

## **Preparation, Works and Decisions of The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church**

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### **Abstract:**

The study presents a summary of the history of the preparation and convening of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, held between June 18-26, 2016, at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, highlighting also for the readers' information, the reasons for the appointment of this Council, the causes of the reduction of the list of topics on the agenda, the list of participating Churches and the members of the Romanian Patriarchate, the actual works and final decisions structured in six final thematic documents as well as the Encyclical and Final Message to the believers of the participants in this important Synod.

### **Keywords:**

Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, mission, ecumenical relations, diaspora, autonomy, marriage, fast.

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, held from 18 to 26 June 2016 at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, has represented the achievement of a goal of all local Orthodox Churches expressed since the early last century. Since 1850 until today, the Church has faced unprecedented challenges in her long history. These challenges had their origins in political, social and cultural rights experienced by countries that were active Orthodox Churches. Those changes have imposed internal reorganization of the Orthodox Churches and restructured their mission in an ever-changing world. Thus, if in 1850 there were seven autocephalous Orthodox Churches, namely the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Patriarchate of

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Alexandria, the Patriarchate of Antioch, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Church of Cyprus and the Greek Church, today the number of these churches has doubled. The first seven were added the following seven Autocephalous Orthodox Churches: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church of Poland, the Orthodox Church of Albania and the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia. Full communion of these 14 Autocephalous Orthodox Churches expresses the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. On the other hand, each local Autocephalous Orthodox Church is not a part of the one Church, but is her ultimate fulfillment in a certain space.

Turning to the political and economic changes in predominantly Orthodox countries during the last century and a half we find that they were also the major cause of migration of a growing number of Orthodox either to Western Europe or to America, either to Australia or New Zealand. As a result, the Orthodox Diaspora was born by organizing a large number of Orthodox church units, first parishes, then bishoprics, and later, metropolitans outside the traditional canon territory of the Orthodox Churches. These facts confronted the Orthodox Churches with a challenge, which has not yet found full canonical settlement. Finally, during this period of a century and a half, the Orthodox Churches have come increasingly into contact with heterodox Christian communities and finally with the Ecumenical Movement. Faced with these complex challenges, Orthodox churches felt it was necessary to find a settlement together by organizing the whole Orthodox Church Council.

### **1. Preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church**

Among the first proposals to organize an Orthodox Synod in the first part of the twentieth century, one may include the initiative of the Romanian Orthodox Church Primate Metropolitan Miron Cristea (1920-1925 and 1925-1939 Patriarch). Shortly after the enthronement as Metropolitan of Wallachia, he addressed the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in 1920, an irenic letter, in which he considered as “necessary - in the interest of solving church matters, knocking on the door of all countries having Orthodox believers and in the interest of strengthening the unity of a far and wide eastern Orthodox Church, so useful for all - to resume the thread, so much interrupted, of the conferences in synaxes common to all churches which confess the eastern apostolic faith.”<sup>1</sup> After only three years, another Romanian bishop, namely Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan of Transylvania (1920-1955),

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Gh. Soare, PhD, “De la Vatopedi la Rhodos (From Vatopedi to Rhodes)”, *BOR* (Romanian Orthodox Church), 79 (1961), no. 9-10, p. 844.

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sent the pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople, in 1923, the proposal that the Ecumenical Patriarchate should organize, in 1925, a large gathering celebrating 1600 years since the first Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 1925). This Pan-Orthodox Congress, organized by the Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV Metaxakis (1921-1923), the Romanian Orthodox Church being represented by Archimandrite Iuliu Scriban, welcomed the Romanian proposal and recommended the Ecumenical Patriarchate to organize a pan-Orthodox Council in 1925. This recommendation was the first pan-Orthodox decision to convene a pan-Orthodox Council of the whole Orthodox Church.

In the spirit of the decisions of 1923, the Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory VII (1923-1924), addressed an Encyclical on June 3, 1924 to all Orthodox Churches which called for a “pan-Orthodox General Council or even an Ecumenical one”<sup>2</sup> for the year 1925. Among topics that have been discussed in this Council, the Ecumenical Patriarch promised that it will inform the Orthodox churches of the time,” after which we deal with letters to sister Churches who have written for the purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in the second half of 1924, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has sent all the Orthodox Churches a “work plan” and a list of 26 points divided into eight parts.<sup>4</sup> Orthodox Churches responded to these that the Council could not be called for it was not ready. Thus, the Ecumenical Patriarchate postponed convening a Council and initiated a process of consultation at pan-Orthodox level to identify topics of general interest to be discussed at a Council of all the Orthodox Churches. To follow, the Ecumenical Patriarchate held from 8 to 23 June 1930, at the Vatopedi Monastery of Mount Athos, an inter-Orthodox Commission, where the Romanian Orthodox Church was represented by Bishop Lucian Triteanul of Romania (1923-1947) and Bishop Titus Simeadrea, in the position of an Assistant Bishop to the Patriarch (1926-1935) at the time, then Bishop of Hotin between 1935-1940 and finally Metropolitan of Bukovine between 1940-1945, buried in 1971 at Cernica Monastery). The meeting in Vatopedi adopted a list of 17 issues that have been proposed for study to all the Orthodox Churches. Suggested topics would be studied by a Pre-Council, which however could not be convened due to the opposition from some Orthodox Churches.

Preparing a Council of the whole Orthodox Church was then resumed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (1948-1972) by organizing the four Pan-Orthodox Conferences. The first of which, held from 24 September to 1 October 1961 in Rhodes, the Ecumenical Patriarchate presented a list of topics grouped

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<sup>2</sup> Anastasios Kallis, *Auf dem Weg zu einem Heiligen und Großen Konzil. Ein Quellen- und Arbeitsbuch zur orthodoxen Ekklesiologie*, Theophano Verlag, Münster, 2013, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113-114.

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into eight sections<sup>5</sup>, which were discussed and finally adopted. These themes were recommended to study to all the Orthodox Churches, which soon found that the list is too long and it would be impossible for the Council to deal with all these issues. Therefore, the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference, held from 8 to 16 June 1968 at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, near Geneva, Switzerland, prepared to take the measures necessary to prepare the Council desired by the Orthodox Churches. Among the decisions taken at this meeting it has been included:

- 1) determining the name of the Council, namely the one that was used in Crete;
- 2) establishing a secretariat for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church;
- 3) the setting up of an inter-Orthodox Commission for preparing this Council;
- 4) reducing catalog themes adopted in 1961;
- 5) passing to the direct preparation of the Council by calling a series of Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conferences.<sup>6</sup>

The five Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conferences all held at the Orthodox Center in Chambésy during the years: 1976, 1982, 1986, 2009 and 2015 respectively, had the mandate, first, to unanimously approve a list of ultimate topics for the Holy and Great Council and then develop unanimously a draft text for each of the topics retained. These subjects were studied with input from the local Orthodox Churches, by the inter-Orthodox Commission of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which has developed draft texts on the individual topics and projects were presented to the Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conferences for debate and adoption. Both at Preparatory Commission level and especially at Preconciliar Conferences level, draft texts could be adopted only by unanimity. Getting unanimity on the draft texts, which were to be submitted directly to the Holy and Great Council, was, however, a very difficult process, which explains the long pauses, especially between the last Preconciliar Conferences. But even those long periods of time were not sufficient for it did not come to the adoption of draft texts for each of the ten topics retained in 1976. Deadlock exit from which the preparation of the Holy and Great Council has entered has been possible by the decisions taken by the Primates' Synaxes of the Orthodox Churches.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rev. Liviu Stan, "Soborul panortodox de la Rhodos (The Pan-Orthodox Synaxis in Rhodes)", *MO* (Oltenia Metropolitan), 13 (1961), no. 10-12, p. 723-728.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Hotărârile Întunirilor Panortofoxe din 1923 până în 2009 – spre Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe (Decisions of Pan-Orthodox Meetings from 1923 to 2009 – Towards The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church)*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2013, p. 77-78

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## 2. The Title or Name of the Orthodox Church Council

The Ecumenical Patriarchate letter in 1924, mentioned above, which first launched the proposal to convene a Council of the whole Orthodox Church, referred to “a general pan-Orthodox or even Ecumenical Council” where we understand that the status of that Council was not clear enough. Immediately after canceling this initiative, the idea of a training stage for the whole Orthodox Church Council became obvious, steps that were famous for their unique concept of “Pre-Council”. An important contribution to the clarification of terminology related to the proposed Council was brought by the first Congress of the Faculty of Theology held in Athens within the period 29 November - 6 December 1936. Based on five reports backed by as many teachers, including the 5<sup>th</sup> one of the Romanian professor of canon law in Cernăuți, Valerian Șesan (1878-1940), the Congress concluded that important and normative decisions for the Orthodox Church can only be taken by an Ecumenical Council, but which cannot be convened without a proper preparation. Therefore, until such time when the Orthodox Church will be able to summon an Ecumenical Council, most theologians present at the congress thought it would be useful to convene a general council of the Orthodox Church, namely a Pan-Orthodox Council.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that the first step on the path towards a Council of the Orthodox Church as a whole would be a Pre-Council is reflected in the bulletin of the first Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes in 1961. By way of this bulletin participants stated that “we took a unanimous decision on the list of topics of the future Pre-Council”.<sup>8</sup> Rev. Prof. Liviu Stan, who was present at the meeting in Rhodes, presented the conference as “pan-Orthodox Synax” (see note 5), which means that the terminology used at the time, regarding the Council in preparation, was insufficiently clear. Therefore, the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference in 1968, proposed that the Council in preparation to be called *The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*. One reason for choosing this name was that the ‘Council convened by The Holy Emperor Constantin The Great at Nicaea in 325 was named similarly, and its designation as “*Ecumenical Council*”, namely of the whole Church or of the far and wide Church appeared a few years later, especially by the contribution of St. Athanasius the Great.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, each local Orthodox Church

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Viorel Ioniță, “Sinodul I Ecumenic. Rolul împăratului Constantin cel Mare și importanța acestui sinod pentru viața Bisericii creștine (Ecumenical Council I. The Role of Emperor Constantin the Great and the Importance of This Council for the Life of Christian World)”, in *Cruce și Misiune. Sfinții Împărați Constantin și Elena – Promotori ai libertății religioase și Apărători ai Bisericii*

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Council is called “Holy”, therefore the all local Orthodox Churches Council is not only holy but also great just by its size and importance.

The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference then proposed that the term *Pre-Council* be replaced by that of “Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Conference”.<sup>10</sup> Also at the conference, the title of “pan-Orthodox” was used only for decision-makers, and for Preconciliar conferences and for all preparatory advisory courts, as especially was the Preparatory Commission, the term of inter-Orthodox was used. This distinction between the inter-Orthodox advisory level and the pan-Orthodox decision-making level was changed by the Synaxis of the Primate of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches in January 2016, which used the title “pan-Orthodox” for all committees relating to the preparation and holding of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church.

### 3. Concluding the Topic List of the Council Agenda

Identifying topics of interest for all Orthodox Churches took the most time in the long process of preparing this Council. The first list of topics at pan-Orthodox level was proposed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1924, list consisting of an introduction and seven parts, each with several themes. Then the first list of themes adopted at pan-Orthodox level was the one adopted by the preparatory inter-Orthodox Commission at the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos. This list contained 17 themes, most of them referring to the internal life of the Orthodox Churches. Only topic number 7 referred to the cultivation of “relationships in the spirit of love, that (according to the word of St. Apostol Paul) hopes all things (I Cor. 13. 7-8), with heterodox churches (Armenian, Coptic, Abyssinian, Chaldean, Jacobbite, old Catholic and Anglican), which tend to have similarities with the Orthodox Church and were not proselytizing among the Orthodox”.<sup>11</sup>

A second list of themes for a Pre-Council, as it was called then, was adopted by the first Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes in 1961. This list contained over 120 topics grouped into the following eight chapters: I. Faith and Dogma, II. Divine Worship, III. Administration and Church Order IV. In-between Orthodox Church Relations V. Orthodox Church Relations with the other Christian world VI. Orthodoxy around the World, VII. Theological Subjects and VIII. Social Problems.<sup>12</sup> The

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*(Cross and Mission. Holy Emperors Constantin and Elena – Promoters of Religious Freedom and Church Defenders)*, Vol. II, Studies gathered and published by Emilian Popescu and Rev.Viorel Ioniță, Basilica, Bucharest, 2013, p. 341 ș.u.

<sup>10</sup> Anastasios Kallis, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Gheorghe Soare, *art. cit.*, p. 846 ș. u.

<sup>12</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Hotărârile...* p. 162-169

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catalog of 1961 was considered by all Churches as too long, appreciating that it was not necessary for a council to discuss all those topics. Therefore, The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference in 1968 called The Orthodox Churches to specify the topics of interest to them and which should be discussed by a Council. As a result, the first Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (Chambésy, 21 to 28 November 1976) adopted a list of 10 issues that had been recommended by all Orthodox Churches, namely:

1. Orthodox Diaspora;
2. Autocephaly and its proclamation;
3. Autonomy and its proclamation;
4. Diptychs;
5. Calendar issues;
6. Impediments to marriage;
7. Readjustment of religious provisions regarding fasting;
8. Orthodox Church relations with the Christian world;
9. Orthodoxy and The Ecumenical Movement;
10. The contribution of local Orthodox Churches to achieving Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love between peoples and eliminating racial discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

This would be the end of “the long adventure of the topics list” as stated by Metropolitan Anthony of Transylvania.<sup>14</sup> This list was final for the Holy and Great Council, but the Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conferences failed to adopt draft texts for all ten topics proposed, so not all could be included on the agenda of the Holy and Great Council.

#### **4. The Synaxis’ Concern in The Preparation and then Development Process of The Council**

The Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches is a recent form of practising synodality in the Orthodox Church, which asserted authority primarily in relation to the preparation of the Holy and Great Council. The first Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, which took decisions with direct implications on the preparations of the Council was held in Phanar, Istanbul from 10 to 12 October 2008, during the commemoration of “St. Apostol Paul, Apostle

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<sup>13</sup> *Prémière Conférence Panorthodoxe Préconciliaire* (Chambésy – Genève, 21-28 novembre 1976), dans SYNODICA III, Centre Orthodoxe du Patriarcat Œcuménique, Chambésy – Genève, 1979, pp. 113-117.

<sup>14</sup> Antonie Plămădeală, “O privire asupra pregătirii Sfântului și Marelui Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe (A Look at The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church in Preparation)”, *O (Orthodoxy)*, 29 (1977), no. 2, p. 248.

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to the Gentiles” where the Romanian Orthodox Church was represented by His Eminence Laurentiu, Metropolitan of Transylvania. In the message published at the end of this meeting it was stated that “we welcome the proposal of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to continue throughout 2009 ...The Holy and Great Council preparation.”<sup>15</sup> This decision was the basis for organizing the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference, from 6 to 13 June 2009,<sup>16</sup> which adopted the draft text on the topic of Orthodox Diaspora. Also during this Synaxis, it was decided that the pan-Orthodox preparation of the Holy and Great Council should be attended by representatives of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches and not by those of the Autonomous Orthodox Churches, as had happened so far. The second Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches, which took a number of decisions crucial for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council, was also held in Phanar / Istanbul, from 6 to 9 March 2014.<sup>17</sup> The direct consequence of the decisions of this meeting was the setting up of the Special Inter-Orthodox Committee for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council between October 2014 and April 2015 which had the mandate to review draft texts adopted in the 80s of the last century, these having to be updated. According to the judgments drawn by the March 2014 Synaxis, the revised texts were submitted for discussion and approval at the Fifth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference, held from 10 to 17 October 2015 at the Orthodox Center of Chambésy.<sup>18</sup>

The last decisive step in the preparation of the Holy and Great Council was the organization of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches, from 21 to 28 January 2016 at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, meeting based on the Synaxis decision in March 2014. The first series of decisions taken in January 2016 was about issues that were not yet concluded for the Holy and Great Council. Thus, after a select committee revised the text on the themes: 1). *The Orthodox Church's mission in the contemporary world* and 2). *The Sacrament of marriage and its impediments*, these two texts were adopted directly by the Synaxis. In connection with the theme *Autocephaly and its proclaiming* and that of the *Diptychs*, The Synaxis held that these issues “were not approved unanimously during numerous successive meetings of the preparatory inter-Orthodox

<sup>15</sup> <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/14/156.aspx#1> (January 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Rev. Viorel Ioniță, “A 4-a Conferință Panortodoxă Presinodală, Chambésy/Geneva, 6-12 iunie 2009 (The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference, Chambésy/Geneva, 6-12 June, 2009)”, *ST* (Theological Studies) 5 (2009), no. 2, p. 235 ș.u.

<sup>17</sup> <http://patriarhia.ro/sinaxa-ntaistatatorilor-bisericilor-ortodoxe-fanar-6-9-martie-2014-mesaj-5326.html> (January 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Sfântul și Marele Sinod... (The Holy and Great Council...)*.p. 16 ș.u.



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Committee, to be finally approved by one of the Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Conferences<sup>19</sup>, therefore, the Synaxis decided that these two issues are not part of the subjects of the Holy and Great Council, and therefore were not included on the agenda, being dealt with later. Also on the list of proposed subjects for the Holy and Great Council, the Synaxis also addressed the topic of the Calendar, issue for which it has recommended that “it is proper that every Church be free to implement as they see fit for the spiritual formation of parishioners, but without changing the Easter common celebration date by all Orthodox.”<sup>20</sup> So neither this subject would be on the list of topics at the Holy and Great Council.

Thus, the Synaxis from Chambésy scored on the concluding list of the Holy and Great Council six topics in the following order:

1. “The mission of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world;
2. The Orthodox Diaspora;
3. Autonomy and its proclamation;
4. The Sacrament of marriage and its impediments;
5. The importance of fasting and its observance today;
6. Relations of all Orthodox churches with Christendom”<sup>21</sup>

Defining the list of topics, the Synaxis from January 2016 had then decided that the Holy and Great Council would take place, with the grace of God, at the Orthodox Academy of Crete in Kolymbari of Kissamos from 18 to 27 June 2016. Another important decision taken by the Synaxis was the adoption of an *Organization and Operation Regulation of the Council*.<sup>22</sup> In relation to the authority of decisions that would be taken by the Holy and Great Council, at the suggestion of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Synaxis stated that they would have “pan-Orthodox authority” (Article 13). Finally, the Synaxis in January 2016 decided that the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church should adopt a final message in addressing some of the problems of today’s world. His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel, who through his interventions contributed significantly to clarify several issues related to the preparation of the Holy and Great Council, said that “we must have a vision of pastoral dynamic on synodality, which manifests itself in successive stages or regular every five, seven or ten years, for the good of all Orthodoxy.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe. Documente pregătitoare (The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church. In-Preparation Documents*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2016, p. 78-79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83 ș.u.

<sup>23</sup> (The Speech of the Romanian Patriarch, held in the opening of the Orthodox Church Primates’ Synaxis works, January 2016) *Cuvântul Patriarhului României rostit la deschiderea*

## 5. Council Participants

About participants in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, the Synaxis of January 2016 confirmed the recommendation of the March 2014 Synaxis, that each Autocephalous Orthodox Church should be represented at the Holy and Great Council by her Primate, accompanied by a maximum of 24 bishops and 6 priest counselors, monks or laymen. In addition, each Primate could be accompanied by two special companions. The Synaxis took this decision on the grounds of “pastoral and logistics reasons, which made every bishop participation to it impossible. Then the number of 24 bishops was elected according to the vision of Revelation, 4.4, which says that “twenty-four seats and chairs surrounded the throne and on the chairs twenty-four elders, sitting, clothed in white robes and wearing golden crowns on their heads.”<sup>24</sup> The decision on the maximum number of delegates for each Orthodox Church has met no opposition in any of the 14 Holy Councils of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

The Romanian Orthodox Church delegation was led by His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel, accompanied by the following 24 hierarchs: † Teofan of Iași, Moldova and Bucovina; † Laurențiu of Sibiu and Transylvania; † Andrei of Vad, Feleac, Cluj, Alba, Crișana and Maramures; † Irineu of Craiova and Oltenia; † Ioan of Banat and Timisoara; † Iosif in Western and Southern Europe; † Serafim in Germany and Central Europe; † Nifon of Targoviste; † Irineu of Alba Iulia; † Ioachim of Roman and Bacau; † Casian of Lower Danube; † Timotei of Arad; † Nicolae in America; † Sofronie of Oradea; † Nicodim of Severin and Strehaia; † Visarion of Tulcea; † Petroniu of Salaj; † Siluan in Hungary; † Siluan in Italy; † Timotei in Spain and Portugal; † Macarie in Northern Europe; † Varlaam Ploieșteanul, Assistant Bishop to the Patriarch, Secretary of the Holy Synod; † Emilian Lovisteanul, Assistant Bishop to the Archdiocese of Râmnic and † Ioan Casian of Vicina, Assistant Bishop to the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of the Americas. Our Church legation was accompanied by the following special advisers: Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, honorary patriarchal counselor, Rev. Michael Tița, Rev. Ștefan Ababei, Rev. Nicolae Dascălu, Mr. Ionuț Mavrichi, patriarchal counselors and Rev. Assoc. Prof. Patriciu Vlaicu, PhD. The two special companions of His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel were Mr. Leonard Ciofu, patriarchal counselor and Deacon Mihai Mușat.

As known, four Autocephalous Orthodox Churches absented from the Holy and Great Council, namely The Antioch Patriarchate, The Russian Orthodox

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*lucrărilor Sinaxei Întâistătorilor de Biserici Ortodoxe, 22 ianuarie 2016; cf. <http://basilica.ro/patriarhul-romaniei-un-eveniment-istoric-important-pentru-a-dezvolta-practica-sinodalitatii-la-nivel-panortodox-2/> (January 2017).*

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/faq> ((January 2017).

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Church, The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and The Georgian Orthodox Church. However, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church took place as planned and as approved at pan-Orthodox level. On the other hand, delegations that attended the Holy and Great Council had the mandate of their Church Council, in which they discussed all texts submitted for deliberation in Crete, so that each bishop, and as a result, those who were not personally present in Crete were able to express their views on the proposed topics. Finally, there were bishops in various Orthodox Churches, who did not want to attend The Holy and Great Council, for various reasons. The total number of participants in the Council of Bishops was 167, including the 10 Primates of the Orthodox Churches present...

## **6. The Works of the Holy and Great Council**

The very works of the Holy and Great Council were preceded by the Synaxis of the Primates, of Friday, June 17th, when the draft message was examined and proposals were made that the Ecumenical Patriarch should invite the absent churches to attend at least the Divine Liturgy of Sunday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, when the Council would close. Saturday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, all participants attended the Divine Liturgy celebration in the city Kisame, residence of Kisame and Selinon Metropolitan on whose territory we find the Orthodox Academy of Crete. At the end of this service, officiated by His Beatitude Theodore II, Patriarch of Alexandria, a requiem for all those who helped prepare this Council, but, in the meantime, have passed away, was officiated.

On Sunday June 19<sup>th</sup>, The Pentecost Sunday, all delegates with many believers in Crete attended the celebration of the Divine Liturgy by the Synaxis of ten Primates, in Saint Titus Cathedral in Heraklion, the island's capital. From Monday 20<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, June 25<sup>th</sup> the actual works of the Holy and Great Council took place. The Council work program began every day with the celebration of the Divine Liturgy by each delegation of the 10 Churches present. From the delegation of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated with the blessing of His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel, by His Grace Visarion of Tulcea, on Thursday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Holy and Great Council works, which were held only in plenary sessions, were led by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, as moderator. Discussions focused exclusively on six draft texts on the six topics listed on the agenda of the Council. After discussing and adopting, by consensus, the six texts on the mentioned topics, which meant a great success for the Council works, held in a spirit of fraternity and responsibility, it was stated that, given the extension of the proposed text for the Council Message, the Primates' Synaxis decided to entitle the text prepared by a Pan-Orthodox Committee

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“*Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council*” and instead of a bulletin that should have been adopted by the Council, a “Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church to the true believing people and to all people of good will” was proposed. The latter, as a summary of the encyclical was read solemnly during the Divine Liturgy celebrated in the Primate’s Synaxis present at the Council conclusion, in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in the city of Chania. These last two texts adopted by the Holy and Great Council are completely original and in them we find, developed in an actual manner, some important considerations on the life and mission of the Orthodox Church today, such as family, care for youth, an attitude towards the complex phenomenon of secularization etc. that have not been thoroughly enough elaborated in six basic texts.

The contribution of the Romanian Orthodox Church to the Holy and Great Council, highlighted by many participants, was clearly described by Metropolitan Ieroteos Vlachos of Naupactos, the Church of Greece, one of the critical voices of this Council, as follows: The Patriarchate of Romania prepared very well for the council and made important proposals for correcting texts, especially to the document “Relationships of the Orthodox Church with the remainder of the Christian world” ... During the sessions, the Patriarch of Romania was the one who argued opinions with theological knowledge, with experience in [ecumenical] Dialogues and determination. In some cases, he was very earnest and had an important contribution in the formulation of art. 21 of the document “Orthodox Church Relations with the Christian world” ... Of all Primates, the Romanian Patriarch Daniel showed that he has full theological knowledge and ability to support his opinions. He also had the ability to make alternative proposals when his personal proposals were not accepted”.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Council Decisions

The Synaxis of March 2014 decided that Council decisions would be taken unanimously and that every Church would have only one vote, which is expressed by the Primate. The Holy and Great Council adopted a total of eight texts and all received the vote of the ten Churches present in that they were signed by each of the ten Primates present. The fact that not all the bishops present signed some documents was provided by the *Organization and Operation Rules of the Holy and Great Council* by Article 12, paragraph 2, as follows: “Voting texts by Churches in the Council, not by their delegates does not exclude the possibility of negative

<sup>25</sup> <http://basilica.ro/mitropolitul-ierotheos-vlachos-despre-delegatia-patriarhiei-romane-la-sinodul-din-creta-bine-pregatiti-si-fermi-pe-pozitie/> (ianuarie 2017).

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positions from one or several hierarchs of an Autocephalous Orthodox Church delegation on the amendments, or even on text in general. This disagreement is written in the Acts of the Council.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, even if some delegated bishops did not sign, the decrees of the Council were accepted unanimously.

About the eight texts adopted by the Holy and Great Council there is to be noted that, apart from one exception, all these texts are based solely on biblical and patristic quotations. The exemption means that in the document “*Orthodox Church Relations with all Christian world*” there is a quote regarding the document from Toronto, adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches entitled “*The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches*”. However, this document was adopted at the request of the Orthodox and to its writing contributed, among others, Rev. Prof. George Florovsky. The eight documents adopted by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church are:

### **7.1. The Orthodox Church Mission in the Contemporary World<sup>27</sup>**

This subject was originally entitled “*The contribution of local Orthodox Churches to achieving Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love between peoples and eliminating racial discrimination and others*”<sup>28</sup>, and the first text on this subject was adopted by the Third Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (October 20 to November 6, 1986). Then, on the recommendation of the Primates’ Synaxis of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches from 6 to 9 March 2014, the Special Inter-Orthodox Commission for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council, at its meetings in the spring of 2015, revised the text in 1986 and then proposed the new title. The revised text was adopted by the Synaxis of January 2016.

This theme was proposed by the Synaxis as first on the Holy and Great Council agenda, hence the importance granted by the Synaxis to the topic concerned. In this text, we are offered a series of recommendations for the orientation of the Orthodox Church towards the challenges of the contemporary world, for the affirmation and protection of human dignity and the defense of peace and avoidance of any kind of war, the elimination of all kinds of discrimination in the world today and the risks involved in scientific research and in particular biotechnology,

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<sup>26</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Sfântul și Marele Sinod... (The Holy and Great Council...)* p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> This text este made up from an Introduction and 6 Chapters, as follows: *Introduction* (6 paragraphs); 1) *The Value of Human Person* (4 par.); 2) *Freedom and Responsibility* (3 par.); 3) *On Peace and Justice* (5 par.); 4) *Peace and War Impediments* (3 par.); 5) *The Orthodox Church Facing Discrimination* (3 par.); 6) *The Orthodox Church Mission as Love Testimony in Officiation* (15 par.) cf.: <http://basilica.ro/sfantul-si-marele-sinod-misiunea-bisericii-in-lumea-contemporana-document-final/> (ianuarie 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Hotărârile...* p. 203-214.

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and on the negative aspects of globalization, etc. In the face of all this, the Church “addressed to the human heart and lead him, with Paul, adopt and live all things that are true, all things that are honest, all things that are just, all things that are pure, all things that are love-worthy, (Philippians 4.8), the sacrificial love of His Crucified Lord, the only way to a world of peace, justice, freedom and love between people and nations”.

The concept used in this text, most vividly debated was that of person with reference to the human person; or, as mentioned by His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Rev. Prof. Dumitru Staniloae often used this concept and therefore it was not completely removed from the final text of the Council.

## **7.2. The Orthodox Diaspora<sup>29</sup>**

The draft text on this subject was adopted by the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (6 to 13 June 2009) and consists of an introduction, in which the third paragraph contains a list of 12 Bishopric Assemblies comprising all canonical Orthodox dioceses in the Diaspora. The second part of the text contains an *Operating Regulation for All Bishopric Assemblies in the Orthodox Diaspora*. About the Synaxis recommendations of January 2016, the Holy and Great Council “debated texts related to *the Orthodox Diaspora* and the Operation Regulations of the Bishopric Assemblies in Diaspora, who have been submitted during the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (Chambésy, 2009) and the Primates’ Synaxis of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches (January 21 to 28, 2016) that it has approved with some minor amendments”.

The Holy and Great Council has stated in the introduction, the following: “It has also been found that, due to historical and pastoral reasons, currently one cannot immediately move to the strict order of the Church on this matter, that is to have a single bishop in one place. Therefore, it was decided to keep the Bishopric Assemblies established by the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference until the right time comes, when all the conditions are met for the canonical application of *akrubeia*”.

According to Article 5 of the Operation Rules for Bishopric Assemblies in the Orthodox Diaspora, the tasks of these Assemblies are:

„a) to keep watch and help maintain the unity of the Regional Orthodox Church in its theological, ecclesiological, canonical, spiritual, charitable, educational and missionary commitment;

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<sup>29</sup> The document is made up from an introductory part of 7 paragraphs and the second part containing the Operating Regulation of Bishopric Conferences in the Orthodox Diaspora, made up of 13 articles; cfr. <http://basilica.ro/sfantul-si-marele-sinod-diaspora-ortodoxa-document-oficial/> (January 2017).

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b) coordinating and stimulating activities of common interest in the fields of pastoral catechesis, liturgical life, the publishing of religious publications, media publishing means, religious education etc.

c) relations with the heterodox and followers of other religions;

d) everything that employs the Orthodox Church in her relations with society and public authorities.

e) preparation of an organization project of the Regional Orthodox on canonical bases”.

The implementation of this regulation immediately after the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference, held in 2009, obviously stimulated cooperation between the different Orthodox dioceses and Diaspora, and this was stressed even in the works of the Holy and Great Council, among others, by † Dimitrios of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Due to these results, the Holy and Great Council suggested to continue following the recommendations proposed since 2009 by this text, even if it does not canonically resolve, as desired, the situation in the Orthodox Diaspora.

### **7.3. Autonomy and Its Proclamation<sup>30</sup>**

The draft text on this topic was elaborated by the Inter-Orthodox Commission in preparation for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church at its meeting on 9 to 17 December 2009 and later adopted by the Fifth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (10 to 17 October 2015). The text adopted by the Holy and Great Council contains an introduction, plus three articles, each with several sub-points, by which canonical criteria of granting a Church the status of autonomy were set, as well as her relationship with the Mother Church which she depends on. An important fact stated in this document even in the second paragraph, that “autonomous Churches are not grounded in the geographical area of the Orthodox Diaspora”. In other words, an autonomous Church can exclusively assert herself within the canonical territory of an Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Another important clarification on the status of autonomous churches, mentioned in paragraph 1 a) is that there are “various degrees of dependence with respect to the relationship of the autonomous Church to the autocephalous Church to which it canonically refers.”

Thus, some autonomous churches may have a greater degree of autonomy than others, for example by having their own Holy Council, and then “through the participation of her Primate to the Autocephalous Church Council”, as formulated in Article 1.d.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://basilica.ro/sfantul-si-marele-sinod-autonomia-si-modul-ei-de-proclamare-document-oficial/> (ianuarie 2017).

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The most sensitive issue related to granting autonomy is reached in paragraph 2.f, as follows: “In the event that two autocephalous Churches grant autonomous status within the same geographical ecclesial region, prompting contestation over the status of each autonomous Church, the parties involved appeal—together or separately—to the Ecumenical Patriarch so that he may find a canonical solution to the matter in accordance with prevailing pan-Orthodox practice.

This provision is clear, but it is complicated, as mentioned by the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, when the Ecumenical Patriarchate is itself one of the two sides of the issue. Solving this situation is, however, provided by stating that the solution to solving such situations should follow the “pan-Orthodox practice in force”, namely involving all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches. The danger of two Autocephalous Orthodox Churches to grant a local Church the status of autonomous Church, may be found only in the canonical territory claimed at the same time by two Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, such as Estonia or Moldova, but the proposed text failed to find a practical solution to such a situation.

#### **7.4. The Sacrament of Marriage and its impediments<sup>31</sup>**

This subject was originally called only *Marriage Impediments*, and the first draft text on this subject was adopted by the Second Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (3 to 12 September 1982). Proposals of the Synaxis in January 2016, resulted in drafting a new text composed of two parts, the first referring to Orthodox marriage composed of 11 paragraphs, where the divine origin of the Sacrament of marriage is asserted, having the prerequisite “free union between a man and a woman.” The second part of this text refers to marriage impediments from an Orthodox point of view. Impediments caused by blood kinship relationships or spiritual ones were the subject of the Holy and Great Council just to fix some general principles for all canonical Orthodox Churches. But more problematic proved to be the issue of inter-Christian marriages, let alone inter-religious marriages.

Thus, in relation to mixed marriages between Orthodox and non-Orthodox and non-Christians, the Holy and Great Council decided that “(I) The wedding between Orthodox and non-Orthodox is prohibited by canonical *akrabeia* (canon 72 of the Quinisext Council in Trullo)” and paragraph 5, II, states that “having the salvation of man as goal, it is important that the possibility of ecclesiastical *oikonomia* exercise in relation to marriage impediments must be taken into con-

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<sup>31</sup> <http://basilica.ro/sfanta-taina-a-cununiei-si-impedimentele-la-aceasta-document-oficial/> (ianuarie 2017).



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sideration by the Holy Synod of each Autocephalous Orthodox Church, according to the principles of holy canons and in a spirit of pastoral discernment.”

This decision is more restrictive than all previous proposals, in order to facilitate the acceptance of the text also by the Church of Georgia, which refused to sign the version presented to the Synaxis in January 2016. Finally, the Holy and Great Council always asserts in this regard the canonical principles of the Orthodox Church, but does not exclude the possibility that the Holy Councils of some Orthodox Churches grants Bishops the freedom to approve inter-Christian marriages that are very current in the Orthodox Diaspora.

### **7.5. The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Today<sup>32</sup>**

This subject, developed in nine paragraphs, was called at first “*Readjustment of Church provisions regarding Fasting*”<sup>33</sup> and was first studied by the Third Pan-Orthodox Conference, which gave the title it is wearing today, especially at the proposal of Metropolitan Antonie of Transylvania, head of the Romanian Orthodox Church delegation to the conference.<sup>34</sup> The novelty of this theme was based on the finding that the exact fasting rules were observed only by a minority of Orthodox believers and that is why some believed that those principles must be adapted, not changed, to the present time. The Romanian Orthodox Church attitude was that the solution is asserting the importance of Fasting for salvation, encouraging all believers to practice it.

At the recommendation of the Primates’ Synaxis of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, in March 2014, the text of 1986 was slightly revised by the Special Inter-Orthodox Commission, then adopted by the Fifth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference from 10 to 17 October 2015. In this text, the importance of Fast practice is asserted in the Orthodox tradition and some indicative criteria are formulated with regard to applying the principle of ecclesial absolution from Fasting. About the importance of Fasting, the text adopted by the Holy and Great Council stresses from the first paragraph, the following: “firmly, apostolic decisions, canons of the Council and the whole patristic tradition, the Church has always proclaimed the very high value of Fasting for the spiritual life of man and for his salvation. Throughout the liturgical year, it ennobles the tradition and patristic teaching about Fasting, required for the continual and faultless vigilance of man and to awaken his desire for spiritual warfare. “The principles of applying ecclesi-

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<sup>32</sup> <http://basilica.ro/sfantul-si-marele-sinod-importanta-postului-si-respectarea-lui-astazi-document-oficial/> (ianuarie 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Hotărârile...* p. 226-230.

<sup>34</sup> † Antonie Plămădeală, “A trei Conferință Panortodoxă presinodală (The Third Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference)”, *BOR* (Romanian Orthodox Church), 104 (1986), no. 9-10, p. 38 ș.u.

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al *oikonomia* about Fasting are formulated in subparagraph 7, by stating that “due to pastoral gentleness, the Church put the merciful *oikonomia* limits to Fasting. As a result, she provided the application of the ecclesial principle of *oikonomia* in cases of bodily illness, imperative necessity or due to the hardships of time, according to discernment and bishopric pastoral care of the local Churches”. The conciliar text concerning Fasting is the first if not the only one of those adopted by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox church, which has in view absolutely every believer and, this being a very nice text, it will become available to all as soon as possible.

### **7.6. Orthodox Church Relations with all Christian world<sup>35</sup>**

This theme was separated at first in two issues, namely: 1) *Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement* and 2) *Relationships of Orthodox Churches with the remainder of the Christian world*, both being adopted in a first form by the Third Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference<sup>36</sup> when a draft text for each of them had been adopted. In view to updating these two texts, the Primate's Synaxis of the Orthodox Churches, in March 2014, recommended their review by the Special Inter-Orthodox Commission that suggested, first to merge the two texts, for both themes dealt with international relations of the Church with inter-Christian international organizations and heterodox churches. The unique text proposed as such was adopted by the Fifth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference and consists of 24 paragraphs. The principles embodied in this text, inter-Christian relations of the Orthodox Churches, will be held within the limits set at pan-Orthodox level.

The text related to the issue has raised a dispute, sometimes furious, on the grounds that the Holy and Great Council had recognized unorthodox Christian communities as churches, some Orthodox claiming that the word Church cannot be used in any way with respect to heterodox Christians. First, we should note that the Holy and Great Council adopted the following wording in the 6th paragraph of this document: “In accordance with the ontological nature of the Church, her unity can never be perturbed. In spite of this, the Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her...”

And in paragraph number 21 it states that “Nonetheless, the Orthodox Church maintains reservations concerning paramount issues of faith and order, because the non-Orthodox Churches and Confessions have diverged from the true faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.”

<sup>35</sup> <http://basilica.ro/sfantul-si-marele-sinod-relatiile-bisericii-ortodoxe-cu-ansamblul-lumii-crestine-document-oficial/> (ianuarie 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ioniță, PhD, *Hotărârile...* p. 215-226.

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In the other paragraphs of text, the term church is used only for the Orthodox Church, the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”.

In connection with the use of the term *church* for heterodox Christian church communities, we quote only two examples of how these are mentioned in two cases of authority in Orthodox theology. In the first case we speak about “*The Encyclical Epistle of the four Patriarchs of the East*”, of the year 1848<sup>37</sup>, addressed to “the far and wide Orthodox of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”, which was one of the most critical official Orthodox documents addressed to the Catholic, which, however, uses three times the expression “Western Churches” (see paragraphs 5.VI, 5.XI and 5.XII), and then the expression “the Roman Church” seven times, including the variants “*The Church in all West*” or “*The fully renewing Western Church*” (see paragraphs 13, 16 and 17). Finally, in paragraph no. 13, the Pope is called “His Holiness” or no one can believe that this encyclical would have recognized the ecclesial character of the Roman Catholic Church.

Secondly, referring to Rev. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, who, as shown by Fr. Liviu Petcu, in a study published on September 20<sup>th</sup> on the website of Moldova and Bucovina Metropolitan, “uses the term ‘Church’ when referring, of course, to the true Church, the Orthodox One, but makes use of this term when referring to other Christian denominations. Thus, Father Stăniloae used the terms: *The Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Anglican Church, the Old Catholic Churches, Orthodoxy, the Oriental Coptic Church, the Ethiopian Church, the Syrian Church in Malabar, Protestant Churches, the Greek Catholic (Uniate)*”. Examples like these include tens in the various writings of the greatest Romanian theologian of all time, who never recognized the heterodox Christian communities as churches in the ecclesiological sense. In line with this tradition has the Holy and Great Council used the term “Church”, in reference to the heterodox Christian communities, namely calling them as they call themselves, and they are known to everyone, without thereby recognizing any ecclesial value.

This last basic text adopted by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church contains nothing heretical, as some of the spiritual fathers of great authority found. On the other hand, this text, that has gone through many reformulations from 1986 to 2016, might include some insufficiently clear statements that will be made clear at a later stage. However, this text is the authoritative text for defining relations between Orthodox Churches and other Christian communities, a necessary definition for Orthodox churches to follow in the same line.

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<sup>37</sup> [http://saraca.orthodoxphotos.com/biblioteca/enciclica\\_1848.htm](http://saraca.orthodoxphotos.com/biblioteca/enciclica_1848.htm) (ianuarie 2017).

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### 7.7. Encyclical of The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church<sup>38</sup>

The Encyclical takes most of the themes of the six documents with intent to deepen the most important. One of the concerns of the Orthodox Church expressed in this document is about family in secular society, which “approaches marriage in a secular way with purely sociological and realistic criteria, regarding it as a simple form of relationship – one among many others – all of which are entitled to equal institutional validity”. (*Paragraph 7*). The family crisis is opposed in the Orthodox Church by marriage that is “a Church-nurtured workshop of life in love and an unsurpassed gift of God’s grace” (*Ibid*), whereby man and woman, blessed in the Church, sacrifice together with God and at the same time one for another. Only then marriage becomes a place of fulfillment of men and women and at the same time, the safest environment of protecting and educating children. Referring to youth in the Orthodox Church, she shows that “Orthodox youth should become aware that they are bearers of the centuries-old and blessed tradition of the Orthodox Church and also the continuers of this tradition who will courageously preserve and will cultivate in a dynamic way the eternal values of Orthodoxy in order to give life-giving Christian witness” (*Paragraph 8*).

Concerned by armed conflict, which cut short the lives of many innocent people, the Orthodox Church calls on all decision-makers to do everything in their power to promote peace and reconciliation between people and nations. Thus, also in the Council Encyclical, it is stated that “We therefore urge all parties involved, irrespective of religious convictions, to work for reconciliation and respect for human rights, first of all through the protection of the divine gift of life”. (*Paragraf 18*). Then, before all the challenges and turmoil which today’s world is surging through, the same Council text, in paragraph 13 states that “In a global society, oriented towards ‘having’ and individualism, the Orthodox Catholic Church presents the truth of life in and according to Christ, the Truth freely made Incarnate in the everyday life of each man through his works “till evening” (Ps 103), through which he is made co-worker of the eternal Father [“We are co-workers with God” (1 Cor 3.9)] and of His Son [“My Father is working still, and I am working” (John 5.17)].”

As mentioned, the Encyclical is a unique text, elaborated right during the works of the Holy and Great Council, so the text was highly appreciated. How-

<sup>38</sup> This text is made up of an Introduction and seven Chapters: *Introduction* (4 parag.); I. *The Church : The Body of Christ and the Image of the Holy Trinity* (5 para.); II. *The Church Mission in the World* (3 para.); III. *Family – The Image of Christ’s Love for His Church* ( 2 para.); IV. *Education in Christ* (1 para); V. *The Church Facing Contemporary Challenges* (5 para.); VI. *The Church Facing Globalization, Violence as The Extreme Phenomenon of Migration* ( 5 para.); și VII. *The Church: Testimony in Dialogue* (2 para; and two conclusive paragraphs) cfr.: <http://ziarullumina.ro/enciclica-sfantului-si-marelui-sinod-al-bisericii-ortodoxe-dum-114557.html> (ianuarie 2017)

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ever, this text can not be separated from the other documents approved by this Council, for the decisions of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church are complementary, even if they refer to different themes. All decisions of this Council are based on The Holy Scripture and The Holy Tradition, which interprets the Orthodox perspective with regard to the challenges the Church is facing today.

#### **7.8. The Message of The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox to The True-Believing People and to All People of Good Will<sup>39</sup>**

The message of the Holy and Great Council is basically a summary of the Encyclical above and stresses, first, that “The key priority of the Council was to proclaim **the unity** of the Orthodox Church. Founded on the Eucharist and the Apostolic Succession of her Bishops, the existing unity needs to be strengthened and to bear new fruits” (*Paragraf 1*). With regard to the Orthodox Church on dialogue with other Christian communities in this message it is emphasized that “In response to her obligation to witness to the truth and her apostolic faith, our Church attaches great importance to **dialogue**, primarily with non-Orthodox Christians. In this way, the remainder of the Christian world comes to know more precisely the authenticity of the Orthodox Tradition, the value of patristic teaching and the liturgical life and faith of the Orthodox. The dialogues conducted by the Orthodox Church never imply a compromise in matters of faith” (*Paragraf 3*).

Similarly to the Encyclical, in the Message one may find the special concern of the Orthodox Church towards youth, Who, by this Message, “addresses herself to **young people** who seek for a plenitude of life replete with freedom, justice, creativity and also love. She invites them to join themselves consciously with the Church of Him who is Truth and Life. To come, offering to the ecclesial body their vitality, their anxieties, their concerns and their expectations. Young people are not only the future, but also the dynamic and creative present of the Church, both on a local and on a world-wide level” (*Paragraf 11*).

Finally, the Message says that “during the works, The Holy and Great Council underscored the importance of the Primates’ Synaxis formerly assembled and decided to convene a regular Holy and Great Council, every 7 or 10 years” (*Paragraf 1*). This emphasis was based on the proposal made by His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

### **8. Reception of The Holy and Great Council Decisions**

Of all the information above one may conclude that the topics listed within the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church were adopted in the prepara-

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<sup>39</sup> <http://basilica.ro/mesajul-sfantului-si-marelui-sinod-al-bisericii-ortodoxe/> (ianuarie 2017).

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tory phase by consensus of all local Orthodox Churches, and the texts proposed to this Council were approved also by consensus of the ten Orthodox Churches present at the Council. Lately, a number of critical comments about the status of both the Council and the six texts, summarized above, have been made. Faith is professed and preserved in its totality by what we call in Greek Church *Pleroma*, which includes both the bishops and other clergymen, monks and nuns and all the faithful laity or lay. The clergy alone without the faithful does not represent the Church *pleroma*, and much less faithful laity without clergymen. In this sense, the initiative of His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel to summon the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church was inspired, being materialized in its third working session of 2016, shortly before the Council of Crete; therefore, being able to have discussed all proposals for this Council and according to their theological correctness, they were retained to be held in Crete.

By its decisions, The Holy and Great Council did not change anything from the everlasting teaching in the Church of Christ, but formulated this teaching, more specifically, with reference to some of today's challenges to the Orthodox Church. The decisions taken by this Council have "pan-Orthodox authority", as specified in The Organization and Operation Rules of the Holy and Great Council, and its importance is highlighted by the decision reception of the entire *Pleroma* of the Orthodox Church, including the four Orthodox Churches absent from the Synod. About the decision reception of the Holy and Great Council, the Romanian Orthodox Church can be taken as a model in that in its working session of October 29, 2016, the Holy Synod of our Church "took note with appreciation of the participation and substantial involvement of the Patriarch of Romania and other delegated members of the Romanian Orthodox Church to the works of *The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*". On the same occasion, "the contents of the documents, in their approved form, in the works of The Holy and Great Council of Crete were taken note of", and that the texts adopted by the Council of Crete "can be explained, tinted or developed by a future Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church"<sup>40</sup>.

The Romanian Orthodox Church was the one who, through the voice of her Primate recommended continuing the practice of synodality worldwide, but given the fact that in Crete not all the Orthodox Churches were present, the Holy Synod of our Church expressed hope that explaining the adopted texts as well as "drafting other synodal documents on different themes should not be made, however,

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<sup>40</sup> See "Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe din Creta (16-26 iunie 2016) (The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church in Crete-16-26 June, 2016)", *Ziarul Lumina* (Lumina Newspaper) of October 31, 2016.

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under time pressure, but where there is no pan-Orthodox consensus, they should be postponed and improved until a consensus will be achieved<sup>41</sup>. The Holy and Great Council of The Orthodox Church held in Crete meant resuming synodality practice within the Orthodox Church at pan-Orthodox level and continuing synodality practice at this level is imperative for consistent testimony of the Orthodox Church in the world today.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem.*