



ACTIVITIES OF THE SYNODICAL OFFICE FOR PILGRIMAGE TOURS OF THE HOLY SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF GREECE

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Synodical Office for Pilgrimage Tours and
Development of Religious Tourism of the
Holy Synod of the Church of Greece

Abstract:

The common point that connects all of us and our opinions is that we all have God as a starting point of our existence, and His will as the foundation of the moral evaluation of human behavior. Various religious shrines and monuments represent important physical and spiritual values, whose valorization and promotion are the responsibility of the Synodical Office for Pilgrimage Tours. Pilgrimage should be considered a process involving journeys, sacred centers and symbolic articulations of deep religious messages along with manifestations, recognized not only as the elements of faith, but also as the elements of world heritage, as examples of Christianity's contribution to humanity, world history, the arts and culture in general adds to the reflections on the spiritual meaning of a pilgrimage visit, as one of the foundations of the moral evaluation of human behavior, and the importance of not giving due consideration to the faith and the teachings of the Holy Scriptures.

On the part of the Church, there are principles recommended that should characterize the organization of a "tourism visit" to a religious monument, and there are behavioristic factors that should be considered in order to maintain and respect the holiness of the shrine or monument, particularly the Monasteries, and the Churches which are active parishes.

The varied activities of the Synodical Office for Pilgrimage Tours of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece exemplify how the religious and tourism elements can co-exist peacefully and productively, maintaining the desired religious respect.

The activities of the Synodical Office among others, regard the promotion of pilgrimage tours, the development and valorization of religious monuments, the facilitation of the visit, and the practices followed. Such activities are targeted at improving the collaboration among various stakeholders of "religious tourism" and the potential they can present, without compromising the holiness of the places.

A growing number of pilgrims and visitors to the Holy Monasteries bear witness to the permanence of a culture transcending our transient times and emanating from the spirituality of Christian worship. A reference should be made to the wide range of material manifestations of this transcendent culture (churches, monasteries, holy relics of saints, chapels, pilgrimage shrines, simple abodes for solitary monks [kathismata], holy icons, liturgical books, church utensils, vestments and heirlooms). An emphasis is placed on the great responsibility we bear on our shoulders as heirs to this vast ecclesiastical, cultural, Christian and European heritage.

Christian sites of pilgrimage are a part of the world heritage and proof of the contribution of Christianity to mankind. There are no actual museums in the

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Orthodox Church. What is preserved within is therefore honored, upheld and cherished as a living vehicle of sanctification and spirituality. This is not an approach of cold and soulless archaeological attitude, but living manifestations of faith and strong community ties.

Our religious pilgrimage wealth is not confined merely to spiritual treasures of the past, but it also consists of the presence and spiritual radiance of the holy personalities of the present (such as father Paisios and father Porphyrios of the Holy Mount Athos, holy father Justin Popović and others), who actively operate, serve and run our pilgrimages and, indirectly, can become an additional pole of attraction to all pilgrims who seek to join the dialogue of love with God and His Church.

However, we make a short reference to the dangers of commercialization of both faith and its venerable items, which is sometimes threatening the Church, even from within, and to the risks arising for example, from the excessive number of visitors who may be disturbing the daily schedule of monasteries or creating problems from the lack of respect for their spiritual laws and theological rules, strict sometimes, but of course, within reasonable limits.

The Synodical Committee of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece for Pilgrimage Tourism, was initially set up in 2001 with the aim of creating appropriate conditions for the rapprochement and familiarizing people with the holy sites. In this direction, the Synodical Committee indicatively make reference to the conferences and one-day workshops that take place annually and bringing together the travel agencies of the country, hoteliers, and professional guides, with the scope of mutual exchange of information and identification of difficulties that may arise in the performance of the activities of pilgrimage and religious tourism.

All Dioceses of the Church of Greece make coordinated efforts to highlight, preserve and promote the Holy Monasteries, Pilgrimage sites and monuments in all the Hellenic territories. They produce printed and electronic editions of guidebooks with the collaboration of distinguished scholars (historians, architects, theologians, Byzantinists etc.). They also see to the distribution of printed material for the information of visitors about our ecclesiastic history, the holy services, and for the enhancement of their access to the monuments by means of special documentation and maps (such as "Beyond the Acropolis" – "On the Steps of Apostle Paul" – the National Tourism Organization brochure on "Religious Tourism" and on "The Steps of St. Paul").

Through the Secretariat of the Synodical Office of Pilgrimage Tours, the Church of Greece shows a necessary extroversion, in a coordinated manner, for the purposes of

highlighting, promoting and familiarizing people with its Holy Monuments, Monasteries and Pilgrimage sites within and outside the Greek territory, valorizing also elements of the Byzantine history and traditions.

With reference to different pilgrimage sites in Greece, a brief description of the activities of the Synodical Office is outlined with regard to the promotion of pilgrimage tours, the development and valorization of religious monuments, the facilitation of the visits, the practices followed.

More specifically and in brief, since the completion of the successful 1st Panhellenic Conference on Religious Tourism, on the island of Zakynthos 7 years ago, the following targeted actions and events took place: participation in international tourism exhibitions; participation in conferences of tourist interest within and outside Greece; organization of one-day workshops for all clergymen and lay persons designated as representatives / liaisons of the Holy Dioceses of the Church of Greece; exchange of working and networking visits to and from other Orthodox Churches and the official Roman-Catholic Pilgrimage Agency (Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi) in Rome; signing of Cooperation Protocols with other Orthodox Churches; Greek tourist agencies survey and selection / designated for cooperation; Operation of Joint Committee between the Church of Greece and the Ministry of Tourism; Organization of special Delegations to countries and cities of tourism importance, among other things a Mission to China; Multilingual brochure and electronic editions ("St. Paul Guidebook", CDs of Monasteries etc.); Distribution of questionnaires within the framework of a scientific survey conducted in monasteries, pilgrimage sites and holy monuments of each Holy Diocese of the Church of Greece, regarding the activities developed and the possibilities of extending hospitality services and promoting church / monastic products; Visits to the Holy centre of our Mother Church and cooperation with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, regarding matters of Pilgrimage Tourism, particularly under the wise guidance and inspiration of the Venerable Person of our Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Bartholomaios. These are some examples of activities, which show the collaboration among the various stakeholders of "religious tourism" and the potential they can present, without compromising the holiness of the places. These practices make the case for the osmosis of cultures and for pilgrimage tourism as a proposal of a way of life to a modern man, founded upon the true values of the Christian spirit, faith, love, solidarity and hope. Given that Orthodoxy is the culture of our soul, pilgrimage tours or pilgrimage tourism are an instrument of unity and communion of people in upholding the value of the human person.

Keywords:

spiritual and behavioral characteristics, pilgrimage tours, Church of Greece.