

On the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

Scheduled for the Pentecost of 2016, the organizational process for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church has encountered problems some of which have become insurmountable.¹ The Orthodox Church has held no council of this significance since the Seventh Ecumenical Council in AD 787. The early preparatory work for this current council began in the 1960s. The Holy and Great Council was not intended to be at the level of Ecumenical Councils as its mandate was limited to adopting resolutions on six documents of practical significance, such as the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the other Christians, and the question of marriage. According to the Holy Tradition, no decision can be passed by the Great Council unless it is endorsed by all members of the universally recognized 14 autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

The two documents that proved to be the most controversial among sister orthodox churches were prepared in advanced and approved at the pre-council meetings in Chambésy, Switzerland: “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World” was adopted by the 5th Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference on October 17 2015, and “The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments” was approved by the Synaxis of the Primate of Local Orthodox Churches on January 27 2016.²

The Churches of Antioch and Georgia did not participate in the approval of “The Sacrament of Marriage” document. The Synod of the Patriarchate of Georgia subsequently stated that it would support the document if specific editorial changes were made to the document. On May 26 2016, the Church of Georgia

¹ June 16-26 2016 were set as the Great Council dates.

² The English texts of both documents are published in the current issue of our Journal.

released proposed specific editorial changes to this document.³ Among the articles of the document, the Church of Georgia refused to endorse is the following statement on same-sex unions and marriage:

The Church does not deem it possible for her members to contract same-sex unions or enter into any other form of cohabitation except marriage. The Church exerts all possible pastoral efforts so that those of her members who enter into such unions may come to true repentance and love blessed by the Church.⁴

This article can be read either as (1) the church not blessing the same-sex unions or (2) not blessing the same-sex unions outside marriage. It was the intention of the drafters of the document to state the former, while the reader can easily derive the latter meaning. The Russian,⁵ and especially the Georgian versions⁶ of the document create a stronger case for the unintended interpretation endorsing the same-sex marriage. The Church of Georgia also proposed some editorial changes to the “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World” document.⁷

On May 24 2016, at least a dozen of bishops of the Church of Greece withdrew from the official delegation of the Greek Church to the Holy and Great Council. Among the reasons that the bishops stated was that they were to participate in the Council without the right to vote – only the heads of the participating churches were expected to vote. Other reasons: the objections raised

³ “საქართველოს ეკლესია კრეტას „დიდ კრებაზე“ გასატან ორ საკითხს ისევ უპირისპირდება” DFWATCH, May 26 2016 <<http://dfwatch.net/საქართველოს-ეკლესია-კრეტ-42847>>

⁴ Article 10, “The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments” in the current issue.

⁵ Таинство брака и препятствия к нему, Русская православная церковь, 28.01.2016, <<https://mospat.ru/ru/2016/01/28/news127389/>>

⁶ „ქორწინების საიდუმლო და მისი დამაბრკოლებელი მიზეზები“ საქართველოს საპატრიარქო, 22 მაისი 2016 წელი <<http://patriarchate.ge/geo/qorwinebis-saidumlo-da-misi-damabrcolebeli/>>

⁷ DFWATCH, May 26 2016.

by sister churches, and criticism by Greek theologians of the texts to be approved by the Council. The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece replaced the bishops who left the delegation.⁸

The most serious objections to the Council documents have been raised by the Church of Bulgaria. On June 1 2016, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Church raised a series of objections to proposed documents of the Council, and its organizational matters. It was noted in the decision that none of the documents prepared for the Council had such great urgency or importance to call for “ecumenical resolutions.” The Bulgarian Church also noted objections raised by sister churches, objected to the organizational provision of the Council that would not allow the delegations to edit the proposed drafts, and expressed its disapproval of some of other procedural errors, and of the large expense involved in the Council participation. The June 1 2016 decision of the Church of Bulgaria urged to postpone the Council to better prepare for it.⁹ Two days later, citing spreading of “misleading and false” information regarding its June 1 decision by unnamed sources, the Holy Synod of the Church in Bulgaria announced that it was withdrawing from the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church.¹⁰ This decision by the Church of Bulgaria essentially brought the prospects of the Great Council adopting any ecumenical resolution to nil.

On June 7 2016, the Patriarchate of Antioch publicly declared its intention not to attend the Great Council.¹¹ The Church of Antioch has been quoted stating the following: "If the Council convenes whilst two apostolic churches are not in

⁸ “Δώδεκα Μητροπολίτες παραιτούνται από τη Μεγάλη Σύνοδο των Ορθοδόξων,” Proinos Logos, May 24 2016 <<http://www.proinoslogos.gr/epikairoτητα/42-koinonia/36474-δωδεκα-μητροπολιτες-παραιτούνται-από-τη-μεγάλη-σύνοδο-των-ορθοδόξων>>

⁹ “РЕШЕНИЕ на Св. Синод от 1 юни 2016 г. относно ВСЕПРАВОСЛАВНИЯ СЪБОР (16 – 26 юни 2016 г., о-в Крит),” 01 юни 2016 13:28, Българска Патриаршия <<http://www.bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=205494>>

¹⁰ “ИЗЯВЛЕНИЕ НА СИНОДАЛНАТА КАНЦЕЛАРИЯ във връзка с ВСЕПРАВОСЛАВНИЯ СЪБОР,” 03 юни 2016 15:00, Българска Патриаршия <<http://www.bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=205771>>

¹¹ “Syrian Orthodox Church refuses to participate in Holy and Great Council on current terms.” TASS – Russian News Agency, June 7 2016 <<http://tass.ru/en/world/880550>>

communion with each other, this means that the participation in the synodical sessions is possible without taking part in the Holy Eucharist, which deprives the Council of its ecclesiological character and grants it an administrative quality, contradictory to the steadfast Orthodox synodical tradition."¹² This statement appeared to be made in reference to Antioch's dispute with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. In 2013, the Church in Jerusalem consecrated a new Archbishop of Qatar without consulting Antioch. The Church of Antioch regards this as a violation of church canons and Tradition, as according to its jurisdictional claims the area that Qatar is part of, namely "the Gulf of Arabia" (the Persian Gulf) has been under Antioch's jurisdiction from "the early Christian period."¹³

The Holy and Great Council was originally scheduled to take place in Constantinople, today's Istanbul. Later the venue was moved to the Island of Crete to account for political tensions between Turkey and Russia, which made it very awkward for the Russian church delegation to attend such an important event in Turkey. The Orthodox Academy of Crete was chosen to host the Great Council.¹⁴ The venue did not escape scrutiny either, as Protopresbyter Anastasios Gotsopoulos of St. Nicholas Church in Patra, Greece, distributed a letter dated May 20 2016, which detailed iconographic irregularities found in a couple of locations of that academy.¹⁵

The Orthodox Church in North America (OCA) has not been invited to participate as a voting member in the Great Council due to the objections to its autocephalous status by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and some other autocephalous churches.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Resolution Objecting to the Uncanonical Interference of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the Canonical Jurisdiction of Antioch," Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America <<http://www.antiochian.org/resolution-objecting-uncanonical-interference-patriarchate-jerusalem-canonical-jurisdiction-antioch>>

¹⁴ The Orthodox Academy of Crete <<http://www.oac.gr/en/>>

¹⁵ Protopresbyter Anastasios Gotsopoulos, "To the Pan-Orthodox Secretariat of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Geneva," Patra, 20.5.2016 <<http://new.sliven.net/res/news/205376/1-en-OAK-vitro.pdf>>