

The Pan-Orthodox Council

The much-anticipated Pan-Orthodox Council, known officially as The Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, was held in June of 2016, in Kolymvari, Crete. Preparations for the Holy and Great Synod were begun in 1961, in recognition of the fact that there existed certain issues within the Orthodox Church which needed to be discussed. The Synod of this past June, generally speaking, was convened in order to address and resolve some of these recognized issues. The matters which were supposed to be discussed at the Synod were condensed into six thematic clusters, which were as follows: 1) The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World 2) The Orthodox Diaspora 3) Autonomy and the Means by Which it is Proclaimed 4) The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments 5) The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today 6) Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World. The most contentious issues, which were originally to be addressed at the council, such as, the common calendar issue, diptychs, and the manner of granting autocephaly, were not discussed.

Although the Synod approved, with minor emendation, all of the conciliar documents, which addressed the above six thematic clusters, the Synod's approval of the said documents was not representative of all of the fourteen universally-recognized autocephalous Orthodox churches because, significantly, not all of the fourteen autocephalous Orthodox churches attended the Synod. The absence of even *one* of the fourteen autocephalous churches would have been enough to call into question the truly ecumenical nature of the Synod. However, not one autocephalous church was absent, but *four*. Orthodox churches absent from the Synod included the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Generally speaking, the absence of the Antiochian Church was due to an ecclesiastical dispute which exists between itself and the Church of Jerusalem (one of the fourteen autocephalous Orthodox churches that *was* present at the Synod) over the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Qatar. The Georgian Church decided not to attend the Synod, mostly because of disagreements that it had about several of the documents which were to be discussed at the Synod, citing in particular the document titled "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World". The Bulgarian Church, in a similar vein, decided not to take part in the Synod, generally speaking, because of issues that it found in some of the documents to be discussed at the Synod.

The Russian Church, recognizing that the Pan-Orthodox Council could not be truly Pan-Orthodox due to the absence of the above three churches, suggested to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, that an extraordinary pre-Council conference be held in order to help resolve the issues, which Antioch, Georgia, and Bulgaria cited as reasons for their abstention from the Synod. This Pre-Council conference, which perhaps could have persuaded Antioch, Georgia, and Bulgaria to attend the Holy and Great Synod by resolving each of the church's issues, never occurred because Patriarch Bartholomew ignored the Russian Church's suggestion. Furthermore, the Russian Church recognized correctly that the conciliar protocol imposed by Bartholomew I, which forbade the six conciliar documents submitted to the Holy and Great Synod from being altered, was in opposition both to the spirit of unity which the council was supposed to foster, and was inconsistent with the conciliar protocol of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Of significance as well was the fault that the Russian Church found in the conciliar document titled "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World". The document erroneously makes use of the term 'churches' to describe other groups who attempt to follow our Savior apart from the Orthodox Church. The Russian Church rightly, and in keeping with good Orthodox ecclesiology, preferred that the term 'church' be reserved for the legitimate and true Church of Christ, the Orthodox Church.

Ultimately, because no pre-Council conference occurred to help resolve the issues cited by the above three churches, the three churches remained unwavering in their decision not to attend the Synod. The Russian Church, in turn, seeing its very rational suggestion fall on deaf ears and realizing that the Pan-Orthodox Council would thus remain not truly Pan-Orthodox, did not attend. One wonders if the hierarchs, who continued the Synod in the absence of four of the fourteen autocephalous churches, forgot about the consensus reached among the apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Certainly, the Synod, and the documents which it approved—It is worth noting that there was no consensus, even amongst the delegates who attended the Synod, as is required—do not exemplify the following Spirit-filled words proclaimed at the Council of Jerusalem and the consensus which these words represent: *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*(Acts 15: 28).

The absence of four autocephalous churches from the Synod raises the question of whether the documents adopted by the Synod are to be binding even for those four churches who did not attend. The Synod's spokesman, Archbishop Job (Getcha) of Telmessos asserted, in concert with other synodal representatives, that the decisions reached at the Synod would be binding, even for the autocephalous churches which were not present at the Synod. This assertion, even to a laymen like myself, seems to conflict with logical expectation. How does it follow that the four absent autocephalous churches must abide by the documents which the Synod made without them, especially considering that the suggestions of these churches were ignored, and that combined membership of these churches exceeds the membership of the rest of the fourteen universally-accepted autocephalous churches combined? Unsurprisingly, Archbishop Job's assertion, and the assertion of the other synodal representatives, were rejected by the four absent autocephalous churches, who, in light of their own abstention from the Synod, do not recognize the Synod as truly universal, and therefore do not recognize the documents adopted at the Synod as universally binding.

It should be noted that, even with the existence of what may seem to be so much disagreement amongst the autocephalous Orthodox churches, the doctrinal and sacramental unity of the Orthodox Church as a whole remains uncompromised. Furthermore, one needs only to consult the history of Christ's Church to see that inter-ecclesiastical conflicts and squabbles do, from time to time, occur, and that Church councils, even those which aspire to be truly Ecumenical, are not immune. In short, ecclesiastical conflict does *not* indicate ecclesiastical disunity. After all, our Lord Jesus Christ did not promise us that His Church would remain free from disagreement or conflict, but that, more importantly, the gates of hell would not prevail against Her (Matt. 16:18). The Orthodox Church holds fast to this divine promise, and anticipates a future Holy and Great Synod in which all autocephalous churches are represented.