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CONSTANTINE THE GREAT AND THE CEREMONIAL OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

Abstract: *The terms ecclesiastical order and ceremonial procedure mean the unwritten and written rules that govern, shape, record, and secure the ecclesiastical customs and practices in the Orthodox Church.*

This paper will argue that Constantine the Great significantly contributed to the genesis of ecclesiastical ceremonial procedure through the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, and his work was continued by his successors in the following Ecumenical Councils. More specifically, with letters (κλητήρια γράμματα) the emperor invited metropolitans and bishops to come to Nicaea. The letters-invitations informed the bishops of the exact date and place that the Council would meet. Moreover, Constantine as the organizer was responsible for covering the travel and accommodation expenses of the participants in the Council.

The imperial ceremonial procedure was not confined to a static repetition of dry protocol. On the contrary, it offered a vision, a representation of the heavenly order and of the ideals of decency, good behaviour, clarity and harmony. For Constantine the Great not only called the Council, but he ensured the Council's smooth conduct.

Consequently, the ceremonial procedure that started with Constantine the Great at Nicaea was continued in the Ecumenical Councils that followed. But most importantly, the same ceremonial procedure is being applied today, in various conferences, pan-orthodox, inter-Christian etc, convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate - as primus inter pares, showing the contribution of Constantine the Great to the genesis of the ecclesiastical ceremonial procedure.

Key words: *Constantine the Great, Ecumenical Councils, ceremonial procedure, letters of invitation, travel and accommodation expenses, heavenly order.*

The conversion of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor, marked a watershed in the history of both the Roman empire and the Christian Church*¹. His reign from 306 to 337 witnessed many developments that helped to shape the

* We would like to thank Dr. David Gwynn (Royal Holloway, University of London) for his valuable comments.

¹ “The more closely Constantine's life and achievement are studied, the more inevitably is one driven to see in them an erratic block which has diverted the stream of human history”. Cf. Baynes 1931, 3.

subsequent history of Christianity. One of the greatest events of those years was the gathering of the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea, in May-June 325. Constantine played a central role in the organization of the council, attended the debates in person, and enforced the decisions of the assembled bishops.

The aim of this paper is to present the contribution of Constantine the Great to the genesis of ecclesiastical ceremonial procedure. The emperors and bishops who attended the subsequent ecumenical councils looked back to Constantine and the Council of Nicaea for inspiration and guidance, and the same principles have been followed down to the present time in the ecclesiastical customs and conciliar institutions of the Orthodox Church.

It must be acknowledged that 'we cannot exploit fully the importance of the First Ecumenical Council for the conciliar tradition of the Church, due to the difficult historical problems that surround the Council of Nicaea and particularly the loss of the council's *Acta* and the uncertainties raised by the fragmentary evidence from the sources that do survive'.² Nevertheless, it is still possible to trace the role that Constantine played at Nicaea and the influence that his example continues to exert on the Orthodox Church today.

From the moment Constantine the Great recognized Christianity, the Church received the patronage and protection of the state. As a Christian, Constantine was the first emperor to express a personal concern for the Church's organization and unity³.

When he defeated his imperial rival Licinius in 324 and united the entire Roman Empire under his rule, Constantine discovered that the Church was divided by the theological debates begun by the dispute between the Alexandrian presbyter Arius and his bishop Alexander of Alexandria⁴. In response to those disputes, it was Constantine who in 325 summoned the First Ecumenical Council⁵ to meet at Nicaea in Bithynia. By doing so, Constantine established the practice (*συνήθεια-έθος*) followed by the later Ecumenical Councils, that an ecumenical council was to be called by the emperor⁶.

The conciliar institution, of course, already existed within Christianity before Constantine. The idea of a Church council appeared with the creation of the very first ecclesiastical communities during the apostolic period, with the gathering of the Apostolic Synod (Jerusalem 48/49 AD)⁷, and is inherent in the ecclesiastical way of life as an essential means of making decisions and resolving problems. Ten years before he summoned the Council of Nicaea, Constantine had already been involved in a major western council at Arles in 314 in an unsuccessful attempt to resolve the Donatist schism in North Africa⁸.

The Council of Nicaea in 325, however, marked a new stage in Church organization. According to Professor Pheidas⁹, 'the Synod of Nicaea (325) was the first ecumenical synod, and thus it formed a new form of expression for the conciliar system of the Church, according to the prototype of the Apostolic Synod. For almost three centuries, the Church expressed its conciliar consciousness with the help of various historical schemes (local and regional synods, conciliar and episcopal correspondence etc), due to the difficult external circumstances. The

2 Cf. Pheidas 1976, 129.

3 Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 309.

4 Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 312.

5 Cf. Pheidas 1976, 126-227.

6 'The call of the Ecumenical Councils by the emperor became henceafter tradition. That is why the Byzantine emperors convened the remaining Ecumenical councils following the example of Constantine the Great', cf. Pheidas 1976, 151.

7 Cf. Pheidas 2002, 42-44, 47, 64, 191, for the Apostolic Synod.

8 On Constantine and the Donatist schism, see Frend 1971.

9 Cf. Pheidas 1976, 128.

ecclesiological capacity, however, to call an ecumenical council was never foreign to the Church of the first centuries (...). The call of the First Ecumenical Council neither surprised nor puzzled the body of the bishops of the Catholic Church. The Ecumenical council always existed in the historic life of the Church, the ecclesiological expression of the unique perspective of the conciliar ecclesiastical consciousness, and, as such it was preserved by the Orthodox Church until now.'

The purpose of an ecumenical council was twofold¹⁰. Firstly, an ecumenical council was a large gathering of bishops representing the entire Christian world¹¹, which at Nicaea in 325 comprised not only bishops from across the Roman Empire but even a few bishops from beyond Rome's borders¹². Secondly, such a council was required to debate important doctrinal and ecclesiastical matters that affected the entire Church¹³.

In 325 those matters included the theological debates over the teachings of Arius and the question of the correct date for the celebration of Easter¹⁴.

As a Christian, Constantine had a personal interest in the correct resolution of these matters. As the emperor, however, he was equally concerned in maintaining domestic peace and ensuring unity within the Church. Like many later Byzantine emperors, Constantine knew that religious affairs and particularly religious conflicts could have a very damaging effect on the empire¹⁵. After he united the empire in 324, Constantine was informed of the scale of the Christian debates by his advisor, the Spanish bishop Ossius of Cordova. In response, the emperor decided to confront the rivalries by calling the Ecumenical Council¹⁶.

The opinion of Professor Pheidas on the same subject is of particular interest. He suggested correctly, that 'emperor Constantine the Great called the First Ecumenical Council by inviting to the council with royal letters all the bishops of the Catholic Church. But calling the council was, really, due to the request of the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, whose request was delivered to the emperor by the imperial advisor, Ossius of Cordova. Consequently, by calling the First Ecumenical Council, Constantine the Great did not act arbitrarily. Instead, he followed the advice of the responsible member of the ecclesiastical authority, Alexander of Alexandria'¹⁷.

Once the decision to summon a council had been made, the emperor sent letters of invitation (*κλητήρια γράμματα*) to the bishops with the exact date and place (town) where the sessions of the council were about to be held¹⁸. The exchange of letters had been an important part of Christianity from the very beginnings¹⁹. The use of letters for the purpose

10 Cf. Shalmas 2007, 25.

11 Bishops discussed matters of belief and ecclesiastical good order. Cf. Koukoussas 2004, 19-20.

12 The vast majority of the attending bishops came from the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean, but in addition to those who came from the west a handful of bishops came from further afield, including the Crimea, Armenia and Persia. See further Honigsmann 1939, 17-76.

13 Cf. Karmiris 1960, 105-106. And Stavridis 1989, 4-6. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 309: Thus through the Ecumenical Councils, the Church condemned the most important heresies, proceeded to the final writing of the doctrine (dogma), and gave effect to the institution of the Pentarchy of the Patriarchs. For the institution of the Pentarchy of the Patriarchs, see Pheidas 1977.

14 The problems arose from the appearance of the heretical teachings, and the disagreement for the Easter celebration. Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 312.

15 Cf. Papoulidis 1970, 72-73; Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 312.

16 Cf. Karmiris 1960, 114-122; Pheidas 1976, 130-140.

17 Cf. Pheidas 1976, 159.

18 Cf. Papoulidis 1970, 72-73; Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 313.

19 The exchange of letters, especially between the bishops is an old habit of the Church going back to the

of an Ecumenical council further encouraged the development of a large network of communication between those who were most directly associated with matters of belief and ecclesiastical good order²⁰.

There were two major forms of imperial letter that were circulated regarding an ecumenical council, and again both these practices can be associated with Constantine at Nicaea. The first were the 'imperial sacra' or 'holy types'²¹, namely the royal letters of invitation sent to the presidents of the churches and to the bishops who were to participate in the council. When discussing the role of such letters in the councils, His Eminence Meletions (†), the Metropolitan of Nikopolis and Preveza, supports the view that 'holy type (*sacra forma*) or sacra were acts of particular nature. In the Councils, before any other action taken, the sacra about the assembly is being read first, securing the legitimacy of the Council, offering guarantee of the acceptance and the enforcement of its decisions, and defining the topics of the agenda'²².

The second set of imperial letters circulated regarding the Council were the letter-acts²³ that were sent to all the dioceses after the completion of the council. The latter validated and recited to the clergy and the people of every diocese the decisions of the council. While only a few traces of Constantine's letters of invitation for Nicaea now survive, we do still possess the letters that he circulated at the end of the council preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* and in Socrates Scholasticus' *Ecclesiastical History*²⁴.

In addition to sending the letters of invitation to the bishops, Constantine the Great also provided them with every possible help for quick transportation to Nicaea in Bithynia. He also solved practical problems regarding the bishops' accommodation, security and maintenance, and the preparation of the place where the sessions of the council were about to take place²⁵.

Moreover, although we lack authentic reports of the First Ecumenical Council²⁶, it has been suggested²⁷ that 'the entrance of the emperor in the sessions of the council was splendid. The emperor was the central figure of the council, and his participation was an unprecedented experience for the Church, because, in this way, the emperor's personal interest and care for what was happening became evident'.

Under those circumstances, it is believed that the sessions of the council began with a short address by Constantine²⁸, who made his interest for the Church and its

time of the Apostles. Cf. Karavidopoulos 1999, 36.

'Most books of the New Testament are written in the form of letters, which were sent by the Apostles to the newly established churches, so that the latter could confront the problems that arose. In the post-apostolic period, the correspondence that was developed, mainly between the bishops and the councils, shows the conciliar function of the Church'. Cf. Shalmas 2007, 145.

20 Cf. Shalmas 2007, 146.

21 Cf. Shalmas 2007, 162-163. Despite the fact that the original imperial sacra has not survived, we have firm evidence, that Constantine the Great invited to Nicaea in Bithynia the bishops from all around using letters - 'τους πανταχόθεν επισκόπους διά γραμμάτων'.

22 Cf. Shalmas 2007, 162-163.

23 Cf. Shalmas 2007, 162-163.

24 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* III.17-20; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* I.9.

25 Cf. Pheidias 1976, 140; Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 313; Papoulidis 1970, 72-73. According to Papoulidis, the government covered the costs for the meeting, the transportation and the maintenance of the participants.

26 Cf. Karmiris 1960, 117.

27 Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 314.

28 Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 314.

problems obvious and declared that the bishops were solely appointed to provide solutions to those problems²⁹. When his speech ended, he gave the floor to the bishops to organize the debates³⁰. There has been much modern controversy over who was the president of the First Ecumenical Council, but it seems clear that 'the council was chaired by eminent patriarchs with the support of the emperors or their representatives, ensuring the order and 'good behaviour' of the participants³¹. 'The imperial ceremonial was not confined to a static repetition of a cold protocol. It was rather a vision, an image that depicted the heavenly order, decency, propriety, clarity, and harmony'³².

Without doubt, Constantine the Great significantly contributed to the genesis of the ecclesiastical ceremonial of the ecumenical council. We may, however, ask ourselves whether his contribution influenced or not the ecclesiastical ceremonial of the Orthodox Church today. The answer to this question is surely positive.

On a Pan-Orthodox level, the supreme ecclesiastical and administrative body of the Orthodox Church is the Pan-Orthodox Council or the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that has been prepared for years. Until the Pan-Orthodox Council shall be convened, the supreme Pan-Orthodox institutional and administrative body is represented by the Pan-Orthodox Conferences and the Meetings of the Heads of the Orthodox Churches.

In the last sixty years, the conciliar tradition of Orthodoxy has been experienced and expressed firstly through the Pan-Orthodox Conferences in Rhodes, Belgrade and Chambes in Geneva (1961, 1963, 1964, 1968), and the other Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Conferences, and more recently with the Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Conferences in the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Geneva of which four have so far taken place (1976, 1982, 1986, 2009).

The proceedings of two indicative conferences reinforce our view regarding the contribution of Constantine the Great to the genesis of the ecclesiastical ceremonial of Orthodox conciliar tradition.

Firstly, based on the 'Proceedings of the Preparatory Committee of the Holy Orthodox Churches' (Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi, Holy Mountain, 1930)³³, we may demonstrate that before the conference Patriarchal Letters were sent to the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, answering Letters regarding the acceptance of their participation were received, and the same practices were followed as at Nicaea for the transportation, accommodation and maintenance of the conference participants. Furthermore, throughout the sessions, from the beginning to the end, the same practices were ensured.

Secondly, the Proceedings of the First Pan-Orthodox Conference (Rhodes 1961)³⁴ demonstrate that the Ecumenical Patriarchate originally announced the gathering of the Pan-Orthodox Conference through the Patriarchal Letters sent individually to the Orthodox Autocephalous and Autonomous Churches, to the Anglican and Old Catholic Churches, and to the World Council of Churches³⁵.

The Proceedings from the 1961 Conference³⁶ include statements of the aim of the gathering, the time, place, and composition of the delegations of the Patriarchates and of the

29 Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 314.

30 Cf. Koukoussas, Valais 2011, 314.

31 Cf. Karmiris 1960, 106.

32 Cf. Nassis 2011, 402.

33 Cf. Ecumenical Patriarchate 1930.

34 Cf. Ecumenical Patriarchate 1962.

35 Cf. Ecumenical Patriarchate 1962, 7.

36 Cf. Ecumenical Patriarchate 1962, 18-49.

Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, the programme of the sessions, the transportation, accommodation and maintenance of the delegates, the replies of the Orthodox Churches, the designation of the Patriarchate Delegation (designated President and representatives), the organizing committee (with the Patriarchal Pittakion), the final programme of the Conference, and information about the arrival of the Representatives in Athens, and their departure to Rhodes.

The second part of the Proceedings³⁷ comprises information about the Conference (the official opening first session, regular sessions), the regulation of the function of the sessions of the Conference, and the closing of the Conference with the final letters sent by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the answers to them.

The conciliar ceremonial that began during the reign of Constantine the Great was continued in the Ecumenical councils of the following centuries. But no less importantly, that ceremonial is still being applied today, in the various Pan-Orthodox and Inter-Christian Conferences held by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as *primus inter pares*, confirming the contribution of Constantine to the genesis of ecclesiastical ceremonial and tradition.

Finally, we agree with the view of Professor Pheidas³⁸, according to which ‘the First Ecumenical Council, correctly evaluated, constituted in the fourth century a new expression of the Conciliar System. But nobody questioned the Council’s real relation with the conciliar consciousness of the Church, because the criteria of the conciliar tradition from the past for calling, constituting and running the Council were used and reinterpreted according to the prevailing circumstances’.

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КОНСТАНТИН ВЕЛИКИ И ЦЕРЕМОНИЈАЛНЕ ПРОЦЕДУРЕ ВАСЕЉЕНСКИХ САБОРА

Термини црквени поредак и церемонијална процедура подразумевају неписана и писана правила која управљају, руководе, документују и чувају обичаје и праксе у православној Цркви.

Овај рад изнеће тезу да је Константин Велики значајно допринео настанку црквене церемонијалне процедуре током Првог васељенскога сабора у Никеји 325. године, те да је његово дело настављено од стране његових претходника на наредним васељенским саборима. Конкретније, император је путем писама (*κλητήρια ὑράκις*) позвао митрополите и епископе да дођу у Никеју. Та писма-позивнице обавестила су епископе о тачном датуму и месту на коме ће се Сабор састати. Уз то, као организатор, Константин је преузео обавезу да покрије трошкове пута и смештаја учесника у Сабору.

Царска церемонијална процедура није била ограничена на статичко понављање устаљеног протокола. Управо супротно, она је нудила једну визију, слику небескога поретка и идеале пристojности, лепог понашања, јасноће и склада. Јер Константин Велики није само сазвао Сабор већ се побринуо и о његовом несметаном току. Ово је имало за последицу да се церемонијална процедура која је започела са Константином Великим у Никеји наставила и на наредним васељенским Саборима. Но, најважније од свега, иста церемонијална процедура користи се и данас, на различитим конференцијама, све-православним, међу-хришћанским, итд, које сазива Васељенска патријаршија – као прва међу једнакима, што указују на допринос Константина Великог настанку црквене церемонијалне процедуре.