



**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)*

The Orthodox Church has witnessed for many decades 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, fresh disagreements and proposals have come forward.

Even at this late stage, participation in the Holy and Great Council is uncertain, and the Synod's 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 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 gratitude to God our Eucharistic communion with all the Orthodox Churches, starting 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 unavoidably emerge in the Orthodox Churches. It is argued that the intensity of the objections demonstrates that the Holy and Great Council should be postponed in order to prevent 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 Primates, has opened the path to the Holy and Great Council. As we write, the obstacles on this path are emerging with even greater strength than before.

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.