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**LASALLIAN EDUCATION
ACCESSIBLE TO OTHER
RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS**
Addresses given at the Meeting of the
European Education Commission in Greece
(1/2)

I.

Address given by Brother François Varthalitis in the presence of the Metropolitan of Piraeus, Monsignor Kallinikos

Monsignor,

We are all filled with great joy!

It has pleased God to bring together all the members of the European Education Commission (CLEE) here in Piraeus, a city in which the Holy Spirit has given your venerable person spiritual responsibility for the citizens.

We thank you for your warm welcome and for opening to us the doors of your Metropolitan See. We thank you even more for opening to us the door of your heart and that of your local Church.

We, the members of the CLEE, have come together for these few days to reflect on the work of Christian education pursued in some 600 Lasallian establishments in Europe. In these establishments, some 20,000 teachers, Brothers and lay people, seek to inspire the numerous pupils entrusted to us with the breath of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit continues to lead the Church of Christ and to speak to it through the events of everyday life. This same Spirit urges us to follow his inspiration. What does the Spirit seem to be saying today about Europe?

Present-day Europe is characterised by religious and cultural pluralism. It no longer has, to the exclusion of everything else, characteristics which traditionally defined its identity and distinguished the features of its face. Other civilisations, other Christian dogmas, other religions now co-exist side by side with those which forged the Christian face of the West: the Catholic Church and the Churches inspired by the Reformation.

This fact, Your Excellency, does not worry us, nor does it pose a threat. It forces us, in fact, to re-think and develop new foundations for the presence of the Gospel and the Church in Europe.

As a Church, we have behind us the experience of 20 centuries of history. This new situation forces us to be more

keenly aware of our situation as committed Christians, baptised in the name of the Most Blessed Trinity, and to bear witness, in the new world which seems to be emerging in Europe, to the truth of the Orthodoxy of the Gospel in the Orthopraxis of life in the Church.

This is why we are now spending a few days considering the topic of "Cultural and religious pluralism in Lasallian schools in Europe".

It is clear, Monsignor, that, more and more, social, cultural and religious changes in society are causing cultural and religious changes in schools, and creating considerable diversity among the pupils. But should these differences and characteristics be seen as an obstacle to education, or should they rather be thought of as a call to education to move towards the acceptance of differences in others, and to enrich itself by the presence of persons whose social, cultural and religious background may be different from mine?

And another point. Should we not replace the traditional way of defining identity as an exclusion of others to make room only for ourselves by a more modern and evangelical way which leaves room for the acceptance of others and collaboration with others?

The Lasallian school, faithful to the Gospel of Christ and to the teachings of its Founder, St John Baptist de La Salle, made its choice a long time ago, when it said "YES" to the human and Christian education of people, based on respect for their cultural and religious differences.

The meeting of the European Education Commission currently being held in Piraeus will make a careful study of how children and young people should be treated in Lasallian schools, so that all children may give, receive and become enriched, but never at the expense of others.

Is not this the way, Monsignor, in which our Churches are moving forward together at this moment in history? There is fraternal dialogue between them based on truth. They seek unity in Christ, they seek their lost communion. It is a dialogue which opens the door of their heart so that they can share with each other the precious gifts the God of all goodness has granted them for his glory.

We ask you to bless us, to bless the work of our meeting, and the future success in Christ of Lasallian work.

As an expression of our sincere love and of our gratitude for the truly warm welcome you have given us, please accept, Monsignor, a copy of the latest encyclical of the Pope of Rome, John Paul II, "UT UNUM SINT".

II

Reply of Mgr Kallinikos, Metropolitan of Piraeus

I would prefer if we sat down: it would give our meeting a more fraternal and family character, just as if we were a family!

You have come to Piraeus and you have come to visit us. Let me say how happy I am and how much esteem I have for your admirable work.

I have some idea of what you offer our children in your schools. I have very happy memories of the visit you paid me 2 years ago when you came to my monastery during your meeting for headmasters of Lasallian schools in Greece.

I have a genuine love for the Catholic Church.

It is with profound interior grief that I witness the sorrowful separation of the Churches.

As members of the Orthodox Church, we feel deeply the worries and problems of people today.

We are well aware of all the changes taking place in Europe at the present time. We feel our share of responsibility as we see the progressive degradation of the human condition today. Catholics and Orthodox united together, we need to give witness to the faith to the whole world.

I suffer because we do not have the communion that we ought to have.

I am convinced that meetings between the Churches can play a positive role in bringing them closer together.

We have no fanaticism nor rejection of other people.

We believe firmly in the truths of the Orthodox church, but we have genuine respect for the Catholic Church.

I think that in your schools, and especially in Lasallian schools, you help to attenuate differences.

Our representative in your schools, Father Methodios, passes on your messages to me very faithfully, and has told me about the possibility you have offered Orthodox pupils to take part in services.

I, in my turn and with great charity, would like to recommend one thing to you: it is that we should put an end to the prejudices and friction that exist between us, and thus create an atmosphere that is more conducive to dialogue. I think also that greater attention on the part of the Church to questions which are a sensitive issue in the Orthodox Church would help even more the process of drawing the Churches closer together.

With all my heart I bless your meeting.

I wish you every success in your work. I must say, incidentally, that something gave me great joy when we celebrated a national feastday recently. I was standing next to the

episcopal vicar and I remarked to him that the pupils in the march-past who were dressed most correctly and with the greatest dignity came from the Catholic schools. They made a great impression on me.

Be assured of our love, of our prayers for the success of your work. May God grant you a spirit of unity in the truth, so that our two Churches may become one again and present a common face to the world of today.

God be with you!

(Translated from Greek to French, sentence by sentence, by Brother Varthalitis).

Answers to questions

* An invitation to Father Methodios to say something about the links between the Fathers of the Church and St John Baptist de La Salle gave much joy to Mgr Kallinikos, who said he supported any educational initiatives taken by the Catholic Church. Education was an undeveloped aspect in the Greek Church because of the identification of the Church with the State.

He added that the Orthodox Church was not always in total agreement regarding the school programmes drawn up by the Ministry. The underlying pessimism of some programmes and of some methods was a contributory factor to the crisis of young people and to the challenging of fundamental values.

* In answer to a question regarding globalisation which was a characteristic of the century that was coming to an end, Mgr Kallinikos spoke of the drift in thinking, including Christian thinking: it needed to be regulated better. He referred to the need for our two Churches to find a meeting point: "It is a luxury to remain separated nowadays. Christ is mocked. Yes, there are many vigorous centres of spirituality in existence, but are they enough in the face of the millions of young people who keep their distance from them!"

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