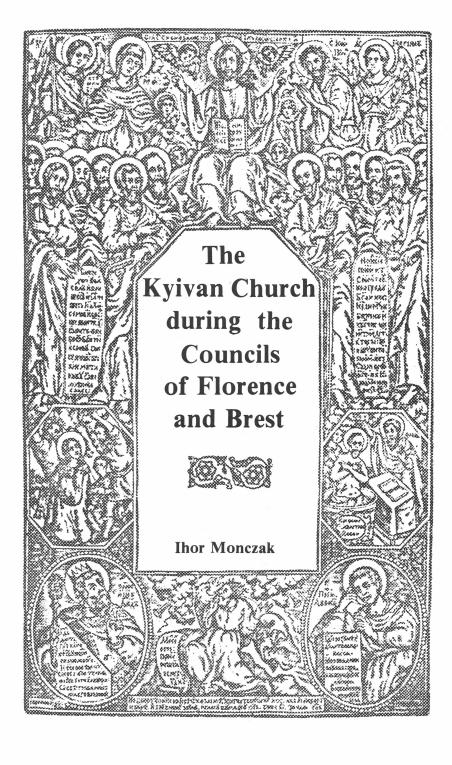


WOLODIMIRUS | S. HELENA

from the book by Ukrainian Stefan Yavorsky (Russian Catechism, London, 1723).



1. The Vatican Council on Individual Churches

Throughout the entire history of the Church, the Ecumenical Councils, following the requirements of their times, attempted to solve one theological problem after another, starting from the most basic and descending gradually to the most practical. Those Councils of the first millennium attempted to clarify the most sublime dogmas, those pertaining to the Holy Trinity and the divine-human person of our Saviour. Then, during the late Middle Ages, the means of salvation, i.e., the Holy Sacraments, were scrutinized. The Councils of Modern times, particularly both Vatican Councils, held as their main task to look into the nature of the salvation of mankind, into the divine-human institution of the Church.

The First Vatican Council succeeded only in pronouncing some statements about the supreme authority of the Roman Pontiff. According to this incomplete presentation, the Church seemed like a highly centralized institution with all its authority concentrated in one person, sustained from above by Divine authority and extending over passive ordinary Church members

This distorted picture of the Church was amended by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which presented the Church as a coherent functional structure, organically united and hierarchically organized. Local Churches, composed of active responsible members, coalesce into larger ecclesiastical units, Individual Particular Churches, and these, together, make up the Universal Church, headed by the Supreme Pontiff.

In the basic Conciliar document *Constitution on the Church, art. 23*, it was pointed out that the Universal Church is structured in the same manner as any local particular Church:

The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity of the bishops and of the multitude of the faithful.

The individual bishop, however, is the visible principle and foundation of unity in his particular church, fashioned after the model of the universal church.'

In the *Dogmatic Constitution* the following very important statements are to be found:

In and from such individual churches there comes into being the one and only Catholic Church.²

This quite simple and evident assertion has far-reaching practical implications. It excludes the false opinion that the existence of diversified individual Churches is tolerated only as something exceptional and apart from the main core of the Catholic Church. In fact, there is no preferential core in the Church with the prerogative of supremacy or of being a "model" Church.

Consequently, the relation of the Supreme Pontiff, as head of the Catholic Church, towards all Individual Churches is identical, even if personally he is a member of some one Individual Church and bishop of a particular see.

This particular status of the Supreme Pontiff makes it possible that discord between some particular Churches must not necessarily implicate the denial of the Supreme Authority, even if the Supreme Pontiff himself belongs to one of the Individual Churches in dispute. There can be many different reasons of discord not necessarily challenging the hierarchical authority and structure.

From this follows that the reunification of separated Churches does not necessarily and exclusively consist in acknowledging the Supreme Authority of the Universal Church, a fact which may not necessarily have been disputed, but rather in removing the real causes of discord; in healing mutual injuries and injustices to whomever these were inflicted. Obedience and discipline is not the only prerogative that makes of Church members and of ecclesiastical units a coherent and organic whole of the Universal Church.

There is much more life and meaning in mutual relations among Individual Churches and it is only schematically indicated in the Conciliar *Constitution on the Church*:

By divine Providence it has come about that various churches established in diverse places by the apostles and their successors have in the course of time coalesced into several groups, organically united, which, preserving the unity of faith and the unique divine constitution of the universal Church, enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage, and their own theological and spiritual heritage. Some of these churches, notably the ancient patriarchal churches, as parent-stocks of the faith, so to speak, have begotten others as daughter churches. With these they are connected down to our own time by a close bond of charity in their sacramental life and in their mutual respect for rights and duties.³

The Conciliar *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches* and the *Decree on Ecumenism* elaborate even further on the nature of Individual Churches, speaking about different rites, discipline and spirituality.⁴