METROPOLITAN HILARION OF VOLOKOLAMSK SPEAKS AT THE SESSION OF THE EPISCOPAL COUNCIL OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH ON THE RESULTS OF STUDYING THE DOCUMENTS OF THE COUNCIL ON CRETE

As a continuation on the topic raised in the presentation of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia at the session of the Episcopal Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and chairman of the Biblical-Theological Commission Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk spoke on the topic of the results of studying the documents of the Council of Crete (18th – 27th June 2016).

The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church at its session on the 15th of July 2016 entrusted the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission with the task of, "upon receipt of officially verified copies of the documents approved by the Council of Crete, publishing these documents and studing them, taking into account the possible responses and comments of their Graces the bishops, the religious educational institutes and schools, theologians, clerics, monks and nuns, and to present the conclusions of this thorough study to the Holy Synod" (Journal no.48).

In touching upon the status of the Council of Crete in his speech, Metropolitan Hilarion reminded listeners that from the very outset of the pre-Conciliar process the principle of consensus among all the commonly recognized Local Autocephalous Churches was to be the basis for the taking of decisions at all events in preparation for the Pan-Orthodox Council. However, by June of 2016 this consensus in relation to the convocation of the Holy and Great Council was absent for a number of reasons. In particular, the delegation of the Patriarchate of Antioch did not sign the resolutions of the gathering if the First Hierarchs of the Orthodox Churches in Constantinople of 2014, among which was the resolution on the convocation of the Council in 2016, as well as the resolutions and a number of other documents (including the Council's agenda) of the gathering of the First Hierarchs of the Orthodox Churches in Chambésy in 2016.

The draft of the Council document on the topic of marriage was not signed at the gathering of the First Hierarchs in 2016, nor by the delegation of the Church of Georgia.

The First Hierarchs of the Russian and Georgian Churches in their speeches at the gathering of the First Hierarchs in 2016 and in the subsequent correspondence indicated that the condition for their

agreement for holding the Council in June of 2016 would be the reaching of consensus on all controversial issues in the time left before the Council. This consensus was not reached.

Less than a month before the proposed date of the opening of the Council, the Holy Synods of five autocephalous Churches – of Bulgaria, Antioch, Serbia, Georgia and, finally, Russia – called for its postponement in order to overcome those obstacles that hindered their participation in the Council (later the Church of Serbia took the decision to participate in the Council). These calls were ignored. As a result, ten of the fourteen commonly recognized autocephalous Local Churches took part in the work of the Council of Crete. The fullness of the One Catholic Orthodox Church was not represented at it, and therefore the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church at its session of the 15th of July 2016 admitted that "the Council of Crete cannot be viewed as an Ecumenical Council, while the documents adopted at it as expressing the common Orthodox consensus" (Journal no.48).

The Council of Crete adopted eight documents: "Autonomy and the Means of Its Proclamation"; "The Orthodox Diaspora"; "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Modern-day World"; "The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today"; "The Sacrament of Marriage and Obstacles to It"; "The Relationship of the Orthodox Church Towards the Rest of the Christian World", the "Epistle of the Council" and the "Circular Epistle of the Council" (Encyclical).

The majority of these documents (with the exception of the two epistles composed directly at the Council of Crete) were prepared within the framework of the pre-Conciliar process which had been going on for decades with the active participation of the Russian Orthodox Church. After the publication of the draft documents of the Holy and Great Council, they were discussed at the level of the Local Orthodox Churches. The Russian Orthodox Church prepared and sent to all the Local Churches its proposals for amendments to the draft documents on "The Relationship of the Orthodox Church Towards the Rest of the Christian World" and "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Modern-day World." These amendments were in many ways consonant with those critical comments which were expressed on the two aforementioned documents on the part of the other Local Churches and the Holy Koinotita of the Mount Athos.

As the chairman of the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission noted, the documents adopted at Crete may be divided into three categories depending on their relationship towards drafts earlier examined by the Episcopal Council of 2016. The first of these are documents which were accepted by the Council of Crete without adding any substantial amendments. Among these are the documents "The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today" and "Autonomy and the Means of Its Proclamation." To the second category belong the documents adopted by the Council with important amendments to their contents. These documents are "The Orthodox Diaspora", "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Modern-day World"; "The Relationship of the Orthodox Church Towards the Rest of the Christian

World” and “The Sacrament of Marriage and Obstacles to It.”

In particular an amendment was added to the document “The Orthodox Diaspora” which limits the Local Churches in obtaining “already existing titles for bishops” in the diaspora. This addition requires further discussion at a Pan-Orthodox level.

The document “The Relationship of the Orthodox Church Towards the Rest of the Christian World” incurred the most critical comments within the Orthodox milieu after its publication. There was no consensus of opinion even at the Council of Crete itself: it was not signed by twenty one bishops of the one hundred and sixty participants of the Council, including seventeen of twenty five bishops of the delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Special criticism was evoked by the following formulations: the labeling in the document of non-Orthodox communities as “churches,” and the expressions “the search” and “the restoration” of the unity of Christians. The amendments proposed by the Russian Church reflected this concern but were not taken fully into account by the Council of Crete.

The document “The Sacrament of Marriage and Obstacles to It” contains a number of controversial formulations. In particular, the phrase from an earlier published draft – “The Church considers it impossible that her members can conclude a same-sex union” – was modified at the Council in the following manner: “The Church does not recognize as possible for its members to conclude civil unions, whether same –sex or whether with the opposite sex.” This formulation introduces an ambiguity into the text. The original formulation expresses the Church’s teaching on marriage more accurately. The document “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Modern-day World” in the form in which it was adopted at the Council of Crete contains formulations which create the impression that as a result of the incarnation of the Word of God all of the human race is already gathered in Christ, and is saved and deified, which evoked serious criticism within the Orthodox milieu. These expressions require an obligatory clarification, said Metropolitan Hilarion. – Moreover, there is an inappropriate reference to Eusebius of Caesarea, who is not only not an authoritative Father of the Church, but has been accused, and not without justification, of semi-Arianism.”

To the third category belong documents which were prepared and adopted directly at the Council. These are the “Epistle of the Council” and the “Circular Epistle of the Council” (Encyclical), which reflect the decisions taken by those autocephalous Churches which participated in the Council on a number of relevant issues. As was noted at the presentation read at the Episcopal Council of the chairman of the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, the basic ideas of these documents on the whole do not contradict the social doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church. “At the same time, the documents contain a number of not quite successful and unclear formulations, as well as assertions which were not earlier discussed at the Pan-Orthodox level,” said the metropolitan. “These formulations and assertions require further discussion.”

“In order that the draft documents prepared during the pre-Conciliar process and examined at the Council of Crete become decisions recognized by all the Orthodox, they must be further developed and agreed upon at a Pan-Orthodox level, and then adopted by a consensus of all the Local Autocephalous Orthodox Churches,” he emphasized in his presentation.

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