

Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon George (Khodr)

A Life of Mission and Dialogue

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The condition of dialogue is an existential condition. Dialogue sheds a light on oneself. Being in a process of meeting, one finds oneself in a condition of thorough self examination. The metropolitan of Byblos, Botrys and Mount Lebanon, George Khodr, a most prominent personality in the Orthodox Arab world of today (and beyond), has elaborated extensively on the nature of dialogue throughout his entire life. He refers to Martin Buber, to assert that “when you embark on a dialogue, you put yourself under questioning”.¹

In his view, the one under questioning in a theological dialogue is not God, but may very well be the Church. “It is Christian history, as well as the theology that has been elaborated within it, which are under thorough scrutiny, not only within Protestant reformation”.²

Khodr places a great emphasis on personal and existential effort to attain self knowledge, at all levels. Exploring and deeply understanding one’s own personality and situation has been a life-long struggle for him.

This is somewhat related to his character as a poet. A poet in prose. It is reflected in most of his works, especially the short texts called نَجْوَى (najwah). It is related to his inclination towards art and his studies in art, in the Fine Art Faculty, and especially literary arts,³ a fact that escapes the attention of most of his biographers, where the emphasis is on his studies in law and his diplomatic career.

Biography

Speaking of biography,⁴ in his native Lebanon Khodr was one of the founders of the Orthodox Youth Movement (OYM) also known as MJO (Mouvement de la jeunesse orthodoxe), which was established in 1942 and contributed to the resurgence of

¹ George Khodr, “Mission and Dialogue: A Theological Reflection”: WSCF Journal, April 1988: 30 [30-33].

² Ibid.

³ George Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood*, Nuha Jurayj (transl.) (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press <Orthodox Christian Profiles Series,6>, 2016), 39-40.

⁴ Information for this biographical sketch is taken from the official biographies of the Metropolitan in his books, or on his official website (<http://georgeskhodr.org/>), but also from personal testimonies and accounts from Antiochian Christians.

Orthodoxy in the Arab world through a series of activities inspired by love, zeal and enthusiasm: the creation of Bible Study groups, the establishment of cultural centres, witness among working people, social work etc. Some of the effects of this atmosphere can be seen in the monastic revival, the development of parish life and self-awareness and the blossoming of Orthodox thought. The MJO was also a founding member of Syndesmos, the World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, and through its principles, its spirit and its activity it played a major part and had an impact on Orthodoxy and its youth movement internationally.

Metropolitan George was born in Tripoli, the second city of Lebanon in terms of size and importance, on 6 July 1923. He grew up in the Christian neighborhood of Harat el Nasarah (an-Nasarah) (Nazarenes are the Christians), for which he had a great affection. He describes his childhood memories and the course of his life in the most significant of all his books, *The Ways of Childhood*, which has been published in Arabic, in French and (very recently) in English and will shortly appear in Greek.⁵ He studied Law at St Joseph's University, a Jesuit institution in Beirut.

On 11 November 1943, he joined friends and fellow-students in a peaceful demonstration against the French colonial administration, proclaiming the right and aspiration of the Lebanese people to freedom and independence. That day remained indelibly engraved in his memory and would determine the future course of his life, since on government orders the unarmed demonstrators came under fire, resulting in the deaths of 11 people including personal friends of his.⁶ It was a life-changing experience that led him to dedicate himself to peace and justice, and become one of the most political (in the original, true meaning of the word) as well as spiritual leaders within the Orthodox Church. From his youth he liked the simple people, largely illiterate but richly endowed with wisdom, humility and clarity of mind. His love for the poor accompanied him throughout his life. Genuine as it was, it never came from a position of superiority, nor did it take the form of a benevolence and charity that was all one way. He also loved the life of solitude and contemplation which he experienced when he took refuge in a mountain village, after finishing secondary school.⁷ In his solitude and isolation a window of light opened wide. It was the window of faith. In his *Ways of Childhood*, in the chapter "To Become a Living Church" Khodr starts out with painting. He picks a narrow door to

⁵ Forthcoming by Maistros Publications which is gradually publishing his entire work in Greek, translated by Roni Bou Saba and myself.

⁶ Ζορζ Κοντρ, *Η Φύση του Ισλάμ* [George Khodr, Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon, *The Nature of Islam*], Roni Bou Saba (trans.), Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina (prol. and ed.) (Athens: Μαΐστρος [Maistros], 2009), 52 (biographical note by the editor). Cf. *The Ways of Childhood*, 63.

⁷ George Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood*, 29, 35.

painting, namely Gauguin and his “pagan word”.⁸ It is quite interesting, that other first class theologians and monks also enter the world of prayer through art and especially painting. Among many, most noteworthy are Leonid Ouspensky and Sophrony Sakharov of Essex. Perhaps Gauguin is a narrow door to painting, but it is a token of the wide and solid basis of Khodr’s cultural cultivation and education, and the openness of his heart and spirit, beyond borders. There, in isolation and solitude, he describes reading Bergson, “because of the poetry and spiritual traits that suffuse his work”.⁹ There, in prayer and silence he dedicated himself to the study of sacred texts, experiencing an unexpected wonder in front of new and uncharted, inexhaustible hermeneutical depths. It was there that he discovered the notion of sanctity, he experienced the presence of God as a friend. “Those who live in holiness, are often incapable of eloquence, or barely speak”,¹⁰ he observes, but silence can also be transmitted. Sanctity in life radiates like light, and preaching in silence is worthier than words, he remarks many a time in his works.

But life varies as time moves on and Khodr descends from his mountain of transfiguration and comes downhill where he gets actively involved in the youth movement. His interests began to turn increasingly towards his faith. In the early 1950s he studied theology at St Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, after which he returned to Lebanon. In 1954 he was ordained priest on 19 December. Then the following year he began serving in the parish of the Prophet Elias in the harbour area of Tripoli, where he remained until he assumed the rank of bishop on 15 February 1970.

Already as a priest he became known as a theologian, pastor and spiritual father, and his fame spread beyond the borders of Lebanon. Thus in 1968 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, and twenty years later by the Protestant Theological School in Paris. On 22 June 2007 he was similarly honoured by St Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute.

His dedication to the field of education was of enormous importance. He was professor of Arab Culture at the Lebanese University and taught Pastoral Theology at the St John of Damascus Theological Institute at the University of Balamand. His activity was of great significance not only on the inter-Orthodox level, through the MJO and Syndesmos, but also in the area of dialogue between Christianity and Islam and ecumenical dialogue. He usually served as the Orthodox Church of Antioch’s official representative on the official pan-Orthodox and inter-Christian dialogues.

⁸ Ibid. 35.

⁹ Ibid. 36.

¹⁰ Ibid. 40.

As a writer he was especially productive, authoring works of various sorts on an extremely wide range of subjects. Articles and homilies of his have been published in a variety of places within Lebanon and abroad and made available on the Internet and mass media, while his books have been published mainly by An Nour Publishing (the name means 'Light' - this is the publishing arm of the MJO), by An Nahar (which means 'Day': An Nahar publishes books as well as a daily newspaper, in which the Metropolitan held a regular weekly column for many decades), and of course by the Archdiocese of Mount Lebanon, and have also been translated into other languages.

The great variety of subject matter that he concerned himself with is revealed by the titles of his writings: *New Antioch*, *A Word on Sunday*, *Hope in Time of War*, *Issues in Lebanon*, *The Movement as Enlightenment and Vocation*, *The Spirit and the Bride*, *Places of Pilgrimage and the New Life*, and especially the most important work, previously mentioned, *Ways of Childhood*.

The hoary Metropolitan with his breadth of spirit, his love, his tireless desire to bring peace and reconciliation and his limpid, original thinking remains even today a reference point in the suffering region of Lebanon and the Middle East as well as throughout the world.

Language and the Struggle for Expression

We have already referred to his love of literature and prose. He says of literature:

Literature is a bridge between soul and mind, between our spirit and the hearts of others. The heart flows into our consciousness, and the writer's task is to create a starting place for the soul's purification, a softening of reason and thought in communion with the Spirit. Literature brings about the unity of our being; it opens the door to divine influences that perfect it through grace and benevolence.¹¹

The struggle to find expression is even harder when it comes to theology. In *The Ways of Childhood* he uses a literary persona representing the *alter ego* of the author. Though he chooses to speak of his "friend", the book is an autobiographical narrative. Yet it cannot be adequately classified in a specific literary genre. On our topic, theological expression, he says:

My friend was struggling to tame words. How could he correctly express his thoughts without letting God die between the lines?¹²

Christian preaching is a proclamation of the Living God. As we mentioned at the beginning, referring to the condition of dialogue, it is not Christ who is under questioning. Yet the

¹¹ Ibid. 40.

¹² Ibid. 40.

Church as such and the people of the Church may very well be. Do they convey the message of a living God or are they witnesses to His death? The theology of the death of God may have to do with the unsuitability and unworthiness of Christian preaching.

One should take great care not to let God die between the lines. The struggle for expression is immense. It may take place in silence, by a life that radiates light and holiness; it may take place in words. The words of the Arabic language.

George Khodr was in love with the Arabic language. He mastered it at the highest level. His deep knowledge of the language, of its various layers in the course of time, is very rare. Khodr is difficult to understand to his very depth; he is also difficult to translate.

In his use of words he conveys the whole meaning of them, starting from the very root of the word. Those who are familiar with Arabic understand the importance of the roots of the words and the multilevel connections and interrelated meanings they carry. He is conveying all the multiplicity of historical variations, playing with the multiple connotations of each word.

His deep love of the Arabic language is only a part of his personal excavations to find the inheritance, the tradition and the fullness of meaning, of expressing his own condition as a man, a human in a specific historical context.

In the very first phrase, the first chapter title, of *The Ways of Childhood* he states:

بَعْضٌ مِنْ شِعْرٍ

Ba 'adun min shiar. A piece of poetry. And yet, the word شِعْرٍ, usually and commonly translated as poetry, also means intuitive knowledge. A knowledge that is not logically constructed, in fact goes beyond logic *sensu stricto*, what we call *ratio*. It derives from the hidden depths of human existence, moves through uncharted ways, works through unspecified methodological steps and constructs itself according to undefined laws.

لَا يَذْكُرُ الْكَثِيرَ عَنْ طُفُولَتِهِ. مَرَّتْ غَامِضَةً كَأَنَّهُ لَمْ يَكُ يَوْمًا طِفْلاً

He does not remember much about his childhood, as if he had not been there. And suddenly an older type of Arabic emerges (يَكُ) instead of the common type of the verb كان in Jussive (يَكُنْ). And the language signifies the author's travel through time, it actually depicts it and brings it to life. And the past is closed, it is dark and unclear; all these meanings (simainomena) conveyed by one sign, one signifier (simainon). The word غَامِضَةً, an adverb from the verb غمض, to close, to shut, in a metaphorical sense, signifies the dark, the obscure.

Khodr's understanding of poetry does not limit itself, does not even focus on arranging words and rhymes, creating a rhythm or even an aesthetic delight. He himself describes poetry in his first chapter as a deep intuitive knowledge.¹³

Mission and Dialogue

It is a common *locus* of contemporary Orthodox theology on mission that there is no contradiction between mission and dialogue, on the contrary, they belong together.¹⁴

His Eminence Metropolitan George was a pioneer of this idea.¹⁵ But dialogue is not only an official occasion. It is a daily achievement, having to do with real people's lives. This is an important observation he made also during the preconciliar process on the lengthy road towards the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church.¹⁶

His above-mentioned love of neighborhood is a love of people, of space and history. He speaks as follows of the marketplace, the living heart of his own town:

The goldsmiths' quarter had, in his eyes, two peculiarities. First, most goldsmiths were charitable to the poor and regularly practiced almsgiving. Every Saturday, the beggars would receive the pennies that had been set aside for them, and none left empty-handed. In addition to this, the quarter resembled a place of prayer in which Byzantine chant would now and then be heard. The goldsmiths enjoyed displaying their knowledge of the churches and monasteries which previously occupied the old marketplace; they showed my friend the sacred remains.

He found stone more eloquent than nature, and less ephemeral. Stone is far from mute. We are the heirs of those who have departed. We have entered into a dialogue with their relics; one does not speak with what exists no more.

The past is in our hands. We overturn it, and it nourishes us.¹⁷

Though the marks of Islam are everywhere, the signs of Christianity are also omnipresent, for the one who has eyes to see – even in the foundations of the market place.

¹³ For these observations I am referring to the original edition:

جورج خضر، *لو حَكَيْتُ مَسْرَى الطُّفُولَةِ*، بيروت، دار النهار، 1979.

¹⁴ Cf. Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, *Η Προσέγγιση των Εθνικών κατά τον Άγιο Ιωάννη τον Χρυσόστομο* [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, *Approaching the Pagans according to St. John Chrysostom*] (Athens: Μαΐστρος <Σειρά: Σπουδή των Πατέρων, 1 | Παράλληλη Σειρά: Ιεραποστολικές Σπουδές, 2> [Maistros Publications, <Patristic Studies,1 | Missiological Studies,2>], 2016, 56-57 (overview and further references on the topic, n. 59).

¹⁵ Cf. George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit," in *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, ed. Petros Vassiliadis, Edinburgh Centenary Series, 17 (Edinburgh: Regnum Books, 2013), 114-122. Cf. also the "Introductory Remarks" by the editor, 9 [whole 1-13]. Also see n. 1 here.

¹⁶ Cf. Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, "A Reading of the Document on Mission of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church from a Missiological Point of View," *International Review of Mission* 106,1 (June 2017): 140 [136-150] (DOI: 10.1111/irom.12172).

¹⁷ George Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood*, 16.

Metropolitan George is deeply aware of the presence of Islam and the need to coexist with it. One could think mission would be out of the question in these circumstances. He understands the necessity for friendly relationships. He also recognises the value of other religions, along the line of Irinaeus of Lyons' *logos spermaticos* (seminal principle). He thinks that "God is faithful in incarnation, but not imprisoned by it".¹⁸

He states clearly that one should through dialogue and friendship go to meet Christ who "is sleeping in the night of religions."¹⁹

Yet, though he does not chain soteriology to mission,²⁰ and does not wish to dictate the ways of divine economy, he considers all people of Mount Lebanon to be his flock, his Children, and not just the Christians.²¹

Though he is very ecumenically open, his ways of looking at things are not blunted. He sees in the 'other' kindness, skills, achievements but also limitations. The way he sees things is sharp and critical, his heart is open and loving.

Theology of Mission

In a talk he gave in Washington DC in 1994, entitled "Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East"²² he sums up his mission theology. I shall try to follow this article in its main lines, as it presents the most compact expression of his theology of mission, while at the same time dealing with all basic topics that missiology faces today.

Firstly, he links mission to the prophetic calling of the Old Testament and sees it as a continuation of prophecy:

This [prophetic] office continued in the Church where the Spirit, through it, sends off people to the evangelization of nations. But the Church as such is placed in the world as being in mission. Its nature is to preach the Gospel. To bear the Evangel and to transmit it is one and the same task. The Church announces the Kingdom which becomes a reality in the hearts of those who obey it. The mission is not a function of the Church. It is its very being.²³

¹⁸ George Khodr, "Mission and Dialogue: A Theological Reflection": *WSCF Journal*, April 1988: 31.

¹⁹ Ibid. 33. Cf. *Η Φύση του Ισλάμ* [The Nature of Islam], 15.

²⁰ Cf. Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, λ. Ιεραποστολή, *Μεγάλη Ορθόδοξη Χριστιανική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, sv. Ierapostoliki (Mission), *Great Orthodox Christian Encyclopedia*], vol. 8 (2013), 450 [448-459].

²¹ *Η Φύση του Ισλάμ* [The Nature of Islam], 48.

²² Georg Khodr, *Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East*, Washington D. C. , 7 February 1994, (retrieved from http://georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=1994&type_id=15&articleID=1269, 24/7/2016.)

²³ Ibid., 2 of the pdf.

Though the link of mission to the prophetic calling is not all that common among Orthodox theologians, the idea that Church and mission are in a profound sense identical notions lies at the core of contemporary orthodox mission theology.²⁴

Khodr also sees mission as belonging to the core of ecclesial being, belonging to the very nature of the Church:

The Church is missionary because it should gather in itself both Israel and the nations. Those who believe and are baptized constitute the people of God. This is a prerequisite of the salvation promised to all those who believe. However, the power of the Church as missionary stems from the fact that it is a witness. It is a witness because it is the body of Christ.²⁵

Very traditionally, he sees the tight connection between Eucharist and mission. Eucharistic theology is mission theology:

The sacramental life is the very core of an entire proclamation. The power of the message comes to the Church because of its central reality, the Eucharist.²⁶

Most Orthodox theologians make that liaison.²⁷ “Christ is risen” would be the verbal formula of the core of Christian preaching, *kerygma*; and the Body of the Resurrected Christ, the gift *par excellence* that materialises and substantiates the joy of Resurrection and participation in it.

George Khodr, linking ethics and mission, theory and implementation, thinks one can never truly proclaim unless one is enlightened in contemplation and action, unless one’s life is sanctified and purified, unless one sees the light, i.e. the uncreated energy of God:

The Gospel is transmitted in a shining life; proclamation as teaching will never convey light unless the preacher is bathed in the Trinitarian light.²⁸

But perfection, sanctity and light are not the characteristics of fallen man; they are properties of God. Thus, ethics is not a matter of personal achievement. Khodr’s view is not pietistic, it is ecclesial:

This glorification of man is linked to the fact that there is an ecclesial organism growing in the Spirit, which excludes the individualistic approach to salvation and to a privileged time of the conscience of our salvation.”²⁹

²⁴ Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, *Η Προσέγγιση των Εθνικών* [Voulgaraki-Pissina, *Approaching the Pagans*], 57, n. 60.

²⁵ Khodr, *Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East*, 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Cf. e.g. Πέτρος Βασιλειάδης [Petros Vassiliadis], *Ενότητα και Μαρτυρία* [Unity and Witness], Thessaloniki: Επίκεντρο, 2007, 319-322. Δημήτριος Κ. Πασσάκος, *Εύχαριστία και Ίεραποστολή: Κοινωνιολογικές Προϋποθέσεις τής Παύλειας Θεολογίας* [Dimitrios K. Passakos, *Eucharist and Mission: Sociological Preconditions of Paulinian Theology*] (Athens: Ἑλληνικά Γράμματα [Ellinika Grammata], 1997), *passim*.

²⁸ Khodr, *Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East*, 2.

It is exactly this life in communion, this sanctity of life, which makes our being ecclesial; there is no individual salvation and no individual sanctity. This being emphasised, he is very critical toward denominational or other boundaries and expresses his understanding of *ecclesia* as the Body of Christ in a way that gives it boundaries but not barriers. In *The Ways of Childhood*, in the Chapter “Sanctity is the Heart of Christianity” he says:

I have already said that my friend was impressed by the sanctity of certain westerners. Upon discovering the same holiness in some of the evangelicals whom he knew well, he became convinced that sanctity was not confined by any walls of separation. God dwells in those hearts it pleases him to visit, and he gives himself to man without regard for his methods of prayer, nor for his dogmatic convictions. This attitude was never accompanied in my friend by a belief in dogmatic relativism, nor the conviction that every church participates in the same truth. It simply meant that God does not make the Orthodox faith a precondition of his dwelling in the soul. That said, God invites us to this Orthodox faith. That faith is a guarantee of peace and serenity in our minds and souls. It can become in us the starting point of great self-sacrifice, which allows us to discern spiritual realities — the vector of revelation that God plants in the soul and in history.³⁰

The consequences of that thought are of vast importance to mission theology. Dilemmas linking religious / denominational adherence and salvation are removed by God. Yet this doesn't lead to indifference towards mission. Christians should spread around the Good News, sow the seed, show people a much esteemed paradisaal way of life, mirror and reflect God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven – yet all the above does not annul human freedom or limit God's ways' of working for the salvation of His creatures. Mission is not orientated to the present or to venerating the past. It anticipates the fullness of glory, only fulfilled at the *Parousia*, the Second Coming.

The community of the faithful, “the entire transfigured community, which contemplates in its Koinonia the glory of Jesus crucified”, is “witness to his resurrection (Acts 1: 22).”³¹ Therefore contemplation and apostolicity belong together, as is also stressed in the following passage:

This is the reason why the Eastern Church calls the contemplation of Jesus “*bios apostolicos*” (apostolic life). The Christian who bears the vision is sent; his vision makes him an apostle.³²

There is no antinomy between society and the desert.

Denominational or other divisions trouble him also with regard to Christian witness.

²⁹ Ibid. 3.

³⁰ *The Ways of Childhood*, 22

³¹ George Khodr, *Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East*, 3.

³² Ibid.

Our unity in vision implies our unity in testimony. As Saint John of Damascus truly states, it is because the flesh of the witness becomes word that the message is conveyed from the Christian community to another human community.³³

He comes back to silent witness:

We are here to bear witness not only to the word but also to the silence, to the inexpressible zeal of the beings of fire wounded by the Love of Jesus. The silence becomes a song to which human communities can listen. Hence the dialogue of life, the graft of the wild olive-tree, the joint life of the disciples of Jesus and of those who peregrinate through the infinite limits of religions and cultures.³⁴

In the face of the eschaton and the Kingdom of God,

the social can become a prelude to the testimony, but only a prelude. The social is nothing if it does not unveil the power of the Spirit.³⁵

Despite the fact that Khodr can justly be considered one of the most socially sensitive theologians of the 20th century and beyond, his social sensitivity and the quest for justice and freedom are a genuine expression of Christian and pastoral love, but also an effort to mirror the Kingdom of God in the heavily burdened post-lapsarian society.

It seems though that only a Christian in his death, in his complete deprivation (perhaps death meaning death to the world), gains the gift that “allows him to translate the social into a mystery of love.”³⁶

This deprivation, this emptiness, this kenosis is of paramount importance for mission. Mission is thus the transformation of a landscape, “a question of making the space where we live a place of divine epiphany.”³⁷

Mission and Islam

A particularly difficult chapter in mission is mission towards Islam. Khodr refers to it as follows:

How the unity of mission and witness, as we have attempted to bring it out from the Scripture and the theological thought, has been lived in the Land of Islam?[...] However, [despite all efforts] Islam remained impervious. One of the main reasons of this imperviousness comes, as I think, from the fact that **Islam held the power**. It was an established religion, and thus felt itself in a powerful position. Moreover, Islam is an integral religion, structured intimately and on

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

principles linked to the temporal [...]. In Asia Minor, the Balkans and the Middle East, the Church could not but defend the faith, within the confines of the possible. Yet it was instituted in the mentality of the people that the Muslims were impermeable to the Gospel. In front of this the Protestant Missions have utterly failed and have undertaken only a cultural work. We should probably add that the state of legal inferiority [...] which was a canonical status of the marginalized communities, did not help them to blossom at all.”³⁸

In my personal opinion the clue in this view and interpretation is the tight link of Islam to power. Because, if one examines the missionary possibilities towards Islam,³⁹ from a broader historical or geographical perspective, they are not all black. Khodr himself recognises that it was not all a failure, referring to the remarkable success of the Orthodox Church of Russia among the tartars of southern Russia who were to a large degree Muslims as an ethnic group.⁴⁰

But from a narrower perspective, evaluating the situation he lives in, he comes to a tactical conclusion:

In the Middle East, the mission as a system of organization is unthinkable at any time.⁴¹

Even if this is so, it is the character of mission as an organised enterprise, a planned collective operation, an activist project that is out of question in the region of the Middle East.

But the identification of mission with one strategic style of mission only would be a misconception. Besides, the style of Orthodox mission is rarely an entrepreneurial one. Most commonly it is the notion of witness that characterises missionary methodology.

Another misconception may also stand in the way here: a result-oriented concept. Of course, people act hoping for a result. In Mt 28:19-20 the apostles are called to preach, teach and baptise in the name of the Holy Trinity. Yet there is another point within the gospel putting things in a slightly different perspective: The parable of the seed (Mt 13:1-9; Mk 4:1-20; Lk 8:4-15). Mission is about sowing the seed, spreading the word. The final result is in God’s hands. It also depends on circumstances and human free will. The teaching of this parable is very much in alignment with the idea of us being just God’s workers in his mission field, simply partaking in God’s unconditional and infinite love for mankind and the plan of the divine economia, God’s plan for the salvation of His creature.

Khodr observes

³⁸ Ibid. The emphasis is mine.

³⁹ Cf. Voulgaraki-Pissina, “Mission and Dialogue at the Intersection of Three Continents: The Case of Arabic Theology,” in this volume, esp. § Mission.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁴¹ Ibid. The emphasis is mine.

an evident sensibility to the Gospel in this part of the world, yet without adherence to baptism. However, the Church here and there receives Muslims individually. The difficulty to proclaim their conversion emerges mainly from the fact that, outside Lebanon, the Muslim states, where religion and state are intimately bound together, do not recognize their transition to Christianity, nor their marital status, nor do they provide free Christian funerals. At the moment, it is not time for freedom.⁴²

Freedom is fundamental for choice, fundamental for mission, fundamental in terms of human rights and human dignity. Khodr's thinking is also tightly linked with some major tendencies of the MJO movement: openness, spirituality, participation of all Christians, and support for the secularisation of society in the Middle East on the political level. Only when human rights are being respected is there room for mission.

Yet the Church should open up to others, to other churches and Islam, in order to be able to witness in society. A marginalised Church, an introspective Church was neither the idea of MJO nor of Metropolitan George Khodr.⁴³ The revival of the Church is very important for mission, too:

A revival of Church is taking place and people are being stimulated by God to expound the faith in a language accessible to the Arab mind. We are already getting out of the ecclesiastical ghetto, and of the vocabulary which addresses exclusively our congregations. The Christian modes of literary and artistic expression are getting shape.⁴⁴

The question of the quality of mission interconnects with the question of expressing the dogma of the Church at the meeting point of systematic and practical theology:

To be fair to historical reality, one has to say that the Eastern Church did not betray the fact that it is committed to witness. It undertook the apology of faith in different manners. It needs more scholarly knowledge of Islam, and an utterly new language more or less freed from Greek philosophy to express faith within the categories of Arabic mind in a society where secularism has begun to find its way.⁴⁵

And Metropolitan George concludes his speech on mission with a 'what to do' masterplan, in line with the above:

The message which is addressed to both Jews and Muslims, could not be creative nor could it flow from the land of the East unless it is the message of the Eastern Patristic tradition, and in

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cf. Nicolas Abou Mrad, "The witness of the Church in a pluralistic world: theological renaissance in the Church of Antioch," in: Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 246-260, esp. 248-249.

⁴⁴ Georg Khodr, *Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East*, 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Cf. *The Ways of Childhood*, 52.

particular, of the Semitic theology in a terminology that should be worked out by a critical usage of the Greek philosophy which gave its modes of expression to the Christian dogmatic. The Semitic mind in general, and the Muslim in particular, is alien to Greek categories. An intelligent biblical theology read through the Syrian tradition can become the tool of the evangelic message. It is to this task that all churches should settle down. It is the work undertaken together in the mission and the witness which will free the churches of what opposes them.⁴⁶

All this is very well outlined and one couldn't agree more with the priorities set out – hard however to achieve. They form a multiple task and a difficult, but rewarding, path to be taken.

The theology of his Eminence Metropolitan George is wise, holistic, solidly grounded in patristic thinking, in constant dialogue with modernity, well placed in the specifics of time and place, truthful to history and tradition. Yet in regard to this theology, a critical question from a third party would be, how much it influences the life of the Church. One could speak very positively of MJO, of the Metropolitan himself, of the monastic renewal in Antioch,⁴⁷ of dialogues, publications, university faculties. But isn't this already a glamorous past, a heyday that is declining as time ticks relentlessly by? Do such personalities as Metropolitan George and also Patriarch Ignatius IV find students and disciples with an equally creative and open spirit among the younger generation?

It is hard to answer this question, as the overall situation is deteriorating so much in the Middle East. But the fact that Antioch did not participate in the Great and Holy Synod held in Crete, in June 2016, does not fit with the open spirit of Metropolitan George Khodr. Hardship is there in abundance, and let's hope for an abundance of Grace, too.

I would like to close with an excerpt from an article by George Khodr that I consider quite characteristic of his spirit, but also of the difficulty of what he demands. He demands of Christians to be Christians, and to carry their cross in all matters of life:

When those who claim to be followers of Christ rest content with the virtues of the bourgeoisie, they themselves become a food that lacks salt: without the truth of God poured out upon them, they radiate nothing, they have no love. If they are preoccupied with being like 'the nations' who take pride in their power and shows of strength, they will very quickly become worse than those 'nations', because secular people preserve some sort of decency and make use of rational thinking to a greater or lesser extent. A food, however worthless, is edible once we get used to it. But when salt loses its savour it no longer has any reason to exist, so we throw it out well away from the house where it will be trampled underfoot.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 6-7.

⁴⁷ Cf. Amal Morcos, *Keeping Vigil: The Revival of Orthodox Monasticism in Lebanon*, M.A. Thesis, American University of Beirut, 2004.

The great self-delusion is to believe that we can exist by resting content with appearances, that we can influence people by appearances. People trust you, not when they regard you as powerful, but when they have a palpable sense of your greatness. The 'nations' have adopted outward displays of power as a mode of expression. They boast of their kings, their palaces, their horses, their soldiers, not because they are unaware that these things are futile, but because they are trying to express their supposed power through symbols. For Christians, the difference is enormous. There is no supposition that can be made. True greatness cannot disappear, nor can it be expressed through artificial gimmickry. Either we live it, or we are strangers to it. You either are poor in spirit, merciful, humble and pure of heart, or you aren't. You can try to deceive yourself and others. But you cannot hide the truth from yourself or, above all, from God and other people.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Μητροπολίτης όρους Λιβάνου Γεώργιος (Χόντρ), «Το άλας της γης», *Σύναξη* 74 (2000) [Metropolitan George (Khodr) of Mount Lebanon, "The salt of the earth," *Synaxi* 74 (2000)]: 8. The excerpt has been translated by Elizabeth Theokritoff, who also had the courtesy of generally improving my English in style. I would wish to thank her for her friendship and collaboration through all these many years.