

# THE *LAOS TOU THEOU* – AN ORTHODOX VIEW OF THE ‘PEOPLE OF GOD’

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Attribution License.**ABSTRACT**

The creation of the *Ekklesia* by the incarnate *logos* of God created a new and unique relationship with God’s people that allows humanity to enter into the Covenant and to become part of the ‘people of God’ (*Laos tou Theou*). Who is the *Ekklesia*? Is it the entire body of believers in Christ? Who are the chosen race, the royal priesthood and the holy nation of God? If the *Ekklesia* is the new *Laos tou Theou*, does its being so cancel out the initial covenant given to the nation of Israel? Is the nation of Israel still ‘God’s people’? This article strives to provide answers to the above questions by providing a discourse analytic approach to the theme. It is clear from the research that the *Ekklesia* remain the *Laos tou Theou*, comprising the entire corpus of Christ and the entire communion (or fellowship [*koinonia*]) of all of the disciples of Jesus. Essentially, all baptised believers are part of the chosen race and the royal priesthood, which form the holy nation of God. All of us are equally called by God to belong to his ‘people’.

**INTRODUCTION**

If we wish to understand the role of the church in society, it is imperative to have a clear understanding of the term ‘people of God’. The New Testament, as the primary book of Christian revelation, which was passed down to us by the Apostles, is the primary source of orthodox doctrine. It is the most fundamental basis from which we are able to obtain the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The church fathers and ecumenical councils were protectors of holy tradition (*paradosi*). Their main task was to make pronouncements supporting the Holy Scriptures as the inspired word of God. They also sought, by using the Holy Scriptures, to enhance the life of the church. As such, they encouraged a wider interpretation of Scripture and promoted church doctrine based on scriptural truth (*Patrologiae Graecae* [PG] 32:188). Apart from the Holy Scriptures, holy tradition is another imperative source which authorises us to interpret the Scriptures. Such tradition enables Christian truths to be kept intact. Holy tradition allows for the development of the canons of the Church and its dogma from the Holy Scriptures. St Basil the Great said that oral tradition and written Scripture are equal to each other, as far as piety is concerned and, consequently, both are imperative for a clearer understanding and for living a life that is dominated by the revelatory truth of Jesus Christ. Such a phenomenon does not diminish the importance of Holy Scripture. In fact, Holy Scripture is always referred to in holy tradition. Therefore, the orthodox faith advocates that all church teachings are contained within Holy Scripture (Androustos 1975). The New Testament, as Apostolic teaching, is, therefore, the fundamental source of holy tradition. The church seeks to preserve holy tradition as part of the life of the church which ‘embraces the truth of the New Testament’ (Papadopoulos 1964).

Such a basis must be understood, as we seek to ascertain who the *Laos tou Theou* are. As orthodox dogmas are identified as divinely revealed truths, they have total divine authority and are, therefore, regarded as expressions of the consciousness of the church. The *pleroma* (the fullness of the church) is the bearer of the dogmas of orthodoxy, as it is inspired by the Holy Spirit through a number of ecumenical councils (Karmiris 1965). The Orthodox Church refutes those dogmatic traditions which cannot be linked to the Apostles, regarding these as false witness. All books of Holy Scripture, both the Old and New Testament, are *Theopnefsta* (inspired) by the action of the Holy Spirit and must be understood in their general meaning and interpretation and not merely in terms of the words used.

The essence of God is infinite and basically inexpressible (*Arretos*) and is totally incomprehensible to a natural man (PG 94, P 808), except by means of the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, in order for us to arrive at a clearer understanding of the concept of the *Laos tou Theou*, we must search through both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the patristic tradition. The current paper will attempt to address the orthodox understanding of the concept of the ‘people of God’. The concept ‘people of God’ is largely based on a number of different biblical preconceptions and premises, starting with the idea that God created human beings according to biblical presuppositions and a patristic interpretation of ecclesiology, in His own likeness and image (Papdemetriou 2005).

**LAOS AS THE NATION OF ISRAEL BEING THE ‘PEOPLE OF GOD’**

In the Greek Septuagint, the word *Laos* or ‘people’ clearly refers to the nation of Israel alone. Such an understanding is apparent as the expression *Laos tou Theou* refers to the nation of Israel in all instances. Deuteronomy 7:6 states that ‘Thou art a holy people to the Lord thy God’ (*Laos hagios ei kyrio to theo sou*). God had a perfect plan for creation, in which he included a nation which he set apart as his chosen ‘people’ – the nation of Israel. We read in Exodus:

*Then I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.*

(Ex 6:7)

Such an idea is reinforced on several occasions. God is certainly unequivocal in His intention: ‘I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people’ (Lv 26:12).

## LAOS AS THE NATION OF ISRAEL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, the '*Laos tou Theou*' were the Israelites and people from other nations – *ethne*, who aligned themselves with the true God, the God of Israel. It is evident in the Holy Scriptures that God set aside the nation of Israel as his beloved people:

*And the Lord has chosen thee this day that thou shouldst be to him a peculiar people, as he said, to keep his commands, and that thou shouldst be above all nations, as he has made thee renowned and a boast, and glorious, that thou shouldst be a holy people to the Lord thy God, as he has spoken.*

(Dt 26:18–19)

It was not the *ethnos* (the state of Israel) that would enlighten the nations of the world but rather God's '*Laos*' in as much as they would be obedient and true to God. God, as a loving Father, had great compassion on the nation of Israel and delivered them from the severe bondage which oppressed them in Egypt. Not only did he deliver them, but he also led them to the promised land of Canaan. God took them to be his own and gave them a special place as a 'holy nation' with whom he made a covenant. The history of Israel is viewed as the history of the *Laos tou Theou*, viewed especially in God's promise to Abraham, as well as in the covenant made with the Israelites on Mount Sinai. The nation of Israel as God's chosen people was set apart to worship God and to obey his commandments. In addition to being set apart and their required obedience, the members of the nation were to proclaim God's truth to the world. His *Laos* as a 'royal priesthood' were 'to teach and to guide the entire human race' to call upon his holy name (Agus 1969). The people of Israel had free choice to be his people (*Laos tou Theou*) by faith, as they identified themselves with him. God did not select the people of Israel to be his people as a special favour to them, or to glorify them, but rather that they might bring the light of God to all the 'nations', that they might serve as his divinely inspired messenger and that they might witness to all the peoples of the entire world (Huffman 1969).

Those among the Israelites who did not accept him, were, therefore, as a result of their free choice, not included among those who were regarded as the 'people of God'. Many Israelites lacked faith in God, and failed to live according to his commandments. Many also committed offences which led to them being isolated from those who were regarded as the 'people of God'. Exodus makes clear that God excludes from among his people those who transgress his commandments:

*Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.*

(Ex 12:15)

Old Testament rites and events foreshadowed the emergence of the church of God (*Ekklesia*) of the New Testament. As his *Laos* were under his divine protection, both the bondage and suffering which they had to endure while they were confined in Egypt and their subsequent liberation and migration to the Promised Land, effectively foreshadowed the suffering and the utter glory of salvation that has been experienced by all God's people ever since. Being called upon to act as his servants, God's people were to be used by him to demonstrate his glory: 'You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will show my glory' (Is 49:3). His *Laos* would serve to enlighten the Gentiles about his magnificence, demonstrating to them the truth:

*It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make you a light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

(Is 49:6)

His people were to uphold his laws and to strive to maintain their covenant with him: 'You shall therefore love the Lord your

God, and always keep his charge, his statutes, his ordinances, and his commandments.' (Dt 11:1)

The Covenant established by Moses on Mount Sinai with God set the tone for the way in which his people were expected to act in order to please God. Their obedience to his law was non-negotiable. If the *Laos tou Theou* obeyed God's commandments, they would be blessed beyond imagination. However, failure to comply would lead to both spiritual and bodily death. The people of Israel, as the *Laos tou Theou*, were a royal priesthood: 'And ye shall be to me a royal priesthood and a holy nation' (*'hymeis de eseste moi basileion hierateuma kai ethnos hagion'*) (Ex 19:6). The implication of such a declaration is that of a divine choice. The *Laos* was not as faithful as they had been expected to be and were in need of redemption. God's faithfulness to his *Laos* preserved them until the incarnation of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. During the Old Covenant period (and more particularly in Ex 24:1–2, 9–11), God's Covenant is bestowed upon his people during the partaking in a meal on Mount Sinai by the elders of Israel, who are the chosen people. While Moses, Aaron and others eat together, they have communion with God. Such communion is, in a sense, a precursor of the Christian Eucharistic meal of the New Covenant.

## LAOS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament takes a different stance on the issue of who the 'people of God' are. It is clearly insufficient to simply share in the same gene pool as the patriarchs do, as can be found in Romans:

*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.*

(Rm 2:28–29)

The 'people of God' are the *pleroma* of the church, or the congregation of God's people. The *Laos tou Theou* is distinct from the *ethne*, or the Gentiles, who became absorbed into the body of Christ by virtue of their faith. God chose the nation of Israel to be his own, according to the writings to be found in Deuteronomy and Isaiah 2. According to Marks (1972), '[h]e selected Israel to be his "holy people" (*Laos hagios*) and "beyond all nations" (*pera panta ta ethne*), to know and worship him alone as Lord God.' The other nations (*ethne*) in the Old Testament are generally viewed as the enemies of the nation of Israel, being 'the earthly powers that oppose the rule of God' (Childs 1985).

The words *Laos* and *ethnos* are used synonymously in John's Gospel in Chapter 23, where he reports the High Priest Caiaphas saying that 'it is expedient for you that one man should perish for the people, and that the entire nation should not perish'. In such a context, it is obligatory to interpret the word *Laos* in a strictly political sense. Generally speaking, a clear distinction is made between the use of the terms *Laos* and *ethnos* (people as a political entity) and the use of such words as *ochlos* (crowd) and *demos* (populace). In the Septuagint, the word *Laos* is used as an equivalent of the Hebrew word *goy*, which implicitly means the 'people of God'. The word refers to a specific group of people. The use of the word '*Laos*' thus denotes God's chosen people, which is distinct from the denotation of *ethne*, which refers to those nations who inhabit his creation (Pancaro 1969). The people of Israel were called exclusively, and especially, by God: 'and the Lord thy God chose thee to be to him a peculiar people beyond all nations that are upon the face of the earth' (*'kai se proieileto Kyrios o Theos sou einai auto Laon periousion para panta ta ethne, osa epi prosopou tes ges'*) (Dt 7:6). The term *Laos* is used in a 142 cases in the Holy Scriptures. In 115 of these cases, the term indicates the Jewish nation. Luke 2:31 refers to the Old Testament reference to 'the nations' (*laoi*). The Lucan reference is surprising, as, in both the gospels and in the book of Acts reference is made

to the people of Israel as the *Laos tou Theou*. Acts 15:14 states that the heathen are to be converted from the *ethne* (nations) to the *Laos tou Theou*, so that they, therefore, cannot exclusively be Jews. In the Epistles, about half of the references to *Laos* refer to the people of Israel alone.

Essentially, the word *Laos*, therefore, implies a possession which is freely selected by God, by virtue of his great love for his own. However, the term is also sometimes used to refer to the mass of common people, with a similar denotation to that of the Greek word *ochlos*. Such a use is evident in Matthew 4:23 and Luke 9:13, in which context the word is used to refer to the crowd which is gathered to hear Jesus. The theological basis of the concept of the ‘people of God’ largely, therefore, depends on the biblical description of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel, with his chosen people, and with how Christians generally come to internalise the notion that they are the new Israel (Ac 15:14; 1 Pt 2:10).

On two occasions, in Luke 7:29 to 7:30 and again in Matthew 27:64, the term *Laos* is used in the New Testament as being almost synonymous with the Hebrew term *am ha’aretz* (the people of the land). This was the way in which the Pharisees referred to the rural masses.

### LAOS AS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

Most of the Christian believers of the early church, who were Jews, continued to view themselves as the *Laos tou Theou*, which heritage they had inherited from the Old Testament. The situation altered when the Jewish Christians became convinced that both Christ’s salvation for God’s people, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, were intended for the Gentiles as well. The church, essentially, was in continuity with the Israel of God. The Early Church fathers made such an understanding abundantly clear in their writings. Orthodox belief maintained that the church consisted of the ‘people of God’ and, essentially, formed the new Israel:

*The first followers of Jesus in the ‘days of His flesh’, were not isolated individuals engaged in their private quest for truth. They were Israelites regular members of an established and instituted Community of the ‘Chosen People’ of God ... Indeed; a ‘Church’ already existed when Jesus began His ministry. It was Israel, the People of the Covenant... The existing Covenant was the constant background of His preaching. The Sermon on the Mount was addressed not to an occasional crowd of accidental listeners, but rather to an ‘inner circle’ of those who were already following Jesus ... ‘The Little Flock’ that the community which Jesus had gathered around Himself was, in fact, the faithful ‘Remnant’ of Israel, a reconstituted People of God. Each person had to respond individually by an act of personal faith. This personal commitment of faith, however, incorporated the believer into the Community. And this remained forever the pattern of Christian existence: one should believe and confess, and then he is baptized, baptized into the Body.*

(Florovsky 1963:n.p.)

The Christians of the early church became convinced that God was carrying out what He wanted to do by adopting His people of God (*Laos*) from the nations of the world (*ethne*) and from then on looked on they regarded people of God as the ‘saints’ (*hoi hagioi*) and they were ‘holy people’. The term *hagioi* was used extensively in the early church to refer those who followed Jesus. The term ‘saints’ came to denote a universal community that was not discernible according to gender, race, nationality or social class. St Paul writes, ‘[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gl 3:28). In the gospels, the singular form of the word ‘*Laos*’ refers to Israel, with it now applying to a group of believers from any nation, who formed the church of Jesus Christ. The church is the Israel of God, not being ‘a new Israel, but the one and only people of God, Israel in a new Face of history, namely, that of Jesus’ (Newell 1951).

When the Word of God (*Logos*) appeared, he established a new bond with God’s people, which came to include, in the New Covenant, all races and all persons (Papademetriou 2005). Israel, the church of God (*He Ekklesia tou Theou*), is also an eschatological community, which exists in order to gather all peoples and nations under the rule of God, in recognition of Jesus Christ as the Lord of all and our Messiah (Dahl 1957). The writer of Hebrews uses the term ‘*Laos*’ to describe the entire church, with the reference to *Laos* denoting those believers who are under the Christian dispensation.

The term *Ekklesia* is used to refer to all those who are obedient to God and who are, in a sense, a universal manifestation of God’s concern for the entire human race, rather than just for the Jews. The ‘people of God’ (*Laos tou Theou*), which, earlier, had referred only to Jews, over time became used to refer to all Christians (Sanders 1987). Irrespective of whether a person was a Jew or a Gentile, those who wished to be regarded as part of the *Laos tou Theou* could only be regarded as such if they professed their faith in Jesus Christ. The outward manifestation of their willingness to repent was their desire to be baptised, symbolising a breaking away from the Judaic faith. The religious practices of their forefathers were regarded as irrelevant in such a context. Baptism, thus, paved the way for them to become the *Laos tou Theou* and also came to symbolise their identification with Jesus Christ as Saviour.

In the Gospel according to St John 1:12, the *ethnos* (nation), *Laos* (people) and *tekna tou Theou* (children of God) are all identified, with the differences between such terms being clear. The *tekna tou Theou* are ‘all who received Christ’ (Scouteris 1985). The *Laos tou Theou* are forever safe, because Jesus Christ has chosen them, and he is faithful in his desire to maintain them:

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.*

(Jn 10:27–30)

A prominent scholar of orthodoxy describes the orthodox understanding of the term ‘*Laos tou Theou*’ as follows:

*The term laikos is etymologically derived from Laos, the semantic significance of which is the idea of the people of God, the pleroma of the church. After all, the Church cannot be theologically conceived in terms of superior and inferior classes, but only as a unity, as one body; nor can it reflect secular structures based on power and divisions, but the inner life of the Holy Trinity, which according to Christian dogmatic tradition, is unity, communion, love and sharing.*

(Vassiliades 1988:n.p.)

The First Epistle of Peter states that, ‘At one time you were not God’s people, but now you are his people’ (1 Pt 2:10).

### THE LAOS TOU THEOU AND THE HOLY EUCHARIST

The rite of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (as it is celebrated in the Holy Eucharistic communion) are those symbols that depict entry into God’s kingdom and which make those who celebrate them the ‘people of God’. Therefore, all those who participate in the Holy Eucharist, regarding it as a ritual in which they share in the body of Christ as part of a united body, by means of which the church can realise its fullness, are ‘people of God’ (Vassiliades 1988).

As church members, of one and the same body, the ‘people of God’ are united with one another and with the divine head of the body, by means of divine grace, which is apparent in their new life in Jesus Christ. It is by means of such grace that they live a new existence, which is spent in continuous communion (*koinonia*) with the triune Godhead. In such a way, they become ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (1 Pt 2:9).

The New Covenant of Jesus with the 'people of God' was based upon his sacrificial death:

*And when he had taken some bread and given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise he took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you.'*

(Lk 22:19–20)

Each of the members of the church, as the *Laos tou Theou*, share in each of the prophetic, high priestly and royal offices of Christ. Through divine grace, they become the communicants of all the blessings of the divine glory. They are all able to live out the fullness of God's truth in the *Ekklesia*, as well as to live out the experience of the variety of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental life (*mystiriake zoe*) of the church (Limouris 1992). The early church fathers all accepted the message that is contained in the Old Testament as a precursor to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. All of those sacrifices that feature in the Old Testament are regarded as a prefiguration of the good news (*evangelion*) and of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ at Golgotha. The *Laos tou Theou* are a 'peculiar people' (Tt 2:14), who are characterised by their Christian belief. They are essentially a mystical body, who are inspired by the *energeia* (energy) of the Holy Spirit, and who fall under the headship of Jesus Christ (Theodorou 1982). People were not made to be of God by the old Mosaic covenant. They were made the *Laos tou Theou* by means of the New Covenant, to which the prophet Jeremiah refers in the Old Testament:

*'Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,' declares the Lord. 'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'.*

(Jr 31:31–33)

The identity of the 'people of God' as the elect, or as those who are called by God, is made manifest in the *koinonia* (fellowship) which they share with Jesus Christ. The *Ekklesia* church, as that of the 'people of God', continues to offer protection and to strive to perpetuate the faith of the one true God in the world.

Those who wish to be numbered among God's people must first receive Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour:

*Jesus therefore said to them again, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture ... I am the good shepherd; and I know my own, and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd.'*

(Jn 10:7–9, 14–16)

The New Testament is a consummation of the Old Testament. Jesus is the Messiah who is spoken of by the prophets, and it is in him that all promises and expectations are fulfilled. The law of the Old Testament and the Gospel belong together as a unity. Those who do not recognise Jesus as the Messiah betray the old dispensation. Jesus' life of total service, as well as his death and resurrection, are the basis of a new community, which is erected on an ongoing basis by listening to the good news of the Gospel and by appreciating the special gifts of the sacraments by means of participating in them. Belonging to the church implies living in total communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit (BEM 1982).

## THE LAOS TOU THEOU AND THE STATE OF ONENESS

The idea of the oneness of all of humanity is a central teaching in the Orthodox Christian faith. In terms of such faith, St Basil the Great explains that all people are related and that all are brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*), who come from the one Father who made everything (Vasiliades 1978). St Irenaeus stresses that the *pleroma* (fullness) of the church, which consists of the holy 'people of God', is received at baptism, in order to preserve the 'rule of truth' (*kanona tes aletheias*). By receiving such baptism, the 'people of God' become the custodians of the truth.

The emphasis of Orthodox theology is on communion; the centrality of the ritual is manifested in the church in the form of Eucharistic communion. In the new Israel, the *Laos tou Theou*, including all of humanity who accept Christ, are incorporated into the one body of Christ. The formerly 5 distinct groups which coexist in harmony in the *Ekklesia* form the body of Christ. Yves Congar (1969) described the *Ekklesia* as 'the community of the faithful who march in the way of salvation' (my emphasis). In reality, the church, despite keeping the teachings of Christ alive, also from time to time seems to ignore or forget certain of his teachings. The church does so because, even though all its members are saints, we, as members of such a church, are also all sinners, due to the original sin which was committed by Adam, and we are all, therefore, in need of the forgiveness of Christ. In all history, only Christ himself was without spot or blemish. The church is, therefore, in constant need of reform and the cleansing of those offences that its members commit.

## CONCLUSION

Christ is the head and the body, with the church being the *Laos tou Theou*. The 'people of God' are the guardians of all truth, including Christian doctrine. The guardian of religion is the very body of the church, which consists of the people (*Laos*) themselves. The term 'people of God', in terms of the Orthodox Church, thus refers to those members of the body of Christ who believe and who will come to believe, in the *pleroma* (fullness) of the church, comprising the new Israel of God, the 'saints', the 'elect', the 'chosen race', and the 'royal priesthood'. The church is 'God's holy people', who consist of those baptised who participate in God's Eucharistic communion. The *Laos tou Theou*, in either the Old Testament or the New Testament, are all those who have placed their faith in God to save them. The Old Testament 'people of God' trusted in the coming Messiah, whereas the New Testament 'people of God' put their trust in the Saviour who has come to free us from spiritual bondage. In the Orthodox *paradosi* (tradition), all of humanity is one in the sight of God. St Basil the Great stated that all humans, who are related to one another, are all *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters) who are given life by God the Creator (Vasiliades 1978).

In the Old Testament, the 'people of God' were the 'sons of Abraham', who, by their faith, trusted in God's promise of a Messiah who would save his people from their evil ways. In the New Testament, the *Laos tou Theou* are those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as the promised Saviour. The history of Israel is the history of the *Laos tou Theou*, who are the 'people of God'. Such a deduction is evident in God's promise to Abraham and in the Covenant which was made with Moses on behalf of the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. The creation of the *Ekklesia* by the Incarnate Logos of God created a new and unique relationship with God's people, which allows humanity to enter into the Covenant and to become part of the *Laos tou Theou*. The *Ekklesia* remain the *Laos tou Theou*, comprising the entire corpus of Christ and the entire communion (or fellowship [*koinonia*]) of all of the disciples of Jesus. All baptised believers are part of the chosen race and the royal priesthood, which form the holy nation of God. All of us are equally called by God to belong to his 'people'. Jews and Gentiles, free citizens and slaves, the rich and

the poor, and all genders have shared with one another in the life of the *Ekklesia* as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that the *Ekklesia* is the new *Laos tou Theou*, such a finding does not replace the initial Covenant which was bestowed on the people of Israel (Ac 3:25; Gl 3:17). The nation of Israel still remains one, as a nation of God’s people in which, by divine grace, we are able to share in the honour and privilege of being part of the *Laos tou Theou* (Rm 9:6).

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