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**THE COUNCIL ON THE ISLAND OF CRETE AND THE POSITION OF THE
BULGARIAN PATRIARCHATE**

In June 2016, on the Island of Crete, the Republic of Greece was held the so-called ‘Great and Holy Council’ of the official local orthodox churches, which had been in preparation for decades. In the period leading to the Council’s taking place, as well as after it, numerous commentaries were written containing detailed analyses both of the draft documents and those adopted by the Council. From a confession perspective, the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* occupies a central place among them. In the following lines we are not going to comment on its entire text but will only focus on one of its paragraphs. We would like to remind you that even before starting its open ministry, our Church had expressed her attitude towards ecumenism by publishing the book *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism* (1992), written by the ever-memorable archimandrites Seraphim (Alexiev) and Segrii (Yazadzhiev), and in 2012 the official *Ecclesiological Stand of the Bulgarian Orthodox Old Calendar Church* was released. We are not going to discuss the church-political struggles connected with the Council on the island of Crete, among which were the efforts of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to assert their supremacy and place the Moscow Patriarchate in isolation, or, conversely, the efforts of Moscow to neutralise the moves of Constantinople and assert themselves as a leading church-political factor in the official orthodoxy. We are going to direct our attention towards the most important issue which almost all traditionalists abiding within the ‘official Orthodoxy’ avoided talking about – precisely what was the primary aim of the Council in Crete **from a confession point of view?** We are immediately going to highlight the fact that the primary aim of the ideologists and organisers of this Council was **to legitimise ecumenism on the highest, conciliar level as the ideology of the official orthodoxy, accepted by all official local churches.** Exactly this rather than adopting some new and so far unprecedented apostatic dogmas.

In the past, the local churches participating in the Council as members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) accepted ecumenical documents of far more controversial nature containing the dogmatic, or rather the adogmatic foundation, required for membership in this largest of all ecumenical organisations. It is enough to recall the so-called Toronto Statement

(A declaration entitled *The Church, The Churches and The World Council of Churches*, accepted by the Central Committee of WCC in Toronto in 1950), which the orthodox apologists of ecumenism like quoting selectively (and manipulatively). It is exactly with texts from this Statement that the adopted by the Council in Crete document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* justifies the participation of the official local churches in the ecumenical movement (§19). This section says, ‘It is their [the Orthodox Churches that are members of the WCC] deep conviction that the ecclesiological presuppositions of the 1950 Toronto Statement, *On the Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches*, are of paramount importance for Orthodox participation in the Council.’¹ A little further on follows a citation from the Toronto Statement, “*The purpose of the World Council of Churches is not to negotiate unions between Churches, which can only be done by the Churches themselves acting on their own initiative, but to bring Churches into living contact with each other and to promote the study and discussion of the issues of Church unity. No Church is obliged to change her ecclesiology on her accession to the Council*²... Moreover, from the fact of its inclusion in the Council, it does not ensue that each Church is obliged to regard the other Churches as Churches in the true and full sense of the term”³.

The Toronto Statement is a controversial document containing also ecclesiological wording whose meaning is contrary to that quoted in the text which was accepted by the Council in Crete.

Let us see how the first hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, St. Philaret, Metropolitan of New York, commented on its content in 1969, ‘In 1950, In Toronto were accepted the main tenets of the World Council of Churches, which were more careful than what is currently being stated, but they also already contradicted the Orthodox teaching about the Church. Then, it was indicated in §4 that “*The member churches of the World Council consider the relationship of other churches to the Holy Catholic Church which the Creeds*

1 *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* (in Greek, English, French and Russian) §19 - <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world> [Accessed 5.12.2016].

2 What is noticeable is that this sentence, the second one in the cited text, is missing from the English version of the Toronto Statement on the WCC site <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/centralcommittee/1950/toronto-statement> [Accessed 5.12.2016], but it is contained in the text of the Statement released in the *Ecumenical Review* journal, which is published by WCC, in the October 1950 issue - <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1950.tb01220.x/pdf> [Accessed 6.12.2016]

3 Toronto Statement § III (2), (3), (4)

profess as a subject for mutual consideration.” This formulation is no longer acceptable for us because the Holy Catholic Church is interpreted here not as really existing in the world but as some abstract concept, mentioned in different creeds. In fact, even then it was indicated in §3 that “*The member churches recognize that the membership of the Church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body.*” And since in the previous §2 it is stated that “*The member churches of the World Council believe on the basis of the New Testament that the Church of Christ is one.*”, either an inner contradiction arises, or the profession of a new dogma that membership in the One Church without professing her dogmas and outside liturgical communion with her is possible. This teaching is Protestant, but not Orthodox at all”⁴.

A number of other contradictory expressions and statements incompatible with the Orthodox ecclesiology can also be pointed out in the Toronto Statement. For instance, on the one hand, it is claimed that the WCC is not and must never become a ‘superchurch’ (§III (1)), the implication being that WCC is only a forum for communication, for ‘living contact’ between the member churches, without any compulsion for their unification whatsoever (§III (2)). In addition, ‘The World Council cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the Church. It does not prejudge the ecclesiological problem.’ (§III (3)). On the other hand, however, the Statement underlines that ‘The main problem is how one can formulate the ecclesiological implications of a body in which so many different conceptions of the Church are represented, without using the categories or language of one particular conception of the Church.’ (§II). Yet, it is specifically stated that the WCC is not a church and that it must not become a ‘superchurch’. Why, then, is it necessary to formulate **‘ecclesiological principles of WCC itself’**? Does a forum for ‘living contacts’, for spontaneous communication, really need formulating its own ecclesiological principles?⁵ A logical consequence of the claim that WCC ‘does not prejudge the ecclesiological problem’ is the illegality of this very body to formulate its own ecclesiological principles. At the same time, as has already been mentioned, in the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world* it is proclaimed that ‘It is their [the Orthodox Churches that are members of the WCC] deep conviction that the ecclesiological presuppositions of the 1950 Toronto Statement, *On the Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches*, are of paramount importance for Orthodox participation in the Council.’ It turns out that the

4 http://catacomb.org.ua/modules.php?name=Pages&go=print_page&pid=1199 [Accessed 6.12.2016]

5 Cf. „Торонтская декларация“ - <http://allexell.livejournal.com/19862.html> [Accessed 1.12.2016].

Orthodox churches also accept the ecclesiological presuppositions of the Statement, according to which ‘The member churches recognize that the membership of the Church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body.’ (§IV (3)). Also, further on, ‘All the Christian churches, including the Church of Rome, hold that there is no complete identity between the membership of the Church Universal and the membership of their own church. They recognize that there are church members “extra muros”, that these belong “aliquo modo” to the Church, or even that there is an “ecclesia extra ecclesiam”.’ (§IV (3)). We can stop here. The aforecited speaks for itself eloquently enough.

We shall remind that the main aim of the ideologists and organisers of the Council held on the island of Crete was to announce the participation of the official local churches in the ecumenical movement as impeccable from an orthodox perspective and to legalise it as unanimously accepted by the authority of a ‘pan-Orthodox Council’. We looked at the wording of this aim specified in the content of §19 of the document.

Was this aim achieved?

Yes, it was achieved to a large extent on the strength of the fact that the representatives of the ten churches participating in the Council **adopted a document in which ecumenism and the membership in the World Council of Churches are presented as entirely acceptable from an orthodox point of view and the local churches are even obliged to join the bilateral dialogues with the heterodox.** This leads to the logical conclusion that in future anybody who proclaims themselves, within the official Orthodoxy, to be against participating in the ecumenical movement or takes the liberty to critique it, **finds themselves facing a conciliar decision**, which, according to the ideologists of the Council, follows to be accepted by all local churches (*Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*, §22).

Four churches did not participate in the Council and this casts doubt on its ‘pan-orthodox nature’. From a confession point of view, however, this does not make any difference. After the Council took place, three of those churches expressed their disagreements, which, however, are unrelated to their confession. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church – the Bulgarian Patriarchate (BOC – BP), which expressed her disagreement based on confession motives, was an exception. The *Position of the Synod of BOC – BP* published on 29 November 2016

says that ‘in comparison with their pre-council version, the documents voted and adopted by the Council on the island of Crete underwent certain changes which render them insubstantial and insufficient for their pan-orthodox acceptance.’⁶ (we remind you that the pre-council version itself was accepted by BOC – BP during the pre-council meeting in Chambésy in January 2016 – my text in brackets – K.T.).

The expressed position (in itself) that ‘some of the documents contain inconsistencies with the Orthodox Church teaching’ and therefore are unacceptable should receive a positive evaluation. In the Position of the Synod, eight items critically analyse inaccuracies, ambivalent expressions and inconsistencies with the Orthodox teaching contained in the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*. It is not essential to study the theological validity of this critique in detail - more important is to comprehend the main conclusion of the Position. It is the following: in the documents of the Council, there are ‘theological errors’ and ‘some of them contain inconsistencies with the Orthodox Church teaching’ due to which they ‘require further theological discussion with the purpose of rectifying, editing, correcting or replacing with other (new documents)’. Immediately after that it states that ‘in the future, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church will continue to abide in fraternal, eucharistic, spiritual, dogmatic and canonical communion with all other local Orthodox churches – both with those who participated in the Council on the island of Crete and those who did not.’

As a whole, the Position of the Synod of BOC BP creates the impression of being contradictory and inconsistent. This is mostly noticeable in their attitude to the major issue the Council in Crete poses before the orthodox consciousness: **what is ecumenism from an orthodox point of view as a theological conception (or a set of theological conceptions), an organised social movement and a religious practice; what is the significance for the official local churches of the legalisation of ecumenism by the Council and the legitimising of those local churches’ participation in the ecumenical movement as well as of the World Council of Churches as an ecumenical organisation?**

6 СТАНОВИЩЕ на Св. Синод относно Събора в Крит (2016) and the text „Отношенията на Православната Църква с останалия християнски свят” <http://bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=220554> [Accessed 6.12.2016].

The Position of the Synod of BOC BP **carefully evades the answer to this question**. Not only is ecumenism not discussed in the aforementioned document, but is it also not mentioned, unlike the documents of the Council on the island of Crete, where ecumenism is discussed on numerous occasions in an unfailingly positive sense. What should be the expected principled and consistent orthodox position of the Synod at a moment when ecumenism is being established conciliarly as the ideology of the official Orthodoxy by ten local churches? It would be natural for the Synod, first of all, to express its clear attitude towards it. Is ecumenism a heresy, or is it not? It is exactly this most important question that is being avoided. Silence is maintained on the subject of ecumenism as if it did not exist or as if the Council that was held on the island of Crete was unrelated to it. Why? Had the Synod focussed its attention on ecumenism and defined it as an ecclesiological heresy, then it follows that first of all it should have denounced and condemned this heresy. In order to avoid doing this, the Position does not mention a heresy but ‘theological errors’ and ‘inconsistencies with the Orthodox teaching’. However, the case in point is not about separate errors that can be identified here and there, in one or another paragraph of the analysed conciliar document in the Position, but it is about advancing an entire outlook, a carefully considered policy for promoting a non-orthodox ecclesiology and ultimately - for asserting ecumenism in the ecclesiological consciousness of the official orthodoxy.

Instead of exposing and condemning **the conciliarly adopted on the island of Crete non-orthodox ecumenical ecclesiology**, in their Position the Synod of BOC BP vaguely criticises the well-known ecumenical ecclesiological concepts of the ‘invisible church’, the ‘branch theory’, ‘baptism theology’, which it calls ‘**heterodox** theories’. This is an escape from the essence of the main issue. Because these theories are not vaguely ‘heterodox’ but are precisely **ecumenical** and are held both by the heterodox and the ‘orthodox’ ecumenists. For example, the famous Metropolitan of Pergamon John (Zizioulas) from the Ecumenical Patriarchate is among the leading ideologists of the above-mentioned ‘baptism theology’.

In the Position of the Synod of BOC BP a central place is given to the debate whether the heterodox communities can be called ‘churches’ or not. Naturally, the ‘orthodox’ ecumenists use the term ‘churches’ to soften and eventually to blur the differences between the orthodox and the heterodox. However, the main issue raised by the Council on the island of Crete cannot be reduced to this debate at all, which, incidentally, can be resolved simply by specifying whether the term ‘church’/‘churches’ is used in a conditional or unconditional sense. In a particular context, heretical communities were conditionally called ‘churches’ by

Holy Fathers and conciliar documents alike. The main issue consists in giving a clear assessment of the Council in Crete as the next considerable step on the road of apostasy, a step which binds the official local churches to upholding the ecumenical heresy conciliarly. Instead, the attention is diverted and directed towards the discussion in question regarding the concept of ‘churches’, which is given a central and exceptional focus. The trees are pointed to, but the wood is concealed.

As a result of all this, the Synod of BOC BP belittles the danger, introduces unjustified reassurance among the believers and ultimately conceals the assertion of ecumenism carried out by the Council on the island of Crete by feigning a stand ‘against’ this Council. Why feigning? Had the Synod of BOC BP proclaimed ecumenism a heresy and condemned it as a heresy, then consequently it also had to indicate the correct attitude towards the ideologists of the Council in Crete, towards those preaching the heresy nationally and establishing it conciliarly. On this issue the church canons are clear and explicit – the shepherds should fence off themselves and their flock from those who purposefully disseminate the heretical teaching and from those who submit to the latter. The very fencing off from those disseminating heresy and the ones submitting to them is achieved through discontinuing church communion with them. Such would have been the principled and canonical orthodox stand. Instead, the Position announces that BOC BP will continue to abide in full church communion with the local churches that participated in the Council on the island of Crete and adopted its documents – the document of confession nature *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* in particular. Of course, such a statement would have been entirely inappropriate if it had been preceded by the assessment that the hierarchs participating in the Council in Crete conciliarly asserted the ecclesiological heresy and legitimised the World Council of Churches – the organisation which is the main conductor of ecumenism from the middle of the 20th century onwards. So, instead of fencing off their flock from the heresy, the shepherds announce that they will continue communion in the Faith and in the Sacraments with its propagators.

The statement that in the future BOC BP will continue to abide in full church communion with all other official local churches is built on a faulty view of belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. According to this view, in order to belong to the Church, one has to be in communion with the currently existing local official churches, which mutually recognise themselves. This formally-managerial organisational-corporate principle makes the belonging to the Church dependent on communion as such, without paying attention to the

confessed faith – whether it is Orthodox in its entirety or not. Thus the paradoxical claim is reached that in order to be ‘inside’ the Church, one has to abide in communion with those who have established a heresy conciliarly and also with those in communion with them! Consequently, in order to be ‘inside’ the Church, one has to be in communion with the hierarchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate headed by Patriarch Bartholomew, who has been preaching openly and imposing conciliarly his non-orthodox views in the course of decades! The same one who stated that the Council in Crete cannot be called ecumenical because the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches⁷ did not participate in it. What ‘orthodox quality’ can be imparted to anyone by the Eucharistic communion with a hierarch-heretic and with an episcopate, which (regardless of the personal opinions of separate hierarchs) actively or passively support such a hierarch and affiliate themselves with the heresy preached by him on the strength of abiding in Eucharistic communion with him?

Would BOC BP have become ‘schismatic’ and fallen away from the Church of Christ if it had proclaimed ecumenism an ecclesiological heresy, if it had condemned this heresy conciliarly and if (as the church canons require) it had announced that it ceased church communion with those who preach the ecumenical heresy and with those obeying them? Not in the least! On the contrary. Had it done this, it would have announced its unquestionable belonging to the catholic Church of Christ on the strength of the confessed Orthodox Faith and on the strength of the fencing off from the supporters of the heresy and those who follow them. We can only imagine what a healing process such a confessor’s act would have triggered in the official orthodoxy. Unfortunately, both the overall direction of the Position and the conclusion based on its content do not raise the hope that we can witness such a confessor’s feat.

7 Пирейски митрополит Серафим. Всеправославният събор през 2016 година може да доведе до разкол

– <http://dobrotoliubie.com/2016/03/01/%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82-%D1%81%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BC-%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0/> [Accessed 6.12.2016];

Василианна

Мерхеб. Православието пред историческо събитие – Всеправославния събор през юни 2016 г. -

<http://www.glasove.com/categories/vytreshni-glasove/news/pravoslavieto-pred-istorichesko-sybitievsepravoslavniyat-sybor-prez-yuni-2016-g> [Accessed 6.12.2016].

We can conclude that the Council in Crete represented a new considerable step on the road leading the 'official orthodoxy' towards the apostatic departure from the very Orthodoxy. Objectively, the Position of the Synod of BOC BP has a deplorable result because it diverts the attention from the crux of the problems caused by ecumenism as an ecclesiological heresy, it represents a replacement of the genuine confessor's position, it strives to dispel the anxiety of the flock and thus to keep it 'within the church fence' of the official orthodoxy, i.e. within the course of the apostasy from the Truth of Christ.