Inter-Orthodox Cooperation in the Preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

Inter-Orthodox Cooperation in the Preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

1. Introduction

First of all, I would like to warmly thank the Academic Council of St. Petersburg Theological Academy for honouring me with the degree of Doctor of Divinity *honoris causa*. I accept it not so much as acknowledgement of my services as an advanced credit for the future and a wish from one of the oldest academies that I may work ever harder in fulfilling the tasks with which the Church entrusts me.

St. Petersburg Academy has a 290 year-long history. Among its rectors were outstanding theologians and church leaders including the present Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, His Holiness Kirill, who dedicated as many as ten years of his life to it.

Much effort for developing the academy was made by the ever-remembered Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of Leningrad and Novgorod, whose memorial study is still here reminding us of this outstanding hierarch. It is to his bright memory that I would like to dedicate my Doctor's lecture.

As chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Nikodim gave considerable attention to inter-Orthodox cooperation. He was an initiator of the process which eventually was to lead to the convocation of a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. Significantly, the first pre-Council inter-Orthodox conference took place in Rhodes Island in 1961, only a year after His Eminence Nikodim became head of the DECR. He participated in the pre-Council process personally until his timeless death in 1978. Among the participants in this process were also his successors as DECR chairman, Metropolitans Juvenaly, Filaret and Kirill. Today, it has become my duty to lead the Moscow Patriarchate delegations to inter-Orthodox conferences.

Today I would like to tell you about the history of the pre-Council process and our expectations from the Pan-Orthodox Council, if it really takes place.

In recent years, the preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church have been discussed in the public domain, especially in the Internet space. Though there is a great deal of information given in open sources about what problems are considered in the preparation process and how this consideration progresses and what results it has led to, not only the public at large but also the academic church community has not been sufficiently familiar with this topic. For this reason, I believe it important to talk about it today, the more so that the pre-Council process has advanced far enough and the convention of a Council of the Orthodox Church in the near future is fairly feasible.

2. Grounds for preparing and convening a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

The preparations for a Holy and Great Council have often been associated with various perplexities and sometimes even outright speculations in certain circles. Some marginal media have started up a real campaign against the convention of a Council. There are websites placing disinformation on various aspects of the pre-Council process. They give quotations from holy fathers given once on quite different occasions or intentionally taken out of the context. Similar tricks have also been used in anonymous leaflets which have sometimes been distributed at our churches and which present the prospect for convening a Council as something dreadful. Sometimes, we can even hear voices calling to refuse communion with other Local Churches. The faithful are intimidated into believing that the forthcoming Council will become 'antichrist' because it will allegedly make decisions contrary to the teaching of the Church, her dogmata, canons and rules. The married episcopate will be introduced, they say, fasting will be abandoned and the creed will be revised. And then the Orthodox Christians will have nothing else to do but to leave the fold of the 'official' Church and seek other ways of salvation.

Such speculations are not only groundless but also point to the ignorance or intentional distortions of historical facts and the church tradition by those who air them.

According to Orthodox ecclesiology, a Council of Orthodox Bishops is the highest form of inter-Orthodox communion and an expression of the unity of the Universal Church. *"This great truth was clearly expressed by holy apostles themselves when, on account of perplexities arising amidst new Christians concerning circumcision and some rites and in the wish to enact rules for the entire Church of Christ which existed at that time, they decided to act in council (see, Acts 15:28)* and enacted the Canons of the Holy Apostles stating that *"a council of bishops shall be held twice a year and they shall reason with one another about the dogmata of devotion and resolve occasional church contradictions".*

In keeping with the apostolic tradition, the Church has always sought to make important decisions concerning her life by the conciliar mind.

At the same time, it is known that none of the Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church could be *a priori* seen as an 'ecumenical'. This designation was ascribed to them by consequent Councils in order to stress the significance of their decisions as obligatory for all Christians. An assessment of a particular Council was always made *post factum.* They became part of the Orthodox tradition gradually, after they were duly received by the entire Church. This procedure excludes in principle any possibility for imposing some 'secret' decision though obligatory for all Orthodoxy.

However, problems requiring an authoritative discussion involving the whole Church tend to appear in every historical era. Therefore in the centuries since the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787, pan-Orthodox or inter-Orthodox Councils used to be convened on repeated occasions.

It should be admitted that through centuries there were objective factors which impeded a full conciliar fellowship of Orthodox Churches in their own midst. More often than not, some of them had to think only of their very survival under the pressure from people of other faiths and to save their flock from physical elimination.

By the 20th century, new conditions had developed in the socio-political life as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated and fundamentally new principles of inter-state relations came into play. There appeared such phenomenon as the Orthodox diaspora. Several new autocephalous Churches emerged. In this connection, a whole number of issues arose to require pan-Orthodox consideration concerning especially inter-Orthodox relations.

The agenda now included such practical problems as a common approach to the church discipline concerning fasting, Christian marriage and canonical obstacles for it. Especially acute were the problems involved in the development of theological education which concerned, among other things, inter-Orthodox contacts in this area, the Orthodox Church's relations with the rest of Christendom and with other religions and the development of Orthodox pilgrimage. Among the problems which needed to be discussed was also the role of the laity in the Orthodox Church.

In the early 20th century, two inter-Orthodox forums took place under the aegis of the Church of Constantinople: the Inter-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople in 1923, and the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission in 1930 at the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos. Regrettably, there were attempts at these meetings to adopt some provisions of openly renovationist nature. Russian Orthodox Bishops opposed this tendency at the 1923 Congress and did not attend at all the Commission in 1930.

Eventually, the pre-Council process came to a stop in the 30s.

It was resumed two decades later, now on the initiative of our Church. Two Conferences of Heads and Representatives of Local Orthodox Churches took place in Moscow in 1948 and 1958. They adopted several decisions on relations with the World Council of Churches, on the Anglican hierarchy, on the church calendar, etc. These decisions were recognized by a number of Churches while several other Churches abstained.

3. Beginning of preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

The preparations for a Pan-Orthodox Council intensified in September 1961 when a first Pan-Orthodox Conference was convened in Rhodes Island in Greece.

Addressing the Conference at its opening, Archbishop Nikodim of Yaroslavl and Rostov, who led the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church, noted: *"We see in our pan-Orthodox gathering a visible sign of God's benevolence towards the efforts of all the Orthodox Churches to consolidate the pan-Orthodox unity and to strengthen their cooperation. Faithful to the salvific Orthodoxy, our Local Churches are in the unity the image of which is given to us in the sacramental and mystical unity of the Holy Trinity, Co-Reigning and Co-Enthroned.*

The Conference compiled a detailed catalogue of over one hundred topics concerning very diverse aspects of the life of the Orthodox Church. They were systematized under the following sections:

1. Faith and doctrine
2. Liturgy
3. Governance and church order
4. Relationships between Orthodox Churches
5. The Orthodox Church's relations with the rest of the Christendom
6. Orthodoxy in the world
7. General theological themes
8. Social problems

The catalogue was compiled considering that the already mentioned issues requiring inter-Orthodox discussion were supplemented by such subjects as the calendar problem, definition of conditions for the recognition of new autocephalous and autonomous Churches, the structuring of the Orthodox diaspora and other issues including such problems as euthanasia, cremation of the dead, family planning, the

youth, etc.

According to the adopted procedure, every Orthodox Church was to state her point of view on this catalogue.

In the Russian Orthodox Church, draft documents were prepared by a special committee made up of leading theologians, both bishops and clergy and laity. The committee was established by the Holy Synod on May 10, 1963, with Metropolitan Nikodim as its head and had its work completed by June 1968. An enormous work was carried out. Metropolitan Nikodim submitted the most important drafts to the Holy Synod for approval.

There were two more Pan-Orthodox Conferences in 1963 and 1964. They dealt mostly with issues concerning inter-Christian relations.

4. Reduction of the catalogue to ten themes

The 4th Pan-Orthodox Conference, which took place from July 8 to 15, 1968, in Geneva, resolved that the Pan-Orthodox Council be prepared by Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commissions and Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences, which since that time have traditionally met at the Patriarchate of Constantinople's Center at Chambesy near Geneva, Switzerland.

For servicing the work of the Preparatory Commissions and Pre-Council Conferences, the Ecumenical Patriarchate was charged with setting up a secretariat at Chambesy to be directed by one of the hierarchs of Constantinople authorized to report to the Ecumenical Patriarchate about the results of the meetings. It should be noted that the Russian Orthodox Church delegation proposed to introduce the rotation principle, that is, to appoint as Secretaries representatives of different Local Church by turn but this proposal did not pass. The Inter-Orthodox Commissions and Pre-Council Conferences chose Greek, Russian and French as their working languages.

A procedure was adopted for developing and coordinating the themes of the catalogue. Now they were to be phased and divided between the responsible Churches which undertook to study each her own theme and draft a report within six months. The Chambesy Secretariat was charged with circulating the reports to the rest of the Churches so that they could study them and make their proposals. After that, as the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Primates of other Church agreed, the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission and the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference were to meet in order to finalize the dossier on each theme.

According to the adopted procedure, the Holy and Great Council may be convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch with the consent of the Primates of other Local Orthodox Autocephalous Churches and that only after the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences have completed the consideration of all the themes.

The first Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission met from July 16 to 28, 1971, at Chambesy. It considered reports from Churches on six themes from the comprehensive catalogue and submitted the agreed draft documents on these themes to the first Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference for adoption. Meanwhile it had already become clear that the work on the entire comprehensive catalogue might take decades because of the abundance of themes included in it. None of the Local Churches except for the Russian Church could cope with such an enormous amount of work within 10 years after the first Conference in Rhodes. For this reason the Commission expressed a wish that the First Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference reconsider the catalogue for it to be considerably reduced.

The First Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference, which took place from November 21 to 28, 1976, at Chambesy, reduced the list of the themes proposed for consideration by the Pan-Orthodox Council to the following ten most important issues:

1) Orthodox Diaspora

2) Autocephaly and the way of declaring it

3) Autonomy and the way of declaring it

4) Diptychs

5) Calendar problem

6) Obstacles for marriage

7) Coordination of church decrees on fasting

8) Orthodox Churches' attitude to the rest of Christendom

9) Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement

10) Contribution of Local Orthodox Churches to promoting Christian ideas of peace, freedom,

brotherhood and love among nations and the elimination of racial discrimination.

Six out of the ten themes (from the 5th to the 10th) were elaborated in the period from 1971 to 1986 by two Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commissions and three Pan-Orthodox Conferences. Draft decisions on practical issues in pastoral theology, canon law, the modern liturgical Statutes and Orthodox Churches' relations with the external world were prepared. A considerable role in the elaboration of these decisions in their final form belonged to the Russian Church's delegations.

I will dwell on these decisions in more detail.

5. The problem of the calendar

The calendar problem was first considered by the 1971 Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission which resolved that this theme should have two aspects, theoretical (theological) and practical (pastoral).

The Commission stated that *"there are no canonical decrees concerning the calendar at present, except for the established Paschal tables. The early Church adopted a calendar which prevailed in the Roman state... Diversity in the liturgical practice and church customs is a phenomenon which is in principle recognized by the Orthodox Church... while diversity in the calendar is a different matter since it weakens the bonds of this unity... Since old times the Church has sought to overcome the discrepancy in setting the day of Pascha... The First Ecumenical Council [which established a unified Paschal table] believed the astronomical factor to be decisive in setting the day of Pascha just as the calendar as a whole. Therefore, all Orthodox Churches should celebrate Pascha according to the decree of the First Ecumenical Council, i.e. on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox in accordance with the astronomic data. This can be achieved by the use of a calendar considered by astronomers to be the most accurate. The new Orthodox calendar is considered to be such at the present time".*

It is stated further on in the draft document that *"at present, astronomers believe the new Orthodox calendar to be more accurate than the old one. Accordingly, the best way of solving the calendar problem and the Paschal table is for all the Orthodox Churches to recognize the new Orthodox calendar both for the unmovable feasts and the Paschal table... Nevertheless, in the awareness that some local Churches experience pastoral difficulties (as is evident from the report of the Russian Church, the statement of the Serbian Church and the special statement of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem), the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission proposes that the implementation of this decision remain at the discretion of Local Churches".*

The Commission commended *“the laudable custom whereby in some regions, where the local Church observes the new Orthodox calendar while the communities or parishes of another Church in her territory observe the old calendar and Paschal table, efforts are made to get adjusted to the prevailing local system”.*

As is evident from the text of the document, the efforts of the delegations of several Orthodox Churches including the Russian Church resulted in a change made in the paragraph which originally made it binding for all Local Orthodox Churches to move to the New Julian calendar (a report on this theme was prepared by the Greek Orthodox Church).

The next discussion on this problem took place at the First Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference in 1976, which failed to make any principled judgment on this matter. In spite of the pressure from several delegations and as a result of consistent efforts made by the delegations of the Churches of Russia, Jerusalem and Serbia, the Conference admitted the need *“for a thorough and comprehensive study of this problem and for [instruction] to convene as soon as possible a conference for this purpose to be attended by responsible chief pastors, canonists, astronomers... and to have the results of their work presented to the Secretariat by the next Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference”.*

The latest discussion on this problem was held by the Second Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference in 1982. Its final document reflects only the evolution in the studies on the calendar problem towards a mere statement of the fact that *“at the present time, the transition of all the Local Churches to the New Julian calendar does not appear feasible”.*

Among the important points in the Conference’s final decision was a provision that *“anomalies arising over the calendar should not lead to division, differences or schisms and that even those who disagree with their own Church should accept the Tradition-sanctified sacred principle of obedience to the canonical Church and reunification in her fold in the Eucharistic communion, guided by the conviction that ‘the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath’ (Mk. 2:27)”.*

6. The problem of canonical obstacles to marriage

The problem of canonical obstacles to Christian marriage was considered by the 1971 Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission. Its conclusions were based on the reports made by the Russian and Greek Churches who took into account particular remarks by the Churches of Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Czechoslovakia.

The participants took into account the degrees of kinship to which the marriage permission should not apply (the 5th degree inclusive in case of blood relationships and relationships by marriage, the 2nd degree in case of relationships by adoption and spiritual relationship). As far as the clergy are concerned, it was underscored that *"according to the canonical order in force, marriage is forbidden to a person who is ordained to priesthood in any degree of ordination (Canon 3 of the Council in Trullo). Nevertheless, the Commission, considering the present situation in some local Churches and pastoral needs, [expressed] the opinion that for the Church it would be useful to discuss the question of marriage for the 1st degree of priesthood, i.e. deacons, after their ordination and to study this theme with favourable attention to that which is possible in a spirit of canons and the old practice of the Church so that the number of the sacred clergy may not decrease".*

The Commission concluded that monastic tonsure was an absolute obstacle for marriage (according to Canon 44 of the Council in Trullo), while monks *"who have left a monastic community voluntarily or involuntarily can marry after they have been transferred to the rank of laity by a church decision".*

Concerning the already existing marriage it was stated that *"it is an absolute obstacle to contracting another marriage until the existing marriage is dissolved or annulled. The Orthodox Church categorically rejects a fourth marriage".*

The Commission noted that *"concerning obstacles to marriage, the Church should also take into account the appropriate regulations of the local civic legislation but certainly within the limits of*

tolerance on the part of the Church".

In this sense, of interest are the decisions of the Commission concerning mixed marriages. With regard to a marriage with a non-Orthodox Christian, the Commission *"identified the following views:*

a) The Russian Church accepts that 'a marriage of an Orthodox Christian with a non-Orthodox Christian can be blessed in the Church only if the non-Orthodox party accepts the importance of the blessing by the Orthodox Church"...

b) The Church of Greece believes it would be better to avoid mixed marriages without distinction between Churches and confessions and to allow such only if there are special reasons for them.

c) The Polish Church suggests that, in the spirit of ecumenism and on the bases of local inter-confessional relations, a mixed marriage with any baptized person should be considered valid".

Clearly, these opinions are linked with the situation in which each of the mentioned Churches lives. Thus, the Russian Church carries out her ministry in a mixed confessional milieu while the Greek Church in a mono-ethnic and mono-confessional and in Poland the non-Orthodox environment prevails. As a result, the Commission agreed that "this problem does not imply a single Orthodox point of view, the evidence of which is a diverse practice of local Churches". In the Commission's opinion, "it would be desirable for the Pre-Council Conference to leave a relative freedom for the solution of this problem taking into account the existing local contexts".

Concerning the problem of marriages between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox or non-believers, the Commission identified the following points of view:

"a) *While the Russian Church recognizes that mixed marriages of this kind are strictly forbidden by Canon 72 of the Council in Trullo, she nevertheless believes that 'contemporary life conditions of the Church of God with regard to the problem of mixed marriage between Orthodox Christians and non-Christians urgently require a return to the church practice of the first three centuries of Christianity'*

when the Church following St. Paul (1 Cor. 7:12-14, 16) 'condescended to mixed marriages'. Besides, 'in the oldest canons there is no ban with regard to this issue'.

b) In the opinion of the Church of Cyprus, 'it is forbidden for a Christian to marry a non-Christian' (Canon 14 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council).

c) The Church of Greece believes that the Pre-Council Conference could allow of and apply oikonomia to the issue of marriage with non-Christians.

d) The Polish Church proposes 'to discuss a possibility for blessing only one of the parties to a marriage in case the other party is a non-believer'.

e) The Church of Czechoslovakia cannot bless a marriage of an Orthodox Christian and a non-Christian (a Jew, Muslim, etc.).

Considering the above-mentioned positions of various Orthodox Sister Churches, the Commission, after a thorough study of the Church's canonical order whereby a marriage between an Orthodox believer and a non-believer is thinkable only if the non-Orthodox believer or the non-believer joins the Church, suggests that the appropriate ways of applying oikonomia be examined, on one hand, and that freedom be given to local Churches as to whether oikonomia should be applied if necessary, on the other".

In 1982, the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference agreed on the whole to the draft decision on obstacles to marriage proposed by the 1971 Commission, introducing in it the following definitions concerning mixed marriages:

"*It was agreed that*

a) marriages between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox be opposed due to the canonical akrivia but be blessed due to condescension and love of men on the condition that the children of such a marriage will be baptized and raised in the Orthodox Church. Local autocephalous Orthodox Churches may take decisions to apply oikonomia in particular cases depending on their special pastoral needs;

b) marriages between the Orthodox and those of other faiths or non-believers be absolutely forbidden due to the canonical akrivia. But in case of such a marriage, local autocephalous Orthodox Churches may still apply pastoral oikonomia to the Orthodox party, depending on their special pastoral needs".

7. The problem of fasting

The problem of fasting was fist considered by the 1971 Preparatory Commission. The report of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which proposed an essential reform in the fasting discipline, was taken as a basis for discussion. For instance, it was proposed that *'fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays should be observed the whole year round but with a permission to take vegetable oil and fish except on the days which fall on a period of fasting".* It was also proposed that *"beginning from the second Sunday of Lent to the Palm Sunday inclusively, permission be given to eat fish", "that the Christmas Fast be halved or permission be given to take fish and oil throughout the Fast except for the last five days", "that the Sts Peter and Paul Fast be reduced to eight days preceding the Feast if the period between the All Saints' Day and the Day of Sts Peter and Paul is longer than eight days... permission be given not to observe fast on all Wednesdays and Fridays in the period from the Sunday of St. Thomas to the Ascension Day", "that the duration of the Assumption Fast be retained but permission be given to take fish and vegetable oil on all days except Wednesdays and Fridays*", etc.

These allowances were justified by the fact that the existing instructions for fasting concern mostly the monastics, while the rest of Christians find it difficult to observe fasts *"due to various reasons, such as climate, way of life, difficulties involved in procuring lenten fare, etc.*"

The Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission stated that "*most of the faithful in the modern society do not observe all the fasting instructions due to the present-day difficult living condition. All this requires*

that fasting be made easier, that the duration of fasts be reduced so that the faithful may not subject themselves to 'interrogation by conscience' because they breach strict church rules poisoning their spiritual life".

This draft document drew criticism from some Churches, and the Second Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference in 1982 deemed its elaboration insufficient. Further work on the problem of fasting was carried out by the 1986 Commission which, with a considerable contribution of the Russian Orthodox delegation, managed to prepare a new draft document to be approved by the Third Pre-Council Conference in 1986. As is evident from this text, the Conference rejected all the proposals made in 1971 and placed the question of oikonomia in observing the fasting discipline *"at the spiritual discretion of Local Orthodox Churches".*

The Third Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference adopted in 1986 the following basic provisions on fasting:

"Fasting is… a great spiritual feat and predominant expression of the Orthodox ascetic ideal.

… In the very beginning of the apostolic era, the Church… fixed each Wednesday and Friday as fasting days (Didache, 8, 1) as well as the fast before Pascha… The established diversity as to the duration and content of these fasts… underlines the spiritual character of a fast and all the faithful are called to observe it, each according to his or her power and resources, while not giving them the freedom to defy this sacred rule.

An authentic fast as a spiritual feat is intrinsically linked with continued prayer and sincere repentance.

…The ideal of spiritual perfection is very high and everyone who wishes to attain it should rise to it accordingly… Very few conform to the prescriptions of the high Orthodox ideal so as to attain deification in their lifetime… All the rest, according to the Orthodox understanding of spiritual life, are obliged never to give up the good feat of fasting but in self-condemnation and awareness of one's own low state, to give oneself to the mercy of God since Orthodox spiritual life is unattainable without the spiritual feat of fasting.

The Orthodox Church, like a loving mother, has established all things beneficial for salvation and… offers sacred fasts as the best way in the feat of spiritual perfection and salvation of the faithful and declares the need for them to observe all the established fasts of the Lord's year, i.e. during the Great Forty Days, Wednesdays and Fridays, as is testified by sacred canons, as well as the Fasts of Christmas, the Day of Sts Peter and Paul, the Assumption Day and one-day fasts on the Day of the Elevation of the Honourable Cross, on the eve of the Epiphany Day and on the Day of the Beading of St. John the Baptist, as well as all the fasts established through pastoral care or observed at the faithful's wish.

At the same time, the Church has established at pastoral discretion some limits of the oikonomia of humanity as applied to fasting and provided therefore for physical weakness or an urgent need or a difficult time by applying the principle of church oikonomy under the reasonable judgment and pastoral care of the Local Churches' episcopate.

In our time, many believers do not in fact observe all the fasting rules due to either negligence or under the pretext of personal conditions of life whatever these may be. However, all the cases of such relaxation of sacred instructions for fasting, be they common or individual, should be treated with loving motherly love on the part of the Church which never wishes the death of a sinner but that he should be converted and live. Therefore, for those who find it difficult to observe the effective fasting rules for either such frequent reasons as illness, military service, working conditions, life in diaspora, etc., or more general reasons, such as special conditions prevailing in some countries due to their climate and impossibility to find lenten fare…, it is placed at the spiritual discretion of local Orthodox Churches to define the measure of humane oikonomy and condescension by relaxing in these special cases the customary 'strictness' of sacred fasts. All of this however is determined within the limits of the above and with the aim to avoid weakening the sacred rules of fasting…

Similarly, it befits all the faithful of the Church to hold fast before Holy Baptism and to get accustomed to fasting in showing repentance, fulfilling a spiritual vow, achieving a particular sacred aim, experiencing a temptation to be combined with soliciting something from God at a time of natural

disasters, before baptism (for those who prepared themselves for baptism in an old age), before ordination, in case of a penance, during pilgrimages and in other similar situations".

As we can see, this document outlines the commonly accepted church teaching on fasting, only explaining the way to be followed in applying it to the pastoral practice of today.

8. Orthodox Churches' attitude to the rest of Christendom

The attitude of Orthodox Churches to the rest of Christendom was first considered by the 1986 Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission. The draft decision proposed by the Commission, focusing on the Orthodox Church's dialogue with the Roman Catholics, Old Catholic, Lutherans, Anglican, Reformed churches and the Oriental Churches, was approved by the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference in 1986.

It should be noted that by now a considerable part of this document has become out of date and needs to be seriously revised since many parameters of inter-Christian dialogue have seriously changed since 1986. Thus, a number of Protestant denominations have deviated into extreme forms of liberalism by legitimizing such things as women's priesthood and women's episcopate, same-sex unions and ordination of parties to such unions. Due to these circumstances, the Russian Orthodox Church has discontinued dialogue with a number of Protestant groups.

In 2000, the Bishops' Council of our Church adopted a document 'The Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church's Attitude to Non-Orthodoxy'. The principal postulates of this document, we believe, should be taken into account in a revised draft pan-Orthodox decision on this subject.

Some principles reflected in the document concerning coordination between Local Orthodox Churches in conducting dialogue with non-Orthodox Christians also called for revision. At the same time, some fundamental provisions of the document can be taken as a basis in drafting a new version.

9. The Theme of Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement

The theme "Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement" devoted to the participation of the Orthodox

Church in various inter-Christian organizations, such as the World Council of Churches, Conference of European churches and others, was discussed in 1986. Today, 25 years later, the text written by the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference needs a substantial revision. In the last quarter of a century, along with already mentioned tendencies asserted in the Protestant milieu, the very format of Local Orthodox Churches' participation in inter-Christian organizations just as the situation within these organizations have changed.

In 1997, the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church considered the problem of ecumenism and the question whether the Russian Orthodox Church can remain a member of the WCC. It was agreed to discuss the problem of the present-day ecumenical movement on a pan-Orthodox level. A Pan-Orthodox Conference was convened on the initiative of the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches in summer 1998 in Thessaloniki. The Conference testified that for all the years of the WCC's existence the doctrinal and ethical gap between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox had not diminished but rather widened. It was stated that the present structure of the WCC, the decision-making mechanism and organization of joint prayers were unacceptable for Orthodox Churches. They would either withdraw from the Council or the Council should be radically reformed. The Conference agreed on the need to set up a bilateral parity commission for dialogue between the WCC and Orthodox Churches. That idea was produced by the chairman of the DECR, Metropolitan Kirill (now His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia).

The principles of participation in inter-Christian organizations, elaborated by the Pan-Orthodox Conference, were taken into account in preparing the above-mentioned 'The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Principles of Attitude to Non-Orthodoxy'. It appears appropriate that this longtime work should be reflected in a future inter-Orthodox document on inter-Christian relations.

10. The theme on the Contribution of Local Orthodox Churches

to Promoting Christian Ideas of Peace, Freedom, Brotherhood and Love among Nations and Elimination of Racial Discrimination

This item was also discussed in 1986. It is noteworthy that the documented drafted at that time was certainly influenced by its time. It is not accidental that the document focused on the problem of general disarmament. Today it has to be decided whether the Council should take up a document stamped with so apparent an impact of out-of-date ideological concepts or a new document should be prepared. At the same time, some provisions of the draft document can well be used because the Christian understanding of peace, the dignity of the personality, human freedom and the national issue will always

be relevant.

11. The crisis in inter-Orthodox dialogue in the 1990s

The Third Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference in 1986 approved an agenda for the next Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference. It included the remaining four themes in the reduced catalogue:

1. Diaspora

2. Autocephaly and the procedure for declaring it

3. Autonomy and the procedure for declaring it

4. Diptychs.

The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference was planned to be convened immediately after all the Churches had studied the reports prepared on the above-mentioned themes. In actual fact however the Fourth Conference was convened twenty three years later. In all these years the theme of the Orthodox diaspora alone was elaborated.

The process of preparations for the Council stopped because the bilateral relations between the Church of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church considerably worsened to lead in 1996 even to a 4 month-long suspension of the Eucharistic communion between them. This situation was caused by the emergence of a church problem in Estonia where in 1996 the Patriarchate of Constantinople created the so-called Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church despite the fact that Estonia is part of the canonical territory of the Russian Church and the self-governed Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has carried out her minister there. Constantinople's intention to make the EAOC a full-fledged participant in Pan-Orthodox Conferences led to the blockage of the pre-Council process.

It was only in October 2008, during a meeting of heads and representatives of Local Orthodox Churches in Istanbul that an agreement was finally reached to let only autocephalous Churches participate in Pan-Orthodox Conferences. Thus the EAOC of the Patriarchate of Constantinople was removed from direct participation in the pre-Council process – a step which allowed resuming the preparations for a Pan-Orthodox Council.

12. The theme of diaspora

By the early 90s, there were only four themes remaining on the agenda of the pre-Council process, namely, Orthodox diaspora, church autonomy, autocephaly and diptychs.

The problem of diaspora was the most pressing as it affected the concrete needs of millions of Orthodox people who found themselves in strange lands as a result of the mass resettlement in the second half of the 20th century. Today these people reside in regions which do not belong to the canonical territory of any Local Orthodox Churches in North and South America, Western Europe and Australia. Bishops and priests from various Orthodox Churches once moved to these regions together with lay people and continued to take pastoral care of their spiritual children. With time, new bishops and priest were ordained there. They developed missionary service in their local non-Orthodox environment, which resulted in the appearance of many clergy from among former Protestants and Catholics.

Thus a situation developed not quite consistent with church canons as one and the same city came to have several Orthodox bishops from different jurisdictions. For long decades the life of the Orthodox in diaspora involved the need to resolve numerous contradictions among Churches bringing in an element of division in their life and difficulties in the common Orthodox witness.

The Russian Orthodox Church always sought to promote consolidation among Orthodox communities living in diaspora so that with time conditions might be ripe for granting them ever greater church independence expressed in self-government, autonomy and autocephaly. It was this vision that compelled the Russian Church, for instance, to grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America in 1970.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople, in its turn, on the grounds of a much stretched interpretation of Canon 28 of the Forth Ecumenical Council, has insisted on its own right to bear predominant responsibility for the pastoral care of the entire Orthodox diaspora. This stand has been shared by several Greek-speaking Churches.

Thus, the report presented to the Secretariat in Chambesy by the Patriarchate of Constantinople on the issue of diaspora stated that a decision on this matter is possible only on the basis of *"the principal factor in relations between Orthodox Churches, namely, the special service and work of the Throne of Constantinople and its privileges recognized by Ecumenical Councils, which, even if challenged during centuries, then only for reasons which had nothing to do with sacred canons or the age-old church practice".* In the opinion of the Constantinople side, Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council defines that *"any area located outside the borders of the established jurisdiction is subject to the Church of*

Constantinople".

The report states that the Patriarchate of Constantinople *"has not yielded its rights to the diaspora"* to anybody, and if it ever, *for the sake of peace in the Church, "yielded them for a time like a loving mother who sometimes shields and justifies deviations from the strict canonical order",* then it was only *"a temporary cessation in the fulfilment of jurisdictional rights".* According to Constantinople, no *"Church or Throne can canonically extend its power beyond its own regions, except for our holy, apostolic and patriarchal Ecumenical Throne, which, on the basis of the privilege given to it to consecrate bishops in barbaric countries..., has the full right to have churches abroad under its spiritual protection".*

Conversely, the report on the diaspora presented to the Secretariat in Chambesy by the Russian Church's delegation stated that, according to Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, *"the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople extends only to the ancient dioceses of Pontus, Asia and Thrace and 'barbarians of the aforementioned dioceses' and does not concern the Orthodox diaspora in Western and Northern Europe, in North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australia".*

In the opinion of the Russian Orthodox Church, *"none of the Local... Orthodox Churches has any special, exclusive or all-embracing jurisdiction over the entire Orthodox diaspora; any interference of one Orthodox Churches in the development of the church diaspora of other Churches is rejected; the disorder of plurality and contradictoriness of numerous jurisdictions and jurisdictional relations in the Orthodox diaspora needs to be healed through the efforts of all the Orthodox Churches who have the diaspora of their own and who... bear responsibility for the present and future of this diaspora; the right solution of the diaspora problem requires that all, in the name of unity and well-being of holy Orthodoxy, should proceed not only from the particular interests of their Churches but also from the understanding of what is necessary and what is beneficial for holy Orthodoxy as a whole in the countries of diaspora; the Orthodox Churches in diaspora, which emerged as a result of the missionary achievements of particular Local Orthodox Churches and due to a large gathering of Orthodox settlers, should be gradually turning into new Local Churches, receiving autocephaly (or, first, autonomy) from their Mother Churches and recognition from the rest of Sister Churches".*

The diaspora problem was considered by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commissions in 1990 and 1993 and by the Conference of Orthodox Canonists in 1995.

An agreed decision on it was adopted by the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference in June 2009. The Conference's final document states that *"at the present stage it is impossible... to ensure an immediate move to the strictly canonical order of the Church with regard to this problem, that is, to have only one bishop in one place. For the same reason it was agreed to propose for a transitory provision which will lay the groundwork for a strictly canonical solution of the problem".*

In accordance with this decision, Bishops' Assemblies were established in various diaspora regions to unite all the canonical Orthodox bishops in a particular region. They began their work in April 2010 and enabled us to coordinate inter-Orthodox cooperation in the diaspora. The regions where Bishops' Assemblies have been established are as follows:

1. North and Central America

2. South America

3. Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific

4. Great Britain and Ireland

5. France

6. Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg

7. Austria

8. Italy and Malta

9. Switzerland and Lichtenstein

10. Germany

11. Scandinavia

12. Spain and Portugal

13. The theme of church autonomy

The theme of church autonomy was originally included in the comprehensive catalogue of the themes elaborated by the 1961 Pan-Orthodox Conference and was subsequently included in the catalogues of Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences.

It was first considered by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission in December 2009. It was necessary to define in whose competence it was to declare a new autonomous Church, what the role of the Mother Church was in this decision and in what way the conciliar participation of other Local Churches in this decision was to be realized.

It followed from the reports that a number of Churches believe that the question of granting autonomy and autocephaly should be handled according to the same pattern and in keeping with the principle of conciliarity, the guarantor of which is the Ecumenical Patriarch.

The delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church suggested that the approaches to these questions should be distinct.

As a result of an in-depth analysis of historical precedents undertaken by the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, it has become clear that the status of church autonomy, unlike the clearly defined status of church autocephaly, is very versatile and uncoordinated in many cases, as evident from examples found both in past and present history. The only provision which can be regarded as universal and commonly accepted is that each autonomous Church with her more or less broad scope of rights preserves fundamental ties with her kyriarchal Church. These ties are expressed in that the Head of an autonomous Church mentions during the liturgy the name of the Primate of the respective autocephalous Church and in the presence of some other signs of close canonical unity between these Churches, which depend on the extent of rights of self-governance granted to a particular autonomous Church.

It is important to note that the constitutive documents of Churches which enjoy autonomy or a status close to autonomy invariably contain a clause that their relations with the One Holy Catholic and

Apostolic Church are realized in organic unity with the respective kyriarchal Church and through her.

From the evident fact that however broad can be the self-governance rights of a particular autonomous Church, they do not abolish her fundamental relations with the kyriarchal Church, the Moscow Patriarchate delegation concluded that the procedure for granting autonomy should be in competence of the respective autocephalous Church. To bring the problem of declaration of autonomy up to the inter-Orthodox level would be a violation of Canon 2 of the Second Ecumenical Council, Canon 22 of the Council of Antioch, Canon 16 of the First-and-Second Council, Canon 3 of the Council of Sardica and other council's decrees banning the interference of one Local Church in the internal affairs of another.

The position articulated by the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church was laid in the basis of a decision on which all Churches managed to agree. It has been recognized that each Local Church has the right to decide on her own whether the rights of autonomy should be granted to a particular part of her and what the scope of these rights should be.

14. The theme of church autocephaly

The question of the way in which autocephaly should be granted is fundamentally different from that of autonomy since a new autocephalous Church becomes a member of the family of Local Churches and her emergence is of immediate concern for the other Sister Churches. It is logical to assume that after a Mother Church decides to grant autocephaly to her particular part, this decision should be submitted for consideration by the Primates or authorized representatives of all the Local Churches and, in case of their consent to the decision, should be completed by issuing a conciliar Tomos of Autocephaly.

At the same time, so far there has been no fixed procedure for granting autocephaly. Most often in the past it happened so that a particular Church would unilaterally declare her own autocephalous status and only years later her autocephaly would be recognized by other Churches. There were also other precedents when autocephaly to a particular Church was unilaterally granted by her Mother Church. It was the case of the Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and some other Churches whose autocephaly was granted by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the case of the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia and the Orthodox Church in America which received autocephaly from the Moscow Patriarchate. It did not happen without incidents when the same Church was given autocephaly twice as was the case with the Polish Orthodox Church.

The theme of autocephaly was sequentially included in the catalogues of Pan-Orthodox Conferences. Originally it was formulated as follows:

Declaration of autocephaly

a) who declares it;

b) preconditions and terms;

c) autocephaly declaration procedure;

d) what Churches are recognized as autocephalous today.

Then the designation of the theme was reduced as follows: *"Autocephaly and the Procedure of its Declaration".* The job to elaborate this theme just as the theme of autonomy was given to the Greek Orthodox Church.

Nevertheless, reports on this theme were presented by other Churches as well, including the Russian Church. They were considered by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission on November 7-13, 1993, in Chambesy. The head of the Secretariat for Preparing a Holy and Great Council, Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland, made a comparative analysis of the opinions held by Local Churches and presented to the Commission his report on their convergences and divergences.

It is evident from his report that the Greek Churches (the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Greece) unanimously rejected the unilateral right of any Church to grant autocephaly to her part, putting in the forefront the conciliar way of making decisions on autocephaly.

At the same time, they stated that the consent of the entire family of Orthodox Churches was *conditio sine qua non* (indispensable condition) for the emergence of a new autocephalous Church. It was also stated that the canonical competence in declaring autocephaly should belong to a Pan-Orthodox Council or at least to a unanimous decision of all the Local Churches while the initiative for declaring autocephaly should come, according to the Greek reports, from the Ecumenical Throne *"due to the need to achieve pan-Orthodox consensus"* and certainly with the consent of the Mother Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church's position on autocephaly and the way of its declaration on the basis of equality of all the Churches regardless of their age and apostolic origin upheld the principle of full

independence of the Mother Church in granting autocephaly to any of its part. At the same time, it was stated that such declaration of autocephaly *" should be accompanied with the subsequent recognition of a new Autocephalous Church by all the Local Autocephalous Orthodox Sister Churches, thus manifesting the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace (Eph. 4:3)".*

Ultimately, the Commission took as a basis the draft decision which included a compromise sub-paragraph stating that any Local Church has the right to accept a request for autocephaly from any of her part, to assess preconditions for granting it and, by the decision of her Local Council, to put forward an appropriate proposal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for achieving pan-Orthodox consensus, while notifying other Churches about it. By the same document the competence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate with regard to this matter was limited to its honorary duty to send an appropriate Patriarchal letter to all the Local Churches and "seek" an expression of pan-Orthodox consensus. It was also provided that *"in expressing the consent of the Mother Church and pan-Orthodox consensus, the Ecumenical Patriarch officially declares the autocephaly of a petitioning Church by issuing a Patriarchal Tomos"*, which is to be signed without fail by the Primates of the Church of Constantinople and the Mother Church and advisably by other Primates.

The Commission failed to reach a final agreement on the last point, which was reflected in a footnote. The elaboration of a unified position on it was put off till the subsequent meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission.

The Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission meeting in December 2009 agreed on a decision whereby the declaration of a new autocephalous Church, after an appropriate request of the Mother Church, is to be made through issuing a Tomos of Autocephaly signed by the Heads of all the autocephalous Churches.

Now the Commission has to elaborate a draft model Tomos on Declaration of Autocephaly and to define the procedure for signing it. To this end, the Local Churches' delegations met on February 21-27, 2011, in Chambesy. The discussion proved to be not easy, and in the present stage the Commission has failed to reach a final agreement on this issue. Thus, while the Local Churches have reached an agreement on autocephaly in principle, they still have to clarify some technical details.

15. The theme of diptychs

The Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission at its meetings in February 2011 reached the stage when it was to consider the last theme in the catalogue concerning the problem of diptychs – the lists whereby the Primates of Local Churches are mentioned during the Liturgy and the order in which they are listed in the official church protocol.

As of today, there are several versions of such diptychs which differ in the place given in them to the Georgian and Polish Churches and in the presence or absence of the Orthodox Church of America in them.

The common principle used in compiling the diptychs is that the list begins with the Primates of the four ancient Patriarchates (those of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem) and the Russian Orthodox Church, whose order is fixed by the decisions of previous Councils. They are followed by other Patriarchates and after them by the rest of the Churches whose Primates have the title of Metropolitan or Archbishop in accordance with the chronological order in which these Churches became autocephalous.

The Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Serbia, Romania, Cyprus, Greece and Albania place the Georgian Orthodox Church at the 9th place on the basis of the fact that she is the last Patriarchate to be recognized by Constantinople. The Churches of Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Poland, Czech Lands and Slovakia and the Orthodox Church in America put the Georgian Orthodox Church at the 6th place on the basis of the anciency of her autocephaly received from the Church of Antioch.

As far as the place of the Polish Orthodox Church is concerned, the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Poland and Albania put her at the 12th place, that is, before the Church of Albania, recognizing as valid the Tomos of Autocephaly given her by the Church of Constantinople in 1924. The Churches of Antioch, Russia, Georgia, Czech Lands and Slovakia and America put her at the 13th place, that is after the Church of Albania, on the basis of the fact that autocephaly was granted to the Polish Church by the Russian Mother Church in 1948.

In the Serbian Church, there is no tradition of mentioning the Primates of Churches who do not have the title of Patriarch.

The Orthodox Church in America is present in the diptychs of the Churches of Russia, Bulgaria, Poland and the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia.

The Church of Cyprus too has a special opinion concerning the place of her Archbishop in the diptychs, believing that he should be mentioned before the Patriarchs of Georgia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria.

This theme is not as important in practice as, for instance, the problems of diaspora, autonomy and autocephaly. For this reason, while it was consequently retained in all the catalogues, the consideration on it has been put off on several occasions.

In the opinion of the Russian Orthodox Church, no decision in this area can be made through the majority's pressure on the minority. It is necessary to strictly observe the principle of pan-Orthodox consensus. All the autocephalous Churches regardless of their anciency and the situation in which they received autocephaly have equal rights and dignity. And the status of the Primates who are not listed in the diptychs in the first places is by no means diminished as compared to that of the Primates whose names are mentioned before them in the list.

The absence of full identity in the diptychs used by Local Churches has resulted from the fact that the diptychs developed on the basis of the custom which established itself in a particular Church. Since the absence of full identity of the diptychs tends to create certain inconveniences it would be desirable that the conciliar mind recognizes the need to seek a unified opinion on this issue. However, we can also preserve the present practice whereby in each specific situation it is the diptych of the Church in whose territory an event is held that comes into force.

In our opinion, different views on the problem of diptychs should not affect the order fixing the places of the Primates of the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem as fixed by the decrees of Ecumenical Councils and the fifth place of the Moscow Patriarchate approved by the Councils of Constantinople of 1590 and 1593.

As far as the place of the Primate of the Georgian Church is concerned, we believe it fair to take into account the fact that according to authoritative canonical sources, before the Georgian Orthodox Church lost her independence in 1811, she had already enjoyed the status of autocephaly received no later than the 11th century from the Patriarchal Throne of Antioch. The restoration of her autocephaly (it is not important whether it took place in 1917 or 1943 or 1990) was actually the fact of the Georgian Church's return to the family of autocephalous Churches. Therefore we believe it acceptable and historically fair that in defining the place of the Primate of the Georgian Church in the diptychs, consideration should be given to the anciency of the "initial" autocephaly of this Church and her head should have the 6th place in the diptychs.

The presence of the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America in the diptych is a separate matter. In our opinion, this problem should be finally settled in the course of completing the procedure of Pan-Orthodox recognition of the autocephalous status this Church received from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970.

Primates of autonomous Churches are not to be included in the pan-Orthodox diptychs on the grounds that the mentioning of fellow-Primates is a prerogative of Heads of autocephalous Churches

---

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/55009/