

32. You've got to have faith By Archbishop Elpidophoros

Preface

Belief in something bigger than ourselves or a wisdom beyond our own experience needn't be supernatural. Here a holy man from the Greek Orthodox church shares a little divine wisdom.

I have travelled to many places and lived in different parts of the world for long periods. I can tell you that human nature is the same everywhere, no matter the specific characteristics of each country.

People sometimes violate the law – human law and divine law – and harm others to put their ego first. The common good comes second. I am honoured to be a bishop of a church whose leader, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, has developed initiatives to promote the protection of the environment. He is the first religious leader to say that damage we do to the environment is a sin because it shows disrespect to God's creation.

Pollution is a sin. We need to re-evaluate our behaviour against the environment. I'm proud that Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, because of his environmental initiatives and teachings, is known as The Green Patriarch.

By definition, religions and religious institutions are conservative and resistant to change. But the idea of renewal and modernisation is central to the Orthodox Church. We follow the changes of society with a certain sense of delay but change is always there.

Not long ago – about 60 or 70 years – church services were divided into men on the right side of the entrance and women on the left. Before then women were not even in the central

nave of the church, they were put on a balcony. That reflected the structure and the social values of the Ottoman Empire. Greeks had to adapt to the times. Now this has changed, of course. This is not due to the decision of any synod in the church of Greece or in the Orthodox Church in general. People change, society changes and the church follows these changes.

Faith in something superior is natural. If this conviction – that there are higher powers governing the world – is not connected to a specific religion or church, it can be difficult to connect faith to the practical matters of an individual's life. It's easier for a person to express their faith through a religion or a church, where they can find structure and a tradition that protects and guides them.

In Greece the church still has a dominant role. If not the church as an institution, then Orthodox faith as a belief that is deeply rooted in the heart, mind and soul of the Greek people. Sometimes institutions face challenges and are questioned. But the faith of ordinary people is so strong and deeply rooted that I don't think any event can shake it.

Having faith is something that belongs to human nature. It's not imposed by any religious organisation or structure. Any church offers an environment for us to practise something that is natural in our heart. It's a need that we have in our souls. If we cannot find a way to express or organise our faith, we have a difficulty in our soul. This brings challenges in our behaviour towards others and it prevents us from socialising in a way we could if our personality was more balanced.

Even a lack of faith – atheism – is a faith. That point of view needs a social context within which people can express their belief that God doesn't exist. Of course, I don't agree with that. But it is a faith in the sense that it's a way of expressing a conviction towards the unknown.

About the writer

Archbishop Elpidophoros of America is the archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. He spoke to *Monocle 24's* New York correspondent, Henry Rees-Sheridan, for a film that's available to view on *monocle.com/films*.