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***Welcoming Address
to the Consultation on
“The Participation of Orthodox Women in the Ecumenical Movement:
Past, Present, and Future”,
Volos, June 8-12, 2008***

Dear Sisters in Christ,

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you in the Volos Academy for Theological Studies for this Consultation on “The Participation of Orthodox Women in the Ecumenical Movement: Past, Present, and Future”, organized by the “Women in Church and Society” program of the World Council of Churches, in collaboration with our Academy and with the support of the Prefecture of Magnesia. We are indeed honored by this gathering of the representatives of the Orthodox Churches around the world and the distinguished figures of the movement of Orthodox women.

We can not deny the fact that in many Orthodox Churches there is a serious problem—or a great ecclesiological paradox—, that is the lack of laity participation and the dominance of the clergy in the Church. This reality finds its natural sequel in the prevalent viewpoint within ecclesiastical and theological circles on the role of women in the Church. However, it would not be far from the truth to say that women’s downgraded position in the present orthodox ecclesiastical circumstances is part of the broad problem known as “the (non) participation of laity in Church life”. Certainly, many acknowledge the increasing alienation of the ecclesial body from theology as well as the inability to establish dialogue between theology, academia and the modern world.

It is exactly the establishment of this dialogue, that is the main goal of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies—a Church related institution with a strong female presence in its academic team and staff— which functions as an open forum of thought and dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the broader scholarly community of intellectuals worldwide. The Academy organizes a series of studies, international seminars, conferences, round tables and publications, as well as

addresses —besides the classical theological issues such as “Church and Eschatology” or “Eucharist, Church and Word”— the more modern and provocative issues as “Orthodox Christianity and Modernity,” “Lay Participation in Ecclesiastical Life,” “Gender and Religion—The Role of Women in the Church,” “Women and Religion: The Problem of Violence and Fundamentalism”, and more.

Regarding the issue of women’s participation in the Church, we must note that the new and radical element characterizing theology and the praxis of Christian Church from the very beginning —as a result of its Eucharistic and eschatological identity— is the overcoming of all kinds of division and fragmentation (gender, tribe, nation, language, culture, social class and origin), in as far as: «There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus» (*Gal.*, 3:28. Cf. *Col.*, 3:11). Therefore, it was only natural that the early Church revalued the place of women, as is explicitly demonstrated in several biblical texts as well as in the praxis of the early Christian community. Also, later patristic tradition in the person of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus was to repeat and expand Paul’s theology of unity and its eschatological fulfillment in Christ where there is no place for any segmentation or division whatsoever to such an extent that Gregory even characterizes gender, tribe or social class discrimination as “traits of flesh” that demean the Christ-likeness and image of God in human beings.

Christianity, in contrast to the ideas and practices of the male-dominated Hebraic and Ancient-Greek milieu in which it appeared revalued the role of woman. In the person of a woman, the Theotokos Mary, a human being was counted worthy, within History, to give birth to the Son and Word of God. Eminent representatives of Christian tradition, such as Saint Gregory Nazianzus, did not hesitate to denounce the unjust laws towards women: “laws were enacted by men; therefore, legislation would be against women; [...] I don’t embrace this legislation, nor do I praise this practice”. The texts and speeches of Saint John Chrysostom express for the first time a theology of tenderness in marriage and, concerning the attitude of husband towards wife and, in marriage, the communion of persons is stressed, to wit companionship, mutual attraction and love instead of childbearing as the aim of marriage.

In addition, the missionary activity, the liturgical and social function and the life of the first Christian communities in general perhaps for the very first time in history led to women moving outside the home, taking on roles or vocations within

the Christian Church parallel to those of traditional wife and mother, for example as missionary, as charismatic or as social worker. Moreover, the establishment of the institution of Deaconess in the Early Church and throughout almost the entire Byzantine period, witnesses this new reality and invites the Church, if she wishes to remain true to her tradition, to think hard about and begin a dialogue towards the revival of this ancient apostolic order.

However, this new dimension of reality did not last since the burden of Hebraic mores and traditions, social conservatism and the established philosophical and anthropological prejudice, mainly of ancient Greek origin, influenced the Church's historical course and praxis. Indeed, in parallel with the liberating attitude we presented in brief, the tendency of belittlement and disdain of women was not missing from church circles, in which women were associated with evil, sin and smut. Already, several Pauline texts pose serious interpretative, theological and pastoral problems, since they order the hierarchical subordination of women to men, or their compulsory silence in public worship areas (*I Cor.*, 14:34-35. Cf. *I Tim.*, 2:11 ff.), as well as the covering of their head. References to women's silence in Church and their subordination to men are repeated by Saint Basil of Caesarea, commenting on the respective quotation of Paul, and in a milder tone by Gregory of Nazianzus in a text attributed to him in *Sacra Parallela* by John of Damascus. Even Saint John Chrysostom, who speaks so warmly about relations within marriage and the love of husbands for wives, inaugurating a theology of tenderness, elsewhere has difficulty applying to woman the basic anthropological principle of «in God's image». It is also widely known that negative expressions and characterizations of women are abundant in ascetic texts, to the point of considering women more dangerous and vicious than the devil himself, while in Church pre-christening services relating to birth and the forty days following birth there are reference to smuttiness and uncleanness which presuppose as "impure" the biological function of maternity, with sexual intercourse demonised and women degraded and humiliated. They were the same perceptions that led to the establishment of the well-known interdictions and legal provisions regarding in a totally negative way the female body and female menstruation and that actually rendered woman a second-category member of the Church and introduced the shadow and the burden of the Law within the Church.

Moreover, the hierarchical subordination of women to men —“heritage” of the ancient-Greek and Judaic world— passed to a certain degree through the institutions, life and spirituality of the Church, and especially monastic spirituality, reproducing forms and structures which were evidently not in correspondence with its theological and eschatological self-consciousness, leading from time to time to the temptation of fundamentalism. The depressing burden of History and of social conformism was often even more of a weight in the history of the Church than evangelical truth and authenticity, as witnessed by the current ecclesiastical and pastoral reality which is far from friendly towards women.

Can Church and theology, therefore, continue to refer gloatingly to the first reality and pretend that they don't care about the second? Can we close off all related discussions while claiming continually and unilaterally that Christianity has liberated women when after twenty centuries so many questions are still pending and at the same time as even this limited dignity and equality enjoyed by women nowadays seems to be more a result and consequence of the conquests of Enlightenment and “modernity” (which would be unconceivable, in our opinion, if it were not for its Christian origins) and of the women's movement after the 19th century rather than a result and consequence of the traditional “Christian” communities?

The crucial question, following the aforementioned remarks, is for how long will we continue accepting, as self-evident and in howling contradiction with our ecclesiological and theological self-consciousness, and attempting to justify theologically the social structure of gender, the male-dominated/patriarchic relations of power and domination resulting from this structure, despite the fact that civil society and secular institutions consider all this obsolete? Would not a theological consideration of gender and of «in the image of God » in women, in combination with the theological and pastoral evaluation which overcomes the distinction of pure-impure, inaugurated by the New Testament, manage to interpret the tough theological and social problems posed by the issue under discussion?

As the consultation's focus is on the participation of Orthodox women in the ecumenical movement, let us remember that Orthodox theology in the 20th century has extremely developed and became known, as well as rediscovered its self-consciousness and its mission in the world in the framework of ecumenical dialogue,

through the encounter with the questions, concerns and the challenges that West posed. We should therefore question ourselves what the Orthodox Church would be apart from the ecumenical movement, enclosed to its confessional and provincial self-sufficiency. By analogy we have to recognize the significant contribution of the ecumenical movement, and especially of the WCC, as far as the women's issues are concerned. Let me just remind you the previous meetings of Agapia, Rhodes, Damascus and Istanbul.

Before closing this opening address, let us thank the executive of the WCC program on "Women in Church and Society", Ms Fulata Moyo, for the excellent collaboration and financial support for the success of this meeting. We would also like to thank the Prefecture of Magnesia, and personally the Prefect Dr Apostolos Papatolias and the Vice-Prefect, Ms Anastasia Oikonomou, for the generous sponsoring of this consultation and their presence among us this morning. Last but not least, I thank the team Academy, Anastasia Vassiliadou, Claire Nikolaou, Katerina Pekridou, Christos Parissis, and especially the initiator of this consultation, Dr Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi and also Katerina Karkala-Zorba, responsible of women's Department of the Holy Metropolis of Demetrias, for their hard work, enthusiasm and commitment.