

# The Historical Path towards of the Council of Crete

## 1. The Encyclical of Patriarch Joachim III (1902)

- This Encyclical was addressed by Patriarch Joachim III of Constantinople to the heads of sister autocephalous Orthodox Churches

- Patriarch Joachim, in this Encyclical, was first referring to the need for closer cooperation and fellowship among the Orthodox Churches. Relations were critical at that time. Caring for Orthodox unity, however, **Joachim stressed also the need for Churches to think about the issue of their present and future relations with the two great branches of Christianity, viz. the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the Reformation.**

- Reminding that the concern for Christian Unity was central in the life of the Orthodox Church, the Patriarch was asking whether or not the **time was proper for a preliminary inter-Orthodox meeting which would determine the best bases and ways of working out an honest and straightforward contact with western Christendom**

**The new context of the National Churches:** The emergence of national states out of the European and Ottoman empires during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based on the ideology of the European Enlightenment, which brought forth the right of the nations for self-determination. The Followers of the European Enlightenment also projected the foundation of national Churches within the jurisdiction of the national states, completely subjected to the latter. Within that context, the formation of national states and Churches in the Balkan Peninsula contributed in the dramatic decrease of the provinces of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in that region.

## 2. The 1923 Pan-Orthodox Congress

After the 1923 Pan-Orthodox Congress, it was announced that a Council was planned to take place in 1925, at the sixteenth centenary of the Council of Nicaea. It never took place. Some topics important topics of discussion came out: renewal of the calendar, Matrimony and Priesthood, commemorating the Council of Nicaea and the situation of the Russian Church.

After the 1923 Congress and the many discussions in the ensuing debate, there was a certain reticence about the gathering of the Great Council, especially

on the part of the conservatives. The political conditions were also not very favourable.

1. The updating of the calendar;
2. The Orthodox Church and the adoption of the updated calendar;
3. The importance of the sacrament of marriage and the sacrament of ordination;
4. The question of second marriages for widowed priests and deacons;
5. The age for ordination;
6. The celebration of 1600 years since the first Ecumenical Council;
7. The situation of the Russian Church.

### **3. Inter Orthodox Meeting in Vatopedi (1930)** “the first pre-Synod/pre-Council”

A list of 17 themes:

1. The promotion of inter-Orthodox relations (items 1, 2, 6 and 17);
2. Issues in direct reference to the life and discipline of the Orthodox Church (items 3, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14 and 16);
3. The relations of the Orthodox Church with other Christian Churches (items 7 and 8);
4. The problem of the calendar (item 13);
5. The status of the Orthodox Church in America (item 4);
6. The activity of the Orthodox Churches among the peoples to which they belong (item 15)

### **4. The Pan-Orthodox Congress in Moscow (1948)** **(the moment of the mixing between Orthodox Theology and Sovietic Anti-European Propaganda)**

Four Resolutions and an Appeal:

1. „The Vatican and the Orthodox Church”
2. „The Ecumenical Mouvement and the Orthodox Church”
3. „Church Calendar”
4. „On Anglican Orders”
5. „An Appeal to the Christians throughout the World”

## 6. The Rodos Conferences

### - 1961

approval of seven rules for the development of the future Council. One of them should be noted: the fact that all decisions should be taken with unanimous approval.

1. Faith and Dogma
2. The Divine Worship
3. Church Administration and Order
4. The Relations of the Orthodox Churches among Themselves
5. The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Other Christian World
6. Orthodoxy and the World
7. Theological Themes
8. Social Problems

### - 1963

1. to appoint observers for the Second Vatican Council;
2. to start an official theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

### - 1964

1. to study the way in which the Catholic Church should be informed about the decision of the Orthodox Church for a dialogue between the two churches;
2. the content and course of this dialogue.

#### a) **The Pan-Orthodox Conferences of Chambesy**

In view of the responsibility assumed by the Ecumenical Throne and the contribution it was expected to make, it was considered useful and indispensable for the Patriarchate to have a "SPEAKER" abroad, a "HOUSE" outside Istanbul. A center from which the direct and most universal messages of Orthodoxy emanating from the Phanar could henceforth be broadcasted. Patriarch Athenagoras spoke of a concrete Centre, which he saw and located, almost exclusively, in Switzerland, in Geneva in particular.

One might ask: Why especially in Geneva?

Because, by its nature and location, this Patriarchal Centre should be close to the parallel international organizations established in Geneva: the United Nations, the International Red Cross, the International Labor Office and, above all, the World Council of Churches. It should be remembered that the Ecumenical Patriarchate participated in the WCC as a founding member and cooperated at all levels of activity from the first day of its creation in 1948.

- 1968

1. The Sources of the Divine Revelation (the Ecumenical Patriarchate);
2. The participation of the laity in the life of the Church (Bulgarian Church);
3. A revision of the church prescriptions for fasting (Serbian Church);
4. Impediments to marriage (Russian Church and the Church of Greece);
5. The question of the calendar and the celebration in common of the Holy Easter (Russian Church and the Church of Greece);
6. Church Economy (The Romanian Orthodox Church).

- 1976

1. the Orthodox diaspora;
2. autocephaly and the way to proclaim it;
3. autonomy and how to proclaim it;
4. diptychs;
5. the question of a common calendar;
6. impediments to marriage;
7. the updating of ecclesiastical prescriptions concerning the fasting;
8. the relations of the Orthodox Churches with the Christian world as a whole;
9. Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement;
10. the contribution of the local Orthodox Churches to the realization of the Christian ideals of peace, freedom, fraternity and love among peoples and to the abolition of racial discrimination

The following three Conferences of Chambesy (1982, 1986 & 2009) adopted different documents from the list above.

## II. Last Steps towards the Council

### 1. Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Church 2014

When the **Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches** gathered in Constantinople at the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the Phanar in March 2014, it was decided to convene a special **inter-Orthodox commission** to review a few texts of the second and third preconciliar panorthodox conferences of 1982 and 1986. Moreover, this Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches adopted the rule that all decisions in the Council's work will be taken **unanimously on the principle of consensus**. It had been decided that the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church would be convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople in 2016. The council will be presided as established by the Ecumenical

Patriarch, while the Primate of the other Orthodox churches will be seated to his right and to his left. Each Church will **send a delegation consisting of its Primate and 24 bishops.**

## **2. Synaxis of the Primate 2016**

Thus, among the ten themes on the agenda of the Holy and Great Council, two could not reach a consensus at the meetings of inter-Orthodox preparatory commissions, despite many efforts. This is the **question of autocephaly** and the manner of its proclamation and the question of the **diptychs**. The Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches met in Chambésy in January

2016 decided that these two issues will not be examined by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, but will be during another subsequent council. This Synaxis has even decided to remove **the issue of the calendar** from the agenda because some local Orthodox Churches have stated that they do not desire and are not ready for a calendar reform. Moreover, the Synaxis considerably reworked **the text on the impediments to marriage that is now entitled “The sacrament of marriage and its impediments.”** This text was not signed by the Churches of Antioch and of Georgia. The Church of Antioch did not sign also the decisions of the Synaxis of 2016. Bearing in mind that the two texts on the relationship of the Orthodox Church to the ecumenical movement and the relationship of the Orthodox Church with the Christian world had been combined into one, it resulted that the six items on the agenda of the Council, approved by the 2016 Synaxis, with the relevant texts are:

1. **The mission of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world;**
2. **The Orthodox diaspora;**
3. **Autonomy and the manner of its proclamation;**
4. **The sacrament of marriage and its impediments;**
5. **The importance of fasting and its observance today;**
6. **The relationship of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world.**

Given the difficult political situation in the Middle East, the Synaxis of the Primate of January 2016 decided not to assemble the Council in Constantinople and finally decided to convoke the Holy and Great Council at the Orthodox Academy of Crete from 18 to 27 June 2016. The opening of the Council will take place after the Divine Liturgy of the feast of Pentecost, and the closure – the Sunday of All Saints, according to the Orthodox calendar.