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**LIFE AND ACTIVITY OF ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH ATHENAGORAS I
(1886-1972)**

SUMMARY -

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SUMMARY -

Keywords: Ecumenical Patriarch, Holy and Great Council, Pogrom, Great Schism, interfaith dialogue, Roman Catholic Church.

This work has emerged from the desire to provide contemporary Romanian society with an example, a perspective, or even clarification regarding "The Life and Activity of Patriarch Athenagoras." A person who is unknown to many and known to few can prove to be a true model in approaching current challenges according to Gospel principles.

Patriarch Athenagoras was a wise and spiritual man who always sought peace, love, and understanding among all inhabitants of the earth, regardless of nationality, religion, or social position. Like Saint Apostle Paul, he made himself "all things to all men, that he might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Of course, many of his actions may have been exaggerated, mistaken, or controversial, but by analyzing these actions, from intention to realization and consequences, we have the chance to gain valuable lessons on how we can carry forward or establish an inter-Orthodox or interfaith dialogue.

Although Patriarch Athenagoras is a prominent figure in the universal Church history, specialized literature in Romania dedicates very few pages to him. He is mentioned briefly in Church History textbooks, in contemporary studies, in the context of the Pan-Orthodox meetings in Rhodes, or on the occasion of his visit to Romania in the autumn of 1967. Therefore, a compact work encompassing his entire life was urgently needed.

The work is structured into four chapters corresponding to important stages in the life of the Patriarch.

The first chapter describes his place of birth, family, early education, and significant events in his life that contributed to shaping the personality of the future Patriarch. Born on March 25, 1886, in the village of Tsaraplana (now Basiliko), near the city of Ioannina in the Epirus region, Aristokle Spirou came into contact with ethnic and religious diversity from an early age, living alongside Serbs, Armenians, Turks, playing with Muslim or Jewish children, and forming friendships with them. From 1903 to 1910, he attended the Patriarchal Theological School in Halki, and from 1910 to 1918, he served as a deacon in the Diocese of Pelagonia. With the end of World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the Diocese of Pelagonia was transferred to the Serbian Church, and thus Deacon Athenagoras was forced to retreat for 6 months to Chilia Mylopotamos in Mount Athos. In 1919, he was called by Metropolitan Meletios Metaxakis to serve as archdeacon at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Athens and was elected as the secretary of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, a position he held until December 1922.

The second chapter describes the period between 1922 and 1930, during which Athenagoras served as the Metropolitan of the Island of Corfu. From the houses built and made available to refugees, to the established schools, to the care for the youth, and to the training of priests, all these activities made him stand out as a good organizer, a tireless philanthropist, and a true spiritual leader. During this fruitful period, he established the YMCA Corfu (Young

Men's Christian Association), the Society of Saint Spyridon, a Theological Seminar, the "Sfântul Spiridon" magazine, and he also offered the community of Corfu the relics of Saint Spyridon, which had been in the possession of the Vulgaris family for almost five centuries. Among his controversial actions was the introduction of organs in the churches of Corfu. This decision can be understood considering the historical context, the fact that the island of Corfu had been under Venetian and Catholic influence for 400 years, and the fact that Orthodox Christians on the island attended Catholic churches not out of conviction, but only because the music was more beautiful there.

In the third chapter of the work, we discussed the major contribution that Athenagoras made to the development of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in America. Officially established through the efforts of Archbishop Meletios Metaxakis on May 11, 1922, but with evidence of the presence of a Greek church as early as 1864, the Greek Orthodox Church in America emerged as a necessity due to the massive wave of Greek immigrants who came to America starting in the late 19th century. In 1906, there were only 29 Greek churches on the American continent, but by 1916, ten years later, there were 59 churches. By 1926, the number of Greek parish churches had reached 153.

Although as early as 1908, the Patriarchate of Constantinople entrusted the Greek Orthodox parishes to the Holy Synod of Greece through a Patriarchal Tomos, it was only in 1918 that Archbishop Meletios Metaxakis of Athens, accompanied by Bishop Alexandru of Rodostolon, went to America and laid the foundations for a diocese. Until the arrival of Archbishop Athenagoras in 1931, the Greek Church faced difficulties due to disagreements between royalists and Venizelists, with unprepared priests ordained by Russian or Serbian bishops, and with bishops sent by the Synod of Greece claiming the rightful spiritual leadership, all in the context of the semi-autonomous status granted to the Archdiocese of America by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople since 1922.

Athenagoras arrived in America at the beginning of 1931 and was enthroned at the "Saint Eleftherios" Church in New York on February 26. He immediately began the process of reorganizing the Archdiocese: he convened the fourth lay-clerical Congress (November 14, 1931), during which it was decided to eliminate the synodal system, centralize the administration, and return to the direct jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Although these decisions significantly improved the situation of the Archdiocese, they made Archbishop Athenagoras the target of hostile attacks.

Despite facing many difficulties, Athenagoras stood out through his social, philanthropic, cultural, and spiritual activities. He established the "Holy Cross" Seminary in Brookline, Massachusetts (1937), the "Saint Basil" Academy in Garrison, New York, the "Church Philanthropic Arm" Society (1931), and the publication "Orthodox Observer" (1943-present). One of his main concerns was his pastoral visits to all parishes of the Archdiocese, engaging with the people, listening to them, trying to resolve conflicts between Venizelists and royalists, and ensuring that the community's priest was well-prepared and worthy of his role. In his eighteen years of leadership in America, he managed to visit each parish at least twice. He constantly cared for the priests and their families, considering himself their elder brother, always ready to help and support them. He encouraged their education, urged them to collaborate with the laity, and exempted them from the obligation to have long hair and a large beard, as was the norm in the East.

Another aspect highlighted in this chapter was the relationship between Archbishop Athenagoras and the presidents and leaders of the American state. As soon as he arrived in America and succeeded in reconciling the spirits, he visited President Herbert Hoover to assure him that the Greek conflicts, which had troubled the American state for a decade, had come to an end. He also had friendly relations with the next two American presidents, Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. The latter even made the presidential aircraft, the renowned Air Force One, available to him for his journey to Turkey on January 26, 1949, after he was elected as the Ecumenical Patriarch in November 1948.

In the fourth chapter, we presented moments from the patriarchal life of our protagonist, his significant role in the fight against communist expansion, the context in which he became patriarch, his relations with other churches, and the struggle for national and religious unity. After the end of World War II, the United States recognized the rising influence of the Moscow Patriarchate as an instrument of Russia's international politics, and therefore sought to support and strengthen the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople as a reaction to the expansion of Soviet influence in the Balkans and the Middle East.

At that time, the Ecumenical Patriarch was Maximos, who sympathized with the Soviet Union, which led to his forced retirement in 1948 on health grounds. In his place, Archbishop Athenagoras of America, aged 61, was elected in November 1948. He did not meet any of the conditions imposed by the Turks on candidates for the Ecumenical Patriarchate after the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. However, due to Turkey's need for support from the United

States of America, this decision was accepted, and Patriarch Athenagoras was granted Turkish citizenship upon his arrival at Istanbul Airport by the city's prefect.

At the time of Patriarch Athenagoras' arrival, there were around 300,000 Orthodox Greek Christians in Turkey, the majority of them in Istanbul. Jurisdictionally, the Patriarchate of Constantinople included Greek areas such as Mount Athos, Patmos, and the Dodecanese Islands, the entire Greek diaspora in Western Europe, America, and Australia, part of the Russian diaspora in Europe, the semi-autonomous Church in Crete, and the autonomous Church in Finland.

Once installed as Patriarch, Athenagoras sought to maintain good relations with the Turkish authorities. He was the first Patriarch to receive a visit from a Turkish Prime Minister, Adnan Menderes, in 1952. He sought every opportunity to improve relations between the Greeks in Istanbul and the Turks: he sent greetings and messages on Turkish holidays, raised the Turkish flag on the Patriarchate building like any public institution, and visitors to his personal office were amazed to find a huge painting of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

All these good relations came to an end in 1955 with the emergence of the Cyprus problem and the Pogrom of the night between September 6 and 7 when, within a few hours, houses, shops, churches, and everything belonging to the Greek community in Istanbul were destroyed. It all began after World War II when Greek Cypriots revolted against the British, who had been in control since 1878 and now supported the idea of union with Greece. The situation escalated after the election of Makarios as Archbishop of the Greek Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Corfu in 1950, who called for Greece's assistance in achieving the union. The Turks, representing a minority in Cyprus, felt threatened, and thus the relations between the two countries deteriorated.

Shortly thereafter, Patriarch Athenagoras fell out of favor, both with the Turks who had requested his assistance and expected him to depose the divisive Bishop Makarios, and with the Greeks who would have expected the Patriarch to support the union of Cyprus with Greece. From that moment on, protests against the Patriarch began, demanding the relocation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from Turkish territory and the expulsion of all Greeks from Istanbul.

The Cyprus issue was partially resolved in 1960 when the island gained state independence, forming a bizonal federal republic (Greek and Turkish). However, the image of

the Ecumenical Patriarch remained tarnished, and his relationship with the Turkish state was nowhere near as good as when he ascended the Constantinopolitan throne. On the contrary, it continued to deteriorate. The Patriarch was prohibited from performing any functions outside the country's borders, the ability to print was revoked (the patriarchate's printing press was closed in 1964), the publication of the two patriarchal periodicals "Orthodoxia" (1926-1963) and "Apostolos Andreas" (1951-1964) was interrupted, and the Patriarchal School in Halki was closed in 1971. Thus, the one who was welcomed with great pomp upon arrival in Turkey at the beginning of 1949 ended up being viewed as *persona non grata* until the end of his life.

In this chapter, we also presented the relations that Patriarch Athenagoras had with other Churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church. He is known for jointly revoking the mutual excommunications between Cardinal Humbert of Moyenmoutier and Patriarch Michael I Cerularius, which were pronounced in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and led to the Great Schism, the lasting rupture between the two Churches in 1054. The declaration lifting the anathemas was simultaneously read on December 7, 1965, in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on the occasion of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and in the Cathedral of St. George of the Patriarchate in Constantinople.

Following the meeting in Jerusalem from January 4-6, 1964, between Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, the dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church intensified, culminating in reciprocal visits made by Pope Paul VI to the Patriarchate of Constantinople between July 25-26, 1967, and by Patriarch Athenagoras to Rome between October 26-28, 1967.

This dialogue initiated by Patriarch Athenagoras did not have the consensus of the entire Orthodox Church. On the contrary, many considered that such ecumenical acts affected the essence of Orthodoxy itself. Among those who did not view the actions of Patriarch Athenagoras favorably were Metropolitan Chrysostom of Athens, Archimandrite Epiphanius Theodoropoulos, Saint Paisios the Athonite, who wrote a few thoughts to the Patriarch published in the newspaper *Orthodoxos Typos* (Orthodox Press) in 1969, and the Serbian theologian Archimandrite Justin Popovici.

Another topic addressed throughout the fourth chapter is related to the preparation for the Holy and Great Council. Patriarch Athenagoras convened the Pan-Orthodox Conferences in Rhodes in 1961, 1963, and 1964, and the fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambésy, Geneva, in 1968. During these conferences, the participating Orthodox Churches,

in addition to discussing the topics on the agenda of the Holy and Great Council, established the principle of dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church on an equal footing, and the issue of Orthodox delegates attending the sessions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was raised.

By going through the four chapters, we observe Patriarch Athenagoras' involvement in the ecclesiastical life of the 20th century. Besides simply recounting the important events in the life of the Patriarch, we have sought to explain the historical and social context of his actions so that we can gain a more realistic understanding of the problems he faced, the environment in which he operated, the challenges he encountered, and to portray his spiritual and cultural profile for a better understanding of his thinking and motivations. Moreover, I believe that this work paves the way for further research, as many facts and aspects of his life can be studied in more detail and depth to supplement the pages of the great book of Universal Church History.