

ADVICE FROM ST. MAXIMOS CONFESSOR FOR CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIANS

James R. Payton, Jr.

James R. Payton, Jr. is Professor of History at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada, and Executive Secretary, CAREE (Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe). Unable for visa reasons to present this paper at the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Skopje in the spring of 2004, he visited Macedonia in October 2004.

INTRODUCTION

All three of our monotheistic religions rely on the divine Word, written for us: for Jews in the Tanakh, for Christians also in the New Testament, and for Muslims as well in the Qur'an. For all our disagreements with each other, we recognize a common rootedness in a tradition of faith finding its beginning in Abraham, for Jews carried forward by the patriarchs and Moses, for Christians fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and for Muslims culminating in Muhammed. Consequently, even in the midst of the tensions that have separated our faiths over the centuries and have contributed recently to the tensions notable in your beautiful land, our religions have enough common heritage that we should be able to listen to and, it may be hoped, appreciate each other – with a view to finding ways both to honor our own religious faith and yet also to honor those who do not share it. For this, we need to try to find emphases and approaches to which we can all resonate. One of these may be found in a declaration which all three of our religions have heard and emphasized.

WHAT GOD WANTS FROM US: LOVE FOR GOD AND OTHERS

The declaration I am referring to comes from the pen of Moses; it is emphasized by the first-century rabbi confessed by Christians as the incarnate Son of God; and it is affirmed as the faithful teaching of one recognized as a prophet in the Qur'an. I present that declaration to you as a Christian who hears in these words the way God wants us to live; I trust that you who are Jews will recognize them as God's Word to you from your own holy scriptures; I hope that you who are Muslims will resonate to them as the instructions of a faithful prophet, Jesus. As with so much of his teaching, the words come to us in a story: when asked by a Jewish religious scholar of his day what God especially wants of us, Jesus wove together two passages, one from the fifth book of Moses (Deuteronomy) and another from the third (Leviticus). Jesus responded:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” [Deut. 6:5]. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Lev. 19:18]. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37-40).

As we proceed to reflect on this summary of what God requires of humanity, I hope that you who are Jews will hear adumbrations of what your own holy tradition encourages you to do, and I trust that you who are Muslims will recognize that this précis comes to you from a great prophet of Allah. But I expect that all of you who profess Christianity will give careful attention to the instructions of him whom we confess as the incarnate Son of God, our Lord and Savior: this is how he tells us God wants us to live, at all times – including the tense days facing Macedonia in the present.

Before turning to consider the guidance offered by an esteemed leader of the ancient Church on this mandate, we should note that New Testament teaching already had elaborated on the implications of Jesus Christ’s summary. On the one hand, these elaborations specified the relationship between love for God and love for others. On the other, they dramatically expounded how far love for neighbor must go.

The clearest example of the first was St. John the Theologian’s striking declaration of the interconnectedness of love for God and for others:

Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (I Jn. 4:7-8,20-21).

The apostle will not allow a disjunction between love for God and love for others; indeed, he excoriates any such separation, declaring that – whatever one might otherwise claim – failure to love others shows that one does not love God. According to New Testament teaching, love for others flows inevitably out of any true love for God.

The second major elaboration of the call to love God and others comes from Jesus Christ himself. Recognizing our sinful propensity to hate rather than love, he not only calls us to love our neighbors, but even to love those who hate us. In the Sermon on the Mount, he declares:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your

enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?... And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:43-48).

Jesus Christ himself calls his followers to love even the hostile “other,” identifying such love as the family resemblance between the heavenly Father and his children. Christians are to pattern their love for others on the divine love for humankind.

With all this, Christianity has been faced from its earliest days with the challenge of unstinting love toward God, to be manifest in loving all other human beings. As Christians, we must recognize that our teaching and practice have too often fallen far short of that mark. We can be thankful, though, that we have also been favored with faithful teachers who boldly faced the implications of the summons to a life of love and called the Church in their day to live up to them fully. The words of such leaders speak to us over the centuries, in circumstances quite different from the particular ones those teachers faced themselves. One of those great leaders whose words on love for God and others can and should speak powerfully and helpfully to all of us today – and, perhaps, especially to you in Macedonia at this tense point in your history – is St. Maximos Confessor.

INSTRUCTION FROM ST. MAXIMOS CONFESSOR

St. Maximos Confessor (ca. 580-662) was one of the last of the universally esteemed Church fathers. Hailed in both Western Christianity and in Eastern Orthodoxy as a stalwart, St. Maximos was a contemporary of Muhammed (although the two never met and seemed to know nothing of each other). Revered as a faithful teacher in the Western Church, St. Maximos speaks authoritatively to Roman Catholics and to Protestants alike. St. Maximos exercises even greater authority within Eastern Orthodoxy, though: he was a major figure in the articulation of Orthodox teaching,¹ and he valiantly withstood the false teaching of monothelism, to the point of being exiled three times and eventually having his tongue cut out and his right hand cut off (thus earning his epithet “Confessor”). St. Maximos offers challenging and helpful guidance for Christian doctrine and life; he speaks especially clearly

¹St. Maximos coordinated the prior ascetical and doctrinal teaching of the Church fathers; his work was further refined by St. John of Damascus in his *The Orthodox Faith*, a volume that has stood for centuries as the preeminent exposition of Eastern Orthodox teaching.

and profoundly to Christians of all times as he calls them to live by the words of Christ, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In this regard, St. Maximos has challenging advice to give today to contemporary Macedonians.

St. Maximos wrote a number of works. He devoted two of them – *The Ascetic Life*² and *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love*³ – to extended considerations of Christ’s command of love. Significantly, these two volumes are key for understanding the whole of St. Maximos’ thought, since love for God and others is foundational to all his teaching.⁴ In these two works, consequently, we have a condensation of the main themes of this Church father’s understanding of the faith and life inculcated by Christianity. In this paper, we obviously cannot explore the whole of St. Maximos’ doctrinal understanding, in general, or even the complete pattern of his thought on love, in particular. What we will do is consider how he deals with the New Testament themes noted above as he expounds the implications of Christ’s command of love for Christ’s followers in St. Maximos’ day – and in ours.

As we begin our consideration of his teaching, we should note that both these works were written to monks, and the instruction St. Maximos gave directly addressed the monastic life. But as with the rest of Eastern Christian teaching, both before his time and subsequently, so also in St. Maximos, monasticism served as a stimulus for all Christians: all the faithful, and not just the monks, were to live a life of total devotion to God, as exemplified so strikingly in monastic commitment. Thus, St. Maximos’ directions to monks addressed, in their different circumstances, all the faithful who lived in society and encountered the challenges and opportunities of non-monastic life. Consequently, his words speak to us today – to all of us, wherever we are, in whatever circumstances, and thus to all of you in contemporary Macedonia.

²This work is available in an English version: Polycarp Sherwood, trans. and ed., *St. Maximus the Confessor: “The Ascetic Life” and “The Four Centuries on Charity”* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), at pp. 103-135. (Quotations from *The Ascetic Life* in the paper below will be taken from this version; they will be cited as AL, followed by indication of the section in the work taken from this version.)

³The most recent English version of this work is found in George C. Berthold, trans. and ed., *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1985), at pp. 33-98. (Citations from *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love* will be taken from this version; they will be cited as FHCL, followed by the number of the “century” [group of one hundred statements] and, following a colon, the number of the section within that century.)

⁴Sherwood asserts, “The true heart of Maximus’ doctrine is love” (“Introduction,” p. 91); cf. also his declaration, “what is most characteristic in Maximus [is] his doctrine of love” (p. 96).

THE RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE FOR GOD AND LOVE FOR OTHERS

It can be no surprise that St. Maximos teaches that love is essential to Christian life; as a basic orientation point, he declares that the Christian life must be permeated by love. Loved by God himself in Jesus Christ, we love in response – by loving God and loving others. Indeed, St. Maximos boldly declares, “Any ascetic [read: “Christian”] life or practice that is without love is a stranger to God” (AL §17).

St. Maximos affirms that love for God is at the heart of all true religion: it is the greatest and first commandment. But he urges that the one “like it” is not just similar, though: following St. John the Theologian, St. Maximos teaches that love for neighbor flows out of and evidences love for God:

This is the sign of our love for God, as the Lord Himself shows in the Gospels: *He that loves me, He says, will keep my commandments* [cf. Jn. 14:15]. And what this commandment is, which if we keep we love Him, hear Him tell: *This is my commandment, that you love one another* [Jn. 15:12]. Do you see that this love for one another makes firm the love for God, which is the fulfilling of every commandment of God? (AL §7).⁵

St. Maximos spoke strongly on this because he recognized that love for others was not particularly evident in his day among many who claimed to be followers of Christ; instead, hatred – the opposite of love – had taken deep root in too many professed Christians. But St. Maximos would allow neither excuse nor place for hatred, and he is utterly forthright in denouncing it and warning against it: “The one who sees a trace of hatred in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man whoever he may be makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in no way admits of hatred for man” (FHCL 1:15). According to St. Maximos, hatred for others and love for God are mutually exclusive. Even so, hostility toward others had become widespread enough among those who claimed to be followers of Christ that St. Maximos challenged the Church of his day: “Are we not all nurturers of wrath? Are we not all bearers of malice?... Is not our calling upon God the Father make-believe? Instead of children of God have we not become children of Hell?... Let no one be vexed at hearing the truth” (AL §32). He went on boldly to challenge all those in whose lives not love but hatred toward others was manifest: “How can we be called children of God, and not rather the contrary?... How then can we be called Christians, who have nothing at all of Christ in us?” (AL §33). St. Maximos would not let professed followers of Christ in his day

⁵Cf. Sherwood’s assessment that for St. Maximos, “The activity and proof of perfect love for God is love for our neighbor” (“Introduction,” p. 97).

make excuses for taking a different path than that of love as laid out by Jesus Christ himself.⁶

St. Maximos pursued the point vigorously. He pointed out that forgiveness for our sins – which Christians seek from God through Jesus Christ – is all tied up, as Jesus Christ himself taught in the Lord’s Prayer, with forgiving our neighbors.⁷ St. Maximos declared, “We find the forgiveness of our trespasses in forgiving our brothers and sisters, and the mercy of God is hidden in mercifulness toward our neighbor” (AL §42). For St. Maximos, to fasten on the faults of others towards us and hold resentment against them indicates that we have not yet let the merciful love of God reach the depths of our being; more, we delude ourselves if we think we can claim divine mercy while withholding human mercy.

LOVE LIKE GOD’S: FOR ALL, WITHOUT EXCEPTION

According to St. Maximos, love toward others cannot depend on who they are or what they are like. Created in the divine image, human beings are called to attain divine likeness,⁸ but likeness to God requires acting as he does in dealing with humankind. St. Maximos declares: “God ... loves all people equally” (FHCL 1:61). St. Maximos calls us to do the same: we must seek to attain “perfect love, which cannot be possessed except by the one who loves all people equally, in imitation of God...” (FHCL 1:61). This is repeatedly stressed by St. Maximos: in *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, he explicitly and repeatedly calls Christians to love for all people, irrespective of who they are or their relationship toward us, as a reflection of the divine love which goes out to all humanity, irrespective of who they are or how they relate to God.⁹

This may well seem impossible; it did to someone who asked St. Maximos, “How can I love the one that hates and repulses me?” St. Maximos recognized the difficulty entailed, but he responded:

⁶Sherwood has calculated that over a quarter of the chapters in FHCL refer to or focus on love for other human beings (“Introduction,” p. 238 [n. 398]).

⁷The fifth petition is, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12).

⁸For an exposition of the distinction between the divine image and the divine likeness in the thought of St. Maximos Confessor, see Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 120-129.

⁹Sherwood has identified six such places: FHCL 1:17; 1:24-25; 1:61; 1:77; 2:10; and 2:30 (“Introduction,” p. 93).

For those that are created after the image of God and are motivated by reason, that are thought worthy of knowledge of God and receive their law from Him, it is possible not to repulse those that cause grief and to love those that hate them.... When the Lord says: *Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you*, and what follows, He does not command the impossible, but clearly what is possible.... The Lord Himself ... has shown it to us by His very works.... (AL §8)

St. Maximos went on to point out that those who would follow Christ have no other option, given the pattern shown by Jesus Christ himself: “Blasphemed, He was long-suffering; suffering, He patiently endured; He showed them every act of love. Thus against the Instigator He fought back by His loving-kindness towards those egged on – O paradoxical war! Instead of hate He sets forth love, by goodness He casts out the father of evil” (AL §12). Christians are to learn from Christ’s conduct himself and must love all, even those hostile toward them; St. Maximos urges:

“But I say to you,” the Lord says, “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you” [cf. Matt. 5:44; Lk. 6:26-27]. Why did he command these things? So that he might free you from hate, sadness, anger, and grudges, and might grant you the greatest possession of all, perfect love.... (FHCL 1:61).

According to St. Maximos, this will not preclude Christians from recognizing differences between those who show love toward God and us and those who do not seem to do so; even so, he urges that such distinctions must not shape or limit our love toward them if we love God: “The one who loves God cannot help loving also every person as himself, even though he is displeased by the passions of those who are not yet purified” (FHCL 1:13). A Christian might appropriately recognize the difference between those who live as God calls from those who seem not to do so, but that difference must not constrict the love shown. St. Maximos explained:

Just as God ... loves all people equally as his creatures, but glorifies the virtuous person for desiring to become his friend, and has mercy on the wicked out of his goodness and converts him by chastening him in this life, so also the one who desires to be good ... loves all people equally – the virtuous because of his nature and good will, and the wicked because of his nature and the compassion by which he pities one who foolishly walks in darkness (FHCL 1:25).

St. Maximos stresses that, since God himself sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike (Matt. 5:45), Christians must show even-handed love toward other human beings of all kinds: “The one who imitates God by giving alms knows no difference between evil and good or just and unjust..., but distributes to all without distinction according to their

need, even if he prefers the virtuous person over the wicked because of his good intention” (FHCL 1:24). St. Maximos teaches that love for God issues into love like God, a love that reaches out to all humanity, whatever their moral, religious, or ethnic situation:

Perfect love does not split up the common nature of humanity on the basis of divergent lifestyles but always looks steadfastly at it and loves all people equally – those who are zealous as friends, those who are negligent as enemies. It is good to them, forbearing, and endures what they do. It does not think evil of them at all but instead suffers for them, if occasion requires, so that it may make them friends, if possible. If not, it still does not fall away from its own intention always to manifest the fruits of love equally for all people (FHCL 1:71).

In this vein, St. Maximos declares, “Blessed is the one who has learned to love all people equally” (FHCL 1:17). Indeed, for St. Maximos, anyone who wants to live as a Christian must aspire to nothing less than perfect love in which one is “like God”: “The one who is perfect in love ... knows no distinction between ... faithful and unfaithful.... Looking to the one nature shared by humanity, he regards all equally and is equally disposed toward all” (FHCL 2:30).

THE CHALLENGE OF SUCH LOVE

This not only requires love for those who are thoughtless or careless toward us; it also requires love for those who are or have been hostile toward us. Instinctively, we are inclined to respond in kind – whether by hostile action, word, or attitude showing hatred toward them. Loving such people is no easy task, especially if injustices have been endured or hostilities are of long standing. St. Maximos recognizes the challenge and speaks with economy when he urges, “Be as eager as you can to love everyone, but if you cannot do this yet, at least do not hate anyone” (FHCL 4:82). Even so, no Christian dare remain at that level. St. Maximos warns: “If you hate some people and some you neither love nor hate, while others you love only moderately and still others you love very much, know from this inequality that you are far from perfect love, which lays down that you must love everyone equally” (FHCL 2:10).

Difficult as this is, it is not impossible. According to St. Maximos, with determined effort, one could grow in this: “The work of love is the deliberate doing of good to one’s neighbor” (FHCL 1:40). Conscious determination to live by love is the Christian path through the hostility that pervades human relationships in a broken world. St. Maximos offers three strategies to help us live by love.

In the first place, we should deliberately avoid reports about the deeds of others which inflame us against them. He urges, “Do not lend your ear to the slanderer’s tongue nor your tongue to the fault-finder’s ear by readily speaking or listening to anything against your neighbor. Otherwise you will fall away from divine love and be found excluded from eternal life” (FHCL 1:58).¹⁰ According to St. Maximos, evil reports threaten the standing before God of the one who brings them and the one who listens to them alike. Even so, recognizing how easy it is to fall into this vice, and how readily we open ourselves to it as it vilifies others of whom we are already afraid or suspicious, St. Maximos forthrightly counsels:

Do not regard as well-meaning those who bring you tales that cause you pain and hate toward your brother, even though they seem to be true. Instead, turn away from such people as deadly serpents in order to cut them off from abusive speech and to deliver your own soul from wickedness (FHCL 4:31).

If we would live in love toward others, we must neither engage in nor tolerate slander.

Secondly, St. Maximos advises us to repudiate the resentment and anger we find in ourselves and to overcome them. He brings a sharp challenge when he asks, “If you are really observing the commandment of love for neighbor, for what reason do you bear him the bitterness of resentment?” (FHCL 3:15). Love can overcome resentment and anger: “It belongs to it [love] to be merciful and to do good to one’s neighbor, to be long-suffering in his regard, to endure what he inflicts.... By these means, then, love tames anger....” (AL §20).¹¹ St. Maximos repeatedly stresses, “love tames anger” (AL §19).¹² If we find anger nonetheless deeply rooted in us, St. Maximos counsels how to uproot it: “If you bear a grudge against anyone, pray for that person and you will stop the passion in its tracks....” (FHCL 3:90).¹³ If new provocations arise which drive us toward anger, St. Maximos advises, “When you are insulted by someone or offended in any matter, then beware of angry thoughts, lest by distress they sever you from charity [love] and place you in the region of hatred” (FHCL 1:29).

¹⁰Soon afterwards, St. Maximos expands on this warning: “Silence the one who is slandering in your hearing, lest you commit a double sin with him – by accustoming yourself to this deadly vice and by not restraining him from foolish talk against his neighbor” (FHCL 1:60).

¹¹At FHCL 2:47, St. Maximos offers similar advice “Long-suffering, the forgetting of offenses, and meekness check it [anger] and do not allow it to grow, while love, almsgiving, kindness, and benevolence make it diminish.”

¹²St. Maximos makes the same point at FHCL 1:66 and 4:80.

¹³Cf. the similar advice offered by St. Maximos: “For grudges, pray for the one who has hurt you and you will be rid of them” (FHCL 3:13).

Beyond negatively avoiding such responses, St. Maximos positively encourages: “Bless when being reviled, keep silent when spoken ill of, and remain friendly when being conspired against. This is the way of Christ’s wisdom, and the one who will not take it is not in his company” (FHCL 4:30). It is spiritually dangerous, consequently, to reply in kind when others are opposed to us; by contrast, we secure our spiritual safety if we love them despite their anger.

This leads to St. Maximos’ third directive; he urges that we must move beyond prayer to attitude and action commensurate with love. He declares:

The one who does not envy or is not angry, or who does not bear grudges against the one who has offended him, does not yet have love for that person. For it is possible for one who does not yet love not to return evil for evil, because of the commandment. But love returns good for evil spontaneously (FHCL 2:49).

Returning good for evil is the pattern of the divine love, the pattern which followers of Christ must emulate. Loving even those who act and speak as enemies against us is loving like God, the goal of Christian life; St. Maximos declares, “Deliberately to do good to those who hate you is a mark of perfect spiritual love alone” (FHCL 2:49). Basic to this will be our attitude toward others: “love of neighbor prepares the mind to think always well of him” (FHCL 1:40).

St. Maximos goes on to urge a specific way to way to return good for evil – namely, by helping others escape their anger toward us. He counsels, “If someone else bears you a grudge, be generous and humble with him, treat him fairly, and you will deliver him from the passion” (FHCL 3:90). St. Maximos does not simplistically assume that extending love to hostile others will always work. In that regard, he counsels: “If he does not want to be at peace, still keep yourself away from hate by praying sincerely for him and by not speaking ill of him to anyone” (FHCL 4:35). No matter how another responds to the overtures of love, a follower of Christ must live in love toward all. St. Maximos forthrightly urges Christians in his day, and in ours: “Purify your mind of anger, resentment, and shameful thoughts, and then you will be able to know the indwelling of Christ” (FHCL 4:76).

This is all contrary to what commonly transpires in human interaction in this world; for St. Maximos, though, that is the point. Christ calls us to live out of his kingdom, rather than the one of this world. His kingdom is a kingdom of love; we cannot claim to be seeking his kingdom if we follow other pathways than the one of love like that of God. Given this, St. Maximos can declare, “Blessed is the one who has learned to love all people equally” (FHCL 1:17). If the king himself loves all people equally, then his subjects must love in this way, too.

So, St. Maximos urges Christians, then and now:

Let us love one another with our whole heart. Let us say ‘Brothers’ even to those who hate and abominate us, that the Lord’s name be glorified and manifest in its joyfulness. Let us, who are harassed one by the other, grant pardon one to another, since we are all warred upon by the common enemy (AL §41).

This is not only necessary for good interpersonal relationships: it is essential for our relationship with God. St. Maximos urges, “Let us then love one another and be loved by God; let us be patient with one another and He will be patient with our sins. Let us not render evil for evil, and we shall not receive our due for our sins” (AL §42).

No Christian can escape these claims. Love for others is not an option, but a necessity for a Christian. Consequently, in times of tension – whether between one person and another, or between one ethnic (or religious) group and another – the only path which Christians may walk is that of love: love for God, love for neighbor, love for enemy, love for all. Jesus Christ calls us to nothing less; his apostles call us to nothing less; the Church Fathers call us to nothing less; and St. Maximos Confessor calls us to nothing less.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ himself urged that his disciples must show a family resemblance to their heavenly Father – by loving all equally, even the enemy. This challenged his hearers then; it did people in St. Maximos Confessor’s era; it still does people today, everywhere in the world – including in Macedonia. What specifically, though, can we say in conclusion to his instruction? Let me offer three clarifications about what St. Maximos taught and then consider the implications for us today of what we have considered.

Firstly, we must recognize that St. Maximos was not speaking to government leaders, but to Christians – monks first of all, but all Christians with them. A Christian can appropriately serve in government, of course, but a government is charged with other responsibilities than we have considered in this paper – defense of people and borders, punishment of those who do evil, and reward of those who do well (cf. Rom. 13:1-7). With the other Church fathers, St. Maximos recognized the role and responsibility of civil government. While St. Maximos’ advice doubtlessly gives Christians involved in government much to consider, he did not attempt to prescribe governmental policy. He was not writing to governments or civic leaders: he was writing to the generality of Christians.

Secondly, we must also recognize that St. Maximos was not addressing the situation that has developed over the last several centuries, has intensified in the last few years, and that faces you today in Macedonia. St. Maximos could not know the particular tensions, fears, and irritations that have beclouded the Macedonian horizon recently; consequently, he did not speak to them. Instead, he spoke to a situation human beings find themselves in throughout most of history; because of that, though, his words do speak to us all, and to you in Macedonia today.

Thirdly, we should recognize that St. Maximos speaks directly to Christians – to all of us, whether from Western Christian or Eastern Orthodox backgrounds. His words come to all Christians, undifferentiated; we all need to consider and heed them, wherever we live and whatever situation we face. Even so, for us Western Christians, St. Maximos is one patristic voice among many; his authority within Orthodoxy is much greater. Consequently, out of all of us, the instruction we have considered from St. Maximos most directly and powerfully addresses you who are Orthodox. As we turn to consider what St. Maximos' teaching means for us today, I trust that all of us Christians will give careful heed, but especially you who are Macedonian Orthodox.

But because St. Maximos speaks authoritatively to Orthodox, his advice is especially important and potentially promising for Macedonia. The 1994 census indicated that over 66% of the citizens of your country are of Slavic heritage; of them, the vast majority of religious faithful are members of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Consequently, if you who are Orthodox take to heart what St. Maximos Confessor, as an esteemed patristic authority, counsels about living by love toward God and others, then you will unquestionably have a profound impact on the present and the future of your nation.

It should be clear that St. Maximos will not let us Christians escape the implications of our Lord's command to love others as ourselves. St. Maximos leaves no room for excuses: nothing can justify resentment, grudges, or anger in a Christian. As against what may be common in human interaction in this regard, St. Maximos summons us to a higher standard – that of Christ himself, who calls us all to love our neighbors as ourselves, who tells us to love even our enemies, and who manifested such love as he faced the opposition of others during his life and throughout his suffering and death. Whatever others may do or say, we are not allowed to reply in kind: we must love them all, equally, with a perfect love like that of God himself.

It must also be clear that St. Maximos takes this call with utmost seriousness, for he invests it with ultimate significance. “Children of God” or “children of hell,” with all that contrast implies for this life and for the one to come – that is the stark alternative St. Maximos describes between those who love all others and those who do not. How we deal with others – not only those who love us and are like us, but those who are opposed to us and are not like us – shows who we are. If we would be followers of Christ, we must love all others, even those who are enemies to us, and must deliberately do good to them: we must seek the well-being of others, whether they are like us or not, whether they love us or not. In your situation in Macedonia, that means you Orthodox Christians must – you simply *must* – love Albanian Muslims, Jews, and those who are Catholics or Protestants or non-believers, whatever their ethnic background or culture. St. Maximos’ instruction really leaves all of us Christians no choice; in your situation in your country, he leaves you Macedonian Orthodox no choice.

The general implications of St. Maximos’ advice are clear enough: his counsel about slandering others, prayer for them, and turning from anger leave little doubt as to the general direction your lives need to take as you strive to live in love toward all. But in the specific situations that face you, how should you proceed? That neither I nor St. Maximos nor anyone else can specify for you. You must work that out in the challenges and concerns that confront your country, realizing that in every situation you are not simply facing others but standing before the face of God. With the Church through the ages, you need to call out to God for wisdom to take the path you should – a path which, as we have seen, will be a path of love for all. This challenge will give new meaning to the prayers of the liturgy, “Lord, have mercy” and “Grant this, O Lord.” No one else can guide you into the future. The direction you must go is clear: he calls you to live in love, whatever situations and challenges you face. The precise steps you should take are not clear, though. Yet you must move forward in faithful response to his summons. Is not this what it means to live by faith?

This may sound like a heavy obligation – and it is. But it also offers you who are Macedonian Orthodox an unusual opportunity. Over the last one-and-one-half centuries, some Orthodox churches have done a poor job of manifesting love for others: as Macedonian Orthodox, you experienced that yourselves during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Greek Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, and Serbian Orthodox churches all played their roles in their respective nations’ aggrandizements of your territory and your people. Xenophobia has besmirched Orthodox dealings with others in too many Orthodox lands; indeed, “ethnic cleansing” has marked some Orthodox responses to “others” who have

obviously not been loved with the kind of love demanded by Jesus Christ himself and described by St. Maximos. No Church father makes room for such xenophobia or ethnic cleansing; as we have seen, St. Maximos calls for the exact opposite. To many people in the world today, though, Orthodoxy and hatred for others have become closely associated.

You who are Macedonian Orthodox have the unusual opportunity to “do it right” – to show the sort of love toward others demanded by the richest sources and most significant authorities of the Orthodox faith. You who are Macedonian Orthodox can break the flawed Orthodox pattern, here in your country which has not yet fallen into the abyss of civil war. You have the opportunity, as Macedonian Orthodox Christians, to take another path – the path of love, even for those who have been and may still continue to be opposed to you. You have the opportunity to chart a new direction for Orthodoxy in relating to others. May you step boldly forward and show your Orthodox brothers and sisters around the world the way to heed the instruction of St. Maximos Confessor about how to live out the command of Jesus Christ that we love others – all others – as ourselves.