Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church

On 17th October 2019, during a session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, a statement was adopted concerning the situation that arose in the Greek Orthodox Church after it convened on 12th October 2019 the extraordinary Council of Hierarchs on the Ukrainian church issue (Minutes No. 125).

Members of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church have acquainted themselves with the published in the mass media documents of the extraordinary Council of Hierarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church held on 12th October 2019, in particular, with the communiqué of the Council and the report of His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece entitled “Autocephaly of the Church of Ukraine” containing a suggestion “to recognize… the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of the independent Republic of Ukraine.”

As the self-governing Ukrainian Orthodox Church led by Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine with her ninety-five hierarchs, over twelve thousand parishes, over two hundred and fifty monasteries and convents and tens of millions of believers is in canonical unity with the Russian Orthodox Church and never asked for any autocephaly, it is evident that the point at issue is the recognition of schismatic communities in the country. Earlier, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople on several occasions announced his recognition of Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine as the sole canonical Primate of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine (the last statement was made in public at the Synaxis of the Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches in January 2016). Yet, in the end of 2018 Patriarch Bartholomew betrayed his earlier statements and, lacking canonical powers, “restored in the rank” without repentance and renunciation of schism those who had been deposed, anathematized or had neither canonical consecration nor even formal apostolic succession. A man who was “consecrated” by the defrocked and anathematized Filaret, former metropolitan of Kiev, has become the head of the newly created structure. Filaret was “restored” in his “episcopal dignity” by the Patriarch of Constantinople, but soon after abandoned the newly established “church” and declared the re-establishment of his former schismatic community which he calls “The Kiev Patriarchate.”

The Russian Orthodox Church repeatedly informed the supreme authorities of the Greek Orthodox Church about the difficult situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church after the anticanonical legalization of the Ukrainian schism by Constantinople, about violence and persecution against its faithful children by the former authorities of Ukraine. On 9th October 2019, several days before the aforementioned extraordinary Council of Hierarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All

Russia sent a fraternal letter to His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece with an appeal to refrain from unilateral actions and from taking “premature decisions until the Holy Spirit gathers Primates of all Holy Churches of God and makes them wise in the name of the entire Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church to find a common decision that will be acceptable to everyone and serve to overcome the present crisis.”

It is regrettable that His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos based the necessity of a hasty and unilateral recognition of the uncanonical schismatic community on a number of erroneous and false arguments that were repeatedly refuted not only by bishops, scholars and theologians of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also by many prominent archpastors, pastors and theologians of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The assertion of His Beatitude Ieronymos that “the Orthodox Church of Ukraine… has always remained in the canonical church jurisdiction of the Mother Church – the Ecumenical Patriarchate” does not correspond to reality. In 1686 the Metropolis of Kiev was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate by the charters of His Holiness Patriarch Dionysius of Constantinople and the Holy Synod of the Church of Constantinople. For over three hundred years the canonical jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate over the Metropolis of Kiev has been recognized by the entire Orthodox world, including the Greek Orthodox Church. In addition, according to the holy canons of the Church, the period of limitation of disputes over territorial jurisdiction does not exceed thirty years (Sixth Ecumenical Council, canon 25).

All these facts were ignored by the two Commissions of the Greek Orthodox Church that were charged with examining the Ukrainian church issue. According to Metropolitan Seraphim of Kythira and Antikythera, these Commissions in their conclusions “overlook over three hundred years of the living tradition of dependence of the Metropolis of Kiev and All Ukraine on the Moscow Patriarchate. These realities were present in all calendars of the Church of Greece till this year. It is possible that the Commissions also overlook the fact that Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople in his patriarchal letters dated 1992 and 1997 recognized the canonical jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate over the Metropolis of Kiev and respected canonical punishments imposed on the defrocked schismatic clerics, now cleared and restored in their rank.”

The assertion of His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos that “due to the absence of the Moscow Patriarchate at the Council of Crete in 2016 there was no opportunity to discuss the issue of autocephaly” does not correspond to reality, too. In sober fact, the topic of autocephaly was excluded from the agenda of the Council much earlier at Patriarch Bartholomew’s insistence. The reason has become clear now. Representatives of all Local Orthodox Churches at the meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission in 1993 and 2009 agreed upon the order of granting autocephaly

which presupposes: a) consent of the Local Council of the kyriarchal Mother Church for the autocephaly of its part; b) the Ecumenical Patriarch's ascertainment of consensus among all Local Orthodox Churches expressed by the unanimity of their Councils; c) on the basis of the consent of the Mother Church and pan-Orthodox consensus the official proclamation of the autocephaly by issuing a Tomos which "is signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch and is witnessed by the signatures of their Beatitudes Primates of the Holy Autocephalous Churches invited for this purpose by the Ecumenical Patriarch." As to the last point, only the order of signing a Tomos was not agreed upon, but it does not annul the achieved agreements on other points. At the Synaxises of the Primates in 2014 and 2016 the delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate and representatives of some other fraternal Churches insisted on putting the topic of autocephaly on the agenda of the Council. The Russian Church finally agreed to take off this topic from the Council's agenda only after January 2016, when Patriarch Bartholomew in the presence of other Primates gave his assurances that the Holy Church of Constantinople had no intention to undertake any action pertaining to the church life in Ukraine either at the Great and Holy Council or after the Council.

The arguments put forward in the report of His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos and refuted earlier on repeated occasions accord to the letter with the position of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Yet, doubts arise whether the plenitude of the Greek Orthodox Church shares them. Metropolitan Seraphim of Kythira testified to the lack of unanimity among the hierarchs of the Church of Greece on the issue in question, noting that the voice of those who disagreed with the recognition of the Ukrainian schism fell on deaf ears: "First the white-haired and eminently respectable Metropolitans Seraphim of Karystia and Germanos of Ilias took the floor and with profound wisdom and intelligence talked about this crucial issue, admitting that the Ecumenical Patriarch has the canonical right to grant autocephaly on certain conditions, but as the situation at present is critical, extraordinary caution and intensive study of this complicated problem are needed without any haste. In the same vein were presentations of the Most Reverend Metropolitans Daniel of Caesarea, Nicholas of Mesogaia, Seraphim of Piraeus… and mine. The Most Reverend Metropolitans Andreas of Dryinoupolis and Kosmas of Aitolia did not take the floor but joined the hierarchs who had spoken earlier. The Most Reverend Metropolitans Symeon of New Smyrna and Nektarios of Kerkyra were absent, but presented their position in the written form. They treated this serious Ukrainian issue with the same sentiments and from the same point of view."

In his letter to the Council of Hierarchs and His Beatitude the Chairman, Metropolitan Symeon of New Smyrna notes that the granting of autocephaly to Ukraine under the conditions in which it was provided "bears no resemblance to the other autocephalies that were previously granted" by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. He emphasizes that "the quick recognition… of the schismatics and of the so-called 'self-consecrated' – bypassing the canonical local Church, as well as the Moscow Patriarchate, by whom the schismatics were condemned – and the granting of autocephaly to the new ecclesiastical structure raise reasonable questions and cause reactions." He also points out the canonically unacceptable fact of

existence of “two parallel local Churches” in Ukraine and the second split within “the new ecclesiastical structure that received autocephaly.” He speaks directly about the interest of the great geopolitical powers in the rushed granting of “autocephaly” to the schismatics. Comparing the current state of the Orthodoxy to the events of the Great Schism of 1054, he calls upon the hierarchs “not to rush to take a position.” “A hasty and ‘off the cuff’ treatment of the issue,” Metropolitan Symeon writes, “will expose us and involve our Church in adventures. It is a mistake to believe that such an approach to the issue constitutes support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate.”

Metropolitan Nektarios of Kerkyra, who was not able to attend the extraordinary Council of Hierarchs of his Church, addressed the Council with a letter, calling upon “to postpone a decision.” He notes that “it is not the right time to take a decision on this thorny issue, and because geopolitical conditions in the wider region are not ideal… any decision is likely to cause difficulties in our country.” He also calls upon the Greek Church to “take a mediating role” in order to initiate a dialogue between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Moscow Patriarchate.

Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus, known as a canon law expert, presented to the Council a comprehensive study, in which he convincingly refuted the arguments put forward in the report of the Primate of the Greek Church, and in his oral statements expressed strong criticism over the so-called “unification council” of the schismatics. He emphasized that the “so-called ‘unification council’ is invalid, for it consisted of laypeople, and therefore the granting of the autocephalous status to this non-existent ‘church’ structure is also invalid.” He noted that all the attempts to justify this “canonical lawlessness” on the grounds of anomalous canonical practice, “by reference to the Ottoman captivity of the Church” and to the difficult period when a number of Local Churches directly depended on the Patriarchate of Constantinople, “pass over in silence the canonical ecclesiastical order of the Holy Ecumenical Councils.” “I requested the Holy Synod of the Greek Church,” Metropolitan Seraphim writes, “to convene a Pan-Orthodox Council with the view of resolving this most complex issue which is intertwined, regrettably, with geopolitics and even geostrategy affecting all Primates of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches. Concurrently, I reproached the Synodal Commission for Inter-Orthodox and Inter-Christian Relations for not presenting to the Permanent Holy Synod and His Beatitude the Chairman of the Hierarchy of the Greek Church either a report on the opinions of other Autocephalous Orthodox Churches on this matter or an assessment of possible consequences for the unity of the Church of the severance of communion by the Russian Church and the recognition by it of the old calendarists in Greece. At the same time, I responded to the chairman of the Commission for Doctrinal and Nomocanonical Matters that Metropolitan Onufry had no opportunity to attend the so-called ‘unification council’ just like His Beatitude the Archbishop of Athens could not serve together with the self-proclaimed ‘Archbishop of Athens’, Parthenios Vezireas – a deposed deacon of the Greek Church.”

The communiqué of the extraordinary Council of Hierarchs informed of the decision taken following the discussion of this report. However, it remains unclear who exactly took this decision and in what form. A whole number of authoritative hierarchs drew the Council's attention to the critical state of the world Orthodoxy, to the need for extreme caution and thorough examination of the problem – without any haste and external pressure. Several metropolitans, including those not present at the Council, asked the Council in writing to postpone a decision.

Decisions of the Council of Hierarchs in the Greek Church are taken by a vote of all participants. However, either on the issue of recognition of the Ukrainian uncanonical communities, or on the issue of approval of the decisions of the Permanent Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church on Ukraine, the voting of the episcopate did not take place. For instance, Metropolitan Seraphim of Kythira made the following statement: "As it is known, decisions in our Church are taken by a vote: either by raising a hand, or by an open or secret vote, or by questioning all the participants in the assembly. Perhaps, enough votes would be cast in favour of autocephaly, but there would also be many of those taking the opposite point of view, as well as those who by their silence would join the latter."

No official document signed by the Greek archpastors which can be regarded as an expression of the common conciliar decision of the Local Church is publicly available. Moreover, spread rather quickly was the news alleging that the Greek Orthodox Church had recognized the Ukrainian autocephaly, which does not conform either to the text of the communiqué or to the position of many participants in the Council. Serious concerns arise that the conciliar method of decision-making, sanctified by the words of the holy apostles – "good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Act 15:28) – and by the thousand-year history of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, in this case has been violated.

In the event that the Ukrainian schism will really be recognized by the Greek Orthodox Church or its Primate – in the form of con-celebration, liturgical commemoration of the leader of the schism or by sending official letters to him – it will be a sad indication of exacerbation of the division in the family of the Local Orthodox Churches. The full responsibility for this division will lie, first and foremost, with Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and with those external political forces, in whose interests the Ukrainian schism was "legalized." Instead of admitting his mistake and trying to correct it by the means of a pan-Orthodox discussion, Patriarch Bartholomew blocked any negotiation initiatives on this matter and for a year, according to multiple sources, exerted unprecedented pressure on hierarchs of the Greek Church, demanding that they recognize the schismatics. On numerous occasions he spoke of the recognition of the uncanonical false hierarchs in Ukraine by the Greek Church as if the matter was already settled, as if it would not be an independent decision of the autocephalous Orthodox Church. The situation of the Greek Church, which is substantially restricted in its autocephalous organization, is aggravated because of the dual jurisdiction of a considerable part of its episcopate which is canonically dependent on Constantinople: for instance, circular letters were sent to these hierarchs from the

Patriarchate of Constantinople, urging them to immediately recognize the newly created pseudo-church structure. Those who found the courage to openly denounce the errors of the Patriarch of Constantinople and debate with him, received threats, including those of disciplinary measures, and were accused of betrayal and lack of patriotism.

It is regrettable that in such a way the historical merits of the Greek people in spreading the Orthodoxy are being frittered away in exchange for momentary political benefits and support for the geopolitical interests alien to the Church. Yet, these speculations in national sentiments will be a poor success. They will fail to undermine the unity of our faith bought at the cost of blood of the new martyrs and confessors of our Churches. They will not shatter the unity of our ascetic tradition built up by numerous venerable fathers and zealots. They will not destroy the centuries-old friendship between the Greek and Slavic peoples bought at the cost of blood of the Russian soldiers and strengthened in the joint fight for the freedom of the brotherly Greek people.

Treasuring prayerful communion with our brothers in the Greek Orthodox Church, we will preserve with it the living prayerful, canonical and Eucharistic ties – through all those archpastors and pastors who have already spoken or will speak in future against the recognition of the Ukrainian schism, who will not stain their name by con-celebrating with the schismatic false hierarchs, but will show an example of Christian fortitude and firmness in defending the truth of Christ. May the Lord strengthen them, like confessors, in this heroic deed by the prayers of Saints Mark of Ephesus, Gregory Palamas, Maximus the Confessor, and all the Greek saints who were and are venerated in the Holy Rus'.

At the same time, we remember that the holy canons of the Church condemn those who enter in prayerful communion and con-celebration with the deposed and excommunicated (Apostolic Canons 10,11,12; First Ecumenical Council, canon 5; Council of Antioch, canon 2; etc.). In view of this we sever prayerful and Eucharist communion with whose hierarchs of the Greek Church who have entered or will enter in such communion with representatives of the Ukrainian uncanonical schismatic groups. We also do not give our blessing to undertaking pilgrimages to the dioceses governed by the aforementioned hierarchs. The relevant information will be widely spread among pilgrimage and tourism organizations in the countries within the canonical territory of our Church.

The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church authorizes His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia to cease the commemoration of the name of His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece in the diptychs in the event that the Primate of the Greek Church will begin to commemorate the head of one of the Ukrainian schismatic groups during divine services or will take other actions indicating his recognition of the Ukrainian church schism.

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