

Ecumenism „avant la lettre”

- The Orthodox Church was among the pioneers of the promotion of the ecumenical idea from the very beginning of the 20th century. This idea can be traced in some important Encyclicals issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate between 1902 and 1920. The first was promulgated on 12 June 19023, “long before there were any major signs of those trends which we call today the ‘Ecumenical Movement’”

- 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 Church⁶ 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 ripe 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

- In order to respond better to the urgent need of unity within the universal Church, the Encyclical invited the Orthodox Churches to move towards more dynamic inner communion, synodality and cooperation

- In dealing with the question of Christian unity¹¹ and the relations of Orthodoxy with Western Christendom, Patriarch Joachim made special reference to the Old Catholics

- The ecumenical remarks become even more important, if we recall the difficulties the Ecumenical Patriarchate faced during the 19th century: the proselytism by some protestant missionaries in its jurisdiction¹⁶ and the negative consequences of the development of national states and Churches in the Balkan, resulting from the revolutionary ideology of the European Enlightenment.

CONTEXT EXPLANATION:

The Protestant issue: Many protestant missionaries from the USA and Europe came to Smyrna, Constantinople, Bursa, Cyprus and Greece during the 19th century, in order to civilize the folk, to spread the sciences, and to preach the Gospel. Motivated from that historic reality, Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory VI

issued an Encyclical against proselytism, and asked from his bishops to be on alertness.

The new context of the National Churches: The emergence of national states out of the European and Ottoman empires during the 19th 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.

- Patriarch Joachim proposed a momentous principle that became a commonplace in the life of the Ecumenical Movement: namely that differences in faith (dogma) should not prevent Churches from coming together in order to reflect on common theological interests.

- The initiative of Patriarch Joachim to issue the Encyclical of 1902 generated favorable impression and echo, both among the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox Churches. In their responses²³, all the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches expressed their desire to open relations and dialogue, particularly with the Anglican Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

- This Encyclical is acknowledged and considered to be a “precursor” of the Ecumenical Movement.