

Why the Great Synod of Orthodoxy is necessary today

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Introduction

As is well known, at the fifth Meeting of the Primate of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches to be held since 1992, this one under the chairmanship of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, from 6 to 9 March, 2014, in the church of Saint George in Fanari, Constantinople, a decision was taken that is of momentous importance for the whole of Orthodoxy. It was decided to put flesh and bones onto the vision, which had been gestating for many years, of the convocation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, at Pentecost 2016, unless unforeseen circumstances prevent this. The suggestion was made that, provided permission is granted by the Turkish Ministry of Culture, this should take place in the old Cathedral Church of Saint Irene, where the 2nd Ecumenical Synod took place in 381.

The momentous significance of this Synod for the whole of Orthodoxy is obvious. For the first time in more than a thousand years, representatives of all local Orthodox Churches would gather to discuss and take common decisions on the most important issues which have been facing the Orthodox flock, and, indeed, the whole of humankind, for decades now, because of the unprecedented and pressing challenges we are confronted by in the rapidly changing modern world. From this point of view, the convocation of the Holy and Great Synod is vital, if Orthodoxy is to respond to the challenges of the times, by providing a powerful testimony to its theanthropic presence a modern world which is floundering spiritually, morally and socially.

1. The Holy and Great Synod facing the challenges and problems of the modern world

The challenges and problems which the Orthodox Church is being called upon urgently to face through the Holy and Great Synod by providing a dynamic testimony to its presence in the modern world were described very clearly and eloquently by the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Bartholomew, in his opening address at the Meeting of Primates of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches. In the first place, as the Ecumenical Patriarch noted, the violence which is often perpetrated in the name of religion is a threat to all Christians, without exception, but for the Orthodox in particular, since they are experiencing personal persecution, destruction and desecration of their holy churches, as well as kidnappings and murders of clergy and monastics, even hierarchs of the Church. In the face of this threat to the Orthodox Churches as we know them, we are called, he noted, 'to raise our voices in protest, not as individual persons or Churches, but as the single Orthodox Church, united throughout the world'[i].

Apart from this, there is also the enormous danger to the Orthodox Church, and other Churches, too, of course, posed by the rapid secularization of Christian societies. As we all know, the Church in secularized Christian societies has increasingly been forced into the margins of public life, unfortunately, and the fundamental spiritual and moral principles of the Gospel are gradually being sidelined from people's lives. The Orthodox Church, therefore has a duty, responding in accordance with its own nature and mission, to promote these Gospel values to the modern world with a single voice, irrespective of whether they conflict with important interests or prevailing notions.

Although, as the Ecumenical Patriarch has stressed, the Orthodox Church is characterized also by its attachment to the tradition of the past, this does not mean that it is fossilized and indifferent to the various challenges of history which are particularly acute in our own day. One such challenge arises from the rapid development of technology and the globalization based on this. Despite the beneficial effects as regards the dissemination of knowledge and information, technology constitutes a serious danger because it is a channel for the transfer and imposition of foreign cultural models which threaten to alter the cultural identity of individual peoples. This is another challenge which the Church has to meet. Beyond this threat from technology and linked to it, is the rapid evolution of biotechnology, which involves the emergence of serious bioethical problems related to the technologies of assisted reproduction, transplants of tissues and organs, euthanasia, genetically modified foods and so on, towards which the Church is duty bound to take a responsible stance. Moreover, if we add to all this the daily destruction of our natural environment through our greed and high-maintenance lifestyle (despite warnings from the 'great and the good' of this earth), then the conservation and protection of

God's 'very good' creation is a prime duty of the Church. In fact, given its rich liturgical and ascetic tradition, Orthodoxy is the sole responsible agent, which can contribute to the combatting of this crucial problem in ways not available to other Churches and Confessions^[ii]. In any case, this is why the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as we all know, was, in 1989, the first in the whole of Christendom to promote and highlight the importance of this crucial issue, through a series of significant initiatives, such as the establishment of the beginning of the Indiction (1 September) as the day for the protection of the natural environment, with the late hymnographer Yerasimos from the Small Skete of Saint Ann, being commissioned to produce a service which is sung on that day. Besides this, a whole host of international ecological conferences have been organized, with speakers of world-wide repute. This means that Orthodoxy can and should play a leading role in the conservation of the natural environment.

But apart from the problems outlined above, the Orthodox Church also has a duty to deal sympathetically with the problems arising from the economic crisis and social injustice which, in our own times appear to be a scourge even in the most highly-developed economies. Alas, these problems are not merely economic and social; they are psychological and profoundly existential, because they touch upon the dignity and self-respect of people who have become victims of the global economic establishment. As the Ecumenical Patriarch again notes: 'Our Most Holy Church must listen with attention and sympathy to the problems inflicted on people by the economic structure of the modern world. We are all witnesses of the negative effects on the dignity and survival of the human person from the economic crises which are crushing people in many regions of the world, even in countries supposedly economically 'developed'. Youth unemployment, an increase in

the number of the impoverished, uncertainty about tomorrow- all of these demonstrate that humanity today is a long way from implementing the principles of the Gospel. And we ourselves are not without responsibility since our pastoral care has often been exhausted by concentration on the 'spiritual' and we have forgotten that people also need nourishment and the barest material means in order to live decently, as persons who are images of God'[iii]. For these reasons, the Orthodox Church, faithful to the principles of the Gospels and without giving the impression that it is indifferent to spiritual matters, has a duty to proclaim its interest in the eradication of social injustice and the ascendancy of social justice throughout the world. Moreover, this interest on its part is not foreign to its nature and its spiritual mission in the world, because, in essence, it is a spiritual matter. As Berdyaev so aptly pointed out, giving the Orthodox dimension to the interest in finding solutions to economic and social problems: 'Concern over the life of one's neighbor, even in material and bodily terms, has something spiritual about it Worry about how to guarantee my bread is a material problem. But worry about other people's bread is a spiritual problem'[iv]. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that this position is stressed almost word for word in the Resolution of the Fifth Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Meeting (Chambésy-Geneva, 10-17 October, 2015), which refers to the mission of the Orthodox Church in the modern world[v].

2. The Holy and Great Synod and the unity of Orthodoxy

However, if Orthodoxy is to respond successfully to these challenges and if its discourse is to resonate in the modern world, it will have to present a united and single voice, overcoming any problems which have to do with the specific national features of the individual Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, which

make it seem, to the outside world, fragmented and weak. The system of autocephaly, which is, of course, rooted deeply in the ecclesiological and canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church, should not work to the disadvantage of communion and cooperation between the individual Autocephalous Orthodox Churches in practice. Much less should it prove a cause of competition between them, especially in matters which affect the whole of Orthodoxy.

From this point of view, this Holy and Great Synod is a unique opportunity and also the most appropriate means, from a canonical point of view, for the Orthodox Church to proclaim its unity and to express itself with a single voice to the modern world. At the same time, however- and this is equally deeply rooted in its ecclesiological and canonical tradition- it is also the sole and necessary instrument for overcoming any arbitrary behavior, which demonstrates a lack of Orthodox ecclesiological awareness, such as, for example, when certain autocephalous Churches decline to participate in actions which derive from decisions taken at the Pan-Orthodox level, or when they do not observe Pan-Orthodox decisions, which they actually co-signed, or when they even call into question the canonical boundaries between various autocephalous Churches. If we are to ensure the unity of Orthodoxy, all these problems can be dealt with and resolved only by the greatest synodal instrument, from a canonical point of view, which is a Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. Of course, the synodal system is indissolubly linked with the nature and the life of the Orthodox Church. But as the Ecumenical Patriarch recently pointed out, most appositely, even though this system has been and is observed to this day, more or less faithfully within the autocephalous Churches, it is almost completely absent in relations between Churches, the result being that an image is created of an Orthodoxy with

many Churches, rather than one Church. This is totally unacceptable in terms of Orthodox ecclesiology[i]. It was for precisely this reason that, addressing the Primates of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarch stressed the need to reinforce the institution of the synod beyond the boundaries of the individual autocephalous Churches, so that an awareness of one single Orthodox Church can be cultivated, a prospect to which the Holy and Great Synod could certainly make a decisive contribution[ii].

3. The agenda for the Holy and Great Synod

For all the above reasons, then, whether they are related to the challenges and problems faced by people today, or have to do with internal problems which affect the unity of Orthodoxy, the need to hold the Holy and Great Synod is obvious. This is why the agenda for the Synod, which has already occupied all the autocephalous Orthodox Churches for more than fifty years, at the preceding five Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synod Meetings (1976-2015), corresponds entirely to the above problems and challenges of our times.

Until the 4th Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synod Meeting (2009), the agenda for the Synod consisted of the following ten items: a) the matter of the Orthodox diaspora; b) autocephaly and the manner in which it can be proclaimed; c) autonomy and the manner in which it can be proclaimed; d) the diptychs; e) the calendar question; f) impediments to marriage; g) the importance of fasting and its observation today; h) relations between the Orthodox Church and the rest of the Christian world; the Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical movement; and i) the mission of the Orthodox Church in the modern world: the contribution of the Orthodox Church to the establishment of peace,

justice, freedom, brotherhood and love among nations and the elimination of racial and other forms of discrimination. In the end, however, these ten themes were restricted to nine, since the Special Inter-Orthodox Committee which met in April 2015 decided that item number 9 (the Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical movement) should be subsumed into the 8th (Relations between the Orthodox Church and the rest of the Christian world), at the insistence of the Churches of Russia, Bulgaria and Georgia, which, for mainly pastoral reasons did not want a separate theme referring to the relations between the Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical movement.

It is clear that all the themes of the Holy and Great Synod refer to contemporary issues related either to the organization and the institutional expression of the unity of Orthodoxy (diaspora, autocephaly, autonomy, and diptychs); or to the preservation of Orthodox spirituality in combination with the contemporary needs of the Orthodox flock (calendar, impediments to marriage, fasting) or to inter-Christian relations (bi- and multi-lateral); or to the credible witness of Orthodoxy in the modern world (naturally, on the basis of the Christian ideals of peace, justice, freedom, brotherhood and love among nations)[iii].

Seven of these nine themes have already been discussed and completed at the preceding Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synod Meetings, at which the relevant texts were approved. These will be sent for comments and final approval to the Great and Holy Synod. Only two of the above nine themes, the issue of the manner of proclaiming a local Church as autocephalous and that of the order of commemoration of the Autocephalous Churches in the diptychs have encountered serious difficulties during the discussions, though, in the opinion of most of the Autocephalous Churches, this should not be an obstacle to the

convocation of the Holy and Great Synod. There were also some of the above seven themes, such as those regarding the challenges and problems of the modern world (e.g. impediments to marriage, or ordinances on fasting) or those referring to relations between the Orthodox Church and the heterodox and the ecumenical movement whose texts were approved at the 2nd and 3rd Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synod Meetings (1982 and 1986 respectively). These will have to be brought up to date and modernized, given that the decisions made on these issues were taken some time ago, when different conditions obtained[iv]. To this end, a Special Inter-Orthodox Committee has been set up, which, at three successive meetings (2014-2015) has dealt with the updating and modernization of the texts in question, which, to allow their submission to the Holy and Great Synod, were approved at the 5th Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synod Meeting which convened at Chambésy, Geneva, from 10-17 October, 2015[v].

So from the point of view of preparation, all the necessary steps have been taken relating to the content and resolutions regarding the items under discussion, so that, God willing, the Holy and Great Synod will be able to begin its proceedings at Pentecost, 2016, with the aim of not only ensuring and expressing the institutional unity of Orthodoxy, but also of providing a credible and powerful witness 'concerning the hope within us' to the modern world.

Conclusion

Given what we have said, it should be clear, I hope that after a backlog of internal problems which date from decades ago and have affected the unity of Orthodoxy, and of pressing external challenges facing people today, and

following the enormous preparations for this momentous event which have lasted more than fifty years, the voice of Orthodoxy, through the Great and Holy Synod, is extremely relevant and indispensable. I would like to bring my address to a close with the words of Metropolitan Damaskinos, the late Metropolitan of Adrianoupolis and formerly of Switzerland, at the conclusion of an article of his on the subject: ‘Through its convocation and proceedings, the Holy and Great Synod will contribute to the renewal and renown of the message of Orthodoxy, not only among the Orthodox faithful, but throughout the whole of Christendom. The hour of Orthodoxy has, indeed, arrived’[vi]

[i] See www.amen.gr/article17136#sthash.Rmz056Eq.dpuf.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] See Το πεπρωμένο του ανθρώπου στο σύγχρονο κόσμο, transl. Eft. Yioultsi, pubd. by P. Pournaras, Thessaloniki, 1980, p. 13. See also St. Ch. Tsombanidis, Εκκλησιολογία και Παγκοσμιοποίηση. Οι Εκκλησίες στην οικουμενική πορεία για μια εναλλακτική παγκοσμιοποίηση στην υπηρεσία των ανθρώπων και της γης, pubd. by P. Pournaras, Thessaloniki 2008, p. 96. Θεσσαλονίκη 2008, σ. 96.

[v] See chap. ‘Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Modern World. Contribution of the Orthodox Church to the Establishment of Peace, Justice, Freedom, Brotherhood and Love among Nations and Elimination of Racial and Other Forms of Discrimination 6, § 5: ‘if concern over our nourishment is a material issue, concern for the nourishment of others is spiritual. (Jas.2, 14-18).

[i] .ibid

[ii] ibid

[iii] See His Eminence Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland, «Η αγία και μεγάλη σύνοδος της Ορθοδοξίας», in Ορθοδοξία 2000: Παρελθόν – Παρόν – Μέλλον (Proceedings of the International Theological Conference, Athens 4-8 May 2000), pubd. By Apostoliki Diakonia, Athens 202, p, 385.

[iv] On this, see Th. A. Meimaris, The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement, Ant. Stamoulis Publications, Thessaloniki 2013, pp. 123 ff., 173 ff.

[v] See Ανακοινωθέν Ε΄ Προσυνοδικής Πανορθόδοξου Διασκέψεως εν Σαμπεζύ Γενεύης, Εν Σαμπεζύ Γενεύης, τη 16^η Οκτωβρίου 2015, at <http://www.churchofcyprus.org.cy/print.php?type=article&id=5629>.

[vi] See Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland, op.cit. p. 391.