



‘We have reached consensus on the autocephaly procedure’ – DECR chairman’s interview with the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate

As the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission for the agenda of a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church continues its work, the issue of granting autocephaly and the diptych order has come up to its attention in the period of 2009-2010. The leader of the Russian Orthodox delegation at the Preparatory Commission meetings, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s department for external church relations, expounds the work of the Commission in an interview to the editor-in-chief of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, S. V. Chapnin.

- Your Eminence, the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory commission’s decisions on the procedure of granting autocephaly, adopted in December 2009 in Chambesy, make it possible to speak about a serious step made in the development of inter-Orthodox cooperation. How different were the initial positions of the Churches, and can one say that the search for consensus was difficult?

- According to the resolution of the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference, which took place in June 2009, the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission was to consider the way in which an Orthodox Church can declare its autocephaly and autonomy as well as the order of diptychs, which are lists prescribing the order in which the names of the heads of Local Churches are mentioned during the liturgy. During the six days of its work, the Commission managed to consider two of the above-mentioned issues, namely, autocephaly and autonomy, while the discussion on diptychs had to be put off till the next meeting of the Commission.

The issue of church autocephaly was already considered by the Preparatory Commission in 1993. At that time, it was agreed that autocephaly asked by a certain part of a Local Church can be granted on the basis of the consent given by the Mother Church to be followed by a search for pan-Orthodox consensus with the Patriarch of Constantinople as coordinator. It was the procedure for declaring autocephaly that came under discussion at the December meeting, and it was not an easy task to reach an agreement on this matter.

The principled stand of the Russian Orthodox Church, expressed by our delegation, was that this procedure should conform to the principle of *sobornost*, traditional for the Orthodox Church, in making decisions on important common church matters. In this understanding, a Tomos on Autocephaly should be signed by the heads of all the Local Churches. The same stand was taken by the delegations of the Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish Orthodox Churches as well as the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia. At the same time, the delegations of some Churches insisted that the signature of the Ecumenical Patriarch alone was sufficient for granting autocephaly.

As a result of a prolonged discussion the Commission adopted a wording that presupposes signatures of the primates of all the autocephalous Churches. It was also agreed that the very contents and procedure for signing a Tomos on Autocephaly would be specified by the next meeting of the Preparatory Commission.

As for church autonomy, the Russian Orthodox Church believes every Local Church has the right to decide on its own whether autonomy should be granted to some part of it, otherwise the canonical principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of an autocephalous Orthodox Church would be challenged. Indeed, while enjoying broad rights to self-governance, every autonomous Church still preserves fundamental relationship with its predominating Church. This relationship is expressed both in the approval of its head by the autocephalous center and in receiving holy myrrh from it and in exalting the name of the primate of the autocephalous Church during liturgy celebrated in the churches of a respective autonomous Church.

This position was unanimously approved by the meeting in Chambesy, which resolved that every autocephalous Church has the right to an independent decision on granting autonomy to any of her part. In doing so, she is obliged to notify other Churches about the granting of autonomy which took place.

On the whole, the working out of agreed decisions was a strained but constructive process.

- There is a notorious problem of precise wordings, especially in translation to other languages. Which language or languages were used in discussing the documents? Are there official Russian versions?

- According to the procedure of the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences and Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commissions, adopted in 1986, their official languages are Greek, Russian and French. During the December meeting in Chambesy, just as during similar previous meetings, the speakers

used all three languages. The secretariat in Chambesy provides for the simultaneous translation of the reports and discussions into these languages. The final documents are signed in their Greek, Russian and French versions. They all are authentic.

- How representative were the Local Churches' delegations who participated in the discussion on the document?

- The Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commissions' terms of reference provides only for a primary elaboration of the agenda for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. Documents adopted at the Commission meetings are only drafts. They are to be submitted for approval to Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences and then to a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. The next Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference, the fifth one, will be possible to convene only after the Commission has finalized its work to draft a document on autocephaly and to consider the issue of diptychs.

- When will the next meeting of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission take place?

- The date for the next Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission to draft a procedure for signing a Tomos on Autocephaly and to discuss the diptychs has not been fixed as yet. I hope its participants will manage to build on the progress already achieved, and the common desire to reach agreement in discussing even the most acute issues will remain unchanged.