

Orthodox Social Service and the Role of the Orthodox Church in the Greek Economic Crisis

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The Research

This work is based on research commissioned by the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) that was conducted in 2008 and 2009. Parts of this article were reworked from the final Orthodox diakonia survey report, used with permission of the IOCC. The results of this work are available at IOCC (2009) and have also been published as Molokotos-Liederman (2010).

Orthodox Diakonia

The general question that frames this presentation is the link between religion and social problems from the perspective of approaching religion as a solution. The role of faith-based NGOs is therefore particularly relevant. I will specifically focus on the Christian Orthodox approach to addressing social issues of poverty, injustice and inequality through social service. This part of the presentation is based on my work for the Orthodox diakonia survey for the IOCC.

Historical Background on Orthodox Social Service (from Byzantium to the Postcommunist Period)

Orthodox social service is based on social theology and more particularly on the Christian concept of *diakonia*, based on solidarity, inspired by Christian values (God's love and compassion). It is expressed through charity and philanthropy towards those in need. The term *diakonia* was used in early Christianity to indicate philanthropy and love (love of the human person), which were used almost interchangeably in Christian theology. During the Byzantine Empire the Church was in charge of philanthropy, ranging from giving at an individual level to looking after the needs of all in a more organised and structured way by overseeing social welfare services, including hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and so on. In developing an institutionalised philanthropic platform the Church was able to promote its moral greatness and attract clergymen, bishops, believers and members. Therefore, the philanthropic diakonia of the Byzantine Empire became somewhat of a prototype and source of inspiration for the social consciousness of the western Church.

Since the Byzantine period Christian theology has aimed to integrate social action into its spiritual life and theology by trying to address social welfare issues. In this context, Orthodox social service has been at the core of the

social mission of the Orthodox Church, but since Orthodox Christianity is marked by diverse geographic and ethnic variations that affect many areas of church life, Orthodox social service has developed in a specific way through various historical periods and geographical areas: in Byzantium, during the Ottoman period, the nineteenth century, the communist regimes for most of the twentieth century and, more recently, in the postcommunist period with the renewed social and political engagement of Orthodox Churches in the public sphere.

The Specificities of the Orthodox Approach to Social Service and International Humanitarian Assistance

With the fall of communism and the opening of Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans there was a revitalisation of national Churches and more specifically the reactivation of Orthodox Churches in the social arena as political, social and cultural actors. However, in the postcommunist period many Eastern Orthodox Churches in the 1990s found themselves in a precarious socio-economic position. Along with opportunities came great need and high demand for humanitarian assistance, particularly after the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars in the Balkans. National Churches in these areas, having come out of particularly challenging socio-economic and political circumstances, were faced with a double challenge: great need to provide social services in economically fragile postcommunist societies by filling in the gaps in the social welfare that was originally provided by the state, but having to do so with a scarcity of resources.

During times of necessity and moments of crisis Orthodox Churches and related organisations have typically offered social assistance circumstantially and locally using mostly informal channels and charitable initiatives through Orthodox churches, dioceses, monasteries, and related associations. Humanitarian assistance is offered to individuals or small groups and communities through local Orthodox NGOs working in a rather unstructured fashion through personal and informal networks and through contacts between dioceses, parishes, monasteries and Orthodox brotherhoods or sisterhoods. This form of Orthodox diakonia at a 'micro' level, offering charitable assistance locally to individuals and small groups in need, is often referred to as *micro-diakonia*.

The Greek and Romanian case studies in the Welfare and Religions project and the Welfare and Values in Europe project which Grace Davie (University of Exeter) co-directed with Anders Backstrom (University of Uppsala) (see WREP and WaVE respectively) have clearly shown the different forms of social welfare in traditionally Christian Orthodox societies where the family

and the Church have typically filled in the gaps left by the deficiencies of state welfare systems.

The specificities of the Orthodox approach to social service become even more apparent if we compare Orthodox diakonia across the world with the work of international Catholic and mainline Protestant churches and organisations that are involved in international humanitarian work. Orthodox diakonia is distinctly different since Orthodox Churches have not always responded adequately, consistently and systematically to social problems and humanitarian concerns. This in turn has not favoured the development of an organised pan-Orthodox approach in the provision of humanitarian assistance worldwide. Comparatively, Christian Orthodox organisations seem to have a weaker international presence and public profile in the arena of humanitarian work, where many secular and other Christian NGOs have contributed to the field of international social policy, development and humanitarian assistance and have been visibly active particularly after the Second World War in response to urgent humanitarian needs.

To conclude, we can distinguish five structural and historical factors that differentiate Orthodox diakonia from the social service offered by other Churches.

1. The Eastern Orthodox Church has often been criticised as 'other-worldly', dedicated to mysticism, contemplation and conformity to liturgical rituals, with a tendency to look inwards and 'above' the affairs of this world, thus not focusing on direct missionary action or social service, such as we find in the Western Churches. This also relates to Orthodox diakonia not being considered an activity of its own, but rather part of Orthodox spirituality and the liturgical life of the Church, which is in contrast to Catholic or Protestant theology according to which engagement in the pursuit of social justice and welfare is an essential part of the Churches' concern for man's spiritual evolution.

2. In the Orthodox Church there is no predominant centralised and hierarchical administrative structure, such as we find in the Catholic Church. Orthodox churches are autocephalous entities headed by autonomous Patriarchates that have the right to elect bishops in each administrative jurisdiction. Local Churches are decentralised, but united in spirit through the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the other Orthodox Patriarchates. The absence of centralisation and the important role of the diocese and the parish in Orthodoxy make Orthodox diakonia more prone to develop locally and often at an informal and unstructured level.

3. National churches are often deeply connected to ethnic characteristics, thus blurring the dividing line between spirituality/religion and ethnic/national characteristics. The propensity of Orthodox Churches towards identifying themselves with a specific nation also means that they can set themselves apart in favour of maintaining strong ties to the state and local or regional institutions. This can have implications on the ability of Orthodox social service organisations to implement a well-coordinated social action on a trans-national pan-Orthodox scale.

4. Many Orthodox Churches consider that giving public and media visibility to their social action would be in contrast to the principles of authentic philanthropy and Orthodox ethos. According to Matthew 6, 'when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets ... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret'. This can explain why some Orthodox ecclesiastical organisations involved in humanitarian work usually act locally and informally, being more interested in offering social services than expecting any form of public recognition or visibility.

5. Finally, most Orthodox churches and organisations have at their disposal limited financial resources, and therefore prioritise social assistance to the pressing requirements of their own populations in their respective countries. Therefore, the bulk of Orthodox organisations are based primarily in South-East Europe, the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Republics, which have predominantly Orthodox populations. For this reason there are few Orthodox humanitarian NGOs that provide a truly international humanitarian aid. For many organisations, this means lack of resources and low public and international visibility.

Recent Developments in International Orthodox Diakonia

Despite the absence of organised forms of social service, there is a great deal of activity 'on the ground' as the Church often addresses social problems practically, locally and informally. Until the 1990s, historical circumstances, the decentralised structure of Orthodoxy and the prevalence of national/ethnic Churches collectively contributed to the current state of Orthodox diakonia. However, Orthodox *micro-diakonia* has grown into wider-reaching initiatives involving a broader commitment to solidarity and social justice (*macro-diakonia*). Recent developments indicate strong interest in a renewed and visible social involvement in worldwide Orthodox diakonia. Furthermore, there is an increasing degree of cooperation and partnership between Orthodox organisations and a variety of other actors, such as secular and faith-based NGOs, international organisations and government agencies.

After 1961, when the majority of Orthodox Churches joined the World Council of Churches (WCC), the WCC developed a programme to assist them in the development of Orthodox diakonia programmes, including the requirement that bishops and priests be actively engaged in social problems and demonstrate public and practical acts of philanthropy.

The 1978 international conference 'An Orthodox Approach to Diaconia' at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, in Greece, on the initiative of the WCC's Orthodox Task Force, marked a change of direction in Orthodox social theology and service. The conference acknowledged the need for the Orthodox Church to engage more actively in social service. It also clearly indicated the need to further develop its social mission in order to articulate more clearly Orthodox social action and diakonia (locally, regionally and internationally) to offer both preventive and therapeutic social services. Subsequently, after the fall of communism, Eastern Orthodox Churches strengthened their commitment to social mission, as indicated by an Orthodox diaconal renewal in the Russian Federation, Romania, Serbia, Belarus, Albania.

More recently, the foundation of International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) in 1992, as the official international humanitarian organisation of the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), was an important stepping-stone in developing an integrated Orthodox humanitarian agency using a global perspective and responding to social and humanitarian concerns in a way that superseded territorially centred Orthodox diakonia initiatives, rooted to a specific nation-state.

In 2004 the WCC, the IOCC and Orthodox Church Aid from Finland (OrtAid) organised for the first time an international conference on 'Orthodox Social Witness and Diaconia' in Finland. During the meetings leaders and practitioners of Orthodox social service organisations, theologians, academics and church hierarchs exchanged reflections and practical experiences on Orthodox social service worldwide.

The Orthodox Diaconia Project and Survey: Mapping of Orthodox Social Service across the Globe

In 2007 I was asked by the IOCC to conduct research in order to map Orthodox diakonia worldwide, provide a snapshot of the state of Orthodox social service and gain a global perspective on the range of organisations and their work in the field.

The 2008 mapping survey identified humanitarian and social service organisations whose mission is driven by a predominantly Christian Orthodox ethos, namely: officially affiliated Orthodox organisations mandated by national Churches or Patriarchates (official social arms of national Churches); recognised Orthodox organisations, but not officially affiliated with a Church; and local small-scale initiatives (Orthodox associations etc.). Organisations that are not strictly Orthodox, but are located in a mostly Orthodox region or include a strong Orthodox presence, were also of interest.

The absence of a centralised administrative structure in the Orthodox Church as a whole and the lack of a coordinating body of Orthodox social service organisations worldwide presented a challenge in the data collection process. Orthodox diakonia organisations are often local, working with limited resources and staying away from formal documentation and communication channels, which make them hard to identify and approach. A total of 51 organisations were identified using a variety of sources, including the list of conference participants in the 2004 Orthodox diakonia conference, organisations in the partner directory of the WCC Diakonia & Solidarity Europe Desk, web-based research, and existing partners of the IOCC.

The survey was carried out by sending out 51 questionnaires containing 16 brief questions on topics including structure, mission/objectives, funding sources, type of services offered, challenges and future aspirations. The response rate was 54.9 per cent; thus we received 28 completed questionnaires.

Typology and Profile of Orthodox Diakonia Organisations

Most of the Orthodox diakonia organisations were established in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Republics in the 1990s. They started as charitable and philanthropic entities offering social services and emergency relief locally and nationally. During their course of work many organisations evolved into structures that provided a more sustainable form of aid, venturing into community development and capacity-building programmes, thus making material and community-building claims in solving social problems.

Most surveyed Orthodox diakonia organisations are fairly young, at most between 15 and 20 years old, having been formed in the 1990s after the collapse of many communist regimes, but there are a few older and well-established organisations in Africa and the Middle East. They are small- to medium-size organisations with a staff of 5 to 20 people, with the exception of

the historic large and well-established organisations in Africa and the Middle East and the IOCC. They operate and offer their services mostly in areas with predominantly Orthodox populations in South-Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Republics; there are also a few regional and international organisations and others based in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Most of the surveyed organisations are affiliated with a national Orthodox Church or a Patriarchate. They are governed by a Board of Directors, including both religious and non-religious board members, or are under the authority of a Holy Synod.

Almost all Orthodox diakonia organisations are charity/philanthropic organisations offering emergency relief (food, clothing, medical supplies and care), but many have ventured into the area of sustainable and community development. There are both advisory/coordinating/funding bodies and/or implementing organisations. Donor or umbrella organisations are solely responsible for funding, coordinating and/or advising on the provision of services and programmes that are offered by other implementing bodies (associations, agencies). Implementing organisations have the added role of actually offering services and implementing programmes themselves. This distinction has implications on their size and staffing, geographic location, funding and existing partnerships. Most organisations work with and are funded by multiple sources with which they have formed working partnerships; these include church-based, ecumenical and international organisations and alliances/networks and government structures and agencies.

While additional data on more Orthodox diakonia organisations is necessary, five types of organisations can be distinguished:

1. *Historical organisations*: older, well-established and fairly large organisations in the Middle East and Africa. For example: BLESS (Egypt), DICAC (Ethiopia) and St Georges Hospital (Lebanon).
2. *International organisations*: they use a global approach to Orthodox diakonia, funding, coordinating or providing humanitarian assistance internationally. For example: IOCC, OrtAid and Solidarity.
3. *Middle-sized organisations*: the bulk of organisations offering humanitarian assistance and social services, some with an emphasis on sustainable development and capacity building. They work locally and nationally in countries with predominantly Orthodox populations (Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Republics). For example: Philanthropy,

Diakonia Agapes, Armenia Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation Office (ART).

4. *Small organisations or associations*: they offer assistance locally and nationally in a relatively informal or unstructured way. For example: the Pastoral and Philanthropic Foundation of the Diocese of Switzerland of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Switzerland, the Alexandrian Lighthouse/Archbishopric of Johannesburg and Pretoria in South Africa.

5. *Consortium organisations*: secular and ecumenical organisations, including some (but not exclusive) Orthodox participation. For example: AidRom and the MCIC.

Key Issues and Challenges

Organisations face various levels of interrelated difficulties and obstacles during the course of their humanitarian work. The lack of adequate and sustainable funding at a time of an economic crisis and decreasing resources worldwide is by far the greatest difficulty that most organisations face today. Lack of funds usually means insufficient materials and equipment, but also insufficient human resources or poorly qualified or trained staff, thus lack of expertise in the planning, management and implementation of the humanitarian or social work offered. This has an impact on service provision for the short term and on the implementation of programmes for the medium and long term.

This difficulty seems to have implications not only for the implementation of services and programmes, but also for the ability to apply for and secure long term funding (for example accessing funding available from the European Union or from international organisations), which can help the long-term sustainability of these organisations. In some cases, organisations also mention poor management and lack of planning and coordination among local diaconal organisations, social structures of churches and church-related NGOs in the implementation of humanitarian assistance and social services. This issue relates back to funding as it is a criterion for securing sustainable funding from international agencies and governments.

The aspiration by increasingly more Orthodox Churches and organisations to shift their social action from local and national philanthropy towards sustainable community development alongside the ongoing work by governments and international NGOs (both religious and secular) is a noteworthy development in the Orthodox world. In this effort, most surveyed organisations indicated that they aspire to work more closely with partner

organisations in order to coordinate initiatives and programmes efficiently, especially during times of humanitarian crises, when time and resources are critical and a quick humanitarian response is vital.

The 2008 Orthodox Diakonia survey report was an initial assessment of the development and current state of Orthodox diakonia across the globe, a relatively underresearched area in the field of religious NGOs. As such it has become a starting point for further research in this field and cooperation between Orthodox diakonia organisations, as illustrated by the Symposium of Orthodox Partners in Social Service and Humanitarian Response and Development that was organized in the Balamand Monastery, Lebanon, in March 2012. The objective of the Symposium was to create an opportunity for representatives of seven Orthodox humanitarian relief and development and social service agencies to share experiences, accomplishments, expertise and challenges.

The Role of the Orthodox Church in the Greek Socio-Economic Crisis

The research for this part of the presentation on the role of Greek Church in the economic crisis was conducted from the UK using personal contacts in Greece, academic articles on the role of the Church in social welfare, Greek/English newspaper articles, and web research, including the websites of the Church of Greece and the Archdiocese of Athens. I would like to extend a special thank-you to Despina Katsivelaki, Consultant of the IOCC based in Athens, for providing me with a wealth of useful information on the current situation in Greece.

Current Social Situation and Problems

The current economic crisis has shaken Greece since 2007. What makes this economic crisis so severe and widespread is that it has affected so many layers of the social fabric and population, not only already disadvantaged people, but also the middle class. The spiralling aspects of the current economic crisis and social discontent feature: increase in unemployment (14.7 to 21.7 per cent between January 2011 and January 2012 and up to 51.2 per cent among young people in January 2012 (EC, 2012) as a result of business closures and increasing lay-offs in the public and private sector; rising poverty (27.7 per cent of Greek citizens were at risk of poverty or social exclusion after social transfers in 2010 (Eurostat, 2012); and decreasing salaries and pensions coupled with increased taxation and cost of living.

With the current economic crisis, the family unit as a support mechanism is under pressure and often family members are unable to care for relatives. The

traditional family support and safety net is under strain and there is rising homelessness, malnourished school children, lack of access to social benefits, cuts in welfare services, and increased cases of mental illness and suicide rates (particularly among men) in a country where suicide rates were among the lowest (2.8 per 100,000 inhabitants (Kirschbaum, 2012). According to the Greek Ministry of Health, there was a 40 per cent rise in suicides between January and May 2011 compared to the same period in 2010). Crime, drug use and human trafficking are also on the rise.

Immigration is also an important issue that feeds into the growing problems of the economic crisis. Known in the past as a country of emigration, for the past 15 years Greece has become a country of immigration and the main point of entry for unauthorised migrants on their way to other parts of Europe (Greece, 2012). As a result and in addition to the ongoing economic crisis, the country has to deal with increasing asylum applications and inadequate immigrant detention systems. Furthermore, among other Southern European countries (Portugal, Italy and Spain), Greece attracts immigrants with a lower level of education and thus in greater risk of poverty or social exclusion (Migrants, 2011). Work opportunities for migrants are now very limited and many migrants remain illegally in Greece until they can escape to another European country, usually through Italy.

The first wave of migrants to Greece came mainly from the former Soviet Union, while a second wave came from Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and other Balkan countries; more recently migrants have also been coming from Africa, India/Pakistan and the Middle East.

The flip side of the crisis in relation to immigration is the gradual increase in emigration of Greeks relocating abroad, primarily young and well-educated people leaving Greece to study and work abroad. This trend is expected to increase the country's existing brain drain. The wave of emigration of Greeks who join family members living abroad, for example in North America and Australia, means that the Greek Diaspora worldwide may be on the increase.

Brief Overview of Philanthropy and Volunteerism in Greece

Volunteerism and civil society tend to be weak and fragmented in Greece. Philanthropy in Greece and among the Greek Diaspora tends to be circumstantial, with giving to charitable causes taking place primarily during moments of crisis, such as natural disasters. This means that voluntary organisations lack strategic planning and organisation in terms of regular development of budgets and long-term planning of fundraising activities. There is also lack of good management in the allocation of funds and

cooperation between different organisations. For this reason, many Greek NGOs do not meet international standards of non-profit organisations and are therefore unable to receive international funding from foundations.

In response to the current crisis charitable giving and volunteerism are on the increase but it remains to be seen how short-lived or long-lived they will be and to what extent the wave of philanthropy that has been activated by the current economic crisis will continue when the economic situation in Greece improves.

Social Welfare Provision in Greece

Without going into too much detail on the provision of social welfare, it is important to note that Greece falls under the underdeveloped Southern European model which is marked by fragmentation and clientilistic tendencies with cash benefits predominating over social services (see Kokosalis and Fokas, 2007-2010). The National Health System was created in 1984 and comprises health centres and various social security funds providing a multi-tier and mixed system of services, thus producing a mosaic of public and private providers of services. Social care is provided by institutions that provide services and care to people with disabilities and other long-term illnesses but this responsibility is usually undertaken by the family, which usually takes precedence in social care provision over the social services of NGOs and the Church that provide essential services (for example, residential and home-care).

In order to receive unemployment and other social benefits, as well as free health care, Greek citizens have to produce a range of documents proving that they are unemployed, uninsured and with no income. Undocumented foreign migrants usually do not have identification papers or other documents proving that they are unemployed and uninsured but they can be admitted for free treatment, especially in emergency situations, in various state-run polyclinics and hospitals. This ambiguous and grey area in the issue of accessibility to free health care has created a great deal of tension between Greeks and foreign migrants.

Social Welfare Activities of the Church in Greece

The Church of Greece is the only Orthodox national Church not to have experienced communism, so it has followed a different trajectory from most of the Orthodox Churches that I have referred to above. However, Orthodox social service in Greece shares similarities attributes with the Orthodox diakonia characteristics discussed in the first part of this presentation.

Against the socio-economic background described above, the Church of Greece acts as a pillar of support, having the main burden of helping the destitute and thus filling in the large gaps left by the state welfare system by dealing with problems that are often not addressed by the formal, bureaucratic and institutionalised social service pathways offered by the state. In addition to its spiritual role (faith acting as a source of comfort for people from all walks of life, not just the needy) and a marker of national identity, the Church in Greece has always had a key social role addressing the material needs of the vulnerable segments of the population. As Effie Fokas has noted in the Greek case study in the WaVE project, the Church in Greece has a 'de facto significant place' in the Greek welfare system, which originates in the philanthropic role of the Church during the Byzantine era, as discussed earlier (see Kokosalis and Fokas, 2007-2010). The Church provides material, psychological and social support to all vulnerable people in order to supplement the inadequate services offered by public social services and the unaffordable alternative services of private care provision.

The social welfare activity of the Church is decentralised but also flexible in terms of organisation since it has the advantage of being in close proximity to local communities: social welfare by the Church is coordinated and implemented locally and sometimes informally by individual dioceses. In that sense it can be described as a *micro-diakonia* type of social service. Through its local dioceses, the Church has the advantage of having extensive knowledge of local needs and the socio-economic circumstances of the local congregation and community in order to be able to offer easy and open access to organised social services. Social services are provided by some Church staff but mostly by volunteers, predominantly women. As a result of this de facto decentralisation of Church welfare provision, both the volume and quality of its social services vary from diocese to diocese and from area to area, thus contributing to the overall mosaic effect of social service provision in Greece.

The Church provides social services in four levels: *centrally* through its Synodical Committee for Social Welfare and Benefits, which has more of a consultative status on social problems, *regionally* through its dioceses (providing for regional charity funds and welfare institutions), *locally* through parishes (offering local charity funds and meals), and also through *monasteries* (see Petmesidou and Polyzoidis).

The social welfare service of the Church comprises regular and ad hoc social assistance through allocation of material support (food and clothing) and medicine to families, the elderly and the disabled through the regional funds of dioceses and local funds of parishes. The Church also provides social care offered through the approximately 700 social welfare institutions all over

Greece offering shelter, food, clothing, medicine, financial support, entertainment, education, vocational training, blood banks and health services. They include elderly homes, homes for handicapped people and people with chronic illnesses, orphanages, nurseries, guest houses for the homeless, refugees and migrants, and Orthodox youth summer camps (54 summer camps for young people hosting approximately 15,000 children).

The largest and most visible Church organisations that provide an extensive range of social services in the greater Athens area include: *Christianiki Allilengyi* (Christian Solidarity), the social service of the Archdiocese of Athens (<http://www.iaath.gr>), created in 1957; and *Apostoli* (Mission), the NGO of the Church of Greece created in 2010.

I will briefly discuss their work below before making some closing remarks.

The Work of Christianiki Allilengyi in the Greater Athens Area

Christianiki Allilengyi (Christian Solidarity)

(http://www.iaath.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=107&Itemid=471) is the centre for the organisation of social service provision throughout the 145 parishes of the Archdiocese of Athens. The main 'Christian Solidarity' office directs the Regional Solidarity offices, which direct the parish Charities of the Archdiocese of Athens. Therefore, the core social action is led by the parish (clergy, laity and 4000 volunteers) and is economically financed by donations from churchgoers, exploitation of real estate (rental property), private donations, and various activities. The organisation also collaborates with government agencies and NGOs.

The organisation offers immediate provision of material or other assistance to individuals and groups experiencing poverty and economic and social exclusion, for example practical help such as free meals, clothing and footwear, residential/at-home and nursing care, assistance in obtaining blood transfusions but also youth summer camps, summer holidays for the elderly. Typically 40 per cent of the organisation's work involves older people and their families but during the past few years younger people are asking for help as a result of the rising unemployment. Although they are obviously religiously orientated, the social services offered by the Church embrace all kinds of people, without discrimination. For example, for several years now the Church has been organising soup kitchens serving thousands of meals to migrants in several key locations throughout Athens, under the name 'Church in the Streets'. These used to be offered primarily to migrants but the percentage of ordinary Greeks in soup kitchens has now greatly increased and meals are also offered to them.

The organisation also implements preventive programmes to combat the causes of poverty and social and economic exclusion, but nowadays with the current economic crisis the focus is on immediate provision of material and social assistance to groups in need. There are approximately 190 Church solidarity sites serving at least 75,000 people annually.

More specifically Christian Solidarity offers a variety of services in the Greater Athens area including:

- Provision of meals: over 70 parish centres and a mobile unit offering 12,000 meals to homeless and poor people, as well as distributing 2000 food parcels a day to both Greeks and migrants.
- Food collection outlets: approximately 300 food collection outlets in supermarkets, the collections from which are donated to local charities and distributed to people in need.
- 16 parish elderly homes caring for both self-sufficient older people and bedridden non self-sufficient older people.
- Two parish guest-houses and a short-stay hotel with accommodation to cover urgent short-term housing needs.
- Two nurseries looking after 200 children daily.
- A Family Support Centre for single mothers and victims of domestic violence and human trafficking.
- The 'Tabitha' group that provides clothing and footwear to refugees, immigrants and the needy, by redistributing used items donated by other people.
- Blood donation sessions (blood drives) held at the parish level in collaboration with hospitals.
- Summer Holidays for the Aged programmes providing accommodation for older people by the seaside.
- Funding of scholarships.

The Newly Created Church NGO: Apostoli

The creation of the NGO *Apostoli* (Mission) (<http://www.mkoapostoli.com>) in 2010 is an example of the Church's aim to modernise, improve and better supervise its overall social work by: collecting and providing reliable and continuously updated information on the needs in dioceses and archdioceses in Greece and developing countries; developing relevant initiatives; and coordinating, managing and implementing projects and programmes. The organisation was also created in order overcome legislative or cultural barriers to network with NGOs having similar objectives. For example, through *Apostoli*, the Church's organisation Christian Solidarity has successfully linked with and is a member of organisations with similar aims, such as the Greek Network for the Right to Housing and Residential Care and

the Greek Network for the Fight against Poverty. Finally, *Apostoli* also aims to submit recommendations to national, European and international bodies on behalf of the Church of Greece.

Apostoli is the successor to Solidarity (not to be confused with Christian Solidarity discussed above), the NGO of the Church of Greece that was shut down a few years ago because of misuses and mismanagement of funds. As a new organisation, it was founded by Archbishop Ieronymos (who was elected in 2008 following the passing of the controversial Archbishop Christodoulos) with the aim of creating a transparent social service agency with a different ethos, away from big relief mission and infrastructure projects, focused more on smaller but more visible charity work. The following excerpt from the web site of *Apostoli* refers implicitly to the ill-fated Solidarity and the will to instil a new ethos in the organisation:

the recognition of our mistakes ... real transparency, the pursuit of harmony and unity are some of the antibodies that will be needed to face a disease that eats away almost all our institutional structures (Apostoli, n.d.)

Apostoli has set a national and international scope of humanitarian activity of providing emergency and non-humanitarian aid to Greece and abroad, and implementing and managing training programmes for vulnerable groups, including immigrants.

In Greece, the organisation works in cooperation with the Church and all of its regional and local organisations as well as local government, research institutions, businesses and other civil society organisations. *Apostoli* also aims to expand its social action outside Greek borders in order to offer social assistance to developing countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Western Balkans, the Middle East and Latin America. For the implementation of its programmes and activities the organisation has begun collaboration with national and international bodies, such as the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Health, the European Commission and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations.

Highlights of the work of *Apostoli* include the following actions that support vulnerable social groups in need of basic provision (food, clothing, medical care) and those who need more specialised care (people with for example mental disorders or Alzheimer's):

- Three social food-banks/grocery stores in the greater Athens area operated on a coupon basis and developed in cooperation with public local authorities.

- A social pharmacy/clinic for uninsured people in cooperation with the Athens Medical Association. Services offered by volunteer doctors and pharmacists are available to uninsured and unemployed people. There are also plans to develop mobile medical units for elderly people and children.
- Two mental health day centres in Crete.
- An integrated Alzheimer centre in Athens.
- Two mobile mental health units in northern and southern Greece.
- A guest-house for unaccompanied refugee minors

An Example: a Soup Kitchen in Central Athens

In May 2012 I had the opportunity to visit briefly a soup kitchen in the centre of Athens (near Omonoia Square) operated by the Archdiocese of Athens and *Apostoli* on a site (a large building and courtyard) owned by the municipality of Athens. Two to three soup kitchens operate daily in this location, one run by the Church the other two by the municipality. It is estimated that they serve approximately 1300-1500 meals a day.

From my observations and after speaking with a volunteer, it seems that the majority (roughly 70 per cent) of people who go to this soup kitchen are foreign migrants (young men and women but also families with children originating from Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, including Pakistan and Bangladesh). The number of Greeks who go to the soup kitchen has been on the rise: they are mostly individual elderly people and some middle-aged or younger people (not necessarily homeless) as well as drug addicts, but usually no families and children. There is a greater sense of social shame and embarrassment felt among many of the Greeks, so that they end up having to go to a soup kitchen as a last resort.

Loaves of bread and individual pre-packaged meals, prepared and delivered by a catering company on behalf of the Archdiocese of Athens and/or the municipality of Athens, are delivered to the soup kitchen and distributed by volunteers (including Greek citizens and priests, and an Anglican priest). Individual people usually wait for the meals in a long queue but priority is given to elderly people and those who are unwell or unable to stand or wait for a long time. Families with children wait for the meals in the middle of the courtyard (where children can play). Volunteers hand slices of bread and a meal to each person in the queue and the meal distribution process tends to be fairly orderly. I was told that there are occasional quarrels between groups of people, sometimes between Greeks and foreigners, but also among different foreign ethnic groups, in cases when meals are not enough or when someone tries to grab more than one meal. Apparently, after persistent

tensions and quarrels between Muslims (such as Pakistanis) and Africans, now only three or four Africans come to collect several bags of bread and meals that they take with them to hand out to other Africans living nearby, thus avoiding any problems or friction. After people receive the meals, they tend to leave the site quite quickly, rather than eat their meals there.

Social Welfare Provision by Other Faith-Based Social Service Organisations

The presence of other Christian faith-based third sector organisations in Greece has been limited, partly because of the strong ties between church and state and the monoconfessional character of Greek society. Caritas Greece, a member of the Caritas Europa network, has a small presence in Greece: the Caritas Athens Refugee Centre for immigrants living in Athens and its surroundings. It serves 300 meals a day, offers Greek and English lessons and provides vaccinations for children as well as relief kits with clothes, blankets and baby milk. But the Centre has limited resources (only five employees and 70 volunteers).

More research and fieldwork is needed in order to obtain more information on the extent and type of social work by organisations of the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Greece.

Current Debates on the Finances of the Church of Greece

The Church of Greece is a state church supervised by the state (the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs), and thus an extension of public administration. It is financed by the state (through salaries for the clergy and non-clergy staff paid by the state and tax exemptions) and private donations (from private wealthy individuals but also from ordinary citizens/churchgoers). The Church also owns its own assets (about 130 properties - it is the largest landowner after the state), amounting to approximately 75 per cent of its wealth.

The holdings and finances of the Church have recently come to the forefront of public attention and become the source of questions and criticism that the Church owns too much property, pays too little in taxes and is not contributing enough during this economic crisis. In that sense the Church has been put on the defensive. As a result, Archbishop Ieronymos and other members of the clergy have made repeated public declarations emphasising the Church's use of material assets in helping the needs of the population and giving details in concrete figures about the Church's social work, including its annual revenue, expenditure and how much tax it pays. This is a new development reflecting the Church's reaction to the overall public outcry for

transparency in public finances, which may help dispel the veil of opacity covering this hitherto taboo issue.

In a report to the Holy Synod in October 2011 that is publicly available on the Church's website the archbishop offered a detailed financial report on the Church's revenues and expenditure for 2010. He has further reiterated these points in the press and in an interview he gave to Greek television in April 2012 where he stressed that the Church's spiritual and social work towards the common good cannot exist without adequate financial resources.

According to the Church, the value of its philanthropic work in 2010 amounted to 96 million euros. The Church's assets were estimated in 2008 at between 700 million and 2.5 billion euros, but there is no way of knowing the exact income of the Church in order to tax it since there is no formal land register which would reveal exactly how much land it owns. Because of the political connections between church and state, Greek politicians have always been reluctant to press the Church authorities on the Church's finances. Even though the Church has its own financial board, which manages its immovable (land and real estate) and fluid (rental income etc.) assets, its finances and property in concrete figures remain opaque.

Given the weakened financial situation of the Greek state, particularly the public sector cutbacks (including cutbacks in the clergy, with fewer priests replacing those that die or retire), one of the challenges faced by the Church of Greece is the question of funding and fundraising, especially outside the Greek context, for example, among the Greek diaspora, and the issue of seeking new sources of funds from European and international funding bodies. Because of the Church's previous mismanagement of its NGO Solidarity and more generally because of the prevalence of financial corruption in Greece, there is a great deal of distrust among potential large donors on the appropriate use of funds. In response to this challenge and in order to assist the Church to better organise, coordinate and implement its social work and its ability to fundraise, the IOCC and *Apostoli* have established an agreement of cooperation and started to implement together small- scale projects. More specifically, the two partner organisations have agreed to work together to address humanitarian and development needs in areas and among populations where the two organisations already have available human and material resources and organisational capacities. The IOCC will also oversee in terms of management, accounting and implementation the projects that it funds but also assist *Apostoli* more generally to ensure that it follows international standards for non-profit organisations.

Closing Remarks and Reflections

The advantages of the social assistance and care provided by the Church, compared to state social welfare services, are its flexible organisation and funding and its proximity to local communities and problems. On the other hand, the fact that the Church is an extension of the state and that it therefore depends on government/state mechanisms imply its inability to stand on its own feet. As an extension of public administration, the Church is prone to clientilistic practices. This also means that the Church's dependence on the state can act as deterring factor that limits the extent of social activism of the Church in broader issues of social issues of poverty, social justice and inequality and its ability to seek alternative revenue sources of funding given the dwindling private donations and reduced state support in Greece. Also, the Church's decentralised structure can lead to a fragmentation of activities and inconsistency in the social services it provides.

In the current climate of acute economic crisis, the challenges that lie ahead of the Church, forcing it to reduce its operating costs while at the same time seek new funding sources to continue its social work, could be an opportunity for the Church. By strengthening and highlighting its social function in Greek society and expanding its social work through greater involvement in social welfare, it can also hopefully address its structural weaknesses and improve its social service provision so that it can become a significant social welfare actor in Greece.

As a matter of survival, 'the crisis is offering the church a chance to reduce its financial dependence on the state via legitimate business enterprises, as other churches did decades ago' (Papachristou, 2012).

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