

# OPENING REMARKS MEETING OF THE RESEARCH PROGRAM “ EARLY MONASTICISM AND CLASSICAL PAIDEIA”

Jerusalem, 22 October 2014

Professor Rubenson,

Distinguished Members of the Research Group,

Your Eminences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We welcome you warmly to Jerusalem and to this meeting of your research group as you continue your explorations into the relationship between early Christian monasticism and the *paideia* of late antiquity. This is a fruitful field of study, in which much work remains to be done, and we encourage you in your research and in your efforts to make your findings, which are so much needed in our day, well known in the scholarly world.

Over the last 40 years, the study of Late Antiquity has been transformed. Because of the work of the great scholar, Peter Brown, and his colleagues and successors in the field, we no longer view this period of history in the negative light of our predecessors. Rather, we see in Late Antiquity a remarkable richness, not least in this part of the world, which formed the Eastern Roman Empire. New discoveries and fresh readings of texts and other physical evidence have

broadened the picture for us of life between the second and the eighth centuries throughout the Mediterranean world.

We have long known about the ambiguous relationship between the emerging Christian civilization and its classical predecessor. Several Christian authors wrestled with the question of how Christianity was to relate to the thought and literature of the classical world. Some early Christian writers opposed the reading of classical literature, while other, most notably Saint Basil in his well-known Letter to Young Men, saw the potential benefits of such reading under the careful tutelage of a master.

It is not surprising that we are discovering, particularly through your research, that the relationship between early Christianity and classical *paideia* is even more multi-layered and subtle than we first imagined. And since the influence of monasticism on the life of the Church from the fourth century on was so pervasive, a proper understanding of the role of monasticism, especially in the development of Christian culture, is paramount.

As Peter Brown says in his now classic book, *The World of Late Antiquity*, in this region “monasticism was the bridgehead by which the fringes of the classical world entered the culture and politics of the Roman world” (London, The Folio Edition 2014, p.74).

He also reminds us that in the East monasticism did not “stand aloof” from the community; rather, it “flowed directly into the life of the great cities” (ibid., p.75). In this respect, Saint Justin Martyr speaks about the *logos spermatikos*, that in any cultural expression there are seeds of truth. “In every person”, he wrote, “there is a divine particle, reason,” and according to Saint Justin, whenever human beings use this reason, the Divine Logos is at work in them, whether they know or acknowledge this or not.

When we turn to the subject of monasticism, we see that monasticism flourished in this region from the earliest days of the movement in the fourth century. Monasticism spread north from Egypt and Gaza. Even today, for example, we have surviving evidence in the name El Arish of the famous Saint Hilarion of the Gaza region. Christians in the Holy Land who desired to make this radical and complete commitment to the Gospel found in the Judean desert an ideal environment. For here Saint John the Baptist first lived the ascetic life and his voice was heard as "one crying out in the wilderness" (Mt. 3:3).

There was a time when there were hundreds of monastic settlements in this region, and the most important of them, the Brotherhood of the Tomb of Christ, dates from the early fourth century and has given itself to the spiritual mission of guarding and serving the Holy Places ever since. Mar Sabba, one of our great monasteries, is also one of the oldest monasteries of the strict monastic *askesis* in continuous occupation in the world. Nor should we forget in this regard the monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula, a monastery of equal antiquity and importance. It seems right, therefore, that here in the Holy Land the two primary aspects of your research should find a happy meeting place.

We highly commend your work in this field. The results of your research will benefit not only scholarship, but also the life of the Church. Monasticism is a living aspect of the life of the Church in the Holy Land, and monasticism is a sign to the Church and to the world of the complete giving of the self to God. Influenced early by the classical *paideia*, monasteries have become in their turn not simply communities of celibates of destinations for pilgrims, but places where Christian culture is preserved and deepened. Without monastic communities in East and West, so much Christian culture and civilization would have been lost over the centuries.

The ultimate purpose of Christian monasticism –and this

distinguishes it from the concept of classical *paideia*- is the attainment of the contemplation of the glory of God that was manifested on Mount Tabor by Christ to his disciples in the Transfiguration. The metaphysical concept of divinity of the classical *paideia* was taken up in the theological shadow (*skia*) on Mount Sinai to Moses, became incarnate in Bethlehem, and manifested as "Uncreated Light" in the glorified person of Jesus Christ.

We wish you well in your conference and in your work and we are glad to welcome you to the Patriarchate, the living embodiment of the monastic heritage of this land. May God bless you all your academic deliberations.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem