



**The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America
Statement on the Holy and Great Council
to be convened on the Island of Crete
June 20 – 26, 2016**

*We greet you in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
Who is the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)*

For many decades, the Orthodox Church has witnessed the efforts to assemble a Holy and Great Council as a contemporary witness to the Holy Orthodox Faith. The initiative in this modern endeavor belonged to the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras. The long pilgrimage toward the Holy and Great Council began in the 1960s. There were long pauses in this pilgrimage, followed by a renewed period of intense preparation at the initiative of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Through the decades, Pan-Orthodox conferences, consultations, and meetings of patriarchs and primates have revised the list of topics. During recent months, as the churches have reviewed draft documents and reflected on their formulations, new proposals have been brought forth and fresh disagreements have arisen.

Even at this late stage, participation in the Holy and Great Council is uncertain, and its outcome is equally uncertain. In the midst of all this uncertainty, there is one certainty: the Orthodox Church in America, not being universally recognized as an autocephalous church, is not invited to be a participant. Our reaction to this is one of sadness, but not alienation. With gratitude to God, we affirm our identity as the Orthodox Church in America. We also affirm with gratitude to God our autocephaly, as granted to us by the Russian Orthodox Church, and as recognized by the Churches of Georgia, Bulgaria, Poland, and the Czech Lands and Slovakia. We affirm with profound gratitude to God our Eucharistic communion with all Orthodox Churches, beginning with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. We therefore accept and affirm our right

and duty to accompany the Holy and Great Council with love and reflection and prayer.

The discussions and debates surrounding the draft documents express concerns and objections that emerge in the Orthodox Churches. It is argued that the intensity of the objections demonstrates that the Holy and Great Council should be postponed so as to avoid possible schism. Such a conclusion appears to reject the conciliar vision and practice of the Orthodox Church. The challenges of our time require more theological reflection and debate, not less. The urgency of such theological reflection and debate calls for more conciliarity, not less.

At the heart of concerns and objections to the Council and its draft documents is the fear of eroding the Orthodox identity and self-understanding, diluting Orthodox theology (the truth about God) and ecclesiology (the truth about the Church). Today's challenge to the Orthodox Church is the same it has always been: to bring to all people the Christ who is the way and the truth and the life, to bring the Gospel of Christ to all people with love and compassion, to worship God eucharistically in Spirit and in Truth. In faithfulness to this Orthodox way lies deliverance from fear and growth in life and faith and spiritual understanding (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).

The commitment of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the building of consensus, as shown by periodically convening the Synaxis of Patriarchs and Primate, has opened the path to the Holy and Great Council. Even at these last moments of preparation the obstacles on this path are emerging with even greater strength than before. The most recent sign of the crisis came at the meeting of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on June 3, 2016. The minutes of this meeting enumerate the procedural and substantive challenges faced by the Orthodox Churches on the eve of the Council – including the unresolved dispute between the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem, the demands for changes in some of the draft documents coming from the Churches of Georgia, Serbia, and Greece, and also from the Monasteries of Mount Athos, and finally the decision of the Church of Bulgaria insisting on the postponement of the Council and declaring categorically that she will not participate in the Council set for the end of June 2016. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church concludes that this extraordinary situation may be resolved by the convening of an extraordinary Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Consultation not later than June 10. This Consultation would have as its purpose a review of the existing situation and a study of the proposed changes to the Council documents. On the basis of the conclusion of the Consultation the Churches could determine whether the convening of the Council on the announced dates is possible.

The convening of the Holy and Great Council as a sign of unity and as a witness to unity is a worthy vision for Orthodoxy pursued with patience and determination by His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The painful difficulties in realizing this vision have always been evident. The dangers on the road towards this vision are now seen in bold relief, yet the beauty of the vision is clear as never before. Today, the Orthodox Churches stand before the world unable to conceal the wounds

of our fractured relationships. Yet the vision of unity will not be denied, because it comes from the heart of the Orthodox Faith and is intrinsic to the Good News of Christ. Whatever the difficulties and wounds we bear, we are following the Risen Christ and are empowered by Pentecost to witness to the Gospel of Christ everywhere and at all times.

It is our sincere hope and fervent prayer that the pilgrimage towards the convening of the Holy and Great Council will bear fruit for the Orthodox Church's unity and for her mission and witness in the world. Just as we pray in the Divine Liturgy for the descent of the Holy Spirit on us and on the gifts that are offered, so let us pray that the Holy Spirit may descend on us all and on the gifts of conciliarity that are offered to God.

Issued June 6, 2016