

The 1930 Inter-Orthodox Meeting in Vatopedi

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.

Ecumenical Patriarch Basil III summed up this desire to prepare the Council with the cooperation of all autocephalous Churches very well. On 1 May 1926, he sent a letter to the Primates of the Orthodox Church "to ask their opinion on the possibility of convening a preparatory congress or conference, which was to precede the future Ecumenical Council".

The autocephalous Churches responded favourably to what was called back then as the convocation of the *pre-synod*, seen as a preparatory instrument for the Pan-Orthodox Council. The successor of the previously mentioned Patriarch Basil III, the illustrious Ecumenical Patriarch Photius II, convened the meeting of the Inter-Orthodox Commission for June 8, 1930 in the Patriarchal Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos. The Patriarch requested the autocephalous Churches that the delegation consist of two bishop delegates from each Church. Regarding the purpose of this very important preparatory meeting, the Patriarchal letter of convocation said:

The purpose, apart from the close spiritual communion of the brothers in Christ representing our Holy Orthodox Church, is to definitively establish the catalogue of topics that will be discussed in the following pre-synod, which will be convened in the future (among these topics there will be obviously also those issues that constitute emergencies, and to establish the number of representatives of the Holy Autocephalous Orthodox Churches in the pre-synod.

The meeting took place from 8 to 23 June 1930 and brought its mission to a successful conclusion. All the invited Churches participated, except for the Russian Church. The monastery of Vatopedi had been chosen because it was considered one of the most open and the only one at that time to have updated the calendar. The inter-orthodox meeting in Vatopedi, which took place in 15 sessions, "had the task of preparing a programme for the pre-synod, which was to

be further verified by the particular Churches, and then to arrive at the pre-synod with reductions or additions". The supreme authority of the Pan-Orthodox Council was acknowledged, because it was confessed that neither the meeting of Vatopedi nor the pre-synod could make any changes, all having only a temporary character until the gathering of the Holy Synod. The inter-orthodox commission gathered at the monastery of Vatopedi identified 17 issues to be considered by the pre-synod and then by the Pan-Orthodox Council. These 17 items on the list proposed to Vatopedi were divided into 6 categories:

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)

Careful observation of these themes shows us their diversity, but also the fact that some of them take up (a) certain issues addressed in Constantinople in 1923. This is how the Romanian scholar of the Council, Viorel Ioniță, analyses these themes:

To start with we recall the diversity of the problems identified by this commission. They refer not only to the internal situation of the Orthodox Church, during the Pan-Orthodox Congress in 1923, but it included a considerable number of themes meant to deepen the relations of the Orthodox Churches among themselves. The largest number of points refers to several concrete aspects of the life and the discipline in the Orthodox Churches – some of these problems were dealt with during the 1923 congress – particularly the impediments to marriage, requirements for ordination, and last but not least, the problem of the calendar. The absolutely new themes on the list are connected with what was to become later “the problem of the Diaspora, the situation of the Orthodox Church in America, and afterwards, the relations of the Orthodox Church with the other Christian Churches. So it happens that ‘the problem of ecumenism’ came about for the first time on the Pan-Orthodox level, but with no decisions in this respect.¹

After the meeting of the Inter-Orthodox Commission of Vatopedi an intense preparation began in some Churches for the pre-synod, announced in 1931 to take

¹ V. IONIȚĂ, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod*, 17

place in June 1932 also in the monastery of Vatopedi. Unfortunately, due to the opposition of some Orthodox Churches to the idea of convening a Council of all Orthodox Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate had to cancel the pre-synod. However, all these efforts were not in vain, because they showed the importance of collaboration and common decisions in what concerns the common problems of the Church and beyond. The Second World War pushed the Council even further away, but the issues discussed were taken up again after this second world war event.

The short telegram of the Ecumenical Patriarch:

“Some of the most Holy Churches, in spite of their strong desire, are unable to take part in the pre-Synod, because of the circumstances. We think that as a result of this, it [pre-Synod] needs to be postponed” .

Once decided to be convened for 19th of June, pan-Orthodox pro-Synod failed, being postponed just two weeks before.

The “pan-Orthodox” terminology:

The Patriarch, Basil III of Constantinople used different names for this pre-Synodal event: congress (perhaps after the model of the previous one in 1923), *preparatory conference*. However, it is important to understand that this event was intended to be preparatory to the Great Council which had the task of bringing together all the Orthodox Churches to reflect together on some important changes in the life of the Orthodox Church. Eventually the name by which the 1930 Vatopedi event would go down in history would be *The Meeting of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission at Vatopedi in 1930*. This meeting was seen as a primary event of the Council (thought at the time to be imminent), some called it the pro/pre-synod preparatory event. The Council itself, as we have already mentioned, will also have several names throughout history. In fact, in 1923 the name 'Pan-Orthodox' was used to indicate the proposal for a Great Synod/Council of all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches (perhaps in connection with the event that proposed it: the Pan-Orthodox Congress of 1923). On the contrary, the letter of convocation of 1926 used another name: future *Ecumenical Council*. What is essential, beyond the different names, is on the one hand to distinguish between the preparatory meetings or conferences, and on the other, the Council as the desired goal.

The extended list of the themes proposed in 1930:

As the result of the works of the Commission the following 17 topics of agenda were defined:

1. The issue of the Russian Church. The preparatory inter-Orthodox meeting inscribes this issue the first of the catalogue of topics of the pro-Synod, and ask his all-Holiness that he makes possible before the convocation of the pro-Synod the representation in which-ever way of the Russian Sister-Church by delegates either from inside, either from outside of Russia.

2. Closer relationship and contact of the Orthodox churches between each other and measures in this sense, between them exchange of students between the Orthodox churches and reciprocal visit of delegations of clergymen, theology professors and preachers in order of fuller contact; better cooperation of the Orthodox churches in spiritual, moral and social matters for the well-being of the Orthodox peoples(nations).

3. Education of clergy theological and pastoral and necessity of its organisation under immediate supervision of the church and deleting all tendencies which are against Church.

4. Examination of the present situation of the Orthodox Church in America and of the ways of its therapy and improvement.

5. Finding of ways of reestablishing Orthodox Eastern monasticism in its ancient beauty and shining by insisting in traditions and monastic rules by renewing the old activity: scientific, philanthropic, cultural and specially by cultivating the holy arts.

6. Finding ways of cooperation of the Orthodox Churches in order to reject Atheism, and mistaken ideologies: Masonism, Theosophy and Spiritism, etc.

7. Relations of the Orthodox churches to heterodox churches on the East and on the West:

a. Relations in spirit of love, which following the Apostle is hoping everything with the heterodox churches (Armenians, Copts, Abyssinians, Chaldeans, Jacobites, Old-Catholic, Anglicans), which are trying to come closer to the Orthodox Church, and don't make proselytism among the Orthodox.

b. Relations of precaution and defence against heterodox, who are practicing proselytism and try in any way to damage the Orthodox Church, it means:

Roman-Catholicism – Uniatism, Protestantism – Methodism, Baptists, Chiliasm, and so on.

8. Examinations of the issue which heretics and schismatics will be received in the Orthodox church by the baptism, which are received by Chrismation, and which by simple confession of faith.

9. Definition of conditions of proclamation and recognition of of Autocephalous Church, and definition of the number of the generally recognised today Autocephalous Churches in order of better canonical reciprocal (mutual) communion and full (aproskopton) participation in pan-Orthodox gathering and Synod. And in the same way definition of conditions of recognition of the church as autonomous.

10. Codification of the holy canons and canonical decisions to be submitted in time to the Ecumenical Synod.

11. Examination of the actual practice of the local Churches about impediments of wedding, about reasons for divorce, and about legal procedure of them. Also examinations of the way by which if it's possible should be reached similar procedure in the whole Orthodox Church

12. Organisation of spiritual courts as possible in similar way in all Orthodox church, establishment of ecclesiastical system of justice.

13. Examination of the way of election of bishops, and specially of Primates of Autocephalous Orthodox Churches more corresponding to the holy canons.

14. Examination of the issue of calendar in connection with the decision of the 1st Ecumenical Synod about the Easter date and finding way to re-establish concordance of the churches about this issue.

15. Uniform if it's possible formulation of Typicon according to holy Tradition.

16. Examinations and finding of ways by which the Orthodox Christian culture can be strengthen among the Orthodox nations in all its dimensions.

17. Examination of ways of sustaining and promoting traditional byzantine art in its different forms, it means: church music, iconography, architecture and the art of holy vestments and utensil.

Churches who participated

In 1930 Meeting of the Preparatory Commission of the Holy Orthodox Churches was convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch Photios at the Sacred Great Monastery of Vatopedi at the Holy Mountain, 8-23 June. Delegations of the following local churches took part in the meeting:

1. Ecumenical Patriarchate
2. Alexandria
3. Antioch
4. Jeruslaem
5. Serbian Church
6. Romanian Church
7. Church of Greece
8. Church of Poland
9. Church of Cyprus delegated to be represented by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (letter of Archbishop Cyril of Cyprus to the Ecumenical Patriarch Photios from 20 May 1930).

According to some testimonies, there was also unofficial representation from the Bulgarian Church