

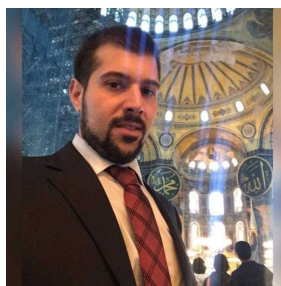


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The Efforts of Patriarch Meletios Metaxakis of Alexandria to convene a Local Synod in 1927

Abstract

Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios Metaxakis (1871-1935) systematically addressed the issue of convening a Council of Orthodox Churches. In 1923, he convened the Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople, which proposed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate the convening of a Pan-Orthodox Council in 1925, on the occasion of the 1600th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council's convening - a proposal accepted by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Church of Constantinople, setting the Orthodox Church on the lengthy preparatory path for the Holy and Great Council (2016). After resigning from the Ecumenical Throne and being elected to the Patriarchal Throne of



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Alexandria, Patriarch Meletios endeavored to convene a Local Synod to resolve the calendrical issue definitively. This article examines both Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria's efforts to convene this Local Synod and the stance of the Eastern Patriarchs.

Keywords

Ecumenical Patriarchate, Patriarchate of Alexandria, Local Synod, Pan-Orthodox Council

1 Introduction

Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios Metaxakis (1871-1935) systematically addressed the issue of convening a Council of Orthodox Churches, while also emphasizing that the neglect of convening "General Councils" posed risks to the unity of the Church. He observed that although the synodal system was applied separately by each Autocephalous Church, it did not function smoothly in the administration of the entire Church. Additionally, numerous ecclesiastical issues required formal resolution and needed to be settled "by a common decision of the whole Orthodox Church."¹ In this context, he proposed forming a Committee to prepare a list of topics for the upcoming Council.²

¹ Πρακτικά και Αποφάσεις του ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Πανορθοδόξου Συνεδρίου (Proceedings and Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople) (Constantinople: Patriarchal Printing House, 1923), p. 32.

² "Patriarchal Letter to the Presidents of the Holy Orthodox Churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Serbia, Cyprus, Greece, and Romania," No. Prot. 872, February 3, 1923, in *Pantainos* 15 (March 17, 1923), pp. 195-197.

The majority of Orthodox Churches accepted the proposal above, leading to the convening of the Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople in 1923. This congress recommended to the Ecumenical Patriarchate the convening of a Pan-Orthodox Council on the occasion of the 1600th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council (325 AD). On July 9, 1923, the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate accepted the resolution of the Pan-Orthodox Congress and decided to convene the Pan-Orthodox Council two years later.³

However, the convening of the Council faced obstacles due to generally adverse historical and ecclesiastico-political conditions: 1) the Turkish Republic replaced the Ottoman Empire, 2) the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, 3) the population exchange was carried out, and 4) the global economic crisis broke out. In the efforts made from 1923, when the decision to convene the Council was made, until 1925, when it was scheduled to take place, the Ecumenical Throne was vacant three times: Meletios IV (1921-1923), Gregorios VII (1923-1924), Constantinos VI (1924-1925), and Basilios III (1925-1929).⁴

Despite the aforementioned objective difficulties, the convening of the Council had become an urgent necessity, as most Orthodox

³ See also: I. Ladas, "Pan-Orthodox Communication and Cooperation: The Centenary of the Convening of the Pan-Orthodox Congress and the Decision to Convene a Council of the Orthodox Churches (Διορθόδοξη συνεννόηση και συνεργασία: Ἐπέτειος ἑκατονταετηρίδος ἀπὸ τῆς σύγκληση τοῦ Πανορθοδόξου Συνεδρίου καὶ τὴν ἀπόφαση συγκλήσεως Συνόδου τῶν Ὁρθοδόξων Ἐκκλησιῶν)," *Dodekanisos* 30 (2023), pp. 389-419.

⁴ B. Stavridis, *The Ecumenical Patriarchs - 1860 to the Present. History and Documents (Οἱ Οἰκουμενικοὶ Πατριάρχαι - 1860 – Σήμερα. Ἱστορία καὶ Κείμενα)* (Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis, 2004), pp. 516-525; 551-565; 480-515.

Churches had declared, due to pressing issues specific to each.⁵ Additionally, after the Ecumenical Patriarchate adapted its liturgical calendar to the revised Gregorian calendar on March 10, 1924, it initially left the resolution of the Paschal issue to the Ecumenical Council and subsequently to the Pre-Synod. However, each year it found itself in the position of having to determine the date for celebrating Easter, repeating in its correspondence to the Autocephalous Churches the stock phrase "the hoped-for convening of the Ecumenical Council not having been achieved this year either" or later "the convening of the Pre-Synod, it was determined that the upcoming Holy Easter be celebrated, etc."⁶

2 The decision of Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria to convene a Local Council

Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios, who was compelled to resign from the Ecumenical Throne in September 1923⁷, was elected Patriarch of Alexandria on May 20, 1926, succeeding the deceased Patriarch Photios of Alexandria (1853-1925).⁸ As the Patriarch of Alexandria, he attempted to convene a Local Synod at the end of 1927 to address the Calendar Issue. The

⁵ "Report of the Ecumenical Patriarchate," No. Prot., November 24, 1924, Archive of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the preparations and procedural convening of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Churches, see the following: I. Ladas, "The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church 2016: Preparation-Procedures," PhD diss., Thessaloniki, 2023.

⁷ B. Stavridis, *The Ecumenical Patriarchs - 1860 to the Present. History and Documents* (Οἱ Οἰκουμενικοὶ Πατριάρχαι - 1860 - Σήμερα. Ἱστορία καὶ Κείμενα) (Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis, 2004), p. 480-515.

⁸ See also: Th. Meimaris, *The Election and the Recognition of Meletios Metaxakis as Patriarch of Alexandria (1925-1927)* (Thessaloniki: K & M. Ant. Stamoulis Publications, 2016).

Alexandrian Church believed that the calendar should be changed "by a decision of a Synod broader than the Provincial," both "to maintain the synodal characteristic of the Church" and "to enforce greater authority over the faithful."⁹

This initiative was connected firstly to the fact that the Patriarchates of the East had conditioned the calendar reform on the assembly of an Ecumenical Council, whose convening faced severe difficulties unlikely to change in the near future, and secondly to the election of the former Patriarch of Constantinople, Meletios, to the helm of the Alexandrian Church. To better understand Patriarch Meletios's actions, note that in 1919, when he was the Head of the Church of Greece, discussions were held in Athens regarding the convening of a General Council of the Orthodox Church. Members of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece and professors from the Theological School of the University of Athens concluded that the "Association of various Orthodox Theologians from different Churches" should study the problems concerning the Church and prepare the ground for the convening of a Council¹⁰.

In December 1926, the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria convened in the wake of the postponement of the Ecumenical Council and the efforts of the responsible parties to delay the scheduled Preliminary Council. Upon the Patriarch's suggestion, it was decided to send a metropolitan to Jerusalem

⁹ Letter from Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria to Ecumenical Patriarch Vasilios, No. Prot. 1715, July 10/23, 1927, in *Orthodoxia B* (September 20, 1927), pp. 261-264.

¹⁰ Πρακτικά καὶ Ἀποφάσεις του ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Πανορθοδόξου Συνεδρίου (Proceedings and Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople). Constantinople: Patriarchal Printing House, 1923, 43-8. See also: E. Karageorgoudis, *Meletios Metaxakis as Metropolitan of Athens (Ο Μελέτιος Μεταξάκης ως Μητροπολίτης Αθηνών)* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras Publications, 2005).

and Damascus. This hierarch would deliver a written proposal from the Church of Alexandria to Patriarchs Gregory IV of Antioch (1859-1928) and Damian of Jerusalem (1848-1931) regarding the formation of a joint Synod of the three Patriarchs and their Bishops, before Easter 1927, with the specific purpose of "determining by common decision each of the three Churches' stance towards the calendar difference."¹¹ Alexandria was deemed the most suitable location for the Synod due to "communication and environmental" reasons, but there was no objection to another city being preferred. If the Synod were to be convened in Alexandria around the middle of Lent, the Patriarch of Jerusalem would return to Jerusalem on the eve of Holy Week, followed by a multitude of pilgrims. For this reason, the Holy Synod of the Church of Alexandria announced a pilgrimage to the Holy Places for the upcoming Easter. As for the number of bishops who would participate in the Local Synod, it was left to the discretion of the Patriarch to invite as many as he wished, as there would be no need for a vote.¹²

The Holy Synod of the Alexandrian Throne convened from May 6/19 to June 12/25, 1927, and reviewed the report of the metropolitan of Nubia, who had been dispatched to the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch, as well as the letter from the Patriarch of Jerusalem. From these discussions, it was concluded that the two Patriarchs, due to specific local reasons related to their Churches, would continue to observe the old calendar, without opposing the preference for the new calendar by other Churches. Moreover, given that both were "well-informed and physically frail," they would not be able to

¹¹ "Synodal Decisions (Συνοδικαὶ Αποφάσεις)," in *Pantainos* 19 (December 18, 1926), p. 832.

¹² Report of Metropolitan Nikolaos of Nubia, January 14, 1927, p. 2, YDIA, Central Service Archive 1927/62.2.1.

participate in the proposed Local Synod and deemed the upcoming Preliminary Synod sufficient.¹³

Even though the Patriarchate of Alexandria was positioned between two groups of churches—those that had already embraced the calendar reform and those that reasonably rejected it—it decided to organize a Local Synod in Alexandria in mid-October 1927. This Local Synod was to be composed primarily of representatives from the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, as well as from the Autocephalous Churches of Cyprus and Greece. The purpose was "to definitively resolve the issue by a formal decision of the Local Synod," which had been causing disturbances in the churches and presented an obstacle to ecclesiastical life.¹⁴ Consequently, on July 10/23, 1927, the Patriarch of Alexandria specifically invited the Churches of Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Greece to participate in the Local Synod, as they had closer communication and were particularly concerned with the calendar issue. Other Orthodox autocephalous Churches, namely the Russian, Serbian, Romanian, and Polish Churches, were not excluded from the Local Synod. It could be argued that Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria desired the participation of these other Churches for a "more manifest visitation of God."¹⁵ The Synod could also address other pending general issues if raised, but the opinion of the Local Synod would not be binding on any particular Church.

¹³ "Decisions of the Holy Synod," in *Pantainos* 20 (June 17, 1927), p. 438.

¹⁴ *Idem*, pp. 438-439.

¹⁵ B. Archondonis, Ecumenical Patriarch, "Efforts to Convene an Ecumenical Council Fifty Years Ago (Πρόσπάθειαι συγκροτήσεως Οικουμενικῆς Σύνόδου πρὸ πεντηκονταετίας)," in *Festschrift for Metropolitan Barnabas of Kitros on the 25th Anniversary of His Episcopacy* (Athens: 1980), p. 91.

Furthermore, this Synod would not have the jurisdiction to discuss internal matters of the individual Churches.¹⁶

The purpose of the Local Synod was not to persuade other Patriarchates or to compel them to adopt the New Calendar. Instead, the aim was to uphold, in a justifiable manner, the stance of each Church. The Patriarchate of Alexandria recognized that the Churches of Antioch and Jerusalem had "particular reasons" to maintain the old calendar. However, the Church of Alexandria, which was "free from restrictions," also postponed the calendar change "out of solidarity" with the two neighboring Patriarchates. For this reason, it sought their cooperation to facilitate the calendar change. Should these Patriarchates "refuse assistance," it would consider and decide "its own particular" actions.¹⁷ The Local Synod would also help to "quell" the turmoil in both Greece and Romania, caused by "the exploitation of the Calendar as a matter of faith, doctrinal, and national issue by some opportunists." Moreover, "the three Patriarchates would be united and strong," as they were perceived to have been overlooked by newer Churches that boasted of the size of their flocks. Thus, they would be disadvantaged if they did not demonstrate their cohesion and Apostolic authority through collaboration, as the newer Churches sought to shift Orthodoxy's center of gravity. Therefore, it was deemed necessary for the three Patriarchates to renew their Local Synods periodically.¹⁸

3 The reaction of the Patriarchs of the East

Metropolitan Nikolaos of Nubia (1876-1939), who later became the Patriarch of Alexandria, visited the Patriarchate of Jerusalem

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 91.

¹⁷ Report of Metropolitan Nikolaos of Nubia, January 14, 1927, p. 2, YDIA, Central Service Archive 1927/62.2.1.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

on December 23, 1926, following a synodal decision, with instructions to invite the Patriarch of Jerusalem and subsequently the Patriarch of Antioch to a Local Synod. The question posed to the Patriarchs was, "What should be done? Should we postpone indefinitely until the anticipated Ecumenical Council? But its convening seems very arduous and extremely difficult."¹⁹

Metropolitan Nikolaos engaged in repeated dialogues with Patriarch Damianos of Jerusalem, yet the latter remained resolute against the proposals of the Alexandrian hierarchy, rejecting the convocation of a Local Council. Initially, the Patriarch of Jerusalem also refused the calendar reform for the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, deeming it detrimental to pilgrimage. He certainly exaggerated his fears regarding the Latins, as there had been no trial attempt at negotiation. He further emphasized that even if the Patriarch of Antioch agreed to convene the Local Council, his stance would not change.

Patriarch Damianos expressed concerns about aligning the calendar with the Latins, citing "pilgrimage issues" that could lead to friction and conflicts regarding the timing of the Holy Services. In response to these concerns, Metropolitan Nikolaos assured Patriarch Damianos that he would be recognized by the Synod as having the right to maintain the old calendar. Still, his Church should prepare for a "future resolution" of the issue by an Ecumenical Council.

Nevertheless, the Patriarch of Jerusalem did not share this opinion and only consented to the formation of a Pan-Orthodox Council and Pre-Council at Mount Athos by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He clarified that even if a calendar correction were decided there, the festal calendar of the Church of Jerusalem should not be assimilated, maintaining that it should retain

¹⁹ Idem.

specific, unique feasts and celebrations to highlight its differences from other local Churches and systems. With the impending Pre-Council at Mount Athos, he found the proposed Local Council in Alexandria unnecessary. He also added that the Church of Jerusalem was well-informed and had to address serious and urgent issues. Nonetheless, he seemed willing, outside the Local Council, to offer "brotherly support" to the Church of Alexandria if it deemed it could not wait for the convocation of the hoped-for Ecumenical Council and wished to "regulate its own affairs."²⁰

Patriarch Damianos did not appear to pay attention to the argument that resolving the calendar issue among the three Patriarchates would also assist the Greek Government and the Church of Greece by ending the "separate tendencies of the old calendarists in Greece".²¹ Indeed, before the departure of the metropolitan of Nubia to Damascus, the Patriarch of Jerusalem hastened to inform the Patriarch of Antioch by letter about his negative response to the proposal.²²

Metropolitan Nikolaos traveled to Damascus on December 30th and met with Patriarch Gregorios of Antioch, to whom he also presented the rationale behind the Alexandrian decision. Patriarch Gregorios listened with great interest but was very cautious in his responses. The Patriarch of Antioch expressed concern that the calendar issue could become a pretext for more significant reforms and innovations within the Church. Metropolitan Nubia pointed out that the problems he was concerned with were unrelated to the proposed Local Council,

²⁰ Idem, p. 3.

²¹ Document from the Consul General in Jerusalem (Chatzivasileiou) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. Prot. 17, January 12, 1927, YDIA, Central Service Archive 1927/62.2.1.

²² Document from the Consul General in Jerusalem (Chatzivasileiou) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. Prot. 18, January 20, 1927, YDIA, Central Service Archive 1927/62.2.1.

which would focus solely on the calendar issue. Nevertheless, the Primate of Antioch disagreed for both general and local reasons ("due to the ravaging Latin propaganda in Syria").²³

Conclusions

Following the dispatch of invitation letters by Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria, Ecumenical Patriarch Basilios III (1840-1929), in his letter dated August 27, 1927, wished every success to the works of the Local Council but responded negatively, as he believed there was no reason for the Church of Constantinople to participate in this particular Local Council. For his Church and other Churches that had adopted the revised calendar, the issue of the ecclesiastical calendar was permanently and definitively resolved.²⁴ The Church of Greece maintained the same stance, while the Church of Cyprus expressed willingness to participate, provided that the other Autocephalous Churches also took part.²⁵

Given the aforementioned circumstances and the positions of the Patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem, the Patriarch of Alexandria, with the Patriarchal and Synodal Circular No. 1477, decided to adopt the reformed Julian Calendar across the jurisdiction of the Patriarchal Throne of Alexandria (the Paschal cycle would

²³ Report of Metropolitan Nikolaos of Nubia, January 14, 1927, p. 4, YDIA, Central Service Archive 1927/62.2.1.

²⁴ Reply from Ecumenical Patriarch Basil to the Letter No. Prot. 1715 from Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria, No. Prot. 1975, August 27, 1927, in *Orthodoxia B* (September 20, 1927), pp. 264-267.

²⁵ B. Archondonis, Ecumenical Patriarch, "Efforts to Convene an Ecumenical Council Fifty Years Ago (Πρόσπάθειαι συγκροτήσεως Οικουμενικῆς Σύνόδου πρὸ πεντηκονταετίας)," in *Festschrift for Metropolitan Barnabas of Kitros on the 25th Anniversary of His Episcopacy* (Athens: 1980), p. 92.

remain unchanged).²⁶ However, the steadfast position of the Alexandrian Church was that the definitive resolution of the calendar issue belonged to an Ecumenical Council. Therefore, the implementation date was set for October 1, 1928, with the "minimal hope" that the Pre-Council would be held in the meantime.²⁷ Ultimately, in 1930, instead of the Pre-Council, a Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Committee convened at the Holy Monastery of Vatopedi, and the Pre-Council was scheduled for 1932. Given that the Pre-Council could not be convened, attempts were made to hold it in 1951. Subsequently, the Orthodox Church embarked on a long preparatory journey for the Holy and Great Council, which was eventually convened only in 2016 by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

The efforts of Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria to convene a Local Council highlight, on one hand, the need for a joint decision by all Orthodox Churches on urgent ecclesiastical matters, and on the other hand, the refusal of the Orthodox Churches underscores their commitment to canonical norms, as Councils, Assemblies, and generally all Pan-Orthodox bodies are convened only by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This dynamic underscores the complexity and the deeply rooted traditions within the governance of the Orthodox Churches, reflecting a balance between the desire for consensus and adherence to ecclesiastical order.

²⁶ Encyclical of Patriarch Meletios of Alexandria regarding the New Calendar, No. Prot. 1477, June 19, 1928, in *Pantainos* 20 (August 31, 1928), p. 558.

²⁷ *Idem*.

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