



Presentation by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the opening of the ‘World Orthodoxy: Primacy and Conciliarity in the Light of Orthodox Dogmatic Teaching’ conference



On 16th September 2022 the ‘World Orthodoxy: Primacy and Conciliarity in the Light of Orthodox Dogmatic Teaching’ conference opened in the St. Sergius Hall of Christ the Saviour Cathedral.

Your Eminences, Your Graces, all-honourable fathers, dear brothers and sisters,

Allow me to convey my greetings to you all, the participants of the ‘World Orthodox Primacy and Conciliarity in the Light of Orthodox Dogmatic Teaching’ conference.

The topic which we examine today leaves no doubt as to its importance and relevance. The state of affairs in the family of the Local Orthodox Churches is cause for great concern. The situation that has arisen in the Orthodox Church we may judge to be a crisis.

That it is a crisis is borne out by the serious differences among the Orthodox on how we understand the order of Universal Orthodoxy, what we mean by primacy and conciliarity and how we define the relationship between ecclesiastical order with what is done in the sphere of ecclesiastical administration.

We can, of course, observe within this crisis the influence of certain political forces; indeed, the entire history of the Church has been accompanied by such influences. It would be wrong to deny that in the world there are those who would desire to destroy the foundations of Orthodox life and sow division and enmity among peoples and Churches. And it is quite obvious that there is an attempt to create a mediastinum, if not to tear away completely Greek Orthodoxy, Mediterranean Orthodoxy from Slavic Orthodoxy and in the first instance from the Russian Orthodox Church. That is to say, to reproduce the model of the Great Schism of 1054 and thereby weaken the Orthodox Church which today, I dare say, like no other Christian community is carrying out and is capable of carrying out a prophetic ministry by above all giving an evaluation to all that is happening to human civilization.

As the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church who is obliged to preserve and strengthen relations with the other Local Orthodox Churches, I cannot but feel personal pain at what is happening in our mutual relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and with those Churches which have been drawn by Constantinople into recognizing the so-called 'autocephalous Ukrainian Church', which is in fact no more than the legitimization of church schism.

At the preparatory stage of the Pan-Orthodox Council (which did not take place) between the Local Orthodox Churches a principal agreement was reached that autocephaly in the future would be granted only with the consent of all the commonly recognized Local Orthodox Churches. We reached this consensus at a session in Chambésy and it was received with enthusiasm as this position does indeed erect a barrier for the possible development of all sorts of schismatic movements. The decision should have been sanctioned at the Council, but at the request of the Patriarch of Constantinople the topic of autocephaly was shelved. And after the convocation of ten Local Orthodox Churches on Crete in 2016 this topic was finally buried, all agreements reached in the past were annulled and the Patriarch of Constantinople stated that he supposedly enjoys the right to unilaterally, without the consent of the other Local Churches, grant autocephaly to whomsoever he pleases. It is entirely evident that not a single church canon asserts this right. There *are* canons which regulate the relationship of the Patriarch of Constantinople with the metropolitans who come under his Patriarchate. But Constantinople has imposed this model on all the Orthodox Church without, of course, referring to any of the church canons.

The claims to special rights and privileges were earlier announced by the bishops and theologians of

Constantinople, but they have never been enunciated with such a harsh intonation and in such a radical interpretation as today. We have even reached a situation whereby the Patriarch of Constantinople has started to be called not the “first among equals”, but the “first *without* equals”. This new ecclesiology has no basis either in the holy canons or in Church Tradition.

The growth and strengthening of these tendencies have not gone unnoticed by the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2008 the Episcopal Council of the Russian Church noted that “threats to church unity at the present time exist not only within the confines of the Local Russian Church, but also in the life of Universal Orthodoxy. They come above all from the careless attempts to revise the centuries-old foundations of ecclesiastical relations fixed by the holy canons of the Church.” Expressing deep concern over the tendency to review the canonical tradition, manifesting itself in the utterances and actions of certain representatives of the Church of Constantinople, the Council emphasized that the vision of the Patriarchate of Constantinople of her rights and powers which is ever more often expressed by bishops of this Church “comes into direct conflict with the centuries-old canonical tradition upon which rests the life of the Russian Orthodox Church and the other Local Churches.”

In 2013 the Holy Synod of our Church adopted a document entitled ‘The Position of the Moscow Patriarchate on the Issue of Primacy in the Universal Church’. The document emphasizes the notion that within the Holy Church of Christ primacy belongs in all things to her Head, that is, to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. When I touched upon this topic at one of the sessions at Chambésy, in order to argue my position, I said: Look at the icons of the Ecumenical Councils – there is no president; in place of a president, we see the icon of the Saviour. When the emperors attended the Ecumenical Councils, they occupied the central place, and when the emperor was absent, the place was occupied by an icon of the Saviour. Even in those instances when the emperor was present, an icon was still to be found in the place of the one presiding over events. This iconographic tradition clearly reflects Orthodox ecclesiology on the issue of whether there exists a visible head of the Orthodox Church and affirms that there is no visible head, while the head of the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ (unlike the Western – Latin – understanding of this subject).

The Church as a divine-human organism undoubtedly has need of earthly organization, and this organization is expressed through, *inter alia*, the special ministry of the primacy of honour. The Orthodox mind clearly understands that primacy at the level of an autocephalous Church bears a special nature: not only are the bishops to “acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head,” but the primate “who is the first, must not do anything without the consent of all.”**[1]**

If the authority of primacy were to be limited in this manner at the level of an autocephalous Church, then even more so at the universal level should the primacy of honour never be replaced by a primacy of authority.

We can see that the ecclesiological tendencies which were noted earlier and which cause alarm have today been developed further and have already caused significant damage to the mutual relations between the Local Orthodox Churches. Especially dangerous is the serious violation of canonical order caused by the interference of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Ukraine, which is the territory of another Local Orthodox Church.

This interference may truly have profound consequences which capable of destroying the relationships between all the Local Churches. And yet, there have often been instances in church history when crises have provided the impulse for a deeper reflection upon dogmatic teaching and the various issues of church life. I believe that we need a theological analysis of what is happening today in Universal Orthodoxy.

The basic tasks of this conference, as I see it, are, firstly, to analyze and identify the ecclesiological reasons for the present crisis. It is essential to examine the relationship of the understanding of primacy and conciliarity as enunciated today by Constantinople with the ancient understanding as laid down by Church Tradition. This is of the utmost importance as we can prove that Constantinople is mistaken simply by examining her present-day position with regard to that which always obtained in the Orthodox Church in realizing the role and meaning of the first hierarch.

Secondly, it is important to evaluate theologically and canonically those actions which proceed from a false understanding of primacy. I suggest that in order to give this evaluation it is extremely vital to examine assiduously the political context of the 'granting of autocephaly' to the so-called 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine', that is to say, the schismatic structure which the Patriarch of Constantinople has used in an attempt to replace the genuine Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a church consisting of more than twelve thousand parishes and more than two hundred and fifty monasteries, and the members of which are millions of Orthodox Ukrainians. But it was decided to replace one with the other: simply remove the canonical Church and replace her with a schismatic organization.

Thirdly, in analyzing the problems that have arisen, we should not forget the history behind them. From the mutual relations of the Local Orthodox Churches in the past, their place in a particular country, we can draw lessons which are beneficial for our time.

Finally, it vital once more to think over what we mean by church schism and how the Local Churches are to react to it. Is it permissible to enter into prayerful and Eucharistic communion with the schismatics? What canonical consequences will there be for doing so? Can we view as legitimate that church authority which has violated ecclesiastical order through concelebration with schismatics and the self-consecrated who do not possess any canonical ordination?

The church canons, of course, do give us definite answers to all of these questions. Yet how are we to apply these canons in practice? What do they actually mean in this current situation? Where are the limits of ecclesiastical economy and where does acrimony (strict interpretation) begin? It is my hope that the conference participants will reflect upon this subject too.

I would like to emphasize that, confronted by the schism which has arisen in world Orthodoxy, the Russian Orthodox Church has, by the grace of God, remained one and consolidated. I may even add that the events that have occurred in Ukraine, caused by Constantinople's unlawful interference into the canonical territory of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, have helped many people in our Church to be ever more conscious of the gift of unity which we have inherited from our thousand-year-old Church.

Within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church we see an amazing oneness among the episcopate, clergy, monks, nuns and laity. In spite of the mass aggressive propaganda campaign and political pressure aimed against unity with the Russian Orthodox Church, church people – the true bearers of faith and piety – have demonstrated their resolute will to preserve this unity. In spite of the fact that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been subject to discrimination and persecution, she continues to grow through the appearance of new monasteries and parishes.

A consistent growth of the number of monasteries and parishes can be observed throughout all the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church, and this cannot but be a cause for joy for us. We see in this a special sign of God's favour towards our Holy Church which has arisen from the ashes after seven decades of persecution and which for more than thirty years has been experiencing a rebirth, has grown in strength and has been expanding.

At the same time, the events happening beyond the confines of our canonical territory cannot allow us to remain indifferent. They touch upon all the members of Universal Orthodoxy and we are called upon to seek jointly ways out of this crisis.

That is why we greeted the initiative of His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem and All Palestine Theophilus III to call in Amman an inter-Orthodox meeting which we participated in. The primate of this most ancient Church, which liturgical books call the 'Mother Church', courageously took upon himself the noble mission of offering to the Local Orthodox Churches a platform for discussions in conditions when the Patriarch of Constantinople has in effect deprived himself of the opportunity of calling such gatherings.

It is for this same reason that our conference is attended not only by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also by representatives of the other Local Churches and to whom I extend my

heartfelt greetings. We can listen to those who have been unable to come as a result of the pandemic restrictions through the means of modern communications technology.

It is vital that not only the bishops of the Church, but also representatives of the academic theological community give their judgment on the attempts to legalize the schism: how far these attempts go beyond the confines of ecclesiology and canon law, and are we not dealing in this instance with a revision of Orthodox ecclesiology and rejection of the canons which are so principally important for the preservation of church unity? Our conference is attended by leading theologians from various countries. I hope that their voice will be heard also in those places where today the schism is widening and deepening. Let us try jointly to halt it so that, as St. Basil the Great said, “we may bring once more to the unity of the Church those who have so often been divided among themselves”.

The Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church has already worked and continues to work upon the study of the new tendencies in the ecclesiology of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Theological insights can help us all to understand and judge better the current situation.

I hope that the results of the conference will be used for further work in this direction, that it will activate theological dialogue and will be of benefit to all those interested in preserving the Orthodox dogmatic teaching and canonical order.

I would like to note especially the importance of this conference as the forthcoming Episcopal Council of the Russian Orthodox Church will give its evaluation to what we can see happening today in the Orthodox world, and if it is pleasing to the Holy Spirit and the bishops gathered, the Council will adopt a resolution with regard to the position of our Church concerning the actions of Constantinople.

I wish God’s aid and labours that will bring forth fruit for all the conference participants. I call God’s blessing down upon you all.

[1] 34th Apostolic Canon.