

NEW YORK: Communication of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia to the Clerics and Faithful — 13 April 2016.

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, Venerable Monastics and Pious Faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia:

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!

In light of the welcome publication of the documents to be considered by the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council, scheduled to take place on Crete from 16-27 June 2016, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia has undertaken to examine these texts, together with a multitude of other Hierarchs, clergy and laity who are doing the same as preparations for the Council continue, and to communicate with our God-preserved flock and others the manner of suggestions we are proposing, since the documents of the Council are the cause of interest and questioning to very many. We are reminded, in this as in all things, of the words of the Lord to the Holy Apostle St. Peter, when He pronounced that the future shepherd's work would be to *feed My sheep* (John 21.17); and likewise that the food for those who love Him is to diligently preserve what Christ has taught them: *If ye love me, keep my commandments* (John 14.15), and *If a man love me, he will keep my words* (John 14.23).

It is with zeal for such divine commandments that the whole plenitude of the Hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church seeks to apply the counsel of the Righteous Solomon: *incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding* (Proverbs 2.2), scrutinizing the documents that have been made available to us with humility, diligence and obedience. This task is undertaken in a spirit free from fear or worldly worry, since we fervently trust that God Himself is ever the helmsman of the Church, and as He has guided her through the many centuries to our day, so He will continue to guide and preserve us now and until He comes again. Rather, we offer reflections on a few of the texts as a means of conjoining our thoughts to those of many others who are working for the good of all our inter-Orthodox endeavours, including His Holiness the Patriarch and those members of our Russian Orthodox Church who labour with him in these preparations.

While certain of the documents — which have been prepared by the Pre-Conciliar Conferences for the Council's consideration, but which are of course not final texts and are necessarily preliminary — do not give rise for concern in our reading, and indeed contain elements of useful clarification (for example, the document "Autonomy and the Means of Proclaiming It"), the employment in others of ambiguous terminology, a lack of theological precision, and ecclesiological language foreign to the sacred tradition of the Church, demand commentary that may lead to their correction. This is most notably the case in two documents: "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World", and "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World"; and a few issues arise also with the procedural text entitled "Organisation and Working Procedure of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church."

The Document "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World"

We cannot read the document "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World" without noting the pronounced measure of inconsistency — both in terms of language as well as conceptuality — that marks it out; but also, more painfully, the failure of the

document to espouse proper Orthodox ecclesiology in the manner necessary for the full proclamation of Christ's Truth in a divided world. In our estimation this is the most problematic of the Pre-Conciliar documents, and one which will require substantial revision and amendment during the sessions of the Council itself, if it is to attain a form suitable for adoption.

The inconsistencies in ecclesiological terminology are readily apparent, and have already been noted by many (the Most Reverend Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and St. Vlasios, the Most Reverend Metropolitan of Limassol, as well as various learned Orthodox clergy and scholars). While the document opens by identifying the Orthodox Church as "the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" (art. 1), which "grounds her unity on the fact that she was founded by Our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as on the communion in the Holy Trinity and in the Sacraments" (art. 2), the terminology used throughout the remainder of the text renders ambiguous these otherwise clear and true phrases. Not only is proclamation of the Orthodox Church as "the One" Church befuddled by the statement that "the Orthodox Church acknowledges the existence in history of other Christian Churches and confessions which are not in communion with her" (art. 6) and the repeated references to "various Christian Churches and confessions" (art 6, art. 20); the document also lacks any reference to the fact that the Church is not only "founded by" our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ (cf. art. 2), but is ever His mystical Body, always one and indivisible (cf. Ephesians 5.30; Colossians 1.24). Though of course all acknowledge the existence in history of groups who seek to follow the Saviour apart from the Orthodox Church, and which may by self-definition refer to themselves as 'churches', Orthodox ecclesiology permits of no pluralization of what is, and must always be, One: Christ's Body itself. In casual usage such terminology (i.e. of 'other churches') may at times be employed out of convenience, but it can have no place in a formal document of the Church, which must be scrupulously precise and give clear, unequivocal voice to the traditions we have received from our Fathers, which they received from the Lord.

More serious are the deficiencies in this text regarding the essential distinction it seeks to address: namely, the Church and her relations to those outside her. While our hearts echo the sentiment of the holy Hieromartyr Hilarion (Troitsky) who observed of the fracture in the Christian world: "What conscious Christian does not sorrow in soul when he sees the enmity and division among people who should be uniting their faith, among whom should be reigning the peace left and given by Christ to His disciples, and love poured into the hearts of Christians by the Holy Spirit!" — we acknowledge at the same time that the advent of such peace to those who are divided can come only through the proclamation of the one true path towards unity: the life of salvation offered in the Church; and that understanding how to return to the indivisible Church begins with a right understanding of separation. Here the document is at its most unclear. At no point does the text heed the example of the Holy Fathers, Councils and Canons of the Church in identifying the division between Christian peoples as arising from schism and heresy (terms which, most surprisingly, do not appear in the text at all); that is, in terms of increasing degrees of severance and departure from Christ's Body and Truth.¹ Instead, the document takes the para-ecclesiological approach of locating division within a broadly-defined concept of "Christian unity" (cf. art. 4), which itself becomes an ambiguous phrase used to imply a paramount "unity of believers in Christ"

¹ As, for example, in the clear language of St. Basil the Great in his First Canonical Epistle (Epistle 188), as well as the First Canon of the same Father and the commentary of St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain on the same; and in many other elements of the Church's tradition.

(*ibid.*) that extends beyond the “One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” and incorporates many other confessions.²

It is in this context of a heterodox para-ecclesiology that the document goes on to speak of Christian unity as something that has been “lost” (art. 5), and “the restoration of Christian unity” as one of the Church’s persistent aims (art. 4, 5, 12, 24). Such statements contradict the otherwise valid proclamation that “the unity by which the Church is distinguished in her ontological nature is impossible to shatter” (art. 6). Moreover, intermingling the right proclamation that the Church bears witness “to those who are external to her” (*ibid.*), with the suggestion that she engages with such bodies in order to seek “lost Christian unity on the basis of the faith and tradition of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils” (art. 5), makes clear that the “unity” being spoken of is one in which the Holy Orthodox Church of those Councils is but a part or component, rather than the undivided whole which Christ has ever preserved as His own Bride (cf. Ephesians 5.25-26, 32). In all this, not only is a heterodox ecclesiology implicated in the draft of a potentially pan-Orthodox statement, but a powerful pastoral opportunity is neglected. The true disunity present among Christian peoples today is the loss of unity of *heterodox Christians with the Orthodox Church*; and the path of healing that can render divided humanity truly united is the repentant departure from schism and heresy, and the return to the One Church whose unity has never been broken.³ It is for the divine preservation of this interior unity that we pray when we petition for “the union of all” in the Divine Services, while at the same time bearing in our hearts the hope that those who are parted from it may return. A pan-Orthodox statement that fails to proclaim this Gospel hope into the world misses an opportunity rightly to bear the message of salvation.

The same document contains other errors which cannot be passed over. Its twenty-third article comments on the necessity of inter-Christian theological dialogue (itself a good and potentially fruitful endeavour) “excluding any practice of proselytism or any outrageous manifestations of inter-confessional antagonism” (art. 23). The loose association of the term “proselytism” with “inter-confessional antagonism” is problematic, for the Lord commands both the active preaching (leading to baptism) of “all nations” (cf. Matthew 28.19, 20) and assures the Church of His special preservation of those being proselytised — a reality we hymn in the Typical Psalms of the Divine Liturgy (κύριος φυλάσσει τοὺς προσηλύτους, Psalm 145.9). To categorically forbid “proselytism”, properly understood, by Orthodox towards the heterodox is a tacit acceptance of an “equality of confessions” (something the document itself rightly says cannot be accepted; cf. art. 18), since it amounts to an avowal of the idea that the heterodox are already united to the Body of Christ (the Church) and therefore need not be drawn towards repentant conversion into it.

We presume this clearly anti-Evangelical prohibition is not what is intended by the text, which pairs “proselytism” with “outrageous manifestations of inter-confessional antagonism”; and instead that it is using the term in a commonly-acknowledged vernacular to refer to devious and

² In this regard we are particularly grateful for the elucidation of His Eminence Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and St. Vlasios, in his *Letter to the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece* (18th January 2016), in which he draws attention to the implicit presence of so-called “Baptismal Theology” raised through the document’s reference to the 7th Canon of the Second Ecumenical Council, and the 95th Canon of the Quinisext Council; and which His Eminence also notes appears to call into question the decision of the Patriarchs of 1756, by which the one baptism of the Orthodox Church is understood to have no parallel in other confessions.

³ We are grateful for the clarity on these points offered in the recent letter of His Eminence Athanasius, Metropolitan of Limassol (dated 11th February 2016), with whose considered opinions we are in agreement.

often underhanded tactics employed in preaching the Gospel, rather than the preaching of the Gospel itself (which is how we likewise interpret the employment of the term in the recent joint declaration of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and the Roman Catholic Pope of Rome⁴). However, while informal usage of the term to refer to perversions of behaviour may be permissible in unbinding documents, it cannot be permitted of a formal ecclesiological statement.

The Document “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World”

The problems contained in the document “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” are more subtle and theological in character than those in the text on the relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world, but for precisely this reason deserve special attention. His Eminence the Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and St. Vlasios has already carefully laid out the basics of the anthropological flaws that undergird the whole of this text, which render its otherwise noble focus on the work of Orthodoxy to foster peace, the aversion of war, the fight against discrimination, etc., deeply problematic until they are corrected.

The heart of the problem lies in the document’s persistent use of the term “human person” where it ought to use “man”, and grounding its humanitarian discussion in elaborations on this phrase.⁵ Usage of the term “person” for man emerges within Orthodox discussion in a notable way only from the time of V. Lossky, who himself acknowledged the novelty of his employment of it; and while it has become almost normative in contemporary discussions, the Holy Fathers are consistent in employing the Scriptural and liturgical language of “man”. The term “person” (Рус. лицо, Gr. πρόσωπον)⁶ is chiefly used in Orthodox language in reference to the Divine Persons of

⁴ See the Joint Declaration of Patriarch Kyrill and Pope Francis, 12th February 2016, section 24.

⁵ We note the careful precision that must be applied in this matter, as the document employs both correct references to “man” (человек, ὁ ἄνθρωπος), as well as incorrect references to the “human person” (человеческая личность, τὸν ἀνθρώπινον πρόσωπον). The latter, which are the core of the theological problems with this document, are located at: Art.1 Title; 1.i, iii; 2.i, iii; 3.i; and 6.v).

For the sake of those reading the texts in other translations, the problem is at times compounded (for example, the English translation in wide circulation, which is not itself an official translation of the Pre-Conciliar Conferences, regularly confuses the matter further by failing to distinguish between the different terms in the official text, rendering almost all instances even of человек, ὁ ἄνθρωπος as “human person”. Cf. Pref. paras. 2, 4; art. 1.i; multiple instances in 2.i; 6.iii, x; multiple instances in 6.xii, 6.xv).

⁶ We note here an important distinction between theological usage in the Russian and Greek languages: Russian makes a distinction between Лицо (used in reference to the Divine Persons, Лицы, of the Holy Trinity) and личность, which is sometimes used of man, given that it retains a distinction between the type of Persons identified in the Trinity, and the being of the human creature. Thus in the official Russian edition of the present document, the phrase in question is always rendered *человеческая личность* and not *человеческое лицо*; while in Greek such a linguistic distinction does not exist and therefore the phrase is always rendered as the entirely unacceptable *ἀνθρώπινον πρόσωπον*.

In addition to matters of theological accuracy, this also introduces a procedural problem to the Council’s documents, since the official version of the Russian text employs a differentiation of vocabulary that is not employed in the Greek. Further inconsistency exists in the official French version of the document, which employs “la personne humaine” (or a variation) some 12 times, as opposed to 7 in the Russian and Greek versions, often using it where the Greek text reads ὁ ἄνθρωπος and the Russian reads человек (e.g. in the Preface; art. 1.ii.). Thus we have *three different documents*, using different distinctions and nuances of vocabulary, rather than a threefold presentation of a single text in translation.

the Holy Trinity, in confessing the unique hypostatic being of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as the singular hypostatic reality of the One Son in Whom both the divine and human natures co-exist “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably” (Definition of the Fourth Ecumenical Council). Almost never is the term applied to the human creature (in whom such distinctions do not exist), precisely as a way of noting the absolute distinction between that which is created and that which is Uncreated — for while man is “in the image and likeness of God”, he is in no wise comparable, in his createdness, to Him Who has no beginning.

This clarification, which may at first strike as overly nuanced or even pedantic, is of fundamental importance to Orthodox theology and anthropology, and demonstrates the need for the most exacting attention when considering documents for widespread circulation (even in a case such as this, where the text does not purport to be about Trinitarian doctrine at all, yet inadvertently puts forward doctrinally problematic themes). The rise in misapplication of the term “person” to man over the past 75 years has resulted in numerous perversions of theological language in the realm of doctrinal reflection, one of the most notable of which, the concept that there is a “communion of Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity”, is directly stated in the document (art. 2.i).⁷ The precise theological discussions of the fourth and fifth centuries clarified that the Father, Son and Spirit are united in an eternal communion of *essence* (in the begottenness of the Son, the procession of the Spirit and the *monarchia* of the Father), but not a communion of Persons. Misapplication of the term “person” to man has led, however, to considerations of the community of the human race being applied to the nature of the Holy Trinity in a manner that contradicts the clear teaching of the Fathers and Ecumenical Councils. Furthermore, such improper language of Trinity creates new anthropological problems that arise from seeing “the human person” as “a community of persons in the unity of the human race *reflecting the life and communion of the Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity*” (art. 2.i — one of the most problematic phrases in the document).⁸ While it is true that man’s freedom (the subject of Article 2) is a gift arising from his being created “in the image” of God, neither his life in the broad community of the race of men, nor the freedom he exercises within it, are comparable to the freedom of the Divine Persons expressed in their eternal, mutual indwelling.

In numerous places throughout the document signs of this flawed anthropology are present, summed up in its desire to advance “the general recognition of the lofty value of the human person”

While the Russian distinction of *лицо/личность* may be less problematic than attributing the direct title of “person” (*лицо*) to man, it is nevertheless a theological innovation that this document need not foster. It seems to us that theological precision is best maintained by avoiding it, and using the proper *человек, ὁ ἄνθρωπος, l’homme* for man in all instances.

⁷ Both the official Russian and Greek versions include this improper theological statement, describing the Holy Trinity as: « общение Божественных Лиц », « κοινωνίαν τῶν θείων προσώπων ».

⁸ Rus. « и как члену сообщества личностей, в единстве человеческого рода по благодати отражающих жизнь и общение Божественных Лиц в Святой Троице ». Gr. « καί ὡς κοινωνίαν προσώπων ἀντανακλώντων κατά χάριν διά τῆς ἐνότητος τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου γένους τὴν ἐν τῇ Ἁγίᾳ Τριάδι ζῶν καί κοινωνίαν τῶν θείων προσώπων ». Once again we see here the difference in Russian usage, which distinguishes in this sentence between *лицо* and *личность*, and the Greek which uses *πρόσωπον* in each instance.

(art. 1.iii)⁹ as the source for its language of mission. Yet when man is identified improperly as a human person reflecting an improper conception of a “communion of Divine Persons” in the Trinity, his “lofty value” is elaborated in necessarily inaccurate terms. Man’s value is indeed lofty, but the right foundation of his value lies precisely in his created *distinction* from the Persons of the Trinity, into Whose life he is nonetheless called and Whose image he yet mystically bears, rendering him unique among all creation in that he can attain the likeness of God through the deification of his nature.

In summary, we wish to stress that this document on the mission of the Church says much that is good: its emphasis on the proper exercise of human freedom, the pursuit of peace and justice, the struggles against discrimination, the identification of multitudinous problems with the secular and consumerist ideologies of our present culture, and so forth — these are all laudable and God-pleasing aims. But they must not be met through the application of flawed anthropological and theological concepts. The phrase “human person” should be replaced throughout with the more satisfactory “man”, especially in key phrases like “the value of the human person” (art. 1.iii). Similarly, other ambiguous or improperly-applied anthropological terms should be carefully scrutinized and corrected (such as the use of “gender”, when in fact “sex” is meant; cf. Preface, art. 5[ii, iii]).

A Word on the Procedures and Authority of the Council

Finally, a word must be said on the operational procedures established for the Council, with reference to the authority any documents it may approve will have within the Orthodox world.

We are not the first to note the flawed ecclesiological statement present in Article 22 of the document “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”, which claims that “the preservation of the true Orthodox faith is only possible thanks to the conciliar structure which since ancient times has been for the Church the strong and final criterion in matters of faith”. The Holy Councils of the Church, even those deemed Ecumenical in the consciousness of the Church, have never been “the strong and final criterion in matters of faith,” but rather the Spirit-led confirmation of the one criterion of faith which is the express Will of Christ. The true Orthodox faith is not preserved “only ... thanks to the conciliar structure” of the Church, but through the unwavering, active headship of Christ over His Body, which properly constituted and prayerfully unified Councils manifest rather than determine.

This is accomplished through the charismatic, Apostolic grace bestowed upon the Hierarchs of the Church, which in conciliar prayer and reflection mystically discloses the Will of God Who speaks in and through His ministers. For this reason, those councils which have been assessed by the Church as having binding authority on her work and life are those in which the full freedom of this episcopal grace is preserved. Each bishop equally manifests the Apostolic charism, and in council each bishop is freely able to raise his voice in the plenitude of that assembly. Only in such a manner have councils been able to say *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* (Acts 15.28) and proclaim authoritatively the Will of the Lord.

The determinations made through the Pre-Conciliar process and the decision of the Primates of the Autocephalous Churches, spelled out in Articles 3, 12 and 13 of the “Organisation and Working Procedure of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” document, make clear that the Pan-Orthodox gathering to take place this year will not be a council of this nature.

⁹ « Всеобщее признание высокой ценности человеческой личности »; « ἡ κοινὴ ἀποδοχὴ τῆς ὑψίστης ἀξίας τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου προσώπου ». Cf. art. 6.v, where a similar sentiment is expressed, again using the improper terms.

We hasten to add, in a spirit of full faith and love, that this in no wise means it cannot be of value and importance, and indeed we pray for a fruitful meeting that permits a new degree of inter-Orthodox dialogue and common work. However, a council that includes only a fixed number of representative bishops (art. 3.i), in which voting on the adoption of texts is done on a novel “one Church, one vote” model in which voting “shall be effected by autocephalous Orthodox Churches, not each particular member of the delegations represented at the Council” (art. 12.i), in which it is explicitly asserted that “the voting of a Church at the Council, not a member of a delegation, does not exclude the possibility for one or a few hierarchs in the delegation of a particular autocephalous Church to take a negative position towards introduced amendments or a text in general” (art. 12.ii) and which relegates any such dissenting voice to “an internal affair of that Church to which the hierarchs belong” (art. 12.iii) — all these things mean that any documents which are approved at this council may indeed have “a pan-Orthodox authority” (art. 13.ii), but this authority can be neither dogmatic nor doctrinal, but will represent only the authority of the voices of those hierarchs permitted by such regulations to be present, speak, and have a vote. While we are satisfied that the insistence upon unanimous consensus for any amendments (art. 11.ii), as well as the adoption of texts themselves (art. 13.i), adequately safeguards against the possibility of the imposition of any text by “majority vote”, the fact remains that even in such cases where decisions are taken at this council by the unanimous consensus of those present, such decisions can never be considered to bear witness to the consensus of the plenitude of the Church, and therefore the authority they bear shall be adjudged accordingly.

Conclusion

We write the above both to offer a few critical corrections to the documents set forward for consideration by the forthcoming Council, in the spirit of fraternal co-operation, agreement and support of our brother Hierarchs and clergy of the other Local Orthodox Churches, such as those previously mentioned in this letter, who are contributing in like manner; and also in order to reassure the faithful flock entrusted to us by Christ of the careful attention being laid upon the task of examining these documents by their pastors. The process of addressing the pastoral needs of any given age is one which requires both tremendous prayer and ascetical devotion from all Christians, but also the dedicated, deliberate work to ensure, in any document the Church may put forward, the faithfulness to the Gospel we have inherited. All such texts, now as throughout history, go through many stages of preparation and revision; and the fact that we, together with others, have identified serious problems with some of the documents pending consideration by the forthcoming Council should be a cause for neither fear nor anxiety. The Holy Spirit Who always guides the Church in love, is not far from us today; and the Church is not in our times, nor has she ever been, without the active headship of her True Head, Christ our God, Whom we trust with full faith will guide His Body in all truth.

We fervently implore the prayers of all our faithful flock, that standing fast upon the rock of the Church, their prayers may uphold all those Hierarchs who will work for the good of this dialogue and assembly.

Signed,
+ HILARION,
Metropolitan of Eastern America and New York, President of the Synod of Bishops.

+ MARK,
Archbishop of Berlin and Germany.

+ KYRILL,
Archbishop of San Francisco and Western America,
Secretary of the Synod of Bishops.

+ GABRIEL,
Archbishop of Montreal and Canada.

+ PETER,
Bishop of Cleveland.

+ NICHOLAS,
Bishop of Manhattan.