Constantinople’s claims to power as a threat to Church unity



Presentation by the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion at the ‘World Orthodoxy: Primacy and Conciliarity in the Light of Orthodox Dogmatic Teaching’ conference on 16th September 2021.

Your Holiness,

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

As His Holiness the Patriarch noted in his speech, the situation within the family of Orthodox Churches reflects the crisis which has overtaken it. There are different aspects to this crisis, but one of the most important, in my view, is the threat to the unity of Orthodoxy.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself left the commandment to his disciples that they be one. The theme of unity resounds repeatedly in the high priestly prayer of the Saviour: “That they all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Jn 17.21); “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (Jn 17.22-23).

Orthodox dogmatic teaching, taking its cue fr om the Gospels, speaks of the unity and the oneness of the Church and makes this the prime characteristic of the Church among all other characteristics. The theological foundation for the unity of the Church proceeds primarily fr om the notion that God is one. Within the Church there occurs the coming together as one of each member with each other and with the Head of the Church the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture contains a multitude of images reflecting the unity of the faithful with Christ, among which we may single out the image of the Church as the Body of Christ as proposed by the holy apostle Paul.

Fr om the earliest centuries of the Church’s existence patristic theology continued the topic of unity in expressing it through the use of figurative language. The holy martyr Ignatius of Antioch writes: “In your concord and harmonious **love**, **Jesus Christ** is sung. And man by man, become a **choir**, that being harmonious in **love**, and taking up the song of **God** in unison, you may with one voice sing to the Father through **Jesus Christ**, so that he may both hear you, and perceive by your **works** that you are indeed the members of his **Son**. It is profitable, therefore, that you should live in an unblameable **unity**, that thus you may always enjoy communion with **God**”.**[1]**

Any threat to the unity of the Church is a threat to the Body of Christ in which all the faithful are united by a single faith, the Eucharist and the Church’s Head Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that the most tragic events in the Church’s history have been schisms in which the unity which Christ commanded has been violated, in which the oneness of mind that abides in faith is lost, in which the oneness around the Eucharistic cup ceases to be, in which the apostolic succession of the hierarchy is violated and as a result of which a deep wound arises in the Body of Christ.

Within the Church’s history we can find many examples of how the actions of her individual members have led to tragic divisions, the consequences of which we feel to the present day. These pages of Church history may serve as a lesson and a warning against such actions in the present and the future. To this day, however, the unity of Orthodoxy is subjected to threats not only from without, but also from within on the part of those who try to act against Orthodox dogmatic teaching and canonical tradition. We observe such actions on the part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

It is well known that from the mid-eleventh century this particular Patriarchate occupied within the family of Local Orthodox Churches the first place according to honour. In what manner was this honour

accorded it? By means of a sad coming together of circumstances. For many centuries the first see in the Christian world was that of Rome as the imperial capital. After the emperor Constantine founded a new capital on the shores of the Bosporus, the Second Ecumenical Council adopted a resolution which made Constantinople the New Rome as the “city of Caesar and the Senate” on an equal footing with the old Rome. As a result of this decision Constantinople occupied second place after Rome in the diptychs of the Churches. When, though, in 1054 communion was broken off between Constantinople and Rome, primacy within the family of the Eastern Orthodox Churches automatically went to Constantinople. But this was a primacy of honour, not of power.

For several centuries this perception was defended by the patriarchs of Constantinople, in particular within the polemical debate over the claims of the pope to universal jurisdiction. In 1894 the Patriarch of Constantinople Anthimus VII in his letter to Pope Leo XIII wrote: “The divine fathers, in honouring the bishop of Rome merely as the bishop of the imperial capital city, accorded him the honourable privilege of presiding, looked upon him merely as the first among the other bishops, that is, the first among equals, which privilege was later granted to the bishop of the city of Constantinople when this city became the capital of the Roman empire… Each autocephalous Church in the East and the West, taken separately, was wholly independent and self-governing during the times of the Seven Ecumenical Councils… and the bishop of Rome had no right to intervene, being himself subject to the decisions of the councils.”**[2]**

This is how the patriarch of Constantinople understood primacy in the Universal Church right up until the twentieth century. And what does their present successor think of primacy? As an example, let us quote his words of instruction which he imparted to one of his recently consecrated bishops: “May you serve the true and unchanging ecclesiology which is far from the sad distortion that states that we are all equal and that the first, that is, Constantinople, is such merely ‘by honour’. Yes, we are equal, we all have the same episcopal rank, but on the basis of the canons and centuries-old tradition we have received other privileges which are unique in meaning and character, and which we have no intention whatsoever of renouncing.”**[3]** And three years ago, in his address to the council of bishops of the Church of Constantinople, Patriarch Bartholomew uttered in particular these words: “The beginning of the Church is the Ecumenical Patriarchate, ‘within which there is life, and this life is the light of the Churches’, and Orthodoxy cannot exist without the Ecumenical Patriarchate.”**[4]**

We could quote many such other words by the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew which bear witness to the way he distorts patristic ecclesiology. I propose that they will be carefully studied by the forthcoming Episcopal Council and will receive a theological and canonical evaluation.

Where does this exaggerated role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople within the life of world Orthodoxy come from? Wh ere or with whom did it appear? History testifies that it all began with

Patriarch Meletius IV (Metaxakis), who headed the see of Constantinople in the 1920s. It is he who developed the theory by which the Patriarch of Constantinople is not merely first among the primates of the Local Orthodox Churches but also has special privileges which set him apart from the other primates and place him above them.

In particular, it was under him that Constantinople started to lay claim to the role as the highest court of appeal for the whole Orthodox Church. According to the theory made up by Patriarch Meletius, any bishop or cleric from any Local Church, judged for whatever canonical infractions, has the right to appeal to Constantinople and overturn the sentence pronounced upon him; the decision of Constantinople in this instance is to be regarded as final.

On the basis of a broad interpretation of the 28th canon of the Council of Chalcedon, under Patriarch Meletius it was asserted that Constantinople also has exclusive rights to all of the Orthodox diaspora. This canon speaks only of the metropolitans of Pontus, Asia and Thrace – dioceses of the Roman empire – as well as the "bishops among the barbarians of the aforementioned dioceses" who are to be consecrated in Constantinople. However, by using this canon as a starting point, the theory was invented that the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople is to extend over all "barbarians", including all the Orthodox Christians who live in Western Europe, both Americas, Australia and Asia.

We may speak of the various sources which threaten the unity of the Church, but even if we stop and examine the theological side of this theory, then there come to the fore distortions of ecclesiology which inevitably bear within them a destructive force aimed against the unity of Orthodoxy. It is only now that we have realized in full measure to what serious consequences for the unity of the Church these one-sided claims to power on the part of Constantinople lead to. But people who possess theological insight have recognized the danger posed by these claims long before the present sad time.

In my speech I would like to take a look at, in particular, the contribution made to a theological understanding of Church unity and the potential causes for its destruction which were made in the mid-twentieth century by schema-archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), who was recently canonized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople as a saintly monk.

When Father Sophrony, after spending more than twenty years on the Holy Mountain of Athos, was in France in the 1940s, he had occasion to plunge into the whirlpool of the jurisdictional disputes which still rage in Russia emigré circles. One of the issues which was then actively discussed was the role of the Patriarch of Constantinople as "first among equals" within the family primates of the Local Orthodox Churches. This issue has a particular relevance for the Archdiocese of Russian parishes which was then under the Patriarchate of Constantinople but also was no less important for the Moscow Patriarchate too.

In 1950 Father Sophrony published a large article under the title ‘Church Unity after the Image of the Holy Trinity.’**[5]** In this article he severely criticizes the ‘papism of Constantinople’, which, he states, ‘is only in its beginning stage.’ The promoters of the papism were at that time the representatives of the Russian jurisdiction of Constantinople who lived in France. During the lifetime of metropolitan Eulogius they ‘sought out above all a “canonical basis” not to be separated from the body of the Universal Orthodox Church after being torn away from the Russian Mother Church… Before 1946, according to metropolitan Eulogius, this group considered its submission to Constantinople to be temporary, and from this moment onwards they thought they had found the ‘canonical truth’ and went under the permanent jurisdiction of Constantinople, seeking out thereby not only canonical but also theological foundations for doing so.’

Metropolitan Eulogius (Georgievsky), as we know, shortly before his death returned to the Moscow Patriarchate and called upon the members of the Archdiocese to follow him. The majority, however, preferred to remain under Constantinople. In order to justify this decision, they, as Father Sophrony writes, ‘at first recognized the primacy of Constantinople’s rights of jurisdiction… Then they started to assert that Constantinople enjoys the right to be the supreme court of appeal within the Universal Church, forgetting the centuries-old struggle of the latter against the claims of Rome to this right; forgetting that it is Rome’s claims which led to the great and final division of the Churches in 1054. Forgetting that at the Council of Florence Rome obtained from the East above all the right to be the supreme court of appeal in the Universal Church. Forgetting that many canons of the Ecumenical and Local Councils reject this right in whatever Local Church. Forgetting the struggle of the same Church of Constantinople which maintained a firm Orthodox position when she needed to combat Rome’s claims.’

Thus, Father Sophrony draws a direct parallel between the claims of Rome to universal leadership which led to the ‘Great Schism’ and the modern-day (in 1950) claims to such leadership by the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Russian followers of ‘Constantinople papism’, says Father Sophrony, ‘recognized that Constantinople had the exclusive right to the entire Orthodox diaspora throughout the world, while rejecting the same for the autocephalous Churches in relation to their own diaspora. Without any basis for this in either the canonical order of the Church or in her centuries-old practice, they, like Rome of old, started to assert these rights not on the basis of the canons but on the orders of “God himself.”’

In the Circular letter by the Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras, made public on the Sunday of Orthodoxy in 1950, Father Sophrony sees ‘an ever-increasing assimilation to the First Rome; in essence, the idea that the First Rome had fallen, and that the Second Rome had come along to replace it with the same rights and arguments.” Constantinople does not ‘impart its existence upon the other autocephalous Churches, but regards them as lesser than her: Constantinople is above all the Universal

Church, while the others are but parts of her, and belong to the Universal Church only in as far as they are linked to Constantinople.'

In posing the question in this way, Father Sophrony sees a dangerous departure from Orthodox dogmatic teaching which he calls a heresy: 'Should we not also say that this form of papism is also an ecclesiological heresy as Roman papism? Should we not also say that if it is realized within the Church, it will inevitably lead to a distortion of the entire spiritual image of our being? If we tie, like the First Rome, to the locality (and as regards Constantinople we have to add to race as they are Greeks) exclusive rights of jurisdiction and teaching within the Church, then this heresy will return us to the times spoken of in the Gospel: "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place wh ere people must worship is in Jerusalem."'

In his article Father Sophrony examines the doctrine that Constantinople is the 'Mother Church' for all of the Local Churches. Firstly, even if this were the case, it would not impart to the mother Church any advantages over the daughter Churches. Secondly, the example of the Church of Jerusalem convincingly demonstrates that this is not the case: it is the Church of Jerusalem which is the 'sole undisputed Mother of all the Churches, not excluding the First Rome.'

The principle of the autocephalous structure of the Local Churches is then examined in detail. According to Father Sophrony, the 'notion of autocephaly speaks of how the Catholic Church in every place enjoys in full the grace imparted to her, and as a result of this fullness of grace-filled gifts she is every place none other than the One Catholic Church. The notion of autocephaly speaks of how neither locality, nor title, nor ethnic origin in the Church grants any advantage of jurisdiction or doctrine over any other localities or peoples; it speaks of how the Holy Spirit "breathes wh ere he will", and that this breath in the Church is not contingent upon the will of a bishop.'

At the end of his article Father Sophrony explains why he had decided to speak out upon such a painful topic: 'In combatting the neo-papism which has arisen within the bosom of our Holy Church, we are fighting not only for the truth in the ecclesiastical and eternal meaning of this word. We reject all "Romes", both First, Second and Third, if this means the introduction of the principle of subordination in the life of our Church. Both Roman, Constantinopolitan, Moscow, London, Parisian and New York and any other papism we reject as an ecclesiological heresy distorting Christianity.'

In declaring war upon a new heresy, Father Sophrony was following the ancient monastic tradition whereby the monks would abandon their secluded cells in the instance when the Church was threatened by a false doctrine. Church history is replete with examples of the participation of monks in the fight against heresies. And Father Sophrony did not remain on the sidelines when he believed that a danger threatened the Church.

Aside from spiritual intuition, he also possessed theological intuition. ‘Distortion at the particular level will inevitably lead to a distortion of the whole,’ he wrote. ‘If we now distort the doctrine on the Church … then how can she then be the path to the truth for her children? You may ask how this distortion manifests itself today. I say: in the neo-papism of Constantinople which extremely quickly is aiming to transfer itself from the theoretical phase to that of the practical…’.

The transfer from the theoretical phase to the practical, which Father Sophrony prophetically foretold, has been accomplished before our very eyes. Seventy years after the appearance of his article, there has come true that which he warned against: the papist claims of Constantinople have led to a new ‘Great Schism’, now already within Orthodoxy.

The distorted understanding of primacy at the level of the Universal Church is not only a departure from Orthodox ecclesiology, but also a genuine threat to the unity of the Church, especially in the instance when this understanding is imposed upon the other primates by the primate who is first in the diptychs. It is the attempts by Constantinople to assert her autocratic jurisdiction within the Church that lie at the basis of the inter-Orthodox crises of recent decades.

Let us not forget that the unlawful and anti-canonical intervention by Constantinople within the borders of Ukraine in 2018 was preceded by the no less unlawful intervention in Estonia in 1996. Even then it led to a rupture in Eucharistic communion between the Russian Church and Constantinople. And although a compromise solution was found as a result of great efforts, Constantinople has yet to fulfill those obligations which she took upon herself as one of the conditions of restoring communion. The fragile peace was only an interlude to what was unfortunately the far more serious conflict that has unfolded before our eyes.

Constantinople’s claims to universal primacy became especially evident at the Council of Crete in June of 2016. From the very beginning of the pre-conciliar preparations the participants with hope looked upon the forthcoming Holy and Great Council as a historical gathering which would be attended by all the autocephalous Orthodox Churches as a gathering which would visibly testify to the world of the unity of Holy Orthodoxy. For this reason, the Local Churches agreed that all decisions at the preparatory level and the level of the Council itself would be taken on the basis of a consensus. But after four Local Orthodox Churches several weeks before the start of the Council argued that they would no longer participate in it and asked for the Council to be postponed, it became evident that it was impossible to hold the Council since it could no longer fulfill its intention of being an icon of the One Orthodox Church.

Nevertheless, in spite of the voices of these Churches, the Patriarchate of Constantinople decisively and ignoring all objections insisted upon holding the Council. And now we can understand why. It was

pursuing different aims. It needed a different icon – the image of an earthly head for the whole Church who, ignoring everyone and acting only by his own discretion, could convoke Pan-Orthodox Councils and make their decisions binding for those who did not even attend them.

We know to what consequence holding the Council of Crete have led: part of the Local Churches recognizes it as Pan-Orthodox while others decline to do so. We have an evident division. However, an incomparably greater blow for Church unity was inflicted by the interference of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Ukraine and the legitimization by him of the Ukrainian schism in 2018.

This evening, as part of our conference proceedings, we will acquaint participants with a fuller collection of documents on the history of the unification of the metropolitanate of Kiev with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1686. This is a collective labour, the fruit of the endeavours of the best Russian scholars and competent specialists of our Church.

The published documents manifestly show that when the metropolitanate of Kiev was transferred to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate there was no question of a supposedly temporary or limited nature of this transfer. The documents clearly state: “Let the metropolitanate of Kiev be subject to His Holiness the Patriarch of the see of Moscow and let her bishops recognize as their head and primate the Patriarch of Moscow as it will be at the present time and by those who are consecrated by him.” There is not a single word on the temporary nature of this decision or of the possibility of it being reviewed in the future.

The patriarchs of Constantinople proceeded from this very position when they published in their annual calendars of their Church the names of the bishops of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as being part of the Moscow Patriarchate when they recognized the decisions concerning the Ukrainian Church as being part of the exclusive realm of competence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, for example, when in 1992 canonical sanctions were imposed upon metropolitan Philaret (Denisenko), Patriarch Bartholomew wrote to the ever-memorable Patriarch Alexy II: “In reply to the corresponding telegrams and the letter of Your Beloved and Esteemed Beatitude regarding the problem that has arisen within the sister Church of Russia which have caused the Holy Synod for well-known reasons to depose the until recently leading member of the Synod the metropolitan of Kiev the Lord Philaret, we desire fraternally to inform Your Holiness that our Holy and Great Church of Christ, in recognizing the fullness of the competence of Your Holy Russian Church in this issue, will take a decision on the level of the Synod on the aforementioned without wishing to create any difficulties for Your Sister Church.”

But in 2018 everything unexpectedly changed. Constantinople unilaterally reviewed the Act of 1686 and declared it to be temporary, referring to the extraordinary necessity of the Patriarch of Moscow to ordain the metropolitans of Kiev. This was done with the sole aim of justifying interference in Ukraine. This

interference came about under the pretext of healing the schism. In fact, no healing took place as the episcopate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with the exception of two bishops, refused to join the schismatic grouping which had been legitimized by the Patriarch of Constantinople.

As a result, an unprecedented situation arose by which the Church with more than twelve thousand parishes and two hundred and fifty monasteries and comprising the most numerous religious community in Ukraine was declared by Constantinople to be 'non-existent', and attempts were made by fair means and foul to transfer her lawful rights and even name to the schismatics.

It is impossible to label the actions of Constantinople a healing of the schism in Ukraine. Their obvious uncanonical nature and even absurdity lead us to believe that the Phanar was indeed pursuing different aims. It appears that Constantinople had decided to show the world who 'the boss' is in the Orthodox Church. Now, anyone who recognizes the legalization of the Ukrainian schism and the newly-created 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine' automatically recognizes the fact that the Patriarch of Constantinople enjoys a power within Universal Orthodoxy that is not constrained by anything or anybody: at his own discretion and ignoring objections he can annul historical agreements that are three hundred years old, declare people to be bishops who have had no canonical ordination, at the stroke of a pen proclaim a multi-million-member Church to be 'non-existent', and so on.

It is no exaggeration to state that the intervention in Ukraine, which in fact has become the embodiment of the schemes of Constantinople's would-be theologians, may lead to the same tragic and irreversible results as the events of 1054. The then participants of events – the Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerullarius on the one hand and the papal legates on the other – could hardly have imagined that the division would last so long. But it has lasted for just under a thousand years.

The threats to the unity of Orthodoxy which we see now in the actions of Constantinople demand a broad and multifaceted study on the part of both bishops and theologians. It is for this reason that before the Episcopal Council of the Russian Orthodox Church we are now holding a theological conference on the topic of primacy and conciliarity in the Orthodox Church. During the conference, I hope that we will fulfill those tasks which His Holiness the Patriarch spoke about and put the results of our work to use for further labours in evaluating the situation in world Orthodoxy.

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[1] To the Ephesians, 4.

[2] Circular Patriarchal and Synodal Letter of the Church of Constantinople on the encyclical of Leo XIII on the unity of the Churches from 20th June 1894.

[3] Sermon by Patriarch Bartholomew at vespers in the Church of St. Andrew in Kiev, 21st August 2021.

[4] Sermon by Patriarch Bartholomew at the Synaxis of bishops of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from 1st to 4th September 2018.

[5] The article is quoted according to the version published in *Vestnik Zapadno-Evropeiskogo Patriarchego Ekzarkhata*, no.2-3, 1950 (Paris).

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