His Holiness Patriarch Kirill opens conference on primacy and conciliarity in Orthodoxy



On September 16, 2021, the conference on “World Orthodoxy: Primacy and Conciliarity in the Light of Orthodox Teaching” began its work at the St. Sergius Hall of the Cathedral Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.

The forum was organized and promoted by the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission, the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate and Doctoral Studies. The event is held with the support of the Foundation for the Support of Christian Culture and Heritage.

The conference was opened with the introductory remarks of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

Pointing to the topicality of the theme under consideration, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church stressed, “The state of affairs in the family of the Local Orthodox Churches is of much concern. The situation as it has developed in the Orthodox world can be assessed as critical. An evident testimony to the crisis are serious differences among the Orthodox Christians over our understanding of the order of the Universal Orthodoxy - what we mean by primacy and conciliarity, how we correlate the canonical order of the Church and actions in the area of church governance”.

His Holiness pointed out that an influence of certain political forces can be perceived in this crisis. “It cannot be denied that in the world there are those who would like to destroy the foundations of the Orthodox life, to sow division and enmity between nations and Churches”, Patriarch Kirill said, “And there is quite an evident trend to create a dividing wall, if not altogether to tear away the Greek Orthodoxy, the Mediterranean Orthodoxy fr om the Slavic Orthodoxy, and first of all, fr om the Russian Orthodox Church, that is to say, to reproduce the model of the 1054 schism and thus weaken the Orthodox Church, which carries out and is capable of carrying out the prophetic service - such service, I am not afraid to say. as few of other Christian confessions are able to do - first of all by assessing all that is happening to the human civilization”.

He also noted that as Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, who is obliged to take care of the preserving and fostering relations with all the Local Orthodox Churches, he cannot but feels “personal pain from what is happening in our relationships with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Churches which were induced by Constantinople to recognize the so-called “autocephalous Ukrainian church”, which in actual fact represents nothing else but the legitimization of a church schism”.

He reminded the conference that at the stage of preparations for a Pan-Orthodox Council, which never took place, a fundamental decision was reached: in future, autocephaly was to be granted only with the consent of all the commonly recognized Local Orthodox Churches. However, at the Patriarch of Constantinople’s request, this theme was removed from the agenda. And after the conference of ten Local Orthodox Churches in 2016 in Crete, this theme was finally buried; all the agreements reached in the past were declared null and void, and the Patriarch of Constantinople stated that he ostensibly received from the apostles the right to grant autocephaly to whom he sees fit, unilaterally, without the consent of other Local Churches.

“The claims to special rights and privileges had been voiced by Constantinopolitan hierarchs and theologians earlier as well, but never before they were voiced so harshly and so radically as today”, His Holiness stressed, “It came to a point wh ere the Patriarch of Constantinople became to be named not the first among equals but “the first without equals”. This new ecclesiology had no grounds whatsoever either in holy canons or on the whole in the church Tradition”.

“We can see that the ecclesiological tendencies, which were noticed before and caused fears, have been further developed to now cause a considerable damage to the relationships among Local Orthodox Churches”, the Patriarch stated. He pointed out that an especially dangerous and grave violation of the canonical order was the invasion of the Patriarchate of Constantinople into Ukraine - into the territory of another Local Orthodox Church: “This invasion can really have pernicious consequences that can destroy relations among Local Churches”.

“Meanwhile, in the history of the Church there have often been cases when the situations of crisis would give an impetus for a more thorough reflection on the doctrine and various practical issues of church life”, the Primate of the Russian Church continued, “I am certain that we need a theological analysis of what is going on today in Universal Orthodoxy”.

His Holiness formulated the basic tasks of the conference, among them an analysis of the ecclesiological causes of the present crisis. “It is necessary to compare the understanding of primacy and conciliarity articulated today by Constantinople with the original understanding sealed in the Tradition of the Church. It is the most important task: we can prove the invalidity of Constantinople’s position only by comparing this actual position with what has always been in the Orthodox Church with regard to the realization of the role and importance of the first”, His Holiness said with conviction.

He also believes it is necessary to give a theological and canonical assessment to the actions resulting from a wrong understanding of primacy. “I believe that for such an assessment it is very important that the political context should be also taken into a thorough consideration and the political context of “granting autocephaly” to the so-called “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”, that is to say, to the schismatic structure used by the Patriarch of Constantinople in an attempt to replace the really existing Ukrainian Orthodox Church - a Church that numbers 12 thousand parishes, over 250 monasteries and millions of Orthodox Ukrainian members”, the Patriarch said.

He pointed out that in face of the schism that has arisen in the world Orthodoxy, the Russian Orthodox Church, by God’s mercy, remains united and consolidated. “I will tell you more: the developments in Ukraine caused by the lawless invasion of Constantinople into the canonical territory of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have helped many in our Church to realize even more keenly the gift of unity that we have inherited from our millennium-long history”, he noted.

At the same time, the events taking place outside our canonical territory cannot leave us indifferent”, His Holiness continued, “They affect all the members of Universal Orthodoxy, and we are called to search together for ways of coming out of this crisis. That is why we welcomed the initiative of His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem and All Palestine to convene in Amman an inter-Orthodox conference and took part in it. The Primate of the oldest Church named in liturgical texts “the Mother of

Churches", courageously took upon himself a noble mission by offering to Local Orthodox Churches a platform for discussion in the situation when the Patriarch of Constantinople really deprived himself of an opportunity to convene such conferences".

As His Holiness pointed out, the conference in Moscow is attended by leading theologians from various countries, representatives of not only the Russian Orthodox Church but also other Local Churches. "I hope that their voice will be also heard there wh ere the schism is broadening and deepening today", His Holiness said, "Let us try to stop him by joint efforts, as St. Basil the Great, said, "in order to bring so often divided Churches to unity again". His Holiness expressed a hope that the results of the conference will enliven the theological dialogue and will be of use to all those who are interested in preserving the Orthodox teaching and the canonical order.

"I would like to point out to the importance of this conference because the forthcoming Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church is to give an assessment to what we see today in the Orthodox world, and if it pleases the Holy Spirit and the assembled hierarchs, to make a decision concerning the position of our Church with regard to Constantinople's actions", His Holiness stressed.

The meeting continued with a plenary paper presented by the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, rector of Ss. Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate and Doctoral Studies and chairman of the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk.

Participating in the discussion on the theme on the agenda are archpastors, clergy and laity - members of the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission; representatives of theological schools of the Russian Orthodox Church; faculty of higher education institutions, clergy from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and guests from Local Orthodox Churches.

Among those present are Patriarchal Vicar of the Metropolis of Moscow Metropolitan Juvenaly of Krutitsy and Kolomna; chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan Dionisy of Voskresensk; Metropolitan Isidor of Smolensk and Dorogobuzh, Metropolitan Ambrose of Tver and Kashin; DECR vice-chairman Archbishop Leonid of Vladikavkaz and Alania; Archbishop Matfey of Yegoryevsk; Archbishop Aksiy of Podolsk and Lubertsy; Bishop Nikolay of Balashikha and Orekhovo-Zuevo; rector of Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary Bishop Feodorit of Zvenigorod; deputy chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate Bishop Savva of Zelenograd; chairman of the Synodal Department for Youth Bishop Seraphim of Istra; Bishop Peter of Lukhovtsy; Bishop Feofilakt of Mytishchi; head of the Moscow Patriarchate Administrative Secretariat Bishop Foma of Odintsovo and Krasnogorsk; rector of St. Petersburg Theological Academy and Seminary Bishop Siluan of Petergof; Bishops Foma of Sergiev Posad and Dmitrov, Constantine of Zaraisk, Paramon of Naro-Fominsk, Porfiry of Ezersk, Roman of

Serpukhov.

Taking part in the conference remotely are Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus Metropolitan Veniamin of Minsk and Slutsk, Metropolitan Alexander of Riga and All Latvia; Metropolitan Nikoloz of Akhalkalaki and Kumurdo (Georgian Orthodox Church); hierarchs of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus - Metropolitan Nikiforos of Kykkos and Tillyria and Metropolitan Isaiah of Tamassos and Oreini, Metropolitan Augustine of Belaya Tserkov and Boguslavsk, Metropolitan Sergiy of Voronezh and Liski, Metropolitan Andrew of Gori and Ateni (Georgian Orthodox Church), chairman of the Synodal Department for Monasteries and Monkhood Metropolitan Feognost of Kashira; Metropolitan George of Nizhniy Novgorod and Arzamas; Metropolitan Zinovy of Saransk and Mordovia; Archbishop Seraphim of Kaliningrad and Baltijsk, administrator of the diocese of Berlin and Germany Archbishop Tikhon of Ruza, Archbishop Theodosius of Sebastia (Orthodox Church of Jerusalem), Bishop Irinej of Bac (Serbian Orthodox Church), rector of Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary Bishop Silvestr of Belgorod, Bishop Seraphim of Bobruisk and Bykhov; Bishop Veniamin of Romanovo-Borisoglebsk, chairman of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law-Enforcement Bishop Savvaty of Bronnitsy; Bishops Mitrofan of Gatchina and Luga, Augustine of Gorodetz and Vetluga, Anthony of Grodno and Volovysk, and Herman of Sochi and Tuapse.

The Conference will last until September 17.

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