

The First Step towards an intra-Orthodox and Ecumenical Cooperation

The preparation of the Council involves a long history of 110 years. Some researchers (Noel Ruffieux) divides the history of the Council of Crete in three periods:

- 1902 -> 1952
- 1952 -> 1990
- 1990 -> 2009
- 2014 -> 2016

A. The Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III (1834-1912; 1878-1884 X 1901-1912)

The patriarchal and synodical encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III in 1902, through which the Primate of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches were called to collaborate and to face the problems concerning the Orthodox Church at that time was the spark which initiated the preparation of a great **panorthodox** council. In 1902 while addressing himself to all local Orthodox Churches, Patriarch Joachim III asked the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches to gather in a conference “in order to pave the way for a constant, reciprocal, and friendly rapprochement (coming together) and to examine – in agreement with all the members of the Orthodox Church – the proper principles, measures, and means that need to be undertaken”. For the Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III this effort toward Orthodox Unity was inseparable from the effort toward Christian Unity that involves the participation of all Christian Churches. Orthodox unity and the Christian unity have the same goal: the communion that should characterize the Church of Christ.

It is generally acknowledged that the Orthodox Church was among the pioneers of the promotion of the ecumenical idea from the very beginning of the 20th century. This ecumenical mentions were first promulgated on 1902, “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, as a follow-up to the responses of the sister Orthodox Churches to his “Irenic letter” sent immediately after his elevation on the Apostolic and Patriarchal Throne of Constantinople. 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 ripe for a preliminary inter-of Christian unity, the Encyclical challenged, the other sister Orthodox Churches to deal with the new reality emerging at the beginning of the 20th century, namely the inter-Christian rapprochement and collaboration.

Although the Encyclical was addressed solely to sister Orthodox Churches, the irenic tone of this letter vis-à-vis the Christian West is easily noticeable and remarkable. In following “the path of evangelical love and peace” it inaugurated a moderate and peaceful attitude towards the non-Orthodox Churches that contrasted with the period of antagonism, enmity and polemics marking the turn of the century. This was acknowledged by the well-known Roman Catholic theologians who stressed that the distinctive and unique feature of this Encyclical is that it was “written in an entirely new spirit full of moderation and love”. This remark becomes even more important, if we recall the difficulties the Ecumenical Patriarchate faced during the 19th century: the proselytism by some protestant missionaries in its jurisdiction and the negative consequences of the development of national states and Churches in the Balkan, resulting from the revolutionary ideology of the European Enlightenment.

Patriarch Joachim’s initiative to call the Orthodox Churches to deal with the issue of Christian unity reveals the positive attitude both of himself and of the Patriarchal Synod towards the rapprochement of the Christian Churches, in spite of the bitter experience of a broken Christian world in the dawn of the 20th century (disunity, hostility, lack of communication, competition among the Christians). The Encyclical declared a firm conviction that, despite the existing divisions among the Christian world, the vision of Christian unity was a real possibility in time. Thus, 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. What is insinuated is that “schism and division should not been seen as a necessary problem which must be tolerated, but rather as an evil abomination and scandal which must be eliminated”.

Not only did the Encyclical letter of 1902 imply the obligation of the Church to work towards the removal of schism and division, but it also provided a modest and practical proposal of how such a task might be undertaken; simple steps such as the recognition of “similarities and points of contact” as well as the re-examination of controversial issues which have divided the Churches could become the starting point on this endeavor, despite the existing differences that till the beginning of the 20th century prevented contacts among the Churches. In the end of this Encyclical, Patriarch Joachim expressed his belief that the universal celebration of Easter in a fixed day could be a good point for preliminary deliberations.

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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 responses, all the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches expressed their desire to open relations and dialogue, particularly with the Anglican Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The calling of the Orthodox Churches to reflect on the urgent topic of the Christian unity motivated the caution of the Western ecclesiastical and political press. Despite the difficult political situations in the beginning of the 20th century in Minor Asia which drained the resources of

the Orthodox Church, the significance of that Encyclical was acknowledged, and it was considered in any way “precursor” of the Ecumenical Movement and of the Holy and Great Council of Crete.

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. Patriarch Joachim strongly believed that any dialogue with the West had to be undertaken with the agreement of all the autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

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**. It is through this proposal that Joachim III put forward the bases of a new Orthodox synodical ethos, after many centuries of isolation between the Orthodox Churches, due to particular historic circumstances.

B. THE 1904 ENCYCLICAL OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

Taking advantage of the favorable responses of the sister Orthodox Churches to this Encyclical, Patriarch Joachim came up again on the issue of Christian unity, by issuing a second Encyclical. This Encyclical was a “Response to the reactions of the local Orthodox Churches” and was considered as making one “entity” together with the Encyclical of 1902, because of their common context and content. In fact, the 1904 Encyclical dealt again with the main issues already expressed in the former one, namely the improvement of the bonds among the Orthodox Churches, and the relations of the Orthodox Church with Western Christianity.

C. The 1924 Pan-Orthodox Conference took place in Constantinople, being convoked by the Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV; 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 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.

The Ecumenical Patriarch Photios II convened a meeting of an inter-Orthodox preparatory committee in 1930 at the monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos, during which they established an initial list of **17 topics**, which were raised to be addressed, including inter-Orthodox relations, the relations of the Orthodox Church with other Churches and Christian confessions, the question of the calendar and various questions of disciplinary order. This council was necessary following the significant changes that the Orthodox Church had witnessed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the emergence of new autocephalous Churches, and the challenges the new century threw at the Church, already shaken by the First World War.