Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church expresses its position on the Council held in Crete

The participants in the session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, held under the chairmanship of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia on 15 July 2016, considered the Council of the Primates and hierarchs of ten Local Orthodox Churches, which took place from June 18 to 26, 2016, in Crete.

The Holy Synod, at its session on June 13, 2016 (Minutes No. 40), considered the situation that has arisen in connection with the refusal of a number of Local Orthodox Churches to participate in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church on the established day earlier, June 18-26, 2016, and adopted a statement on this topic.

The statement, which was sent on the same day to His Holiness Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, and to the Primates of all the Local Orthodox Churches, contains in particular a call to support the proposal made by the Churches of Antioch, Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria, to postpone the date of the Pan-Orthodox Council.

Nevertheless, the Council did take place on June 18-26, 2016, in Crete, and it was attended by delegations of ten Local Orthodox Churches. The Churches of Antioch, Russia, Georgia and Bulgaria did not participate in its work. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, on June 16, sent a message to the Primates and members of the delegations of the Local Churches, who had gathered in the Island of Crete. Expressed in the letter is a conviction that the differences between particular Churches concerning the preparation of the Holy and Great Council should not become a factor of dividing and weakening the unity of the Orthodox Church. Pointing to the importance of the voice of each Local Church and the absence of consent from the Patriarchate of Antioch as to the convocation of the Council, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill pointed out that the meeting in Crete can make a contribution to the preparation of a Holy and Great Council in which all the generally recognized Local autocephalous Churches will take part.

The documents adopted by the Council in Crete are placed in the Internet, but they have not been officially received by the Russian Orthodox Church to this day. A number of hierarchs of various Local Orthodox Churches who participated in the Council are reported to have stated that they refused to sign the document on “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World” because they

disagreed with its contents.

On June 27, 2016, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Antioch adopted a statement concerning the holding of the gathering in Crete. It states that the documents adopted by it are not binding for the Patriarchate of Antioch and underlines that “the principle of consensus remains an invariable foundation of relations between all the Orthodox”. The Holy Synod of the Church of Antioch recognized the meeting, which took place, as “a preliminary gathering on the way to a Pan-Orthodox Council”, while the documents it adopted as not final and open for discussion. It was also noted that the Church of Antioch appealed to postpone the convocation of the Council “so that the pan-Orthodox unity may be strengthened, the Orthodox consensus on disputed problems on the Council’s agenda may be ensured and the ecclesiological conditions may be created for all the autocephalous Orthodox Church to participate in it”. The statement stressed that the Council, which was originally planned as pan-Orthodox, was conducted in the absence of Churches “representing over a half of the Orthodox faithful in the world”.

On July 9, 2016, the chancellery of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church reported that after the documents of the Council on Crete are received officially, they will be conveyed to the metropolitans of the Patriarchate of Bulgaria for a thorough study, after which the Holy Synod, at its meeting, will express its attitude to the decisions of the Crete Council.

The participants in the session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church resolved to acknowledge that the Council that took place in Crete, in which the Primates and hierarchs of ten out of fifteen autocephalous Orthodox Local Churches participated, was an important event in the history of the conciliar process in the Orthodox Church initiated by the First Pan-Orthodox Conference which took place on Rhodes Island in 1961.

As the members of the Holy Synod stressed, it has been the principle of consensus that has constituted the basis for pan-Orthodox cooperation throughout the conciliar process. They stated that the holding of a Council in the absence of consent from a number of autocephalous Orthodox Churches violates this principle; therefore, the Council that took place in Crete cannot be considered to be pan-Orthodox while the documents adopted by it to be considered expressing pan-Orthodox consensus. In this connection, the participants in the meeting pointed out to the position taken by the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch.

The Holy Synod the Russian Orthodox Church charged the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission with publishing and studying the officially attested copies of the documents approved by the Crete Council, taking into account possible responses and remarks of the Most Reverend hierarchs, theological schools, theologians, clergy, monastics and laity, and after a comprehensive study to submit

the conclusions to the Holy Synod.

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