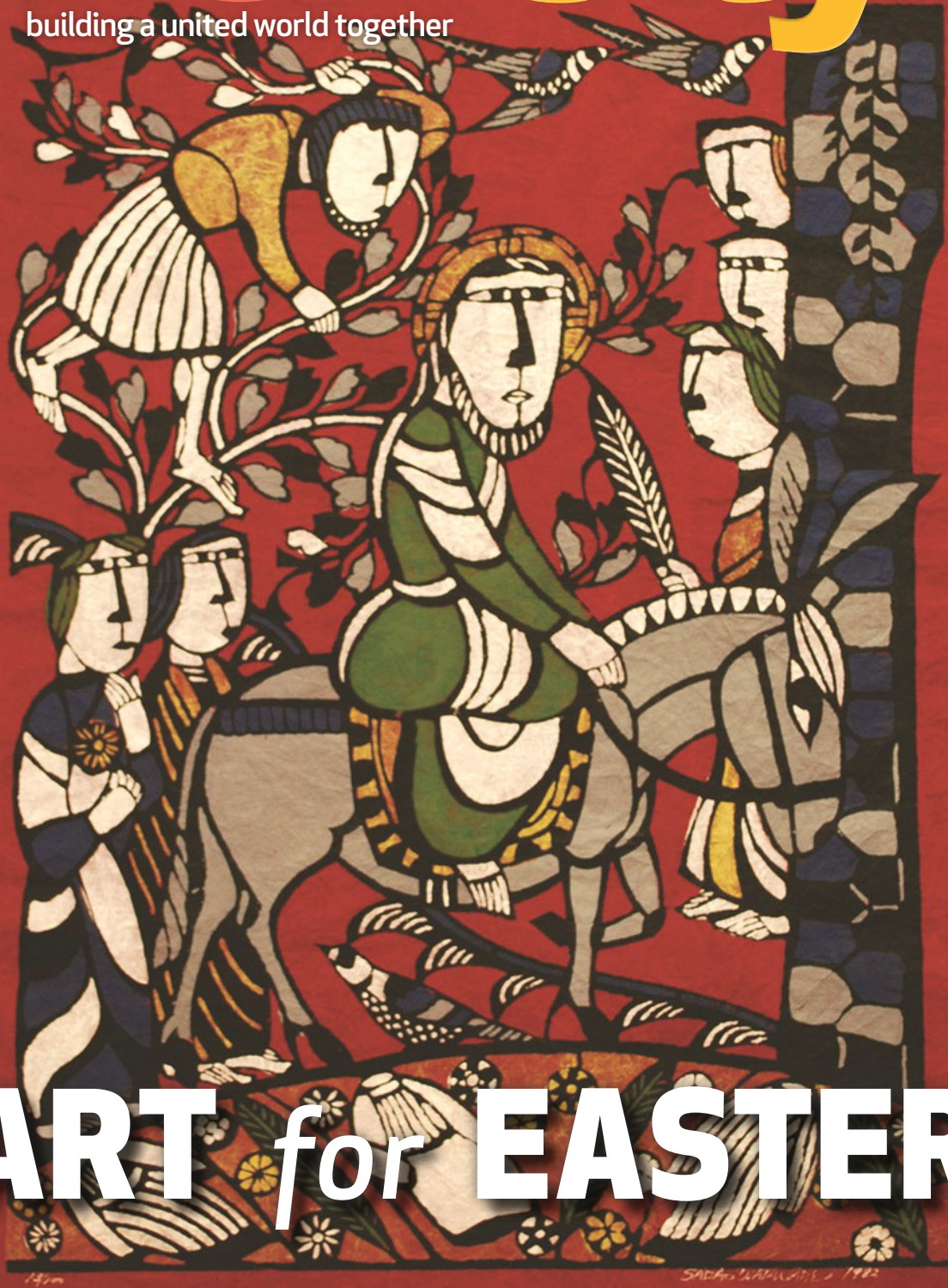


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## ECUMENISM

# My ecumenical journey

## Archimandrite Panteleimon Papasynefakis

Archimandrite Panteleimon Papasynefakis is the general director of SYNYPARXIS the Ecumenical Refugee Programme of the Orthodox Church of Greece. **Joan Patricia Back** visited him at their office in Athens to learn about their work.

**Archimandrite Panteleimon, you were born in Nea Ionia (Athens). In your upbringing, did you have contact with Christians of different Churches?**

As Greece is a predominantly Christian Orthodox country, in my early years I hadn't encountered Christians from different Churches. However, Nea Ionia where I grew up, was a suburb created by displaced Greeks who in 1922 were forced to leave the western coast of Anatolia (today Turkey). Their distinct identity, forged not only by the trauma of their displacement but also by their rich cultural background enabled them to thrive and contribute to the development and enrichment of Greek economy, culture and society, despite the scepticism and even hostility they initially encountered by local populations. Growing up in this area has played a definite role in my interest in intercultural and interreligious dialogue and ways of interacting with the others, those perceived as 'different' or even 'threatening'.

**Your studies brought you to Rome for your doctorate at the Pontifical Oriental Institute. How did those years in Rome influence your ecumenical outreach?**

My academic journey reflects my dedication to inter-Christian dialogue, evident in both my master's de-

gree and doctoral thesis. Pursuing my doctorate with a scholarship from the Catholic Church has profoundly shaped my ecumenical outreach as an Orthodox priest. Exposure to diverse Churches and movements, such as the Focolare, during my time in Rome deepened my understanding of our shared spiritual heritage and the theological nuances among different Christian denominations. This experience facilitated close interactions with scholars, theologians, and clergy from varied backgrounds, encouraging open discussions, mutual respect and a commitment to finding common ground among the Christians.

**You have a number of responsibilities in the Church of Greece but one in particular is very important. Could you tell us something about SYNYPARXIS?**

The Church of Greece has been actively supporting refugees and migrants for decades, leading to the establishment of the organization 'SYNYPARXIS – Ecumenical Refugee Programme' in 2012. When I was appointed to the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece seven years ago as a migration issues consultant, I never anticipated becoming the General Director of SYNYPARXIS. This role has been a transformative experience for me, presenting challenges ranging from first-hand encounters with human suffering to administrative struggles but also



Photo: @Courtesy of Archimandrite Panteleimon Popsasnefakis



Archimandrite Panteleimon (second from left) with Joan Back and colleagues at the Focolare Centre in Rome

rewarding me with a deep moral fulfilment, utilizing my theological and academic background to achieve tangible results.

SYNYPARXIS aims to improve the situation of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Greece through legal and psycho-social support, research, advocacy, collaboration with immigrant communities, and information activities. It also informs the Church of Greece on critical migration issues.

In 2020, SYNYPARXIS expanded its scope to child protection, operating five shelters for unaccompanied minor refugees in Greece hosting around 200 children aged between 10-18 years. The shelters provide, through experienced and specialized professionals, a wide range of services from basic needs to psychosocial and psychological support, preparation for autonomy and adulthood and facilitating their integration in European society. In 2024, SYNYPARXIS will coordinate a consortium for a three-year project, creating a nationwide mechanism for the protection of unaccompanied minors in collaboration with the Greek State (see [www.synyparxis.org](http://www.synyparxis.org)).

**Besides SYNYPARXIS you are a priest of the Holy Dormition Cathedral of Nea Ionia and Philadelphia**

**and an author of theological books and articles. In 2023 you published a very interesting bilingual book (Greek/English) on 'The Orthodox Church and Refugees. The theological foundation of engaging with immigrants.' What made you write this book?**

Despite my various responsibilities and duties as well as my deep commitment to our work with SYNYPARXIS, I am first and foremost a priest. When I decided to draft an anniversary volume dedicated to the work of the Church of Greece for migrants through SYNYPARXIS, I felt compelled to include a chapter exploring the theological underpinnings that guide our engagement with these populations. Published as a separate booklet, it aims to bridge the gap between theology and practical outreach, offering insights and perspectives that can inform our approach to welcoming and supporting those in need. It is my hope that this work contributes to a greater understanding within our faith community, inspiring meaningful initiatives that reflect the love and compassion advocated by our Orthodox tradition.

**Could you share some experiences of working with Christians of other Churches?**

## ECUMENISM

Beyond my experiences in Rome, my engagement with 'SYNYPARXIS' allowed me to collaborate closely with various Churches. Our organization actively seeks partnerships to efficiently pursue its goals, participating as an active member in numerous formal and informal networks of faith-based organizations. Through SYNYPARXIS, the Church of Greece is a founding member of the Church's Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), contributing to European ecumenical advocacy on migration issues.

Personally, as a Church of Greece representative, I am a founding member of the Network for Dialogue, a European platform uniting faith and civil society personnel to enhance dialogue for effective social inclusion policies for migrants and refugees. Additionally, we maintain longstanding collaborations with Churches and faith-based organizations across Europe, receiving support from entities such as Kerk in Actie (Netherlands), Bread for the World, Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, Evangelischen Kirche of Rheinland (Germany) and the Protestant Church of Switzerland.

### What would you say to young Christians trying to live their faith today?

As you navigate the intricacies of modern life, I encourage you to approach your faith with an open heart and an inquisitive mind. Embrace the diversity of our world, understanding that different perspectives enrich our understanding of God's creation. Seek a deep, personal connection with God through prayer and engagement with sacred texts. Remember that living your faith is not just about words but also about embodying love, kindness, and humility in your interactions with others. In the face of contemporary challenges, allow the teachings of Jesus to guide your responses, promoting justice, compassion, and understanding. Build a community that supports and uplifts one another, valuing each individual's unique journey. Most importantly, approach your faith journey with authenticity and integrity, understanding that it is a continuous process of growth and discovery. 🌱