent the Incarnation of God according to Christian faith and teaching has influenced human behaviour and civilisation as a whole.

If we also consider that the twentieth century witnessed the largest and most violent movements of people and populations – sometimes due to voluntary migration and, at other times, due to violent expatriation and the uprooting of people – then we can understand more fully the importance of the general theme 'Xenos and Philoxenia' for every country today.

We must add that the theme is vital, not only for the person who migrates or moves but, to an equal if not greater degree, also for the person who receives the other as a stranger and sojourner. For there can be no doubt that the one who has the first say – acting from a position of power – is the one who receives the other. For this reason, he or she must first of all be sufficiently aware of the corresponding responsibilities which, by definition, come while meeting or showing hospitality to another. However, we should not in any way think that this absolves the stranger who is shown hospitality from all responsibility, purely because circumstances

have left him or her in an 'inferior' position. Interpersonal relations always signify an innate mutuality, which in turn regulates the degree of responsibility on both sides.

It was only natural for Australia, one of the major destinations of migration with an intake of hundreds of thousands – similar to the USA and Canada – to give attention to migration programs and government measures that would allow a smooth and swift entry into mainstream society. While Australia initially spoke of 'integration', the aim of which was more or less the assimilation into monolithic Anglo-Saxon culture, the final thirty years of the 20th century then introduced multiculturalism and cultural diversity officially, thereby ensuring, with huge state funds admittedly, the most hospitable and democratic region in the modern world. Furthermore, the recent 'Living in Harmony' program of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, was perhaps a further attempt at deeper and more substantial 'reconciliation' between the countless ethnicities, religions and traditions that comprise the entire population of modern Australia.

For all the above reasons, the theme of the 2nd Greek Australian Cultural Forum could not possibly leave the relevant Department indifferent. It promptly responded to the request of the Archdiocese for direct co-operation, by meeting at least a portion of the enormous costs involved in an international Conference of this kind. We therefore express our warm appreciation for the support of the Australian government, and especially to the relevant Minister, Philip Ruddock, who also kindly took the time to officially attend the Opening of our proceedings today.

In addition, the fact that the Forum is held just three months before the commencement of the Olympic Games in Sydney – which, apart from the competitive spirit, always maintain the underlying ideal of interaction and peace between nations – was a further reason to consider the proceedings of our Conference as being a most welcome and necessary 'cultural introduction' into the authentic spirit and almost forgotten underpinning of sport in general, which is a perpetual impetus towards constant self-transcendence, just as the word *anthropos* (human) indicates [the etymological meaning of *anthropos* is 'to look upwards'].

Following this perhaps lengthy, but necessary, introduction, we can now proceed to a discussion of our topic which - no matter how we articulate it – has no other aim than to underline the significance, on a world level, of Greek thought on the one hand, and the Orthodox faith on the other, as a now integral and indivisible cultural factor in the creative response to all issues related to so-called 'humanistic' values.

It is more than obvious that 'philoxenia' should be considered, right from the outset, the 'touchstone' in the evaluation and estimation of each cultural and 'humanistic' value. How can we possibly love and promote any human creation – whether in literature, art or science – if we do not first of all love the totality of the human person that has created them? For, the person precedes its creations, and therefore stands, until the very end, above and beyond them in its inexpressible tragicality, sacredness and uniqueness.[2]

We should at any rate limit the focus of our attention to the most fundamental aspects of Greek and Christian tradition - to those elements which sufficiently and characteristically express the 'Hellenic spirit or *psyche*', that is to say the Greek cultural physiognomy, as it was developed and purified of the last trace of earthly gravity, through its Baptism in the springs of Christianity. [3]

However, the above statement already shows us that we do not simply have a 'working hypothesis' waiting to be proved, but rather a very rich and distinctly outlined project. According to this project, we must touch upon the 'Hellenic *psyche*' not only through timeless Greek Mythology (which we know was also the theology of the ancients, at least in its popular basis), but also through Greek literature and history in general, regardless of whether the object of their study is natural phenomena, the adventures of man and ideas, or the creations of art and science.

In this intricate network of multiple parameters, which are of course not always equally 'discernible', we are to search for the 'traces' and 'intimations' of truth and life in relation to the topic at hand.

The notion and the reality of the human being as 'xenos', and the behaviour shown towards that person known as 'philoxenia', must certainly not be considered as being constant or stereotyped across all peoples and times. On the contrary, these things are so fluid in relation to collective

human behaviour, that it is impossible to claim that we can observe unchanging features even of only one people throughout the unbroken succession of its various historical periods.

Yet, in spite of this fluidity, we can say at this point that there is a wondrous attentiveness and appreciation for the uniqueness of the human person through the centuries by the Greeks, regardless of whether we are referring to pre-Christian or Christian Greece, even up until the present.

Commencing from mythology, and especially from the period during which the twelve gods of Mount Olympus were dominant in the Greek world, we must recall that one coming in the capacity of the 'stranger' was not simply received with all the almost religious ritual described in the Epics of Homer. What is even more impressive is the fact that Zeus himself, the greatest of the gods of Mount Olympus, who was for all people 'the father of both men and gods', had been given the name 'Xenios Zeus', thereby placing under his protection any stranger, who for this reason alone was considered to be sacred.

Characteristic of the yearning of the ancient Greeks to embrace and become acquainted with the 'stranger' and the 'unknown' – which should actually be considered as being almost correlative terms – is the fact that, while the twelve gods of Mt Olympus represented a 'closed' and complete fullness with the highly symbolic number of twelve[4], this never excluded the parallel adoption of foreign divinities of Egypt, the Middle East etc. in the general religious 'Pan-theon' of Hellenism. Thus arose the phenomenon of so-called 'Syncretism'. Even the meaningful Greek word 'Pan-theon' is itself the most eloquent expression of the unquenchable need of the Greek spirit to leave no divinity 'ignored'.

An even more moving expression of this need was the existence in Athens of an Altar dedicated to 'the unknown god'. And this was, as is known, a splendid opportunity for the Apostle Paul to preach to the Athenians the true God 'whom they worshipped without knowing' (Acts 17:23).

We should however admit that the 'stranger' and the 'unknown' – according to an inviolate psychological rule – are either treated with fear or at least 'reservedness' by primitive peoples who are isolated and underdeveloped. On the contrary, more developed people, who are open to trade and communication, had always felt as a 'second nature', the

need to surpass and broaden their horizons. The Greeks undoubtedly had from very ancient times the characteristics of the second group, which is why they were among the first to colonise so extensively in all directions of the known world. No matter to what extent the historiographers of ancient times (such as Herodotus) attributed this compulsion of Greeks for 'exodus' to the 'permanent poverty' of the motherland, it appears that what was 'strange' and 'unknown' captivated and excited the Greek spirit probably for much deeper reasons. [5]

It was precisely this contemplative nature of the Greeks which was epigrammatically defined by Plato when he said: 'the beginning of philosophy is to wonder'. 'Ec-stasy' and 'wonder', then, which lead directly to 'philosophical enquiry' cannot possibly be interpreted in economic terms, as Marxist ethics would have it. If we agree that the human person is much more than 'what he eats', we must be very careful when we try to interpret cultural values and creations in general.

In speaking, therefore, about the 'Hellenic *psyche*' which, according to Aristotle, 'has by nature the desire to know', we must see its relationship towards what is 'strange' and 'unknown' not simply in terms of peaceful 'acceptance' and 'co-existence', and much less so of course in terms of utilitarian 'tolerance'. The 'ec-static' and enquiring nature of the Greeks in relation to the 'stranger' and the 'unknown' is manifested first and foremost as a dynamic process, a drastic searching. Thus, not as a response, but rather as an initiative.

This is the deeper reason for which we see, in the cultural tradition of a relatively small people, such as the Greeks, the development – under the same economic conditions – of so many and varied 'theories' and philosophical systems, ranging from the most materialistic and positivistic, through to the most idealistic.

At this point, however, we should emphasise that, for the Greeks, the 'stranger' and the 'unknown' were never depersonalised values in themselves, that is to say irrelevant to the human 'person'. The 'unknown x' of mathematical research occupied Greek thought as a scientific 'extraversion', mainly during the period of the pre-Socratic Ionian physicians, while with Heraclitus we see the commencement of a radical shift towards anthropological 'introversion'. Even before Socrates had

reached his pious 'existential' apophaticism, with the well-known phrase 'I know but one thing, and that is that I know nothing', Heraclitus had already begun his own 'Copernican revolution' in ethics, in stating ' I sought after my own self'.

The major question in Greek thought, then, is no longer mathematical principles, the 'elements' of nature, or the mysteries of astronomy, but rather the human being itself, with its deeper needs and fears, its inclinations and expectations, its most daring dreams.

This explains why Aristotle defined the human as 'a political being'. For the same reason, the Athenians described in the Acts of the Apostles have no more beloved pastime than to 'hear or say something new' (Acts 17:21).

The fact that this relentless uneasiness of the Greeks was not merely 'curiosity' of the 'cognitive faculty', but rather a deep thirst also of the 'volition' and 'desire' of the soul, was expressed with incomparable simplicity and wisdom by the national poet of Greece Dionysios Solomos, who said: 'my inner self and the sea are never at rest'.

With such an 'idiosyncrasy', it was impossible for the Greek to have anything other than the human person above any other 'goods', whether material or spiritual. The thirst to know the unknown person was the starting point, as well as the ultimate criterion, of meeting the 'stranger', the 'unknown' person who comes to us. This is why we can already see in Homer that the 'stranger' is received as if he is 'known' from the outset. Every form of heartfelt reception is offered 'without conditions', and this is why it is called 'philoxenia', in other words 'philia' (friendship) towards the 'xeno' (stranger). Only after the stranger recovers from the effort of the journey is he asked to reveal who he is and what brought him to that place.

It would be sufficient and highly instructive to make a fundamental etymological analysis of certain key terms in the Greek vocabulary, which have direct connection with the phenomenon of people coming together. Then of course the nobility of spirit and the silent expectations that Greeks always had before any meeting could be more clearly proved. It is worth noting at this point that these terms and words have remained almost completely unchanged, from the time of Homer up until today, in the everyday language of the people. Several examples of this are as follows: 'an-thropos' (which in Homer means light), 'ip-antisis', 'epi-skepsis', 'sin-

erhesthe', 'si-zitisis', 'logos', 'omilos', 'omilia', 'en-tefxis', 'sin-entefxis', 'kouventa' (from *con-venire*).

All of the above concerning the stranger and philoxenia in ancient Greece may perhaps sound today somewhat unreal, as congestion in the large cities and the related crime rate have, even unconsciously, contributed greatly to the misery and desacrilisation of the human person. For a people who had never known the modern chaotic cities, and for whom the measure 'anthropos' was therefore decisive even in public monuments (what comparison could be made between the Parthenon and the Pyramids of Egypt!), philoxenia was both a duty and a right imposed not only by virtue of the nature of the human person, but also by his environment, and especially by the humanising Greek light. We should perhaps recall here that this very splendour and 'philanthropy' of the Greek natural landscape made Odysseas Elytis uplift Greece even from its purely geographical aspect as 'the point' of ideal balance in the world, beyond which chaos inevitably encroaches upon us.

A serious question which could cast this ideal Greek perception of xenos and philoxenia in doubt could at first glance perhaps be that of 'slavery', which also existed in ancient Greece, as in many other lands. We must however note carefully, and take into consideration, that this was a widespread institution of social structure, and not a phenomenon of social behaviour, which could in turn influence philoxenia.

Turning now from pre-Christian Greece to Christianised Hellenism we should say briefly that, just as the value of the human person in general was lifted to new heights by the Gospel of Christ in all ethical matters of personal, family and social life, so did the concept of philoxenia undergo a true transfiguration.

The more people believed that 'we do not have here a permanent city, but we seek the future one' (Heb. 13:14), the more willing they were to share without conditions or limits, as brothers and sisters, all goods of this life, and this would lead them already from the present to peace and blessedness in God.

The 'Incarnation' of God, being the 'recapitulation' by grace of all people 'divided' and 'scattered' through the sin of 'self-love', does not allow the possibility any longer for racial or other barriers between

individuals and peoples: 'for in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female, there is neither slave nor free...' (Gal. 3:28). For, even the person who has never heard the Gospel and has not become a member of the Church, does not cease to be a 'brother' nonetheless, since Christ became man and was crucified for him also, regardless of whether he realises it. The fact that one is not aware of an inheritance does not mean that one is not entitled to it!

Therefore the notion of the 'stranger' and the 'foreigner' takes on other dimensions and another quality in Christianity. Now the 'stranger' is by definition every human being. And the most 'official' stranger is God incarnate himself. This truth is epigrammatically expressed by the Akathist Hymn which says 'having seen the strange birth, let us become strangers in this world'. The hymnography of the Orthodox Church – which of course belongs to all Christians, since it derives from the first common Christian millennium - is replete with the liturgical cry of the worshipping community for the union of the soul with Christ, the 'Bridegroom'. The standard expression of this plea is very characteristic: 'Give me this stranger'! [6]

Perhaps the most moving daily commentary of the sensitivity of the faithful towards the 'stranger' and 'philoxenia' are the great number of relevant customs, myths and traditions of the Orthodox people.

As a simple but characteristic example, we can mention here the fact that in many parts of Christian Greece when the table is set, a spare plate is still put aside, in addition to the number of table guests. This is considered to be 'the plate of Christ'. And whoever passes by during the course of the meal, receives *ipso jure* the vacant seat, as if he were the Lord Himself.

In Crete, hospitality both transfigures the 'stranger' into a sacred and adorable person, and changes the entire family surrounds of the host into a strictly 'inviolate shelter' for anyone who 'seeks refuge' or 'willfully comes' to it.

It is said that once during a fight - which unfortunately were not rare on Crete - a stranger killed the son of an elderly man who almost always remained in his 'sheepfold' on the mountains. The murderer, pursued by the police and visibly exhausted, reached the sheepfold late at

night, and asked for protection without realising who the old man was who lived there. The unfortunate father had learnt about what had occurred, but the unwritten law of hospitality did not allow him to deny shelter to the pursued criminal. Pretending he knew nothing, he set the table to eat together, and he showed him the place where he would sleep. When daybreak came, he woke up the stranger in time so that he could leave before the police arrived. He put bread, wine and water in his shoulder bag, and as he said goodbye in the yard, he stated bluntly: 'go now and look out for the police. But especially look out for me, because the man you killed was my son'.

In another case, on the eve of a wedding, a member of the couple's family died suddenly. In order not to worry the guests, they hid the deceased and their sorrow with enormous strength for the entire three days of the wedding festivities, and only when all guests had left did the relatives make funeral arrangements.

The area in which xenos and philoxenia have shown that 'grace' can not only 'conquer', but literally 'transubstantiate' 'nature', is Orthodox monasticism. By this of course we mean the way in which monasticism is still practised, after eleven entire centuries, on the peninsula of Athos, known as the Holy Mountain.

In spite of the fact that it is not only Greek monks who dwell on Mt Athos, the established spiritual life of the monastic community is based upon, and continuously inspired by, 'Greek Christian values'. Clearly, these values were not only freely and gladly adopted by other Orthodox, but they were also enriched by the other monks who would apply them according to their individual sensitivity, while living according to the way of Athos. [7]

It is noteworthy, first of all, and highly indicative, that the notion of 'migration' was, in medieval and modern Greek terms, a bitter 'fate' for such a small and poor people, who were continually forced to migrate in order to survive. However, this painful experience did not remain for the Greek Orthodox tradition a purely negative or grievous circumstance. While the faithful who struggled daily and the unnamed people of folk songs may have handed down to us the most painful 'songs of migration', the Orthodox monk who does not in any way 'reject' the world, but by

definition tries to restore the entire creation of God to its 'original beauty' and to its 'virginal' power, responds to the condition of the 'stranger' and 'migration' in a totally dynamic way, turning the curse into a blessing. This is exactly what occurred in the case of the 'wood of the Cross' which, from an instrument of humiliating death, became for the Christians the 'strength of rulers' and the 'support of the faithful'.

The Orthodox monk was never satisfied by the view expressed in the cosmopolitan ideal of the Stoic philosophers through the well-known phrase 'all the earth is our homeland, and every homeland is foreign', and went instead beyond the known frontiers. Just as in medicine, the 'injection' to combat a virus is nothing more than a calculated dose of the virus itself, in order for the body to develop in time the necessary antibodies, in the same way Orthodox monasticism viewed 'migration' – which was initially only a geographical distance - as being within our very body, and called 'migration within the world' the ultimate and insurpassible 'cutting off of one's own will'. And it is truly apparent that the monastic vows of obedience, celibacy and poverty are connected in a wonderful way to the 'cutting off of one's own will' and constitute the total migration in the present world.

In concluding, let me remind you that in all monasteries of Mt Athos, the special premises provided for the visitors and pilgrims are called the '*Archondariki*', which means the rooms for the *Arhondes* (i.e. 'lords'). And the behaviour of all monks towards the visitors, regardless of who they are, is the attitude of a 'servant' to a 'lord'. Precisely for this reason, the stay of any visitor in monasteries of Mt Athos is always without payment, a unique case in our materialistic time and society at least.

After all this, we must admit that the Church Fathers were indeed right in stating that the monk always remains, for the entire people of God, the visible example of the renewed creation, just as the monk has only the angel as his example.

NOTES:

1. The Opening Address of the 2nd Greek Australian Cultural Forum, delivered in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, from 7-21 May, 2000.
2. Above all, one should consider the synthesis achieved by the Cappadocian Fathers and, soon after, the even deeper reconciliation in the works of St Maximos the Confessor.
3. Greek culture and tradition must be studied and assessed as an indivisible tradition from the Homeric epics, through to the Byzantine and Medieval heritage, right up until the creations of modern Greece. This should be regarded as the only appropriate method of doing justice to the different stages of the mentioned longest cultural tradition, as distinguished scholars like E.R. Dodd and G. Thompson have shown.
4. The true eschatological meaning of the number 12 has been fully expressed and appreciated in the Judeo-Christian tradition (12 Patriarchs, 12 Tribes of Israel, 12 Apostles etc.)
5. It is remarkable, for example, that all Greeks who felt the need to leave their country of origin and seek new horizons were not always the 'bankrupt' or the 'ruined', but rather the brave and youthful members of the population, and those who were full of energy and dreams. This was the case from the time of the journey of the Argonauts until the present.
6. From the service of Holy Friday evening, in a special hymn which commences with the words: 'When the sun had hidden its rays, and the curtain of the temple was torn, Joseph, having beheld the death of the Saviour, approached Pilate begging him, saying "Give me this stranger". '
7. One of the leading modern Greek writers, the late Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, had repeatedly expressed his admiration for the deep feeling of hospitality extended by the Athonite monks, as concerning not only the living, but also figures of the past. The visitor can see accordingly in the welcoming quarters of the monasteries and even the cells of the monks, not only photographs and ornaments of living Church and political authorities. Also apparent are departed Patriarchs, Kings and even revolutionaries of Greek history, still honoured as if they were still governing figures.

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