

Vibrant Parish, Vibrant Church: A Report on the 2015 Sobor and Synod of the UGCC

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Having been a participant in the sixth session of the patriarchal sobor¹ of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (UGCC) and having been present at the 2015 meeting of the synod of bishops of the UGCC that followed immediately, I have fielded many requests to make a few observations about these two important gatherings. What follows is a series of reflections that are, of course, personal, but at the same time informed by a bit of history and ecclesiological thought.

The Patriarchal Sobor

At the outset it is best to define some terms, since there are a number of terms that mean similar things in the various Eastern Churches, but carry different shades of meaning and have varying authority. The word *sobor* is the traditional Slavic word for “council.” Thus, an ecumenical council is rendered as “vselens’kyi sobor” in modern Ukrainian. The institution known as the “patriarchal sobor” in the UGCC is listed in the Latin original of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (CCEO) as “conventus patriarchalis.” This, in turn, is

¹ The five previous sessions of this body, as constituted by the 1990 *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, were held in 1996 (L’viv), 1998 (L’viv), 2002 (L’viv), 2007 (Kyiv), and 2011 (Prudentopolis, Brazil). I was last involved in the 1996 meeting.

often rendered in English as “patriarchal assembly.”² Thus, the name of this institution is a little misleading for those who expect it to mean a council, with all of the decision-making authority that church councils have traditionally exercised.

The UGCC struggles to live out its legitimate autonomy as an Eastern Church in full and visible communion with Rome and the other Catholic Churches. It is currently bound by the legislation of the Catholic communion, including the CCEO and the Particular Law of the UGCC. But legislation created for Eastern Christians by the Latins or by Latin-trained canonists is sometimes interpreted differently by Eastern Catholics, who unsurprisingly have the unnerving habit of sometimes thinking more like the Orthodox than like the West-Romans. Thus it is that Ukrainian Greco-Catholics will often translate the Ukrainian “Патріарший Собор” [Patriarshyi Sobor] as “patriarchal council” rather than “patriarchal assembly,” or intentionally employ the ambiguous “patriarchal sobor.” I will abide by the latter convention.

According to canon 140 of the CCEO, the patriarchal sobor is a consultative or advisory body.³ Interestingly, in the preamble to the “Statutes of the Patriarchal Sobor of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church”⁴ the authors have taken pains to emphasize that this body “continues the ancient tradition of the ‘conciliar’ [*soborna*] activity of the Kyivan

² See *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (hereafter, CCEO) title IV, chapter VII. This chapter deals with the *conventus patriarchalis*, the patriarchal assembly.

³ Canon 140 explains the general competence and parameters: “the patriarchal assembly is a consultative group of the entire Church over which the patriarch presides and which assists the patriarch and the synod of bishops of the patriarchal Church in dealing with matters of major importance especially in order to harmonize appropriately the forms and programs of the apostolate and ecclesiastical discipline with the current circumstances of the time, taking into account the common good of its own Church as well as the common good of the entire territory where several Churches *sui iuris* co-exist.”

⁴ Canon 145 of the CCEO states “the patriarchal assembly is to have its statutes, in which are contained the necessary norms for attaining the goals of the assembly, approved by the synod of bishops of the patriarchal Church.”

Church.”⁵ That same document states that “The Sobor is a forum for discussion and the expression of ideas and desiderata in the spirit of Christian liberty and responsibility.”⁶

Much in this document is directly based on the relevant section of canons 140–145 of the CCEO, but there are some noteworthy differences. For example, article 16, no. 5 of the statutes specifies that of the two laypeople formally called to the sobor, one is to be male and the other female. The CCEO refers only to two laypersons. Article 17 makes a provision for the “Father and Head of the UGCC” to appoint additional delegates beyond those that are mandated by canon 143 of the CCEO. It is in this capacity that I was invited to the sobor as the delegate of Patriarch Sviatoslav.

Everyone who is listed as being summoned to the sobor has a canonical obligation to attend,⁷ but eparchial bishops may send a proxy. In fact, every eparchy, exarchate, and other administrative structure of the UGCC was represented at the 2015 sobor – except for the Eparchy of St. Nicholas in Chicago. This eparchy’s absence was noted as an exception on several occasions. Moreover, apparently it was also the only eparchy not to have held an eparchial sobor in preparation for the patriarchal sobor.⁸

The sixth session of the sobor took place in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk, in Western Ukraine, August 25–27, 2015. Its theme was the strategic pastoral plan of the UGCC, known in some quarters as Vision 2020 (since it constitutes a roughly decade-long plan of action initiated by the synod of bishops of the UGCC in 2011 for how they would like to see the Church in the year 2020), but officially titled “The Vibrant Parish: A

⁵ The 2014 Statutes of the Patriarchal Sobor of the UGCC are available in Ukrainian at <http://sobor-ugcc.org.ua/docs/statut-soboru-2014.docx>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, article 1. The rest of article 1 is not original and restates canon 140 of the CCEO.

⁷ Canon 143 – §1 gives a list of six categories of persons who are to be called to attend; this list is reproduced in article 16 of the statutes.

⁸ The documents of these eparchial sobors are available in Ukrainian at <http://sobor-ugcc.org.ua>. The resolutions/recommendations were also distributed in published form to delegates of the patriarchal sobor.