

On a Summoning of a Great Council of the Orthodox Church - Archimandrite Justin Popovich

This letter (7 May 1977) was addressed to Bishop Jovan of Sabac and the Serbian hierarchy with a request to transmit it to the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Not long ago in Chambesy, near Geneva, the First Pre-Conciliar Conference took place (21-28 November 1976). After reading and studying the acts and resolutions of this conference, published by the Secretariat for the Preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Geneva, I feel in my conscience the urgent, evangelical necessity, as a member of the Holy and Catholic Orthodox Church, even though its humblest servant, to turn to Your Grace and, through you, to the Holy Council of Bishops of the Serbian Church, with this exposition that must express my grievous considerations for the future council. I beg Your Grace and the Most Reverend Bishops to hear me with evangelical zeal and to listen to this cry of an Orthodox conscience, which, thanks be to God, is neither alone nor isolated in the Orthodox world whenever there is mention of that council.

1. From the minutes and resolutions of the First Pre-Conciliar Conference, which, for some unknown reason, was held in Geneva, where it is difficult to find even a few hundred Orthodox faithful, it is clear that this conference prepared and ordained a new catalogue of topics for the future Great Council of the Orthodox Church. This was not one of those Pan-Orthodox Conferences, such as were held on Rhodes and subsequently elsewhere; nor was it the Pro-Synod, which has been at work until now; this was the First Pre-Conciliar Conference, initiating the direct preparation for the celebration of an ecumenical council. Moreover, this conference did not begin its work on the foundation of the Catalogue of Topics established at the first Pan-Orthodox Conference in 1961 on Rhodes and unelaborated up until 1971, instead it compiled a revision of this catalogue and set forth its own new Catalogue of Topics for the council. Apparently, however, not even this catalogue is definitive, for it will very likely again be altered and supplemented. Lately, the Conference has also reconsidered the methodology formerly adopted in the planning and final preparation of topics for the council. It abbreviated this entire process in view of its haste and urgency to summon the council as soon as possible. For, according to the explicit declaration of Metropolitan Meliton, presiding chairman of the Conference, the Patriarchate of Constantinople and certain others are hastening to summon and celebrate the future council: the council must be of short duration and occupy itself with a limited number of topics; moreover, in the words of Metropolitan Meliton, The Council must delve into the burning questions that obstruct the normal functioning of the system linking up the local Churches, into the one, single Orthodox Church. . . (Acts, p.55) All of this obliges us to ask: what does it mean? Why all this haste in the preparation? Where is all of this going to lead us?

2. The questions of the preparation and celebration of a new ecumenical council of the Orthodox Church is neither new nor recent in this century of the history of the Church. The matter was already proposed during the lifetime of that hapless Patriarch of Constantinople, Meletios Metaxakis — the celebrated and presumptuous modernist, reformer, and author of schisms within Orthodoxy — at his Pan-Orthodox Congress held in Constantinople in 1923. (At this time it was recommended that the council be held in the city of Nis in 1925, but since Nis was not in the territory of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the council was not convened, probably for that very reason. In general, as it appears, Constantinople has assumed the monopoly of Pan-Orthodoxy, of all the Congresses, Conferences, Pro-Synods and Councils.) Later on, in 1930, at the monastery of Vatopedi, the Preparatory Commission of the Orthodox Churches took place. It defined the Catalogue of Topics for the Future Orthodox Pro-Synod, which should have been the prelude to the ecumenical council.

After the Second World War came the turn of Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople with his Pan-Orthodox Conferences on Rhodes (again, exclusively in the territory of the Patriarchate of Constantinople). The first of them, in 1961, called for the preparation of a Pan-Orthodox Council on condition that a pro-synod be summoned, and it confirmed a catalogue of topics which had already been prepared by the Patriarchate of Constantinople: eight full chapters with nearly forty primary topics and twice again as many paragraphs and subparagraphs.

After the Rhodes Conferences II and III (1963 and 1964), the Belgrade Conference was held in 1966. At first this was called the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference (Glasnik of the Serbian Orthodox Church, No. 10, 1966 and documents in Greek published under this title), but later it was reduced by the Patriarchate of Constantinople to the grade of an Inter-Orthodox Commission, so that the succeeding conference, held in Constantinopolitan territory (the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at Chambesy-Geneva) in 1968, might be acclaimed the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference in its place. At this conference, apparently, its impatient organizers hastened to shorten the path to the council, for from the enormous catalogue of Rhodes (their own work, however, and nobody else's) they took only the first six topics and defined a new procedure of work. At the same time there was established a new institution: the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission, indispensable for the coordination of work on the topics. Moreover, the Secretariat for the Preparation of the Council was also established; in fact, this meant a bishop of Constantinople who was assigned the task, with his seat at the above-named Geneva — at the same time proposals for including other Orthodox members in the Secretariat were rejected. This preparatory commission and the Secretariat, by wish of Constantinople held a meeting at Chambesy in June, 1971. At this meeting they examined and unanimously approved abstracts of the selected six topics, which subsequently were published in several languages and submitted, like all the previous work in preparation for the council, to the merciless criticism of Orthodox theologians. The criticisms of the Orthodox theologians (among them my Memorandum sent at that time through Your Grace and, with Your Grace's approval, to the Holy Council of Bishops, and subsequently approved by many Orthodox theologians and published in various languages in the Orthodox world) apparently explain why the decision of the Preparatory Commission of Geneva to convene in 1972 the First Pre-Conciliar Conference for the revision of the catalogue of Rhodes, was in fact not observed that year, and the conference took place only with great delay.

This First Pre-Conciliar Conference was held only in November of 1976, again, of course, on Constantinopolitan territory at the above-named centre in Chambesy, near Geneva. As is clear from the acts and resolutions, only now just published, and which I have carefully studied, this conference re-examined the catalogue of Rhodes to such an extent that the delegations participating in the work of the various committees unanimously chose only ten topics for the council (only three of the original six were included in the list!), while about thirty topics, not unanimously chosen, were set aside for particular study in the individual Churches in the form of problematics of the Orthodox Church (a concept entirely alien to Orthodoxy). In the future these topics could become the subject of Orthodox examinations and perhaps be included in the catalogue. As already stated, this conference altered the process and methodology of elaborating the topics and the preparatory work of the council which, I repeat, according to the organizers from both Constantinople and other places, should take place as soon as possible. From all this, it is clear to every Orthodox Christian that the First Pre-Conciliar Conference has not come up with anything substantially new, but continues rather to lead Orthodox souls as well as the consciences of many into ever new labyrinths constituted by personal ambitions. This is the reason why, it would seem, the ecumenical council has been in preparation since 1923, and why at the present time it is desired to bring it to a hasty realization.

3. All the contemporary problematics concerning the topics of the future council, the uncertainty and mutability of their invention, their determination, their artificial cataloguing, as well as all the new changes and revisions, demonstrate to every true Orthodox conscience one thing only: that at the

present time there are no serious or pressing problems that would justify the convening and celebration of a new ecumenical council of the Orthodox Church. And if, nevertheless, a topic should exist, worthy of being the object of the convocation and celebration of an ecumenical council, it is unknown to the present initiators, organizers and editors of all the above-mentioned Conferences with their previous and present catalogues. If this were not the case, then how is it to be explained that, beginning with the meeting in Constantinople in 1923, continuing through Rhodes in 1961 and up to Geneva in 1976, the thematics and problematics of the future council have been constantly changed? The alterations extend to the number, order, contents and the very criteria employed for the Catalogue of Topics that is to constitute the work of this great and unique ecclesiastical body — the Holy Ecumenical Council of the Orthodox Church, as it has been and as it must be. In reality, all of this manifests and underscores not only the usual lack of consistency, but also an obvious incapacity and failure to understand the nature of Orthodoxy on the part of those who at the present time, in the current situation, and in such a manner would impose their Council on the Orthodox Churches — an ignorance and inability to feel or to comprehend what a true ecumenical council has meant and always means for the Orthodox Church and for the pleroma of its faithful who bear the name of Christ. For if they sensed and realized this, they would first of all know that never in the history and life of the Orthodox Church has a single council, not to mention such an exceptional, grace-filled event (like Pentecost itself) as an ecumenical council, sought and invented topics in this artificial way for its work and sessions; — never have there been summoned such conferences, congresses, pro-synods, and other artificial gatherings, unknown to the Orthodox conciliar tradition, and in reality borrowed from Western organisations alien to the Church of Christ.

Historical reality is perfectly clear: the holy Councils of the Holy Fathers, summoned by God, always, always had before them one, or at the most two or three questions set before them by the extreme gravity of great heresies and schisms that distorted the Orthodox Faith, tore asunder the Church and seriously placed in danger the salvation of human souls, the salvation of the Orthodox people of God, and of the entire creation of God. Therefore, the ecumenical councils always had a Christological, soteriological, ecclesiological character, which means that their sole and central topic — their Good News — was always the God-Man Jesus Christ and our salvation in Him, our deification in Him. Yes, He — the Son of God, only-begotten and consubstantial, incarnate; He — the eternal Head of the Body of the Church for the salvation and deification of man; He — wholly in the Church by the grace of the Holy Spirit, by true faith in Him, by the Orthodox Faith.

This is the truly Orthodox, apostolic and patristic theme, the immortal theme of the Church of the God-Man, for all times, past, present and future. This alone can be the subject of any future possible ecumenical council of the Orthodox Church, and not some scholastic-protestant catalogue of topics having no essential relation to the spiritual life and experience of apostolic Orthodoxy down the ages, since it is nothing more than a series of anemic, humanistic theorems. The eternal catholicity of the Orthodox Church and of all her ecumenical councils consists in the all-embracing Person of the God-Man, the Lord Christ. This is the central and universal reality, the theme of Orthodox Councils, this is the unique mystery and reality of the God-Man, upon which the Orthodox Church of Christ is built and sustained with all ecumenical councils and all her historical reality. Upon this foundation we are to build, even today, in the sight of heaven and earth, and not upon the scholastic-protestant and humanistic topics employed by the ecclesiastical delegates or delegations of Constantinople or Moscow, who at this bitter and critical moment of history present themselves as the leaders and representatives of the Orthodox Church in the world.

4. From the acts of the last Pre-Conciliar Conference in Geneva, as in similar situations previously, it is clear that the ecclesiastical delegations of Constantinople and Moscow differ little from one another with respect to the problems and themes set forth as the subject of work for the future council. They have the same topics, almost the same language, the same mentality, similar ambitions. This, however, is no surprise. Whom do they in fact represent at the present moment, what Church and what people of God? The Constantinopolitan hierarchy at almost all the pan-

Orthodox gatherings consists primarily of titular metropolitans and bishops, of pastors without flocks and without concrete pastoral responsibility before God and their own living flock. Whom do they represent and whom will they represent at the future council? Among the official representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate there are no hierarchs from the Greek islands where real Orthodox flocks are to be found; there are no Greek diocesan bishops from Europe or America, not to mention other bishops — Russian, American, Japanese, African, who have large Orthodox flocks and excellent Orthodox theologians. On the other hand, does the present delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate in fact represent the holy and martyred great Church of Russia and the millions of her martyrs and confessors known only to God? Judging from what these delegations declare and defend, wherever they travel outside the Soviet Union, they neither represent nor express the true spirit and attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church and its faithful Orthodox flock, for more often than not these delegations put the things of Caesar before the things of God. The scriptural commandment, however, is otherwise: Submit yourselves rather to God than to men (Acts 5:29).

Moreover, is it correct, is it Orthodox to have such representations of the Orthodox Churches at various pan Orthodox gatherings on Rhodes or in Geneva? The representatives of Constantinople who began this system of representation of Orthodox Churches at the councils and those who accept this principle which, according to their theory, is in accord with the system of autocephalous and autonomous local Churches — they have forgotten that such a principle in fact contradicts the conciliar tradition of Orthodoxy. Unfortunately this principle of representation was accepted quickly and by all the other Orthodox: sometimes silently, sometimes with voted protests, but forgetting that the Orthodox Church, in its nature and its dogmatically unchanging constitution is episcopal and centred in the bishops. For the bishop and the faithful gathered around him are the expression and manifestation of the Church as the Body of Christ, especially in the Holy Liturgy: the Church is Apostolic and Catholic only by virtue of its bishops, insofar as they are the heads of true ecclesiastical units, the dioceses. At the same time, the other, historically later and variable forms of church organisation of the Orthodox Church: the metropolias, archdioceses, patriarchates, pentarchias, autocephalies, autonomies, etc., however many there may be or shall be, cannot have and do not have a determining and decisive significance in the conciliar system of the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, they may constitute an obstacle in the correct functioning of the conciliar principle if they obstruct and reject the episcopal character and structure of the Church and of the Churches. Here, undoubtedly, is to be found the primary difference between Orthodox and papal ecclesiology.

If this is so, then how can there be represented according to the delegation principle, that is by the same number of delegates, for example, the Czech and Romanian Churches? Or to an even greater extent, the Patriarchates of Russia and Constantinople? What groups of faithful do the first bishops represent and what the second? Recently the Patriarchate of Constantinople has produced a multitude of bishops and metropolitans, almost all of them titular and fictitious. Is it possible that this is a preparatory measure to guarantee at the future Ecumenical Council by their multitude of titles the majority of votes for the neo-papal ambitions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople? On the other hand, the Churches apostolically zealous in missionary work, such as the American Metropolia, the Russian Church Abroad, the Japanese Church and others are not allowed a single representative!

Where in all this is the Catholic principle of Orthodoxy? What sort of ecumenical council of the Orthodox Church of Christ will this be? Already at the Geneva Conference, Ignatios, Metropolitan of Laodicea and representative of the Patriarchate of Antioch, sadly affirmed: I sense uneasiness, for harm is being done the conciliar experience which is the foundation of the Orthodox Church.

5. Nevertheless, Constantinople and some others cannot wait to summon the council. It is primarily in accordance with their wishes and insistence that the First Pre-Conciliar Conference in Geneva decided that the council should be summoned as soon as possible, that this council must be of short duration, and that it should take for consideration a small number of topics. And the ten chosen

topics are cited. The first four topics are: the diaspora; the question of ecclesiastical autocephaly and the conditions for its proclamation; autonomy and its proclamation; the diptychs — that is, the order of precedence among the Orthodox Churches.

Evangelical objectivity obliges one to note that the conduct of the presiding chairman at the Pre-Conciliar Conference, Metropolitan Meliton, was despotic and unbefitting a council. This is clear from every page of the published acts of the conference. There it is clearly and plainly stated that, This Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church which is being prepared must not be regarded as unique, excluding the further summoning of other Holy and Great Councils (Acts, pp. 18, 20, 50, 55, 60).

In view of all this, an evangelically sensitive conscience cannot help but ask the burning question: what is the real end of a council summoned in such haste and in such a highhanded manner?

Most Reverend Bishops, I cannot free myself from the impression and conviction that all this points to the secret desire of certain known persons of the Patriarchate of Constantinople: that the first in honour of Orthodox Patriarchates force its ideas and procedures on all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, and in general upon the Orthodox world and the Orthodox diaspora, and sanction such a neo-papist intention by an ecumenical council. For this reason, among the ten topics selected for the council there have been inserted, indeed are the first, just those topics that reveal the intention of Constantinople to submit to herself the entire Orthodox diaspora — and that means the entire world! and to guarantee for herself the exclusive right to grant autocephaly and autonomy in general to all the Orthodox Churches in the world, both present and future, and at the same time to determine their order and rank at her own discretion (this is exactly what the question of the diptychs implies, for they concern not only the order of liturgical commemoration but the order of precedence at councils, etc.).

I bow in reverence before the age-old achievements of the Great Church of Constantinople, and before her present cross which is neither small nor easy, which, according to the nature of things, is the cross of the entire Church — for, as the Apostle says, When one member suffers, the whole body suffers. Moreover, I acknowledge the canonical rank and first place in honour of Constantinople among the local Orthodox Churches, which are equal in honour and rights. But it would not be in keeping with the Gospel if Constantinople, on account of the difficulties in which she now finds herself, were allowed to bring the whole of Orthodoxy to the brink of the abyss, as once occurred at the pseudo-council of Florence, or to canonize and dogmatize particular historical forms which, at a given moment, might transform themselves from wings into heavy chains, binding the Church and her transfiguring presence in the world. Let us be frank: the conduct of the representatives of Constantinople in the last decades has been characterized by the same unhealthy restlessness, by the same spiritually ill condition as that which brought the Church to the betrayal and disgrace of Florence in the 15th Century. (Nor was the conduct of the same Church under the Turkish yoke an example of all times. Both the Florentine and the Turkish yokes were dangerous for Orthodoxy.) With the difference that today the situation is even more ominous: formerly Constantinople was a living organism with millions of faithful — she was able to overcome without delay the crisis brought about by external courses as well as the temptation to sacrifice the faith and the Kingdom of God for the goods of this world. Today, however, she has only metropolitans without faithful, bishops who have no one to lead (i.e. without dioceses), who nonetheless wish to control the destinies of the entire Church. Today there must not, there cannot be a new Florence! Nor can the present situation be compared with the difficulties of the Turkish yoke. The same reasoning applies to the Moscow Patriarchate. Are its difficulties or the difficulties of other local Churches under godless communism to be allowed to determine the future of Orthodoxy?

The fate of the Church neither is nor can be any longer in the hands of the Byzantine emperor or any other sovereign. It is not the control of a patriarch or any of the mighty of this world, not even in that of the Pentarchy or of the autocephalies (understood in the narrow sense). By the power of God the Church has grown up into a multitude of local Churches with millions of faithful, many of whom in our days have sealed their apostolic succession and faithfulness to the Lamb with their blood. And new local Churches appear to be rising on the horizon, such as the Japanese, the African and the American, and their freedom in the Lord must not be removed by any super-Church of the papal type (cf. Canon 8, Third Ecumenical Council), for this would signify an attack on the very essence of the Church. Without their concurrence the solution of any ecclesiastical question of ecumenical significance is inconceivable, not to mention the solutions to questions that immediately concern them, i.e. the problem of the diaspora. The age-old struggle of Orthodoxy against Roman absolutism was a struggle for just such freedom of the local Church as catholic and conciliar, complete and whole in itself. Are we today to travel the road of the first and fallen Rome, or of some second or third similar to it? Are we to believe that Constantinople, which in the persons of its holy and great hierarchs, its clergy and its people, so boldly opposed for centuries past the Roman protectionism and absolutism, is today preparing to ignore the conciliar traditions of Orthodoxy and to exchange them for the neo-papal surrogate of a second, third or other sort of Rome?

6. Most Venerable Fathers! All the Orthodox behold and realise how important, how significant today is the question of the Orthodox diaspora both for the Orthodox Church in general and for all the Orthodox Churches individually. Can this question be decided, as Constantinople or Moscow desires, without referring to, without the participation of the Orthodox faithful, pastors and theologians of the diaspora itself, which is increasing every day? The problem of the diaspora, without doubt, is a church question of exceptional importance; it is a question that has risen to the surface for the first time in history with such force and significance. For its solution there would be cause indeed to convoke a truly ecumenical council in which all the Orthodox bishops of all the Orthodox Churches would truly participate. Another question that, in our view, could and should be considered at an authentic ecumenical council of the Orthodox Church is the question of ecumenism. This, properly speaking, is an ecclesiological question concerning the Church as theandric unity and organism, a unity and organism that are placed in doubt by contemporary ecumenical syncretism. It is also related to the question of man, for whom the nihilism of contemporary, and especially atheistic, ideologies has dug a grave without hope of resurrection. Both questions can be resolved correctly and in an Orthodox manner only by proceeding from the theandric foundations of the ancient and true ecumenical councils. For the present, however, I leave these problems aside so as not to overburden this appeal with new discussions and expand it unduly.

The question of the diaspora is, then, both grievous and extremely important in contemporary Orthodoxy. However, do the conditions at present exist that would guarantee its solution in council as correct, Orthodox, and according to the teaching of the Holy Fathers? Is it possible, indeed, for there to be a free and real representation of all the Orthodox Churches at an ecumenical council without outside influence disturbing them? Are the representatives of many, especially of the Churches under militantly atheistic regimes, really able to express and defend Orthodox principles? Can a Church that denies her own martyrs be an authentic confessor of the Cross of Golgotha, or a bearer of the spirit and conciliar consciousness of the Church of Christ? Before a council takes place, let us ask ourselves whether it will be possible for the consciences of millions of new martyrs, made white by the blood of the Lamb, to speak out in it. The experience of history teaches that whenever the Church is crucified, each of her members is called upon to suffer for her Truth, and not to debate artificial problems or to look for false answers to real questions — fishing in muddied waters in order to satisfy personal ambitions. Shall we not remember that so long as the persecutions of the Church endured, no ecumenical councils were convened — which does not mean that the Church of God in those times did not live or function in a conciliar fashion. Quite the contrary, the age of the persecutions was its period of richest fruits. And when afterwards the First

Ecumenical Council gathered, there gathered also the confessors with their wounds and scars, the bishops tried in the fire of suffering, who then could freely testify concerning Christ as God and Lord. Will their spirit be present also at this time? In other words, will the bishops of our own age who are similar to the martyrs be present at the council that is now preparing, so that this council might think in accordance with the Holy Spirit and speak and decide according to God, and that there not be heard in it primarily those who are not free from the influence of the powers of this world? Let us consider, for example, the group of bishops of the Russian Church Outside of Russia who, for all their human weakness, bear upon themselves the bonds of the Lord and of the Russian Church that has fled into the wilderness from the persecutions in no way inferior to those of Diocletian: these bishops have been excluded in advance by Moscow and Constantinople from participation in the council, and in this way condemned to silence. Let us think of those bishops of Russia and of other openly atheistic countries who will be unable to participate freely in the council or to speak and make decisions freely; some of them will not even be allowed to attend the council. Not to mention the impossibility of them or their Churches preparing in a worthy manner for so great and significant an occasion. Is this not more than sufficient proof that at the council the conscience of the martyred Church and the conscience of the ecclesiastical pleroma will both be silent, that their representatives will not be allowed even to enter — such as occurred with one of the most illustrious witnesses of the persecuted Church at the assembly in Nairobi (I refer specifically to Solzhenitsyn)?

We may leave aside the question of how moral or even normal it may be that at a time in which the Lord Jesus Christ and faith in Him are crucified in more terrible fashion than ever before, His followers should be deciding who will be first among them. At a time in which Satan is seeking not only the body but the very soul of man and the world, when mankind is threatened with self-destruction, is it moral and normal that the disciples of Christ should be occupied with the same questions (and in the same way) as the contemporary anti-Christian ideologies — ideologies that sell the Bread of Life for a mess of pottage?

Keeping all this in mind and painfully aware of the situation of the contemporary Orthodox Church and of the world in general — which has not substantially changed since my last appeal to the Holy Council of Bishops (May, 1971) my conscience once more obliges me to turn with insistence and beseeching to the Holy Council of Bishops of the martyred Serbian Church: let our Serbian Church abstain from participating in the preparations for the ecumenical council, indeed from participating in the council itself. For should this council, God forbid, actually come to pass, only one kind of result can be expected from it: schisms, heresies and the loss of many souls. Considering the question from the point of view of the apostolic and patristic and historical experience of the Church, such a council, instead of healing, will but open up new wounds in the body of the Church and inflict upon her new problems and new misfortunes.

I recommend myself to the holy and apostolic prayers of the Fathers of the Holy Council of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The unworthy Archimandrite Justin