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The First Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Orthodox Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus

Prva sinaksa primasov starodavnih pravoslavnih patriarhatov in Ciprske Cerkve

Abstract: The Ecumenical Patriarchate made the decision to convene Council of Orthodox Churches in the early 1920s. Despite this, for well-known historical reasons, the Council took place only after 93 years of lengthy preparatory work. The convocation of the Council is primarily attributed to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Bartholomew just one year after his election to the patriarchal throne, he convened the primates of all Orthodox Churches to strengthen pan-Orthodox unity. The institution of the Synaxis of the Primates of all Orthodox Churches, introduced by Patriarch Bartholomew, constitutes a sophisticated system of inter-Orthodox consultation and coordination under the auspices of Constantinople, which has proven highly beneficial for the Orthodox Church. Until the convocation of the Council, a total of six Synaxis of Primates of all Orthodox Churches and one Synaxis of Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus were held. In this article, we will examine the first in order and the last to date Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus with the aim of highlighting its historical significance and the utility of establishing this institution, which holds much promise for the future of the Orthodox Church and its presence in the modern world.

Keywords: Ecumenical Patriarchate, ancient Patriarchates, Church of Cyprus, Synaxis of Primates

Povzetek: Ekumenski patriarhat je v zgodnjih 20. letih 20. stoletja sprejel odločitev o sklicu koncila pravoslavnih Cerkva. Kljub temu pa je – zaradi dobro znanih zgodovinskih razlogov – do koncila prišlo šele po 93 letih dolgotrajnih priprav. Sklic koncila se pripisuje predvsem ekumenskemu patriarhu Bartolomeju. Ta je že leto dni po svoji izvolitvi na patriarhalni prestol sklical poglavarje vseh pravoslavnih Cerkva z namenom krepite vsepravoslavne enotnosti. Ustanovitev sinakse poglavarjev vseh pravoslavnih Cerkva, ki jo je uvedel patriarh Bartolomej, predstavlja prefinjen sistem medpravoslavnega posvetovanja in usklajevanja pod okriljem Carigrada, ki se je za pravoslavno Cerkev izkazal kot zelo koristen. Do sklica koncila je bilo skupaj izvedenih šest sinaks vseh pravoslavnih

poglavarjev ter ena sinaksa poglavarjev starodavnih patriarhatov in Cipske Cerkve. V prispevku bomo proučili prvo in zadnjo po vrsti od doslej izvedenih sinaks poglavarjev starodavnih patriarhatov in Cipske Cerkve z namenom osvetlitve njenega zgodovinskega pomena ter uporabnosti vzpostavitve te institucije, ki obeta pomembno vlogo za prihodnost pravoslavne Cerkve in njeno navzočnost v sodobnem svetu.

Ključne besede: ekumenski patriarhat, starodavni patriarhati, Cipska Cerkev, sinaksa poglavarjev

1. Introduction

The decision to convene a Council of the Orthodox Churches was made by the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite this, for well-known historical reasons, the Council of the Orthodox Churches took place only after 93 years of extensive preparatory work. The convocation of the Council is primarily due to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who, undeterred by the threats of certain Churches, unified the efforts of all Orthodox Primates and realized the dream of his predecessors, entering history as the Patriarch who opened new perspectives in the operation of the synodal system (Ladas 2025, 525–526). Indeed, from the onset of his patriarchy, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, I worked systematically with the well-understood interest of the Orthodox Church in mind. In this context, just one year after his election to the patriarchal throne, he convened all the Primates of the Orthodox Churches in Constantinople to strengthen pan-Orthodox unity and to enhance the witness of Orthodoxy in the modern world. The First Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, held in 1992, coincided with global events that necessitated closer communication among the Orthodox Churches, such as the fall of existing socialism in the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (Harper 2011). In contrast to the institution of the Synaxis of Hierarchs of the Ecumenical Throne, which emerged and was established due to purely historical reasons—namely the prohibition by Turkish authorities on non-Turkish citizen bishops participating in the Synod of the Patriarchate — (Lambriniadis 2015, 137) the institution of the Synaxis of Primates of all Orthodox Churches appeared to be necessitated by the need for closer communication and cooperation among the local Orthodox Churches. This initiative was driven by the evolving geopolitical and religious landscapes that highlighted the importance of a more unified approach among the Orthodox jurisdictions worldwide.

Undoubtedly, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, through his actions, revitalized the entire ecclesiastical body, as he brought the Orthodox Church out of its static character. As Professor Stylianos Tsompanidis aptly points out, “At the threshold of the third millennium and amidst tremendous and rapid changes that overturned the global stage and marked the beginning of a transitional era, both

for the world and for the churches and religions, Orthodoxy was fortunate to have an Ecumenical Patriarch of great personality and global influence.” (Tsompanidis 2017, 162)

The Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, an institution introduced by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, constitutes a refined system of inter-Orthodox consultation and coordination under the auspices of the First-Throned and Leading Church of Constantinople. This system has proven to be extremely beneficial for the Orthodox Church. By the time of the Holy and Great Council in June 2016, a total of six Synaxis of Primates of all the autocephalous Churches and one Synaxis of Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus were held, all under the presidency and wise guidance of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. In this article, without neglecting the importance and multiple benefits for the Orthodox Church of the institution of the Synaxis of the Primates of all Orthodox Churches, we will examine the first and, to date, last Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus. Our aim is to highlight its historical significance and the utility of establishing this institution, which holds much promise for the future of the Orthodox Church and its presence in the modern world.

2. The Historical Context of the Convocation of the Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus

In the early 2010s, serious problems emerged in the troubled region of the Middle East. Among these were the so-called Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, along with the economic issues they brought and the consequent refugee crisis. Naturally, the Christian population living in these areas was not left unaffected. Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus (1941–2022), during his response at the Synaxis under study, described the situation and stated explicitly: “Raids on places of worship during services, murders of innocent people, violence and acts of aggression against Christian properties, blatant violations of even the most basic human rights, compose today’s scene against Christians in the Middle East.” (AHSSEP, Response of archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus to the Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2011)

Alongside the previously mentioned situation, certain intra-Orthodox problems also emerged, which could potentially form significant obstacles and impede the progress of the Orthodox Church towards the Holy and Great Council. In February 2011, the 6th Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Committee was convened to prepare for the Holy and Great Council, chaired by Metropolitan John of Pergamon (1931–2023) and with the participation of representatives from all Orthodox Churches. The committee aimed to examine the issue of autocephaly at a tertiary level and the matter of the Diptychs at a primary level. The outcomes of the committee’s work did not foster optimism for the future of the pre-synodal process, and any

attempt to reconvene the committee was deemed futile. Consequently, the obstacles to convening the Holy and Great Council became increasingly insurmountable, and the progress of its preparation was rendered unfeasible. Furthermore, the continued postponement of the Council severely undermined the prestige and credibility of the Orthodox Church (Ladas 2025, 398–399).

The Ecumenical Patriarchate, in an effort to overcome the deadlock and “after much torment and mature reflection,” proposed that the convocation of the Holy and Great Council be held with a limited agenda, specifically the 8 topics that had already been prepared, along with the addition of a Message of broader content, which would address issues concerning contemporary humanity. Patriarch Bartholomew I indeed presented the primates with three alternative proposals for the further prospects of the preparatory path and convocation of the Holy and Great Council, emphasizing that there was a possibility that the Council might not be convened and that the Orthodox Church might abandon the endeavour, to the satisfaction and delight of third parties (AHSSEP, Patriarchal Letters to the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, Prot. No. 329 dated April 16, 2011).

Additionally, this year significant issues arose in the relations between the Orthodox Churches of Jerusalem and Romania, which led the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to unilaterally break the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Romania and to dismiss the Romanian Patriarchate’s representative in Jerusalem, Archimandrite Hieronymus Kretsu. The catalyst was the establishment by the Romanian Patriarchate of a guesthouse and a Holy Church in Jericho, a city that falls under the canonical ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (AHSSEP, Official communiqué of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem dated April 26 / May 9, 2011).

Following the decision of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to sever Eucharistic communion with the Church of Romania, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Patriarchate decided not to send representatives (bishops or clergy) to inter-Orthodox ecclesiastical assemblies (including the Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference and the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committee), which included Eucharistic liturgy in their programs. The Holy Synod, as clarified by Patriarch Daniel, made this decision: 1. to avoid creating an uncomfortable situation for the organizers of the inter-Orthodox and pan-Orthodox events, 2. to prevent any humiliation of the representatives of the Romanian Patriarchate, and 3. to ensure that the representatives of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem were not “disturbed” (Ladas 2025, 424).

Under these circumstances, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I decided to convene a Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus, that is, the Churches that have enjoyed special honour since ancient times as their autocephaly stems from the Ecumenical Councils. This decision was made because these Churches could contribute their long-standing experience to the advancement of Orthodox affairs in the modern world and thereby facilitate the work of the pan-Orthodox and inter-Orthodox committees and conferences. (AHSSEP, Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Synaxis of the Patriarchs of the ancient Churches 2011)

3. The Convocation of the Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I invited the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates of Alexandria Theodoros II, Antioch Ignatius IV (1920–2012), and Jerusalem Theophilos III, as well as the Primate of the venerable Church of Cyprus Chrysostomos II (1941–2022), to a Synaxis. The main topics for discussion were the examination of the situation of the Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, especially following the previously described developments in Arab countries, and the study of general Orthodox matters, including the progress of the Orthodox Church towards the Holy and Great Council (AHSSEP, Patriarchal Letters to the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, Prot. No. 329 dated April 16, 2011). The Synaxis was set to convene in Constantinople, with the commencement of its proceedings on September 1, 2011. The choice of this date for the Synaxis is symbolic as it marks: a) the beginning of the Indiction, i.e., the start of the new ecclesiastical year, b) the remembrance of the Lord's visit to the synagogue of the Jews, during which He was given to read from the book of Isaiah the beginning of the 61st chapter "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me," (Nikodemos the Hagiorite 1819, 1–2) and c) the Synaxis of the Most Holy Theotokos of the All-Blessed, whose icon is treasured in the Patriarchal Church of St. George. Additionally, in 1989, following a synodal decision, this day was designated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the Day of Prayer for the natural environment, and a special service composed by the ever-memorable hymnographer Saint Gerasimos Mikragiannanitis (1903–1991) is chanted, which coincides with the relevant holy service found in the Menaion, and a special Patriarchal Message regarding the protection of the natural environment is issued (AHSSEP, Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Synaxis of the ancient Churches 2011).

The Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus was held as scheduled from September 1 to 3, 2011, at the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George in Phanar, chaired by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, with the participation of the ancient Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and the Church of Cyprus. As specified in the Patriarchal invitation letters, the Synaxis focused on the developments in the Middle East and "on general Orthodox matters, including the progress towards the Holy and Great Council of the Most Holy Orthodox Church." Additionally, the Synaxis unanimously decided to issue a joint Communiqué and Message to the Christian faithful and to every person of goodwill, expressing solidarity and sympathy towards those suffering and calling upon political and religious leaders to establish principles and commitments aimed at the peaceful coexistence of believers of different religions in the sensitive geographical area of the Middle East. (AHSSEP, Message of the Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Orthodox Churches 2011)

The delegation from the convening Church of Constantinople was composed of five members, including the Ecumenical Patriarch himself, Metropolitan John of Pergamon, and Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, now Metropolitan Elder of Chal-

cedon, Archimandrite Bartholomew Samaras, Secretary of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, now Metropolitan of Smyrna, and Grand Protopresbyter George Tsetsis (1934–2024). The delegation from the Patriarchate of Alexandria was composed of three members: Patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria and Metropolitans Kallinikos of Pelusium (1936–2013), former, and George of Accra, now Metropolitan of Guinea. The delegation from the Church of Jerusalem included four members: Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem, Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth, Archbishop Konstantinos Aristarchos, and Archdeacon Athanasios Themistocleous. The Church of Cyprus was represented by a threemember delegation consisting of Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus (1941–2022), Metropolitan Georgios of Paphos, now Archbishop of Cyprus, and Archdeacon Kyprianos Kountouris. Although Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch was the first to accept the invitation, he was ultimately unable to attend in person due to circumstances and was represented by Bishop Issac of Apamea, now Metropolitan of Germany and Central Europe. (AHSSEP, List of Members of the Synaxis of Ancient Orthodox Churches)

On the morning of Thursday, September 1, 2011, a festive Divine Liturgy was celebrated on the feast of the Indiction, during which the Ecumenical Patriarch officiated and was co-officiated by the attending Primates, along with the bishops accompanying them, the representative of the Patriarch of Antioch, and the hierarchs of the Throne. Subsequently, they jointly signed the Act marking the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year. (AHSSEP, Communiqué of the Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Churches)

The official ceremony marking the beginning of the Synaxis's proceedings took place at 6:00 PM on the same day, September 1, 2011, at the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George in Phanar. Initially, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I offered a prayer, and then he delivered his introductory speech, setting the purpose, goals, and principles of the Synaxis, with specific, pertinent proposals aimed at further enhancing Pan-Orthodox unity and the progress of inter-Orthodox efforts, among others, including the advancement of preparations for the convocation of the Holy and Great Council. In his speech, he noted that the Synaxis was taking place "in days of trials and temptations for all humanity," but particularly for those living in the geographical area of the specific Churches. He expressed his conviction that the cooperation of the Primates would prove "fruitful for the good of unity and the mission in the world of the most holy Churches and of the entire most holy Orthodox Church." Following this, the Ecumenical Patriarch pointed out that the "fluid and unpredictable" political developments in the region were intensifying concerns about the future of the "Orthodox Churches that have resided there for centuries." This situation necessitates a prudent stance from all the Churches in response to these developments, aiming to protect the Christian flock and ensure their stability in the region. At this point, he also set the objective of the Synaxis, given that the said Churches were more directly affected by the developments in the Middle East and therefore needed to collectively assess the situation "as it pertains to their presence and life there, primarily of the Orthodox, but also of other Christian Churches."

During the opening ceremony, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I emphasized the importance of not missing this blessed opportunity to exchange views on the general position of the Orthodox Church in the modern world and the fulfilment of its mission therein. He proposed that the Primates exchange ideas about the preparations for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which was facing some difficulties. Furthermore, he expressed his certainty that the convocation of the Council was crucial for the life of the Orthodox Church and brought the Primates before their responsibilities, remarking with regret, "We are saddened, not to say ashamed, that it has not yet been realized, despite being announced several decades ago." He added that it was time to remove any obstacles "for the realization of this sacred duty, sacrificing if necessary, the narrowly understood interests of our Churches for the sake of this lofty purpose, from whose fulfilment Orthodoxy as a whole will benefit, as well as each Autocephalous Orthodox Church by extension. For, in the final analysis, the interest of each of our Churches is found in the unity and strength of the whole Orthodoxy."

Furthermore, the Ecumenical Patriarch referred to the ecological crisis, stating,

"Given that in this region of the Mediterranean, besides our Orthodox Churches, there are other Christian Churches and denominations, as well as faithful of other religions, we consider it would be very useful to prepare and realize a meeting of religious leaders of this area, during which an ecological 'Mediterranean Charter' would be agreed upon and proclaimed. This Charter would set forth the principles derived from each one's religious convictions, mandating the protection of God's creation from the destruction threatened by human activity."

He added, "The joint addressing of ecological problems, in conjunction with the interreligious dialogues already underway, can greatly contribute to the approach and peaceful coexistence of the peoples living in the volatile region of the Mediterranean" (AHSSEP, Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Synaxis of the Patriarchs of the ancient Churches 2011; Ladas, 2018; 2024b).

The speeches of all the Primates reflected the concern of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus for the future of Christians in the Middle East, who are being tested due to political upheavals and their repercussions. Subsequently, a dinner was held at the Sacred Patriarchal and Stavropegic Monastery of the Life-Giving Spring of Baloukli, providing an opportunity for further fellowship and discussion among the participants about the pressing issues highlighted during their addresses. (AHSSEP, Program of the Synaxis of the Ancient Churches 2011)

The Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus resumed its work on September 2nd at 9 AM, initially engaging in mutual updates and extensive discussions regarding the situation in the Middle East. Following this, Synaxis turned its attention to various intra-Orthodox issues, exploring solutions and strategies to enhance cooperation among the churches and address-

sing the pressing challenges faced by their communities. This approach underlined the commitment of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus to not only address regional geopolitical issues but also to strengthen the Orthodox communion through dialogue and shared initiatives.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem proposed that the Primates decide on changing the regulations of the Holy and Great Council, while the Archbishop of Cyprus suggested discussing the issue at a Pan-Orthodox Council and insisting, in case of disagreement, “under the threat of exclusion.” The Primates of the Ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus considered it most appropriate to convene a Synaxis of Primates of all Orthodox Churches to address the decision-making process of the Holy and Great Council. The Archbishop of Cyprus emphasized that the Council should be held as soon as possible and that the Churches should try to “impose” their position but should not be able to exercise a veto, in order to prevent the Council from being held hostage by any individual Church. Consequently, the Metropolitan of Pergamon raised questions about (a) the composition of the Council and (b) whether participation should be universal or proportional. Furthermore, he queried whether they desired a Council with 8 topics and whether a revision of the texts was anticipated, given that the agreements must be maintained.

Additionally, various inter-Orthodox issues were discussed, including the geographical boundaries of each autocephalous Church and the ecological crisis. The Metropolitan of France emphasized the need for specific proposals and a defined stance towards political problems and discussed interreligious dialogue, which differs from inter-Christian dialogue as it promotes understanding and is a dialogue of coexistence, reconciliation, mutual respect, and the opportunity to learn about the customs of others.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem stated that specific initiatives need to be undertaken to relieve Christians in the Middle East. Concrete actions, such as the construction of a clinic or a nursing institution, should be implemented. The Synaxis also highlighted the necessity of frequent communication to support each other and find solutions.

The proceedings of the Synaxis concluded on the afternoon of Saturday, September 3, where the Primates and the representative of the Patriarchate of Antioch thanked the Ecumenical Patriarch for the invitation “to come to the holy center of Orthodoxy and discuss collectively the issues concerning their Churches at this time and decided that they should meet more regularly to discuss Orthodox matters.”

4. The Decisions of the Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus

The Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus decided that the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus would further support and strengthen the ongoing inter-Christian and interreligious dialogue, which is being conducted under the care of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and in

accordance with the relevant decisions of the Third Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference (1986). Additionally, the representatives of the Churches located in the Middle East were instructed to maintain communication with the Office of the Orthodox Church in the European Union to address emerging issues and find appropriate solutions through the adoption of necessary measures.

Moreover, the Synaxis decided that the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Archbishop of Cyprus should take the following actions: 1. Ensure the construction of a medical facility on a property owned by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, located within its canonical geographical jurisdiction, to provide care and treatment for patients in that troubled region. 2. Provide scholarships from each Church to young faithful of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, enabling them to pursue undergraduate or postgraduate studies at academic institutions under their jurisdiction. 3. Collaborate with the Patriarchate of Alexandria to contribute to the fight against infectious diseases (e.g., AIDS/HIV) and epidemic illnesses in many countries across the African continent (Ladas 2024a).

As part of its proceedings, the Synaxis also addressed the issue of preparing for the Holy and Great Council and decided to expedite the preparatory process, aiming to make it possible to convene the Council “in the foreseeable future.” The Synaxis noted with regret that the deadlock, which arose in February 2011, in the progress towards the long-prepared convocation of the Council was due to the provisions of the Rules of Procedure of the Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synodal Conferences, specifically those requiring decisions to be made by unanimity. For this reason, the participants recommended to the Ecumenical Patriarch to convene a Synaxis of Patriarchs and Presidents of all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches with the purpose of revising these provisions, “for the quicker advancement and completion of the Council’s preparation.”

The Synaxis adopted the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s proposal to hold a meeting of religious leaders from the Mediterranean region “in the near future,” during which an ecological “Mediterranean Charter” could be agreed upon and proclaimed. This initiative would contribute to efforts to protect the natural environment and promote peaceful coexistence and cooperation among the region’s religions.

5. Conclusions

Based on the decisions of the First Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus, the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to convene a Synaxis of the Primates of all Orthodox Churches. This Synaxis, with its authority, would resolve the obstacles that hindered the convocation of the Holy and Great Council and would make specific decisions to advance the preparatory work, with the goal of definitively guiding the Orthodox Church towards the convocation of the Council. Consequently, the Ecumenical Patriarch invited the Primates of the Orthodox Churches to Constantinople the fol-

lowing year. Unfortunately, the Synaxis could not be convened in 2012. However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate did not abandon the idea of convening the Orthodox Primates. In September 2012, it was decided that the Synaxis would convene “in due course in Phanar.” Additionally, to facilitate the convening of the Synaxis, it was decided to send a patriarchal delegation, consisting of Metropolitans John of Pergamon, Emmanuel of France, and Archimandrite Bartholomew Samaras, to the Orthodox Churches to discuss “all matters concerning this Synaxis and the details... so that agreement might be reached on all issues on the agenda” (Ladas 2025, 423). Ultimately, the fifth Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches was convened in 2014, and it decided that the Holy and Great Council would take place, at the invitation of the Ecumenical Patriarch, in Constantinople in 2016.

For the sake of historical record, it should be noted that the Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus was subjected to unfounded criticism, despite the fact that the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s competence to convene pan-Orthodox bodies is rooted in Holy Tradition and the Sacred Canons (Canon 3 of the Second Ecumenical Council, Canon 28 of the Fourth, and Canon 36 of the Quinisext Council). Some labelled it a “selective Synaxis of the Eastern Primates,” while others spoke of “two-speed” Churches. It was even argued that such an initiative undermined the unity of Orthodoxy and cited the alleged—though never officially expressed—displeasure of the Primates of the newer Patriarchates and autocephalous Churches that were not invited. In truth, the questioning of the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate became manifest throughout the preparatory stages of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church and was persistently pursued by certain circles, supported by specific Orthodox Churches. These circles willfully disregarded the ecumenical and pan-Orthodox responsibilities of the Church of Constantinople, aiming instead to confine its mission to narrow, local dimensions.

However, no Orthodox Church opposed the convocation of the Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus. On the contrary, all, without exception, awaited its decisions. This criticism, whether well-intentioned or not, does not do justice to the facts, as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as the First-Throned and leading Church, always acts with the best interests of the Orthodox Church in mind. For this reason, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew introduced the institution of Synaxis of all Orthodox Primates, his predecessor Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I (1886–1972) established the institution of Pan-Orthodox Conferences, and Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios (1914–1991) convened the Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conferences to prepare for the Council.

The institution of the Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus, therefore, in no way seeks to divide the Orthodox Churches, nor does it conflict with the broader inter-Orthodox cooperation. On the contrary, it further strengthens inter-Orthodox collaboration by leveraging the contributions of the ancient Orthodox Churches in advancing the Orthodox witness in the world. The equal participation of all Orthodox Churches in pan-Orthodox and inter-Orthodox meetings remains respected and upheld, but this does not negate

the special honour bestowed upon the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus, whose autocephaly has been ratified by Ecumenical Councils since ancient times. The Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus contributes with the extensive experience of the ancient Churches to the promotion of Orthodox affairs in the modern world and facilitates the work of pan-Orthodox and inter-Orthodox committees and conferences. (AHSSEP, Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Synaxis of the Ancient Churches 2011)

Indeed, the Message of the First Synaxis explicitly stated: "We, who bear the responsibility of leadership and pastoral care of the ancient and historic Churches, which were founded by the Apostles of Christ and declared autocephalous by the Ecumenical Councils of the one undivided Church, have gathered here to revive an ancient custom and to exchange thoughts..." (AHSSEP, Message of the Synaxis of the Primates of the Ancient Orthodox Churches, 2011) In this context, it is noteworthy that the Archbishop of Cyprus, during his response, emphasized that

"The two-thousand-year history of our ancient Churches, their participation in all the Ecumenical Councils, and their struggle to uphold the correct doctrine have endowed them with unique experience. Moreover, the continuous martyrdom over centuries, which compels them to remain in constant vigilance, has given them another privilege: by measuring worldly matters with a different standard, they consider it their duty to stand by the faithful individually and by Churches with less experience." (AHSSEP, Response of archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus to the address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2011)

Therefore, the institution of the Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the ancient Church of Cyprus is a significant initiative by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and proves to be highly beneficial for the Orthodox Church in many ways.

Finally, it should be noted that there were considerations for convening a Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus in 2022, following the uncanonical incursion of the Church of Russia into the canonical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. To this end, Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon visited Patriarch John of Antioch and conveyed the idea of convening a Synaxis of the Primates of the ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus before the Great Lent and Holy Week of 2022 in Constantinople (Patriarch John X receives Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon Balamand, 2022). The Synaxis was intended to discuss all the issues facing the Orthodox Church, and with the wisdom and experience of the ancient thrones of the East, it would make the appropriate decisions. However, due to well-known reasons, the convening of this second Synaxis has not yet taken place.

Abbreviation

AHSSEP – Archive of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Archival sources

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