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THE ARCHBISHOP IN ALABAMA

The following excerpt is from the Orthodoxy in America Lecture given by Professor Albert J. Raboteau at Fordham University, Bronx, New York, entitled, “In the World, Not of the World, For the Sake of the World: Orthodoxy and American Culture” on April 4, 2006. An Orthodox response to poverty and social injustice, the lecture goes on to elucidate the teaching and actions of the Church Fathers in obedience to the Gospel commandments. Below we spotlight an almost forgotten moment in American Orthodox history – when His Eminence Iakovos, Greek Archbishop of North and South America, stepped forward as an Orthodox Christian against injustice.

Permit me to use a visual epigraph to introduce this lecture: a *Life* magazine cover photograph of Archbishop Iakovos standing next to Martin Luther King, Jr., at a civil rights demonstration in Selma, Alabama. How this extraordinary juxtaposition came about requires some historical explanation.

In January of 1965, African-American residents of Selma, Alabama and surrounding “black belt” counties took the first steps in a campaign to gain the right to vote, a right denied them by a system of apartheid that had prevailed in Alabama for as long as they could remember. Mobilized by civil rights workers from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), increasing numbers of local black people risked their jobs, their homes, their physical safety, and their very lives for merely registering to vote. Rejected time and again by white registrars, they joined together in marches and peaceful demonstrations to protest their disenfranchise-

ment, a persistent reminder of the intransigent rule of white supremacy.¹

On February 17, Alabama state troopers, wielding billy clubs, attacked a group of marchers in nearby Marion. “Negroes could be heard screaming and loud whacks rang through the square,” reported a *New York Times* correspondent from the scene. When twenty-six year old Jimmie Lee Jackson rushed to protect his mother, Viola, and his eighty-two-year-old grandfather, Cager Lee, from being beaten, a trooper shot him twice in the stomach. He was taken to Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma where he died on February 26th. In response to Jackson’s death, SCLC leaders conceived a plan to march from Selma to the state capitol of Montgomery, a distance of fifty-four miles. On Sunday, March 7th, a group of marchers started across the Edmund Pettus Bridge toward Route 80, the highway to Montgomery. On the bridge they were met by a large contingent of Alabama State troopers and local police. After warning the marchers to disperse, the police charged the crowd with tear gas and billy clubs. Newspaper and television pictures of “Bloody Sunday,” as the event came to be known, stirred outrage across the nation. Martin Luther King, Jr., issued a nation-wide call for religious and civic leaders to come to Selma to participate in another march, scheduled for Tuesday, March 9th.

Among the hundreds of clergy responding to King’s invitation was Reverend James Reeb, a thirty-eight year old white Unitarian minister, who worked as a community organizer for the Friends Service Committee in the inner city neighborhoods of Roxbury, Massachusetts. Reeb not only worked to improve housing in poor black neighborhoods, he insisted on living there as well, with his wife and their four small children.² The second march was brief. Due to a temporary restraining order prohibiting a Selma to Montgomery march, King decided to march only to the point of confrontation with the police. Facing the state troopers and police forces again on the Pettus Bridge, the marchers turned and retreated to a mass meeting at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church. There King asked those who had come from afar to remain until a final decision on the legality of the march to Montgomery came down from the court.

¹ The following account of the Selma campaign is drawn from Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Charles E. Fager, *Selma 1965; The March That Changed the South, Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Fayetteville, NC: Kimo Press, 2005); Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma: Childhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days, as told to Frank Sikora* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1980).

² Gustav Niebuhr, “A Civil Rights Martyr Remembered,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 2000.

That night Reeb, and two other Unitarian ministers, were attacked by three white men outside a Klu Klux Klan hangout in Selma. Clubbed to the ground, Reeb suffered a massive concussion. His death two days later prompted a national uproar. President Lyndon Johnson went on national television to decry Reeb’s murder as an “American tragedy.” And in response to the public pressure, the Administration finally sent a voting rights bill to Congress. On Monday, March 15, a memorial service for James Reeb was held at Brown Chapel. White officials denied permission to hold memorial services at the courthouse, which would have symbolized the cause that cost Reeb and Jimmy Lee Jackson their lives. As the congregation waited for King to arrive for the service, distinguished leaders, who had gathered from around the country (including Archbishop Iakovos) eulogized Reeb and linked arms to sing “We Shall Overcome” and other movement hymns. The Archbishop spoke briefly about the meaning of Reeb’s death.

I came to this memorial service because I believe this is an appropriate occasion not only to dedicate myself as well as our Greek Orthodox communicants to the noble cause for which our friend, the Reverend James Reeb, gave his life; but also in order to show our willingness to continue this fight against prejudice, bias, and persecution. In this God-given cause, I feel sure that I have the full and understanding support of our Greek Orthodox faithful of America. For our Greek Orthodox Church and our people fully understand from our heritage and our tradition such sacrificial involvements. Our Church has never hesitated to fight, when it felt it must, for the rights of mankind; and many of our Churchmen have been in the forefront of these battles time and again....The ways of God are not always revealed to us, but certainly His choice of this dedicated minister to be the victim of racial hatred and the hero of this struggle to gain unalienable constitutional rights for those American brethren of ours who are denied them, and to die, so to speak, on this battlefield for human dignity and equality, was not accidental or haphazard. Let us seek out in this tragedy a divine lesson for all of us. The Reverend Reeb felt he could not be outside the arena of this bitter struggle, and we, too, must feel that we cannot. Let his martyrdom be an inspiration and a reminder to us that there are times when we must risk everything, including life itself, for those basic American



Photo Courtesy Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

ideals of freedom, justice, and equality, without which this land cannot survive. Our hope and prayer, then, is that we may be given strength to let God know by our acts and deeds, and not only by our words, that like the late Reverend James Reeb, we, too, are the espousers and the fighters in a struggle for which we must be prepared to risk our all."³

Eventually King arrived and delivered the main eulogy. Just as he finished speaking, Ralph Abernathy announced that the U.S. District Judge of Mobile had ordered Sheriff Jim Clark to permit a march to the courthouse. As the congregation moved to exit the crowded church King and the Archbishop (who had met briefly in Geneva ten years earlier) shook hands. Iakovos "wore a frozen look. [Perhaps not knowing what was next.] A small black girl took him by the hand and said not to worry."⁴ At 5:08 pm the crowd of some 3,500 began the procession to the courthouse, which Clark had locked, and a twenty-minute memorial ceremony was held on the front steps, with King laying a wreath for voting rights martyrs Reeb and Jackson. A photographer captured the ceremony for the next cover of *Life*. (In his biography of Iakovos, George Poulos noted that some southern Orthodox took offense at this picture of their Archbishop fraternizing with civil rights agitators.)

Years later, the retired Archbishop Iakovos told King biographer Taylor Branch that he had decided to go to Selma "against the advice of his clergy and staff, who worried correctly that he would be called traitor to the quest of marginalized Greeks for full acceptance as Americans. Not a single member of the Orthodox community, he reported, appeared for scheduled events at his next stop, and he found himself alone in a Charleston hotel room ... telling hostile callers nationwide that he was compelled to Selma by formative memories of Greek suffering on his native Adriatic islands under harsh occupation by the Ottoman Turks."⁵

Black demonstrators deeply appreciated the presence of white religious leaders in Selma, even though they were keenly aware of the disparity between the national outpouring of publicity and grief over the death of the

3 *The "Complete Works" of His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos*, Volume Two, Part 1, 1959-1977, ed. by Demetrios J. Constantelos (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), pp. 198-199.

4 Branch, p. 108.

5 Branch, p. 106.

Opposite: Archbishop Iakovos and Martin Luther King, Jr. Selma, March 15, 1965.

white James Reeb and the sparse attention devoted to the death of the black Jimmie Lee Jackson. A few days after the memorial a Federal Court Order was issued permitting the march to Montgomery and the nation watched as white and black Americans joined in the “high water mark” of non-violent southern protest in the Civil Rights Movement. That movement... has served as a paradigm of religious activism for social justice in the public square, “the arena,” as Iakovos called it, alluding to those ancient arenas where martyrs died for the faith. Though many saw it as merely political, King, and those who agreed with his vision, interpreted the movement as a moral struggle, a “God-given cause,” as Archbishop Iakovos put it, to achieve social justice for those denied “human dignity and equality.”

As much as his words, the Archbishop’s presence at Selma was, as his critics perceived, a powerful symbol of an Orthodox commitment to social justice....

I am haunted by one detail of Archbishop Iakovos’ visit to Selma: the moment at Brown Chapel when that small black girl took his hand and told him not to worry. I wonder what the Archbishop thought. Did he perhaps recall Jesus’ words: “for of such as these is the kingdom of heaven”? We sometimes forget that children were an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement, filling, for example, the jails of Birmingham and other cities in the South. Two little girls, Sheyann Webb, aged eight, and Rachel West, aged nine, lived in Selma and participated prominently in the daily demonstrations in 1965. (Perhaps it was one of them who took Archbishop Iakovos by the hand, since both were present at the memorial service in Brown’s chapel.) Years later they wrote about their experiences, including their response to the death of James Reeb. In Rachel’s words:

Me and Sheyann used to walk about the church there and look for some sign that would tell us the Lord was on our side, that He was watching us. We’d look and we’d see a leaf falling, and we’d say that was the sign. And we’d know we were winning. We’d see the moon shining down some nights and we’d say that was the sign. And we’d say we were winning. We’d hear the wind blowing or hear the thunder. That was the sign, we’d say. We were winning. So this night, very late, the night James Reeb died, we were out there with all these sad people, and so many of them were still crying. So we walked about the crowd looking for a sign, because we needed that assur-

ance. And we’d heard somebody – one of the ministers or nuns – say that when a good person dies the Lord hangs out a new star in the night. So we looked up for a shiny new star...but the sky was full of clouds. And I said to Sheyann, ‘There ain’t no sign tonight.’ And she says, ‘Keep lookin’ Rachel, ‘til we see it.’ So we kept standing there, with our heads turned upward like that. And all of a sudden it started raining...right in our faces. And I yelled, ‘They, there ain’t gonna be no sign.’ But she’s still looking up like that and all of a sudden she says, ‘The rain’s the sign. The rain is.’ And I looked up again, letting it just splatter all over my face and in my eyes. The sudden way it had started made me agree that it surely must be the sign. So we sat on the steps of Brown Chapel...shivering and praying there. And we were convinced that this rain meant that even the Lord in Heaven was sad by James Reeb’s death and He was joining us in our sadness, in our weeping.’⁶ ✚

Professor Raboteau’s full lecture can be read on-line (or watched in video) at:
http://www.fordham.edu/images/theology/hayward/raboteau_orthodoxy_2006_lecture_book.pdf

⁶ Selma, Lord, Selma, pp. 117-118.