



Opening address by Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev and All Ukraine to the first meeting of the ROC Inter-Council Presence's commission for opposing and overcoming schisms

Fellow-Archpastors beloved in the Lord,

Dear Fathers and Brothers:

First of all I would like to welcome you all to the land of Kiev, the ancient capital of Rus'. Here, in the holy Laura of the Caves, under the Protecting Veil of the Heavenly Queen and at the healing relics of the honourable fathers of the Caves, let us ask them for their intercession in our task to meet the complex challenges facing our commission.

I will remind you that the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, at its meeting in the Laura on 27 July 2009 under the chairmanship of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, decided to 'establish an Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church' (Proceedings No. 55). At the same time it adopted a Provision for the Inter-Council Presence and its membership. The Inter-Council Presence is 'an advisory body which shall assist the supreme authorities of the Russian Orthodox church in preparing decisions concerning major problems of the Church's internal life and external work' (Provision for the Inter-Council Presence, I.1). This body is called, in the first place, to discuss urgent problems of church life.

The first meeting of the Inter-Council Presence presidium took place on 29 January 2010 at the cathedral Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. The presidium approved thirteen commissions of the Inter-Council Presence. One of these commissions is to deal with opposing and overcoming church schisms.

The fact that the first meeting of our commission is held in Kiev is not just a tribute of respect for the ancient capital city of Rus'. It is also a response to an urgent need of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Indeed, the problem of church divisions is especially pressing precisely in Ukraine today. For the last two decades, our church boat has suffered a good many shocks. As a result, along with the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church which remains in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate, there are also several non-canonical entities which have separated themselves from our Church. The largest of them are 'the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kievan Patriarchate' (UOC KP) and 'the Ukrainian Autocephalous

Orthodox Church' (UAOC). For us to assess the scale of church divisions in Ukraine, I will cite the official state statistics. As of January 1, 2010, the Ukrainian State Committee for Nationalities and Religions registered 11 704 communities of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, 4 251 communities of the UOC KP and 1 194 communities of the UAOC. Thus, there are over five thousand communities in Ukraine living without communion with Universal Orthodoxy. It is a substantial figure. As a matter of fact, the number of believers in the non-canonical structures in Ukraine exceeds the size of some National Orthodox Churches. It is a serious challenge to us.

Schisms are bleeding wounds on the body of the Church of Christ, which demand a skilful and considerate treatment. And how painful it is to hear from the faithful of our Church that we should not be concerned over the fate of our brothers and sisters who are outside the Eucharistic communion with us. It is painful to hear from those who claim to be Christians the words of disdain for our compatriots who are part of non-canonical associations.

A refusal to heal the wounds of schism is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and comes into conflict with the teaching of Church Fathers. Let us remember our Saviour's words: *If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost* (Mt. 18:12-14). Are not these words a direct call to us to exert every effort to bring our brothers back to the saving fold of the Church? Let us remember that for St. Paul the thought about his kinsmen who rejected Christ was continual sorrow and great heaviness in his heart. He even agreed to as much as being cut off from Christ for the sake of his kinsmen (cf. Rom. 9:2-3).

This grief of the heart is natural for every Christian who sees a mistaken brother. And this pain should compel us to do all that is possible for us to overcome the church schisms.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, during his visit to Ukraine in summer 2009, spoke about this pain on several occasions. Thus, during the Divine Liturgy on the Day of St. Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles here, at the Kiev Laura of the Caves, His Holiness said: 'In the festive mood of this radiant day there are also sad overtones. This sadness comes from the fact that not all of our brothers of the same faith share in this feast. Some of them dwell outside the saving fold of the Church, outside its precious unity. Let us pray for them so that the Lord may show them His mercy, breathe into them the resolve to defy all the temporal human passionate and sinful temptations and return to the Father's house in order to join us in the joy and simplicity of the heart, asserting together the eternal values of the holy Gospel'. His Holiness promised to do all possible 'for the united Church of Christ, the martyr and confessor Church, who was faithful to Christ even unto death and who shared the fate of her people, to recover the power and resources to hold her faithful children in her maternal embrace'.

In these words of the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church we see a clear pastoral imperative.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has exerted much effort to heal the schisms. Thus, as far back as November 1995 the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church set up a Synodal commission for dialogue with the UAOC (Proceedings No. 67). And after the UOC KP and the UAOC sent us official appeals in 2007, the Holy Synod in July 2008 adopted replies to these appeals, stating the clear desire of our Church to do all that was possible to overcome the existing schisms. The document addressed then to the UOC KP stated: 'Conscious of the need to overcome the church divisions in Ukraine as soon as possible, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is ready for constructive dialogue and cooperation with all the parties concerned'. This position of our Church received support from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill who, during his visit to Ukraine in summer 2009, stressed on several occasions the need to find ways of overcoming the schisms.

On September 9, 2009, the UOC Holy Synod resolved that dialogue with the UAOC be continued and adopted a new membership of the Synodal commission for this dialogue. It also set up a working group to prepare dialogue with the UOC KP.

In addition, when the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church was prepared in January 2009 we put forward an initiative for setting up a commission to engage in a detailed study of the church situation in Ukraine and formulate competent proposals for healing church divisions.

Today we are holding the first meeting of the Russian Orthodox Church's Inter-Council Presence commission for opposing and overcoming church schisms. We believe the establishment of this commission to be a response of His Holiness to the initiatives we set forth in January 2009. Our commission includes representatives of the episcopate and clergy, church and public figures, as well as theologians.

In accordance with the Inter-Council Presence presidium's decision, we are to define today the priorities of themes approved for our consideration and to discuss further procedure of our work.

I wish all the participants in our meeting God's help in this complicated and very responsible work. I hope that our efforts aimed to benefit the Church of Christ will succeed. [?]