



Synodality and Church: An Indissoluble Relationship

A Reflection on the Forthcoming Holy and Great Council

In Orthodox ecclesiology, the nature and mission of the church is almost always presented from within the framework of *koinonia*. As such, not only is the church preeminently seen as a fellowship of believers - or, indeed, more broadly, a fellowship of the entire created realm with God - but the claim is also made that all ministries within the church - including how the church is administered - need to be communally conditioned. Indeed, a fundamental criterion judging the justifiability of any activity taking place within the life of the church is the extent to which it reveals and upholds *koinonia*. It is from within this communal context that the indissolubility of *koinonia* for ecclesiology is underscored since it is rightly believed that it is by this means that the communion between local churches - or as is often presented, the synodality of local churches 'in space' - is actualised and preserved. In this way, synodality or conciliarity is seen to be coterminous with the communal being of the church and therefore needs to permeate the entire life of the church. It is from within this doctrinal perspective that the convocation of the forthcoming Holy and Great Council constitutes an absolute necessity.

The Orthodox teaching on the indissoluble relationship between synod and church is clearly seen in the Scriptures. The practise of synodality, for example, is already apparent in the New Testament, in which an Apostolic Council is recorded to have taken place in Jerusalem to decide upon how the New Testament church would receive newly converted Gentiles into its fold (cf. Acts 15: 6-29). In line with this basic axiom, modern Orthodox scholarship in ecclesiology highlights the inextricable link between church and synodality. As early as 1965, for example, Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis) of Australia had already observed: "if at any time the church were to reject, from its life, even for a moment, the idea of the synodal system, it would cease automatically to be church."¹ These very same sentiments were expressed more recently in January of this year at a preconciliar meeting of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew which referred to synodality "as an essential dimension of church life, as a central function of the ecclesiastical body and as a principle of unity in the church... that vitalises the communion of our churches in time and space."² Beyond the exercise of synodality on a local and regional level, Orthodox Churches need to retrieve again a way of upholding synodality on a universal level as well - as was the case in the ancient church. It is from within this latter exercise of synodality that the convocation of the forthcoming Holy and Great Council in June, 2016, needs to be understood.³

If accepted that church and synodality are intimately connected - indeed, to the point where the latter is seen to be absolutely necessary for the well-being of the former - then the gathering of the fourteen universally recognised autocephalous Orthodox Churches in Crete⁴ at the feast of Pentecost during the month of June, 2016 for two weeks cannot be seen as an added luxury within the life of the church but, on the contrary, an absolutely necessary feature of its life. Not only will this institution enable the Orthodox Churches together to give witness to - and even celebrate - their unity, but also to express themselves with a united and single voice to the modern world on issues pertaining to the whole of Orthodoxy, and in a language which resonates with twenty-first century sensibilities. Indeed, their gathering 'in one place' is especially important today since Orthodoxy is often seen by the outside world - and perhaps justifiably so - to be fragmented, co-opted, competitive and more concerned with preserving its nationalist origins (whether these be Hellenist, Slavic or Arabic) - all tendencies which are totally alien to basic principles of Orthodox ecclesiology. In this way, the convocation of the Holy and Great Council will prove to be a highly significant event on at least two fronts: for the Orthodox Churches themselves, this gathering will manifest a more intentional commitment to live out the Holy Spirit's life-giving gift of *koinonia* amongst themselves thereby advancing the unity of the Orthodox Church. The resulting communion of the autocephalous Churches, however, will then allow for a more credible witness of Orthodoxy in the world today.

Having preoccupied the Orthodox Churches since at



least the 1960s, the proposed agenda for the Holy and Great Council has undergone many revisions - as one would have expected in light of the significance of the forthcoming gathering. At the First Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation in 1976⁵ the agenda, as it stands today, was abbreviated to the following ten items. These included: 1. the Orthodox diaspora; 2 and 3 deal with autocephaly and autonomy respectively and their manner of proclamation; 4. the diptychs (the list and order of names used by the Orthodox Church in its commemoration of the fourteen autocephalous Churches); 5. the matter of a common calendar; 6. impediments of marriage; 7. adaptation of church regulations on fasting; 8. relations of the Orthodox Churches with the rest of the Christian world; 9. Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement (topics 8 and 9 were subsumed into one at a Special Inter-Orthodox Committee meeting which met in April, 2015)⁶ and lastly 10. the contribution of local Churches to Christian ideals relating to peace, justice, freedom and discrimination. Essentially, these ten items can be divided into three more general areas of concern: namely, into topics dealing with inter-Orthodox relations, responses to some contemporary pastoral issues and thirdly, the engagement of the Orthodox Church with other Christian Churches and the world at large. It was agreed that a text would be prepared for each of these issues which would ultimately be submitted to the Holy and Great Council for approval. Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committees were responsible for arriving at a unanimous formulation for the 10 respective texts which could be agreed to by all Churches. These draft texts would then be submitted to the Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultations (of which there have been six to date) for approval. The latter will then refer the agreed statements to the Holy and Great Council.

Not surprisingly, the Orthodox Churches have not been able to agree on a common text for some of the topics under discussion. They have not, for example, agreed on the manner of proclaiming a church autocephalous, nor have they agreed on a list of diptychs. Rather unfortunately, the Orthodox Churches have also decided not to raise the issue of reviewing the calendar - as originally proposed at the 2nd Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation (Geneva, 1982) so that it may be more in line with the scientific data available to us today - as intended and prescribed by the First Ecumenical Council in 325. Beyond the lack of agreement on some of the topics, it is also said that the agreed texts, the result of many decades of work, do not forcefully speak to today's issues - indeed, some texts are incomplete - and therefore, will prove to be disappointing. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that these texts lack a breadth of vision opting instead for rigidity and repetition of old tropes. On a positive note, however, the fact that the Orthodox Churches will gather to deliberate on some of the issues is a step in the right direction towards regaining a more communal or conciliar consciousness. Indeed, the importance of this cannot be overstated especially in light of the continuing tensions between the Ecumenical Patriarchate, first amongst equals within Orthodoxy, and the Patriarchate of Moscow, whose numerical dominance has consistently wanted to cast aspersions on the primacy of Constantinople. Coming together in council and "look[ing] at each other in the eyes" as the late Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras would say,⁷ will surely go a long way in overcoming suspicions and beginning to restore a more genuine expression of the church's communion. Indeed, even though some of the texts may prove to lack lustre, and despite the fact that heated debates may follow which may seem to be totally irrelevant to

the needs of today, the council, at the very least, will be an opportunity to offer itself, even as a "defective *prophora*"⁸ to God, who alone will be able to transform it into his very presence, and thus into life-giving words speaking compellingly to the world today.

There is much talk regarding the status of the Holy and Great Council, namely the extent to which it can possibly be considered as 'ecumenical'. A proper understanding of the status of the forthcoming Council becomes all the more important when one recalls that the last Council to have taken place, which all Orthodox Churches today recognise as 'ecumenical', was in 787, namely, more than 1,200 years ago.⁹ It must be remembered that, in the history of the Church, councils were only ever recognised to be ecumenical retrospectively. The reason for this is that the principle of *koinonia*, guiding Orthodox ecclesiology, highlights a correlative and organic relationship between the authority of the episcopate and the faithful as a whole in the proclamation of truth and always under the communal guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, the gathering of Orthodox leaders for the Holy and Great Council will definitely mark a momentous occasion in continuity with the "later 'great' or 'greater' councils of the second Christian millennium"¹⁰ which convened in order to deliberate on issues which had to do with doctrine, canon law or administration. The preeminence of the Holy and Great Council is further attested to when it is realised that a council, which will bring together fourteen recognised autocephalous Orthodox Churches, is unprecedented, to the extent that ancient councils gathered, at best, five churches - namely, the five ancient Patriarchates (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem). Ultimately, the significance of this gathering will not necessarily lie in its authority to ratify the agreed texts that will be submitted to it, but rather that it will have initiated a process out of a prevailing isolationist and self-sufficient predilection - which in the end will be its death - towards a restoration of *koinonia* - an expression of the Church's communion, more precisely its communion with the Holy Spirit, leading its people, through Jesus Christ, to an encounter with the living God!

For this reason, it is highly significant that the faithful purposefully pray for the Council: pray that it might prove to be a 'theophany' namely a genuine sign of the continued presence of Christ within the life of the church, and thus a compelling voice for the life of the world today.

1 (Archbishop) Stylianos (Harkianakis) of Australia, *The Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology*, trans. Philip Kariatlis (Adelaide: ATF Press & Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2008), 129.

2 Homily delivered by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew during the Divine Liturgy at the Church of St Paul (Chambésy-Geneva, January 24, 2016).

3 There is a penetrating lecture delivered on the Holy and Great Council by the Revd Dr John Chryssavgis titled, "Towards the Great and Holy Council: Retrieving a Culture of Conciliarity and Consensus" at the 33rd Annual Schmemmann Lecture, St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, February, 1, 2016. This can be accessed at: http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/svsvoices/the_33rd_annual_schmemmann_lecture.

4 At this stage, the Holy and Great Council has been scheduled for June 16-27, 2016. It also needs to be pointed out that the original plan was to hold this Council at the Church of St Irene in Istanbul, the place where the 2nd Ecumenical Council had taken place in 381. However, due to political tensions between Turkey and Russia, the venue was changed so as not to hinder the presence of the Orthodox Church in Russia at this Holy and Great Council.

5 At the First Pan-Orthodox conference at Rhodes in 1961, there were over 100 items on the agenda.

6 This was done at the insistence of the Orthodox Churches of Russia, Bulgaria and Georgia.

7 Cited in an address given by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Scholars' Meeting at the Planar (January, 5, 2016).

8 This phrase belongs to Archbishop Anastasios of Albania cited by the Revd Dr John Chryssavgis titled, "Towards the Great and Holy Council: Retrieving a Culture of Conciliarity and Consensus" at the 33rd Annual Schmemmann Lecture, St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, February, 1, 2016. This can be accessed at: http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/svsvoices/the_33rd_annual_schmemmann_lecture.

9 For a more extensive analysis on how different Orthodox Churches view the authority of the Council, see the insightful article by Dr Paul Gavriluk, "The Future Pan-Orthodox Council: To Be Or Not To Be?", *First Things* (January 22, 2016). This can be accessed at [firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com).

10 Revd Dr John Chryssavgis, "On the Great Council of the Orthodox Church", *First Things* (February, 3, 2016). This can be accessed at [firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com).

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