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THE HISTORY AND THE PRESENT STAGE OF THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE PAN-ORTHODOX COUNCIL

The Orthodox Church attaches great importance to catholic ecumenical councils in the life of the Church. However, according to a majority of Orthodox theologians, such a council has not been summoned by the Orthodox Church since the ecumenical council in Nicaea in 787. In this context, the initiative to summon the “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church”, which was taken in the recent decades, has achieved particular significance. The present reflection has been meant as an attempt at comprehensively presenting the history and the present stage of the preparations for the planned council.

1. The history of the preparations for a new council of the Orthodox Church

The process of preparing a new council of the Orthodox Church has been relatively long and considerably diverse in character. We can distinguish two basic stages in it: an early preparation and an immediate or indirect preparation. The first stage of preparations comprised individual initiatives of some of the local Orthodox Churches. At that stage, it was just a general idea of the council existing in the Orthodox consciousness, and it was taking a more and more substantial shape in the succeeding years of the preparations. Initiatives taken at the second stage have had a character of a structured process of conciliar preparations comprising the whole Orthodox world.

The first initiatives aiming at summoning of a new council of the Orthodox Church were taken by the Constantinople Patriarchate at the beginning of the 20th century. One can consider the encyclical of Joachim III of June 12th, 1902, as their origin. In it, the Patriarch called on the Orthodox Churches to seek appropriate means of accomplishing the Pan-Orthodox unity. In order to achieve this, a congress was organized in Constantinople in 1923, and a conference of the representatives of Orthodox Churches was made on Mount Athos (at the

Vatopedi monastery) in 1930. The issue of summoning a council recurred at the First Congress of Orthodox theologians in Athens in 1936 and at the conference of the heads of Orthodox Churches in Moscow in 1948. Despite numerous efforts taken and meetings held, it was not possible to work out a common stand on the possibility of summoning and character of a common council¹.

The preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council intensified only at the times of Patriarch Athenagoras I, when during the First Pan-Orthodox Conference on Rhodes in 1961, the final decision was made to summon the “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” and start the immediate preparations for its realization. The Conference settled a list of over one hundred issues that needed common consideration². In 1968, for the sake of coordination and speeding up the preparatory works, the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference established the “Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission for the Holy and Great Council” and a permanent “Secretariat for the Preparation of Holy and Great Council” with its seat at the Orthodox Centre in Chambésy. Moreover, it was decided to summon preparatory “Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conferences” in the future, where draft documents for the future council might be considered and approved after having been prepared by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission basing on the work of the local Orthodox Churches. From among the issues settled on Rhodes in 1961, the Fourth Conference selected six ones in 1968 to be elaborated at the first stage of the pre-conciliar preparations. The Conference also defined a detailed procedure of those preparations³.

The Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission gathered for the first time in Chambésy in 1971 in order to discuss the preparatory draft texts on the six topics. Having considered the 1961 list of topics to be too comprehensive, they proposed an utter revision of it. Thus, the First Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference ultimately defined the present list of nine basic issues which should be put forward for the future Council’s debate: 1/ the Orthodox diaspora; 2/ autocephaly and the way it is to be proclaimed; 3/ autonomy and the way it is to be proclaimed; 4/ diptychs; 5/ new calendar; 6/ impediments to marriage; 7/ adaptation of the fasting ordinances; 8/ relations of the Orthodox Churches with the whole Christian world; 9/ the Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement; 10/ contributions of the local Orthodox Churches to the promotion of

¹ Cf. T. KAŁUŻNY, *Nowy sobór ogólnoprawosławny. Natura, historia przygotowań, tematyka*, Kraków 2008, 139–160. See also: A. JENSEN, *Die Zukunft der Orthodoxie. Konzilspläne und Kirchenstrukturen*, Zürich – Köln 1986.

² For details see: LA I CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE DE RHODOS [1961], *Catalogue des thèmes du pro-synode projeté*, „Istina” 9 (1963) nr 1, 49–53.

³ Cf. LA IV CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE [1968], *Décisions* [Chambésy, 15 juin 1968], in: *Quatrième Conférence Panorthodoxe. Procès-verbaux et textes*, (Chambésy, 29 juin–3 juillet 1977), [Synodica VI], Chambésy (Genève) 1982, 127–128.

Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love among peoples, and elimination of racial discrimination⁴.

The last six of the ten themes were studied by Orthodox Churches and corresponding commissions, and then passed as draft documents for the future Council during the debates of the two succeeding Pre-Conciliar Conferences. The Second Pre-Conciliar Conference in 1982 resulted in passing two draft documents: *Calendar Issue*⁵ and *Marriage Impediments*⁶. At the Third Pre-Conciliar Conference in 1986, the following four drafts were passed: *The Significance of Fast and Its Observance Today*⁷; *Relations of the Orthodox Churches with the Whole Christian World*⁸; *Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement*⁹; *Contribution of the Orthodox Churches to the Promotion of Peace, Justice, Freedom, Fraternity and Love among Nations, and Elimination of Racial or Any Other Discrimination*¹⁰. Furthermore, it was decided at the Conference that the four remaining issues (Orthodox diaspora, autocephaly, autonomy, diptychs) would be considered together at the succeeding, Fourth Pre-Conciliar Conference. In accordance with the adopted procedure, the work on preparing the texts of the documents was taken by the Secretariat for the Preparation of the Council in cooperation with the local Orthodox Churches and the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission. During the preparatory work, the positions of the individual Orthodox Churches on all of the four issues turned out considerably divergent at the same time. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1990's, a serious crisis occurred in inter-Orthodox relations, which was caused, among others, by the conflict between the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow concerning the autonomy of the Church in Estonia. All of this led to suspending of the preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council¹¹.

⁴ Cf. LA PREMIÈRE CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE [1976], *Décisions* [Chambésy, 28 novembre 1976], in: *Première Conférence Panorthodoxe Préconciliaire. Procès-verbaux et textes*, (Chambésy, 21–28 novembre 1976), [Synodica III], Chambésy (Genève) 1979, 114.

⁵ Cf. DEUXIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE, *Question du calendrier*, in: *Deuxième Conférence Panorthodoxe Préconciliaire. Procès-verbaux et textes*, (Chambésy, 3–12 septembre 1982), [Synodica VII], Chambésy (Genève) 1994, 190–191.

⁶ Cf. DEUXIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE, *Empêchements au mariage*, in: *Deuxième Conférence Panorthodoxe Préconciliaire*, 189–190.

⁷ Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE [1986], *Importance du jeûne et son observance aujourd'hui*, „Episkepsis” 17 (1986) nr 369, 6–8.

⁸ Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE, *Relations de l'Église orthodoxe avec l'ensemble du monde chrétien*, „Episkepsis” 17 (1986) nr 369, 9–13.

⁹ Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE, *Église orthodoxe et mouvement œcuménique*, „Episkepsis” 17 (1986) nr 369, 14–17.

¹⁰ Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE, *Contribution de l'Église orthodoxe à la réalisation de la paix, de la justice, de la liberté, de la fraternité et de l'amour entre les peuples, et à la suppression des discriminations raciales et autres*, „Episkepsis” 17 (1986) nr 369, 18–26.

The decision to renew the process of the conciliar preparations was made during the meeting of the heads of the local Orthodox Churches in Istanbul in October 2008¹². On 6–13th of June 2009, the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference held in Chambésy passed a draft document on *Orthodox diaspora* for the future Council¹³. At its session in December 2009, the Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Commission settled a common position on autonomy in the Orthodox Church and passed a text that will be proposed for approval at the closest Pre-Conciliar Conference¹⁴. The most recent Preparatory Commission, held in February 2011, continued reflection on the remaining two themes of the future Council: autocephaly and diptychs¹⁵. The next session of the Commission is planned for 2012¹⁶.

2. The present stage of the preparations for the Holy and Great Council

As a result of the preparations, eight drafts of the conciliar documents have been passed so far. They refer to: calendar issue, marriage impediments, meaning of fast and its observance today, relations of the Orthodox Church with the whole Christian world, attitude of the Orthodox Church toward the ecumenical movement, attitude of the Orthodox Church toward the problems of the contemporary world, Orthodox diaspora, autonomy and the way of proclaiming it (this has been settled at the level of the Preparatory Commission). So far, attempts at working out a common Pan-Orthodox position on autocephaly and diptychs have failed.

The main divergence of positions on autocephaly concerns the subject who would be competent to proclaim it by issuing a *tomos* (church act of autocephaly), and the way of signing it by the heads of Orthodox Churches. At the session of the Preparatory Commission in December 2009, it was agreed upon that it should be the Ecumenical Patriarch who should officially proclaim autocephaly of the

¹¹ Cf. T. KALUŻNY, *Nowy sobór ogólnoprawosławny*, 189, 198, 203–204; J. OELDEMANN, *Kommt das Panorthodoxe Konzil? Alte Konflikte und neue Konstellationen in der Orthodoxen Kirche*, „Herder Korrespondenz” (2010) nr 11, 553–557.

¹² Cf. *Le Message des Primats de Églises orthodoxes* [2008], „Episkepsis” 39 (2008) nr 692, 26–30.

¹³ Cf. HILARION (ALFEYEV), *La saint et grand concile del l'Église orthodoxe*, „Irénikon” 84 (2011) nr 2–3, 223–224; S.P. DOBRESCU, *La quarta Conferenza panortodossa preconciare*, „O Odigos – La Guida” 27 (2009) nr 3, 7–10.

¹⁴ Cf. *Communiqué du Secrétariat du Concile*, 17 décembre 2009, in: A. ARJAKOVSKY, *En attendant le Concile de l'Église Orthodoxe*, Paris 2011, 673–674.

¹⁵ Cf. *Genève: réunion de la Commission préconciare préeparatoire*, „Service Orthodox de Presse” 37 (2011) nr 356, 1–2.

¹⁶ Cf. HILARION (ALFEYEV), *La saint et grand concile del l'Église orthodoxe*, 232, 238; *Genève: réunion de la Commission préconciare préeparatoire*, 1–2.

Church applying for it, and he should do it by issuing a *tomos* after the granting of consent by the mother Church and the whole Orthodoxy. However, they did not reach full agreement as concerns signing of the *tomos* of autocephaly by the heads of the Orthodox Churches. This issue and that of preparing a uniform text of an autocephaly *tomos* were discussed at the session of the Preparatory Commission in February 2011. However, it was not possible to reach unanimity, and, therefore, the text on autocephaly requires further work¹⁷.

As for diptychs, the divergence of opinions refers, first of all, to the “classification” of some Orthodox Churches in the diptychs, especially the Georgian, Cypriot and Polish Church. The Georgian Church wants to be mentioned by all local Orthodox Churches as the sixth one, succeeding the Moscow Patriarchate. At present, the Greek Churches mention her as the ninth one. The place of the Polish Church also requires uniformity in the diptychs. So far, two Churches – the Russian Church and the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia – mention it as the thirteenth one, succeeding the Church of Albania. The remaining Churches mention it as the twelfth one, preceding the Church of Albania. This is due to the fact that autocephaly was granted to the Church in Poland twice – by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1924 and by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1948. The problem with the Cypriot Church is more difficult to solve as it is associated with understanding of the very “classification” of the local Orthodox Churches in the diptychs. Thus, this demands declaring clearly if the place in the diptychs is determined by the criterion of antiquity and universality of the autocephaly proclamation or the title of the head of the given Church (whether patriarch, archbishop or metropolitan). The Church of Cyprus is in favour of following the first criterion as a less controversial one. This would allow her for taking the fifth place, right before the Russian Church. However, acknowledging the role of the Moscow Patriarchate, she agrees to take the sixth place after the Russian Church. Besides, even the very presence of some Churches in the diptychs evokes controversy – this, namely, concerns the Orthodox Church of America, which received autocephaly from the Moscow Patriarchate in 1970. This Church is not found in the diptychs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Church of Greece. The Moscow Patriarchate has proposed in its drafts to place her at the fifteenth place. Thus, the above mentioned detailed issues concerning the diptychs await their solutions at a succeeding session of the Preparatory Commission¹⁸.

¹⁷ Cf. HILARION (ALFEYEV), *La saint et grand concile del l'Église orthodoxe*, 229–232; JERZY (PAŃKOWSKI), *Aktualny stan przygotowań do Soboru Panprawosławnego*, 173; A. VLETSIS, *Wer ist der Erste in der Orthodoxie? Das Ringen der Orthodoxen Kirchen um die Gestaltung einer panorthodoxen Rangordnung*, „Una Sancta” (2011) nr 1, 2–3.

¹⁸ Cf. HILARION (ALFEYEV), *La saint et grand concile del l'Église orthodoxe*, 232–235.

According to the decisions made, the Pan-Orthodox Council will be summoned after the Orthodox Churches have reached agreement on their common stand on all the ten conciliar topics¹⁹. However, considering the difficulties in common understanding of the issues of autocephaly and diptychs, and, consequently, being afraid that the process of pre-conciliar preparation may become prolonged, the heads of some Orthodox Churches have expressed their readiness to participate in a Pan-Orthodox Council that would deal with only eight of the settled topics. The issues of autocephaly and diptychs could be decided after the Council²⁰. However, the modification of the present catalogue of the conciliar themes would also demand a pan-Orthodox agreement.

Taking up the challenge of preparing a council, the Orthodox Churches are also confronted by the necessity to determine a common position on some technical issues connected with organizing an event of this kind – namely, summoning the council, presiding over it, composition of the council, way of making conciliar decisions. There is no precisely defined single organizational model of an ecumenical or pan-Orthodox council, and the history of councils shows a big variety of solutions in this regard.

As it is known, it was the Byzantine emperor who was in charge of summoning ecumenical councils in the early Church. That practice was generally accepted. This fact inspires a question: who can this initiative belong to and who can be in charge of summoning a new council of the Orthodox Church? Referring to this issue during the conciliar preparations, the Orthodox Churches have expressed their conviction that the privilege of summoning a pan-Orthodox council belongs to the Patriarchate of Constantinople after other autocephalous Orthodox Churches have been consulted²¹.

The privilege of summoning a council is strictly connected with the issue of presiding over its sessions. At the time of the first seven ecumenical councils – as the Orthodox theologians have noticed – the role fell to the emperor, who did it personally or by means of his representatives. In the present situation, both the summoning and presiding over the sessions of the pan-Orthodox council, according to the Orthodox theologians, can be commended to a college consisting of the heads of the local Orthodox Churches or their representatives and headed by the Patriarch of Constantinople or his representative. A similar practice is applied now in the course of preparing a new council of the Orthodox

¹⁹ Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE [1986], *Règlement des Conférences Panorthodoxes*, art. 4.

²⁰ Cf. HILARION (ALFEYEV), *La saint et grand concile de l'Église orthodoxe*, 236.

²¹ Cf. LA IV CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE, *Décisions* (Chambésy, 8–15 juin 1968), in: *Synodica VI*, 127. See also: TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE (1986), *Règlement des Conférences Panorthodoxes Préconciliaires*, „Epispepsis” 17 (1986) nr 369, 2.

Church as far as presiding over the sessions of the Preparatory Commissions and Pre-Conciliar Conferences is concerned²².

Lively debates and contrary opinions were incited by the issue of the composition of the future council. It is, of course, bishops who shall be participants of the Holy and Great Council, but it is not quite clear if the participants' rights shall embrace all bishops or only those representing the local Churches. Taking into consideration the other possibility, we are facing the question: what principle should be followed when deciding the representation – is it an equal number of the delegates of each Church or a number proportionate to the number of bishops or to the number of the faithful in each Orthodox Church? The question of participation of presbyters and laity in the council also remains to be determined. A lot of Orthodox theologians are in favour of their presence at the new council, but only with a counselling voice²³.

As far as the way of making decisions is concerned, during the council preparations, the draft documents for the future council are unanimously passed. It is only resolutions concerning procedural matters that are passed with a majority of votes²⁴. The method of unanimous consent – as it is emphasized by the Orthodox theologians – allows for making decisions taking into consideration the stand of each Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the theologians are aware that it is an exacting method and one which, in a way, makes difficult both a quick summoning of the council and the course of its debates. This is why recently, representatives of some Orthodox Churches proposed to verify this paragraph of the *Rules of Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conferences* and resign the principle of making decisions unanimously at the sessions of the future Pan-Orthodox Council, accepting the principle of a majority of votes instead. The proposition met with a negative reaction of other Orthodox Churches (e.g., the Patriarchate of Moscow) which are in favour of the principle of unanimous decision making. Giving up that principle – as Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfiejew) emphasizes – can lead to new problems within the Orthodoxy because the principle is bound up with the issue of the composition of the future council and with the reception of the conciliar resolutions²⁵.

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²² Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE [1986], *Règlement des Conférences Panorthodoxes*, art. 6.

²³ Cf. T. KALUŻNY, *Nowy sobór ogólnoprawosławny*, 78–89.

²⁴ Cf. TROISIÈME CONFÉRENCE PANORTHODOXE PRÉCONCILIAIRE [1986], *Règlement des Conférences Panorthodoxes*, art. 16.

²⁵ Cf. HILARION (ALFEYEV), *La saint et grand concile del l'Église orthodoxe*, 237–239.

In summary, the preparations aiming at the summoning of a new council of the Orthodox Church have quite a long history. The first conciliar initiatives were taken up at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the situation of the Orthodoxy at that time was inconvenient not only for summoning up of a council but also for starting systematic preparatory work. Direct preparations of the council began only with the pan-Orthodox decision made on Rhodes in 1961. It opened a way of concrete preparations of the Holy and Great Council which was paved with the meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission (1971, 1986, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2009, 2011) and Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conferences (1976, 1982, 1986, 2009). As a result of the conducted preparatory work, eight conciliar draft documents have been passed whereas it has not been possible to work out a common stand on two issues, namely, autocephaly and diptychs. Besides, some “technical” issues connected with the organization of the Pan-Orthodox Council require common agreement. Although, despite the efforts, the idea of a pan-Orthodox council has not been able to be realized so far, the perspective of its being summoned is closer and closer.

Historia i aktualny stan przygotowań soboru panprawosławnego

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono w sposób syntetyczny historię i aktualny stan przygotowań soboru panprawosławnego. Pierwsze inicjatywy na rzecz zwołania nowego soboru podjęte zostały na początku XX wieku. Formalnie jednak dopiero ogólnoprawosławna decyzja na Rodos w 1961 roku otworzyła drogę konkretnych przygotowań Świętego i Wielkiego Soboru, znaczącą spotkaniami Międzyprawosławnej Komisji Przygotowawczej (1971, 1986, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2009, 2011) i Ogólnoprawosławnymi Konferencjami Przesoborowymi (1976, 1982, 1986, 2009). W rezultacie prowadzonych prac przygotowawczych uzgodniono dotychczas projekty ośmiu dokumentów soborowych. Nie udało się natomiast wypracować wspólnego stanowiska w odniesieniu do dwóch tematów przyszłego soboru. Ponadto wspólnego uzgodnienia wymagają niektóre kwestie „techniczne” związane z organizacją nowego soboru. Choć nie udało się dotychczas urzeczywistnić idei soboru panprawosławnego, to jednak perspektywa jego zwołania staje się coraz bliższa.