

Keynote Address By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew To the Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches (Geneva 22-01-2016)

Your Beatitudes and beloved Brothers in the Lord, Primate of the local most holy Orthodox Churches and venerable representatives of brother Primate precluded from participating in this Synaxis, together with Your honorable entourages.

Welcome to this sacred place of our most holy Church of Constantinople, this Center dedicated to the service of Pan-Orthodox unity, which has for decades hosted and continues to host numerous Inter-Orthodox and Pan-Orthodox encounters hammering out and advancing the unity of the most holy Orthodox Church. We wholeheartedly pray that Your sojourn here may prove for each of You satisfactory and pleasing in every way, while our work may be guided by the breath of the Paraclete in order to bear abundant fruit for the love and edification of the body of the Church to the glory of God.

As we know, this Synaxis of ours was to be held at our see, but extraordinary objective circumstances that prevented some of our brothers from traveling there imposed the relocation of our meeting here. We thank all of You for understanding the necessity of this change and for agreeing to come here in order to realize the sacred purpose of the present Synaxis.

Indeed, every Synaxis that gathers us together, as entrusted with by God's grace and mercy with the leadership of His most holy Church, is sacred. However, this particular Synaxis has a very special character because it is bound to the fundamental ecclesiological principle of the Church's conciliarity inasmuch as its primary objective is to prepare the forthcoming convocation, God willing, of the Holy and Great Council of our most holy Orthodox Church. Therefore, we have assembled here to perform a truly sacred obligation, which is precisely why we have an entirely particular need for the support and illumination of the Paraclete as well as of the favorable goodwill of each of us, beyond any other kind of interests, in order that our decisions may contribute to the realization of the Holy and Great Council, which we have already announced. For it is unto us that Divine Providence has assigned the great duty and privilege to give flesh and bones to the visions of our blessed predecessors, who more than fifty years ago conceived the notion of convening this Council. To us, then, belongs the great responsibility to reduce the time, which is already much detained, in order without further delay to transform the vision into reality. After all, this is expected of us not only by our late predecessors, but also by the faithful people of God, as well as even by Christians outside the canonical barriers of our

Church. This is why every further postponement in realizing the Council will only satisfy the enemies of our Church and the Enemy that rejoices in evil.

Our Synaxis has a particularly special significance because it is called to settle matters and aspects that remain from the preparation and relate to the overall operation of the Holy and Great Council. In this regard, we wish to remind Your love of certain basic principles, which we have already accepted and established through formal decisions, and which we are naturally obliged to respect and maintain to the end.

1. On the Agenda

As known, the agenda of the Council was determined by Pan-Orthodox decision of the First Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation (1976) and includes the following ten items according to the order in the Acts of the Consultation:

a) Orthodox Diaspora

b) Autocephaly and its manner of proclamation

c) Autonomy and its manner of proclamation

d) The Diptychs

e) The matter of a common calendar

f) Impediments of marriage

g) Adaptation of church regulations on fasting

h) Relations of the Orthodox Churches with the rest of the Christian world

i) Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement

j) Contribution of the local Orthodox Churches to the prevalence of the Christian ideals of peace, liberty, brotherhood and love among peoples, and the lifting of racial and other discrimination.

According to the prevailing By-Laws, each of the above items should pass through the stage of preparation in order to be examined by an Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committee, which would repeatedly convene until it achieves unanimous formulation of the text in question, which should consequently be approved by a Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation in order finally to be referred *without further ado* to the Holy and Great

Council.

Of the above items, eight have already passed through the stage of preparation and approval by Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultations, while two of them – pertaining to Autocephaly and the Diptychs – have not received unanimous acceptance in the recurrent meetings of the Preconciliar Committee in order to receive final approval by a Preconciliar Consultation and comprise items for discussion at the Holy and Great Council.

In light of the situation that has developed in this way, we were faced with the dilemma of either postponing the realization of the Holy and Great Council until agreement is also reached on these two items or else proceeding with its convocation contented with the eight items.

On this question, there was a Pan-Orthodox decision to proceed with the convocation of the Council contented with the eight items, which received unanimous approval by Preconciliar Consultations.

Subsequently, our Synaxis in March 2014 unanimously decided to convene the Holy and Great Council in 2016 after a Special Inter-Orthodox Committee has previously undertaken the following actions by Pascha 2015:

- a) the *revision* of the texts agreed by the Third Preconciliar Consultation on the items: *Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement; Relations of the Orthodox Churches with the rest of the Christian world; and, Contribution of the Orthodox Churches to the prevalence of peace, etc.*
- b) the *editing* of texts from the Second Preconciliar Consultation regarding: *Adaptation of church regulations on fasting; Impediments of marriage; and, A common calendar.*
- c) If possible (*"it is desirable"*), the discussion of the items of *Autocephaly* and the *Diptychs* by the Preparatory Committee in order to achieve unanimity.

This Special Committee completed its task within the prescribed timeframe with regard to points (a) and (b), working until the eve of Holy and Great Week 2015, but was unable due to lack of time to fulfill the expressed wish of the Synaxis on point (c).

Accordingly, the items that remained for the Holy and Great Council were the eight originally agreed, which received the approval of a Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation as foreseen by the By-Laws.

In the meantime and despite what was unanimously agreed, certain Churches expressed their desire and even demand that the Holy and Great Council be postponed until there is discussion and unanimous acceptance both on the items of *Autocephaly* and the *Diptychs* as well as on the texts of the Second Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation (1982) on *Impediments of marriage* and *A common calendar*, which were not unanimously edited by the above-mentioned Special Committee. As far as the last two items, we cannot but express our surprise from such a demand, given that the decision of our Synaxis in 2014 did not at all foresee any radical revision of these texts, but simply their editing by the Special Committee; which is why the presiding chairman correctly forbade any radical revision since this would constitute transgression or transcendence of the mandate given to the Committee by our Synaxis. The demand on the part of certain Churches to revise these texts would clearly require *a new unanimous decision* of the Synaxis of Primate, different to the one taken in 2014 about a simple editing of the texts, which editing by its very nature could not affect the core contents of the same texts.

Therefore, brethren, we find ourselves before the dilemma, presented to us by certain Churches, either to persist with the decision taken jointly in 2014 to convene the Holy and Great Council with the eight agenda items, which have already acquired unanimous Pan-Orthodox approval, or to delay the convocation of the Council until we achieve Pan-Orthodox agreement also on the items of *Autocephaly* and the *Diptychs* as well as the texts on *Marriage* and the *Calendar*. If we choose the latter, we shall require a whole series of meetings by the Preparatory Committee, which in accordance with the prevailing By-Laws for preparation of the council must conclude with unanimous approval of the relevant texts that must then be submitted for final approval by a new Preconciliar Consultation. Given these procedures, whether and when the Holy and Great Council is to convene would remain unknown and its ultimate cancellation would not be excluded. Our responsibility is indeed immense for whatever might transpire and we are obliged to take this into consideration before preferring what is better over what is good and what is greater over what is necessary if we go back on our original joint decision. Our most holy Church declares that it cannot assume the historical responsibility of delaying the convocation of the Holy and Great Council or the danger resulting from its cancellation.

2. Remaining Matters

a) The Draft of By-Laws for the operation of the Holy and Great Council:

As known, the Special Committee that recently met in Athens to compose a draft for the procedural By-Laws of the Holy and Great Council did not manage to complete its task, finally approving only four of the sixteen proposed articles, which means that we must

discover a way to conclude this work, if possible during the present Synaxis, by means of a special committee composed from our very own members, with the clear directive to complete its task during these days in order to submit it here to our plenary for approval so that there is no need of another Synaxis of Primates for the approval of the by-Laws.

b) The matter of inviting observers to the Holy and Great Council:

This matter is before us for purposes of deciding at this Synaxis in two forms: namely, regarding the invitation of observers (clergy, monastics and laity) both from within the Orthodox Church as well as from other Christian Churches and Confessions, especially from those with whom we are in theological dialogue. In our opinion, both of these categories should be invited to attend the sessions of the Council, without of course the right to speak or vote, given that the Holy and Great Council is of immediate and vital interest both to Orthodox laity, clergy and monastics, but also to the rest of the Christian world. It should be noted that, during the sessions of the Second Vatican Council, our Church was invited to and did send observers.

If there is agreement on the principle of inviting such observers, then we must proceed to the determination of the manner in which they are represented, their number as well as their seating on the Council floor and every other question related to this matter.

c) The matter of the Council's authenticity must also concern this Synaxis. The Holy and Great Council will take place at a time when institutions are generally undergoing a crisis of authenticity, being disputed by contemporary people, something that unfortunately also tends to influence the domain of the Church. Conciliar decisions, which at other times enjoyed the respect of the clergy and the people as the voice of God ("it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" [Acts 15.28]), are today challenged by a group of our faithful, sometimes even before they are formally taken and announced. We know that even the Holy and Great Council that we have decided to convene is questioned by some "defenders of Orthodoxy," who label it as a "robber council" before it has actually convened. What canonical validity will the decisions of the Holy and Great Council have, and what canonical repercussions will any disobedience toward these involve? We believe that this matter must be clarified by us in order to avoid confusion among the people of God and other unfortunate ramifications in the body of the Church.

d) Finally, it is necessary that we clarify a matter that emerged – unexpectedly, in our opinion – namely, the question of the precise meaning of the term *consensus*, which we accepted as a way of reaching decisions both during the preparation as well as during the proceedings of the Holy and Great Council. On this matter, we should clarify the following

issues:

First, the concept of consensus, and not unanimity, internationally signifies that if one or more delegations disagree with a specific proposal and choose to formulate their own, an effort must be made to accept the opinion or proposal of these delegations; however, in the case where consensus is not achieved on the counter-proposal, then this disagreement – should those disagreeing persist – is recorded but does not invalidate the original position that resulted in the disagreement, while those disagreeing sign the original text and, should they so wish, record their disagreement. If someone declines to sign the text, this would imply veto, which would lead to an impasse.

A second matter that requires clarification is whether consensus refers to those present during the deliberations “of a body or requires the physical presence of all members of the body.” If we accept the latter, then any absence or else voluntary and deliberate absenteeism of some members would lead to dissolution of the body on the premise of lack of consensus.

The first of these matters emerged during the sessions of the Fifth Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation, where two delegations declined to sign the joint text for the reason that the position of their Churches were not accepted by all members of the Consultation; thus, we find ourselves before an impasse with regard to preparations for the Council because one of its basic texts remains unsigned by certain delegations.

The second matter emerged during the recent meeting of the Special Committee for preparing the draft of the Council’s procedural By-Laws in Athens. At that meeting, certain delegations persistently sought to include a provision in the By-Laws, according to which if one Church for any reason withdraws from the sessions of the Council, then the Chairman is obliged to secure that Church’s presence, otherwise the Council cannot continue its deliberations (i.e., is dissolved) since there is no consensus. That is our predicament if we regard consensus as applying not only to those present but also to those absent.

We wish to state forthrightly that our most holy Church and we personally cannot conceive or accept the realization of a Council that would operate under the Damocleian sword of dissolution should one or more Churches decide to withdraw. It would be preferable for such a Council, operating under the threat of dissolution, not to be held at all.

The tradition of the Church knows numerous examples where conciliarity is applied in Councils, indeed even Ecumenical Councils, when certain Churches were absent –

sometimes voluntarily, at other times involuntarily – from the sessions of the Council, without this at all preventing their operation. Many Council decisions were recognized retroactively by those who did not participate in them. So far as we know, dependence of consensus on physical attendance has no historical precedent.

We are, therefore, also called to deliberate on this matter fraternally and with love.

We propose these issues to Your love, brethren, as outstanding for our deliberation and decision so that we might arrive at the Holy and Great Council in unanimity. Apart from these issues, there are some other matters of a practical nature, which we are called to resolve in light of the Council. By way of example, we mention some of these here:

a) *The duration of the Council.* We do not know what you think about this, but in our opinion the number, scope and importance of the items for discussion will necessitate the duration of the Council to be at least two weeks, if we also bear in mind the liturgical and other events, which would be added to the sessions.

b) The procedure and placement of the Chairman and Primates decided at our last Synaxis will create a *spacial distance between them and the members of their delegations*, which will complicate the communication between the Primates and their delegations. This practical matter needs to be resolved.

c) We must promptly create a common *Inter-Orthodox Secretariat of the Council*, which will work alongside the existing Secretariat for the Preparation of the Council, assuming the difficult, albeit extremely important task of promoting the Council to the plenitude of the Orthodox Church but also to the world beyond, publishing and circulating the agreed texts, so that the Council may discern the reactions of the faithful and the world in order to bear these in mind in its work as far as this is possible.

d) Finally, it will soon be necessary to confront the practical matter of *the financial cost* of the Council, which due to its magnitude exceeds the capacity of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. As you already know, throughout the preparation over decades for the Holy and Great Council, the Ecumenical Patriarchate bore the burden of the financial expense for many and repeated meetings of the Preparatory Committees and Preconciliar Consultations, as well as the Synaxis gatherings of the Primates. It did so and continues to do so gladly, from its deficiency. Nevertheless, we now require the contribution of each Church, according to its ability, toward a *common fund* controlled on an Inter-Orthodox level in order to respond to the large expenses demanded by such an undertaking as the forthcoming, with God's grace, Holy and Great Council. We are certain that all of the sister Churches appreciate this and will contribute, each according to their ability.

Dearly beloved and most esteemed brothers in Christ,

We have briefly outlined the issues that, in our opinion, remain outstanding and await our resolution as Primates of the sister Churches. You will deem whether and which of these require immediate priority or if there are also other issues that should concern our present Synaxis. We look forward to Your observations in this regard.

Behind our proposals lies the conviction that all of us yearn with the same zeal for the convocation of the Holy and Great Council of our most holy Church without further delay, as we have stated, given that “the appointed time is short” (1 Cor. 7.29) since over fifty years of deferment and postponement have seriously exposed our Church in the eyes of adversaries and friends, not to speak also of God and History. Let us, therefore, advance swiftly with the task that lies before us, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12.2), who through the intercessions of His All-Pure Mother and all the Saints “will not leave us as orphans” (cf. John 14.18), but through the Paraclete will unite us in the same place at the Council, just as He unites us in His body and blood. “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” (Luke 18.27)

“Therefore, brethren, rejoice in the Lord, and may the God of love and peace be with you.” (Cf. 2 Cor. 13.11) Amen!