

Revision of the Text of the 1983 Anathema Against Ecumenism (2000)

[Please note that this account was *not* intended as a history of how the Anathema came to be written and promulgated. We are presently composing such a history. HTM 2006]

The first mention in the Russian press concerning the Anathema Against Ecumenism appeared in *Pravoslavnyaya Rus* (No. 19, October 1983), which featured the *Encyclical of the Bishops' Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad*. The Russian text of this epistle states:

«...Нашъ Соборъ решительно осудилъ это явление, постановивъ внести анаѳемаствовање экуменической ереси въ чинъ Православія...»

Orthodox Life (Vol. 33, No. 6, November-December, 1983) printed the text of this epistle and translated the pertinent paragraph as follows:

“...Thus we see with grief that the process of the increase in practice of the heresy of Ecumenism among Orthodox Christians, of which we warned our brethren in our *Sorrowful Epistles*, has not stopped, but is even growing. The development of an interdenominational understanding of Baptism, the Eucharist, and the Priesthood in recent years has been manifested in various so-called ecumenical services and was especially clearly expressed in the Lima Accord and now in Vancouver. Our Council has decisively condemned this manifestation and has ordered that an anathema of the heresy of Ecumenism be added to the Rite of Orthodoxy....

[Signed:]

Chairman of the Council of Bishops,
✠ Metropolitan Philaret
Members of the Council,
Seraphim, Archbishop of Chicago
Athanasius, Archbishop of Buenos-Aires
Vitaly, Archbishop of Montreal
Anthony, Archbishop of Los Angeles
Anthony, Archbishop of Geneva
Anthony, Archbishop of San Francisco
Seraphim, Archbishop of Caracas
Paul, Archbishop of Sydney
Laurus, Archbishop of Syracuse
Constantine, Bishop of Richmond
Gregory, Archbishop of Washington
Mark, Bishop of Berlin
Alypy, Bishop of Cleveland”

The first time that the Russian *text* of the Anathema Against Ecumenism appeared in print was apparently in Archbishop Vitaly's journal *Православное Обозрѣніе* (*Pravoslavnoe Obozrenie*, *Orthodox Observer*, No. 58, April 1984). In his article describing the Bishops' Sobor of 1983, Archbishop Vitaly writes:

«...По всей вѣроятности, прошло время полемики и пришла пора ее осудить, и какъ бы незначительнымъ казался нашъ Соборъ 1983 года, но онъ, наконецъ, осудилъ экуменизмъ и провозгласилъ ему “анаѳему” въ слѣдующемъ текстѣ:

“Нападающимъ на Церковь Христову и учащимъ, яко Она раздѣлилась на вѣтви, яже разнятся своимъ ученіемъ и жизнію, и утверждающимъ Церковь не сущу видимо быти, но отъ вѣтвей, расколовъ и иновѣрій соединитися имать во едино тѣло; и тѣмъ, иже не

различают истинного священства и таинствъ Церкви отъ еретическихъ, но учать, яко крещеніе и евхаристія еретиковъ довлѣть для спасенія, и тѣмъ, иже имуть общеніе съ сими еретиками или способствуютъ имъ или защищаютъ ихъ новую ересь экуменизма, мняще ю братскую любовь и единеніе разрозненныхъ христіанъ быти: *анаѳема*”...» Note that this article was also reprinted in *Pravoslavnyaya Rus*, No. 10, 1984.

Orthodox Life (Vol. 34, No. 4, July-August, 1984) published an English translation of Archbishop Vitaly’s article, rendering the above passage thus:

“...Without doubt, the time for discussion and polemics has passed and the time has come to judge this movement and, however insignificant our Council of 1983 may seem, it has at last condemned ecumenism and anathematized it in the following words:

‘To those who attack the Church of Christ by teaching that Christ’s Church is divided into so-called “branches” which differ in doctrine and way of life, or that the Church does not exist visibly, but will be formed in the future when all “branches” or sects or denominations, and even religions will be united into one body; and who do not distinguish the priesthood and mysteries of the Church from those of the heretics, but say that the baptism and eucharist of heretics is effectual for salvation; therefore, to those who knowingly have communion with these aforementioned heretics or who advocate, disseminate, or defend their new heresy of Ecumenism under the pretext of brotherly love or the supposed unification of separated Christians: Anathema.’...”

In commenting on this anathema, Archbishop Vitaly — a little further in this same article — goes on to say:

“...In regard to ecumenism, every Local Church has had ample time, more than a century, to spend examining it and, if the Local Churches base their teachings and life upon the canons of the Holy Apostles and the other Orthodox Councils, then they cannot but recognize that ecumenism is clearly the most pernicious of heresies, for it has gathered all the heresies that exist or have existed and has called this union a Church — a deed that savors of Antichrist.

“By proclaiming this anathema, we have protected our flock from this apocalyptic temptation and, at the same time, have reluctantly put before the conscience of all the Local Churches a serious issue, which sooner or later they must resolve in one way or the other. *Their future spiritual fate in the universal Orthodox Church will depend upon the resolution of this question* [italics added].”

Unfortunately, the editors of *Orthodox Life* mistranslated this last phrase (*Отъ рѣшенія этого вопроса будетъ зависеть ихъ дальнѣйшая духовная судьба во вселенской Православной Церкви*) as: “The future spiritual fate of the universal Orthodox Church depends on the resolution of this problem.”!

Alas, in his Nativity Epistle of 1986, Metropolitan Vitaly himself retreated from his previously firm Orthodox stance and wrote:

“...We have pronounced an anathema upon the heresy of Ecumenism for the benefit of the faithful of our Church alone, yet we thereby also call upon the Local Churches (in a modest but firm, gentle but decisive manner) to give serious thought to the implication of our action...”

Earlier it was declared that the Sorrowful Epistles had gone unheeded, that the time for discussion and polemics had passed, and that Ecumenism had finally been decisively condemned. Further it was stated that all of the Local Churches have had ample time to examine the matter, and that their future spiritual fate in the universal Orthodox Church would depend on how they resolve this issue. And suddenly Metropolitan Vitaly speaks of the anathema as if it was merely an invitation to the other Local Churches to “give serious thought” to the matter of Ecumenism! Such is not the nature of an anathema.

In an article published in *Pravoslavnyaya Rus* in 1998 (No. 9, p. 2), entitled “The Bishops’ Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad”, it is stated:

«Въ связи съ вопросомъ объ экуменизмѣ, который теперь вызываетъ не мало проблемъ и въ помѣстныхъ Церквахъ, *после всесторонняго обсужденія* этого вопроса, было постановленно подтвердить анафематствование экуменизма, *текстъ котораго былъ принятъ въ концѣ Аріерейскаго Собора РПЦЗ въ 1983 году.*»

“In connection with the matter of Ecumenism, which at present is causing not a few problems even within the Local Orthodox Churches, *after a thorough discussion of the question*, it was decided to confirm the anathematizing of Ecumenism, *the text of which had been approved at the conclusion of the Bishops’ Sobor of the ROCA in 1983* [italics added].”

Orthodox Life (Vol. 48, No. 5, 1998) reports this same decision by citing the actual minutes of the Sobor as reported in the official publication of the ROCA *Church Life* (NN. 3–4, 1998):

“We resolved: To reaffirm the anathematization of ecumenism, the text of which was adopted at the end of the Hierarchal Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in 1983.”

Now, in the year 2000, the official text of the Anathema Against Ecumenism — as proclaimed publicly during the Rite of Orthodoxy conducted at Synod headquarters in New York City — has been arbitrarily altered and abbreviated to read:

«Теософамъ и прочимъ еретикамъ, масонамъ, окултистамъ, спиритамъ, чародѣемъ отступающимъ отъ Православныя Вѣры и пріемающе иныя на соблазнъ братій нашей, гонителямъ Христовыя Церкви и нечестивымъ отступникамъ, нападающихъ на Церковь Христову, и тѣмъ, иже съ ними общеніе имутъ и съ сими еретиками, или способствуютъ имъ или защищаютъ ихъ новую ересь экуменизма, мняще ю братскою любовь и единеніемъ разнообразныхъ христіанъ быти: *анафема.*»¹

“To Theosophists, and the like heretics, to Masons, occultists, spiritists, magicians, who have fallen away from the Orthodox Faith and who accept other [heresies] to the scandal of our brethren, to the persecutors of the Church of Christ and to the impious apostates who attack the Church of Christ, and to those who have communion with them, and with these heretics or who abet them, or defend their new heresy of Ecumenism under the pretext of brotherly love or the unification of the various Christians: Anathema.”

No explanation was given at that time for these changes in the text of the anathema. However, one would expect that a conciliar decision could be altered only by another council.

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Postscript:

In September 2006, the ROCOR Synod of Bishops once again reconfirmed the Anathema in its “Decision on the Act of Canonical Communion” with the Moscow Patriarchate:

“...We intend to continue to firmly speak out in condemnation of the so-called ‘branch theory’ and of joint prayers with heretics, which is emphasized in our anathema of ecumenism adopted by the Council of Bishops of 1983.”

¹ Based on a tape-recording made on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, March 6/19, 2000, at the Cathedral of the Sign, in New York.