

The Spirit of Rhodes

*

The preparatory pre-synod announced after the Vatopedi meeting in the 1930s was never held, despite some very important pan-Orthodox meetings, such as the Congress of Orthodox Theologians in Athens in 1936 or, more importantly, the Conference of the Primates of the Orthodox Church in Moscow in 1948. The Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras¹ * * * played an essential role in restarting the preparatory process for the Holy Council.

In 1948 Athenagoras was elected ecumenical patriarch and proceeded to become, in the words of Pope Paul VI, “a great protagonist of the reconciliation of all Christians.” At his own initiative, Athenagoras met with Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1964, the first time the leaders of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches had conferred since 1439. In 1965 the two leaders agreed to a revocation of the mutual excommunication decrees of 1054; this historic event was accomplished through simultaneous services in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and the patriarchal church in Constantinople.

*

a. The First Pan-Orthodox Conference Rhodes, 1961

The second period began in 1952, when Patriarch Athenagoras began to rive the conciliar process. (...) Patriarch Athenagoras himself swapped the pen of the encyclical for the staff of the pilgrim: he visited the other primates, received the Patriarch of Moscow, Alexis I, at the Phanar. The hope of a general council no longer seemed absurd. In 1951, the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras sent a letter to all the Primates of the Orthodox Church in which he proposed the convocation of a new Ecumenical Council, especially in the light of the new geopolitical context.

Some words from this letter:

*Our Most Holy, Ecumenical, Apostolic and Patriarchal Throne, while taking into consideration the problems of church nature and of common interest that have come about throughout the centuries, as well as the evolution of the social life, decided, according to the long standing tradition and **making use of its canonical right**, to propose for a time that is suitable to its sisters, the Most Holy Churches, to summon a **Great Ecumenical Council** in order to study and solve them correspondingly.*

In 1952 another letter was sent to the Primates of the Orthodox Church inviting them to reconsider the themes discussed previously, in the 1930 vatopedi meeting. Almost ten years later took place the First Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes between 24th September-1st October 1961. All the Churches except the Georgian and the Albanian Churches were present.

¹ Some words about the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (born March 25 1886-elected Patriarch 1948 – died July 7 1972. He attended the seminary on the island of Halki, near Constantinople, and was ordained a deacon in 1910. He then moved to Athens, where he served as archdeacon to the archbishop Meletios, who later became the ecumenical patriarch. From there, Athenagoras’ career in the church progressed through successively higher offices. In 1922 he became metropolitan of Corfu, and in 1930 he became archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America, with a membership of 1,950,000. While in that office, Athenagoras oversaw the establishment of many new parishes and schools, including a seminary for the training of Greek-American priests.

Metropolitan Nikodim Rotov² * * * in the opening of the Conference:

*

*We see our pan-Orthodox meeting as a visible sign of God's benevolence towards the efforts of all Orthodox Churches to strengthen pan-Orthodox unity and intensify mutual cooperation. Preserving the Orthodoxy, our local Churches remain in that unity, exemplified by the sacred and mystical unity of the Most Holy Trinity, **one in royalty and sharing the same throne.***

The conference began with the approval of seven rules for the development of the future Council. One of them should be noted: the fact that all decisions should be taken with unanimous approval. The purpose of this conference was very precise: to establish a clear list with the topics for the next Pan-Orthodox pre-synod. * The eight topic groups were divided between six commissions:

1. Faith and Dogma
2. The Divine Worship
3. Church Administration and Order
4. The Relations of the Orthodox Churches among Themselves
5. The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Other Christian World
6. Orthodoxy and the World
7. Theological Themes
8. Social Problems

The first Rhodes Conference also approved at the end of the meeting an extraordinarily beautiful and theologically complex Note:

*

Aware of our responsibility before God and men we bring to you knowledge the fact that we have examined the themes in our responsibility and have taken unanimous decisions concerning the catalogue of themes for the future Pro-Synod. These themes, which have preoccupied for a long time our local Orthodox Churches and the whole Christian world in general and which we have established more precisely, will still have to be studied and examined during the next Pro-Synod, and, finally, according to the good pleasure of God, to be brought for clarification and final decision before the Ecumenical Synod which is to be summoned. Our assembly here represents in itself a very great event. Never we have lost from our sight the fundamental idea and awareness that the eyes of our sons of our Church everywhere – moreover even the attention of the whole Christian world – are intent on us and on our work. After a long period of time Orthodoxy met for the first time in a conference which gave expression to its fullness. The awareness of the importance of this event, as well our responsibility for the great expectations of the world, has overwhelmed us, the delegates of the churches, during these days.

² Nikodim Rotov (1929-1978), Ordained in 1960 at the age of 31, the youngest bishop in the Christian world at the time, he would go on to become one of the six presidents of the World Council of Churches. According to some sources he might have been a KGB agent. Nikodim is said to have participated in negotiating a secret 1960s agreement between Soviet and Vatican officials that authorized Eastern Orthodox participation in the Second Vatican Council in exchange for non-condemnation of atheistic communism during the conciliar assemblies. Until 1972, he chaired the Department of External Church Relations. Nikodim collapsed and died in 1978 while in Rome for the installation of Pope John Paul I. The new pope, who would himself die a few weeks later, prayed over him in his final moments. He was a mentor for the current Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill.

*

b. The Second Pan-Orthodox Conference Rhodes, 1963

The Second Pan-Orthodox Conference took place in the context of the convocation of the **Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)**. The two Popes of the Council, John XXIII (1958-1963) and Paul VI (1963-1978), were very interested in getting closer to the Orthodox Church. In fact, John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council invited the Orthodox Churches to send observer representatives to the Council. On the other hand, the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras also wanted to improve relations with the Catholic Church. The Patriarchate of Moscow agreed to send observers, provided that the Second Vatican Council did not condemn communism.

In this context the Second Pan-Orthodox Conference was convened in Rhodes from 26 to 29 September 1963. The precise purpose of this conference was:

1. to appoint observers for the Second Vatican Council;
2. to start an official theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

The Conference began with a lot of enthusiasm after the success the first one had. I recall the words of the future Romanian Patriarch (back then Metropolitan) Justinian * * at the opening of this event:

*You all already know that not only for Orthodoxy, but also for the whole Christian world there is the **Spirit of Rhodes**. For us, Rhodes is not just an island with natural beauty and a special history. For Orthodoxy, Rhodes has become the center of manifestation of our unity in the deepest sense of the word.*

While the First Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes in 1961 aimed at strengthening the fraternal ties between the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches and at composing a list of topics to be discussed by the Orthodox pro-synod, the Second Conference, which took place in 1963, focused on the relations of Orthodoxy with other Christian denominations, especially with the Roman Catholic Church.

This conference revealed very good the two aspects of unity the Orthodox Church of that time was searching for: the internal unity and the ecumenical unity. On the one hand, the dialogue with the Catholic Church was to begin and observers were to be sent for the second session of the Second Vatican Council. On the other hand, pan-Orthodox unanimity was to be found regarding participation in the dialogue and the question of observers.

* The final decision:

Concerning the first question, to send or to not send observers to the second session of the Second Vatican Council, even though the delegations of the churches who took part in the meeting have expressed, in their majority, diverse opinions on this question, nevertheless, it was accepted in common agreement that each of the Orthodox Churches may proceed freely in regard to the special question. The conference recommended that:

1. In as much as is possible, the observers who will be sent should not be bishops, but from among the clergy or lay people;

2. *The delegations who took part in the Conference should present this recommendation to their Church to proceed accordingly.*
3. *The churches who decide to send observers should inform the other churches about their decision*

Although the ecclesiastical newspapers of the time praised this meeting, we observe that the Second Rhodes Conference touched one of the most sensitive points of the pan-Orthodox sphere: **ecumenism**. While the First Rhodes Conference, which dealt only with intra-Orthodox issues, had an extraordinary message and an extended list of topics and succeeded in finding a complex agreement on several issues, in the Second Rhodes Conference, which focused on the relationship especially with the Catholic Church, all that could be agreed upon were some recommendations without anything definitive decision, leaving the Autocephalous Churches the freedom to act according to their possibilities.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's delegation to the II Vatican Council was lead by Father Andrei Scrima (1925-2000)³.

*

3. The Third **Pan-Orthodox Conference Rhodes, 1964**

The Third Rhodes Conference finds itself in a continuity not only historically, but also theologically, with the Second Pan-Orthodox Rhodes Conference. Indeed, the uncertainties and overly general decisions taken in 1963 gave rise to the need for a new Pan-Orthodox meeting to clarify the question of the **official dialogue with the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Rhodes Pan-Orthodox Conference**. This meeting was first convened for 23rd August 1964, but then the convocation was postponed and finally held from 1 to 15 November 1964.

The dialogue with the Catholic Church was the main theme alongside the reopening of the dialogues with the **Anglican Church** and the **Old-Catholic Church**, which did not receive the same attention. There was a certain tension and the establishment of new relations with the Catholic Church was treated with discretion, probably because of the very sensitive topic. The purpose of this conference was to:

- to study the way in which the Catholic Church should be informed about the decision of the Orthodox Church for a dialogue between the two churches;
- the content and course of this dialogue.

The uncertainty present at the Second Pan-Orthodox Rhodes Conference continued into the Third also. In fact, from the speeches of some Orthodox primates contemporary with the event under discussion, we observe that the Catholic Church of that time was suspected of proselytism, especially through the Greek Catholic Churches.

³ ANDRÉ SCRIMA (1925, Gheorgheni - 2000, Bucharest). Monk, member of the Group of Antim ("Burning Bush"), archimandrite of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, personal representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras at the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965); member and inspirer, since 1959, of the Orthodox monastic community of Deir-al-Harf, Lebanon. Studied philosophy, mathematics and theology in Bucharest; between 1957 and 1959 he was a doctoral student in Benares, India, with a thesis on "The Ultimate, its Methodological and Epistemological Connotation According to Advaita-Vedanta". Professor of philosophy and religious sciences at the Catholic University of Saint-Joseph, Beirut (1968-1989) and at the Maronite University of Saint-Esprit, Kaslik, Lebanon. He was a Fellow of the International Academy of Religious Sciences and Philosophy of Science in Brussels and Senior Fellow of New Europe College - Institute of Advanced Studies, Bucharest.

The Romanian delegation supported the dream of the unity of the Church, although it showed that it was still very circumspect about the possibility of dialogue. Metropolitan Justin of Moldavia, the head of the Romanian delegation, recalled that although it was true that dialogue had been decided at the previous Rhodes Conference, the decision taken in 1963 was only “general, taken with great reserve”. Similarly, the Serbian Church, which evoked the political situation of the Second World War, noting the suffering caused by the Catholic Church to the Serbian people during this conflict, mentioned the laity, which is the guardian of the faith and which would not easily accept a profound dialogue with the Catholic Church. The Polish delegation also pointed out that the Polish Orthodox had been persecuted by the Polish Catholics and questioned a possible sincere dialogue between the two churches. Other churches, however, were more positive in their approach. The historical Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch appreciated the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for ecumenical dialogue.

At that time, dialogue with the Anglican Church and the Old-Catholic Church seemed to be easier, which is why the resumption of dialogue with these Churches was voted without any reservations, because it was known that “none of these Churches hid proselytising intentions among the Orthodox”. Metropolitan Nicodemus Rotov, the head of the Russian delegation, was the one who pointed out that the Catholic Church was the only one with a tradition and teaching that differed little from the Orthodox Church.

From many points of view it seems that the 1964 Rhodes Conference was a step backwards compared to the previous conference, because in the decisions it is noted that the conservative view regarding the dialogue with the Catholic Church decided in 1963 won out, recognising that the conditions did not allow for a dialogue at that time.

Our Holy Orthodox Church affirms that it desires to always have good relations with all Christian Churches and Confessions, in view with building the unity of the Christians in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Lord (...)

In this spirit, the First Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes declared itself in favour of promoting inter-Christian relations in the love of Christ, and the Second Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes decided in principle to propose to the Roman-Catholic Church a dialogue on equal footing.

The Third Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes repeats the desire expressed before by the Orthodox Church concerning this issue of the dialogue, but, upon studying its details, realized that for a fruitful beginning of a real theological dialogue a thorough preparation is necessary and suitable conditions should be created.