



“In preparation since 1961”

As the preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council planned to take place in 2016 in Istanbul have been intensified, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, DECR chairman, explains to the readers of Ogoniok, a socio-political weekly, why a meeting of all the Orthodox Churches is needed.

- What is the agenda of the Council?

- Originally, it was planned to put about one hundred items on the Pan-Orthodox Council's agenda. Later, as the preparations were underway, it was decided for starters to reduce the agenda to ten items that in one way or another affect all the Local Churches. Of great importance is the problem of administration over the church communities in diaspora, that is, those outside the traditionally Orthodox countries, for instance, in Western Europe and in the American continent. It was also agreed to systematize church rules concerning marriage and fasting. The Council's agenda also includes the problem of the church calendar, which has aggravated the situation in many Local Churches after they adopted the new calendar. The Council is to evaluate the current dialogue conducted by Orthodox Churches with non-Orthodoxy and to establish the acceptable bonds of these contacts. The agenda also includes the topic which was relevant for the 1960s and 1970s, namely, the Orthodox Church's attitude to discrimination on racial grounds and other social phenomena of the time. Today it is an out-of-date topic, which has to be reconsidered. A number of items concern the administrative structure of the Church and its protocol. Particularly, the Orthodox Churches are to define the understanding of the autocephalous and autonomous status of Churches and to resolve some technical issues of the diptych or the list of the Orthodox Churches.

The Council is called, of course, to respond to new challenges of today, such as the essentially atheistic cult of consumerism, which leads to economic and ecological crisis, progressive erosion of the ethical foundations of the family, and radical nationalist and pseudo-religious extremism. The Council cannot pass over in silence the new persecution of Christianity manifested in various forms in various regions of the world.

- Who will attend the Council and how the delegates will be elected?

- The representation of the Orthodox Churches was considered by the meeting of Primates which took place on March 5-9 in Istanbul. It was agreed that each Local Church will be represented by its Primate and at least 24 hierarchs. The Churches which have not so many bishops will be represented by all their hierarchs led by the Primate. The procedure of delegating representatives of Local Churches will be determined by each of them on their own.

- The previous Council took place before the split into the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. Will the unification of the Orthodox and the Catholics and the role of the Pope of Rome in the Christian world be discussed by the Council?

- Attempts to unite the Churches after the schism were made at the 1274 Council of Lyons and the 1438-1445 Council of Ferrara-Florence. But they failed and only aggravated the schism. There is no item on Orthodox-Catholic unification on the Pan-Orthodox Council's agenda, especially as a considerable part of the Western Christian world broke away from Catholicism with time to form various groups of Protestantism. The problem of Christian unity arises only indirectly in dealing with the dialogue between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. Besides, it should be noted that such developments as the blessing of same-sex cohabitations observed now in some Protestant communities not only make it impossible for the Orthodox to maintain dialogue with these communities but also make us doubt their belonging to Christianity.

As for the role of the Pope in the Christendom, the age-long Orthodox tradition unanimously rejects the supremacy of the bishop of Rome over heads of other Churches and his jurisdiction over the entire universe. Anyway, this item is not included in the Pan-Orthodox Council's agenda.

- What is the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the preparations for the Council?

- From the very beginning of the preparations for the Council since the 1961 Conference in Rhodes, the Russian Orthodox Church has actively joined the preparations process. Our Church is the only one which has prepared materials on each of the 100 items of the original agenda. Subsequently, the Moscow Patriarchate representatives missed no meeting of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission or the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference, taking an active part in the discussion on all issues, putting forward well-elaborated concrete proposals on them and advocating the positions rooted in the Orthodox tradition and the Church's age-old religious experience.

- What interests will the Russian Orthodox Church advocate at this Council?

- The principal interest to be advocated by our Church at the Council is the preservation of church unity and purity of the Orthodox faith in today's historical realities. In a difficult discussion that took place at the recent meeting of the Primates, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia succeeded in persuading all the Primates to recognise the need for the principle of consensus to be observed in decision-making both in pre-Council preparations and at the Council itself. Respect for this principle in our days is a basic reliable guarantee of the unity of Orthodoxy to be manifested by the Pan-Orthodox Council.

- What are the tasks of the Pan-Orthodox Council? Why do the hierarchs of all the Orthodox Churches need to meet at all?

- There is no single administrative center in the Orthodox Church. Since the apostolic times all important issues have been brought up for conciliar, to put it in today's terms, collegiate discussion. It applies to doctrinal, disciplinary and ecclesial-administrative issues. What concerns the internal life of a particular Local Church is considered by her own Council, as it is done, for instance, by the Russian Orthodox Church. But matters going beyond the Local Churches' scope should be considered by a

Council consisting of representatives of all the Local Churches. The decisions made by such a Council have pan-ecclesial authority.

- Why then Councils have not been convened for over 1000 years?

- The seven Ecumenical Councils, which took place in the period from the 4th to the 8th centuries, formulated the doctrine of the Church and formalized her canonical code. Thanks to these fundamental documents, the Church has successfully carried out her mission for centuries. For the 13 centuries since the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, numerous bishops' councils of various scopes and representation were convened. But due to objective historical reasons they did not represent the whole plenitude of the Orthodox Church. Now the point is to renew conciliar mechanisms at the pan-Orthodox level in order to respond to topical problems in the life of Orthodoxy.

- Why there was no Council in the 1960s when it began to be prepared? What prevented it?

- In the process of preparations for the Council, rather serious divergences in the positions of Churches were revealed. A long time was needed to find a consensus as the principle that had guided the pre-Council process before. It was even providential since the past years have put some problems to the background while revealing new and even more profound ones to be dealt with by a Pan-Orthodox Council.

Interviewer Pavel Korobov