



Session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church 3 June 2016

Proceedings No. 35

CONSIDERED: Serious problems which have arisen in the course of preparations for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church to take place from June 18 to 26, 2016, especially concerning the refusal of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to attend the Council if its date is not put off and concerning the serious criticism with regard to the preparation of the Council and the Council's draft documents both in the Russian Orthodox Church and several other Local Orthodox Churches.

BACKGROUND NOTE:

During the Synaxis of the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches at the Patriarchate of Constantinople on March 6-9, 2014, it was decided that 'the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church will be convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2016 in Constantinople. In addition, it was resolved that 'all the decision both during the Council and on the preparatory stages be made on the bases of consensus'. The Synaxis of the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches, on January 21-28, 2016, at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambesy (Geneva), decided that 'the Holy and Great Council will take place from June 18 to 27, 2016, at the Orthodox Academy of Crete'. It was also decided that a Pan-Orthodox Secretariat and an Organizing Committee of the Holy and Great Council be set up. The Primate of Local Churches agreed with the proposal of the Russian Orthodox Church to publish the draft documents of the Council to ensure their broad discussion. A call to the faithful 'to express their opinions and expectations from the Holy and Great Council' was made by His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople in his message on the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

Showing full readiness to engage in active cooperation in preparing the Council, the Russian Orthodox Church immediately assigned its representatives to the Pan-Orthodox Secretariat and the Organizing

Committee (His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia's letter No. 01/818 of 25 February 2016). However, the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, for all the reminders, was invited to attend only from June 7 (His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople's letter of 31 May 2016).

In April 2016, the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod determined (Proceeding No. 34) the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church delegation to the Pan-Orthodox Council and His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople was notified of it in an appropriate letter.

Concurrently, critical remarks began to be voiced concerning draft documents soon after their publication, coming from the episcopate, clergy and laity of the Russian Church. The Moscow Patriarchate, the Department for External Church Relations and other Synodal bodies received en masse letters from the Orthodox faithful criticizing the Council's texts and the very process of preparations for the Council. In response to the confusion of the flock, the Department for External Church Relations came out with the necessary explanations and comments by publishing an appropriate statement. To ensure a broad discussion on the Council's draft documents, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, a conference on 'The Pan-Orthodox Council: Opinions and Expectations' took place on April 19 at the St. Tikhon's Orthodox University of the Humanities in Moscow. As a result of this conference, some amendments to the Council's documents on 'Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World', and 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World' were prepared and submitted to the Supreme Church Authority for consideration.

In spite of the decreasing period of time remaining till the convocation of the Council, there are still a multitude of unresolved problems, which question the possibility for the Council to reach a pan-Orthodox consensus. The Council's Working Procedure, prepared at the Synaxis of the Primates of Orthodox Churches on January 21-28, 2016, in Chambesy, has not been signed by the delegation of the Patriarchate of Antioch. The draft document on 'The Sacrament of Marriage and Impediments to It' has not been signed by the delegations of the Patriarchate of Antioch and Georgia. The proposal of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to use the remaining time for starting pan-Orthodox negotiations on this matters as part of the Pan-Orthodox Secretariat, 'with the consequent consideration of the proposals developed by the Synaxis of the Primates of Local Orthodox Churches' (His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of

Moscow and All Russia's letter to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople No. 01/818 of 26 February 2016) has not been supported by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Secretariat met only twice for the past period to be engaged predominantly in logistical matters. The proposal of the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Pan-Orthodox Secretariat to consider the negotiation of the documents was declined.

Still unresolved are the differences between the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem concerning the church jurisdiction over Qatar and the ensuing absence of the Eucharistic communion between them – which is an essential obstacle for participation of the Church of Antioch in the Council.

During the past week, the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church resolved that the Council's documents on 'The Sacrament of Marriage and Impediments to It' and 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World' should be considerably amended, while the document on 'The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World' 'should be essentially rewritten'. It is noted that if the proposed changes 'are not taken into account and put into the text of the document the Church of Georgia will find it impossible to sign it'.

The Holy Bishop's Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church adopted a document on the preparation of the Pan-Orthodox Council. It 'reflects the position taken by the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church on all the main problems to be discussed at the Great Council and to be decided'. This document, sent for information to the Primates and Holy Synods of Local Orthodox Churches, asked a question 'whether the forthcoming Council meets the criterion and measure of authentic Council known from the history of the Orthodox Church..., whether the Council will express the unity of the Church of Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father'. The bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church point to the shortcomings of the Council's Working Procedure; ask questions about the role and status of the bishops at the Council and about the unjustified reduction of the number of participants in the Council; they also believe it necessary for the Council to consider the theme of autocephaly and the way of its declaration (the matter on which the Russian Church along with other Churches has continually insisted; they express the opinion that the Council's draft documents 'need to be changed and clarified in order to be consistent with the challenges of the Church's life and mission', making a special reference to meet this need in the documents on 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World' and 'The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World', and

also make other remarks.

On May 25, 2016, the Bishops' Council of the Orthodox Church of Greece completed its session, which, as the Council's circular letter reports, 'discussed the decisions and proposals of the Permanent Holy Synod on the Council's documents drafted on the basis of proposals sent to the bishops at a request of His Beatitude Archbishop Jeronimos of Athens and All Greece. Faithful to the teaching of the Church's prophets, apostles and fathers, the Bishops' Council of the Church of Greece thoroughly examined all the proposals of the Permanent Holy Synod one by one and in the spirit of unity, responsibility and seriousness, proposed amendments and additions to these tests, which were finalized as an official decision of the Church of Greece on the Council's documents. These amendments and additions are essential as they reflect the age-old experience and tradition of the Church... In spite of the fact that the opinions of the hierarchs differed, the decisions were adopted almost unanimously'. At the same time, it was noted that 'previously the texts to be discussed by the Holy and Great Council, provoked very much justified concern among many clergy, monks and laity'.

On the same day, the Holy Community of Holy Mount Athos, as a result of a specially convened Extraordinary Twofold Meeting of all the antiprosopes and hegumens of the twenty holy monasteries of Holy Mount Athos, sent to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and the Primate of Local Orthodox Church a letter noting that 'some passages in the pre-Council texts need to be clarified in order to express more clearly the age-old tradition of holy fathers and the conciliar heritage of the Church. With regard to these passages, we humbly express our opinion and propose our amendments'. These amendments affect the draft documents on 'The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World' and 'the Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World'. Presenting these 'proposals, which have become a fruit of ... reflections and prayer', the Athonites stress that the correction of pre-Council texts is necessary, so that the Holy and Great Council could succeed 'avoiding schisms and divisions'.

On May 27, 2016, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Antioch issued a statement indicating that the members of the Synod 'discussed all the details and documents of the Great Orthodox Council' and 'came to the agreement on the general formulation of the Church of Antioch's attitude to the themes on the agenda' and 'decided to adopt all the proposed amendments' introduced earlier by the ad hoc commission and once again voiced the need 'to find a final church solution of the conflict

with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem’.

On May 31, 2015, the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople proposed that in order to examine the problem in the relationships of the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem and to search for a mutually acceptable solution to establish ‘immediately after the Holy and Great Council a bilateral commission from among representatives of these Churches, with the Patriarch of Constantinople acting as coordinator’.

In this connection, on June 1, 2016, the secretariat of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch stated that the Patriarchate of Antioch learnt about this proposal ‘with great distress and astonishment’ and that ‘the above-mentioned decision shows that all the efforts made for the last three years’ since the beginning of the conflict ‘were in vain... These efforts were specially made before the Holy and Great Council, so that the Council could become an expression of Orthodox unity. The best manifestation of this unity is the Divine Liturgy celebrated by all the autocephalous Orthodox Church during the celebrations of the Day of Pentecost. Joint service is the right way of resolving problems that concern the plenitude of the Orthodox Church and an expression of unanimity in these matters’. However, the call to put off the solution of this problem till the end of the Holy and Great Council brings to naught the goal of holding a Council that is called to become an expression of Orthodox unity’. This is what the Church of Antioch has repeatedly warned against’. It is reported that ‘the Holy Synod continues its session and will gather together again in a few days’ time to study the events relating to the Holy and Great Council and to make appropriate decisions’.

On June 1, 2016, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, at its plenary session, ‘held a comprehensive discussion on the matters relating to the convocation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church from June 16 to 26, 2016, on the island of Crete’. The Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Church pointed to the following:

- 1. The absence of themes especially important for a Pan-Orthodox Council on its agenda as these themes are urgent and need a timely pan-Orthodox decision;*
- 2. The differences on some already approved texts of the Council, which have arisen and which have been officially stated by Local Churches;*

3. *According to the already adopted Working Procedure of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church, it is impossible to review the text in the course of the Council's work;*
4. *The proposed sitting of the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches in the hall as planned for the session of the Council violates the principle of equality of the Primate of autocephalous Orthodox Churches;*
5. *The unsuitable sitting places for observers and guests of the Council;*
6. *The need for considerable and unjustified financial costs in case of the Patriarchate of Bulgaria's participation in the Council.*

As a result of its session, the Patriarchate of Bulgaria Holy Synod 'unanimously stated the following:

1. *To insist that the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church in June 16-26, 2016, be put off with the preparations for it continued;*
2. *Otherwise, the Patriarchate of Bulgaria Holy Synod categorically states its decision not to attend the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church planned for June 16-26, 2016'.*

On June 2, 2016, His Holiness Patriarch Neophytos of Bulgaria in his letter informed the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches about this decision.

RESOLVED:

1. That the efforts made by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate representatives for participation in the preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in the period after the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, which took place on February 2-3, 2016, be approved.
2. That the proposals for amendments made by the Russian Orthodox Church to the Pan-Orthodox Council draft documents on 'The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World' and 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World', formulated on the basis of judgements voiced by bishops, clergy, monastics and laity, be approved.

3. That a special mention be made that as a result of the discussion on the Pan-Orthodox Council's draft documents in the Orthodox Churches of Georgia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece as well as the Holy Community of Holy Mount Athos, essential amendments have been made, to a great extent consonant with the proposals made by the Russian Orthodox Church. They need to be thoroughly examined with the aim to find a general Orthodox consensus.

4. Considering that the decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Council may be made only on basis of consensus (The decision made by the Synaxis of the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches, which took place on March 6-9, 2016, Point 2a), that is, by a unanimous vote of all the universally recognized autocephalous Orthodox Churches, it should be noted that the non-participation of at least one of them in the Council constitutes an unsurmountable obstacle to the holding of a Holy and Great Council.

5. That it should be stated that the decision of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church made on June 1, 2016, as well as the continued uncertainty with regard to the possibility for the Patriarchate of Antioch to attend the Holy and Great Council, just as the absence of a preliminary consensus on the draft Working Procedure of the Council and the document on 'The Sacrament of Marriage and Impediments to It' mean that at a time when the planned date of the opening of the Council is only two weeks away, there are serious problems that need urgent common Orthodox actions.

6. That the way out of the present emergency situation could be found in holding an extraordinary pan-Orthodox pre-Council conference to address the present situation and examine the amendments to the Council's documents presented by Orthodox Churches with the aim to work out agreed proposals.

7. That considering the great amount of work and the importance of problems raised, such a conference needs to be convened urgently, no later than on June 10, 2016, so that on the basis of its resolution the Orthodox Churches could make a decision as to the possibility of convening the Pan-Orthodox Council at the stated date.

8. That Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia be asked to address His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople with an appropriate proposal.

9. That the above-mentioned proposals of the Russian Orthodox Church be immediately sent to the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches.

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