

## **The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church 2016**

A “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” will convene on June 16, 2016 and conclude on June 27, 2016.

There are many rumors and much speculation about what this “Holy and Great Council” will mean.

What follow are some brief clarifications on basic questions surrounding the council.

### **What issues are under consideration?**

The following six issues, out of very many that were suggested and studied in fifty years of pre-conciliar meetings, were officially approved for referral to, and adoption by, the Holy and Great Council (click on the topics to be redirected to the approved statements that will be discussed and proposed for adoption):

1. The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Contemporary World
2. The Orthodox Diaspora
3. Autonomy and its Manner of Proclamation
4. The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments
5. The Significance of Fasting and its Application Today
6. Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World.

## **How were the topics selected?**

These topics were unanimously selected by the Primate of the fourteen Orthodox Autocephalous Churches. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew convened a Synaxis of these Primate, or their representatives, at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, Geneva, Switzerland from January 21 to 28, 2016.

The agenda of this synaxis (gathering) was to set a June date and to approve the topics that would be referred to the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church.

All of the primates attended the synaxis in person with three exceptions. Patriarch John X of Antioch and Metropolitan Sawa of Poland were unable to attend due to health reasons, and Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece was absent for personal reasons. Nonetheless, all three were represented by officially authorized delegates.

Synaxis sessions were held in the apostolic spirit of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4.15), in harmony and understanding. Moreover, on Sunday, January 24, 2016, the Ecumenical Patriarch the heads of the delegations (with the exception of the Patriarchate of Antioch) concelebrated at the Divine Liturgy held at the Church of Saint Paul in the Orthodox Centre.

The primates and representatives from the Autocephalous Churches studied the proposed topics, and unanimously approved those six cited above which will be referred to the Holy and Great Council.

## **Were any topics rejected?**

Yes. Ten topics were discussed at the February 2016 Synaxis in Chambésy. Of these six were unanimously referred to the Holy and Great Council, and four were not. The four rejected topics were:

1. The manner in which Autocephaly is assigned. The substance of this topic is reflected in the topic, Autonomy and its Manner of Proclamation.
2. The Diptychs. This is the order of the Autocephalous Churches, according to honor and ranking, by which the Primate are commemorated. The order of the Churches may change. (For example, the Church of Cyprus, although it is one of the most ancient and was recognized by the Third Ecumenical Synod in Ephesus in AD 431, is tenth in the order, having been surpassed by Patriarchates, which have been granted Autocephaly in recent times by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and not by an Ecumenical Synod.) There was no unanimity among the primates who met in Chambésy on this issue, so the topic was deferred.
3. The issue of a common Calendar. The overwhelming majority of Orthodox Christians worldwide use the traditional Julian Calendar, which has been the consistent practice of the Church since the time of Christ. These include the Orthodox Churches in the Patriarchate of Russia and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. A minority of Orthodox Christians, however, have adopted the so-called Revised Julian Calendar. These include the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Patriarchate of Alexandria, and the Churches of Cyprus, Greece, and Albania. The Synod was urged to adopt a common practice, but the Church of Russia asserted that it would remain on the historic Julian calendar

regardless of what the Holy and Great Council might say, so this topic was also deferred.

4. The contribution of local Orthodox Churches in the prevalence of Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love among people and removing racial and other discrimination. The substance of this topic was already reflected in the topic, The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Contemporary World.

### **Where will the Holy and Great Council be held?**

The Council will be held at the Orthodox Academy of Crete from 16 to 27 June 2016.

The decision to convene the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in Crete, rather than at the headquarters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople as originally proposed, was dictated by “exceptional objective circumstances” (i.e. by the recent Russo-Turkish crisis) which basically prevents the Patriarch of Moscow, Kyrill, and his delegation from visiting the City of Constantinople.

This is also why the February 2016 Synaxis met in Geneva and not at the Phanar, as had been originally planned.

## **Will the Great Council unite the Orthodox Church with the Western heterodox (i.e., the Roman Catholic and Protestant) churches?**

Not in the least.

## **Is the Great Council an Ecumenical Council?**

In a single word: "No."

The forthcoming Holy and Great Council is certainly a continuation of the early ecumenical councils of the first Christian millennium, and also of the later "great" or "greater" councils of the second millennium. Around a dozen or so of these latter councils have convened through the centuries following the "great schism" of AD 1054 to resolve issues of doctrinal, canonical or administrative character.

There is nonetheless something very unique about this council. This is the first time in the history of Christendom that a council of ancient churches claiming Apostolic succession has included so many individual and independent (autocephalous and national) Churches. The early ecumenical councils of the first millennium assembled the five Churches of the "Pentarchy" (the Patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem). The later great councils convened with fewer churches, and of course without Rome which remains in heresy and schism.

The forthcoming Great Council that will convene in Crete this June will assemble each of the fourteen canonical Orthodox churches from all over the world. These include the ancient Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria,

Antioch and Jerusalem; the modern Patriarchates of Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia; as well as the Archdiocesan churches of Cyprus, Greece, Albania, Poland, and the Czech Lands and Slovakia.

### **What Constitutes an “Ecumenical” Council?**

For Orthodox Christians, there hasn't been an Ecumenical Council since AD 787. The Orthodox believe that it is the whole church (the Orthodox Oikoumene) that must convene for a council to be considered ecumenical.

Tragically, the “Latin” (or “Western”) Church has remained separated since the eleventh century from the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of the First Millennium that was both Orthodox (right-believing and right-worshipping) and Catholic (universal). Sadly, this “Roman” Catholic Church subsequently splintered into tens of thousands of independent denominations since the sixteenth-century attempt at a Protestant “Reformation.”

### **Why aren't Roman Catholic and Protestant churches participating in the Great Council?**

Any hope or expectation of an “ecumenical” gathering, comprising all Christians is, simply put, not realistically possible in any way whatsoever.

This is unfortunate, but the Latin (or “Western”) Church (which comprises the Roman Catholic Church and her Protestant denominations) remains in the clutches of three principal heresies: the Filioque, Papal Primacy, and Created Grace. An Ecumenical Council of all Christendom, would inevitably be

consistent with the faith of the first millennium during which there was only one, undivided Christian Church and would perforce denounce these dogmatic heresies.

The first heresy, that of the Filioque, is a Pneumatological (dealing with the Holy Spirit) and Trinitarian heresy. It refutes the Orthodox and Catholic doctrine of the Holy Trinity, inasmuch as it maintains that the Holy Spirit proceeds “also from the Son.” Thus, it destroys the monarchy within the Holy Trinity and introduces a dyarchy.

Worsening the situation is the reality that many Protestant denominations either deny the doctrine of the Trinity or have a faulty and deficient Trinitarian theology derived from the Filioque heresy.

The second heresy is an ecclesiological heresy pertaining to the doctrine regarding the very nature of the Church and refutes its true, Apostolic character.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the heresy declares the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, to be a sort of super-bishop, without whom the Church does not exist. Thus, it makes ecclesiastical totalitarianism into a dogma, on the basis of which the related heresy of Papal Infallibility was proclaimed as a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in 1870.

Among the Protestants this ecclesiological heresy is expressed in the doctrinal and theological autonomy of virtually every single congregation. Indeed, the notion of personal interpretation of Scripture fundamentally makes “every man a pope.”

The third heresy is soteriological, refuting the Orthodox doctrine of salvation. It asserts that the Divine Grace which illumines and sanctifies us, and leads us to salvation and deification, is created.

Just as the heretic Arius once taught that the Only-Begotten Son and Word of God was created, so also the Roman Catholic Church now teaches that the Divine Energy is created.

Orthodox theology, the doctrine of the first millennium of undivided Christianity, makes a distinction between the Essence of God, which is certainly uncreated and imparticipable, and the Energy of God, which is likewise uncreated and inseparable from the Divine Essence, but is nonetheless participable.

It is this uncreated Divine Essence that sanctifies us, deifies us, and “ontologically bridges the gap between the Uncreated Triune God and created man.” Otherwise, there is no other way that we “might be made participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Believing in created grace, and therefore in the impossibility of man ever having the possibility of being truly united with God, the soteriology of the Western church devolved into “atonement theology.”

The unity of the teaching of the Holy Ecumenical Synods shows forth also the unity of the teaching of the Holy Prophets, the Holy Apostles, and the Holy Fathers of all the ages: the unity of the doctrine and ethos of the Holy Orthodox Church.