***Pentru viața lumii: Către un etos social al Bisericii Ortodoxe* [For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church], Revelatio. Theologia socialis, introd. David Bentley Hart and John Chrysavgis, trans. Viorel Coman and Petre Maican, Oradea, Ratio et Revelatio Publishing House 2020, 140 p., ISBN: 978-606-9659-07-6**

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One of the general accusations brought against the Orthodox is that they have not developed a current social theology, as Catholics or Protestants. The book we present attempts to give a coherent answer to this reproach, a response formulated in an official document written by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

In March 2020, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople issued a comprehensive document on the social teaching of the Orthodox Church: “For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church.” The text of the document has been translated into twelve languages. The document has special importance due to its topic and its proposed theological vision, being a successful attempt to bring Orthodoxy into dialogue with the problems of the contemporary world.

The history of this document begins in 2017, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew appointed a special commission of twelve theological scholars from around the world, with the aim of preparing a formal document on the social teaching of the Orthodox Church, as this has been reflected and expressed in Tradition through the centuries and by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in contemporary practice (p. 9).

The document was completed within two years (2019) and submitted for approval to the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. After careful analysis of this document, the Holy and Sacred Synod approved it in 2020, and congratulated the commission for the exceptional work it had done. This was followed by the official publication of the document, to provide parameters and guidelines for the social responsibility of the Orthodox Church before the challenges and perspectives of today’s world, without overlooking the favorable potential and perspectives of contemporary civilization (p. 10).

The book begins with the publication of the Patriarchal Approval signed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, followed by an introduction

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written by two members of the committee, David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, where we are introduced to the origin of the document, theological context and its pastoral dimensions: "The document aspires to reflect the worldview and mission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as expressed both down the centuries, up to the present day. Though the structure and style that this text have are rather formal, the commission having drafted the document strove to avoid empty abstractions and to offer concrete moral proposals. The document's intentions are purely pastoral, moreover; its analysis of the present is meant to be compassionate, its critiques strictly constructive, and its exhortations are studiously humble from an academic point of view. The document was undertaken, moreover, with a genuine willingness to learn not only from the wisdom of earlier generations but also from its mistakes, as well as to learn from one another in the communion of the Church. In this regard, the members of the commission submit this service to the Church at large as a preliminary step toward a far more expansive theological dialogue and as an aid to spiritual growth for the Orthodox faithful" (p. 14-15).

After the presentation, there is the complete text of the document consisting of eighty-two paragraphs grouped in nine chapters (designated with Roman numerals). Chapter I is an *Introduction* (§1-§7) in which Orthodox anthropology is emphasized, that is, the Church's teaching about man and his purpose in the world.

Chapter II is entitled *The Church in Public Sphere* (§8-§14) which highlights the Church's relationship to this world, starting from the Eucharistic communion and seeking to foreshadow the Kingdom of God in historical realities, regardless of political regimes, but without ignoring the demands of contemporary society. The following statements should be retained: "it is absolutely forbidden for Christians to make an idol of cultural, ethnic, or national identity. There can be no such thing as a "Christian nationalism, or even any form of nationalism tolerable to Christian conscience" (p. 29-30), words that give food for thought, especially in regards to the way the Orthodox are organized.

Chapter III (§15-§31) follows these ideas, developing the topic *The Course of Human Life*. In these paragraphs, human life is described, from the moment of conception in the womb to the grave, as seeking holiness and acquisition of the Kingdom of God. The stages of human life are described here and their connection with the sacred: childhood, adulthood, marriages, conceiving and giving birth to children, the role of monastic life, celibacy, old age and the passing of mortal life in this world. Particular attention is paid to sexuality and human orientation, which the document notes

we have by birth, not by choice: “It is true, as a simple physiological and psychological fact, that the nature of individual sexual longing is not simply a consequence of private choice regarding such matters; many of the inclinations and longings of the flesh and heart to a great extent come into the world with us, and are nourished or thwarted – accepted or obstructed – in us at an early age” (p. 42).

Chapters IV and V (§32-§41, §42-§49), as their titles show, develop the topics of *poverty, wealth, civil justice, war, peace and violence*. We find the teaching of the Orthodox Church here on the above topics and the quotations from the Holy Fathers are impressive, i.e., “life in Christ must entail militant hostility to the conditions that create poverty, as well as a heroic commitment to philanthropy and charity” (p. 63). In the context of rejecting violence, it should be noted that “the Orthodox Church rejects capital punishment and does so out of faithfulness to the Gospel and to the example of the Apostolic Church” (p. 86).

Chapter VI which refers to *Ecumenical Relations and Relations with Other Faiths* (§50-§60), is particularly significant. The conclusion is that “the Orthodox Church seeks sustained dialogue with Christians of other communions, in order to offer them a full understanding of the beauty of Orthodoxy, not in order to convert them to some cultural <Byzantinism>. It also does so to learn from the experiences of Christians throughout the world, to understand the many cultural expressions of Christianity, and to seek unity among all who call upon the name of Jesus” (p. 92). An important issue addressed here is the one related to the dialogue with the religions of the “Book,” i.e. Judaism and Islam, but also with the other religions.

Chapter VII refers to *Orthodoxy and Human Rights* (§61-§67), which it considers as inherited from Europe’s Jewish and Christian traditions. From the perspective of human rights, relations with migrants from all countries must also be considered, since all people bear the image of God in them.

The penultimate chapter VIII develops the topic of the relation between *Science, Technology, the Natural World* (§68-§78), in the context in which the “humanity’s power today to transform physical reality, for both good and ill, is quite unprecedented in human history, and constitutes both a peril and a responsibility” (p. 116), but humanity seems largely unprepared for this enormous responsibility. The authors argue that this is why “to strive to overcome any apparent antagonism between the world of faith and that of the sciences” (p. 121).

The last chapter IX is dedicated to *Conclusions* (§79-§82) and starts with the idea that “the document is offered with the caution and the humble acknowledgement that it is in many respects quite inadequate as a compre-

hensive statement of the social ethos of the Church. In that sense, it is at most an invitation to further and deeper reflection on the parts of the faithful” (p. 132).

One of the main conclusions of the document may be the idea that “the social ethos of the Church is fulfilled not simply through the implementation of ethical prescriptions, but also and most fully, in the liturgical expectation of the divine Kingdom” (p. 132), i.e. the entire social activity of the Church cannot be separated from the eschatological faith. In this sense, the prophetic vocation requires that the Church shall not be silent before injustices, lies, acts of cruelty and spiritual disorder, but at the same time, it must not condemn the world, nations or souls. The mission of the Orthodox Church “is to manifest the saving love of God ..., a love broken and seemingly defeated upon the Cross, but shining out in triumph from the empty tomb at Pascha, a love that imparts eternal life to a world darkened and disfigured by sin and death, a love often rejected, and yet longed for unceasingly in every heart” (p. 137).

The document concludes with an urge to universities, parishes, monasteries to encourage reflection upon this document – for example, the revitalization of the order of the diaconate for men and women, as it was in the early Church (p. 137) – so as to foster the principles and guidelines proposed in this text.

I believe that this document can be considered a great success of Orthodox theologians, a successful synthesis of the social teaching of the Orthodox Church, and – as it was approved only by the Ecumenical Patriarchate – it may serve as an example for other local Orthodox Churches.