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**A Letter to His Beatitude, Our Father Patriarch John X and the Members of the Holy Synod of Antioch regarding the Great Council**

His Beatitude, Our Father John X (Yazigi)  
and Their Eminences, the Members of the Holy Synod of Antioch  
the Patriarchal Center, Balamand

Our Father, Your Beatitude the Patriarch,

After asking for your blessing and prayers, I present you, as a child of the Orthodox Church in the Holy See of Antioch, this analysis and some questions and impressions regarding the "Great" Council that is to be held in June 2016. I present these to you and the Holy Synod as a modest contribution to approaching the coming council. May they be of benefit as background and for shaping the possible end result of this extraordinary event in the life of the Church today.

**Your child in Christ,  
Archimandrite Touma (Bitar)  
Holy Trinity Family  
May 21, 2016**

## **The “Great and Holy” Council: An Analysis, Questions, and Impressions**

*The synod is not “power” in the juridical sense of the word, for there can exist no power over the Church, the Body of Christ. The synod is, rather, a witness to the identity of all churches as the Church of God in faith, life and “agape”.*

– Alexander Schmemmann, 1963

### **A Necessary Preface**

This is the council set to be held between June 16 and 27, 2016. Its characterization, by those who have prepared it, as “great and holy” does not mean anything at this stage, even if perhaps they meant things by it. We are a theanthropic Church. The Church is Jesus Christ! That which belongs to the Spirit of God is only judged spiritually (cf. 1 Corinthians 2)! The Spirit works and speaks in the consciousness of the Church, which is neither limited to an individual nor to a group– including a council, any council, no matter who they are who gather in it, what their number may be, or the issues that they examine! This, in the expression of the Acts of the Apostles, at what is known as the Council of Jerusalem, where the Apostles, presbyters and all the mass of the faithful gathered– that is, the Church there– I say is two statements taken from the message to the brethren from among the gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The first: “it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord” (Acts 15:25). The second: “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us” (Acts 15:28). These two statements are not made as representation, because the Holy Spirit is a revealer of secrets and the final say belongs to divine truth. It is not the property of “pillars”. God is not a respecter of persons, as the Chosen Apostle says, because the Spirit can raise up the little ones without them as bearers of His word. The final is not the property of those who are regarded as wise and knowledgeable because the Spirit reveals the truth, again and again, and sometimes causes the ignorant of the world to shame the wise (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:27)!

Therefore, the current council is nothing more than a council or even a meeting of bishops, even if they are the “representatives” of what are considered to be all fourteen of the “autocephalous churches” in the Orthodox world. Sees increase and decrease– this is a human arrangement! In the Church, there are not representatives of groups, but voices for the Spirit of God in the Church because they do not derive their value from themselves or from their blocs and they are of no regard in themselves! Only if the Spirit is in them and in what they bring about do they become a “great and holy” council! I say this so that no one will think that the Church of Christ is a pagan tribe or that she is kingdoms ruled like the people of the world are ruled, those of whom God’s Word judges: “the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them.. but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 25-26).

These six papers that were the product of meetings and preparations that lasted fifty-five years and which bear the signatures of the representatives of the Orthodox Churches as the Orthodox meeting in Chambésy, Switzerland on January 21-28, 2016, as also their quasi-final formulation that will be presented to the coming council for one last look and a decision- I say that these papers are presented to the conscience of the Church, not imposed upon it! Therefore, whatever their final formulation may be, they do not derive their authority over the Church from their having been issued by those gathered at the coming council! That is not correct! The decisive say remains with the Spirit of God who is active in the Church! No identification is possible between any council and the Spirit in the Church! Consultation at the council, even if it is discussed, cannot be considered to be a foregone conclusion. Even if the council speaks in the name of God and His Church, its decisions cannot be considered to be expressing the truth of the Gospel automatically. The council, as individuals, has respect in any case, but what is issued by it is not automatically accepted. It does not oblige the Church unless it is in transparency and according to the Spirit of God and the conscience of the Church! We cannot submit to the decisions of a council, any council, unless it submits to God, in Spirit and in truth! Identifying the correctness of the conciliar statement is the responsibility of the Church in her entirety, and therefore of each believer in her, by the power of the grace that is liberally bestowed upon the people of God to be kings, priests and prophets for God!

Therefore, those papers marked with the signatures of those who attended the Chambésy meeting- not to even speak of what came before it- are, until further notice, nothing more than indications of the presence of those who attended! Their positions, whether out of conviction, ignorance, or acquiescence, toward what is in them, do not oblige the Church. The Church may reject what these papers contain, either wholly or partially, if they sense, in the Spirit of God, that it is defective! Is it not that God is the one who must be obeyed, not men? Therefore, we are not bound by a paper or by signatures! We are not in chains for the sake of men, but ambassadors in chains for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, like Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles (cf. Ephesians 6:20).

I say this so that none of those who signed will reckon himself obliged, or obligating the Church, on the grounds that they previously agreed on a text or were bound to a position! Their signature is their conscience in Christ first of all! Repentance from error, which may occur, is better than persistence in it in order to preserve human honor. Herod, who ordered John the Baptist beheaded knowing that John was a prophet, and did not turn back from this, in order to save face in front of the dignitaries and officers because, in addition to an adulterer, a criminal! Therefore, that which appears Article 11, Paragraph 2 of the Rules of Operation of the "Great and Holy" Council, regarding amendments to the texts, that amendments, additions, or corrections " that [are] not approved unanimously shall not be passed" is not in harmony with trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, to Him be glory. This does not leave room for any significant change to the prepared texts, as though they were sent down from heaven! Flexibility is necessary! Only that which is in the Holy Bible and what is established in the conscience of the Church, we do not change a letter of it. Apart from that, everything is under examination and testing, no matter how much time looking in to them has taken! There are no acceptable limits in dealing with the proposed texts, especially if there is ambiguity in them or if they touch on dogmatic or ecclesiological issues, as is the case with some of what is contained in these texts. Therefore it is assumed that, until the end, they remain open to addition, editing, and even total deletion, because "the word of God is not chained" (2 Timothy 2:9).

Then, it is not acceptable to gain the conscience of the bishops or of the people of God by arm-twisting or extortion! If the work of the council is not open to Spirit and truth in every case, then it ignores God in God's name! God forbid that this be! The final say, in every matter, belongs to the Word alone! The council acts in Christ, or what value does it have?

### **Some Ecclesiological Premises**

The Church is a people and a bishop, in Christ, on a given territory. There is no people without a bishop and no bishop without a people. The people are in the bishop and the bishop is in the people (St Cyprian of Carthage). They are both in Christ, in correct faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, active in living love. We do not domesticate any flaws in the faith and we do not permit any counterfeit in love! Thus it is said, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Every fault in the faith that we ignore is an idol and all counterfeit in love is idolatry! "Whoever is born of God does not sin... we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:18-20).

As for correct faith, we received it handed down. Of this the Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, "keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you..." (1 Corinthians 11:2). And as John the Elder says to the elect lady and her children, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him" (2 John 1:10).

As for love, it is without hypocrisy (cf. Romans 12:9).

As for the bishop, he is the icon of Christ in his people. His motto with regard to them is the motto of the Chosen Apostle toward the Corinthians, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:1)! He is the scion of the Apostles. It is assumed in his every attitude that "his desires are in agreement with the will of God" (St John Chrysostom). The love of Christ compels him (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:12). He longs for them with the affection of Jesus Christ (cf. Philippians 1:8). He is an extension of Jesus in bearing the suffering of his people! "Who stumbles and I do not burn?" said Paul about the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:29).

As for territory, it is not in itself anything of the Church. But the discourse, every discourse, is directed to the Church, to the faithful, to the brethren, to the saints in Jerusalem or Antioch or even in the house of one of the brethren like Nymphas (cf. Colossians 4:14) or Philemon (cf. Philemon 1:1)!

The path of handing down in faith has accompanied the holy fathers for generation after generation. Like what they cried constantly out at the Fourth Ecumenical Council, "This is the faith of the fathers! This is the faith of the Apostles! Peter speaks thus through the mouth of Leo! Thus taught the Apostles! Thus taught Cyril!"

The ties of love that bind the people and the bishop in Christ caused the likes of Ignatius of Antioch to say, preserving the unity of the Church, "Obey the bishop as you obey the commandments of God" (Epistle to the Trallians 13) and also, "the Spirit proclaimed these words: Do nothing without the bishop; keep your bodies as the temples of God; love unity; avoid divisions" (Epistle to the Philadelphians 7). Likewise, it is the bishop who "is in harmony

with the commandments [of God], even as the harp is with its strings" (Epistle to the Philadelphians 1). This is what makes the bishops in every corner of the earth "one mind in Jesus Christ" (Epistle to the Ephesians 3). This is the given that guides the holy God-Bearer to urge "to respect the deacons as Christ Jesus, the bishop as the image of the Father, and the priest as God's council and the band of the Apostles" (Epistle to the Thracians 3).

God is in each church. Jesus Christ is her head and His truth is her leader. There is no difference between one church and another except in piety. Therefore, the churches are not taken according to their size or their worldly greatness, nor according to their wealth, lest Christ come to be despised in consciousness. Thus the bishops are equal in honor, whether they were ordained for a large church or a small one. God's prestige is our precedence, not maximizing income! Even if a bishop is bishop of people in a village, it is his zeal for the Church of God that places him, when the need calls, over every church throughout the inhabited world! Are we not all brethren in the Lord and a brother is just as zealous for his brother as he is for himself.

Then the bishops in the district, or city, or see, after the scope of evangelism has widened and the believers and pastors have increased in number, should not place one of them over another, so that the headship of Jesus, the chief of our salvation, may not be challenged, He who is present here and now (cf. Matthew 28:20) in His truth and His Gospel! For the ordering of affairs, a first among equals may be established among them, having the gift of serving the servants among them, applying God's words, "he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves" (Luke 22:26)! This is not a scope for glory and authority in disguise, lest the name of God be blasphemed because of them. But rather, it is a model for the service of piety and for humility of heart in the love of the Lord!

### **In Light of the Above**

In order to present a view of the coming council in light of what we have received from the tradition of the Orthodox Church, we determine whether we are in line with the patristic, apostolic mind and in accordance with the theanthropic consciousness that has come down to us from the early Church, the consciousness that constitutes, in correct faith and divine grace, the sole guide for discerning that which is of the Church from that which is not of the Church! Defining whether we need to hold a council, on the level of the whole Orthodox world and the issues that the council must treat in order to preserve the correct faith and edify the faithful depend on the current situation of the Orthodox Church and the challenges that she is facing on every level, as well as on the approach that should be taken in dealing with these challenges and this current reality. I say this because there are question marks regarding the premises of the "makers" of the coming council and some aspects of their approach to the issues raised. Merely presenting an opinion about what they have reached, with regard to certain details, here and there, is not sufficient, but rather places us in the position of someone acquiescing to the mentality, the premises and the approaches upon whose foundation the prepared documents have been built. It is certain to many, ourselves included, that at the foundations or the starting-points that have been adopted, there are defects that cannot be neglected and that cannot be regarded as harmless for us! Therefore, we will question the starting-points first of all, so that we will not be taken on the basis of the approach with their results, lest we find ourselves pouring water into a cracked well!

Where there is no church, in the sense elucidated above, there is no bishop because he is not bishop over a territory, or rather over a church abiding in a territory, and there is no bishop over a territory where a church had previously been established but no longer exists. There is no bishop over Chalcedon, for example, because there is no longer a people, a church in Chalcedon. There are no honorary bishops because their very existence degrades the honor of the Church of Christ, since they do not deal with the Church and take pride in her as a living entity, but rather as a historical, geographical entity that has ceased to exist! There are no auxiliary bishops because their bond is to a task and not to a people! Honorary bishops, auxiliary bishops and those like them invalidate the meaning of the episcopacy and therefore corrupt traditional practice that as long as there is a church there is a bishop. If the need exists for there to be assistants for bishops of the Church in a territory (patriarchates, dioceses, archdioceses...), then it is assumed that people will be appointed and given titles that correspond to the jobs that they hold, not the title of bishop, so as to preserve the meaning and the traditional place of the title "bishop" and so that the Church will not become accustomed to replacing the honor of shepherding the people of God, like one to whom the sheep belong, with empty, honorific titles and in doing so see the Church of Christ- which is identical to Him- become a focus for false glory and lust of self-aggrandizement! The episcopacy is a locus for dying every day in Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:31), not a locus for that which honors the servants of the Church in this world! Nostalgia for a bye-gone past is understandable and one can sympathize with it, but the true practice of the Church cannot be based on it!

Geography is subject to politics. But the Church is hostage neither to geography nor to politics because her North Star is the Kingdom of Heaven everywhere, under any ruler and under any political system! Jerusalem was called Jebus before the Jews. The Roman emperor Hadrian named it Aelia Capitolina. The Arabs named it al-Quds. In the Church, cities do not have Christian or holy names and there are no ecclesiastical political kingdoms! Therefore, it is not fitting for children of the faith to hold on to the names of places and cities, as though they had an eternal, mystical character!

The Byzantine Empire ended. The geography of the imperial world, which was known as the "oikoumene," has changed. The population distribution of the churches in the empire, geographically, is not what it was. A new reality has come about. One formula has not changed and cannot change: a bishop over a people living in a territory! Nicaea has changed its name and become Iznik, so what? If there was a people and a church there, we would call it "the Church that is in Iznik." If we installed a bishop over the church there, we would call him the "bishop of the Church that is in Iznik." Where is the error in taking a realistic approach? But if there is no longer a church in Iznik, then there is absolutely no need to name an honorary bishop for the church that was in Nicaea but no longer exists! Do we keep the name "Nicaea" for sentimental reasons? This cannot overshadow a realistic way of treating the Church, lest the Church become a church of psychological complexes! This, moreover, causes us to act as though historical geography stops at the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire! No history after that can move forward and no geography remains capable of changing. Everything, then, is measured by the standards of the distant past, as though history reached that point and stopped and geography reached that point and its milestones became fixed forever! We continue to be nourished by the theology and spirituality that developed under the empire. That we understand, because it has a profound relationship the faith of the Church and life in her. But for us to be bound by situational arrangements derived from the extinct civic and political

reality of the empire, as though the empire didn't cease to exist 563 years ago, this is an indication of a mental illness whose consequence is either despising the present or hampering it, like people who want to live in the past and don't want to face the challenges of the present! This inevitably establishes, as we think is the case today, an affective schizophrenia. Does this not sometimes disrupt the life of the Church to the point of paralysis?

If there is no longer a Byzantine Empire, then this means that there is no longer, primarily, justification for the continuation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and its component parts! The See of Constantinople is no longer capable of being an example to be imitated. I say "primarily," because the Patriarchate of Constantinople that impressed its character upon the Orthodox world when the empire still existed, if the Orthodox world continues to be influenced by its character after the empire has ceased to exist, then it will exist and has existed, as a non-entity impeding the pastoral care, evangelism and witness of the Church in the time and place where she has been brought by civilizational, political and geographical changes in the world. Moreover, it will exist and has existed as an entity that draws us to itself and not to Christ, as though the Ecumenical Patriarchate continues to derive its "authority" from the person of the Byzantine emperor, not from the service of Christ, the emperor to whom it was organically tied in history (see the article by John Meyendorf, "On the Ecumenical Patriarchal Claims to Universality").

There is no more Constantinople! Those who follow the Patriarchate of Constantinople there have come to be less than two thousand in number. A city named Istanbul has taken its place. Even Istanbul isn't currently the capital of the state that succeeded the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Sultanate, where the Ecumenical Patriarchate had certain prerogatives, but rather Ankara, where there is not a single Christian! The Turkish authorities have at times pressured the Ecumenical Patriarch to move to Ankara. Should we not be humble and accept that Constantinople is no longer patriarchal, but rather an ordinary parish with around five hundred families? We bow down before the terrible sacrifices of the Church of Constantinople, but geography has changed, history has changed, the Church has gone to other places, and the "oikoumene," in the Byzantine sense of the word, no longer has any existence! The issue goes beyond human sentimentality and nostalgia. In the name of what sound mind and what upright theology is it right to call for the patriarchate to continue to be a patriarchate and the patriarch a patriarch, and for the patriarch to continue to keep the title "ecumenical" - not over the oikoumene, as it was understood in the Byzantine period, but over the inhabited world in the sense of the whole world, as is the case today?!

With serenity of soul, but with profound pain, we say that insisting on holding on to the See of Constantinople and its "ecumenical" primacy in the Orthodox world means two fundamental things:

First, that the See of Constantinople, represented by the patriarch and the synod, insofar as it is no longer over a people or a church existing in a territory that bears its name- that is, Constantinople- establishes its authority over a phantom church! So you have a see, or rather, a group of bishops over no people and no church! Therefore, the work of the See of Constantinople is not normal in the Church and is not for shepherding the Church. Its service is no longer service in the explicit ecclesiastical sense of the word. It no longer serves the Church, but rather serves in the name of the Church- and what a difference there is between these two

things! The rights and prerogatives that the See of Constantinople talks about place it in the position of someone eternally seeking, not to deal with the Church, but authority and prerogatives! So holding on to the Patriarchate of Constantinople means, with all apology, substituting for the Church those who are regarded as representing her which frankly makes them, in practice, talk about the Church, but also behave as though they regard themselves as being the Church and above the Church, as mandated above, eternally (!), by an emperor who no longer exists!

Secondly, the See of Constantinople's manner of treating its "historical authority" means intervening in the other churches, on territory that is not their own, and claiming authority over them, by the force of situational canons that can no longer be put into effect because they are civilly tied to the Byzantine Empire which no longer exists, insofar as their guarantor was the person of the emperor and they are tied to him personally. An example of this is Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon. The formulation of the 150 fathers at the council was expressed as follows: "the city which is honored with the imperial government and the senate and enjoys equal privileges with imperial Senior Rome should be exalted like her in ecclesiastical affairs as well." First of all, there is no exaltation except for Him who is depicted in the icon "the Extreme Humility." So by what is this exaltation represented? With the consecration of "the metropolitans alone of the Pontic, Asian and Thracian dioceses, and also the bishops from the aforesaid dioceses in barbarian lands..." Some interpreters understood it as being authority over the dioceses of the "barbarians" in their time, okay. Even if we were to accept this by way of argument, what would we conclude from the background to which it belongs?

We would conclude that this canon, when it was issued, was conditional upon the city of Constantinople being the seat of the emperor and the senate! So insofar as the city is no longer royal because the empire no longer exists and there is no longer an emperor or a senate in it, the canon is no longer in effect and there is no longer any justification for the exaltation (!) of the See of Constantinople in ecclesiastical affairs, just like "Old Rome." The prominent role of the Patriarch of Constantinople, derived from his proximity to Caesar, has become a thing of the past! Here it is noteworthy, as it appears in the Pedalion, was that one of the reasons that the canon was enacted by the fathers of the council was service of the other churches and meeting their needs before Caesar. When the bishop of Laodicea, Nuncius, wanted to defend the glory of the bishop of Constantinople, he said, "He is our glory, because he is concerned with meeting our needs!" As for the barbarians, those who do not speak Greek and were considered barbarians according to the Byzantine Empire's classification, the arrangement adopted for the consecration of their bishops has been cancelled because of the absence of its civil imperatives and the abandonment of the classification of peoples into Greeks and barbarians as had existed in Byzantine times.

Insofar as the Patriarchate of Constantinople no longer has a people and a church for whose service it is responsible, its continued use of authority, considered to be ecclesiastical, has come to be based, in effect, on three claims:

1. The permanent primacy of the See of Constantinople over the other sees in the Orthodox world. Insofar as primacy of service is effectively no longer available, and insofar as primacy of honor is not enough to sate Constantinople's longing for the bye-gone "greatness" of the



Byzantine Empire and its glories, that nevertheless lives on in some souls up to today, the primacy represented by the formula "primus inter pares" is no longer enough for the Ecumenical Patriarch, because it has no explicit evidence of leadership giving it real authority over the other churches, as it had had under the empire. This places it in an unstable and uncomfortable equilibrium. It has before it the Vatican model as a sort of incentive, "reminding" it of what it longs to recover! It is evident, as voices repeat here and there, that Constantinople's restlessness has always been, since days of old, over how the patriarch can bring together the Orthodox in himself into a semblance of Papal primacy, and the correct faith into unilateral authority over the Orthodox world, and dependence on a single man who derives his authority from himself- that is, the Ecumenical Patriarch- insofar as there is no longer an emperor from whom he can derive his authority! We are not saying this as a way of making false allegations or with an intent to harm, but rather by way of objectively observing what voices are saying about it in Constantinopolitan circles. To the best of our knowledge, his yearning has been expressed by at least two people close to the current Ecumenical Patriarch:

The first is Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, Metropolitan of Bursa in the Patriarchate of Constantinople, who was previously secretary to the Ecumenical Patriarch, in his response to the text on primacy issued by the Patriarchate of Moscow, following their response to the Ravenna Document issued by the international body for theological dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Vatican. Among other things, Lambriniadis said, "In the case of the archbishop of Constantinople, we observe the unique coincidence of all three levels of primacy, namely the local (as Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome), the regional (as Patriarch), and the universal or worldwide (as Ecumenical Patriarch). This threefold primacy translates into specific privileges... The primacy of the archbishop of Constantinople has nothing to do with the diptychs... If we are going to talk about the source of a primacy, then the source of primacy is the very person of the Archbishop of Constantinople, who precisely as bishop is one 'among equals,' but as Archbishop of Constantinople is the first-hierarch without equals (primus sine paribus)."

The second is Father John Panteleimon Manoussakis, a professor of Orthodox theology and philosophy in America. He wrote a book entitled *For the Unity of All: Contributions to the Theological Dialogue Between East and West*, which is dedicated to Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Its foreword is written by the Ecumenical Patriarch. The author talks about Petrine primacy as being fundamental to the hierarchical edifice of the Church. This cannot be a primacy of honor, according to him. The author likewise defends Petrine primacy as including the universal primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople. According to him, this solution can put an end to autocephalies and autonomies and even put a stop to schisms! He does not talk about a Petrine primacy by divine right and declared as a dogma, as it is in the West, but rather of a service of primacy on a universal level (belonging to the Ecumenical patriarch as he is the true leader of all the Orthodox)! Manoussakis likewise states that there is no contradiction between primacy and active conciliarity in the Church. He adds that establishing universal primacy for the Patriarch of Constantinople, which allows him to speak in the name of the Orthodox, can, to a remarkable degree, facilitate the possibility of regaining unity with Rome!

2. Effective domination over the Greek-speaking Orthodox churches. The Ecumenical Patriarch behaves, with regard to the Greek-speaking Orthodox churches, as though he has a sort of

function or even moral authority over them, like a his lasso going back to Ottoman times. Likewise, there is a common sentiment in the Greek-speaking sees that they are heir to the Byzantine Empire. The canonical borders of these sees are easily swept aside by Greek ethnic and nationalist sentiments. Candidates for the episcopacy are taken from one see to be installed in another, as is the case with priests, theology professors, monks and nuns who easily move from one see to another within this Byzantine Greek quasi-world. This is rarely subject to examination, but it has been cause for restlessness among some clergy and professors in the Greek-speaking churches– sometimes in very frank terms– as during a recently-recorded talk by Protopresbyter Theodore Zissis. In practice, we can only observe that the Ecumenical Patriarch, as a normal matter of course, exploits Greek ethnic and nationalist feelings in order to establish his authority and his primacy in the Orthodox world. In this context, it can be pointed out that the council held in Constantinople itself in 1872 declared ethnophylitism to be a heresy in the Church! This happened after what the Bulgarian Orthodox did in Constantinople, when they established Bulgarian-speaking churches directly dependent on their mother church and only opening their doors to Bulgarian-speakers. It bears mentioning that ethnophylitism became common, starting in the early 19th century, as a response to domination, and extended to the entire Ottoman Sultanate, in every place, and it– that is, ethnophylitism– is still strongly active even today, not only in the Greek-speaking churches, but also the Slavic and other churches! The truth is, there is no church where nationalist or ethnophylitist sentiments don't play an influential or even primary role. A condemned heresy, but one that is still active.

3. The Ecumenical Patriarchate regards itself as being over the Orthodox in what is called the “countries of the diaspora.” This, referred to openly or obliquely, is on the basis of Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, which was previously mentioned. So the Orthodox in the “countries of the diaspora” are either regarded as being covered by the canon that deals with bishops in barbarian lands, or are regarded (if they are ethnically Greek) as flocks of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, whether they left to the “countries of the diaspora” from Greece, Cyprus, or elsewhere. As for the primacy of the See of Constantinople there, it is expressed by the leadership of the representatives of the See of Constantinople in different regions at the assemblies of bishops that were recently established by a decision issued in 2009 by the Fourth Orthodox Preparatory Commission for the Great Council. To what extent can this formula of episcopal assemblies, under the leadership of the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, hold up and succeed in such an environment? So long as the concern remains affirming the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, this formula remains fragile, for two reasons:

1) The autocephalous churches with a presence in the “countries of the diaspora” cannot be happy with the See of Constantinople having over them anything more than a position of honorary leadership. Any attempt at domination by the Patriarch of Constantinople there will cause the others to leave the assembly, as though it didn't exist.

2) The leadership of the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is not always agreeable to the episcopal assemblies, either because of the small number of “Greeks” in a given region or because the Constantinopolitan bishop is not appropriate. Both situations provoke reservations among the other sees. This is the situation of the Orthodox in South America, for example. The Antiochian bishops there object because the Antiochian presence is more deeply rooted and greater in size. Then it isn't easy for them to accept the leadership of a bishop who is new to

them, simply because he represents Constantinople. People are not easily molded! Thus, the question posed here is: is the leadership of the representative of the Patriarch of Constantinople in every place a sound idea? Would it not be more effective, if service and good pastoral care were the concern, for the bishops themselves to choose, in their assemblies, their own leaders, perhaps on a rotating basis or on the basis of gifts and merit, as was the ancient practice? The Second Ecumenical Council, for example, was not headed at the beginning by the Archbishop of Constantinople, but by the Archbishop of Antioch, Saint Meletius the Great because he was a man of sacrifices and gifts and was radiant. Noteworthy in this context is the position of Protopresbyter Theodore Zissis, who considers the multiplicity of bishops, and thus the episcopal assemblies, to be contrary to the Church's canons and artificial and he proposes that everyone everywhere follow the bishop of the largest church.

### **In What Environment will the Council be Held?**

Since the last great council- whichever you consider it to be, whether in the eighth century, the fourteenth century, up to today- numerous changes have entered into the consciousness of the Orthodox world, which govern the path of the coming council and to a great degree determine what will come out of it. If we make these things clear and make sure to treat them with the necessary wisdom and sobriety, we find them not only liable to cause great disappointment, but also- and we do not know when the council will be held- likely to have repercussions that threaten the cohesion of the Orthodox world!

In light of the above, Constantinople is in a situation in which it cannot remain for long. It is shrinking on its own territory to the point of almost disappearing. It is in dire need of a council that will return to it, on the earth, the role fitting its bye-gone nobility and privileges. In preparing for the great council over the past twenty years, the Patriarchate of Constantinople has been racing against time. The one thing constant in the prepared papers has been the leading role of Constantinople!

Anyone familiar with these papers will notice in general that they are modest and do not attain the level of needs and expectations. These needs do not appear to be fundamental to the architects of the coming council, and they are liable to postponement. The password with them seems to be, first of all, gathering the word, even superficially, no matter what it takes, into the leadership of the Patriarchate of Constantinople! After that, everything follows. The important thing is that we start! The rest will be revealed in turn! For this reason, Metropolitan John Zizioulas talks about the council being a process.

Ethnophylitism in the Orthodox world today dominates to a significant extent. There is something more dangerous than atheism. There is the rampant conviction that Orthodoxy is part of a national or ethnic identity. What is the impact of this new fact? Its impact is that it empties Orthodoxy of its content and quickly leaves it nailed to the cross of ethnic and national entities, and so becoming a dimension in support of the political purposes of these entities! In the Byzantine Empire, there was a peerless civilizational synthesis for the peoples of different backgrounds. Ecclesiastically, there was no need, for example, for Greek or Syriac churches for nationalistic reasons. When Chrysostom preached in Greek at Antioch, there were translators there for Syriac in the church. Those who gathered around great saints like the great Saint Simeon the Stylite were Greeks and Syrians, and they found nothing wrong with praying in

their languages in one place– at different times or even at the same time– or in establishing adjacent monasteries under the care of one elder, whether a Greek- or Syriac-speaker, it made no difference, as long as he was outstanding. Today, Orthodoxy is for the most part a vehicle for ethno-nationalism.

Today, theoretical atheism has abated. Today, the atheism is practical. Christians without Christ and Orthodox without a true, living Orthodoxy that is active in love, in Spirit and in truth. This is what worldliness has done today. By worldliness, what is meant, in Christian terms, is adapting the Church to put her in the service of the affairs of this world. Pragmatism takes the place of matters divine. Worldliness, then, whether on the level of the consumerist approach to life or on the level of science and thought! Theology without Spirit, rituals without worship, study without the fear of God, theology for scholars, not for saints, bishops for authority, not for pastoring!

There is a unity that many today who are called believers long for with intense zeal: the unity of Christians! They regard this as the unity of the body of Christ, the unity of the Church! They say that Christ prayed that all may be one... but what unity can we possibly hope for? The issue of the relationship of the Orthodox Church to the rest of the Christian world, what are its implications? How will this unity be? Will they be brought to the truth or will each of them be made into truth? The important thing is that they unite! That they feel that they are one! One font, one chalice! Their thinking? Let each think in his own way! Their intent? Let their Lord judge this! So why was there tradition and correct belief? A major question, the response to which will define the Church's present and future.

### **Observations about the Council and its Papers**

We have most often noted objections to the paper "The Relationship between the Orthodox Church and the rest of the Christian World." Those objecting are traditionalists who have for some time held positions rejecting this relationship to degrees ranging from moderate opposition to total opposition to all ecumenical activity. This is a sample of what exists, in order to clarify the picture and explain the reactions:

1) First we must realize that the Orthodox Church entered the ecumenical movement, as represented by the World Council of Churches, with one mentality and then they changed and took on a mentality completely different from how they had been at first. What do I mean? Father Georges Florovsky, who was one of the founders of the World Council of Churches, represented his position by affirming that "there is no schism within the unity of the Church, but rather breaking away from the Church," that the Orthodox Church is the true Church, the only true Church, and that for him, regaining Christian unity is "universal conversion to Orthodoxy." He also stated that he did not judge as to whether anyone was outside the Church, because judgment belongs to the Son "no one is authorized to preempt the judgment." However, this does not preclude and is not in contradiction with the Church having authority in history that is, first of all, "the authority to teach and to preserve the word of God faithfully." For him, sound theology is the proper foundation for Christian unity. This does not only mean agreement on formulas and the Creed. The current separation is "a separation in faith, in the experience of the faith itself." For him, there is no separation between theology and Orthodox spirituality. A common consciousness is missing. Our way of reading things isn't one. Only "by

returning to the common mind of the early Church is it possible to overcome divisions." This is what the Orthodox Church must help the others to attain, because she alone is the true Church who bears the apostolic consciousness to the present day.

The Orthodox who are ecumenically-inclined today have, in practice, conceded to the branch theory and the Orthodox Church has become for them like the others, one of the churches and denominations, which are in need of the reform of a unity that has been lost, instead of bringing the others back to the original consciousness as the only one that has preserved it in herself in history.

2. Metropolitan Athanasius of Limassol sent a letter to the Holy Synod of Cyprus on February 11, 2016 in which he commented on the paper "The Relationship of the Orthodox Church to the Rest of the Christian World." Among what he said in it is that the Orthodox Church is the Church and "there do not exist other Churches, only heresies and schisms." As for the expression, "towards the restoration of Christian unity," it "is incorrect because the unity of Christians – the members of the Church of Christ – has never been broken, as long as they remain united to the Church." He then explains that there are no churches and denominations, there is "one Church and that all the others are schisms and heresies." He adds with regard to the purpose of theological dialogues that saying "the final restoration of unity in correct faith and love" is "theologically unacceptable for us all." He also states that, "The view that the preservation of the genuine Orthodox faith is guaranteed only through the synodical system as the only 'competent and final authority on matters of faith' is exaggerated and ignores the truth that many synods throughout Church history taught and espoused incorrect and heretical doctrines, and it was the faithful people which rejected them and preserved the Orthodox faith and championed the Orthodox Confession. Neither a synod without the faithful people, the fullness of the Church, nor the people without the synod of Bishops, is able to regard themselves as the Body of Christ and Church of Christ and to correctly express the experience and doctrine of the Church." He closes by stressing the need for precisely formulating the text and eliminating any ambiguity in it and he reminds us that in order for the council to be acceptable and canonical, it must not deviate in any way from the spirit and dogmas of the holy councils that preceded it.

3. Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus has commented on paragraph 22 of the paper, which condemns "all efforts to break the unity of the Church, undertaken by individuals or groups under the pretext of maintaining or defending true Orthodoxy" on the grounds that conciliarity is "the suitable and final judge in matters of faith in the Church." He commented on it by saying that it gives the impression that the coming council is preemptively seeking for itself "infallibility in its decisions." As for the last part of the phrase, it seems that it does not take into account that the final measure of the faith in the Orthodox Church is the "dogmatic consciousness of the Church's members," something that caused some councils in the past that claimed to be "ecumenical" to be revealed as robbers' councils!

4. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, in his third letter to the Holy Synod of Greece (May 5, 2016), examines, among other things, paragraph 6 of the document, and states that the phrase "the Orthodox Church acknowledges the existence in history of other Christian Churches and confessions which are not in communion with her" must, in order to prevent doublespeak in the document, be replaced with "the Orthodox Church knows that her charismatic limits

correspond to her canonical boundaries, as she also knows that there exist other Christian Confessions, which are cut off from her and do not find themselves in communion with her."

5. In a letter to the Holy Synod of Greece about the paper that we are discussing, Dr Demetrios Tselengidis, after engaging in a lengthy analysis of its contents with the necessary theological precision, arrives at the following conclusion: "With all that is written and what is clearly implied in the text above, it is clear that its initiators and authors are attempting the institutional and official ratification of Christian Syncretism-Ecumenism by means of a Pan-Orthodox Synod. This, however, would be catastrophic for the Orthodox Church. For this reason I humbly propose the text's total withdrawal."

### **What will Result from the Paper if it is Approved**

If the paper is adopted as it has been presented to the "Great" Council, the consequences resulting from its acceptance will be numerous and serious. Here are some impressions in this regard:

Accepting the lowest common denominator of the faith, as represented by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the theology of baptism as sufficient grounds for the unity of Christians will mean abandoning the basis of tradition in the Church! All the fathers and councils of the Church, from Saint Leo the Great to Saint Photius the Great to Saint Mark of Ephesus to all the fathers and councils who have condemned the Catholics for heresy on account of the Filioque, purgatory, the infallibility of the pope, the Immaculate Conception, and many other things, no longer have any value to their judgments! It is no longer possible for us to say, "This is what Leo and Photius taught us, this is what we have received from Mark, this is the dogma of the Church..." because outside the bounds of the teaching of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, there is nothing, in light of the paper, that remains obligatory! Each church may say, then, what it likes. If the Orthodox Church wants to hold on to the likes of Saints Leo, Photius and Mark, that is her business. In any case, there are no longer heresies! Only differences in perspective. The true faith and heresy are twins. It is no coincidence that the word "heresy" does not occur even once in the entire paper!

Accepting the paper and its being binding upon the Church means that the basis of "hypostatic truth", the Lord Jesus Christ, the Spirit who speaks and with the Church, the ecclesial dogmatic consciousness that exists within the believing people, and the lived experience of the faith in the Church, handed down once to the saints and transmitted to us through the righteous ones, saints, and martyrs, is no longer has the decisive say in the affairs of the Church, but rather is entirely replaced by a bureaucracy that arrogates- in the name of formal, nominal conciliarity, in which there is effectively no commitment of spirit, no consultation, no relationship to the Church, the people of God, and no bounds of consciousness- I say it arrogates authority over the Church and gives itself the quality of infallibility in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, tradition, and correct dogma...!

Reliance on the logic of distinguishing between the invisible, mystical Church and the visible, historical Church, regarding the former as one in every case and comprising all, while the latter is divided and undergoing a process of unification through a effort to express her unity in a perceivable manner through uniting the faithful in her in the image of the mystical Church- I

say that reliance on such a logic means replacing the Church of the Holy Spirit with a worldly, psychological church, emptied of her spiritual content, in which judgment is superficial and not spiritual! If the mystical Church is not present, abiding and active in us and translated into history while remaining herself, here and now, then what church remains for us?! In this case, deep down, the love that the paper talks about is no more than fallen human sentiments, not love in Spirit and in truth! In this case, the unity of Christians, in stifling worldly time, a unity that is more political than anything. This means that the work to realize the unity of Christians becomes a value in itself, even if it is regarded, falsely and fantastically, to be an effort for the hoped-for unity of the Church, because in reality it is no more than an effort to attack the Orthodox Church from within and to empty her of her spiritual, dogmatic content! This is a demonic and not a divine activity!!!

Of course, one understands that there is a problem between the Orthodox Church and those outside of her. One also understands, in the words of Father George Florovsky, that "Christian division means nothing less than the failure of Christians to be true Christians... even if they are one in the site of the fullness of truth... because it is impermissible for anyone to be free of responsibility for others." Of course, in all honesty, we in the Orthodox Church are responsible to a great extent for the suffering of those on the outside. This reflects on us, on our failure and our incompetence in "employing the authority to teach and preserve the word of God faithfully in the world," as Florovsky puts it! However, this does not mean, does not permit, does not excuse in any way our consecrating our sin with a canon in order to make it the foundation of our effort to realize a hollowed-out Christian unity in place of the unity of the Church that we can only maintain in ourselves, first of all through repentance, faith and love, in Spirit and in truth!

### **Where to Sail?**

The situation is dangerous! Therefore, let us not talk about it. Let us walk in faith, not by sight.

I do not want to delve into where the journey of this "Great" Council may lead. That is the reckoning of the people of the world. In human terms, the Orthodox world is swimming in an inner sea and an outer ocean, where adverse winds are increasing and the fish are sharks! But the spirit of Orthodoxy is bold, and your Lord has grown bored with monotony and inaction and souls in many breasts have grown restless. Until when? Paul said to the people on the boat, on his journey to Rome (let the reader understand), "I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss..."

Finally, despite the warning, after a long wait, they resolved to set sail. When the south wind blew softly, they supposed that they had obtained their desire. Not long after, a tempestuous head wind blew against the ship and it was caught and could not head into the wind. They suffered for seven days and seven nights. But do not fear, O Paul, God has given you all those journeying with you. Thus it happened that all safely made it to shore.

It is best for the ship to not be launched, but since it has set off, do not fear, because your Lord is sleeping on a pillow in it! What do you see me do when the water is stagnant in the Church and my soul burns with the Spirit in it, boiling in a body whose bonds had grown great over

history? Your Lord only manifests Himself in the storms, since He comes to you walking on water! Do not fear!

The important thing is that no one be alone in himself, like the sailors on Paul's ship, in order to save themselves! In that case, you cannot be saved. Let us hold fast to one another, with you before us! The Spirit of communion teaches you. The Orthodox are crazy, no doubt. For this reason, they are not controlled! This is the mystery of God in them and the mystery of the Opponent's inability to beat them! There is nothing easier for the Enemy than to crush rational people! "You are all fair my love, there is not a spot in you" (Song of Songs 4:7) and this is how your Lord has seen you, O my Church!

Suffice is for us for each one to see to his brothers, even if the neighbors and politicians of the world shriek against it! My Christ, in You first! Then, may your Lord turn everything with you into a blessing. Serve each other in love, He said, But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another (cf. Galatians 5:15)!

But first we must find ourselves on an island, because there are those who want you fight.

So what, then? At least let the muddy water stir. Perhaps, by the grace from above, we may shed this dead skin, lest we rot! May the Lord God pardon your adventures, O New Jerusalem!

**Our father and beloved patriarch,**

This is what I have. I offer it to your fatherhood and to our honorable Synod, asking for pardon in advance for every failing or superfluous word in it.

**I ask for your blessing and your prayers,**

**In the love of the Lord Jesus Christ,**

**Archimandrite Touma (Bitar)**

**Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Silouan the Athonite- Douma, Lebanon**

**Sunday, May 21, 2016**