

Orthodox leaders smooth path to proposed summit meeting

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Moscow, September 2 (ENInews)--The patriarchs of three ancient Orthodox Christian churches met from 1-2 September in Istanbul to discuss the situation of Christian minorities in the Middle East, and perhaps an even more prickly topic -- the move toward a historic pan-Orthodox council -- removing major stumbling blocks to what would be the first such gathering in centuries.

The pan-Orthodox council is regarded with great interest by the world's Orthodox churches, many of which are in unstable regions following revolutions in the Middle East, or in countries facing a third decade of economic and social transition following the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

"The patriarchs, and of course the Archbishop of Cyprus, they all expressed the readiness to proceed to the pan-Orthodox council that is forthcoming, and they said to me that they support the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarch to this direction," said Metropolitan Elpidophoros of Proussa, former chief secretary of the Synodical Office of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, also known as the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The meeting, called a synaxis, was hosted by Patriarch Bartholemew of Constantinople and attended by Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria, Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem, and Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus. Patriarch Igantius of Antioch was represented by a bishop.

Representatives of 14 Orthodox churches met in Chambesy, Switzerland last February to try to establish a consensus towards a pan-Orthodox council, but became mired in disputes about diptychs, the order of commemoration of the churches, and procedures for autocephaly, or the granting of independence to a church. After Chambesy, Patriarch Bartholomew sent a letter to church

leaders asking how they wanted to proceed.

This time, Elpidophoros, said, "the answer of almost all the Orthodox churches was that we can proceed to the pan-Orthodox council without having agreed on these two issues of diptychs and the autocephaly," he said in an interview with ENInews.

Last month, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, toured the Middle East and met with the patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch and Jerusalem. He discussed the importance to Moscow, which is the world's largest Orthodox Church, of the Istanbul meeting and its potential for influencing the move towards a pan-Orthodox council.

At the Istanbul meeting, the leaders discussed the threats to Christians in the Middle East in the wake of recent upheavals. "According to the report of the Patriarchs and the Archbishop of Cyprus, the behavior of these revolutionaries towards the Christian minorities is very hostile and aggressive, and this makes the Christian leaders, and of course the patriarchs, very much concerned about the future," said Elpidophoros.