

Die Schweiz im Dienst der Orthodoxen Universalkirche

Switzerland – serving the Universal Orthodox Church

## **1. A Centre to serve the Ecumenical Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Centre of Chambesy**

Towards the middle of his ministry, Patriarch Athenagoras (1948-1972) had a brilliant and daring idea, for that time. First in the Patriarchal Office, then in the Synod, the need to do something substantial and systematic to present and serve the Patriarchate began to be discussed.

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. In fact, long before that date, especially from 1920 onwards, the Patriarchate had again been a pioneer. It had declared to the Christian world its will and intention to create a "Society of Churches", modelled - at the time - on the League of Nations, which had just been founded and which committed itself to action.

A Patriarchal Centre whose aims should naturally be specified in all their aspects.

Apart from the task of expounding Orthodox and Constantinopolitan thought and tradition, the Centre should bear witness, with relevance and coherence, to Orthodox theological positions on the problems raised in Orthodoxy and in Christianity. To cultivate the spirit of dialogue, especially with the monotheistic religions, should also be among its primary concerns.

However, the inter-Orthodox conferences were already engaged in preparing the meeting of the Holy and Great Council - with three successive Pan-Orthodox Conferences, already held in Rhodes (1961, 1963 and 1964). In view of this fact and in order to cope

with this enormous work, it would naturally be necessary to have a suitable Centre to house the preparatory work and the corresponding stages of the Inter-Orthodox Commission and the Pan-Orthodox Conferences.

The Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was founded in June 1966. Its aims, as written in its Patriarchal and Synodic founding Tome, are:

- to inform the Christian world of the West, and especially of Western Europe, about the Orthodox worship and the Orthodox teaching, tradition and Theology;

- to study the theology and spiritual life of other Christian Churches and Confessions;

- to assist the communication between the local Orthodox Churches, and thus to promote orthodox unity;

- to promote the ecumenical spirit through the cultivation of relationships between Orthodoxy and other Christian Churches and Confessions aiming to promote the inter-Christian unity.

<https://centreorthodoxe.org>

## 2. The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference (Chambesy, 1968)

The list with the themes drafted during the first Pan-Orthodox Conference was sent to all the Orthodox Churches for study. It was soon realized that this list was too complex, and that not all the themes mentioned could become an object for discussion during a likely Ecumenical Synod and even less a pro-Synod. This opinion made itself felt ever since 1964, when representatives from the Patriarchate of Alexandria said that the Ecumenical Councils did not have to solve such large list of themes as the one drafted in 1961, and that the presence of the theologians of all autocephalous churches would not be enough to study all these problems. The Greek Professor Panagiotis Trembelas was even more adamant in this respect during the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference when he said: "in former times each synod dealt with one problelll only, nowadays there are many. We do not have enough theologians and the tasks seem to overwhelm the human powers; even if we were like Origenes, we could not solve them." The need to simplify the way in which to deal with the 1961 catalogue was, the reason behind the summons of the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference. It was summoned "by the consensus of the Primates of all Orthodox Churches only as an Inter-Orthodox Commission," but it ended its sessions as "the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Commission and not as a simple working commission. This fact was revealed during its sessions and it was confirmed by a unanimous decision of the delegates of the Orthodox Churches present at the meeting. The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference was held from 8<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> June 1968 at the **Orthodox Centre in Chambésy**, near Geneva, Switzerland. This centre was founded by Patriarch Athenagoras in June 1966 in order to promote inter-Orthodox and inter-Church relations. Thus, ever since 1968 this centre hosted the whole preparatory work for the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church.

The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference was attended by all Orthodox Churches, except for the Churches in Georgia, Albania and Czecho- Slovachia.

This conference started with "a consultation of the leaders of the delegations", who adopted the following three themes for its agenda:

a. "the creation of a working plan to lead to the convocation of a great inter-Orthodox or Pan-Orthodox Synod that is to decide on the themes put down of the list adopted during the first Pan-Orthodox conference in Rhodes, in 1961;

b. to examine the progress achieved and its perspectives for the relations of the Orthodox Churches with the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Old Catholic Churches, as well as with the non-Chalcedonian Churches and Lutheran Churches;

c. to examine the possibility of a more efficacious action by Orthodoxy in the World Council of Churches and particularly in view of the Fourth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches.,,

In connection with the first point on the agenda of this conference it was decided that several themes be selected from the catalogue adopted in Rhodes in 1961, and be given for study, as follows:

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).

The 1968 Conference decided to give up the plan for a proSynod and in exchange to organize a series of Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conferences, which were to adopt the papers dealing with the themes suggested as far back as '1961. These texts were to be presented directly before the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. As it is suggested by their titles, these conferences were meant to directly prepare the Orthodox Synod.

## The First Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference

The "long adventure of the themes made the convocation of the First Preconciliar Conference very much awaited, despite the fact that many predicted a failure because of the diversity of opinions".

Thirteen Orthodox Churches sent delegations to this Conference. The Churches of Georgia and Albania did not participate. The President of the Conference was always Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon. The first Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference took place from 21 to 28 November 1976 in the place which had already become a symbol of synodal preparation, but also of pan-Orthodox unity, namely the centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy.

I would like to point out that the work of this conference was preceded by two initial meetings between the heads of delegations. This is a novelty, but it will also be repeated when the work of the Council becomes more intense, at a higher level. This meeting between the heads of delegations will become the *Synaxis of the Primates*. This type of gathering of leaders or primates, which does not have a decisive power, has nevertheless managed to give a certain direction to the preparation of the Holy Council.

1. Revision of the list of themes of the Holy and Great Council.
2. Examination of the methods of preparation for the Council, with regard to the study of these themes.
3. General overview and evaluation of the relations and dialogues of the Orthodox Church with other Churches and Christian Confessions and with the World Council of Churches.
4. Study of the common celebration of Easter by all Christians on the same Sunday.

To bring this conference agenda to a successful conclusion, the work was done in commissions. The first commission, presided over by Metropolitan Justin of Moldova (who later became Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church) was responsible for the first two points, which were in a sense the most important ones, because they concerned the content of the topics and the intensification of the preparation of the Holy Pan-Orthodox Council.

The most difficult job was to be done by this commission, and there was a certain kind of deadlock in the Commission itself. In the end, Metropolitan Justin, president of the first working commission, found a mathematical method of selection: the first ten themes that are most mentioned will remain'. This mathematical method unlocked the process of selecting the themes. Finally, as proposed by Metropolitan Justin, the ten most mentioned themes were chosen by the members of the commission, who were part of all the delegations present. The list of the ten most mentioned themes is as follows:

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 other three an-Orthodox Preconciliar Conferences

The First panorthodox pre-conciliar conference of Chambésy in 1976 also established a process for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council. A secretariat for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council was established at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy. It was to receive proposals for each Patriarchal or Autocephalous Orthodox Church in relation to each of the ten established themes and to produce a report to be subsequently examined by an inter-Orthodox preparatory committee convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch who was to meet as many times as necessary until a consensus would be reached between the various Patriarchal and Autocephalous Orthodox Churches on the subject.

The text reflects the consensus reached and was then sent by the secretariat to the Holy Synod of each local Orthodox Church to be ratified, or to be commentated on again. The final comments of each Church were to be sent to the secretariat, which took them into account for the final text, which was to be discussed and adopted unanimously by a panorthodox pre- conciliar Conference convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch. This consisted the last step for the development of texts on different topics and the Council to be discussed and adopted by the Council. We can now understand the long and complex process of the preparation of the Holy and Great Council, which was based on the principle of unanimity.

In this spirit, **the Second panorthodox pre-conciliar conference of Chambésy in 1982** adopted the text on the issue of the impediments to marriage, of the adaptation of the rules of fasting to contemporary conditions, of the question of the calendar (mainly about the common date of Easter (Pascha), following a conference of Orthodox astronomers and canonists previously gathered at Chambésy). The Third panorthodox pre-conciliar conference of Chambésy in 1986 adopted the text on “the contribution of the Orthodox

Church to the realization of peace, justice, liberty, fraternity and love among peoples, and the elimination of racial discrimination and other forms of discrimination,” the relationship of the Orthodox Church to the ecumenical movement, the relationship of the Orthodox Church with the Christian world, and adopted bylaws of the preparatory pre-conciliar conferences and the inter- Orthodox preparatory committees where all the decisions should be taken by consensus, except for procedural matters to be taken by two-thirds of the heads of delegations present.

The Fourth Panorthodox pre-conciliar conference of Chambésy in 2009 adopted the final text on the Orthodox diaspora, which ratified the Orthodox Episcopal Assemblies.