

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Eastern Christian wisdom: seeking unity and justice

Kyle Kooyers Program manager, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

"It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians."

In the Christian New Testament, the word "Christian" is mentioned only three times, and this quote from the book of Acts identifies that it was in Antioch that the label first was used. Thus, the Antiochian Orthodox Church finds its roots in this reference and traces its history to the early followers of Jesus.

The Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity numbers 250 million members and is the second largest Christian community. In 1054, in what is called the Great Schism, it split with the Roman Catholic Church and is currently prominent primarily in Eastern Europe. There are a number of Orthodox churches in West Michigan, including St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church on East Paris Avenue, where the annual Abrahamic Dinner will take place this month.

Central to Orthodoxy is the practice of the Divine Liturgy, an ancient service designed to bring the church into the presence of God to worship and experience the divine holiness and mystery with all the senses. This powerful experience has remained at the heart of Orthodox worship for centuries. It has stood the test of time, even bridging the divides caused by political, religious and ethnic differences within the whole of the Orthodox tradition. From that rich history, Orthodox Christianity, or the Eastern Church, has given the world many voices offering ancient wisdom and formation that might inform how we seek unity and justice in our communities today.

One such voice is the late Philip Saliba, who served as Archbishop of New York and the church's Metropolitan, the term used to designate his leadership of all North America, from 1966 to 2014. During his tenure, Saliba healed the fierce division between two non-communing archdioceses of the Antiochian Orthodox Church. With an eye toward the next generation, he oversaw the development of the Antiochian Village, an Orthodox camp and retreat center in Pennsylvania, built as a space for empowering and equipping youth.

In the late 1970s, Saliba welcomed the influx of thousands of young evangelical Christians into the Antiochian tradition, challenging them to do missions and outreach for the Orthodox Church. With spiritual roots in Jerusalem and Damascus, and family that had witnessed tremendous violence in Lebanon, Saliba spent his life fighting for justice in the Middle East and in the United States.

In a 2009 radio interview, Saliba reflected on his life and learning to live out the hope and justice of his Orthodox Christian faith.

"During the early days of my episcopacy, I wanted to turn the world upside down. I wanted to bring peace to the Middle East," he said.

However, when he found little success pleading the case of Palestinian refugees to the State Department and President Lyndon Johnson, Saliba became immensely frustrated. In the interview, he reflected, "I was very idealistic, and I did not accept things the way they were. I had this drive, this drive to change, change, change, according to my calendar."

Following a heart attack, which he suffered while advocating in Washington D.C., Saliba began to see that change does not happen according to one's personal



Kyle Kooyers is program manager for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

timetable or calendar. Often the quest for justice requires selfless surrender to time, "God's time" as he would say, but time that may or may not be our own. Perhaps we do what we can now so that the next generation might see the fruits of our tireless labor or even bring that hope into fruition.

As he put it: "I reconciled myself to this fact, that Philip Saliba cannot change the world. He can help, but he cannot do it by himself. It takes the grace of God, it takes the power of God, takes the synergy, this work between us and God. ... I must pace myself and change what I can change, and accept what I cannot change, and say 'Thy will be done.'"

Looking ahead to the remaining years of his life, Saliba said, "I remember the Irish author, Bernard Shaw, once said, 'The harder we work, the longer we live,' so I live with this motto. Do your best and leave the rest to God. So I'm going to continue the work which I have been doing, pacing myself, as my doctors tell me to do, and we still have many things to do, many things to do. So I plan to live, if God wills, and do my work in the church for the church."

Toward the end of the interview, Saliba was asked what message he would speak to a stadium full of people from different walks and worldviews. He responded, "I would preach a sermon on the Beatitudes. ... They apply to everybody. ... Don't be dogmatic with them because they're not going to understand ... everyone understands 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' right?"

Until his passing, on March 19, 2014, Saliba continued to be a force of unity and justice in the church, pursuing the overall goal of unifying all Orthodox Churches in the United States. The same faith and tradition that inspired Saliba lives on in Antiochian communities across the country, even here in West Michigan.

We are pleased that one of those congregations, St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, will be hosting this year's Abrahamic Dinner, as we hear from students at area colleges who have become interfaith leaders with the next generation. May we continue to persevere in our best work to build a more unified and equitable community for this generation and the next!

interfaith@gvsu.edu

IF YOU GO

Abrahamic Dinner, 'Listening to New Voices: The Next Generation Speaks'

When: 6 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 20

Where: St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, 2250 E Paris Ave. SE, Grand Rapids

Information and registration: interfaithunderstanding.org

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