

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and I pray that He would bless this festival of yours.

I bring you greetings from the Evangelical Church of Greece (ECG)! A church of the Reformed tradition, the oldest Protestant body in Greece and percentagewise the 0,04% of the Greek population.

Before I go on I would like to thank the President of GAW Rheinland, Pastor Urlike Veerman and Pastor Christoph Cäsar, of GAW Aachen, for the kind invitation not only to attend your annual festival but to be given such a substantial time to present the diaconal ministry of the ECG toward the refugees.

I am humbled by your love and honored by your invitation.

I would also like to thank you for being so patient and willing to hear me through a translation.

As far as I know, this is the first time someone from Greece is attending this festival. Thus, I'd like, on behalf of my Church, to express our deep thankfulness and appreciation for the many years of support you have been providing for us, a very small Protestant Church in Greece.

I do not think there is one parish church of ours whose building program has not been supported by your faithful and generous gift. As far as I can remember, since my childhood when our parish church building was being built, GAW was there to help.

For us, a minority Church, GAW was always a faithful and supportive 'shoulder' we could lean on. In fact it was the only 'shoulder' outside of Greece that we knew and leaned on. If it was not for your support, not only our parish church buildings, but many within the Greek Protestant family, would not have been built.

Along with the support for the building projects that you have provided all along, lately you have been our mouthpiece in Germany with regard to the refugee crisis. GAW, through its Prälatin Gabriele Wulz and its General Secretary Pfarrer Enno Haaks, have been our staunchest supporters and we are deeply thankful to them.

GAW Rheinland, however, has helped us in other ways as well. As you know, Greece has been going through a deep financial crisis for the past 10 years. This crisis resulted in many problems in the proper operation of the church's institutions like the old people's home in Katerini. Two years ago, at a very critical moment, GAW Rheinland came along with a substantial gift and so 'The Good Samaritan House for the Elderly' was able to remain in operation. Thank you!

May God, the Owner of the whole world, reward you for your spirit of solidarity and kindness toward us. A verse from Hebrews 6 comes to my mind, *"¹⁰ For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do."*

You all know by now that the summer of 2015 was a difficult one for Greece due to its economic hurdles. The relationship between Greece and Germany went through a difficult time. The bilateral tensions mounted as populist press and politicians grabbed the opportunity to stereotype and bad mouth the other, bringing out of the closet of frightening historical skeletons which for decades we tried to forget. Thank God that the tension slowly subsided and relations have been normalized again. I hope we came out of that summer wiser.

However, it was because of what was happening the summer of 2015 that the relationship between the ECG and GAW was revitalized and upgraded. Yet, the factor which brought us even closer and in mutual cooperation, was the refugee crisis. By the end of August and beginning of September 2015 thousands upon thousands Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan refugees and with many more of various nationalities, started coming to our islands.

Since then many things have transpired. Greece welcomed hundreds of thousands and Germany took the majority of them. In 2016 our two countries saved the day for Europe. Unfortunately, at the same time, other European countries, ironically claiming their supposedly Christian heritage, shut their borders and built barbed wired walls, leading the way to today's anti-refugee backlash.

We realize that the presence of the refugees, a people of different cultural background, poses a great challenge to our governments, our institutions, our society and to us as Christians and as a Church. Lately we are again seeing a rise in the numbers of refugees crossing into Greece. Almost 24.000 in 2018 and that's until September. That is 17% higher than the same time period in 2017)¹. And this time we cannot be accused of not protecting our borders, as we were in 2016. Today the Greek land and sea borders with Turkey are being watched and guarded by the European Frontex force.

Again, one might question the efficiency of the Greek State's tackle of the refugee crisis. Yet, as a people going through a decade of deep financial crisis ourselves, we have been called to deal with the refugee problem which is larger than us and, to be honest, we did not create it. The mess in Iraq and in Syria, as well as in Libya and Afganistan was not created by us, nor have we been selling weapons to the warring factions in those areas. And yet we have been called to bear the repercussions of the wars of the last 20 years and the toppling of their leaders. Unfortunately, some of those countries which are mostly responsible for the mess they have created, not only are not there to help, nor are they exiting the EU, because, among other issues, they do not want to take in refugees, but some of their companies might be making profit. How fair is this situation either for the people who were forced to leave their homes and become wanderers or for Greece to be called to pay such a high price?

The refugee crisis is a complex issue and we as Christians and as a Church do not have another choice but to show Christian love to a

¹ Church's Commission on Migrants (15th European Conference, October 15-20 , 2018, Greece)

neighbor we did not choose, but whom God brought and is asking us to be a Good Samaritan.

No other factor could have motivated us to initiate and maintain a holistic hospitality for longer than three years now, either at the Port of Piraeus or at Eidomeni or at the various Camps or at the cities where currently many reside, than the call of our Lord to love the 'least of our society'.

Human altruism and philanthropy could have taken us up to a point, but not this far. If it was not for Jesus Christ and His call to love the unlovable and be His witnesses, then none of us would have turned to look to these 'intruders', of our land, a people of different religion, culture, language. A 'threat' according to some in Europe.

It was God's constant and sobering question, demanding an answer from us, "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 4.9) that did not allow us to continue in our reclusive religious passivity, while they were knocking at our door. It was His call to us to be His hands, His feet, and His open arms and to offer ourselves, our resources, our homes and our churches, for the alleviation of their pain caused by the hell war brought to their lives. It was Paul's instruction to Titus to teach believers to "lead in doing good works which are profitable to people" (Titus 3.8).

The Lord's Word captivated us. We could not see secular NGOs get involved and the Church be absent. No, we believed the Church should be there and do its best. Thus we had set a number of goals, three of which were:

1. The Witness of the Christian Church

The responsibility to welcome the Refugees was not a Protestant obligation nor an Orthodox or a Catholic. It's a Christian obligation.

Thus, it was important for us to welcome these people in the name of the Christian Church and not in the name of our particular ecclesiastical community.

And of course, we could not have done it without the help, especially the financial help, from other Churches, like the Evangelical Church in Germany.

Thus, the Refugees were welcomed for the sake of the Church.

2. The Witness of Our Continent: Europe

We were also motivated to welcome these people for the sake of our beloved continent: Europe.

To many of them, Europe is identified with Christianity and in their collective memory they remember Europe's not so Christian behavior in their lands, both in the distant past and in recent times.

Thus, it was important for us, as we were the first Christian European country they were stepping into, not to sport the negative stereotyping of our Continent, with which they were raised, but to replace all that with a Christian narrative of a generous and loving hospitality. We wanted their first European experience to be welcoming, friendly, respectful, dignified.

Thus, the Refugees were welcomed for the sake of Europe.

3. The Witness of Our Homeland: Greece

As you know, since 2009, my people have gone through a very difficult time due to the economic austerity measures which were implemented. If that was not enough, since 2015 we have been called to welcome more than a million refugees. Yet, despite our difficulties, we along with countless Greeks, felt that our economic problems should not deter us nor serve as an alibi in not welcoming these people with decency and respect.

Thus, we perceived it as a great opportunity to show to the world and especially Europe, that despite our own enormous economic difficulties, we can remain humane and welcome the downtrodden.

Thus, the Refugees were welcomed for the sake of Greece.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Allow me to finish with a passage from the Word of God which spoke so strongly to us during all this time and kept us going despite the challenges.

“¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love, because he first loved us. ²⁰ If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.” (1 John 4).

The Christian faith is not a faith of fear, but of love!

A video

<https://youtu.be/LwyvzYTtSQ0>