

The Ever-Memorable Confessor Metropolitan
Philaret, First Hierarch of the Russian
Orthodox Church Abroad
(†1985)



Text III

The Thyateira Confession*

An Appeal by Metropolitan Philaret to the Primates of the Holy Churches of God, and Their Eminences, the Orthodox Hierarchs

Instructing us to preserve firmly in every respect all that the Orthodox Faith commands us, the Holy Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: “But though we, or an Angel from Heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8). He taught his disciple Timothy to abide in that which he had learned and which had been entrusted to him, knowing from whom he had learned it (II St. Timothy 3:14).

This is a mandate which every Hierarch of the Orthodox Church must follow and to which he is bound by the oath given by him at his Consecration. The Apostle writes that a Hierarch should be one “holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convict the gainsayers” (St. Titus 1:9).

At the present time of universal wavering, disturbance of minds, and corruption, it is especially demanded of us that we should confess the true teaching of the Church, regardless of who might be listening or of the unbelief surrounding us. If, for the sake of adapting to the

errors of this age, we should be silent about the truth or put forth a corrupt teaching in the name of pleasing this world, then we would truly be giving those who seek the truth a stone in place of bread.

The higher the standing of one who acts in this way, the greater the scandal that he generates, and the more serious can the consequences be. For this reason, we became very sorrowful when we read the so-called *Thyateira Confession*, which was recently published in Europe with the special blessing and approval of the Holy Synod and the Patriarch of the Church of Constantinople.

We know that the author of this book, His Eminence, Metropolitan [*sic*] Athenagoras of Thyateira, has previously shown himself to be a defender of Orthodox truth, and therefore all the less could we have expected from him such a confession, which is far removed from Orthodoxy. However, if this had been only a personal expression of his, we would not have written about it. We are moved to do this, rather, because on his work there rests the seal of approval of the whole Church of Constantinople in the person of Patriarch Demetrios and his Synod. In a special Patriarchal Protocol addressed to Metropolitan Athenagoras, it is stated that his work was examined by a special Synodal Committee. After its approval by this Committee, the Patriarch, in accordance with the decree of the Synod, gave his blessing for the publication of “this excellent work,” as he describes it. Therefore, the responsibility for this work is transferred from Metropolitan Athenagoras now to the whole Hierarchy of Constantinople.

Our previous “Sorrowful Epistles” have already expressed the grief that overcomes us when, from the throne of Saints Proclus, John Chrysostomos, Tarasios, Photios, and many other Holy Fathers, we hear a teaching which without doubt they would have condemned and given over to anathema.

It is painful to write this. How we would have wished to hear from the throne of the Church of Constantinople, which gave birth to our Russian Church, a message characterized by ecclesiastical rectitude and a confession of the truth in the spirit of her great Hierarchs! With what joy we would have accepted such a message and transmitted it for the instruction of our pious flock! But on the contrary, a great grief is evoked in us by the necessity to warn our flock that from this onetime fount of Orthodox confession there now comes forth a message of corruption that causes scandal.

If one turns to the *Thyateira Confession* itself, alas, there are so many internal contradictions and un-Orthodox thoughts therein that in order to enumerate them we would have to write an entire book. We presume that there is no need to do this. It is sufficient for us to point out the main premise upon which all of the un-Orthodox thinking contained in this confession is based and from which it proceeds.

Metropolitan Athenagoras in one place (p. 60) writes, with full justification, that Orthodox Christians believe that their Church is the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and transmits the fullness of Catholic truth. He likewise acknowledges that the other confessions have not preserved this fullness. But later he as it were forgets that if any teaching departs in any respect from the truth, it is, *ipso facto*, false. Belonging to a religious communion which confesses such a teaching, people are thereby already separated from the one true Church.

Metropolitan Athenagoras is ready to acknowledge this with regard to such ancient heretics as the Arians, but when speaking about his contemporaries he does not wish to take their heresy into consideration. And with regard to them he calls us to be guided not by ancient Tradition and Canons, but by the “new understanding which prevails today among Christians” (p. 12) and by “the signs of the times” (p. 11).

Is this in accordance with the teaching of the Holy Fathers? Let us recall that the First Canon of the Seventh Œcumenical Synod gives us a completely different criterion for the direction of our Church thought and Church life. “For those who have received the priestly dignity,” it is stated there, “the formulations of Canonical decrees serve as testimonies and statutes.” And further: “We embrace the Divine Canons, unwaveringly holding fast to all that is prescribed by the same, whether they have been set forth by the all-laudable Apostles, those trumpets of the Spirit, by the Six Holy Œcumenical Synods, by those who have assembled at a regional level for the purpose of issuing such edicts, or by our Holy Fathers. For all of these, being enlightened by one and the same Spirit, have decreed what is profitable.”

In defiance of this principle, in the *Thyateira Confession* emphasis is constantly placed on the “new understanding.” “Christian people,” it says there, “now visit churches and pray with other Christians of various traditions with whom they were forbidden in the past to associate, for they were called heretics” (p. 12). But who was it that previously forbade these prayers? Was it not Holy Scripture, the Holy Fathers,

and the Œcumenical Synods? And is the matter really about those who were only called heretics and were not such in actual fact?

The First Canon of St. Basil the Great gives a clear definition of the naming of heretics: “They [that is, the Holy Fathers] call heretics those who have altogether broken away and have become entirely alienated with regard to the Faith itself.” Does this really not refer to those Western confessions that have fallen away from the Orthodox Church? The Holy Apostle Paul instructs us: “A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject” (St. Titus 3:10); the *Thyateira Confession*, however, summons us to religious get-togethers and communion in prayer with them.

The Forty-fifth Canon of the Holy Apostles commands: “Let a Bishop, Presbyter, or Deacon who has only prayed with heretics be suspended.” The Sixty-fourth Apostolic Canon and the Thirty-third Canon of the Synod of Laodicæa speak of the same thing. The Thirty-second Canon of the latter prohibits receiving a blessing from heretics. The *Thyateira Confession*, on the contrary, calls for joint prayer with them and goes so far as even to allow Orthodox Christians both to receive communion from them and to give it to them.

Metropolitan Athenagoras himself gives the information that in the Anglican Confession a large segment of the bishops and believers do not acknowledge either the Grace of the Hierarchy, or the sanctity of the Œcumenical Synods, or the transformation of the Gifts at the Liturgy, or the other Mysteries, or the veneration of holy Relics. The author of the *Confession* himself points to those articles of the “Anglican Confession” in which this is expressed. And yet, disregarding all of this, he allows Orthodox Christians to receive communion from Anglicans and Catholics and finds it possible to give them communion in the Orthodox Church.

Upon what is such a practice based? On the teaching of the Holy Fathers? On the Canons? No. The only basis for this is the fact that such a lawless thing has already been done and that there exists a “friendship” which has been manifested by the Anglicans for the Orthodox.

However, no matter what position might be occupied by one who allows an act forbidden by the Canons, and no matter what kind of friendship might be the cause that has inspired such an act, this cannot justify a practice condemned by the Canons. What answer will be given to the Heavenly Judge by the Hierarchs who advise their spiritual

children to receive, in place of true Communion, that which often the very ones who give it do not acknowledge as the Body and Blood of Christ?

Such a lawless thing proceeds from the completely heretical, Protestant, or—to express it in contemporary language—ecumenical teaching of the *Thyateira Confession* regarding the Holy Church. It sees no boundaries in the Church. “The Holy Spirit,” we read there, “is active both within the Church and outside the Church. For this reason its limits are ever extended and its bounds are nowhere. The Church has a door but no walls” (p. 77).

But if the Spirit of God acts alike both within the Church and outside her, why then was it necessary for the Savior to come to earth and found her? Concern for the preservation and confession of the authentic truth—a truth which has been handed down to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Apostles, and the Holy Fathers—turns out to be superfluous in this conception.

Although the *Confession* does say on p. 60 that the Orthodox Church can “rightly claim at this moment of history to be the One Church that Christ the Son of God founded upon earth,” it does not see any necessity for the inviolate preservation of her faith, allowing thereby the coexistence of truth and error. Despite the words of the Apostle, that Christ has presented her to Himself as “a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing” (Ephesians 5:27), the *Thyateira Confession* presents the Church as uniting in herself both truth and that which it itself acknowledges as apostasy therefrom, that is, heresy, although the latter expression is not used here.

The refutation of such a teaching was clearly set forth in the renowned “Epistle of the Eastern Patriarchs” on the Orthodox Faith: “We unequivocally confess, as a matter of firm faith, that the Catholic Church cannot err or go astray, and utter falsehood in place of truth: for the Holy Spirit, always active through the Fathers and teachers of the Church who faithfully serve her, preserves her from every error” (§12).

Submitting to the new dogma of pleasing the times, the author of the *Thyateira Confession* clearly forgets the injunction of the Savior that if your brother “neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (St. Matthew 18:17), and the same instruction of the Apostle: “A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject” (St. Titus 3:10).

Therefore, with great sorrow we must acknowledge that in the so-called *Thyateira Confession* there has resounded from Constantinople not the voice of Orthodox truth, but rather the voice of the ever more widespread error of ecumenism.

But what will be done now by those whom “the Holy Spirit hath made overseers, to shepherd the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28)? Will this false teaching, officially proclaimed in the name of the whole Church of Constantinople, remain without protests on the part of the Hierarchs of God? Will there continue to be, in the expression of St. Gregory the Theologian, a betrayal of truth by silence?

Being the youngest of those who preside over the Churches, we had wished to hear the voices of our elders before speaking out ourselves. But up until now this voice has not been heard. If they have not yet become acquainted with the content of the *Thyateira Confession*, we entreat them to read it attentively and not to leave it without condemnation.

It is frightful that the words of the Lord to the Angel of the Church of Laodicea might be applied to us: “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).

We now warn our flock and call upon our fellow shepherds, appealing to their faith in the Church and to their awareness of our common responsibility for our flock before the Heavenly Chief Shepherd. We implore them not to disdain our warning, lest a manifest mutilation of Orthodox teaching remain without censure and condemnation.

Its broad distribution has moved us to inform the entire Church of our grief. We should like to hope that our cry will be heard.

President of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia

† Metropolitan Philaret

New York

December 6/19, 1975



*Source: *Pravoslavnaya Rus'*, No. 2 (1976), pp. 1-3.