

Joachim III
Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople

Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical (1902)

To their Beatitudes and Holiness's The Patriarchs of Alexandria and Jerusalem, and to The Most Holy Autocephalous sister-Churches in Christ, in Cyprus, Russia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro.

Whereas the most holy presidents of the venerable Autocephalous Orthodox Churches have written to us in Irenical Letters in reply to our announcement of our election (by God's pleasure) and elevation to the most holy apostolic and patriarchal Ecumenical Throne, we are happy to observe the ancient and unbreakable bond, manifested with all haste and great warmth, and the words of evangelical love so warmly expressed and the ardent prayers addressed to God on behalf of this senior holy and Great Church of Christ, their sister most ready in faith and hope and love.

This appearance of brethren praying together in Christ and united in a sacred harmony, stirs our soul and warms us to a more continuous effectual fellowship; and it has excited in us greater hopes of a more fruitful cultivation of mutual relations among Churches sharing in the same opinion, with a view to a more splendid and abundant religious harvest. We declare ourselves full of most excellent intentions and we gladly take up the sincere assurances of the holy Churches, among whom our most holy sister who bears the honours among the Churches in Orthodox States (we speak of the Orthodox Church of All the Russia's) has brought us great consolation by addressing herself as follows:

"The summons to peace and fraternal love and lively mutual fellowship, which you addressed to us and to the other Autocephalous Churches, will find an echo and a sympathy in the hearts of all Orthodox Christians, who are sincerely devoted to their mother Church. Divided by reasons of history and differences of language and nationality, the local holy Churches of God find their unity in mutual love and their courage in close fellowship with one another; and they derive power to make progress in faith and devotion, rejecting the crafts of hostility and proclaiming the Gospel universally". The same spirit of brotherly love and unity derived from the divine source of the Gospel breathes vitally through similar words and expressions in the esteemed letters from all the other sister-Churches: they give us courage and strength, and they afford happy opportunities for us, following the good custom (which dates from time immemorial) of exchanging fraternal greetings and love, to seek also their wise counsel on matters on which both common study and judgement could be considered opportune by the Churches and also the successful achievement of good works to the benefit of the local Churches as well as the whole Church whose head is Christ.

Happily encouraged, then, by such brotherly support and having in mind the advice of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians and to all in all ages who believe in Christ: "I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you; but that you be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgement", we decided to suggest to our Holy Synod for deliberation a plan which we judged to be right and holy and worthy of serious consideration. With a view to a clearer formulation and easier study of certain topics of a religious nature and of great importance, we communicated that plan to our venerable and dear synodical brothers in Christ; and we asked them whether our holy and Great Church of Christ considered it opportune to seek an exchange

of views with the holy patriarchs and most reverend presidents of The Autocephalous Churches on these topics.

After expert study and preparation, they have agreed by a unanimous synodical resolution of our dear brother-bishops gathered around us in the Holy Synod; but standing firm to the custom prevailing in the primitive Church (according to which the bishops and pious guardians of the Churches acquainted each other by letter of their problems and of their solutions, diligently and fraternally being careful to seek after a common mind in word and deed), we are proceeding to outline the questions which have been approved synodically: they do not raise any new matters, but put forward matters which have for some time been the subjects of common study, with the object of mutual enlightenment of the local holy Orthodox Churches of God. They, motivated (of course) by similar intentions for the general good, will gladly (we believe) accept and judge opportune such research into the cycle of spiritual inter communion in over seeing: it is not only to be perceived pragmatically but is also commanded by the calling with which all of us who have been called in Christ, by the favour and grace of God, to guard His holy Churches by giving heed to themselves and to be concerned for the salvation of all men.

It is, indeed, necessary that those who are set over the faithful for their spiritual government should pay attention to the greater good of all Christians, in order that the most precious crown of love might be enabled to bear more fruit according to the divine will. Wherefore, we consider that what should first of all be examined is whatever the venerable presidents of The Most Holy Autocephalous Orthodox Churches deem would be beneficial to do but which is not being done; and what hence-forward should and could be done, towards bringing together the Orthodox people in the unity of faith and in mutual love and common purpose; and what thereafter should be done to strengthen further our holy and Orthodox faith, and to defend more strongly the holy Churches of God against the assault of the contrary spirit of these days.

It is, moreover, pleasing to God, and in accordance with the Gospel, to seek the mind of The Most Holy Autocephalous Churches on the subject of our present and future relations with the two great growths of Christianity, viz. The Western Church and the Church of the Protestants. Of course, the union of them and of all who believe in Christ with us in the Orthodox faith is the pious and heart-felt desire of our Church and of all genuine Christians who stand firm in the evangelical doctrine of unity, and it is the subject of constant prayer and supplication; but at the same time we are not unaware that this pious desire comes up against the unbroken persistence of these Churches in doctrines on which, having taken their stand as on a base hardened by the passage of time, they seem quite disinclined to join a road to union, such as is pointed out by evangelical and historical truth; nor do they evince any readiness to do so, except on terms and bases on which the desired dogmatic unity and fellowship is unacceptable to us. It is a truism that the holy catholic and apostolic Church is founded upon the Apostles and preserved by the divine and inspired Fathers in the Ecumenical Councils, and that her head is Christ the great shepherd, who bought her with his own blood; and that according to the inspired and heaven bound Apostle she is the pillar and ground of the truth and the body of Christ: this holy Church is indeed one in identity of faith and similarity of manners and customs, in unison with the decisions of the seven Ecumenical Councils, and she must be one and not many differing from each other in dogmas and fundamental institutions of ecclesiastical government. If, as in every matter which is impossible with men but impossible with God, we cannot yet hope for the union of all as ever being a possibility, yet because divine grace is constantly active and men are being guided in paths of evangelical love and peace, one must consider very carefully whether it might be possible to prepare the (at present) anomalous way which leads to such a goal and to find points of encounter and contact, or even to turn a blind

eye to certain irregularities until the completion in due course of the whole task, whereby might be fulfilled to our joint satisfaction and benefit our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ's saying about one flock and one shepherd. Wherefore, if it might be acceptable to the holy brethren to follow up this suggestion, we are bold to add this fraternal question: whether the present is judged to be the right time for a preliminary conference on this, to prepare a level ground for a fraternal approach and to determine, by common agreement of members of the whole of our Orthodox Church, what might be considered the best bases, ways and means.

Clearly relevant to Christian unity are the questions concerning those Western Christians who recently separated from the Roman Church and call themselves Old Catholics, and who say that they accept the teachings of the undivided Church down to the 9th century and the decrees of the seven holy Ecumenical Councils: they claim that they are already in the Orthodox Church as a whole, and they seek union and communion with her as the remaining task of formal regularisation. The impetuous zeal for Christian truth and evangelical love on the part of these pious Christians is all together praiseworthy, and in their fine struggle they proved themselves to be filled with it. Their conferences, resolutions and acts are well known to the Christian world, as are their dogmatic and liturgical teaching through their catechetical and symbolical books.

A clear and agreed opinion as to their professed confession of faith does not yet prevail among us, but various opinions about it are expressed by our churchmen, both by those who have known them at close quarters and also by those who have studied them at a distance: some of them have decided that on important dogmatic points this confession is still far from perfect Orthodoxy, and others on the contrary consider it not to contain essential differences which would preclude unity of faith and ecclesiastical communion but to be a well-nigh complete acceptance by them of the complete healthy Orthodox teaching and tradition. We think it good, therefore, to invite the pious and fraternal views of the holy Orthodox sister-Churches on this important matter, as to whether they deem it opportune (and what way would be good and acceptable) to facilitate the realisation of the desire of these Christians for complete union with us, as an auspicious first-fruit of the hoped-for and longed-for unity of all Christians.

Worthy of no less attention, in our opinion, is the question of a common calendar, already for some time spoken and written about, especially proposed methods of reforming the Julian Calendar which has prevailed in the Orthodox Church for centuries, or the acceptance of the Gregorian: the former is more defective scientifically, the latter more exact, considering also the change of our ecclesiastical Easter after the necessary agreement. In the studies on this topic, we see that the opinions which are held by Orthodox who have made a special investigation of it are divided. Some of them consider our ancient inheritance as alone fitting in the Church, having been handed down from the fathers and always having had the Church's authority; not only do they think that there is very little need for change, but they would rather avoid it, for the reasons which they elaborate. Others, champions of the Westerners' calendar and its introduction by us, suggest the greatest possible chronometric accuracy, or even the new usage of uniformity; and they advocate the practice of the Western Church as being reasonable, perhaps in expectation of possible religious benefits, in their own opinion. So, in our times, the discussion has been intensified, various and stimulating assertions being propounded by either side, both of a scientific and of a religious nature, on both of which in some Orthodox countries a certain inclination is evident of adherence to the notion of changing our Orthodox calendar or of some reform of it; and, inasmuch as this question (for all its obvious scientific form) has an ecclesiastical importance, it seems right to us to exchange with the other Orthodox Churches the relevant information in order that on this too a common mind might be reached among

them, and a single opinion and decision of the whole Orthodox Church expressed. For, to her alone belongs the judgement on this matter and the research (if necessary) for a way of uniting (so far as is possible) the hoped-for scientific accuracy with the desired maintenance of hallowed ecclesiastical decrees.

So, then, our Great Church of Christ considers this exchange of views on the above-mentioned points to be a simple indication of spiritual and practical inter communion, and as cementing the unity which should be maintained on all common questions and which is most effective in Orthodoxy; and she cherishes high hopes that her fraternal concern in this matter, and her earnest prayer for holy and evangelical conclusions, will find a sympathetic echo in the hearts of the venerable sister-Churches in Christ and have the approval of their brotherly love, so that on each matter the views of those who reverently preside over the Churches may be made known. We think, too, that as well as the, common benefits expected from the mutual exchanges the great moral strength of the holy Orthodox Church of Christ may be demonstrated once again to the world; for its source is her possession of the unchanging truth, and its strong lever is the unbreakable unity of the local Churches. With such hopes and convictions, which we base upon the inspired zeal of those venerable presidents who govern the holy Churches of God and of the Holy Synods, that their Churches may be glorious and steadfast, we pray to the Lord

with all our heart that all the Orthodox faithful may be preserved and sheltered by His invincible shield, and that He will vouchsafe great happiness and health and long life to Your Beatitude and Holiness, who are much beloved and cherished by us.

Joachim of Constantinople
Joachim of Ephesus
Nathanael of Proussa
Alexander of Neocaesarea
Basil of Smyrna
Constantine of Chios
Polycarpus of Varna
Joachim of Xanthi
Nicodemus of Vodena
Nicephoros of Lititsa
Tarasios of Helioupolis
Hieronymos of Kallioupoli