

***The Orthodox Moment:
The Holy and Great Council in Crete
and Orthodoxy's Encounter with the West:
On Learning to Love the Church***

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So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:13)

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25–27)

Faith, Hope, Love. One does not normally think of these words when the Holy and Great Council of Crete of 19–26 June 2016 is discussed. For many, the infighting that led up to it was a scandal of the faith that led them to wonder: ‘Where is the Church of the Creed we affirm each Sunday Liturgy?’ Is there no one, united Orthodox Church? Or, are there rather just as a series of fractious inward-looking ethnic enclaves, discrete Eastern Churches? And what of hope? For many centuries, Orthodox Christians have longed to meet together as one church, united and freed from the various tyrannies both external and born of conquest (the Ottomans and the Bolsheviks) to those that arose from soured compromises with autocratic powers (Petrine and now Putinist). And this Council, which had been a Pan-Orthodox initiative for over a century and in active planning for 55: it could not even convene all of its fourteen universally acknowledged churches. There seems to be here no hope but only despair. Finally love. How

can you have love—how can you have common counsel—when brother will not dwell together with brother in unity, breaking bread and joining together in one mind and heart, praising the Holy Trinity?

So it seems that Crete has little at first of faith. Little, if anything, to say to the human being longing for the hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ. And last, it did not express love, for when the Lord called His Church to unity, her members did not respond with charity and generosity but enmity and hard-heartedness. But is this it? Shall I simply close this meditation before it begins and declare the Council a grand failure? Well, as you might have guessed, I don't think Crete was a failure. But I do think it has something to tell us about the nature of the Orthodox Faith in our time. It can reveal to us the hope that the Faith gives to us of the Good News of the Gospel. Finally, it can show us the path towards unity and love—the unity and love from which the Church is born in her celebration of the Eucharist—which she must walk in the forest of the new world of the West. Walking through the seeming pathless woods of the West has been and is a *podvig*, a spiritual trial for the Church. The Church has not planted this 'jungle' but now she must creatively shape a foreign landscape. She moves slowly, and often in a stumbling fashion, from overgrown darkness to the open light of a clearing where she finally can see the heavens turning slowly above, leading humanity as the Body of the Living Christ in the ascent to the stars toward salvation in the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Faith

First, let us begin with the Faith. Councils for Orthodoxy are not optional. In our self-understanding, and here I will risk speaking for my Church, we are the Church of the Seven Ancient Ecumenical Councils. We continue unceasingly to witness to the Orthodox Faith in the same way that the Fathers of these Councils once witnessed to the world. Our witness, and so too the witness of the Fathers, is of the hope that is in us—our Head, Jesus Christ—as the Body of the Living God.

And when I say the Orthodox Faith, I mean by this the Catholic Universal Faith. Orthodoxy, just as is the case with Roman

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Catholicism, sees itself as the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, affirmed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed sung at each Orthodox Divine Liturgy. It is not some particular ramshackle collection of local ‘Eastern Churches’ defined by ethnicity, nationhood and tradition. In short, it sees itself as the one and only true Catholic Church of Christ, although, as Fr Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) observed, it is obvious—and this was seen abundantly in regard to Crete—that the ‘*true Church* is not yet the *perfect Church*’.¹ The Encyclical of Crete states this basic Orthodox self-understanding unequivocally and unapologetically expresses the Church as an ongoing living Council:

*The Orthodox Church, faithful to this unanimous apostolic tradition and sacramental experience, constitutes the authentic continuation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as this is confessed in the Symbol of faith and is confirmed in the teaching of the Fathers of the Church. The Orthodox Church, in her unity and catholicity, is the Church of Councils, from the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:5–29) to the present day. The Church in herself is a Council, established by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, in accord with the apostolic words: ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28). Through the Ecumenical and Local councils, the Church has proclaimed and continues to proclaim the mystery of the Holy Trinity, revealed through the incarnation of the Son and Word of God.*²

This is the Orthodox self-understanding. How this self-understanding fits together with the existence of other non-Eastern Orthodox churches in East and West, from the Copts and the Anglican Communion to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, is a matter of great dispute on which the Orthodox

¹ Georges Florovsky, ‘Confessional Loyalty in the Ecumenical Movement’, in *Intercommunion*, ed. Donald Baillie and John Marsh (New York: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1952 [1950]), 196–205 at 204.

² ‘Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’, §2, at <https://goo.gl/jcC5uG> (last accessed 29 October 2017). See Nathanael Symeonides, ed., *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Decisions and Texts*, Faith Matters Series, no. 2 (New York, NY: Dept. of Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016).

Church has many opinions. It has to do with the limits of the Church and it is possible that Crete in the future will be seen as the first Council where the Orthodox began to come to terms with this question on a universal ecclesial level.

In regards to conciliarity, there are two touchstones upon which a theology of the Councils is based: a) Trinitarian theology; and b) ecclesiology. The Church, for Orthodoxy, is a living icon of the Holy Trinity. The Council of the Church is meant to reflect this unity in difference of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the free self-giving and self-receiving loving life that is the Spirit in whom we will live and have our being in the age to come and through whom we now have a foretaste in the Eucharist. Crete expresses this again in its Encyclical:

The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is a *divine-human communion in the image of the Holy Trinity*, a foretaste and experience of the eschaton in the holy Eucharist and a revelation of the glory of the things to come, and, as a continuing Pentecost, she is a prophetic voice in this world that cannot be silenced, the presence and witness of God's Kingdom 'that has come with power' (cf. Mark 9:1).³

Yet, if the Church and Church's Councils should reflect the eternal life of God to which we are called in the age to come, then there are also historical and traditional icons for the Council found in Scripture and hymnography. Thus, Orthodoxy and Crete are characteristic here in looking for their model of conciliarity in the first Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where the Apostles gathered together in the Spirit ('it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' [Acts 15:28]) to decide whether the Gentiles had to follow the Law. Councils are the way through which Orthodoxy can come to the common mind of the Church on a troublesome issue—a heresy, or indeed other points of division—that is causing dissension in the Church and dividing its unity. This comes through very strongly in the hymnography for the Feast of the First Ecumenical Council of 325: the leaders of the Church, the Fathers or hierarchs/bishops—for Orthodoxy is a

³ 'Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church', §2, found at <https://goo.gl/ZMVwyU> (last accessed 29 October 2017), §1.

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hierarchically and synodally run Body—took on Arianism and articulated the Creed as a sort of fence around the Gospel teaching and precise guide for worship enabling one to believe and praise truly:

Let us with faith celebrate today the yearly memory of the God-bearing Fathers, who were assembled from the whole world in the shining city of Nicaea, as we reverence the gatherings of the Orthodox; for they, their minds attuned to true religion, overthrew the godless teaching of Arius, and in council banished him from the Catholic Church; and in the Symbol of faith which they precisely and devoutly laid down, they taught all to confess clearly the Son of God as consubstantial and co-eternal, and existing before the ages. And so we too, following their divine teachings and firm in our belief worship the Son and the all-holy Spirit with the Father, in one Godhead a consubstantial Trinity.⁴

Yet Councils do not exist merely to counter heresies. This is particularly important for extraordinary gatherings like Crete or, indeed, quite differently, Vatican II, which were not gathered to respond ecumenically to any particular heresy or controversial teaching. Councils are also the means by which the Church can witness to the world of the truth of the Gospel and lead it to salvation in new, complex and dangerous times. The Church and the Fathers of the Councils are a sort of lighthouse or fires lighted along a rocky coast; the Christian is guided into safe harbour by following their guidance and avoiding perishing on the rocks:

You are glorified above all, Christ our God, who established our Fathers as beacons on the earth, and through them guided us all to the true faith. O highly compassionate, glory to you!⁵

As I mentioned at the outset, the road to Crete was very long.⁶ The matter of holding a modern Council has not been simple. Much of the

⁴ ‘Sunday of the 318 God-bearing Fathers of Nicaea’, Great Vespers, At the Aposticha, from the *Pentecostarion*, trans. Ephraim Lash, found at <https://goo.gl/yuG5uQ> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

⁵ ‘Sunday of the 318 Godbearing Fathers of Nicaea’, Great Vespers, Resurrection Apolytikion, from the *Pentecostarion*, trans. by Ephraim Lash, found at <https://goo.gl/ftyemQ> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

debate has focused on the calling of an ‘Ecumenical’ Council, that is, a Universal Church Council involving all local Orthodox Churches with universally binding teaching authority. The reasons for the

⁶ See Damaskinos Papandreou, ed., *Towards the Great Council. Introductory Reports of the Interorthodox Commission in Preparation for the Next Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church* (London: SPCK, 1972); Stanley S. Harakas, *Something is Stirring in World Orthodoxy: an Introduction to the Forthcoming Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church* (Minneapolis, MI: Light and Life Pub. Co., 1978); Patrick Viscuso, *A Quest For Reform of the Orthodox Church: The 1923 Pan-Orthodox Congress, An Analysis and Translation of Its Acts and Decisions* (Berkeley: InterOrthodox Press, Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, 2006); George E. Matsoukas, ed., *Orthodox Christianity at the Crossroad: A Great Council of the Church—When and Why* (New York/Bloomington: iUniverse Inc., 2009); Theodoros A. Meimaris, *The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church & The Ecumenical Movement* (Thessaloniki: Ant. Stamoulis Publications, 2013); V. Ionitã, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009*, trans. R. Rus, *Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia* 62, Fribourg Switzerland (Basel: Reinhardt, 2014); *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov v Rossii i za rubezhom* 1 (2016) (whole special issue on Council); Archimandrite Vasileios, *Apropos of the Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, Mt Athos Series, no. 26, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2016); John Chryssavgis, *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Retrieving a Culture of Conciliarity and Communion*, Faith Matters Series, no. 1 (New York: Dept. of Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016); Nathanael Symeonides, ed., *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Decisions and Texts*, Faith Matters Series, no. 2 (New York: Dept. of Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016); Nathanael Symeonides, ed., *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Theological Commentaries*, Faith Matters Series, no. 3 (New York: Dept. of Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016); Bishop Maxim of Western America: *Diary of the Council: Reflections from the Holy and Great Council at the Orthodox Academy in Crete, June 17–26, 2016*, ed. St Herman of Alaska Monastery (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2016); Thaddée Barnas, ‘Le Saint et Grand Concile de l’Église orthodoxe Crète, juin 2016’, *Irénikon* LXXXIX.2–4 (2016), 246–75; and Archbishop Job (Getcha) of Telmessos, ‘The Ecumenical Significance of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’, *The Ecumenical Review* 69 (2017), 274–87.

controversy are complex,⁷ but briefly stated: a) it was said that Ecumenical Councils were called by the emperor, but clearly there is no longer an emperor so one could not be held in the modern period; b) some figures in the Church of Greece and the Moscow Patriarchate (echoing critiques of St Justin Popović [1894–1979] in the late 1970s) claimed, in turn, that the Ecumenical Patriarch by calling a Universal Council (and here they assumed such a Council was ‘Ecumenical’), was attempting to be an ‘Eastern Pope’, aiming to create a “‘super-church” of the papal type’ to guarantee for himself the exclusive right to grant autocephaly and autonomy and to determine the order and rank of Orthodox churches or diptychs. They therefore disputed his spiritual and canonical authority to convene such a Council; and c) some, like St Justin Popović, argued that there were no serious or pressing problems that could justify convening a new ‘Ecumenical’ council of the Orthodox Church. Ecumenical Councils, Popović claimed, dealt with dogmatic questions in dispute and major canonical issues concerning governance and not ‘some scholastic-protestant catalogue of topics having no essential relation to the spiritual life and experience of apostolic Orthodoxy’.⁸ In the end, the Council, which was only called by the Ecumenical Patriarch after extensive consultation with his brother primates as well as many years of joint preparation by all the local churches, was described as a ‘Holy and Great Council’ of the Orthodox Church and not as ‘Ecumenical’. The latter title was deemed too controversial and Orthodox theologians largely agree that the status of an ‘Ecumenical Council’ is retrospectively conferred by the Church in subsequent Councils and by Tradition (liturgical corpus, Patristic writings etc.) more broadly. However, what will be claimed for the Council by some of its proponents seems little different from those seven Councils that are deemed ‘Ecumenical’ by the Orthodox, namely, that it is Universal (involving all the local Churches who answered the call) and that its decisions are binding on all the local Churches.

⁷ I am indebted here to Paul Ladouceur, ‘The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (June 2016)’, *Oecuménisme/Ecumenism* (Montreal) 51/198–9 (2016), 18–39.

⁸ Justin Popović, ‘On a Summoning of the Great Council of the Orthodox Church’ (7 May 1977), <https://goo.gl/qvE5b5> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

Here, I want to give a quick overview of the main landmarks along the way to Crete and the highlights of this journey. Scholars hold different opinions when the road to Crete first began. One clear early signpost is a 12 June 1902 letter by Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III (1834–1912; Patriarch: 1878–84, 1901–12) to all the Orthodox Churches that had sent greetings to him on his enthronement for the second time. In this letter, after celebrating the common unity and love between the diverse bodies, he expressed his desire for a Pan-Orthodox conference that would tackle the thorny issue of their future relations with western Christendom, the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the Reformation. He felt that any dialogue with the West had to be undertaken with the agreement of all the autocephalous churches. In 1923, Patriarch Meletios (Metaxakios) IV (1871–1935; Patriarch of Constantinople from 1921–23) convened a Pan-Orthodox Conference to consider a whole host of issues: calendar reform, marriage of widowed priests and the canonical status of America and the Diaspora (Canon 28 of Chalcedon is at this point used as a justification for interventions in America and Europe). Although the Churches of Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Moscow and Bulgaria did not take part, the reverberations of this meeting were long-lasting, especially its introduction to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the controversial ‘new calendar’, which was never adopted by churches like Russia and Serbia. Then in 1930 on Mt Athos, Patriarch Photios (Maniatis) II (1874–1935; Patriarch: 1929–35) convened another Pan-Orthodox meeting. At this meeting, held at the Monastery of Vatopedi, there was agreement that the Church should move forward with the planning of a Holy and Great Council and there was some discussion of the agenda as well as decisions to intervene in irregular canonical situations such as establishing an exarchate under the Ecumenical Patriarchate for Russian émigrés who had fled from Russia in Western Europe (this is the Paris-based Church of Metropolitan Evlogy and Bulgakov and Florovsky). Because of the Soviet Union and then the Second World War, planning for the Council went into a sort of sleep.

However, in July 1948, we have a brief seizing of the reins by the Moscow Patriarchate. To celebrate the 500th anniversary of its own self-declared autocephaly from Constantinople, the Moscow Patriarchate organized what was initially desired to be an Eighth

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Ecumenical Council but then after resistance from the Greek Churches ended up being merely a meeting of the heads of the Autocephalous Churches. However, although the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Church of Greece were in the city to celebrate the anniversary liturgically, they did not send representatives to this meeting. Indeed, the Ecumenical Patriarchate vigorously opposed the meeting. The Ecumenical movement at the Moscow meeting was discussed in detail as well as the issue of a Common Calendar but it does not appear that there were any concrete moves to plan for a Holy and Great Council.

The planning of the Council waited over a decade until 1961 when there were a series of Pan-Orthodox conferences held in Rhodes, Greece. From this period, the driving force of the movement for a Council was Patriarch Athenagoras (Spyrou) I (1886–1972; Patriarch: 1948–72). By this time, in January 1959, Pope John XXIII had announced that the Roman Catholic Church would hold an Ecumenical Council, the twenty-first Ecumenical Council in the Catholic reckoning (Vatican II: 1962–65). In 1961, the goal of the Holy and Great Council was announced at the first Rhodes conference. In 1963, at Rhodes, there was discussion on sending observers to Vatican II at the second Rhodes conferences.

One notes here a stark contrast. The Roman Catholic Church calls an Ecumenical Council and it meets in a little less than four years. The Orthodox Church calls a Council and it meets in 55 years, with four large churches pulling out at the last moment. The difference is due to many factors; many of the Orthodox churches concerned were under persecution for much of this period. However, one major reason for the difference is quite simply that there is no papacy or strong central governance in Orthodoxy. This can be seen as a bane for Orthodoxy which has led to constant in-fighting and questioning of the nature of Constantinople's 'primacy'. Yet it is also a boon, a gift, for it has prevented a premature and all too hasty modernization of the Orthodox Church driven by a strong centre and with it the loss of much of Orthodoxy's distinctiveness, its 'salt'.

Continuing our conciliar odyssey, we see that at the third Rhodes conference in 1964, an agenda for the coming Council was drawn up which included hundreds of items. In 1968 at Chambésy, at the fourth Pan-Orthodox conference, the churches whittled down the hundreds of items to a list of six topics (sources of divine revelation; the laity;

fasting; marriage impediments; date of Pascha; and sacramental economy). The churches then agreed that they must move to a detailed planning stage and hold a Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference. However, Patriarch Athenagoras died in 1972 and so there is another long pause before Patriarch Demetrios (Papadopoulos) I (1914–91; Patriarch: 1972–91) revived the initiative, largely with the encouragement of the future Patriarch Bartholomew (Arhondonis) I (born 1940; Patriarch from 1991) who was then Metropolitan of Philadelphia and director of the Patriarchal Office until elevated to the Senior See of Chalcedon in 1990. There were four pre-conciliar meetings in all: 1976, 1982, 1986, then a series of smaller drafting meetings and meetings of canonists in 1990, 1993, 1994 until, after a long hiatus, the final and fourth pre-conciliar meeting in 2009 (all in Chambésy, Switzerland).

The six topics of 1968 had changed radically into ten items by the First Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference held in Chambésy, Switzerland, in November 1976:

- a) Internal Relations Among the Orthodox Churches:
 - 1) The Orthodox *diaspora*;
 - 2) Autocephaly and the way of proclaiming [i.e. deciding] it;
 - 3) Autonomy and the way of proclaiming [i.e. deciding] it;
 - 4) Diptychs [the order of commemoration of the heads of the autocephalous Orthodox churches];
- b) Issues of pastoral or practical nature:
 - 5) The problem of a common [liturgical] calendar;
 - 6) Impediments to marriage;
 - 7) Regulations for fasting;
- c) External Relations with other churches and the world:
 - 8) Bilateral and Multilateral dialogues (Official ecumenism);
 - 9) Orthodoxy and the rest of the Christian world;
 - 10) Contribution of local Orthodox churches to promoting Christian ideas of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love among nations and the elimination of racial discrimination.⁹

⁹ John Chryssavgis, *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Retrieving a Culture of Conciliarity and Communion*, Faith Matters Series, no. 1 (New York: Dept. of

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Six out of the ten themes (from the fifth to the tenth) were discussed in the period 1976 to 1986 by two Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commissions and three Pan-Orthodox Conferences. The Third Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference in 1986 approved an agenda for the next Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference, with the remaining four items from the list of ten. It became clear between 1990 and 2009 (the last pre-conciliar meeting), that the most contentious were the Orthodox diaspora and the related issue of the proclaiming of autocephaly, the common calendar and Diptychs. At this point, from the 1970s onwards, there were drafts made on all the issues. The secretariat staff at the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Centre in Chambésy played a decisive role in the drafting, especially Professor Vlassios Pheidas, an historian and renowned expert on canon law from Athens, master of many languages including Russian, who has taught generations of hierarchs in all the Orthodox churches both at the University of Athens and the Institut d'études supérieures en théologie orthodoxe de Chambésy (which is part of the Centre orthodoxe du Patriarcat Œcuménique de Chambésy) where he is Rector. The texts reflect both the interventions of individual churches (the Moscow Patriarchate's fingerprints can be detected particularly in the text on Orthodoxy in Today's World), but also a certain Greek manual theology tradition that is still taught today in the Theology Faculty in Athens. Thus, the texts do not reflect the neo-patristic and liturgical revival for which Orthodoxy is so well known. Texts for each agenda item were discussed at pre-conciliar conferences in 2009 and then at Primates meetings in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

The final decision to convene the Council was taken at an Assembly (*Synaxis*) of the Primates of the local Orthodox churches held 6–9 March 2014, in Constantinople. The Primates agreed that 'the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church ... will be convened and presided by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople

Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016), 20.

in 2016'.¹⁰ The plan was to hold the Council in Istanbul at Hagia Irene, the site of the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, not far from Hagia Sophia. But Turkey shot down a Russian warplane on 24 November 2015, which prompted the Moscow Patriarchate to object to holding the council in Turkey, because of visa and security problems. The Synaxis of the Primate in January 2016 then shifted

¹⁰ 'Communiqué of the Ecumenical Patriarchate' (9 March 2014), <www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=gr&id=1874&tla=en> (last accessed 29 October 2017).



The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I addresses the inaugural session of the Great and Holy Council in Crete, 20 June, 2016.

the council venue to the Orthodox Academy at Kolymbari (near Chania) on the Greek island of Crete, which is in the canonical territory of Constantinople.

The question of representation to the Council was a particularly contentious one. Moscow had pushed for all bishops of every local canonical Church to be invited in the manner of the ancient councils. However, with this Russian position, there was a far more cynical power-political reasoning at work than simple fidelity to tradition, which was that Moscow had many more bishops than all the other local Churches combined and they wanted to dominate the proceedings by sheer numbers. The compromise agreed between the Churches was that each Church was entitled to send 24 delegates, making for a Council of 336 delegates. Some Churches did not even have 24 bishops (e.g., Poland and the Czechs). As four churches ultimately boycotted the Council, there were only about 150 delegates as well as consultants (sometimes monastics, lay theologians and presbyters, but mostly bishops). Voting would be done not by one delegate—one vote but by each local Church voting as a whole or bloc. This meant that first a delegation had to obtain a consensus within itself before it voted led by its primate. This consensus voting system seems to have been adapted from the World Council of Churches (WCC) (est. 1949), devised to prevent the risk of the Orthodox Churches being outvoted by Protestant Churches. Voting by delegation is a model found also at the United Nations (UN) (est. 1945) and was pioneered by jurists whose ultimate aim was international diplomacy and agreement to avoid armed conflicts. However, in an Orthodox context, a context of communion, it presumed hostility between the local Churches and it ran contrary to the vision of each Orthodox bishop having an equal charismatic gift of teaching ('rightly dividing the word of truth', according to 2 Tim. 5:17, quoted in the Liturgical anaphora) and oversight, however big or small their diocese might be.

Moreover, the voting system tended to empower the primates and their courts as they usually were in charge of creating and ordering their respective delegations. It favoured consensus along previously existing ecclesial lines and disfavoured open disagreement by solitary hierarchs. Major Councils like Chalcedon and Vatican I and II were not unanimous and had vocal minorities. In practice, it

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was not always clear how or if internal voting was even being done by each delegation at the Council in June 2016. There was certainly a concerted drive, once a text was formally accepted by the Churches, to obtain signatures of all hierarchs in each delegation but this was not always successful, as many did not sign whose churches had voted to support a text, and some who signed later rejected their signatures. Thus a modern secular bureaucratic principle, itself of Western provenance, overrode a traditional Orthodox sacramental principle but this was because the literal application of the sacramental principle was simply not fit for purpose in a changed modern context. What was needed was a modern Orthodox re-envisioning of the original Orthodox sacramental principle of each hierarch having a *charisma veritatis certum* (sure charisma of truth) (Irenaeus) entitling them to speak in a Council of their brother bishops. But this was something that perhaps only a universal Council itself could do and one, in particular, which was more open in its discussions to theological diversity and lay theological expertise, which was not the case at Crete.

Returning to our path to Crete, we see that at the March 2014 primates meeting, two controversial items were deleted from the Council agenda: autocephaly and the diptychs. This reduced the agenda to eight items. Then the move towards a common liturgical calendar was dropped because of objections. The two items ‘Bilateral and Multilateral dialogues (Official ecumenism)’ and ‘Orthodoxy and the rest of the Christian world’ were combined into one agenda item on ‘The Relations of the Orthodox with the Rest of the Christian World.’ The final agenda items as decided by the Synaxis of Primates in January 2016 and the dates of the approval of the pre-conciliar documents are as follows:

- 1) The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World: approved at the Synaxis of the Primates in January 2016;
- 2) Autonomy and the Means by which It is Proclaimed: approved at the 5th Pre-Conciliar Conference in October 2015;
- 3) The Orthodox Diaspora: approved at the 4th Pre-Conciliar Conference in June 2009;

- 4) The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments: approved at the Synaxis of the Primates in January 2016 (without the signatures of the Patriarchates of Antioch and Georgia);
- 5) The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today: approved at the 5th Pre-Conciliar Conference in October 2015;
- 6) Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World: approved at the 5th Pre-Conciliar Conference in October 2015.

Finally, the Synaxis of the Primates in January 2016 also approved the Organization and Working Procedure of the Council ('the rules'), although the Patriarchate of Antioch did not sign the document. This was because at a meeting of March 2014, Antioch, supported by Moscow, wanted to add a rule that the Council would not take place if all the churches did not attend and if one of the churches during the Council suddenly decided to leave, the Council would then be dissolved. The Ecumenical Patriarchate objected that this would hold the Council hostage and defeat its call to unity. Furthermore, at the same meeting and subsequently iterated, Moscow insisted on the addition of the key phrase in documents that the Council would take place in June 2016 'unless impeded by unforeseen circumstances'. This phrase can now be seen as strategically crucial for Moscow, for it would later, just days from the start of Crete pull out because it claimed there was insufficient preparation (despite preparations since the 1960s) and there were too many objections from other churches. The documents were approved for public distribution with the understanding, as stipulated in the Rules of Procedure, that they could be modified by universal consensus during the Council, in accordance with Article 11.2: 'At the conclusion of deliberations, the approval of any change is expressed, according to pan-Orthodox procedures, by the consensus of the delegations of each autocephalous Orthodox Church. This means that an amendment that is not approved unanimously shall not be passed.'¹¹

¹¹ 'Organization and Working Procedure of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church', <www.holycouncil.org/-/procedures> (last accessed 28 April 2017).

But why has it taken so long to convene this event? Dean Emeritus of St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, Fr John Erickson, once observed (and he was quoting others) that the planned and long hoped-for Pan-Orthodox Council was ‘the greatest non-event of twentieth-century Orthodoxy’ or even an ‘eschatological event’ not likely to happen before the Second Coming of Christ in glory.¹² But here, to answer this question, I will need to explore a change in my own thinking which is crucial in understanding the significance of Crete.

Faith: Excursus on Orthodoxy and the West

In the past seven years, I have repeatedly been critical in my academic work of Eastern Orthodox or Byzantine chauvinism and anti-western polemicism in writers like Georges Florovsky and Christos Yannaras.¹³ But I now want to put forward a corrective to these past critiques.¹⁴ To put this in a sentence: Christos Yannaras is *partially* right about the West and I was *partially* wrong. Christos Yannaras

¹² John Erickson, ‘Overview of History and Difficulties in Preparing for the Council’, in *Orthodox Christianity at the Crossroad: A Great Council of the Church—When and Why*, ed. George E. Matsoukas (New York/Bloomington: iUniverse Inc., 2009), 19–39 at 19.

¹³ See Brandon Gallaher, ‘*Mia epanexetasē tēs Neo-paterikēs sunthesēs; Orthodoxē tautotēta kai polemikē ston p. Geōrgio Phlōrophsku kai to mellon tēs Orthodoxēs Theologias*’ [‘A Re-envisioning of Neo-Patristic Synthesis?: Orthodox Identity and Polemicism in Fr Georges Florovsky and the Future of Orthodox Theology’], trans. Nikolaos Asproulis, Lambros Psomas and Evaggelos Bartzis, *Theologia* 84 (2013), 25–92; “‘Waiting for the Barbarians’: Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky’, *Modern Theology* 27 (2011), 659–69; Review of Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age*, trans. Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 50 (2009), 537–42.

¹⁴ For more detail see Gallaher, ‘Orthodoxy and the West—The Problem of Self-Critique’, in *Polis, Ontology, Ecclesial Event: Engaging with Christos Yannaras’ Thought*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis with Foreword by John Milbank (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, forthcoming 2018).

(b.1935), the great Greek philosopher and theologian, has argued in many books, especially his classic *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age* (2006), that Orthodoxy is inevitably tied to the ‘Greek spirit’ by which he means not only the Greek Fathers and their characteristic teachings but a uniquely Greek approach to reality expressed in Christian Hellenism and finding its origins in the Greek-speaking Eastern Christian empire of Byzantium. The West, in contrast, for Yannaras, seems to be identified with foreignness, the triumph of the Barbarian German tribes in the Western Roman Empire, Western Churches especially the Roman Catholic Church, various presuppositions that define Western Christianity and it can be traced by him to Western ‘scholasticism’, whose poisoned well is Augustine and his ‘teachers’ (Tertullian and Ambrose).¹⁵

Now it should be stated that I continue to be unhappy with a *sterile polarity* between East and West, to which I think one *can* be led by the position of Yannaras, especially if you are unaware of the fact that much of his critique of the West is *self-critique*.¹⁶ Where I have changed my mind is in more clearly seeing that Orthodoxy or the Faith of the Orthodox Church is simply *not a product of the West*. By West I refer to the culture and civilization of the modern age, what Heidegger called the ‘Age of the World Picture’,¹⁷ and, here I would agree with Yannaras, that at the West’s core is a vision of individual reason as an abstract power that posits that which is (Being) before it as an object for its inquiring and relentless gaze, stripping that which

¹⁵ See Gallaher, ‘Eschatological Anarchism: Eschatology and Politics in Contemporary Greek Theology’, in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl, Ingeborg Gabriel and Aristotle Papanikolaou (London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2017), 135–49 at 136–8.

¹⁶ Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, trans. Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), viii–ix (here I now see that this element of self-criticism—all people are now Western for Yannaras including the contemporary Greeks—is at the core of Yannaras’ scathing narrative: see Gallaher, ‘Orthodoxy and the West—The Problem of Self-Critique’).

¹⁷ See Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 115–54.

is thought down to its essentials, to each of its distinct parts that are known with all mystery and dark depths eliminated by the clear light of rationality. Being or whatever is exists, then, in thought as an object of subjectivity, which is thrown forward and interrogated to explain its secrets. This is a challenging of Being to reveal its *reasons* for being. This way of thinking was something relatively new in history when it was first developed through the nascent movement of Scholasticism though one no doubt can always find traces of it in earlier periods. It was developed systematically in the Renaissance and from it came the Age of the Revolutions. Thus the focus on instrumental abstracting reason and with it the slow turn to the cosmos being defined by the gaze of the individual is the basis of technology not merely as bits of machinery from my Apple Mac computer to a dishwasher but as a way of thinking which takes political and economic shape in representative democracy, mass capitalism and industry from the steam engine to Twitter. We see this type of instrumentalizing Western modern reason in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* where the Don Juan of the book—and Kundera is echoing Kierkegaard's Johannes the Seducer in *Either/Or*—is the Czech surgeon Tomáš who pursues women not for love or the pleasure of sex, but for the sake of the will to power:

Tomáš was obsessed by the desire to discover and appropriate that one-millionth part; he saw it as the core of his obsession. He was not obsessed with women; he was obsessed with what in each of them is unimaginable, obsessed, in other words, with the one-millionth part that makes a woman dissimilar to others of her sex.

...

So it was a desire not for pleasure (the pleasure came as an extra, a bonus) but for possession of the world (slitting open the outstretched body of the world with his scalpel) that sent him in pursuit of women.¹⁸

If this is the Spirit of the West, or at the very least, the possibility of a new human mode of being and a new way of coming to know the world with it, then it differs radically from the Tradition and Faith of

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: HarperCollins, [1984] 1991), p. 200.

the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is at odds with Orthodoxy, as it still can be glimpsed in its tradition of liturgy and hesychastic prayer and is still available through the cycle of its services and its fasts and feasts as well as, acknowledging its problems, the ascetic life lived with greatest intensity in places like Athos, Sinai and Archimandrite Sophrony's Monastery in Tolleshunt Knights, Essex. Orthodoxy comes from, was forged in and, in a way, maintains a perpetual memorial of a Christian civilization that remains a sort of alternative narrative of Christianity to that found in so many diverse forms in the West (and by West I now include 'traditional' Orthodox countries especially post-Soviet nations like Russia that have reinvented themselves as perennially Orthodox). Despite this critique, Western Christianity, which has given birth to the paradigm of modernity found in Western European culture and civilization, has a strong, and much needed, emphasis on rational symmetry, legal, ecclesial and liturgical order and the individual Christian faced in faith with the awesome gift of the grace of Christ for salvation.

Orthodoxy, and here I want to emphasize that it stands in *creative* not sterile *polarity* with the West, speaks in poetry, is chaotic and messy, concerned with the upholding of particular community visions that often will clash with what is held as universal, often just offensive and illiberal and always sides with drama over reason. Orthodoxy needs the gifts of the West and Western Christianity, above all Roman Catholicism. Orthodoxy's emphasis on particular community-visions often leads to confusion, tension and even at times a complete internal breakdown in decision-making as was seen in the immediate run up to Crete. Here a spiritual primacy of Peter, but a primacy with juridical teeth, which is far from being equivalent to papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction, would be a gift in allowing the Orthodox Church to express its mind in a new context and age, helping it to balance the particular ecclesial and cultural visions with the universal whole.¹⁹

¹⁹ For different theological Orthodox responses to the possibility of Papal Primacy see Olivier Clément, *You Are Peter: An Orthodox Theologian's Reflection on the Exercise of Papal Primacy* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), and the curious unpublished little book (over 25,000 words) of the late Fr Thomas Hopko, *The Sun in the West: A Response to Pope John Paul's Apostolic*

We need a creative not a sterile polarity: an interpenetration of East in West and West in East.²⁰

But, in some ways, Western Christianity needs Orthodoxy more than Orthodoxy needs it, for so much contemporary Western religion is, in its modernization, chatty, tidy, moralistic and abstract like the secular sphere it engendered. Orthodoxy can help contemporary Western Christianity to remember its own pre-modern roots. It shares the essentials and much besides with modern Western Christianity, of course, but it retains other key elements of a pre-modern, non-Western spirituality still seen in religions like traditional pre-Wahhabist Islam and much of Japanese Buddhism. Amongst these I include: its doxological and sacrificial way of reasoning; its belief that the cosmos is filled with ‘gods’ or ‘spirits’ some malevolent (call them devils) and others good (call them angels and saints) and that these spirits can be communicated with for good or ill; its belief that creation and God inter-penetrate and that creation is a theophany of the divine glory; that God and the world are one differentiated reality (whose unity and difference is unperceived); that in order to perceive this unity one must cleanse the senses through ascetic labours and this presupposes a normative behaviour; that through grace and a spiritual *podvig* one can realize in one’s body and consciousness God’s union with His creation call this *theosis* or enlightenment; that religion is not privatized but speaks to the minutiae of life including the ordering of society which in every part is called to transfiguration and thereby secularism in its popular sense of a ‘neutral sphere’ is a lie; that the cosmos is structured in a hierarchy where each level mediates love and light to the one below; and that the heart of reality is light and silence. I find that many of these themes have been lost in Western Christianity—including sadly even portions of Roman Catholicism’s various Eastern

Letter The Light of the East (Orientale Lumen) (Manuscript Copy 2007). See also Adam A. J. DeVille, *Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy: Ut Unum Sint and the Prospects of East-West Unity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011) and Will T. Cohen, *The Concept of ‘Sister Churches’ in Catholic-Orthodox Relations since Vatican II*, *Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016).

²⁰ See Gallaher, ‘*Mia epanexetasē tēs Neo-paterikēs sunthesēs; Orthodoxē tautotēta kai polemikē ston p. Geōrgio Phlōrophsku kai to mellon tēs Orthodoxēs*’, *Theologia* 84 (2013), 25–92 at 82–92.

Rites or ‘Eastern Christian particular Churches *sui iuris*’—though it certainly still retains the Christian distinctives of the centrality of Christ, God as Holy Trinity and the Church as the Body of Christ yet lacking so much of the ancient context it becomes at times hard to see the connection to classical Christianity and the links to other classical/traditional religious traditions.

It took so long, then, to convene Crete because Crete was the first modern council of Orthodoxy held in the West on a universal level, which brought together hierarchs from as many contexts and churches as possible. The Council of Crete—in being a universal modern church council—was the first stop along the way for Orthodoxy coming to accept on a universal level that Byzantium is no more. Byzantium has a sort of liturgical afterlife in Orthodoxy like Yeats’ ‘sages standing in God’s holy fire/ As in the gold mosaic of a wall’.²¹ At Crete you begin to have a faint recognition by the Orthodox Church that Constantinople has fallen and will never return and never be revived. We are all, in some sense, Western now, as Yannaras has seen so clearly and prophetically. What was clear in the documents and the discussion of the hierarchs is that Orthodoxy was elaborating itself in a post-Byzantine modern context. This explains much of the reactionary quality and the apologetic tone of many of the council documents which both attacked modern Western ills like ‘secularism’ and ‘globalization’, which, it was alleged, give birth to things like genetic experimentation and same sex marriage, and which simply stated in a sort of summary form the status quo of Orthodox practices post-Byzantium. But if Crete was the beginning of an attempt to articulate an Orthodox world after Byzantium then it also was the first universal conciliar attempt to acknowledge that it now finds itself in a new western order that it has not created but which it now must respond to creatively.

Faith: The Challenge of Ecumenism

²¹ W. B. Yeats, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 2nd edn, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1996), ll.17–18 on 193–4,

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Much of the response by Orthodoxy to its new place in the West has been negative with one important exception: ecumenism. Crete finally, and here this opens a new path for the Church, acknowledged, with much rancour on the part of some churches, the long-time Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement as a veritable good. Much of the debate in the Council focused on Paragraph 6 of the document ‘Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World’ and whether it was permissible to call other Christian bodies and confessions ‘churches’. The initial pre-conciliar wording of the draft document approved in October 2015 at the 5th Pre-Conciliar Conference was the following:

According to the Church’s ontological nature, her unity can never be shattered. The Orthodox Church acknowledges the historical existence of other Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her and believes that her affiliation with them should be based on a speedy and objective elucidation of all ecclesiological topics, most especially their general teachings on sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession. Accordingly, for theological and pastoral reasons, Orthodoxy has viewed dialogue with various Christian Churches and Confessions, as well her participation, in general, in the present-day Ecumenical Movement in a favourable manner. She is hopeful that through dialogue she will bear dynamic witness to the fullness of Christ’s truth and to her spiritual treasures to those who are separated from her. Her objective purpose, therefore, is to tread upon the path that leads to unity. (§6)²²

Some hierarchs, principally from the Church of Greece but joined by the Church of Serbia and a few from the Church of Cyprus led by the noted conservative Greek theologian Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos (b.1945) attacked the use of *ekklesia* for the heterodox. They said that it was dogmatically and historically impossible to refer to the non-Orthodox by the name (‘church’) that was solely reserved for the Orthodox Church which is the true and

²² ‘Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World, 5th Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference, Chambésy, 10–17 October 2015’, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/preconciliar-relations> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

only Church. After much extended debate, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon (b.1931) intervened. Along with Metropolitan Emmanuel (Adamakis) of France (b.1958), one of the most dynamic Orthodox bishops in the Church today, Zizioulas was sitting side-by-side with Patriarch Bartholomew. Zizioulas showed how, in Patristic literature from pre-schism times down to the writings of modern ‘fathers’, the Orthodox Church has always referred to the bodies of those Christians who are not Orthodox as ‘churches’. *Ekklesia* is not a magic word that makes heterodoxy into Orthodoxy. He then paused and asked those who were attacking the use of this term for the non-Orthodox: ‘The question now is whether those who have attacked the use of “church” for the heterodox are willing to take the next rational step in their argument: “Will you anathematize the Holy Fathers?” for it is they who use this term of “church” for the non-Orthodox.’ There was dead silence in the Council chamber and the Patriarch called for a pause to the proceedings. After this stand-off between Metropolitans Hierotheos and John Zizioulas, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew requested the two to come up with a compromise wording the following day. The result of the discussions between the churches after this debate is the following somewhat strange wording, which is arguably intentionally ambiguous:

In accordance with the ontological nature of the Church, her unity can never be perturbed. In spite of this, the Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her [Παρά ταῦτα, ἡ Ὀρθόδοξος Ἐκκλησία ἀποδέχεται τὴν ἱστορικὴν ὀνομασίαν τῶν μὴ εὐρισκομένων ἐν κοινωνίᾳ μετ’ αὐτῆς ἄλλων ἑτεροδόξων χριστιανικῶν Ἐκκλησιῶν καὶ Ὁμολογιῶν], and believes that her relations with them should be based on the most speedy and objective clarification possible of the whole ecclesiological question, and most especially of their more general teachings on sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession. Thus, she was favourably and positively disposed, both for theological and pastoral reasons, towards theological dialogue with other Christians on a bi-lateral and multi-lateral level, and towards more general participation in the Ecumenical Movement of recent times, in the conviction that through dialogue she gives a dynamic witness to the fullness of truth in Christ and to her spiritual treasures to

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those who are outside her, with the objective aim of smoothing the path leading to unity. (§6)²³

This phrase ‘the Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her’ can mean that a) the Orthodox Church has always accepted that other Christian bodies are called and are in some sense ‘churches’ (as Zizioulas argued); but b) it can also mean that the Orthodox Church accepts that other Christian bodies have and continue to call themselves ‘churches’ although this in no way means that it accepts them as such (so Vlachos and his ilk). Why is this important and why all the great fuss? It is important because the argument is really about the fact that Orthodoxy now finds itself in a different world, a western world, whether or not this world includes within it Western Christians who touch the inner life of Orthodoxy and are therefore in some sense in communion with her. There are some in the Church who acknowledge the West but reject it as corrupt and barbarian and refuse to accept that there is anything within it that is good and which touches their internal being as Eastern Orthodox Christians. Others, wish to say that the bounds of the canonical Church do not coincide with the bounds of its spiritual reality and that there is much in this new world of the West in which Orthodoxy finds itself that speaks to its most intimate life and being.

Hope

We have taken some time to describe the challenge of modernity for the Orthodox Faith. But now I want to look at how the Council was a matter of hope for many Orthodox, especially for theologians like myself. At this point I will speak of the preparations of the Council in the time I was involved which was only from the Spring of 2014. At first, my involvement consisted of giving academic lectures both in America and the UK and informal student talks. What was apparent from the calling of the Council by the Primates in March 2014 was the excitement of scholars and theologians throughout the Orthodox

²³ ‘Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World’, <https://goo.gl/XEpyF9> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

world. This produced a sort of groundswell with numerous scholars writing articles in the popular media, while the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA) and Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham held a conference in June 2015 at Fordham University on ‘The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’.

All of this excitement was raised to fever pitch when a select group of about 30 or more Orthodox scholars, mostly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP) but also including the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), were invited to participate with the Ecumenical Patriarch and Zizioulas in an Extraordinary Scholars’ Meeting²⁴ at the Phanar in Istanbul on the Future of Orthodoxy and the coming Council in early January 2016. This was organized by Archdeacon John Chryssavgis (b.1958) who is a noted theologian, a theological assistant to the Patriarch and close confidant of Zizioulas. For the Scholars’ Meeting at the Phanar, we were divided into different groups depending on our context. I was a part of a group of Scholars Working in Non-Orthodox Schools. Each group gave a summary address to His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew on our perspective on the contemporary Church. I drafted my group’s address in December then revised it through feedback I received in a Skype meeting with colleagues and then presented it in January before His All-Holiness.²⁵ The general tone of almost all these addresses was that—as scholars and theologians—we were putting ourselves at the service of the Church and were inspired by the mission of witness and communion entrusted to the Ecumenical Throne and His All-Holiness as first hierarch among equals.

Speaking for myself, the whole process of being involved with the Council and serving the Ecumenical Patriarch has confirmed in me that of all the Orthodox Churches only the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and especially His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew, has the vocation, vision and the creativity to face a world changed utterly by the force of the West. Furthermore, in my time working for the Church I have come to the conclusion that of all the Orthodox

²⁴ ‘Scholars’ Meeting at the Phanar’, <https://goo.gl/reQb1m> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

²⁵ ‘Scholars in Non-Orthodox Schools’, <https://goo.gl/5sD8W2> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

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Churches only Constantinople can lead Orthodoxy into new paths ever faithful to tradition. Yet, sadly, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is all too often badly served by some of those who represent it. As an institution, it has, at times, seemed to value loyalty more than excellence, making for mediocrity. It also has repeatedly upheld fidelity to a narrow interpretation of Hellenism making for a turgid ethnic nationalism. Loyalty and ethnocentrism should not be the main marks of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Entrusted to the First-Called is the high calling to witness to the whole universe the saving message of Christ regardless of origin and language. The vocation of the Ecumenical Throne is the expression of the universality of the Orthodox Faith.

After formal greetings with His All-Holiness, we then had an extraordinary three-and-a-half-hour meeting with Zizioulas on the Council and the future of Orthodoxy. Zizioulas, flanked by Fr John Chryssavgis, argued that the texts for the Council were set and could not be changed. Nevertheless, he said that the scholars and theologians had a responsibility to promote the Council, to encourage unity so that the theological legacy of the Council might be shaped in the public sphere. He said that we needed to ‘write, write, write’.

This was a sort of shrewd harnessing of the then current theological intelligentsia of Orthodoxy to help the Phanar. For many decades the Phanar had relied on ‘court theologians’ drawn largely from the Faculties of Theology of Athens, Halki and Thessaloniki. These figures, trained usually initially in Greece then doing doctorates at Catholic theological faculties in Germany or France, and then attending a sort of finishing school at Chambésy, were not necessarily leading international Orthodox theologians and scholars although they became the educators of many of the hierarchs in all the Orthodox churches in the last half-century. They had little or no connection with theology in the English-speaking world, which has become the centre of the study of theology and religion in the last 25 years. Moreover, they have often espoused theologies that were manualist in inspiration or at best were crypto-Catholic and showed little attention to the Patristic and liturgical revival with its leading Russian theologians, Florovsky, Lossky, Schmemmann and Meyendorff.

Fr John Chryssavgis is an exception among theologians working for the Phanar. He was educated not only in Greece but in Australia

and at Oxford under Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia (b.1934), a leading proponent of the neo-patristic movement. Fr Chryssavgis is also, more importantly, as mentioned earlier, a close confidant of Zizioulas who is widely acknowledged as the greatest living Orthodox theologian and who was himself a student of Florovsky. Zizioulas taught for decades in the United Kingdom being connected closely with two of the greatest British theologians of the twentieth century, T. F. Torrance (1913–2007) and Colin Gunton (1941–2003). What is remarkable about the documents of the Council of Crete is just how little they show the influence of the theology of Zizioulas, though his work has transformed Protestant and Catholic theology more than any Orthodox thinker in the last century and his ‘Eucharistic Ecclesiology’ has become the default theology of the ecumenical movement. One might go so far as to say that in the area of conciliar theology far lesser thinkers in the Greek academic sphere have been dominant and Zizioulas’ distinctive voice has been muted.

The Phanar knew the fragility of the conciliar process and was hoping that having the leading theologians on their side would be both a needed PR boost and would raise the theological level of the event which up until then had been for decades controlled by individual assigned representative hierarchs of local churches and the court theologians just mentioned. At the Phanar meeting, Zizioulas was asked whether there might be a chance for theologians to serve as *periti* or theological experts. He clearly was very reluctant on this score and said he could not see them attending except in some capacity of promoting the Council. This ambivalence is important. Zizioulas was caught between his vision of the Council as a meeting of the hierarchs, who are the chief theologians of their churches, insofar as they head it as the liturgical focus of its sacramental being, but he also is Orthodoxy’s paramount creative theologian and knew that so many of those involved with the process lacked any theological vision or what theological vision they had was mediocre and westernized.

The result of the Phanar meeting was explosive. Scholars around the world, but particularly in America and Europe, started to write and discuss all of the themes of the Council plus to produce individual articles on the most current events. The most well-organized example of this birth of the self-consciousness of Orthodox Theology world-

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wide, its ownership of the future of conciliarity and identification with the work of the bishops, was an initiative by the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA)²⁶ and the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University²⁷ where scholars met online and through e-mail and drafted multiple commentaries on each of the pre-conciliar documents. These were then published on Fordham's website and subsequently collected as a volume which was distributed at the Council.²⁸ There was hope. Hope at last that perhaps Orthodoxy would seize its moment and respond to a world that was no longer Byzantium.

In February 2016 on St Valentine's Day, I was giving a lecture at Trinity College Cambridge at a conference on the history of the St Sergius Institute of Paris. Fr John Chryssavgis wrote to ask me to work with him on a small press and media team for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This invitation was not without controversy and tension, for some of my close friends and colleagues thought my volunteering for the Council was a waste of my time and energy, which could have been better spent on other projects, and felt I would be used and hurt by the Phanar and the Council process. They were not wrong about the pain as I came out of it with many illusions about the Church as an institution shattered and close friendships lost because of my own errors, but I do not regret my decision—it was a joy and privilege to serve the Church whatever the cost.

The remit of our team was to promote the Council through the media, the churches and the world of academic theology. Eventually, our small group included a variety of theologians and scholars: Professor Gayle Woloschak of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church USA under the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Northwestern University, Evanston, IL) who is a scientist in the area of Cancer Research and an Orthodox theologian working on science-religion dialogue; Professor Paul Gavriyuk of the OCA (University of St Thomas, St Paul, MN),

²⁶ See <http://www.otsamerica.org/> (last accessed: 29 October 2017).

²⁷ See <https://goo.gl/Ry1v1h> (last accessed: 29 October 2017).

²⁸ See Nathanael Symeonides, ed., *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Theological Commentaries*, Faith Matters Series, no. 3 (New York: Dept. of Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016).

who is a prolific historical theologian specializing in Patristics, the history of modern Russian theology and, more recently, aesthetics; Archpriest Alexander Rentel of the OCA (St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary) who is a canonist and Byzantine and liturgical Scholar; Archimandrite Nathanael (Symeonides) of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (Department of Inter-Orthodox Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations) who is a specialist in bioethics; and Protopresbyter Nicolas Kazarian, Greek Orthodox Church in France (under the Ecumenical Patriarchate: Institut Saint-Serge and IRIS, Paris) who is a geographer specializing in politics and religion in Orthodoxy and now based in the USA.

We were guided in the strange world of the media by Helen Osman, an American Roman Catholic media specialist and former journalist who had worked as US media coordinator for the Vatican on various papal visits. Assistance came from the absolutely invaluable staff of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, including Nikos Tzoitis of the Greek Orthodox Church in Italy and two men in the GOA's Department of Inter-Orthodox Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America: Andrew Calivas (Coordinator of the Ecumenical Projects of GOA) and Nicholas Anton (Coordinator of the UN Programs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate).

Two other scholars were also members of our informal team. Professor Will Cohen of the OCA (University of Scranton, Scranton, PA) was an absolutely crucial member of the team and assisted in much of the writing though he did not attend the Council. Professor Elizabeth Prodromou, of the Greek Orthodox Church of America (Tufts University, Medford, MA) was on the Official Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Council serving as a consultant.²⁹ She is a political scientist specializing in the Orthodox world. Professor Prodromou attended all the Council sessions and was one of a tiny handful (in her words: 'thimbleful') of women at the Council. The fact that she attended all the sessions as a consultant is remarkable as none of the other Churches gave women such access. It is a witness

²⁹ 'Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Holy and Great Council', <https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/-/delegation-ep> (last accessed: 1 May 2017).

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to the open-mindedness and foresight of His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch that she was included.

None of the other scholars and theologians in our team, save for Fr Chryssavgis, had official permission from the Phanar to attend the sessions which were guarded by a phalanx of Greek bodyguards, ever ready to eject errant theologians caught sneaking into the sanctum of the Council chamber. Thus our small group was denied even the privilege of being a proverbial ‘fly on the wall’ at the historical event of the Council. The lack of access of certain figures to the sessions, the blocking of certain figures from entrance for a variety of reasons (the media was not even allowed close to the hierarchs and were kept in a poorly air-conditioned tent below the action) and the attendance of those who had very little reason to be there was a source of constant tension at Crete.

The Orthodox Church as an institution is threatened by scholars and theologians who are not part of its own ecclesiastical system as they are unpredictable and will not necessarily affirm all that the hierarchy decides to do. Many members of the hierarchy are also poorly educated or educated in a system where higher degrees from clergy are largely pro-forma affairs. Nevertheless, many in authority now know that the Orthodox Church is better served by accepting the offers of service from theologians and scholars working outside its official institutions, for it has not been well served by its institutional functionaries who sometimes lack imagination and it needs the most able communicators and thinkers to assist it in articulating its new position in the West. Moreover, it would be far more dangerous for the Church to have its brightest and best minds at odds with it (calling, perhaps, for a ‘Reformation’) than to have them working together with the Church in the project of collective renewal. The Scholars’ Meeting and the Press Team were the first positive movements in this direction. The arms’ length inclusion of theologians and scholars at the Council on a Media Team is, I think, a big step for contemporary Orthodoxy and was the beginning of more substantive cooperation between the hierarchy and its theological and scholarly ‘brains trust’.

At first, my job on the Press Team was simply to create a large international database of journalists and church and state figures with whom we could communicate about the Council. It then became somewhat broader as I was contacted by many ecumenical sources,

especially from the English Anglican and Catholic churches, who wanted information. In the final weeks before the Council things became even busier. The one text which had not been written was the so-called 'Message of the Council'. The plan was to produce a draft text for the Ecumenical Patriarch's team. It then could be used by the hierarchs and theologians on the pan-Orthodox drafting committee as a basis for a common Message of the Council which would be revised by the Primates and then by the Council Fathers. It was assumed that other local churches, especially the Russians—who are at least large and organized if not always constructive and mindful of the health of the whole *Oecumene*—would come with full drafts of the Message and all would be competing to get their vision of the Council articulated.

The drafting of the Message was a very creative process. I worked with a small team of theologians (Professors Woloschak, Gavriilyuk, Will Cohen and Fr Symeonides) led by Fr Chryssavgis that touched on all the themes of the Council but had a golden thread running through it and which had sections which could stand on their own. However, and this was known at the time, a separate Greek team based in Chambésy and apparently led by the eminent Greek philosopher and theologian Professor Konstantinos Delikostantis, a native of the Patriarch's island of Imvros and graduate of Halki who taught in Athens for decades, together with Professor Pheidas, also produced a draft. This draft, somewhat platitudinous, reactionary, triumphalist and lacking any theological cohesiveness, reflected the same school of manual theology taught for decades in Greece and still ascendant at the Phanar. It was strangely at odds with the academic work of Delikostantis himself who is known for his ecumenical engagement and positive engagement with the West and Enlightenment values. The draft also was typical of the 'Greek style' of the Council documents themselves, the majority which were first drafted at Chambésy. This ultimately was the text that the Council used as a basis and both Delikonstantis and Pheidas were on the official drafting team, so it was this flawed vision, the vision largely seen already in the Council texts, that informed what was presented to the Council Fathers and adapted by them. The dominance of this Greek school of theology at the Council was brought home to me when I asked one of my colleagues who was sitting through all the

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Message drafting sessions (with representatives of ten of the fourteen Churches, including Serbia and Romania) what was the lingua franca of the drafting sessions. He gave me the queer, slightly pitying look reserved for someone who is a bit slow, paused and replied, ‘Greek, of course. What else could it be?’ And he was right, for with the absence of four of the churches in the Russian sphere, most of the hierarchs were sent away to be educated in Greece. Indeed, many of them were former students of Professor Pheidas who towered over the Committee as only a revered past professor can do over his pupils. He held the keyboard in the sessions and, as one participant told me, it was clear to all that the only properly Orthodox wording was his wording. The dominance of Greek as the lingua franca continued in the Council sessions with a few hierarchs making a point of speaking in English or French to remind the majority that it was a Pan-Orthodox Council.

After the Primate’s Meeting on 17 June 2016 prior to the Council, it was decided that because of its length, the Message drafted by the Committee would become the Council’s Encyclical. In its place, as the ‘new Message’, a short more homiletic summary of the content of the Encyclical was drafted by Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) of Tirana, Durrës and all Albania (b.1929). Archbishop Anastasios also improved the long Encyclical (formerly, the Message) with more Trinitarian and Eucharistic content but it still is a rather disappointing text that has no real theological centre.

This experience of Council theological politics was, needless to say, a disappointment and a frustration for myself. Nevertheless, it was a wake-up call for me that perhaps up to 60 per cent of the episcopate of the local churches had been educated in a theology that had remained largely untouched from the time of the Rhodes conference of the 1960’s and which was an adapted and modernized manual-theology influenced by Latin scholasticism of a late decadent variety and by Lutheran Pietism. The theology of St Vladimir’s and St Serge, the neo-Patristic synthesis, has had more influence on Western theology than on the present leaders of the Orthodox Church. Moreover, I could now see that the local churches tended to be dominated by hierarchs who had little exposure to the West and who were usually educated entirely in either Greece or Moscow. Thus the division of the Orthodox world between a Grecosphere and

Russosphere was a direct result of an educational paralysis. The major exception would be the very dynamic and large Church of Romania which was a new leader at the Council and whose court theologians often had western training in the English-speaking world and exposure to the Neo-patristic synthesis.

I arrived in Greece on 12 June feeling hopeless. What was clear at this point was that many local churches, led above all by Moscow, were attempting to sabotage the Council and as I got on the plane I did not know if the event would be called off as soon as I landed. Certain churches called for the Council's postponement and then boycotted it: Bulgaria, Georgia, Russia and Antioch. On 1 June, 2016, the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria was to first to announce that it would not attend the council. It was followed on 6 June by the Church of Antioch and on 10 June by the Church of Georgia. It seemed that for the Council to take place depended, quite conveniently, on whether or not the Moscow Patriarchate would attend. Moscow sees itself as the largest and the wealthiest of the Orthodox Churches and so on this basis the natural leader of the Orthodox world. It cannot abide the fact that the primacy of the Orthodox Church falls on Constantinople and since 2009 it has developed under Patriarch Kirill I (Gundaev) (b.1946) a quasi-phyletist form of *symphonia* to support its vision of the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin as the beacon to the West of Christian morality and rectitude: *Russkii mir* (the Russian world).³⁰ The great tragedy of contemporary Orthodoxy is the re-sovietization (or perhaps more exactly: 'putinization') of the Russian Church.³¹ In effect, at the level of its supreme leaders, the much-vaunted resurrection of the Russian Church of the late 20th century was aborted in the 21st century.

³⁰ For in-depth discussion see Brandon Gallaher, 'A Tale of Two Speeches: Secularism and Primacy in Contemporary Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy', ed. John Chryssavgis, *Primacy in the Church: The Office of Primate and the Authority of the Councils, Volume 2: Contemporary and Contextual Perspectives* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 807–37 and 'The Road from Rome to Moscow', *The Tablet*, 20 February 2016, 8–9.

³¹ See Sergei Chapnin, 'A Church of Empire: Why the Russian Church Chose to Bless Empire', *First Things*, November 2015, <https://goo.gl/xL4eCe> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

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In the days before I flew to Greece, I worked with Prof. Paul Gavriilyuk to mobilize an international group of scholars from major seminaries and academic institutions worldwide to produce a petition drafted by Prof. Gavriilyuk with assistance from myself and Prof. Nicholas Denysenko.³² This text was translated into twelve languages from Russian, Georgian and Swahili to Japanese and Chinese, and in less than two days received the support of more than 1,000 Orthodox scholars from all over the world. It urged all the Orthodox primates to attend the council.³³ It was later sent to every one of the 14 autocephalous churches with a list of the scholars who had signed.

The different churches had different reasons for boycotting the Council. Antioch's official position was that it reserved the right to decide to not go to the Council if its dispute with Jerusalem over the canonical jurisdiction of Qatar was not resolved before the Council. It was claimed that leading hierarchs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate had personally promised Antioch that the issue of Qatar would be resolved with a high level meeting between Jerusalem and Antioch (brokered by Constantinople with the Ecumenical Patriarchate putting pressure on Jerusalem) prior to the Council. What was offered by Constantinople instead—it was claimed—was a meeting *after* the Council. Antioch asserted that it could not attend a Council and celebrate communion with a church (Jerusalem) with which it was in dispute, even schism. However, Antioch is a church that has deep historic ties to Moscow, is based in Syria, and has long been protected by the Assad regime, a client state of Putin. There is considerable obscurity as to whether Antioch acted under pressure from Moscow or not. Whatever the case may be, Antioch certainly had its own reasons for withdrawing, quite apart from geo-politics: a) its own longstanding division with Jerusalem which is controlled by a small Greek coterie largely formed from the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, well

³² 'A Plea for Pan-Orthodox Unity', <https://goo.gl/ktmpiA> (last accessed 29 October 2017).

³³ '1,000 Orthodox Scholars Urge the Council to be Held in June 2016' (12 June 2016), <https://goo.gl/LtFFLP> (last accessed: 29 October 2017) and James Roberts, 'Scholars Warn Orthodox Leaders: Don't Derail the Holy and Great Council', *The Tablet*, 10 June 2016, <https://goo.gl/U6ZzY9> (last accessed: 29 October 2017).

known for its shady land dealings with the state of Israel, but whose flock are largely Arabic speaking; and b) a general (and entirely justified) resentment over the ‘Greek chauvinism’ of the other ancient patriarchates towards it as the only Orthodox Church representing Arabic culture and language. Yet councils are not events that presuppose an easy union. They are generally called to heal a fractured communion as indeed exists between Antioch and Jerusalem. So the refusal of Antioch to attend the Council because of its division with Jerusalem and its refusal to concelebrate with its sister church flies in the face of the first principles of Orthodox conciliar thinking.

The post-Soviet Churches, especially Georgia and Bulgaria, had difficulties with the pre-conciliar documents. They claimed the documents did not handle the real dividing issues (e.g. the diaspora problem), were ill prepared and did not make a clear enough distinction between the Orthodox and the heterodox. There were objections that the Ecumenical Patriarchate was acting as an ‘Eastern Pope’ and forbidding changes to the texts. This latter complaint was contradicted by His All-Holiness’s practice of constantly drawing together meetings of the churches prior to Crete so that the churches could amend and revise the texts. Furthermore, the Council Rules allowed amendment of the texts at the Council and indeed changes were made at Crete, albeit minor ones. The difficulties raised by Antioch, Georgia and Bulgaria can, arguably, be traced to a) these churches’ suspicion of Constantinople’s primacy; b) a relatively new ecclesiology that speaks of a series of ethnic and linguistic nation churches each of which has complete independence (autocephaly) in its canonical territory and over their ‘peoples’ abroad; c) growing tendency to oppose in a sterile polarity the Orthodox Church to the ‘West’ (in the case of Georgia and Bulgaria but not Antioch); and d) all three churches being beholden to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Government of the Russian Federation with which the Russian Church works closely as a soft power instrument.

Moscow, ever keen to assert itself as an alternative power base to Constantinople, called for a 10 June emergency Synaxis of the Primates especially to resolve the issues concerning the texts. Division focused on a rule of the Council that all the decisions require unanimity understood as ‘consensus’. But there was no consensus on

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consensus. The four boycotting Churches retrospectively applied this rule to the issue of the quorum for the Council. They argued that a Pan-Orthodox Council could not even be convened unless all fourteen churches were present (as we saw they had attempted to make this a part of the rules in 2014 without success). Thus consensus is identified with absolute unanimity and quorum with the presence of all invited Churches. Constantinople met in an extraordinary Synod and stated, following the rules already agreed upon, that changes to the texts were to be dealt with *at* the Council and called all the Churches to rise to the occasion and attend the Council. There was no need for Moscow's emergency Synaxis of Primates on 10 June since a Synaxis had already been scheduled in Crete for 17 June.

Following the Ecumenical Councils themselves and the practice of local Synods including that of Moscow, Constantinople presently understands 'consensus' as an overwhelming majority and not complete unanimity. However, Constantinople conceded that, for the purposes of passing documents at the Council, consensus could be unanimity. As is the case with other international bodies, Constantinople holds that a meeting is not invalidated because one body does not attend. Absence cannot be held as a veto; it is deemed an abstention.

On 13 June, Moscow finally called for the postponement of the council until such a time as all local Orthodox could attend. It seems that this had been well prepared in advance. Thus, the Pan-Orthodox communiqué of March 2014, at the request of Moscow, said that the Council would take place in June 2016 'unless impeded by unforeseen circumstances'. Moreover, in the weeks leading up to Moscow's withdrawal, many senior Russian Church figures were calling for the postponement of Crete. They were supported in the Russian media by senior hierarchs from other churches that attended Crete who personally had close ties to Moscow.³⁴

However, the ultimate decision to withdraw seems to have been made at the last moment by a tiny power group centred around Patriarch Kirill at Danilov Monastery. It is said that a secretariat was preparing the Russian documents for the Council right up to the

³⁴ 'Metropolit Kallist: Vsepravoslavnyi sobor nuzhno perenesti do luchshikh vremen', 11.06.2016, <https://goo.gl/Yrqagy> (last accessed 3 May 2017).

moment when the decision was announced by Danilov that Moscow would be pulling out of the Council. These preparatory documents appear to have been profoundly disputatious in character and—this is no great surprise—were focused not on unity and the witness of Orthodoxy in the contemporary world, but on querying the nature of the primatial prerogatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch as *primus inter pares*. This accords with allegations coming from Moscow Patriarchal clergy in the months before the Council started which was that the Ecumenical Patriarch was falling into heresy by setting himself up as an ‘Eastern pope’. It is arguable, in this light, that it was best that Moscow pulled out from the Council given that they were intent on disrupting it and derailing it whether by attending or by pulling out of it at the last moment and pressuring other churches to do likewise. It seems entirely reasonable to conclude that Moscow would not have accepted any Holy and Great Council if the upshot was one where Constantinople exercised its ancient primacy and some form of Moscow’s *Russkii mir* ideology was not the core message of the event. In announcing that it would not attend ‘the meeting in Crete’ (avoiding the term ‘Council’), Moscow stated that in the event of the council proceeding, it would not participate since Antioch, Bulgaria and Georgia had announced they would not come.³⁵

The boycotts placed considerable pressure on the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but Constantinople decided that the council would proceed as scheduled, with the opening session after the Primatial Divine Liturgy of Pentecost on Sunday, 19 June. The Serbian Church hesitated right up until the last moment but on 15 June finally decided to attend so that they might represent the viewpoints of the absent churches.³⁶ This gave them considerable leverage and Constantinople allowed them particular leeway in adding sections to the future Encyclical, including affirming as ‘Ecumenical’ many local Councils

³⁵ Russian Orthodox Church, ‘On the situation caused by the refusal of several Local Orthodox Churches to participate in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’ (13 June 2016), <www.pravoslavie.ru/english/94244.htm> (last accessed: 29 October 2017).

³⁶ See the interesting document by Bishop Maxim of Western America: *Diary of the Council: Reflections from the Holy and Great Council at the Orthodox Academy in Crete, June 17–26, 2016*, ed. St Herman of Alaska Monastery (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2016).

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which negated Protestantism and Catholicism. Thus ten of the fourteen local Orthodox churches were represented by their primates and roughly 150 other hierarchs in total: Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Serbia, Romania, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, Czech Lands and Slovakia (in order of precedence). It should be said that what was clear about the many decades of preparation for the Council, the boycotting of the event by four churches and even the voting at the Council which was done by each local church delegation was that the whole process tended to be dominated by the Primates and their courts unless, of course, the Primate was weak, as was the case in many instances when factions in the different Synods could overwhelm their leaders. Conciliarity was in constant tension in each local church with primacy just as the primacy of Constantinople was in tension with the other local hierarchies.

Love

So where, in all this, was the Orthodox Church and the theology that had drawn me to Orthodoxy when I was a young man more than twenty years before? As the Council opened, the situation did not become any easier. The proceedings of the Council were tightly controlled which made promoting the Council in the media sometimes seem impossible as the media had little or no access to the Council Fathers and especially as there was a ban on social media given the fear that the whole event would collapse. There was an inadequate Press tent below the venue of the Academy of Crete; much of the international press left or did not even come when it heard that Moscow was not attending. There were press briefings every day, which could be stiff affairs and not very informative, though Fr Chryssavgis, as the Spokesman for the Ecumenical Patriarch (not for the Council), was an inspiring figure to watch. One day, when the official briefing was cancelled at the last minute, he went down to the tent and waded into the journalistic scrum and answered questions non-stop for hours in a style that was both homiletic and theologically sophisticated.

Sometimes the press conferences could get rather testy. In particular, the Russian media (RT, Katehon, Tsargard, etc.) had

clearly been briefed by the state-church hydra to disrupt the proceedings. They generally took a rude and aggressive stance in their questioning of those who came to brief the reporters. More than once there was on display a battle of wills between the Russian reporters and the Official Council Spokesman, Archbishop Job (Getcha) of Telmessos (b. 1974), one of the greatest living scholars of the Byzantine Liturgy and now permanent representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. Archbishop Job, a Ukrainian Canadian and perhaps the youngest hierarch at the Council, always politely and deftly put these Russian reporters in their place as they attempted to attack the Council and the Ecumenical Patriarch. At another point, an RT war reporter (it is not clear why she was assigned to cover a church council but I suppose councils have a bellicose history), tweeted that the whole of the Council was filled with people with American accents and suggested one Greek-American staff member in charge of media was a CIA or FBI spy. When I confronted her with this tweet she then accused me on Twitter of being a spy as well. The narrative she was promoting was that the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Council was an American-backed conspiracy to undermine Orthodoxy kept pure by Holy Mother Russia.

This last incident was illustrative of the reporting on the Council and the attitude of many in the former Soviet Bloc Orthodox countries who claimed all sorts of absurd things such as that the Council was going to affirm homosexual marriage and women priests. Sad to say, such a mentality is not uncommon in the Russian Church and the reporter was simply reflecting parts of its present ecclesial culture where church and state work in an ever-closer union.

Security was tight in the Council sessions and ostensibly only accredited figures could gain admittance except in extraordinary circumstances; these included hierarch delegates and special consultants (often additional bishops and court theologians with the rare monastic or lay person). However, rules were bent and men with little or no qualifications but with strong connections to various church bodies, and no seeming role in the proceedings, sat through all the sessions and tweeted about it. The Council was often at the edge of confusion and always controlled by a series of overlapping special interest groups from the different local churches. Needless to say, the

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Ecumenical Observers played little role in the proceedings, only attending the first and last sessions (where they were hustled out quickly and with no warning when the last session was followed by a working session), and then being shuttled around the island visiting countless eparchies and monasteries. But even in their marginalization, there was a bright light, for, in the last week of the Council, Fr John Chryssavgis, knowing the observers' frustration, arranged rich special small sessions led by theologians from the Press Team on the key issues of the Council.

One of my mentors told me, as I was expressing some disillusioned feelings about the Council and the Church, that love for the Church was always a crucifixion, a martyrdom. Like St John the Baptizer, who ultimately did not see the fruit of his witness but paid for the truth with his head, we are called to give blood to the Church for only through such sacrifice can it live. Trust in the Holy Spirit requires surrendering yourself for and to a Body animated by that Spirit of Christ whose unity and cohesiveness is mostly glimpsed through the Eucharist and through the gifts of the saints in parish life and monasticism.

It is rare that we see, often it will be in a flash, God at work in His living icons, the bishops. Our eyes are keener to notice and call to account an Orthodoxy that is never easy, always ambiguous and frequently subject to the whims of various mediocrities, that is, the whole institutional *dramatis personae* of the Church today, ranging from state and church powerbrokers on luxury all-access Athonite 'pilgrimages' and clerical bankers with high collars, Gucci loafers and tans, to young and impatient theologians striding across history ready to reform the 'backwards' Orthodox Church and old and alienated hierarchs sitting in silence or sleeping through the Church's greatest need. Yet, amidst the chaos and the infighting, the Church remains and has retained its faith undivided and undistorted by all the trials of modernity.

The Council sessions reflected this inspired movement of the Spirit. Freewheeling discussions, mostly in Greek and occasionally English and French, were held on every subject imaginable. Bishops were calling for renewed mission in the world, a critique of multi-nationals ('big-pharma', as one African bishop spat), denouncing the evils of fundamentalism which ravaged their churches, speaking of the

need and necessity of outreach in the West and to Western Christians and putting Orthodoxy always above ethnicity. Even at one point it seemed as if the Council would draft an anathema against ethno-phyletism led by Constantinople, Cyprus and Alexandria though it was blocked in the end by the primate of Romania. None of this was public. It was all in house and therefore completely lost to the public and of course the Western media who with notable brilliant exceptions—Tom Heneghan of Reuters writing for *The Tablet*—constituted a paragon of Orientalism.

The Chairmanship of the Council by His All-Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew kept the event on track, preventing its degenerating into endless debates. Discussion was time-limited as the documents were pushed through at the rate of about one a day for six days. The Patriarch, in turn, was very conscious that all the Council Fathers should have a chance to speak if they wished. Indeed, at one point Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos, known for his love of controversy, who was particularly keen to be heard and objected to numerous points, got up for the umpteenth time to speak and he was politely asked to sit down by the Patriarch so other voices could be heard.

Some critics would say, however, that there needed to be more discussion of an open-ended variety. This perhaps would have led to more extensive revision of the Council documents and even to documents being rejected by the Council, with the consequent call for drafting of new documents, as was the case at the initial session of Vatican II when the Holy Office's scholasticized drafts were rejected from the floor. As it was, the revisions of the Council documents were minimal at best and so quite inadequate documents passed with little scrutiny. Bluntly put: what was needed was not small corrections and bitty amendments to the texts, but complete and substantial change through writing wholly new texts. Those in agreement would say that the Council documents were indeed the product of many years' preparation, but are theologically quite limited, bearing the fingerprints of a mix of Academic Greek School theology and post-Soviet reactionism. Little in the documents is surprising and mostly they state the status quo. They are, therefore, quite unable to bear the theological weight of the new challenges facing Orthodoxy today. Moreover, many subjects were completely ignored as too

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controversial, such as the question of church autocephaly and the status of new church bodies like the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), the issue of a common Orthodox calendar, and the Diptychs.

Some would also say that the very structure of the Council prevented serious debate and real renewal and reform of the Church. Thus, not only the limited time period of a week when the Council was in session is a problem but also the fact that all voting was done by blocs of bishops from local churches headed by their primates. As mentioned earlier, this method of voting is somewhat analogous to the way voting is done at the WCC and the UN. In contrast, in the ancient church, all bishops, according to this line of critique, had an equal voice by virtue of their consecration. Here the Orthodox can learn from the West, particularly figures like John Henry Newman, in its reverence for the freedom of the individual conscience before God, which Orthodoxy risks swamping by its elevation of a sort of idol of communion. The result was that this Council disempowered individual hierarchs and was very much 'primate-driven', as the delegations were usually chosen and controlled by their respective primates. This, the dissenting voices would say, is a departure from Orthodox tradition in contradiction to our conciliarism and leads to a sort of pluriform papalism with each church being run by a paramount leader rather than the synodal form of government taking precedence but on a universal level.

Yet those who voice these perfectly legitimate critiques risk making the perfect the enemy of the good. Orthodoxy, as a non-Western Christian tradition, only partially modernized and still pre-modern in its liturgical self-consciousness, is only now finding its feet in the new terrain of a world dominated by the West economically, ideologically and politically. Moreover, those who make these critiques are often oblivious to the financial strain that this Council put the churches under, especially the Ecumenical Patriarchate that hosted it. The fact that a Council of the Church met even for one week in our days after centuries of silence on the universal level, that it approved documents that all Churches had had a hand in drafting that express the present status quo theologically, canonically and liturgically, and that it raised wide debate and even some discussion of Orthodoxy's long-suspended issues which it must face and will hopefully face at

another Pan-Orthodox Council is nothing short of an ecclesial miracle, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

All things considered, the Council can be seen as Orthodoxy in the throes of travail, of a birth to its ever ancient and ever new self in the West, in a world it had not created but was called to shape and even renew. Here in the pain and the messiness of fundamentalism, ethnicism and clericalism was found a nascent faith, hope and love of the Church for a world that needed the truth of Orthodoxy, the truth of the Gospel of a pre-modern Church. For many hierarchs who attended the Council, it was an utterly unique occasion to meet their counterparts from all over the Orthodox world. The ancient ecumenical councils were almost entirely Greek affairs with no popes attending except through their legates. But here for the first time the Romanian and some Slavic churches participated in a universal Council of the Church. It was far from perfect and the documents in many ways were very poor but they stated the faith decisively and clearly in the modern context for the first time.

It is the perennial error of idealists to call for such events as Crete to be postponed until ‘better days’. Despite themselves, such people support the zero-sum geo-political game of Danilov who (to adapt an image) with his ‘fat fingers slimy as worms’³⁷ is ever keen to grasp the tiller of the Church for himself, blocking and wrecking any attempt at a universal Orthodoxy freed from all provincialism, a glimmer of which was seen at Crete. There was the sentiment of many at Crete that pan-Orthodox councils should be held on a regular basis, every five to ten years. The Church of Romania has even offered to host the next council in seven years’ time. With the sterile division of Moscow and Constantinople creating a sort of power vacuum, Romania has stepped in and taken a dynamic role in world Orthodoxy and will host a large International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) meeting in 2019, spearheaded by my colleague at Crete, Prof. Paul Gavrilyuk.³⁸

³⁷ Osip Mandelstam, ‘We exist without sensing our country beneath us’ (286 [Stalin Epigram] (1933)), in *Selected Poems*, 2nd edn, trans. James Greene (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 1.5, 65.

³⁸ See <http://iota-web.org/> (last accessed: 29 October 2017).

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This is the Orthodox moment. Now, as the Council is received, is the best chance for a generation for Orthodoxy finally to respond from the depths of its own living tradition to a world changed utterly by the West and to begin to respond to the issues that Orthodoxy has held in suspense and have remained so long unarticulated. It is the time of the Council after the Council in preparation for what is hoped to be the next Pan-Orthodox Council which, one hopes, will be the next in a series of councils, perhaps held every three years, taking up the suspended issues of world Orthodoxy as well as the challenges it faces in a world dominated by a West which it did not make but must face creatively and critically. But such an eventuality, such an opportunity to forge an ecumenical Orthodoxy freed from all provincialism requires risk. It requires humility but also spiritual daring. As Rilke says, ‘You must change your life.’³⁹ It requires a willingness to be hurt in dialogue with the world and other Christians in order, through the Spirit, to grow in the loving wisdom of self-giving seen in Jesus Christ. And with such vulnerability, it also requires a certain embracing of the chaotic messiness of dialogue, the imperfection of the conciliar process, and disagreement as the wellspring of new and hopefully better things as the Spirit leads His Church, the Body of the Living Christ, through its bishops into all truth. But most of all, the Orthodox moment of the Council is a decision to come out of our centuries-old dysfunction and isolation and disunity to witness together boldly in all our brokenness and manifest imperfection to the world concerning the Orthodox Faith and its vocation as the ‘*the true Church and the only true Church*’.⁴⁰ This requires the same faith, hope and love as inspired the Holy Fathers of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. To quote another poet, ‘But where danger is, grows/ The saving power also’ (Hölderlin).⁴¹

³⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’, 1.14 in *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1938), 180–1.

⁴⁰ Florovsky, ‘Confessional Loyalty in the Ecumenical Movement’, in *Intercommunion*, 205.

⁴¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Patmos (Fragments of the Later Version)’, in *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner and trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Continuum, 1990), ll.3–4, 256–63.

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