Chambesy 1986 conference

Section III of the report of the Third Panorthodox Preconciliar Conference, Chambesy, 1986

1. The Orthodox Church, in her profound conviction and ecclesiastical consciousness of being the bearer of and the witness to the faith and tradition of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, firmly believes that she occupies a central place in matters relating to the promotion of Christian unity within the contemporary world.

2. The Orthodox Church notes that in the course of history, for a variety of reasons and in diverse ways, there have been numerous and important deviations from the tradition of the undivided Church. Thus, arose in the Christian world divergent conceptions about the unity and the very essence of the Church.

The Orthodox Church grounds the unity of the Church on the fact that she was founded by our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as on the communion in the Holy Trinity and in the Sacraments. This unity is manifested through the apostolic succession and the patristic tradition and to this day is lived within her. It is the mission and duty of the Orthodox Church to transmit, in all its fullness, the truth contained in the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition, the truth which gives to the Church her universal character.

The responsibility of the Orthodox Church, as well as her ecumenical mission regarding Church unity, were expressed by the Ecumenical Councils. These, in particular, stressed the indissoluble link existing between true faith and the sacramental communion. The Orthodox Church has always sought to draw the different Christian Churches and Confessions into a joint pilgrimage aiming at searching the lost unity of Christians, so that all might reach the unity of faith.

3. The Orthodox Church, which unceasingly prays “for the union of all”, has taken part in the ecumenical movement since its inception and has contributed to its formation and further development. In fact, the Orthodox Church, due to the ecumenical spirit by which she is distinguished, has, throughout the history, fought for the restoration of Christian unity.

Therefore, the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement does not run counter to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church. It constitutes the consistent expression of the apostolic faith within new historical conditions, in order to respond to new existential demands.

4. It is in this spirit that all the local Holy Orthodox Churches actively participate today in the work of the various national, regional and international bodies of the ecumenical movement and take part in different bilateral and multilateral dialogues, despite the difficulties and crises arising occasionally in the normal course of this movement. This many-faceted ecumenical activity derives from the sense of responsibility and from the conviction that coexistence, mutual understanding, cooperation and common efforts towards Christian unity are essential, so as “not to hinder the Gospel of Christ” (I Cor. 9,12).

5. One of the principal bodies of the contemporary Ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC). Despite the fact that it does not include all Christian Churches and Confessions and that other ecumenical organisations are also playing an important role in the promotion of the ecumenical movement at large, the WCC represents today a structured ecumenical body.

Some of the Orthodox Churches were among the Council’s founding members, and later on all the local Orthodox Churches became its members. As has already been stated on a pan-Orthodox level (4th Pan-Orthodox Conference, 1968), the Orthodox Church is a fully-fledged and equal member of the World Council of Churches and with all the means at her disposal, contributes to the progress and success of all WCC activities.

6. The Orthodox Church, however, faithful to her ecclesiology, to the identity of her internal structure and to the teaching of the undivided Church, while participating in the WCC, does not accept the idea of the “equality of confessions” and cannot consider Church unity as an inter-confessional adjustment. In this spirit, the unity which
is sought within the WCC cannot simply be the product of theological agreements alone. God calls every Christian to the unity of faith which is lived in the sacraments and the tradition, as experienced in the Orthodox Church.

7. The Orthodox member Churches of the WCC, accept its Constitutional Basis, as well as its aims and goals. They firmly believe that the ecclesiological presuppositions of the Toronto Statement (1950) on “The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches” are of paramount importance for the Orthodox participation in the Council. It is therefore self-understood that the WCC is not and must never become a “super-Church”. “The purpose of the WCC is not to negotiate unions between Churches, which can only be done by the Churches themselves, acting on their own initiatives, but to bring the Churches into living contact with each other and to promote the study and discussion of the issues of Church unity” (Toronto Statement, 2).

8. Theological studies and other programmatic activities of the WCC are instrumental in bringing Churches together. Particular mention should be made of the Commission on Faith and Order, which carries the work of the “World Movement for Faith and Order”. It is underlined that the document on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”, elaborated by the Commission with the participation of Orthodox theologians, does not express the faith of the Orthodox Church on many points of capital importance. It constitutes, nevertheless, a significant step in the history of the Ecumenical Movement.

9. The WCC, however, as an instrument of its member Churches, does not confine itself to maintaining a multilateral dialogue within the framework of the Faith and Order Commission. Its manifold activities in the fields of evangelism, diakonia, health, theological education, interfaith dialogue, combating racism and promoting peace and justice, respond to particular needs of the Churches and of the world today and provide an opportunity for common witness and action. The Orthodox Church appreciates this multidimensional activity of the WCC and fully cooperates in the above-mentioned fields, within the limits of her possibilities.

10. Following the 6th Assembly of the WCC in Vancouver, there are new perspectives for a more meaningful Orthodox participation in the Council. The balancing of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Council’s work attempted at Vancouver, opens new ways for bringing the Orthodox theological thought in the life and activities of the WCC.

11. It is a fact, however, that an essential Orthodox witness and its specific theological contribution will be weakened, if we cannot find within the WCC the necessary conditions which will enable the Orthodox Churches to act on an equal footing with the other WCC members, on the basis of their own ecclesiological identity and in accordance with their own ways of thinking.

Something which often does not occur because of the very structure of the WCC and the procedural principles applied in the running of the Council.

The same applies with reference to the local Orthodox Churches’ participation in and cooperation with other inter-Christian organisations, such as the Conference of European Churches (CEC) or any other local or regional council, in which the Orthodox Church is called upon to cooperate and bear her witness.

In this connection, concern is expressed about the ongoing enlargement of the WCC, resulting from the admission of different Christian communities as new members. Such a development will reduce in the long term the Orthodox participation in the various governing and consultative bodies of the WCC and will be detrimental to a healthy ecumenical dialogue within the Council.

Consequently it is necessary to make new adjustments within the Council, in order to enable the Orthodox to give their witness and theological input, as the WCC expects them to do, according to the mutual understanding between the WCC and its Orthodox member Churches (the Sofia desiderata).

12. The Orthodox Church is conscious of the fact that the Ecumenical Movement takes new forms in order to meet the new conditions and face the new challenges to today’s world. In view of this development, the creative contribution and witness of the Orthodox Church on the basis of the Apostolic tradition and her faith, is indispensable. We pray that all Christian Churches work in common in order to bring nearer the day when the Lord will fulfil the hope of the Churches that there will be “one folk, and one shepherd” (Jn 10,16).
Points requiring immediate action:

1. It is essential to create within the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and other inter-Christian organisations, the necessary conditions which will enable the Orthodox Churches to act on an equal footing with the other members of the above-mentioned organisations.

It is therefore necessary to work out in the WCC and the other ecumenical organisations new regulations, in order to enable the Orthodox Church to bear her witness and give her theological contribution, as expected by her partners in the Ecumenical Movement.

More particularly, concerning the relations of the Orthodox Church with the WCC, it is necessary to deal with those of the “Sofia desiderata”, on which so far there was not any decision.

2. The Orthodox Church, while participating in multilateral theological dialogue within the framework of the Faith and Order Commission, should find ways of coordinating her efforts, especially with respect to the ecclesiological criteria of her participation in this dialogue.

posted March 31, 1997