



ULBS

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THE HOLY AND THE GREAT COUNCIL OF THE
ORTHODOX CHURCH: PREPARATION,
DEVELOPMENT, RECEPTION

Summary

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The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church took place in Crete, between June 16-26, 2016. It was an event long-awaited by the entire Orthodox world, but also by the rest of the Christians. The timing of the convening of this council was so long-awaited due to the long period during which it was prepared, but also because important results were expected for the Orthodox Church following this Council.

Since the nineteenth century, more and more local Orthodox Churches have acquired autocephaly, this new status being acquired somewhat naturally after the establishment of the new modern states. In this context, the need for meetings and discussions between the representatives of all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches began to be felt more and more strongly, as a result of which unitary decisions could be taken for the entire Orthodox Church. For these decisions to receive pan-Orthodox authority, a meeting was needed between representatives of all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, a meeting in which to discuss the most important issues the Orthodox Church is facing.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, concrete steps began to prepare for such a meeting, which was intended to be in turn the Ecumenical Council, the Pan-Orthodox Council or the Holy and Great Council. The different social and political conditions in which the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches had to carry out their mission led to the prolongation of the preparation of the Holy and Great Council throughout the twentieth century and even in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The diversity of problems faced by the Orthodox Churches and the diversity of solutions to these problems, as well as differing views on some issues, led to more difficult to establish the issues to be discussed at the Holy and Great Council and to establish a consensus on them.

We considered it appropriate that the first chapter begins with some theoretical aspects related to synodality and its manifestation throughout history in the Church. Being a model of the communion of intratrinitarian love, the synodality was a basic principle of the functioning of the Church, since the apostolic period, being considered a commandment left by the Savior. At the same point of my paper, a terminological excursion appears in connection with this principle, being presented several points of view of some Romanian and foreign theologians. According to most opinions, the term catholicity is the most appropriate to use when talking about the attributes of the Church. The use of this term was abandoned, especially in the Churches of Slavic origin, but also in the Romanian Orthodox Church so as not to be

confused with the western part of Christianity. Catholicity refers to the “agreement with the whole”, and this whole can be manifested in the Church only through synodality, a synodality understood in the form of a collaboration between bishops, priests and believers.

The principle of synodality was put into practice with the Apostolic Council, being then applied continuously throughout the history of the Church of Christ. The local councils followed the history of the Apostolic Council, and in the fourth century, the synodality was taken to the highest level by the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council. Until the 8th century, the seven Ecumenical Councils were convened, as well as other local Councils. After 787, no Councils were convened to have the status of Ecumenical Council, but some of them were of great significance to the entire Church. Some of these were mentioned in the first chapter, such as the councils of Patriarch Photius of Constantinople, then, after the Great Schism of 1054, the councils during the time of St. Gregory Palamas, following which the dogma of uncreated energies was defined. The councils organized in the seventeenth century to combat the proselytizing actions of the Protestants are in line with the councils important for the Orthodox Church.

The idea of convening a council to bring together all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches and its concrete preparation was discussed in the second part of the first chapter. This idea was discussed for the first time, in a meeting organized with the participation of representatives of several Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, at the Inter-Orthodox Conference in Constantinople in 1923. Although it could not be organized as early as proposed, the debates on this topic continued in the following years. During the inter-Orthodox meetings in the first half of the twentieth century, various topics were proposed that were considered appropriate to be placed on the agenda of a council that had not been established exactly whether it was to be Ecumenical, pan-Orthodox or Holy and Great Council. The inter-Orthodox meetings convened especially for the discussion of this topic began in 1961 with the Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes, during which a thick list of topics proposed for debate at the next council was established. The other two Pan-Orthodox Conferences in Rhodes in 1963 and 1964 focused on the Orthodox Church's relations with Roman Catholics and other Christians. In 1968, the agenda of the future council and other procedures for the proper evolution of its preparations were discussed again at the Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambésy.

Although things seemed to be going relatively fast in terms of the preparation of the council, this was not the case. This was followed by a very long period of almost five decades, marked by the convening of five Pre-Orthodox Pan-Orthodox Conferences in which

ten topics were established to be placed on the agenda of the future Holy and Great Council, a name also established during these conferences.

The ten topics extracted from the many topics proposed at the Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes in 1961 were:

1. The Orthodox Diaspora;
2. Autocephaly and how it should be proclaimed;
3. Autonomy and how it should be proclaimed;
4. Diptychs;
5. The problem of the new calendar;
6. Impediments to marriage;
7. Re-adaptation of church prescriptions regarding fasting;
8. The relations of the Orthodox Churches with the rest of the Christian world;
9. Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement;
10. The contribution of the local Orthodox Churches to the realization of the Christian

ideals of peace, freedom, fraternity, and love between peoples and the suppression of racial discrimination.

The five Pre-Orthodox Pan-Orthodox Conferences discussed most of the topics mentioned, but not all of them were able to reach a consensus among all fourteen Autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

In recent years, before the convening of the Council, several meetings of commissions set up specifically for the preparation of the council took place. This preparatory period was also marked by a novelty regarding the existing bodies within the Orthodox Church. This novelty was represented by the Synaxes of the Primate of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2008, 2014 and 2016, in which the topics to be discussed at the council were discussed again.

Although the 2016 Synaxis did not meet unanimity on some of the documents proposed for the council's agenda, and these issues were not resolved until the summer of 2016 as promised, the council was opened with the participation of ten Autocephalous Orthodox Churches of a total of fourteen. Although it was not the only cause, the Patriarchate of Antioch justified the absence from the council by referring to the canonical dispute between it and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem over Qatar. Other reasons invoked were those related to the content of some documents, especially the documents related to "The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the whole Christian World" and "The Holy Sacrament of Marriage and the Impediments to It".

Following the announcement made by the Patriarchate of Antioch, other similar reactions followed from the Patriarchates of Georgia, Bulgaria and Moscow, claiming, first, that the absence of the Patriarchate of Antioch from the council would undermine the unity of the Orthodox Church and the impossibility of unanimity, a basic objective of the council, also provided in the Regulation on the organization and functioning of the Holy and Great Council. The dissatisfaction of the Georgian Orthodox Church with the order in diptychs was another reason given by this Church for not participating in the council, while the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was dissatisfied with issues related to some documents without mentioning exactly what documents are those.

However, the ten delegations of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches approved a number of six documents during the council meetings and a Message and an Encyclical of the Council. The six documents discussed and approved by the council were:

1. The importance of fasting and its observance today;
2. The relations of the Orthodox Church with the whole Christian world;
3. Autonomy and its mode of proclamation;
4. The Orthodox Diaspora;
5. The Holy Sacrament of Marriage and the impediments to it;
6. The mission of the Church in the contemporary world.

Changes can be observed after this council, especially in the documents that created some divergences also in the preparatory period for the council, being also places where the observations made by the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches absent from these council meetings were taken into account. Given that not all observations and requests for amendments to the council's documents were taken into account, even if they came from some delegations present, and some changes requested in the preparatory period were applied by some of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches absent from the council, the four Autocephalous Orthodox Churches have fewer reasons not to accept the documents. Moreover, the Russian and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches signed all the documents at the 2016 Synaxis, some of which were only improved after the council, but for the most part, the final documents have the same content as the preparatory ones from January 2016.

In the second chapter, we highlighted the differences between the final documents approved after the Holy and Great Council and the preparatory ones. Having information on the meetings in which various topics were discussed and drawing a parallel between the final and preparatory documents, we considered that an image could be created as close as possible

to reality, in the context in which the minutes of this council were published by the time this study was completed.

The documents “The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today” and “Autonomy and Its Mode of Proclamation” remained, even after the Holy and Great Council, almost entirely the same in form as the one acquired during the preparatory period. Some aspects of the document “Orthodox Diaspora” have been modified in the sense that they have been updated. Thus, a very important part of this document related to the Rules of Procedure of the Episcopal Assemblies of the Orthodox Diaspora has been updated and other areas of the globe in which to establish Episcopal Assemblies are provided. This document also contains the rules according to which these bodies are considered provisional until a solution is found that is perfectly canonical.

As for the other three documents, the changes they underwent during the Holy and Great Council were more significant. Therefore, the document “The Holy Sacrament of Marriage and the Impediments to It” has been improved by clarifying that the Holy Sacrament of the Priesthood does not impede marriage but, according to Tradition, after ordination the Holy Sacrament of Marriage can not be received. Although not all requests to amend this document from the Georgian Orthodox Church were accepted, it was important to emphasize the idea that marriages between Orthodox and heterodox are non-canonical, a proposal from this Church before the council. However, another added article gives responsibility to each Autocephalous Orthodox Church regarding the application of the economy in such marriages.

The document “The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World” was only enriched in the Holy and Great Council, while the document “The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Whole Christian World” was most intensely discussed, this conclusion resulting from the numerous changes, unlike the preparatory one. Given the unrest and pressure before the council, discussions on this document focused largely on the places where other Christian denominations received the “Church” status and attempts were made to reformulate these passages. However, the expression according to which the Orthodox Church would “recognize the existence” of other churches and Christian denominations with the expression “accept their historical name” has been changed. Moreover, the idea that the Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church has been repeatedly emphasized during the Holy and Great Council.

Although the Message and the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council were documents drawn up during the council or very shortly before, they are also dealt with briefly in the second chapter.

Much of the reactions of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches to the Holy and Great Council were mentioned in the third chapter. The four Autocephalous Orthodox Churches absent from the meetings of the Council of Crete had rapid and sustained reactions in the same tone as those before the council. As was natural, the other ten Orthodox Churches that responded to the convocation and sent delegations to the council had very positive reactions to the debates and documents approved during the council. However, some voices have also been raised within the ten Churches that have challenged certain aspects of the council. Such disturbances are known in the Greek Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Ierotheos Vlachos of Nafpaktos, although a participant in the council, disputed some of the wording of the documents. Other disorders also appeared in the Romanian Orthodox Church, disorders caused or sustained by some monks who were supposed to belong to Mount Athos. In the Romanian Orthodox Church, these disorders also led to defrocking in several dioceses. The main problem claimed by the contestants of the council would be the granting to other Christian denominations the title of “Churches”, this expression, according to the councils of Crete, being the only one that refers to the historical name and not to the recognition of another church next to the Orthodox Church, “the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic”.

The analyzes made by the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches and the documents issued by their Holy Councils regarding the Holy and Great Council represent an important part of what we call the reception of the council.

Among the Orthodox Churches absent from this council, the Patriarchate of Antioch had the first reaction regarding its documents and development. First of all, a breach of the principle of unanimity was alleged, which was a basic principle in the Rules of Procedure of the Holy and Great Council. In this sense, the Church of Antioch did not even recognize the status of Pan-Orthodox Conference of this meeting, much less the status of council. Like the other three Autocephalous Orthodox Churches absent from the council, the Patriarchate of Antioch does not consider the documents approved in Crete mandatory.

We could say that the reaction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria towards the Holy and Great Council is at the opposite pole from that of the Patriarchate of Antioch. Thus, the Patriarchate of Alexandria considered this council as a good example of Orthodox unity, thanking the Ecumenical Patriarch and the other Primates present at the meetings of the council for all the efforts made to convene and conduct this event. It was equally appreciated the possibility given to each Orthodox Church to apply the principle of economy according to the social situation in each territory, country or continent.

A more balanced reaction came from the Romanian Orthodox Church, which acknowledged that the unity of the Orthodox Church was damaged at this council by the absence of the four Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, while emphasizing the idea that the documents approved by the council are not dogmas of the Orthodox Church and there are no documents that can no longer undergo some changes if, by consensus, this is decided. Moreover, the Romanian Orthodox Church does not share the opinion of the Cypriot Orthodox Church that the Holy and Great Council of 2016 had all the characteristics of an Ecumenical Council, nor the opinion of the Orthodox Church of Antioch that the Cretan Council cannot even have the status of a Panorthodox Conference. Recognizing some disadvantages, the Romanian Orthodox Church recognizes the status of Saint and Great of this council, but with the specification that it can be followed by other events of this kind, with even more favourable results.

Being a recent event from a historical point of view and, as we know from the examples given by the Ecumenical Councils, the reception of a council is a longer process, we consider that it is not possible to discuss a conclusion of this process until now, nor the possibility to capture all the reactions to the council. However, in the third chapter, we have tried to present the above information in a way that is as comprehensive as possible.

In the second part of chapter three, we tried to make a presentation of two problems that arose within the Orthodox Church. Although the jurisdictional issue between the Patriarchate of Antioch and Jerusalem was raised before the Holy and Great Councils, we considered it appropriate to be introduced in the part related to the reception of the council because, to date, it is an issue unsolved or in the process of being resolved. This dispute greatly affected or, in some opinions, decisively affected the smooth running of the Holy and Great Council. Unfortunately, until this period the canonical dispute between the Patriarchate of Antioch and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has not been fully resolved. Important steps were taken in this regard, the two Primates meeting and announcing that a consensus had been reached, but this consensus did not lead to the participation of a delegation from the Patriarchate of Antioch in the meeting in Amman, organized by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, nor the modification of the title of Archbishop Macarius of Qatar by the Jerusalemite side, according to the official website of this patriarchate.

The differences of opinion between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate deepened after the Holy and Great Council. Although the Russian Orthodox Church did not send its delegation to Crete, after the end of this event they did not break the Eucharistic communion with any of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches present at the

council. The split between the two patriarchates occurred when the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued a Tomos of autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, although the Metropolitan Church of Kyiv canonically belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the latter opposed this action, repeatedly asking the Ecumenical Patriarchate to avoid this decision and not recognizing the document issued in Constantinople.

At present, the Moscow Patriarchate has no Eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the situation being further complicated, mainly because each of the parties presents valid canonical arguments, from their point of view, to support the decisions. The fears of the Moscow Patriarchate, recently presented, are that this gesture of the Ecumenical Patriarchate towards the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would be just a precedent, and the same procedure will be applied to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, especially after the statements made by the President of this country on this subject.