Councils Are The Norm For Church Life, Not It's Distortion

A Pan-Orthodox Council, which has not been convoked for more than thousand years and has been in preparation for more than fifty years, will take place on Crete in June. At a meeting of the First Hierarchs in January in Switzerland the drafts of six documents were approved which are intended to be adopted at the Council. They were published on the internet so that people could familiarize themselves with them. Some of them were subject to criticism among the Orthodox.

In an interview with Interfax-Religion the head of the Synodal Department for Church-Society Relations and the Mass Media Vladimir Legoida gave us an insight into the forthcoming Council and its preparation, and also spoke of how it differs from an Ecumenical Council and how the criticism of this forum should be perceived.

What place does the Pan-Orthodox Council occupy in the life of the Local Orthodox Churches?

First of all, it is important to emphasize that Councils are the norm of Church life and not its distortion. The Seven Ecumenical Councils - the most important assemblies of bishops in the period of ancient of Christianity - have become firmly embedded in our consciousness. However, there were other extremely important councils of Orthodox hierarchs. For example, the Fourth Council of Constantinople, also known as the Council of Hagia Sophia, convoked in 879 under the presidency of Patriarch of Constantinople St. Photius. This Council, among other things, included the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 among the Ecumenical Councils. The decisions of the Council of 879 have become a part of the canon law of the Orthodox Church. Some saints considered this Council to be the Eighth Ecumenical Council. And although there was no later council in Church history which would affirm that this Council had such a high status, the importance accorded to the Council of Hagia Sophia has to be taken into account, especially when we look at the fact that people say that the conciliar life of the Orthodox Church ended with the Seven Ecumenical Councils. This is not the case.

An Ecumenical Council has not been convoked for a long time. How do we account for the thousand-year pause in their history?

One of the reasons for the cessation of the Councils was the Schism. The events of 1054, which led to

the breakdown of unity between Rome and Constantinople, the two capital cities of Christianity at the time, could not but have an effect on Church life. It would appear that for a time Christians believed that Church unity would be restored. There were, after all, divisions before the Schism, but they did not have such far reaching consequences. When the finality of the Schism became an insuperable reality, the Orthodox Church found herself under the dominion of the Ottoman Empire, which in effect excluded the possibility of holding further Councils.

At the same time, it would be wrong to say that Councils on dogmatic issues were no longer convoked after the ninth century. Thus, for example, the so called Palamite Councils condemning Barlaam and his adherents and affirming the teaching of St. Gregory Palamite on important dogmatic issues. These Councils were not called Ecumenical, they were attended primarily by the bishops of the Church of Constantinople, but the resolutions they adopted were also recognized by the other Local Churches.

His Holiness the Patriarch, when presenting the drafts of the Pan-Orthodox Council at the Episcopal Council of the Russian Orthodox Church on 3rd February 2016, went into detail on how the idea of holding the Pan-Orthodox Church was developed, beginning with the twentieth century. I should note that he personally was present at the many stages of Orthodox consultations on this issue. Incidentally, the Patriarch specially emphasized that the Council would not have the status of an Ecumenical Council.

Why is the Council not Ecumenical?

Unlike the ancient Ecumenical Councils, the present Council does not have the task of resolving dogmatic issues as they have already been resolved and cannot be reviewed. Moreover, the Council will not introduce innovations into the canonical structure or the liturgical life of the Church. Even more so as the review of dogma is nonsense that can enter the head only of a non-Church person. The Church has no need too of innovations in her canonical structure - there simply is no necessity for this, and this is evident to any believing Orthodox Christian.

All of the issues that the Council will look at are outlined in the published drafts of the Council documents. And the schedule of the Council, which has also been published, clearly and precisely states that no other issues can be the subject of review of the Pan-Orthodox Council on Crete. Full stop. So there is absolutely no foundation for those who voice their concern that it will permit second marriage for the clergy, adopt the Gregorian calendar, abolish the fasts and so on. These are all fantasies that bear no relation to reality.

What role is played by the fact that the delegations of the Local Churches consist of twenty four bishops?

Constantinople's initial proposal was that the delegations should have only twelve bishops. Then the Russian Church proposed as an alternative that the Council should be held with the participation of all Orthodox bishops. There are about seven hundred of them throughout the world. We said that in order to make this proposal a reality we would be prepared to take upon ourselves the organization of the Council and hold it with the participation of all bishops in, for example, St. Petersburg or Moscow, which was within the bounds of possibility. Unfortunately, this idea did not find any support. Then we decided upon the number - twenty four - of members in each delegation, also thanks to the stance of the Russian Orthodox Church, which insisted upon enlarging the numbers of participants. But this also means that, let's say, the Polish Orthodox Church will be represented by the entirety of her bishops, while the Russian Church only by one fifth of her bishops.

In this regard one Greek bishop expressed his opinion that under these conditions the Council on Crete can hardly be called Great (the official title is the 'Great and Holy Council' - Interfax-Religion), and that it would be more correct to call it an enlarged sessions of heads of the Local Churches. This point of view has some justification.

You said that the Council would not review dogmatic problems. What is the reason for the selection of six topics for the affirmed draft documents?

Here we should recall the history of the preparation of the Council. In 1961at the first Pan-Orthodox convocation held on the island of Rhodes in Greece one hundred topics were proposed for discussion. Let me emphasize that all of these topics were thoroughly examined by our Church and that quality documents were produced on each of them. However, in 1971 representatives of a number of Local Churches agitated for a reduction in the Council's proposed agenda. And the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Convocation of 1976 cut down the list of topics to... ten. Today there remain only six documents which are expected to be adopted by consensus, that is, without objections on the part of any of the Local Churches. At a later stage there was removed from the agenda the document on autocephaly which had in effect been ready since agreement could not be reached on the order in which it should be signed by the First Hierarchs of the Local Churches.

Incidentally, the proposal that decisions should be reached by consensus was also keenly supported by the Russian Church. The alternative would have been to reject unanimity and adopt decisions by a majority vote. However, this would mean there could be issues where the number of those Churches voting 'for' would be very small, while consensus means that if one Church is against, then the resolution is not adopted. This, of course, better reflects the conciliar nature of taking decisions in the Church.

What do you think of the criticism expressed publically of the drafts of the Council documents?

We do not consider the draft documents to be ideal. But it cannot be otherwise. These texts are the result of long and difficult discussions, attempts to balance often various perspectives. They are compromise texts. There are no deviations from dogma or the canons, as was also testified by the Episcopal Council of the Russian Church in 2016. But this does not mean we cannot make more precise certain formulae, clarify not fully clear places or remove possible ambiguities. Our Church initiated their publication, proceeding from the need to receive a wider reaction from the Orthodox faithful of all the Local Churches. We therefore can only welcome the discussion and reasonable criticism of the documents. Our Church held a seminar on this topic at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and a conference at St. Tikhon's Orthodox University which published the final document and also sent to His Holiness the Patriarch their proposals for improving the drafts the of three documents: 'The Relationship of the Orthodox Church towards the Rest of the Christian World', 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church the Contemporary World' and 'The Sacrament of Marriage and Obstacles Towards It'. Strictly speaking, there is only one proposal concerning the third document, that of a more rigorous formula for rejecting so called same-sex unions. In the first two instances there are proposals for making more precise certain formulations or additions, including, for example, quotations from the Fathers.

Moreover, the publication of the drafts of the documents will, as I have already said, reassure those who even now believe that something terrible and concealed from the faithful will be signed or approved. The schedule clearly states: 'The Council will not discuss newly presented texts or issues which have not been unanimously approved by the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Convocations and assemblies of First Hierarchs'.

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