

## **Elements from the prehistory and the life of SYNDESMOS**

Introductory lecture in "Consultation of Orthodox Youth Workers", Bossey, Switzerland,  
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By Manos Koumbarelis

"It is no small thing for 28 Orthodox youth from nine different countries to gather together abroad. Indeed, this happened in Geneva, from 8 to 13 January [1949]. Five days, immersed in an indescribable atmosphere of the One Church of Christ. All Orthodox. Every morning a liturgy in Arabic, Greek, and Russian. In the evening, compline. A continuous state of prayer and dedication, creating a sacred environment within which many difficult discussions were taking place in a wonderful way.

What are we, the Orthodox, going to do to avoid our sickness, namely, our indifference to one another, the one Orthodox Church to the other? We travel to foreign countries but we never have in our mind the desire to meet Orthodox of other Churches. We think that since we are united and we have exactly the same dogmatic faith, there is no need to meet with each other. Thus, little by little, we have reached the point where each Orthodox Church has separate relations and understands better the churches of other denominations than the Orthodox Churches! Not only this, but either political reasons or foreign influences create among the Orthodox a situation of distrust, which of course is a denial of our common faith.

What service can our youth offer today to the Orthodox Churches? This was the pain and the yearning of these 28 youth. How can we co-operate more effectively in our local Orthodox Churches, to help their work for the youth and to build brotherly contacts with the other Orthodox Churches?

The meeting did not have a theoretical character, but rather made reference to the better methods of co-operation and, most importantly, to the more effective participation in the ecumenical movement of the Churches. Here anyone could see our great concern for the enormous responsibility that we have undertaken in our time, namely, the brotherly co-operation with the youth of Protestant organizations and the sacred desire to come to a similar co-operation with the Catholic youth. However, if we are to participate [in the ecumenical movement] only to say that we are participating, but talk all the time only about feelings of holy sentimentality, then there is no need for it. Our purpose, according to the announcement of the committee that discussed ecumenism, is "to be a living witness of Orthodoxy" and to stress certain dogmas for which the Protestants have no clear perception and to influence them with the correct formulation of doctrine. Special emphasis should be given to the importance of the Virgin Mary in our everyday lives, in the family and in the Church.

The Bossey Institute, which hosted us, lived for five days in a pure Orthodox atmosphere and its small chapel rang out each day with Greek and Russian hymns. Obviously, this gathering was not official, but perhaps it will prove to be a good start, a brave first step whose beautiful effect on a better tomorrow no-one can now foresee.

After each international gathering, we are accustomed to make dreams for the future. In this case, let's not express them. It is better to allow the reality of the future to speak for itself."

With these simple words a 25-year-old young man called Nikos Nissiotis described, 50 years ago, a meeting hosted in this same place where we have now gathered together - a meeting that was undoubtedly the most decisive in a long chain of gatherings that mark the pre-history of SYNDESMOS.

Your Grace, reverend Fathers, beloved brothers and sisters!

It was only two weeks ago, when I started preparing myself to make this Introduction, that I fully realized what a difficult task it was, but also what a unique opportunity and challenge it is to try and unravel the yarn of SYNDESMOS's pre-history and life before an audience that includes personalities who actually experienced SYNDESMOS's post-World-War II pre-history: ex-officers, who constitute a living history of the Fellowship; the present governing Board members; and active young youth workers, who are the hope and the imminent future of SYNDESMOS in particular and of the Orthodox Church as a whole. I know that my qualifications are not sufficient. I am not fluent in English. I am not a historian; not even a theologian - just a molecular biologist by education and a Church youth worker by my present occupation. Hence, do not expect much from me. I will not go into every detail. So, please study carefully the material mailed or distributed to you.

I also would like to ask you to bear constantly in mind that history, as read in books or seen on documentary films or even on television, is not really what happened in a given place at a given time. It is only what has leaked into the future through the barriers of oblivion and well-protected privacy. And even of that leakage, history is what has survived from the censorship of later generations who judged first, what was to be an 'acceptable' past to suit their pride, and secondly, which past would serve as an argument base for their dominant ideologies. For it is clear that the past can much better be adjusted to our desires than can the future.

For many centuries Orthodoxy was Eastern and its spiritual unity was beyond any doubt. Three major geo-political developments during the last two centuries had progressively eroded the integrity of this unity:

- 1) In place of the gradually-dissolving Ottoman Empire, national states were formed, one after the other. The concept of the nation state was something foreign to Orthodox tradition, as it had developed during the period of the Byzantine Empire. Eventually, several Patriarchates and Autocephalous Orthodox Churches of national character were established.

- 2) The emigration of Orthodox populations for political, financial and other reasons to Western Europe, North and South America, Australia and Sub-Saharan Africa expanded the geographical horizon of Orthodoxy and changed its character from Eastern to universal. The newly-formed local Churches ignored the traditional spirit of Orthodox mission and Orthodox ecclesiology in general. They developed an attitude that preserved their national character in a foreign environment, which was often considered somewhat hostile.

3) The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the totalitarian governments that had been established during the following years in the countries of Eastern Europe resulted in the isolation of the Orthodox populations of these countries from the rest of world Orthodoxy.

Finally, the unacceptable reality of the relations among Orthodox of different national origins in the so called Diaspora, may not be viewed simply as another obstacle to pan-Orthodox unity, but rather, as a result, a proof, of the partial disruption of this unity on practical levels.

It was only the Head of our Church, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who have protected the sacramental and especially the eucharistic unity of the Orthodox around the world and allowed us to still be able today, despite our differences, to give each other the kiss of brotherly love.

However, this reality created the historical and spiritual necessity for the establishment of an entity within the Orthodox Church that would be devoted to the restoration of full unity among the different jurisdictions. As always in the history of the Church, several inspired and sensitive personalities realized the need and prepared the groundwork. From among the list of the pre-World-War II events in the chronology distributed to you, the pan-Orthodox Conference on Youth convened in 1930 in Thessaloniki and the Congress of Orthodox Pedagogues of 1936 in Dassel, Switzerland are the two most eminent examples of how the seed of pan-Orthodox co-operation had been spread. The war played a catalytic role. In the post-war period everybody was seeking unity at all levels. The creation of several secular and ecclesiastical world wide organizations in this period was a natural consequence. George Khodre, one of the founders of SYNDESMOS and present Metropolitan of the Mount of Lebanon wrote in March 1947:

"Provincialism, abuse of the principle of Autocephaly, differences in languages and race, conflicts between churches and jurisdictions, are the plague of the Orthodox world. Phyletism seems to be our practical heresy. The Church always allies with the state, the nation or the race. The Church cannot fulfil its mission on earth as long as the unity of the Orthodox is not achieved. Only when Orthodoxy is one, it may witness its faith before the heterodox. We should vigorously fight against the evils from which ecumenical Orthodoxy suffers."

In July 1947, the Second Christian World Youth Conference took place in Oslo and gathered 45 Orthodox participants. They discussed, at an unofficial level, the idea of a network of Orthodox youth movements. This was repeated at a lower level at the First General Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948. Fr Alexander Schmemmann was elected Vice-President with Khodre and Nissiotis as members of the WCC Youth Department Committee. The Department was eager to have as a partner a pan-Orthodox Youth Organization. In September 1948, it received a proposal stating that:

"Orthodox young people gathered at the Amsterdam Assembly agreed in principle that an Orthodox International Conference should be held. However, they foresaw a number of obstacles and therefore decided first of all to prepare a smaller International Youth Consultation with limited aims. There they could consider the possibility of holding a larger conference in an Orthodox country at a later time.

Possible date and place: Bossey, 8-13 January 1949.

The Responsibility for the calling of the conference, together with the preparation and leadership of the consultation, should remain with the three Orthodox members of the Youth Department Committee of the World Council of Churches, ie. The Rev. A. Schmemmann (Paris), Mr N. Nissiotis (Greece/Geneva), and Mr G. Khodre (Syria/France).

Themes:

- a) Orthodox Theology
- b) The Ecumenical Movement
- c) Youth Work

Finances. The Youth Department is asked to provide the Preparatory Committee with the means to enable it to convoke and to hold the Conference. A budget proposal will be sent as soon as possible."

The humble budget for the event was 1,270 Swiss Francs. I will not say much more about this Conference. At the beginning of this Introduction, I presented Nissiotis's text and you have with you a full and detailed report of the meeting. I only wish to cite three points:

"It is desirable that all Orthodox youth movements in all of the Autocephalous Churches should enter into direct relation with each other in order to increase their spiritual strength and to exchange their experiences..."

"The Commission drew up several proposals: The annual organization of inter-Orthodox conferences, on the model of Bossey; the publication of a review; the participation in various national congresses of delegates from movements abroad; the introduction of a day of prayer for Orthodox youth; and the exchange of reviews and correspondence..."

"In order not to sever the contacts established at Bossey and while waiting for an official body which will assure the relationships among the various sections of Orthodox youth, the Conference elected a Continuation Committee... to present the results of Bossey to all those who may be interested in them, and also to seek ways for the practical realization of the desires expressed by the Conference."

Although it seems that some disagreements arose on how they would proceed, several significant inter-Orthodox events were organized in the following three years.

In September 1952, a Conference of Orthodox Youth in Western Europe was organized at Sevres near Paris at the initiative of Paul Evdokimoff. I have no written report of the event. My only sources are personal interviews, the most reliable of which is that of Dr. J. Lappas. In a later text (1956), it is Nissiotis's opinion that SYNDESMOS was founded as an idea in 1949 and as a concrete reality in 1952. During the 1952 Conference, a Constitution Committee was formed including Paul Evdokimoff, Fr Alexander Schmemmann, Nikos Nissiotis, Leon Zander, John Lappas, Kyril Eltchaninoff and two or three others. This Committee drafted a first Constitution and chose for the Fellowship, after a proposal by Nissiotis, the Scriptural term, SYNDESMOS (Ephesians 4:3).

In April 1953, a Second Conference of Orthodox Youth in Western Europe, later considered to be SYNDESMOS's First General Assembly, took place in Sevres. The Conference gathered about 50 people of various ethnic origins: Russian, Serbian, Finnish, Georgian, Greek, Romanian, Syrian, Indian. Some of them were official representatives, but the majority were there as individuals. Most of its work was dedicated to the foundation of a permanent organization of Orthodox Youth and it was decided to organize a first Assembly in 1954. The first co-secretaries, who worked part time in the headquarters in Paris, were John Meyendorff, teaching at the time at Saint Sergius's Theological Institute and Marko Markovitch, a young Serb living in Paris. Paul Evdokimoff was elected as the first President of the Central Committee. As stated, the purpose of SYNDESMOS was:

"To serve the Orthodox Church and Her youth and youth movements by keeping contacts between the Orthodox youth groups in different countries, by organizing international Orthodox youth meetings and camps and by spreading the methods of Orthodox youth work as widely as possible."

In the autumn of 1953 and the spring of 1954 independent SYNDESMOS branches with their own Constitutions were founded in Germany and Great Britain. In December 1954 the so-called Second Assembly of SYNDESMOS was held at Bievres near Paris. It gathered 30 people from Western Europe, Finland and Greece, all of whom were representatives of Orthodox Youth Movements. John Meyendorff was elected President, and a Paris Committee was elected, containing members from four out of the five regions in the world where organized Orthodox youth activity existed at the time, namely, Finland, the Middle East, the Russian Diaspora in Western Europe and Greece (but not yet the USA). However, most significantly, the Fellowship sustained a clear, though multiple, vision for the future and it unknowingly "trained" several Orthodox youth leaders from various jurisdictions. They had become devoted to this vision; they had built close personal relations and friendships and had constituted the core that supported this wonderful pan-Orthodox dream.\*

For the period 1956 to 1964, the SYNDESMOS Secretariat was hosted in Athens. John Meyendorff was President and Eftymios Stylios, today Assistant Bishop of the Archbishop of Greece, was Secretary General. During these eight years, the SYNDESMOS membership had grown significantly and included youth organizations from the Far East, Africa and Latin America, which made the Fellowship really international. Special emphasis was given to communication through the circulation of an Information Bulletin, the review, SYNDESMOS, SYNDESMOS Directory and the Prayer Bulletin. Contacts and visits to the Orthodox Patriarchates afforded SYNDESMOS wider recognition and the Fellowship enjoyed the blessing of the Orthodox Church leaders. Direct communication among member movements became more intensive and low scale inter-Orthodox co-operation and exchanges on the level of youth camps also took place. But what characterized this period was the great interest shown for external mission. At the General Assembly of 1958 (Thessaloniki), the President, John Meyendorff, in his lecture on the missionary task of SYNDESMOS, stated:

"Mission is a consequence of unity. To be short, if there is one Truth, we must be united in believing in this Truth. And if there is one Truth, we must let others know it and not keep it selfishly to ourselves...."

In spite of all handicaps, the Orthodox Church has always carried out missions and is at present doing so...This is our chance to serve the Church. All initiative of course belongs and will come from the Church; but at present we are the only

existing pan-Orthodox body, a manifestation of the spirit of unity, which is the source of missions. We are left no choice, we must simply do it. The [missionary] Churches need... material help, but [also] mainly devoted men. Not necessarily theologians and preachers, but doctors and social workers and any inspired men. What can we do to meet this need of our brethren? I suggest that we form a Missionary Society."

The Assembly adopted this proposal. A Committee was formed for this purpose and its first Secretary was Anastasios Yiannoulatos, who later became Vice-President of SYNDESMOS and is today the Archbishop of Albania. In 1959, the first Orthodox periodical on external Mission, *Porefthentes* (Gk. Go forth) was published by SYNDESMOS in two editions, English and Greek. Regular meetings and liturgies were organized by the Secretariat for the non-Greek Orthodox youth residing temporarily in Athens (mainly University students from the Missionary Churches). Missionary courses had been held and financial assistance was provided to missionary Churches.

The Assembly of Beirut (1961) was the first to be held outside Europe. A successful unofficial theological consultation with participants from both the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches was organized just before the Assembly. The present Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatios, served as the chaplain of the Assembly.

The Assembly of Punkaharju, Finland (1964) took several significant decisions: It decided that the Fellowship should hire a full-time Secretary General and elected Gabriel Habib to this position. It moved the secretariat to Beirut, where it remained until 1977 with the same Secretary. Most importantly, it revised the Constitution and allowed Orthodox Theological Schools and Academies to become members of SYNDESMOS. This gave the opportunity to Orthodox youth from Eastern Europe, who were not allowed to have movements, to participate in SYNDESMOS. They used this opportunity for the first time seven years later.

For the next 13 years, until 1977, Albert Laham, was repeatedly elected to the Presidency of the Fellowship.

As SYNDESMOS grew, it began organizing international events. Fr. Lev Gillet led a SYNDESMOS pilgrimage to the Holy Land with great success in 1965. It was followed by a Conference in Broumana, Lebanon, under the theme "New Man" and gathered 80 participants from eleven countries. The following year a Consultation between SYNDESMOS and the Council of Eastern Orthodox Youth Leaders of the Americans was organized in New York. This opened the way for the active participation of American Orthodox in SYNDESMOS's life. A Consultation with great impact was also that on the "Orthodox Diaspora" assembled in Chambesy, Geneva in December 1967. It gathered key personalities from all jurisdictions. As early as 1949, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote:

"The problem of Orthodox unity among the national churches in the USA is acutely felt, especially in relation to the young people who no longer feel as strongly as their parents, loyalty to the country of their origin. "Will there one day be an American Orthodox Church?" is the question some of them are asking. "

Eighteen years later we read in the statement produced by the Chambesy Consultation:

"The history of the diaspora, especially in the last fifty years, has offered the sad picture of nationalistic divisions, political struggles, and canonical disorder. The norms of Orthodox Church structure have been ignored in many ways through the creation of parallel jurisdictions on the same territory, through divisions stimulated by political stands adopted by various groups and also by the impossibility, created by historical circumstances, of working relationships among Churches in various countries. We confess that the divine presence of the Holy Spirit, a continuous miracle expressing God's faithfulness to His Church, has alone been able to preserve Orthodoxy from disintegration in these difficult years.

It was sorrowfully recognized that many young Orthodox are deeply frustrated by internal conflicts, which divide the Church of the diaspora. Sometimes the youth lose interest in the life of the Church and leave the Orthodox community. Too often, those who want to join the Orthodox Church find an obstacle in these conflicts and divisions.

[Our] ultimate goal ... [should] be the elaboration of canonical structures, which would reflect on the one hand the fundamental demands of organic unity, realized locally, and on the other hand the unavoidable reality of languages and traditions which do not contradict this fundamental unity."

The proposals of the Consultation included:

[The creation], wherever, possible, [of] international Orthodox youth centres and, on local and regional levels, inter-jurisdictional centres as places of discussion and retreat;

[The organisation of] local or world youth conferences with the participation of a wide representation of Orthodox youth, from various jurisdictions and countries.

[The organisation of] Theological Schools on a pan-Orthodox basis.

Thirteen years later, we still read in the resolution addressed by the participants of the First SYNDESMOS Festival of Finland (1980) to all Orthodox bishops and to the Holy Synods of all the Orthodox Patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches:

"We, the participants of the first SYNDESMOS World Orthodox Youth Festival, having among us many Orthodox young people from North America, Latin America, Australia and Western Europe, deplore the painful and canonically unclear situation of the Orthodox communities in these areas.

Too often temporal factors are allowed to divide Orthodox Christians living in the same area or nation, and these divisions become a major obstacle to the common witness of our one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith.

Confronted once again by this critical situation, we respectfully address this urgent appeal ... for a speedy resolution of this problem, which continues to be a tragic spiritual burden for millions of Orthodox faithful."

The 1968 Assembly took place in Rattvik, Sweden. In it, the membership of SYNDESMOS was enriched for the first time with Orthodox youth from the USA, and St Vladimir's Theological Seminary was the first Theological School that joined the Fellowship. Among the newly-elected Vice-Presidents was Archimandrite Johannes Rinne, the present Archbishop of Finland. It was also decided that Oriental Orthodox youth movements would have the right in the future to join as associate members. In 1980, the University Student Association of Cairo (Coptic Orthodox Church) became the first Oriental Orthodox member.

At the Assembly of Boston (1971), 16 new members joined SYNDESMOS including the Theological Academies of Moscow and Leningrad, which were the first SYNDESMOS members from Eastern Europe. The present Metropolitan of Smolensk, Kyrill, represented them in the Executive Committee. The first official meeting of Orthodox Theological Schools took place during the Assembly and gathered representatives from ten Schools. The North American region displayed great motivation during this period. Prior to the Assembly it organized with great success two symposia with the themes "Mission" and "Hope," and a Consultation at St Basil's Academy in New York (1975).

However, SYNDESMOS faced a great crisis. No Assembly was convened for the coming six years and no meeting of the Executive Committee took place from 1972 to 1976. Lack of interest from the member movements and from key persons, the lack of funds, and a decline in the commitment to inter-Orthodox co-operation were given by Gabriel Habib as the main reasons for this dysfunctioning. Finally, the resurrection of SYNDESMOS was proclaimed by the 1976 Executive Committee meeting in Leningrad.

The period 1964 to 1977 was characterized by the integration of the Theological Schools and of the movements from the USA into the life of the Fellowship. New potentials were opened for communication with the youth from Eastern Europe and the youth from the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Great emphasis was given to the problem of the Diaspora. Finally, the most serious crisis in the life of the Fellowship was overcome.

The General Assembly of Chambesy, Switzerland (1977) was inevitably the beginning of major changes in the life of SYNDESMOS. A new President, James Coushel from USA, who is today Bishop Demetrios of Xanthos, and a new Secretary General, Alekski Harkonen from Finland, were elected. The Secretariat moved to Finland, where it stayed until 1990, and the Secretary General had, for the first time in SYNDESMOS's history, a regular salary and a full time job. The support of the Church of Finland on a human and financial level was both enormous and decisive for the revival of the Fellowship.

Immediately prior to the Assembly, the first Consultation of Orthodox Theological Schools was convened in Chambesy. Since then six more Consultations have been organized: New York (1982), Leningrad (1986), Suprasl, Poland (1989), Halki, Constantinople (1994), Beograd (1997), and Saint Petersburg (1999). This series of Consultations has proved to be very fruitful for communication. It has allowed students and Professors to share experiences and exchange ideas on theological and methodological issues, but has failed to initiate any permanent co-operation among the different Schools. This circumstance has resulted in the idea of creating a desk or a subdivision of SYNDESMOS, perhaps eventually a separate entity, that will have its own Governing Committee and will serve the aim of promoting and co-ordinating this co-operation.

The most important event of the triennium 1977 - 1980 was the "Witness and Service" Conference that was held in Montgeron, France (1979) and gathered around 100 participants from twelve countries. Closer co-operation was also established with several ecumenical organizations like WCC youth, CEC, MECC, WSCF, Focolare and Philoxenia.

The first SYNDESMOS International Orthodox Youth Festival that took place in Finland just before the 1980 Assembly was the largest international event in SYNDESMOS's history and gathered 300 participants. It was followed by the Festivals of Crete (1983), Vartholomio, Greece, (1985), Spetses Island, Greece (1988) - which created and addressed to all Orthodox Bishops the famous controversial letter of 28 questions on a number of difficult contemporary problems in our Church -, Alexandroupolis, Greece (1991) - well remembered for its unique brotherly atmosphere -, the 40th Anniversary Festival in France (1993), and the Festival of Ligonier, USA (1994). The great success of these communication events prompted the present administration to decide on organizing six Festivals from 1995. Although very successful in their own way, they failed to have the prestige and impact of the one Festival per triennium and their character was not as international as in the past.

In the Assembly of Finland (1980), George Nahas from the Lebanon was elected President and Deacon Rauno Pietarinen from Finland Secretary General. In the following triennium an ecumenical meeting was organized in Syria in 1981, an extremely successful Conference took place in Marseille in 1982 on "Unity and Mission" and in 1983 a unique Consultation on Communications and Information, that has not been seriously followed up on till today, was held at the Chrysopigi Monastery, near Athens.

The first Camp Agape was organized in Karanos, Crete in 1982 and was followed by four more that took place in Kastelli, Crete (1983), in Ayia Napa, Cyprus, (1984) - which was the first SYNDESMOS event in Cyprus -, and in Presov, Czechoslovakia (1986). SYNDESMOS News was published for the first time on a monthly basis.

In the Assembly of Kastelli (1983) George Nahas was re-elected President and Mark Stokoe from USA became the new Secretary General. In the next three years, apart from the various events already mentioned, an ecumenical seminar was held in Beograd and missionary journeys to Ghana, Korea and Japan were sponsored by SYNDESMOS. Thirty-eight issues of SYNDESMOS News were published.

In the years that followed the very successful Assembly in Effingham, England (1986), in which Alexis Struve from France was elected President and Mark Stokoe was re-elected Secretary General, the growth of the Fellowship continued. A Conference with 85 participants was organized in Himmelstur, West Germany in 1987 and two ecumenical seminars were organized in Crete and in Sofia in 1988. A third ecumenical event of special importance took place in Presov where there was a discussion on how the participation of Orthodox youth in ecumenical gatherings could become more responsible. It was followed up by similar events in Varska, Estonia (1994), Geneva (1995), and by a relevant publication. The positive presence of Orthodox youth and of SYNDESMOS people in the recent WCC General Assembly in Harare proved that all of these efforts had borne fruit.

The Assembly of 1989 took place again in Boston. Michel Nseir from Lebanon was elected President and Anu Talvivaara from Finland as Secretary General. Regional work was acknowledged constitutionally as the only way to multiply SYNDESMOS's effectiveness.

SYNDESMOS regions were defined and regional secretaries, working voluntarily, were elected.

In 1990, the General Secretariat moved to Paris and Alexander Belopopsky from England was employed as Assistant Secretary. In practice, he replaced Anu who moved to Geneva to work for the WCC. In this way, the Finnish period that had lasted for 13 years ended. It was a period of growth at all levels. The administration was put on a near professional basis, communication through SYNDESMOS News, other publications and visits became regular. SYNDESMOS evolved into a well-respected partner of all ecumenical bodies. The Festivals, the Consultations, the Agape camps and the other international events allowed hundreds of youth to experience SYNDESMOS's life and formed a much more solid understanding of what the work of the Fellowship was. Concerning the financial basis of SYNDESMOS, the growth of the annual budgets was impressive, but still there was almost no stable income. The available funds were extremely limited for an international organization and the financial uncertainty did not allow the Executive Committee and the Secretariat to make ambitious plans for the future.

The triennium 1989 to 1992 was characterized by a multitude of regional and inter-regional events: the festival of 1991, several ecumenical activities, and the Consultation on Co-operation between Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Youth Movements that was convened at Saint Bishoy's Monastery in Egypt in 1991, which adopted a statement of critical importance for the position of the Oriental Orthodox movements in the Fellowship. But probably the most important, were the self-help workshops organized in Russia and Romania and the first Youth Leadership Training Seminar organized in Poland in 1992. SYNDESMOS could not remain indifferent in the face of the enormous changes that marked the history of Eastern Europe in this period, thereby creating both great new potentials and also unpredictable dangers, for the largest part of the Orthodox youth in the world. The most urgent need was to train young youth workers and leaders for the Church. And this is precisely what SYNDESMOS did.

The Assembly of 1992 was one of the most historic in SYNDESMOS's life. It was the first to be held in Eastern Europe and the first to take place on a boat that traveled for almost 300 miles in Volga River, giving a missionary character to the event. Several speakers from the past underlined the importance for SYNDESMOS to avoid institutionalisation, preserving a dynamic nature of the Fellowship, with relatively limited administrative obligations and of a character much more spiritual and communicative.\*

Since I have been personally actively involved in SYNDESMOS's work from that time on, I will avoid any systematic presentation and criticism of the activities that have followed. I will only briefly mention that in the period 1992-95, SYNDESMOS organized eleven training seminars, seven thematic conferences, two major communication events, its first study visits to Latin America and Albania, its first Conference in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely in Ghana, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, its first ecological projects, including the Spiritual Ecology Camp on Mount Athos that has been organized on an annual basis since 1993. The Day of Orthodox Youth was also created. For the first time, five books that were not reports of SYNDESMOS events, were published. Alex had also changed the financial basis of the Fellowship using funds coming from secular sources, such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and WWF. The former SYNDESMOS constitution, forty years old and no longer uniform or practical, was re-written and adopted by the Assembly at Kykkou Monastery in Cyprus (1995). At that Assembly, 44 new members joined SYNDESMOS, new

structures were introduced in the Governing Bodies, Dimitri Oikonomou from England was elected President and Vladimir Misijuk from Poland as Secretary General. The Secretariat moved to Bialystok, Poland.

I have given you an overview of SYNDESMOS's pre-history and history. You can find more details in the excellent book of Janna Possi on The History and Significance of SYNDESMOS.

I have opened for you the door of the past. In the next few days all of us who are younger will have the unique opportunity to be guided in this past by those more experienced. But this is not the only purpose of this meeting. We have gathered here in order to assess the present and dream for the future. Soon names, dates, titles and figures will be forgotten. What we need to keep in mind is the spirit and the vision inherited by us. This vision and spirit that constitute the SYNDESMOS Tradition.

Before I finish, I will try to draw for you a rough outline of SYNDESMOS's vision and character as described in the sources. I quote from a lecture by Fr John Meyendorff delivered at a SYNDESMOS meeting in 1971:

"It is unnecessary to underline the fact that the Christian faith and religion began as a mission par excellence. I need only quote Christ's last words after His Resurrection: "Go ye therefore, preach to all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The New Testament changed the old religion of a nation to a religion of a person, Jesus Christ, through Whom and in Whom all people of all nations could find the answer to the ultimate meaning of life, and could receive the revelation of the coming of God.

This emphasis on the Good News is fundamental to mission. Extremely important, at the same time, is the inevitable conflict of the Kingdom of God and this world. Christ's whole life can be considered a "failure" because the world refused Him and finally killed Him. He arose from the dead by the power of God, not the powers of man. And the truth of the Resurrection is a mystery known only to those who believe in it and who are, therefore, "not of this world." Their announcement of the truth of the Gospel must face opposition and will breed division.

Christian mission is therefore never triumphalistic and never promises success, which is probably the most difficult thing to accept in our civilization, where man usually works to succeed. If you read the eschatological discourses of Jesus in Matthew, for instance, you will discover there a doubt whether or not Christ will find faith in the people when He comes again. The call for preaching is combined with a complete lack of optimism; there is a prediction of failure in the mystery of the Cross and, at the same time, a triumph in the Cross; but neither is formulated in the world's terms. It is a different kind of triumph, one which is eternal, true and authentic; one not expressed in terms of human success.

I think that these three elements are important: the necessity of mission, the conflict, and the absence of triumphalism.

Efthymios Stylios said at the 1964 Assembly:

"The essential elements of SYNDESMOS are: The pan-Orthodox, the Spiritual and Missionary, the Ecumenical. All these elements are bound in a basic one: The Youth element."

Fr Heikki Huttunen stated in 1995 in Cyprus:

"This experience of coming together and being united by our Orthodox faith is what constitutes SYNDESMOS, or rather this gift of SYNDESMOS is given to us because of the faith we hold. At this Assembly, as always in SYNDESMOS, we have the unique opportunity to meet each other, perhaps to understand each other, and to see what this learning experience means for our own faith and lives as Christians. This encounter is basic to the Christian faith: I am challenged to see beyond myself, to overcome my self-centeredness, selfishness, egoism, and pride, and I am invited to open myself to the reality of the Other, in my fellow human being, and together we are challenged to be changed by this experience and to discover God's presence and Christ's mission to us in His Church..."

SYNDESMOS's greatest strength and potential lies with its membership. The youth movements of the local Churches and dioceses, the Theological Schools and their students, are living the life of their local Churches. Their experience and insight are the greatest resources SYNDESMOS has. Our task is to find ways to use these invaluable talents in the right way by determining how to share them with each other so that they may multiply in the process for the benefit of all."

So, what is the vision of SYNDESMOS? Please recall the very first text I quoted from:

"What are we, the Orthodox, going to do to avoid our sickness, namely our indifference to one another, the one Orthodox Church to the other? What service can our youth offer today to the Orthodox Churches? How can we co-operate more effectively in our local Orthodox Churches, to help their work for the youth and to build brotherly contacts with the other Orthodox Churches?"

And to whom does SYNDESMOS belong? Fr. Rauno Pietarinen was clear in 1983:

"SYNDESMOS does not belong to you or to me, to the Executive Committee, nor to our member movements. It belongs to the Church, to God, and has been given to us to be used for His Glory. Let us continue to manifest His Glory, in and for the world, in and for our Church."

Finally, what is the identity of SYNDESMOS, that we have the sacred duty to preserve? Allow me to summarize:

- 1) It is Orthodox Christian.
- 2) It is for the youth.
- 3) It is a Federation and not a club of individuals.
- 4) It works under the blessing of the Church, but retains its freedom and independence.
- 5) It is humble, powerless and poor and should remain so because its "strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12: 9).

- 6) It serves the unity, the witness and the renewal of the Church and assists the youth in their struggle to live in an Orthodox way within a secularized world.
- 7) It works to eliminate the remaining obstacles that prevent the full union of the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.
- 8) It seeks to witness the Truth and the Orthodox way of life to the heterodox in order to promote the efforts for visible Christian unity.

Let me finish by using the closing phrase of Eftymios Stylios in his report at the 1958 Assembly:

"May God grant Unity to His Church and to entire humanity. Oh God! Thy Kingdom come."