



The Holy and Great Council

PENTECOST 2016

"He CALLED ALL TO UNITY"

Who will attend the Holy and Great Council?

By Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
and V. Rev. Archimandrite Dr. Nathanael Symeonides

On the feast of Pentecost, when the Church celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, more than 500 people – bishops, priests, monastics, and lay men and women – will participate in the Holy and Great Council, to be convened in Crete. Among those present will be the Primates of all 14 Orthodox autocephalous (or self-governed) churches; more than 300 bishops; almost 100 advisors, numerous stewards and students. Certainly, the eyes and ears of the world will be focused on Crete, eager to receive updates from representatives of the Holy Council and by the journalists present.

Founded on the day of Pentecost – as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church – the Orthodox Church is a communion (or commonwealth) of 14 local Churches, which include the ancient patriarchates of:

- Constantinople; whose head, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, serves as presiding bishop of the Orthodox Church or “first among equals;”
- Alexandria, headquartered in Egypt, it is responsible for the Church in Africa and is largely a missionary church;
- Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called “Christians;”
- And Jerusalem, the earliest church, where the Apostles held the first council described in the Book of Acts.

Then there are the ten local churches that have more recently received autocephalous and patriarchal status – most dating from the second millennium to the last century. These include:



All 14 local, autocephalous Orthodox Churches will participate in the Holy and Great Council, including the four ancient Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and the 10 recent Churches shown on this map.

- Russia (today, the largest Orthodox Church in population);
- Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia (though Georgia is unique in this group in so far as it traces its Christian origins to the fifth century);
- Cyprus (an Apostolic Church that was established as an autocephalous Church in the fifth century);
- Greece, Poland, Albania, and the Czech and Slovak Lands (as the most recent autocephalous church).

He called all to unity. May we respond with charity and generosity.



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Voting and consensus at the Holy and Great Council

By Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

For pastoral and practical reasons, each of the local autocephalous churches decided to invite 25 bishops – the primate and 24 others, echoing the 24 elders around the heavenly throne in the book of Revelation. Some might think that the limited number of hierarchs (around 350 in total) attending the council is not an authentic expression of the church. However, there is precedence for this, dating back at least to the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451.

The number of bishops has never determined the importance of a council. The fact is that never before in history has such an extensive, comprehensive, and representative event taken place in the Orthodox Church. In the first millennium, there were only five churches – Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem – attending the Seven Ecumenical Councils. The Holy and Great Council is thus unique and unprecedented.

The local autocephalous churches also agreed that each Church would cast a single vote, although dissenting opinions would be duly recorded. In the early church, from at least the third century, decision by majority was the general principle and conventional practice. One church alone – including Rome – could not veto or control the final decision. However, in order to acknowledge centuries of isolation and encourage a sense of unity to flourish, the principle of consensus was adopted in the Pan-Orthodox preparatory process and will be applied during the Holy and Great Council.

As for the number of votes, the tradition of the early Church is a matter of speculation. At the first Ecumenical Council, a paper was circulated

for signature by all. But in other councils, bishops simply stood beside those with whom they agreed – somewhat similar to the caucus system in US presidential primaries. On other occasions, decision-making resembled the British House of Commons, with the “yeas” standing on the right and the “nays” on the left.

It is almost certain that voting did not imply acceptance of individual rights in the manner that we understand these today: one person – one vote. The Orthodox Church is a hierarchal church; we build on the processes of the early church and the processes of the local churches. The only essential requirements are respect for fairness and adherence to hierarchical order and the conciliar process. And that is certainly guaranteed by the process and rules of operation of the Holy and Great Council.

We fervently ask the plenitude of the Church – clergy and laity, men and women, old and young – to pray for this unique and historical event. We especially ask that you implore God to strengthen and inspire the leaders of the Church to manifest their unity in a world afflicted by conflict and division.

May God bless the Holy and Great Council. And may His abundant grace be with all of you.

- His All-Holiness Bartholomew,
Ecumenical Patriarch



Official channels of communications

The Holy and Great Council will be held June 16-27 in Crete. For the first time in 1200 years, the primates of the 14 autocephalous (internally self-governed) Orthodox Churches, along with more than 300 bishops, priests, monastics, and laity, will meet to pray and discuss issues of common concern. Stay informed of daily updates and connected to the Council by visiting www.orthodoxcouncil.org and by using the communications channels of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

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