

Summation of the Joint Work of the Commissions of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate

Concluding the eighth joint meeting of the Commissions and summarizing its work, it is worth noting the path travelled, beginning with the meeting between His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia and His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus, First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, in Moscow in May 2004. It was then that the Commissions were charged with preparing the documents needed to re-establish canonical communion between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Church Abroad.

The path towards dialogue was opened by fundamental changes in the life of the Orthodox Church in Russia: ruined churches and monasteries are being rebuilt; parish life and spiritual education are returning to normal, more and more people are coming to the Orthodox faith. Orthodox Christians in Russia and abroad are children of one Mother Church, heirs of a great spiritual tradition, cognizant of the artificiality of continuing division. Meetings among clergymen and laypersons, joint conferences, contact on the diocesan and parish level have helped destroy old stereotypes and prejudices, steering mutual relations onto a constructive track and preparing the groundwork for dialog on the hierarchical level.

The Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church of 2000, which glorified the host of New Martyrs of Russia and adopted a series of other important positions of principle, was an event that laid the foundation for the irreversible movement towards unity. The Acts of that Council evoked a positive response from the Council of Bishops of the Russian Church Abroad held the following October. A series of practical measures were subsequently taken towards rapprochement.

Finally, in the bright Paschal days of 2004, at the invitation of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia, a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia headed by His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus visited Russia.

After a common prayer over the relics of the holy martyrs on the plain of Butovo, where tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians gave their lives for Christ, it became apparent that the time had come “to overcome the tragic division of our people, which arose as a result of the revolution and civil war, and the desire to achieve the reestablishment of Eucharistic communion and canonical unity within one Local Russian Orthodox Church, an indissoluble part of which the Russian Church Abroad always sensed itself. Our goal,” states the document adopted during Metropolitan Laurus' visit, “is to draw nearer that day when with one mouth and one heart we might glorify God.”

For the sake of eliminating obstacles to full church communion, His Holiness Patriarch Alexy and His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus called upon the flock to pray fervently for the blessed success of the path taken. The negotiating Commissions established by decisions of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia were given instructions to “develop a common understanding on the following matters, based on the historical experience of the Russian Church and the problems facing the Church today:

- “The principles of the relationship between the Church and state in accordance with the teachings of the Church;
- “The principles of the relationship between the Orthodox Church and heterodox communities and inter-confessional organizations in accordance with Church traditions;
- “The status of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia as a self-governing part of the Russian Orthodox Church;
- “The canonical conditions for the establishment of Eucharistic communion.”

Over the course of eight joint meetings of the Commissions, held in Moscow, Munich, Paris, New York and Cologne since June 2004 through October 2006, a series of documents were prepared expressing a common understanding of these matters of principle. All of these documents have now been approved by the Hierarchies of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

The document “On the Relationship Between the Church and State,” declares: “The Church is called upon to exert spiritual influence on the state and its citizens, to confess Christ, to defend the moral foundations of society. By interacting with the state for the good of the people, the Church, however, cannot assume civil functions for itself. The state must not interfere in the inner structure, administration or life of the Church. The Church must support all good initiatives of the state, but must resist evil, immorality and harmful social phenomena and always firmly confess the Truth, and when persecutions commence, to continue to openly witness the faith and be prepared to follow the path of confessors and martyrs for Christ.”

These principles, upon which the Russian Church establishes its relationship with the state, were actually adopted earlier, at the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000, the Council that glorified the New Martyrs of Russia. This Council of Bishops declared: “The Church remains loyal to the state, but God's commandment to fulfill the task of salvation in any situation and under any circumstances is above this loyalty... If the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatize from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the Church should refuse to obey the state.”

The “Commentary” to the document “On the Relationship Between Church and State” was devoted to reaching an understanding of events in the history of the Church in the 20th century in light of this concept.

The Commissions studied the viewpoints of the relationships of the Orthodox Church to other confessions that had developed in the Moscow Patriarchate and in the Church Abroad. Despite variations stemming from different circumstances in church life, both sides unanimously declared:

“The Russian Orthodox Church strictly adheres to the teaching set forth in the Creed that the Church of Christ is one...

“A condition of the Orthodox Church's participation in inter-confessional organizations, including the World Council of Churches, is the rejection of religious syncretism. Orthodox Christians insist on their right to freely confess their faith in the Orthodox Church as the One Holy Universal and Apostolic Church without conceding the so-called ‘branch theory’ and definitively reject any attempts to dilute Orthodox ecclesiology.

“The Orthodox Church excludes any possibility of liturgical communion with the non-Orthodox. In particular, it is considered impermissible for Orthodox to participate in liturgical actions connected with so-called ecumenical or inter-confessional religious services... In general, the Church should determine the forms of interaction with the heterodox on a conciliar basis, stemming from its teachings, canonical discipline and ecclesiastical expediency” (“On the Attitude of the Orthodox Church Towards the Heterodox and Towards Inter-Confessional Organizations”).

With regard to actual manifestations of such relations, the document states the following: “[T]he possibility of cooperation with the heterodox is not excluded, for example, in helping the unfortunate and by defending the innocent, in joint resistance to immorality, and in participating in charitable and educational projects. It may be appropriate to participate in socially meaningful ceremonies in which other confessions are represented. In addition, dialogue with the non-Orthodox remains necessary to witness Orthodoxy to them, to overcome prejudices and to disprove false opinions. Yet it is not proper to smooth over or obscure the actual differences between Orthodoxy and other confessions.”

Within such limits in the relationship with the heterodox, it is clear that the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the World Council of Churches does not have ecclesiological significance. The Moscow Patriarchate views this organization as nothing more than a forum, since the Church as the Body of Christ by her very nature cannot be a part of a heterodox organism. This position is unequivocally expressed by the Council of Bishops of the Russian

Orthodox Church of 2000 in the “Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church's Attitude to the Non-Orthodox.”

The most important of all the documents drafted by the Commissions was the “Act of Canonical Communion,” which was considered by the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, the IV All-Diaspora Council and Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and finally approved by the Holy Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

The “Act on Canonical Communion” recognizes the independence of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia in pastoral, educational, administrative, management, property and civil matters. Its Council of Bishops is preserved; moreover, her bishops, clergy and laity become full-fledged participants in the Local Council [*Pomestny Sobor*] of the Russian Orthodox Church; and her bishops also participate in her Council of Bishops and Holy Synod in the established order. Decisions of the Local Council and Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy Synod extend to the Russian Church Abroad, yet with consideration of her Regulations [*Polozheniye*] and of her circumstances in the diaspora.

The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia accepted proposals of the Commissions on the status of clergymen who had gone from one jurisdiction to another and were under canonical suspension, and also on parishes of the Church Abroad on the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate. The hierarchies of both sides affirmed that these problems must be resolved on the basis of Holy Canons and in the spirit of love and *oikonomia* .

Where necessary, in the parishes of the Russian Church Abroad, in that same spirit of *oikonomia* and at the discretion of the local ruling bishop, a five-year transitional period may be established with special liturgical commemoration.

The Hierarchies of both sides approved the proposal of the Commissions to convene—following the adoption of the “Act of Canonical Communion”—a conference of the archpastors of the Russian Orthodox Church in the countries of the diaspora, and confirmed a list of those topics which should be discussed.

As we approach the end of the present stage of our work, the members of the Commissions recognize that over the years of division, more than a few questions have accumulated which require understanding and resolution. These include interrelationships in diocesan and parish life abroad; Orthodox mission; specifics in relationships with other faiths; agreement on the celebration of newly-glorified saints; martyrologies, and clarifying the titles of diocesan bishops. These and other ecclesio-canonical and pastoral problems, and also the challenges which our difficult times will continue to set before the Church,

must be decided within a new phase in the life of the Russian Church—with conciliar discussion. The hope for this was expressed by the members of the IV All-Diaspora Council: “We hope that the forthcoming Local Council of One Russian Church will settle remaining unresolved church problems.”

Cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia during the period of the Commissions' work was not limited to the preparation of joint documents. Reciprocal visits by hierarchs, clergymen and laypersons enhanced better understanding and the development of fraternal relations. The holy relics of Holy Grand Duchess Elizaveta Feodorovna and Nun Varvara from Gethsemane Convent of the Russian Church Abroad in the Holy Land were brought to the territory of the Moscow Patriarchate, and over a million worshipers venerated them.

The German Diocese of the Russian Church Abroad and the Stavropol Diocese of the Moscow Patriarchate are together building a rehabilitation center for the people of Beslan who suffered from terrorism.

The theological schools of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia have begun a student-exchange program.

Representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Church Abroad jointly participated in the return to Russia of the remains of Empress Maria Feodorovna, General A.I. Denikin and the philosopher I. A. Ilyin.

The unfolding of dialogue drew a great deal of attention both in Russia and abroad. The Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Serbia and Bulgaria, the Holy Kinot of Mount Athos, archpastors of Local Churches, monastics, social and civil leaders have all sent letters and appeals to the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia expressing hope for the expedient conclusion of the process of regaining unity.

The efforts of the Commissions were accompanied by the prayers of Orthodox Christians in Russia and abroad who see in the desired unity the fulfillment of the will of God. Through the prayers of our New Martyrs of Russia and of the entire nation, may this, God's will, be done.

The feast day of the Iveron Icon of the Mother of God
Cologne, October 13/26, 2006

Presidents of the Commissions:

Mark,
Archbishop of Berlin and
Germany

Innokenty,
Archbishop of Korsun