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PAN ORTHODOX COUNCIL ANNOUNCED FOR 2016

by Walter Sawatsky

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During the week of March 6-9, 2014, a Synaxis at Constantinople announced plans to convene the long awaited Pan-Orthodox Council in 2016. This is major news from the world of Orthodoxy, where the last Oecumenical or Pan-Orthodox Council was held more than 1,000 years ago. Orthodox leaders project issuing 8-10 consensus statements at that Council. That is, something very old and something very new may be coming together.

In recent years several world gatherings may remind us of the complex ways that new energy and initiative toward Christian unity have emerged. There was, for example, a global assembly of the member churches of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Korea (November 2013). That membership includes some major Orthodox Churches (fewer than in 1990, however) and not all of them. Global Congresses on World Mission, to mark the centenary of the famous Edinburgh 1910 congress, were held in Edinburgh, Capetown, and Tokyo in 2010 --the Edinburgh gathering essentially representing WCC member churches plus many observers, at Capetown it was Evangelicals as participants in the Lausanne Covenant (1974f), and still other mission societies (mostly Protestant Evangelical) in Tokyo. With a new pope as head of the Roman Catholic Church, which now numbers a bit over half of all Christians everywhere, its projected synod of bishops may also serve as a turning point in Christian witness, and perhaps for the reputation of Christianity, where the disunity of the “one body of Christ” has been the ever growing shame.

Based on reports from news releases of several Orthodox bodies as circulated through Nachrichten Östliche Kirchen (noek@uni-muenster.de), #09/14, a special issue dated March 13, 2014; and on Global Christian Forum News, 2014 Edition 01 (kimcain@globalchristianforum.org).

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A less well-known turning point came in 1991 after the WCC Assembly in Canberra, with its theme of “Come Holy Spirit”, when enough participant member churches rejected decision making by voting, in favor of a consensus model. That was the model attempted in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006, at which non-member Roman Catholic representatives and Pentecostals, for example, spoke in all commission gatherings to shape outcomes without voting, but by highlighting what was the consensus. Decision by consensus too seldom happens, because it takes much talk, even more listening and respectful hearing, so is not very efficient. Yet among free churches, whose official models for decision making cover a broad spectrum, a de facto consensus turns out to be the only way that common commitments and common confessions have any carrying power. Similarly, this time it is the Orthodox world, reaffirming a consensus model for discerning the mind of the Holy Spirit for the issues of the day, that appears to make a Pan-Orthodox Council possible.

It is not hard to guess why it has taken over 1000 years to come together in counsel at a global level. Not only our grasp of what is “the world God so loved”, or what is the “global” has grown in the past millennium; but there were innumerable events preventing councils from meeting with full representation, and then there were the many human church leaders whose flawed personal features and national hubris made mutual humility and trust rare.

Indeed, there is still another movement now gathering respect and attention, known as the Global Christian Forum (GCF). Also stimulated by a reality reading since Canberra 1991, this became an attempt by leaders of national denominational communions, and by leaders of Global Christian communions, to meet (at least annually) for personal sharing, trust building and fellowship. It was where representative leaders (but seldom official members) from across the barriers of current Christian ecumenical structures came to know each other more deeply, at least enough to recognize the marks of the Holy Spirit in the other and the agenda of common Christian problems. By 2011 the Global Christian Forum had reached enough momentum, to ask the then outgoing general secretary of the Mennonite World Conference, Dr. Larry Miller, to become its general secretary. An expanded website and newsletter issued in February 2014 conveys numerous new initiatives to address common issues challenging global Christianity. They too strike a new tone, announcing “Our Unfolding Journey with Jesus Christ” as a narrative history, doing theology in a testimonial, doxological style. They committed to a process to address the meaning of proselytism in a “world of many Christian families,” and to convene an international consultation on discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom.
So the announced Pan-Orthodox Council process has not happened in a vacuum; the tones from its official closing statement reveal Orthodox efforts to face themes and issues other Christians are also struggling with. For much of Western Christianity (Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical, Pentecostal, Independents) Orthodoxy has become so unknown, that rare are the intercessory prayers said for that part of God’s Church. Perhaps readers will sit up and take more notice when recognizing, as their own, the primary themes for that forthcoming Pan-Orthodox council!

Key global challenges were named in Oecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s opening address, and re-stated many times by other Primates of “Local Churches” [classic terminology for leader of an autocephalous church]. They were: 1) the persecution of Christians, such as mass expulsion in the Middle East and North Africa (including current imprisonment of two metropolitan bishops from the Syrian Orthodox Church, and nuns in the famous Maaloula convent); 2) the spiritual perniciousness of the cult of consumerism “lying at the foundation of the economic crisis”; 3) moral threats from gender and sexual orientation issues; 4) and challenges from bioethics, such as cloning. The Romanian Patriarch Daniil spoke of three challenges: secularization, religious indifference, and migration. In its official “message of the primates”, noting that “the Church of Jesus Christ is in dialogue with every period of time”, the writers quoted St. Paul that “there is fighting without and fear within” (II Cor. 7:5) as “also valid for the Church today.” Other notable lines from the official message included “support for the martyrdom...”, “admiration for the witness of Christians in the Middle East...and other parts of the world”, “support the Patriarchate of Antioch in its spiritual and humanitarian ministry... and the resettlement of all refugees.” Declaring the global economic crisis as “fundamental threat to justice and peace”, its fourth of nine sections concludes with “we emphasize our vocation to transform the world by embracing the principles of justice, peace and love.”

The seventh and eighth sections also evoke the mutual accountability element of interchurch conversations noted above. “Inseparably connected with unity is mission.” That opening line is followed by stating that “the Church does not live for itself but it obliged to witness and share God’s gifts... sharing the gifts of truth and love with all humankind...”, then citing Matthew
28:19-20. Then, given the reality of multiculturalism and pluralism everywhere, no issue can be resolved without reference to the global. “We acknowledge that dialogue is always better than conflict. Withdrawal and isolationism are never options.” Therefore “we reaffirm our obligation at all times to be open in our contact with ‘the other’”, specifically “with other peoples ... other cultures... other Christians... people of other faiths”.

It is a message for all Christians everywhere to take seriously, and to wish the Orthodox well that by 2016 the Pan-Orthodox council will indeed take place as new turning point. It reminds all Christians to adopt along with them that “above and beyond all challenges, we proclaim the good news of God, who ‘so loved the world’ that He ‘dwelt among us.’”