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In Conversation with Christos Yannaras:
A Critical View of the Council of Crete

*Colloquium on Reflections after the Great Council
of the Orthodox Church in Crete in 2016*

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We heard much in the last few months about the Council in Crete, both praise and criticism. We heard much about issues of authority and conciliarity that plagued the council even before it started. We heard much about the historical past, about practices and methodologies rooted in the tradition of the Orthodox Church. We also heard much about the struggle for unity, both in terms of the hope of every council as well as in following the Gospel commandment for unity. Finally, there have been several discussions and publications about the canonical validity of the council. I have to say that I think such approaches are not helping us evaluate the council properly. The main question, I believe, is not whether the council was conducted in a way that satisfies the minimum of the requirements that would allow us to consider it valid, but whether we can move beyond, well beyond this administrative approach, and consider the council within the wider context of the spiritual, pastoral and practical problems of the Orthodox Church today.

Many of my observations were based on Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic's *Diary of the Council*,¹ which says something not only about the official side of the council, but also about the feeling behind the scenes, even if there is a sustained effort to express this feeling in a subtle way.

Many of the ideas that I start with here however, are based on ideas of Christos Yannaras, which have been published in *Kathimerini* around that time,² and through an exchange of ideas with him during 2016-2017. It is for this reason why this essay is titled 'In conversation with Christos Yannaras'. Nevertheless, this should not be taken as a presentation of his own views (by which I mean that he should not be blamed for any ideas expressed here in a stronger way than he himself would present them, or for any opinions of mine with which he may disagree), but rather as a reflection on the significance and the role of the council, which is using some of his concerns as an entry point.

Browsing through Bishop Maxim's *Diary of the Council*, we can certainly discern a lot of good will among the participants of the council, something that may be seen among other things, in the practical difficulties that had to do with the preparation of the council and with the participation and the coordination of the several Orthodox Churches that eventually took

¹ Bishop Maxim (Vasiljevic) of Western America, *Diary of the Council*, Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2017

² Cf. «Μεγάλη Σύνοδος»: η Αντίφαση Εγγενής in <http://www.kathimerini.gr/864266/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/megalh-synodos-h-antifash-eggenhs> (accessed 4 April 2017) and *Ρεαλισμός Μαρτυρίας – Όχι Ιδεολογήματα* in <http://www.kathimerini.gr/865107/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/pealismos-martyrias--oxi-ideologhmata> (accessed 4 April 2017)

part. We can also see this good will in that the Council tried to encourage unanimity of decisions with a light hand, and in this way it tried not to give the impression of a centralized event organized by a strong vertical hierarchy. The concern here however, is not whether there was enough good will and wish for cordial relationships among the bishops who participated, but the problematic framework of the Council which poses serious ecclesiological questions, and also with questions about what constitutes a dialogue and a Council, what are the urgent problems of the Orthodox community, and what may be (or not be) the way forward.

Before we talk about the council itself, we have to take a step back and look at a number of pastoral, ecclesiological, administrative, and theological problems in the Orthodox world. Let us begin with an idea that was fundamental for the Council, even in the discussions that prepared it: the idea of unity. According to the historical guidelines that were discussed in the context of the council and are mentioned by Bishop Maxim in the *Diary of the Council* (participation of the five ancient Patriarchates), despite the historically understandable absence of Rome and the unfortunate self-exclusion of Antioch, the Council may not have had the authority of an Ecumenical Council, but it came close to it. Nevertheless, reality is different. The first idea for a Panorthodox Synod may be found in two encyclicals of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III in 1902 and 1904, while there were many preparatory meetings in Constantinople, the Holy Mountain and Chambésy since 1923. The need for a Panorthodox Council has been acknowledged for over a century, and the anticipation for the meeting of Orthodox bishops has lasted as long.

In terms of the question of the participation, the most notable absence from the Council is the absence of Russia and two of the Churches that are closest to it. The absence of Russia has significant ripples everywhere, especially in the diaspora, where the unity of the Orthodox world is more visibly tested. There has been a tension here between Constantinople and Moscow for some time, both because of the occasionally problematic canonical position of the OCA – and its emancipation from Moscow – and likewise of the even more problematic position of the ROCOR – and eventual unification with Moscow, and also because of the lack of clarity in terms of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the diaspora and in other places where the lines are not very clear, such as the Ukraine, the question of the ethnic identity of several Western Orthodox Churches that consist of largely non-ethnic members notwithstanding.

How serious is this tension? The most pessimist reading of this situation is the one that Christos Yannaras has expressed several times: that in the last few centuries the Russian Church has created a distinct and autonomous religious culture, something that Yannaras observes in its distinct style of music, the specifically Russian vestments for priests and bishops, the modification of ancient symbols and images. In the list of such specifically “Russian” symbols we could also add the Russian Cross, which has its footstool directed in the opposite way than it was in antiquity, something that has given it a very different meaning, predated by the attempt of Ivan the Terrible to create a national cross that echoed his victory over the Tatars and Islam in Kazan in 1552,³ and even the particular directions of Russian architecture. Ultimately, along with different attitudes on liturgical and pastoral practices such as confession just before communion, kneeling during the Liturgy, the insertion of the prayer of the Third Hour in the epiclesis and the insertion of the precommunion prayers (normally read individually at home) just before communion, such differences constitute a distinct and separate ecclesiastical ethos. Some of the changes that

³ Cf. Didier Chaudet, ‘When the Bear Confronts the Crescent: Russia and the Jihadist Issue’, in *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 7 (2), 2009, pp. 37–58.

originated in Russia, such as the emergence of the high iconostasis that divides completely the nave and the altar, have spread, perhaps unfortunately, to the rest of the Orthodox world, while others have not. While many such particular characteristics simply reflect the local culture and ultimately the openness of Orthodoxy (as opposed to the practice of the medieval Roman Church, which systematically imposed its own style of worship in lands under its jurisdiction), they become problematic when they stress an otherness and especially when they produce a distinct theological strand, in opposition to the attitudes, the sensitivities and the views of the rest of the Church. The onion dome, for instance, came about as a combination of the traditional use of the dome as a symbol of heaven (something that may be traced to ancient Rome) and the Gothic spire – something quite natural for the time, the place and the influences that Russia accepted. When Evgeny Trubetskoi, on the other hand, tried to explain it as a result of a different theology (the flame of prayer), he did so carving a special place for the Russian Orthodox identity, equally distinct from the West and the Orthodox world.⁴ Likewise, there are modern Russian iconographers, accustomed to flat surfaces and to a strict symbolism of colours, who do not recognize the 6th century Pantokrator of Sinai as an image that complies to the definition of what is an icon. In other words, while the multiple local experiences are a wide base for the ecumenical experience of the Church, they become problematic if they start producing separate theologies.

Perhaps this view sounds too extreme or unfair within a context of ecclesiastical cultures that have seriously attempted to move beyond the historical stumbling blocks of the past, and to move forward. What we see in the North American experience for instance, where Greeks, Russians, Serbians, Romanians, Arabs, Albanians, as well as Orthodox from non-traditionally Orthodox backgrounds have worshipped together for generations, such symbolic language has been generally embraced by all, and any critical approach to their significance and use can only be done from the inside, as a symbol that belongs to all ethnicities. Therefore, when Alexander Schmemmann says that he is not find of Byzantinisms, he does so at a level beyond the old the oppositions of the historical past, as a way to look into the liturgical experience beyond the weight of history - and it is precisely in this way that Orthodoxy can absorb particular cultures, but not tied to any one of them – Greek, Russian or anything else. Nevertheless, while this promising syncretic view can be seen in multi-ethnic societies, the European experience has not caught up with it yet.

Yannaras observes, quite poignantly, that this alienation of religious culture preceded, in very similar steps, the historical separation between East and West, and warns against the danger of a future schism between the Russian Church, along with any Orthodox Churches that may follow it, and the rest of the Orthodox world. Here we could also remember the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome, an idea that emerged in the 16th century during the time of Ivan the Terrible⁵ that has been put forth since then, even in the 20th century by people who were influential in the diaspora, such as Nicholas Zernov,⁶ furthered the divide between Russia and the rest of the Orthodox world and encouraged the mistrust between the two sides for a long time. What is disconcerting about the idea of the Third Rome, is that as in the case with the alienation between the East and the West, the creation of a different religious and cultural identity may eventually lead to an antagonism of primacy, power struggles, and eventually the exploration of opposing worldviews or theologies.

⁴ Eugene Trubetskoi, *Icons: Theology in Colour*, SVS Press, 1973, p. 17.

⁵ Cf. Alar Laats, 'The Concept of the Third Rome and its Political Implications' in Alar Kilp, Andres Saumets (eds.), *Religion and Politics in Multicultural Europe: Perspectives and Challenges*, Tartu University Press, 2009, pp. 98-113.

⁶ Nicholas Zernov, *Moscow, the Third Rome*, MacMillan, 1937.

This is an elephant in the room of Orthodox ecclesiology, and although the prestige of the Council suffered from the absence of the Russian Church, the Council was not able to solve, or even to address the problem. While as a first reading this looks like a circumstantial disagreement, it brings forth important ecclesiological questions, which may not be solved by an attempt to find the middle way between two different centres of power. We need to look for a deeper spiritual principle here, rather than for politics of compromise. In this case we have two basic questions. The first question, as Yannaras has posed it, has to do with the meaning of a Patriarchate today, and whether its meaning, especially after the emergence of the newer Patriarchates in the Balkans has drifted to mean the official state religion, and to legitimize the ethnophyletist structure of the Orthodox Church. Second, whether the independence of the Patriarchates, and the autonomous and autocephalous Orthodox Churches is such, that in effect we operate on the principle of the branch theory within the Orthodox communion, and in this way our ecclesiology in practice has drifted to a mutual recognition of independent churches, most of which are defined by national characteristics. Bishop Maxim, in his *Diary*, expresses repeatedly the view, or perhaps the hope, that this is not the case, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to see the difference.

In the early church we may be able to discern the role of a Patriarchate as representing a wider context of culture – and therefore the first three major sees in the ancient world were Rome, which represented the Latin world, Alexandria, which represented the most complete or successful fusion of Christianity and the philosophical legacy of the Greek world, and Antioch, which although was also Greek speaking, it was also the preeminent centre of theological thought in the footsteps of the Hebrew exegetical methods. In this way we may discern the dialogue among different ways to understand and express the revelation of the truth of Jesus Christ. The point of this dialogue was not to champion the strand that has the ‘correct’ theological formulas, but to allow us to consider at an ecumenical level the ramifications of what may appear normative within a single culture: therefore, if the terminology about the combined theandric nature of Jesus Christ does not mean the same thing in the Greek or in the Latin world, as it does in the Egyptian, it must be considered insufficient, as it does not express the truth in the way it has to be proclaimed everywhere. The strength of the Ecumenical Councils, and all Church councils to a lesser extent, is that they can challenge the exclusiveness of cultural specificity, and open the way towards a grasping of the truth that speaks to all the possible conditions and ways a human being may exist – and therefore towards a theological synthesis. Perhaps the fullest expression of this inclusivistic ecclesiology may be found in the *Mystagogy* of Maximos the Confessor, who, stepping on the sacramental and ecclesiological theology of Dionysios the Areopagite, described the Church as an ontological network of relations between Christ and the entire world, drawing it in harmony through himself.⁷

To return to the foundation of the early prominent centres of ecclesiastical authority, all of the important early sees, Patriarchates and Metropoleis, were recognized as such because they had apostolic foundation, administrative significance, and were pioneering theological thought. In the beginning this did not reflect the need for a system of global (ecumenical) coordination or governing, something that happened after the fourth century. The addition of Constantinople introduced the Constantinian model of the relationship between the Church and the state, and the addition of Jerusalem, a city which was not important in terms of administration, was made mostly for symbolic reasons. Already at the time we can start questioning what the meaning of a Patriarchate is, because of the proximity of Antioch and Jerusalem, but nevertheless the system of the ancient pentarchy was understood and functioned as an

⁷ Cf. Andrew Louth, ‘The Ecclesiology of Saint Maximus the Confessor’, in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 4, 2004, pp. 109–20.

actualization of community at the global level. Pentarchy certainly never meant the balance of five separate parties that were represented by their own bishops, and certainly nothing that looked like national representations. In the following few centuries this principle was eroded by the emergence of the national Churches in lands that were becoming Christian. Perhaps we need to note that although the normative criterion of pre-eminence in the ecumenical conciliar hierarchy – whatever this may mean – was the antiquity of each Church, we see that this principle had not always been observed, but had been taken into account along with political power. The Patriarchate of Moscow, for instance, although established five centuries after the Patriarchate of Georgia, occupies a higher place of honour than it.

The independence of the Church of Greece from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1833 and subsequently, one by one, of all of the other Balkan nations, either as autonomous or autocephalous Churches or as Patriarchates, was defined according to national criteria. Despite the repeated condemnation of ethnophyletism in theory, the practice of the Orthodox Church since the 19th century has resulted in a communion of fourteen or fifteen national self-governing Churches, each of them administratively independent of the other. The Patriarchate of Constantinople, as Yannaras reminds us, as it is based in a land and a surrounding culture that is not Orthodox or even Christian, is certainly as far as possible from the idea of a national state church, but I am afraid while it maintains a historical *raison d'être* as to what a Patriarchate is because of its historical circumstances (for which, ironically, we are thankful to the Turks), it is the exception rather than the rule, compared with the majority of the Orthodox national Churches. With the exception of Constantinople, this ecclesiological structure is similar to the landscape we encounter in the Protestant world, which consists of several different state churches that may be defined by different national or spiritual trajectories, and yet they largely recognize each other, denying any kind of central coordination. One of the differences however, is that while much of the Protestant world in the past had been shaped under a climate of war (political and religious), clash and differentiation, this is usually not the case anymore: today in the Protestant world we see a large mutual recognition and intercommunion at the level of laity and clergy, which includes churches that had been separated by national as well as spiritual differences in the past.⁸ In this way, the national criterion is now more important in the Orthodox world, where the diaspora has not yet been able to develop a local ecclesiastical structure, despite a significant spread of Orthodoxy beyond ethnic groups, and also despite the gradual assimilation of these ethnic groups into the wider culture, but is still divided and defined by ethnic lines.

To return to the question of the Patriarchate, since the meaning and the role of a Patriarchate has severely eroded since the fourth century, and since the geopolitical map has changed significantly since the time of the foundation of the ancient Patriarchates, it is no longer practical or possible to think along the lines of the historical participation of the two more senior Patriarchates (Rome and Constantinople), or the five (or four) ancient ones, as a way to guarantee the unity of the whole Orthodox world. This would effectively limit the definition of Orthodoxy, as the religion that reflects the glory of Byzantium, and makes sense primarily within the context of the time between the 4th and the 15th century, which still tries to define itself according to cultural and political categories of that time and place, as opposed to the understanding of Orthodoxy as the celebration of the presence of Jesus Christ among us and the continuous communion of the Church with him, as it is reflected in the Gospel, and as it is attested and experienced by the Fathers and the saints of every age and of every place. However in the present, the highest level authority of the Orthodox Church is a committee of fourteen (mostly national) representations, which tries to move in unanimity, or

⁸ An example is the sharing of communion between the Anglicans, the Lutherans, the Methodists, the URC, the Old Catholics, and other churches.

not at all, united by a common aversion to change. The shame of the lack of conformity has become a much more potent agent here than a profound theological exploration. But in the end, there is no mechanism to protect or to enforce this unity other than the very shame of innovation. While it is generally recognized that the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is to convene or preside over Ecumenical Councils – something that has not always been the case, incidentally – it has no power to enforce participation or even agreement. The absence of an Emperor, the person who often demanded and enforced conciliar unity, sometimes with methods that would not always stand to scrutiny, shows a gap in ecclesiology. Here we need to remember that although from the point of view of the citizens of the Roman Empire it made little difference if the head of the state was an Emperor or a King, in the wider context of the Christian world it did make a difference for a long time, at least in symbolism and protocol: for many centuries, the heads of Western European kingdoms sought the recognition and confirmation of their title by the Emperor of the Eastern Roman state when they ascended to power. Even if this was a mere formality, it shows that the role of the Emperor was properly understood beyond and above ethnic lines.

Lacking this kind of unifying power, there was no way to coopt the participation of Russia, Bulgaria, Georgia and Antioch in the Council of Crete. The huge problem of the ethnophyletist structure of the Orthodox Church was not broached. The question here is simply this: can we define unity as the minimum common ground shared by the fourteen independent churches, or should we understand it as the sum of their experience considered as a shared experience? The Council tried to encourage the second approach, but in the end result was sadly consistent with the first. Instead of the richness of the ecumenical Orthodox experience, which would urge us to look at the local experience through the lens of the timelessness and the boundlessness of the eternal Church, in the case of mixed marriages, for instance, the decision was to fall back to the safety of the letter of the law, and to understand the eternal through local criteria instead of the other way round: what was perhaps true for the majority of the Christian world several centuries ago, and still holds true in the mountains of Georgia, has to remain the norm in the rest of the Orthodox world.

To illustrate this point, we can talk about the case of the second marriage of priests, which was dropped from the agenda before the beginning of the Council. I am afraid that this intended omission shows a serious vacuum of theological methodology and thought. The Council in this case acted as a merely administrative structure, closing the door to a huge pastoral problem, by choosing to simply ignore the spiritual and the pastoral dimensions of the issue. Acting in a pietistic manner, without exploring the theological, anthropological and pastoral dimensions of the issue, the council did not find any compelling evidence against the marriage of widowed priests, but decided that since it was not going to be accepted by all Orthodox Churches (for cultural rather than theological reasons, although we have to note that the Church has a strong hand in creating local culture, as much as it is shaped by it), and therefore the possibility of allowing it was not accepted. In addition, without giving a convincing reason, it did not even consider the much bigger and more theologically challenging issue of divorced priests. Yet, it is this case – extreme perhaps – that tests the limits of our understanding both about the priesthood and about the nature of marriage. Let me mention here four reasons qualifying this, as an attempt to explore the practical and the spiritual depth of this issue:

First, because in widowhood the bonds of love may not be shattered, and therefore the spiritual and psychological union between the husband and the wife, although not physical, may continue even after the death of one of the two. The separated couple does not have this privilege: here it is recognized that not only the bond of love is not present anymore, but also that the marriage may be detrimental to the psychological and even the spiritual life of the

spouses. Therefore, while a widowed priest with children may face a heavier practical load (in terms of raising the children as a single parent), the divorced priest may face a heavier psychological and spiritual load.

Second, the Orthodox Church recognizes marriage as an ascetic challenge. The theological implication of this is twofold: first, that while there may not be such a thing as a perfect and care-free marriage, marriage is not founded on pleasure, but on a continuous attempt to be drawn beyond the limits of our ego and to become more than we are. Therefore, a successful marriage is not necessarily one that makes life easier for the spouses, but one that leads to their psychological and spiritual maturity – and conversely, we need to recognize that a marriage where the spouses become increasingly antagonistic, defensive, duplicitous, is harmful to them and to the family, and it may be necessary to dissolve it in order to prevent its harmful effects from being perpetuated, and to make sure that the children are not affected. The second point is that as with any ascetic ascent, if a marriage fails irrevocably, in the Orthodox Church the people are allowed a second and a third attempt, rather than giving up after the one and only attempt. Yet, this premise of trying again is not extended to priests. The de facto fallback status of a widowed or divorced priest is monkhood, although the calling and the roles of the priest and the monk are quite different and should not be confused.

Third, even if we consider a failed marriage as a moral stain, it is a personal stain, rather than one that would necessarily impede the ability of the priest to act as the father of a community. To insist on a legalistic reading of 1 Timothy 3:2, which mentions that the priest should be the husband of one wife, is simply bad exegesis – not only for the legalist attitude, but also because 1 Timothy simply finds concubinage and polygamy incompatible with the most basic understanding of love as understood in the Christian tradition, which does not distinguish between spiritual and corporeal attraction, but is based on the imagery of the Song of Songs, and the complete union of the spouses. 1 Timothy, and the New Testament in general, shows a new direction, speaking of the union of the husband and the wife as a union of two equals, two beloveds given to each other completely, rather than as a social contract. This was revolutionary at the time, and even after many centuries of Christian formative education, issues surrounding the union of the beloveds that are based on social economy, such as property, social status, lineage, taxation benefits, and so forth, often take precedence over the meaning of the union. To draw from all this a legalistic instruction goes against the spirit of the commandment itself. For the Orthodox Church it is clear that the moral status of a priest does not affect his priestly role, and the Biblical spirit of such prohibitions (usually Pauline rather than from the Gospels) has to do with the general concern of St Paul to avoid schisms caused by scandals. The experience of the Anglican Church, where priests are allowed to remarry (something that did not meet with contention), has shown us that society at large is ready for it. Moreover, in many issues that require pastoral sensitivity, the Church, or perhaps more correctly, a certain part of the hierarchy, scandalizes more people by expressing extreme conservative positions, usually articulated in a fundamentalist, legalistic language. Its involvement in political life is greatly reduced to an extreme conservatism leaning towards the extreme right political wing, or often preaching a sermon of intolerance and hatred, as we see in the case of the bishops of Peiraias and Kalavryta. If scandal is to be considered within the Pauline context of 1 Cor 8:13, where the apostle explains that while he naturally has the right to eat meat, he would rather never do it if this caused a difficulty to his fellow Christians (and therefore avoiding scandal is not a matter of observing laws and regulations, but an act of love), we certainly need to discern whether people today are scandalized by a priest who remarries, or by a bishop who directs his flock to spit on a homosexual on sight.

Fourth and finally, marriage was one of the topics that were discussed extensively in the Council, both in Crete and in the pre-conciliar discussions, and as we have already mentioned, despite the pastoral difficulty of mixed marriages, the way forward ought to have been to explore its meaning in the context of Orthodox spirituality. There is a serious impediment in the procedures: this discussion involved no women (with the exception of a couple of female theologians who accompanied Archbishop Anastasios), and no men who had had the experience of marriage themselves. It seems to me that the bishops and monks who attempted to explore the spiritual, the theological and the pastoral aspects of marriage, should have kept a humble silence on a matter on which, perhaps with the rare exception of bishops who were widowed before they ascended to the episcopacy, they had no experience. Instead, the proper procedure would be to refer the matter to committees of married priests and lay men and women. The Orthodox Church, in theory although not in practice, recognizes that both the way of the parish and the way of the monastery lead to salvation (although it is hard to remember even more than a handful of saints who were not monastics), and that the monk is no closer to salvation than the layman. In practice however, this happens a lot, as perhaps the majority of books and articles on marriage in the Orthodox tradition, are written by the people who have no relevant experience. As Maximos the Confessor reminds us commenting on the Transfiguration, the presence of Elijah and Moses signifies, among other things, the equality of the celibate and the married life, since Elijah was celibate, and Moses was married (indeed more than once). Therefore, as it would be inappropriate for a parochial committee to draw the regulations of a monastery, it is inappropriate for a monastic community to draw the regulations of the married life.

These views, which admittedly only scratch the surface of the issue, which unfortunately affects a good part of the clergy in our days, serve only as an example of how such a case may be explored in a spiritual and pastoral way. Likewise, issues that may be explored in a similar light include the ordination of women and the anthropology or symbolism behind it, a more sustained discussion on fasting, bioethical questions, and liturgical literacy. Overall, although we would like to say that Orthodoxy also means Orthopraxy, and that there is no distance between doctrine and practice, in the Orthodox Church we have a serious lack of what has elsewhere been developed as practical theology.

I admit that my views sound quite bleak. I am afraid that we are witnessing the potential beginning of two different schisms within the Orthodox Church. The one, as I have already mentioned, concerns any independent Church that creates its own, distinct religious culture, and gradually separates itself from the dialogue that the rest of the churches engage in, because of the lack of a clear ecclesiological model of global communion. As Yannaras reminds us, it is sufficient to look at the trajectory the Franks followed in their alienation from the Roman Empire, first culturally and subsequently theologically, which prepared the schism between East and West, and draw our conclusions about how much this pattern is repeated in our days. To compare the situation with other Christian denominations, the Papist model may be successful in terms of its administrative effectiveness, but the centripetal force of this model is too high a price to pay. The imperial model, where unity was forced upon the Church by the political power, is also a memory from a different time, which cannot work in our days. The Protestant model of the parallel churches seems to be closest to what we are facing, or rather to what we are practicing, but, unlike Orthodoxy, while that model is not concerned about an overall unity of the constituent churches, for better or worse, it is much more inclusive in practice.

Next to this 'vertical' schism, we can observe a 'horizontal' schism, which has to do with a great number of people who are disappointed by the Church, and who although may be nominally Orthodox, in reality they feel they have been marginalized by their own Church.

This is the silent majority of the laity in Orthodox countries, and I am afraid that the percentage is growing. While Orthodox ecclesiology in theory is based on the community of the faithful, the Church of the Holy Spirit, where all the people contribute in distinct yet equally important roles, what we see in practice is a solipsistic clericalism. The Church generally keeps a distance from the wider cultural, academic, scientific, and political dialogue – and while the entanglement of church and politics has generally been disastrous, the quasi-monastic image of the church regarding the other aspects of communal life, has rendered it irrelevant for larger society. With a very small number of notable exceptions (such as our own Fr Lambros Kamberidis), by and large, Orthodox higher and middle clergy is absent from cultural, academic and scientific life.

Therefore, there is a visible and growing alienation between the clergy and the laity. Symptoms of this alienation, from both sides, include the contempt of many clergymen, especially monastics, for anything ‘secular’, and likewise, a rising social anticlericalism, among people from various socio-economic strata, who nevertheless consider themselves Christian, and also a growing percentage of people in traditionally Orthodox countries, who do not consider themselves Christian. As an indication for this alienation we can look at the statistics that describe church attendance: In Greece the percentage of people who claim that they attend church regularly is 27%, compared to a 51% in Ireland, 47% in the USA, and 20% in the UK. In Russia, the percentage is 8% - and we also know that most of even these percentages in Orthodox countries reflect the participation of the elderly, while the younger generations are even more dramatically absent from the life of the Church, or hostile to it. In this case, the historical pattern and precedent that should concern us is that of the Reformation, which, among other factors, was caused by a sharp contrast between the clergy (or Rome) and the laity (or the local authorities), despite an overall zeal for Christianity on both sides. In contrast to ancient Christianity, and with very few exceptions (such as in Cyprus), in most Orthodox countries there is no participation of the laity in the election of bishops, and therefore the entire administration of the Church has been transformed to a closed, self-selected club limited to monastics. Nevertheless, a larger church gathering, such as an important council, in the context of what we know and what we have experienced in the last few centuries, cannot be limited to a gathering of a limited number of bishops who represent their own constituencies, even if these bishops are accompanied and assisted by lay theologians. *Mutatis mutandis*, we can see that Vatican II, which played a significant role in the regeneration of Roman Catholicism in the middle of the 20th century, faced some of the same problems that Orthodoxy is facing now: the antagonism with liberation movements (in our case also with ultra-nationalist or pagan revivalist movements), the need to assert the position of the laity within the Church, the need to foster dialogue with the modern world, and the need for internal evangelization. Since in the Orthodox world we face more and much deeper challenges than these, we need and should expect a Council with at least comparable impact as that of Vatican II for the Catholic Church.

Is there a way forward here? I am obviously disappointed in the way our Church understands its own structure and its own voice. The ancient Church Councils were not meant to be instruments of *potestas* and *magisterium*, but a framework that would allow a pluralist rather than an exclusivist dialogue, which would address every view and practice that could divide the Church, and it would try to consider these problems in the context of theological reflection, thus finding and showing the way forward to all involved parties. At the dawn of Christianity, this meant an as complete representation as possible, with ideally the participation of all bishops from the entire Christian world, for an extended amount of time – years sometimes. The bishops, all of them equal to each other, contributed the testimony of their direct liturgical and communal experience, rather than represent national or local

interests in carefully considered and agreed groups. St Basil, as we can remember, divided several of the dioceses under his care, ending up in some cases with extremely small dioceses, in order to take more bishops with him in the Second Ecumenical Council – we can perhaps say that he cheated the system, but the point is that the system was disposed to accept all the voices it could possibly accommodate.

Many centuries after the last Ecumenical Council, in anticipation of what could be one step less than an Ecumenical Council for the Orthodox Church, we can look into what motivated early Christianity and at the same time what are the practical and pastoral hopes and challenges of our time. Although the Orthodox Church is sadly disfigured by centuries of ethnophyletist practice, and this is a reality we cannot ignore, I believe it will be wrong to give in to an Orthodox version of the branch theory, as the Council of Crete effectively did, by allowing itself to be defined by participating national Churches with a carefully considered number of delegates each.

The branch theory is inconsistent with Orthodox sacramental theology, for which it is essential that we recognize the entire sacramental presence of Jesus in a gathering of two or three people in his name, following Matthew 18:20. Incidentally, a question for another time, that has not been adequately examined is that if we accept this catholicity (if by catholicity we imply that the gathering of the faithful in one place around one chalice manifests the entire, the complete Church) at the level of the Eucharistic gathering, we either need to consider the entirety of the sacramental presence of Jesus Christ at the level of the parish rather than at the level of the diocese (which is consistent with ancient Christianity), or to recognize that something is missing from the Eucharistic gathering. Our ecclesiology has not yet defined clearly the difference between the parish and the diocese, or the celebrant-priest from the celebrant-bishop, the primary role of both of whom is to preside over the Eucharistic gathering. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of Orthodoxy to national state churches, sanctioned by the Council in Crete, can only be explained on the basis of a version of the branch theory within the limits of the Orthodox Church. Sadly, although Orthodox ecclesiology has given us several theological gems in the 20th century, there is a great difference between our ecclesiological theology and our practice.

All these problems, however, mean that we need to consider a much more open, much more public, and much more extended dialogue than ever before, which will transcend ethnic lines, it will make obsolete the concept of the ethnic state Church, and it will revitalise the sense of the entire Eucharistic community.

Despite the decades-long hype and the non-conclusions of the Council in Crete, there are many real theological and practical questions that need to be addressed theologically, the first two of which have been posed by Yannaras: 1. What is the meaning of a Patriarchate today (and therefore an exploration of the discrepancy between Orthodox ecclesiology and ethnophyletist practice). 2. Whether salvation can be considered an individual achievement or a communal struggle (which touches on pietism and a judicial approach of Christianity). 3. We could also add a question about the Orthodox understanding of belonging to the Church: Too often the approach we encounter nowadays reflects the reduction of Christianity into an ideology, of a religious correctness that is more precisely defined as Orthodoxism rather than Orthodoxy. An area where this may be seen in the last few decades, is the question of millenarism and the end of the world, especially as expressed through literal interpretations of the Apocalypse encouraged by bishops and elders, and usually reduces salvation to ‘belonging to the correct party or ideology’, against any serious interpretation of the Book of Revelation. 4. It is necessary to start an examination of anthropology, with particular emphasis on gender differences and similarities, and sexuality, that would go well beyond

citing Biblical passages out of context, and 5. A discussion about liturgical practices, which would include corrections of the text (such as the quite important *προσφέροντες* which has become *προσφέρονμεν*, something that changes dramatically the meaning of one of the most important prayers of the liturgy), parts that have been interjected into the text relatively recently (such as the individual prayers before communion), a discussion on and enforcement of the 20th canon of Nicea I about kneeling, which is still prevalent in many Orthodox countries, and other liturgical matters. Of course the list can go on and on. It is important that we look at things like that very seriously though, because the Liturgy is, practically and theologically, a product as well as a source of our theological understanding, and of our attitudes concerning communion and salvation. For many people it is the only or the main source of theological thought. Therefore, liturgical matters, in the Orthodox Church more than anywhere else, should not be allowed to collapse because of indifference or limited understanding.

I believe that it is necessary to have an extended and prolonged discussion and exploration of such matters, that could last two or three years rather than two weeks, with the full participation of bishops, priests, lay theologians and professors, and scientists. This is the kind of theology at the public square that would allow us to air the pastoral and theological issues that threaten to repeat history either with a vertical schism between Greeks and Russians (as it was between Greeks and Franks in the past), or with a horizontal schism between clericalism and laity (as it was in the Western Reformation). The Council of Crete at least succeeded in reminding us that we need to carry on with such discussions, and one of its concluding remarks was indeed that it will be good to continue further after this first step. I believe that this needs to be done at a much larger scale than before. Otherwise, I am afraid that History will look on this Council as one of the last opportunities to prevent the fragmentation of Orthodoxy.

But in the end, there is only so much we can do. To close with a thought that Christos Yannaras has expressed repeatedly in the face of bleakness, solutions to our most difficult problems often come from unexpected places, not as a credit to our diligent efforts, but as a result of the presence and the operation of the Holy Spirit. To this effect, he cites two examples. First, how although in the 60s it seemed certain to everyone that the thousand-year old history of Mount Athos had come to an end, as only a handful aging monks had remained in these monasteries, generations of younger monks, many of them educated, with a zeal for the contemplative life and with a passion for theology, appeared out of nowhere, manned the dilapidated monasteries and gave a new, unexpected and vibrant life to the monastic peninsula.

The second example is something we see in our days. Without any apparent strong coordination, without the encouragement of a figure such as Nikodemos the Hagiorite who were advocating frequent communion, in the last few years we can see a rising number of frequent communicants, most of them young, in places such as Greece, where the norm in the previous generation was to receive communion only two or three times a year. There is something acting beyond our discernment here, something that moves despite our best or our worst efforts. And in the end, it is in the life-giving energies of God that we place our trust. Yet, at the same time I believe that we need to look at the theological, practical, pastoral and ecclesiological challenges we face, and start talking about them in depth, even if our first reaction is that of despair.