

Conciliarity in the Church History and Today

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In our day the large-scale synodal events of the Church of the first millennium are both “forgotten” and misapprehended. In recent times, they seem to be accompanied, on most occasions, by a polemic that psychologically loads the debate concerning the issue. Thus, the Holy and Great Council in Crete was so wrongly interpreted in some circles, and today we see that whenever and however it is referred to some people made it the target of public *odium*.

There are different angles from which to approach the topic of synodality. This article hopes¹ to point the way to a more nuanced and realistic understanding of how councils took place and the role played by episcopacy in them.

Within the scope of our discussion I would like to explore the significance of “synodality,” when one sees it as a portrayal of Pentecost and an expression of the Liturgy.

However, in order to reach there, I will have to, for the most part, limit myself to the more prosaic aspects.

¹ The Councils as a rule bring hope. The iconography of the Councils depends on the iconography of Pentecost, which was a council *sui generis*. The choreography in these icons demonstrates colorfully that the Church understood these councils as eucharistic events—in the image of Pentecost and Apocalypse. It is interesting to observe that Salvador Dalí painted a surreal painting *The Ecumenical Council* (1960), one of his masterpieces, as an expression of his renewed hope in religious leadership after the disastrous World War II. It is kept in Dalí’s museum in St. Petersburg in Florida.

I. Conciliarity in Church history and a misapprehended synodality

Should someone randomly ask people on the street what, in their opinion, “synodality” is about, the reply he or she will hear as a rule is the following: a synod is an old-fashioned “institution” detached from ordinary people, a governance dealing with administrative affairs, advocating the church’s laws and morals—in short, something out of touch with the reality on the ground. Sometimes, a notion of “collegiality” is added to the meaning of synodality, according to which idea, a synod is governed in a collegial fashion so that its head exercises his authority in a more circumspect fashion.

In this way, the meaning of synodality in people’s minds appears to be linked to static, legalistic, and formal criteria. The more legalistic a synod is, the more “true” it is. And the more *conservative* the conciliar fathers are, displaying spiritual authority, special gifts etc., the more this induces us to regard them as “holy fathers.” The same applies reversely: when we discern a certain weakness in a Council (such as the absence of some churches, procedural deficiencies, presence of the non-Orthodox etc.), then we tend to write it off the “holy councils” list.

This common and widespread perception of synodality gives rise to certain basic questions, when placed under the light of our Tradition. I call upon Church history for help and examples from the period of the early local and Ecumenical Councils. Let us mention some of them:

1. If synodality is mainly about observing legal and moral values—as some claim—then why did the Apostolic synod introduce an innovation regarding the Jewish law, and accepted the universal mission of the Church? We usually call the Apostolic synod a “*sui generis* council,” but the fact is that it was the foundation of all future innovation in ecclesial life. Nicaea I, Chalcedon, Constantinople I and II, etc. The Apostles were not hesitant to get together and—“after there had been much debate” (πολλῆς ζητήσεως γενομένης, Acts 15:7)—about the most pressing issues of their time they innovated.²

² This openness was a foundation for any other attempt in approaching the world and it led Gregory Nazianzen to affirm the principle of “coining new terms”: εἰ δέ τι καὶ καινοτομήσαι περὶ τὰ ὀνόματα σαφηνείας ἔνεκεν (Gregory Nazianzen, *Discours* 39, 12, PG 36, 348B).

2. There is a group of Orthodox theologians who see little, if any, connection between conciliarity and the Liturgy of the Church. The separation of these two aspects of ecclesiology through the [modern] practice of having councils outside the Liturgy has resulted in several distortions of synodality that contradict fundamental principles of ecclesiology. But the Liturgy itself was never entirely divorced from conciliarity. At a time when the term “synod” had become a *terminus technicus* for the formal councils, people used it for the Liturgy.³ On the other hand, the word “synodos” is used by the Holy Fathers (as St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory Nazianzen, Cyril of Alexandria, Proclus of Constantinople, Maximus the Confessor, etc.), when addressing the Christological issues (they call “synod” the unity between the two natures in Christ.) Therefore, the history of synodality indicates that the goal of the Church councils was never a formulation of faith per se, but the confirmation of eucharistic communion (κοινωνία), be it as reconciliation between the “other” (a Christlike person), or between “others” (eucharistic communities). The main theme of the canons is therefore the restoration to full communion of those excommunicated (τῶν ἀκοινωνήτων).⁴

3. A related difficulty similarly results from the principle “**each and every bishop must participate at a Council**,” advocated by many. This axiom is repeated by many regarding the Holy and Great Council as implying its deficiency.⁵ Quite interesting is—respectively—the fact that while at the First Ecumenical Council, presumably, there existed a direct relation of the local Church with the Council, the subsequent councils introduced a form of *representation* of church-administrative regions. It is said that at the Councils all bishops must attend, as if these were the canonical criterion of their “ecumenicity.” But even this alone is not proof

³ See, e.g., J. Chrysostom, *De Propb. obsc.*, 2, 5 (PG 56:182). Also: Jerome, *Epist. ad Heliodorum*, 12 (PL 22:597). Cf. J. Zizioulas, “Recent Discussions on Primacy in Orthodox Theology,” *The One and the Many*, Sebastian Press 2010, p. 208.

⁴ Canon 5 of the First Ecumenical Council is but one of countless examples. More about this in J. D. Zizioulas, “Ο Συνοδικός Θεσμός: Ιστορικά, Ἐκκλησιαστικά καὶ Κανονικά Προβλήματα”, *Τιμητικὸν Ἀφιέρωμα εἰς τὸν Μητροπολίτην Κίτρους Βαρνάβαν ἐπὶ τῇ 25ετηρίδι τῆς Ἀρχιερατείας του*, Ἀθήναι 1980, p. 169

⁵ “Only a select few bishops were allowed to attend—not invited. Because the entire college of bishops were not invited then it implies that they are not equal and hence not real bishops.” (Met. Hierotheos Vlachos: *Texts of “The Holy and Great Council” Distinguished by “Creative Ambiguity” and Other Flaws*: <http://www.monomakhos.com/met-hierotheos-vlachos-texts-of-the-holy-and-great-council-distinguished-by-creative-ambiguity-and-other-flaws>).

of true synodality; it is of no value if the prerequisite of *synodal* “*phronema*” (consensus) does not exist—in other words, a “*phronema*” that even a council without numerous bishops can have.⁶ As the Fifth Ecumenical Council is concerned, interestingly, Pope Vigilius requested the metropolitan system, that is, accommodating the geographical criterion, while the Eastern Bishops insisted on *representations of the equal number of all five Patriarchal thrones*. Therefore, if we accept the thesis that all Churches and all bishops must participate in a Holy and Great Council, then we must confront the practice of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, of which the Seventh introduced new canonical criteria for a council to be *ecumenical*: representatives from the seat of Rome and Constantinople must “participate in it,” and representatives of the Patriarchates—Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem—must be “in agreement,” that is, they give their explicit consent.

4. Analogous problems also arise, **when synodality is linked to the “quantitative” aspect, i.e., seeking the “validation from numbers”** (*autoritas ex numero*).⁷ Many people revert to this approach because it is interesting; yet, it is not Orthodox nor is it accurate. Numbers and synodality do not relate to each other, nor do they necessarily co-exist. As Fr John Behr noted, some councils, “such as Ariminium-Seleucia in 359, had more attendants (560) than any ecumenical council.”⁸ For instance, the episcopal composition of the Second (381) and Third Ecumenical Councils (431) was on the basis of the metropolitan system, while after the Fourth Ecumenical Council it was in accordance with the patriarchal administrative system. Consequently, to say that one “third” of the Bishops (or Churches=four Patriarchates) was not present in Crete is (canonically and historically) absurd, as if to say that at the Ecumenical Council some “third” was not present. It was at the very Ecumenical Councils that a “third” of the Episcopate was absent, while at many of them even a

⁶ As Russian historian V. Bolotov point out, “for an Ecumenical Council, it is not necessary to have it convened by the pope, nor to have his participation, nor the participation of the individual Churches, nor the momentary recognition as such from the individual Churches. It is necessary that the truth be manifested, which is contained in the entire Ecumenical Church. This point is arrived only by a long historical process. The Church’s life alone in history, not some formal characteristics, puts such a seal on the Councils. This was the case with the following Councils: the Nicene, both Constantinopolitan, the Ephesian and the Chalcedonian” (*History of the Ecumenical Councils*, p. 271).

⁷ See Sulp. Sev., *Chron.* 2.33.1.

⁸ John Behr, “The Holy and Great Council 2016”, this volume, p. ?.

“third” of the Bishops were not even present.⁹ Still, the Ecumenical Councils were recognized after two or more years.

5. The next fundamental misunderstanding is related to seeing the Council as a **matter of singularity in the objectifiable arithmetical sense, a sort of an objectified reality *per se*, as an entity in itself** (Aristotelian substantialist ontology.) However, historically, only the post-council period demonstrated whether a Council measured up to and fulfilled the criterion of the Ecumenical Councils. Council is conditioned *epicletically* and cannot be communicated in seclusion from the communities either through individuals or systems of ideas. To the thesis, many times repeated, that, for example, the Council in Crete was not a “Holy and Great Council” due to certain weaknesses, our Tradition has no other answer than the following: *the future gives meaning and hypostasis to the past*. This makes the Council a relational reality. Let us recall the Third Ecumenical Council. St. Cyril of Alexandria began and finished this Council without the Antiochian Church, which was led by John of Antioch with forty Bishops. While Cyril chaired “his” council, John summoned his own council in which he condemned Cyril and his followers. After two years, in 433, they made peace and “Cyril’s council” became the Third Ecumenical Council. However, Cyril’s dealing with the Third Ecumenical Council in 431 points to thousands of flaws in the proceedings, so that Bishop John of Antioch was forced to anathemise Cyril’s council. So, how is it that this synod is Ecumenical, when it is certain that its historical manifestation did not conform to the requirements of the principles of Aristotelian substantialist ontology?

6. Most studies on conciliarity presume that a synod must be a “success,” in terms of achieving unity and vanishing heresies. Yet, if we **identify synodality with “success”—with the final results in verbal and practical agreement**—then we will need to admit that many Councils were not so “successful.”¹⁰ We must understand here that a dogmatic “gigantomachia”

⁹ Regarding the question of the presence of all Churches at the Great Ecumenical Councils, we can cite the thoughts of Bolotov, the Russian historian, who, in the case of the famed First Ecumenical Council (about which the unjustifiable and unhistorical thought has been that it was a council of all the Bishops), says that: “It is assumed with a level of certainty that at that time there were around one thousand dioceses in the East and about eight hundred in the West. Therefore, only one-sixth of the Christian bishops were present” (*History of the Church*).

¹⁰ The Fourth and Fifth Ecumenical Council were not successful in bringing the unity in the Church. On the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon in the Holy Land and monks rebelling against Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem see Cornelia B. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological*

does not simply end in the agreement of words and formulas, but in *the reality of the Mystery*, recognized (sacramentally, liturgically) in the Image of the Crucified and Resurrected Christ.¹¹ It is indicative that Polycarp, the famous Bishop of Smyrna, in about the year 155 visited his Roman fellow brother Anicetus to discuss with him the disputed issue of the date of Pascha. **Although they did not agree in all things, imagine, they nonetheless served the Liturgy together**, after which Polycarp returned to Smyrna—to his martyrdom.

7. Many people think that a Council is an “**open event**.” However, the two-thousand-year-long history of the Church does not know of an “open council.” Even a series of six patriarchal councils, the so-called Hesychast (or Palamite) Councils, held in the Byzantine capital Constantinople between 1341 and 1351, which dealt with the same topic, consist of six separate Councils, each having its own conclusion. Canonically, *it is impossible to leave a Council “unfinished”* (unless “open” means something else), for then the question is posed of the *validity* of all the adopted and signed decisions of the Council. Here the discussion should develop in the direction of clarifying the *Council* as a “court” and an “authority.” Many councils served to either confirm or reject a previous council. Never in history was there a condemnation of a heresy that was not confirmed by a Council. This is why it is said that **a Council is the final expression of faith**. A different practice has simply not been recorded. For instance, no one could annul the “Robber Council” of Ephesus in 449 until a new Council was called, in Chalcedon in 451 (similar relation exists between the Council in Hieria and the Seventh Ecumenical Council).

8. To the list of misapprehensions of synodality one must add the current widespread trend of **promoting an idyllic picture of the Councils**. Some are ready to speak of the “Church of the Councils.” But our Church

Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian, Oxford University Press 2006. Regarding the Fifth Ecumenical Council, although the Chalcedonian churches did not question its ecumenical status, in the West, the Council of 553 was accepted but not placed on a par with its predecessors. “But hostility to the emperor’s programme in Palestine and the west and the indifference of overwhelmingly non-Chalcedonian Egypt made its ecumenicity depend rather too heavily on imperial and (subsequently) papal confirmation” (R. Price in *Acts 553*, II, p. 299)

¹¹ The Seventh Ecumenical Council “spent relatively little time on the theology of images as such, except where this was relevant in the refutation of the Horos of 754.” Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 284.

is not only that; it is also *a conciliar (synodal) Church*. And yet, all Councils always had unpredictable, usually distressing moments, and the conciliar Acts provide for a broader range of episcopal conduct.¹² As the famous Russian historian Bolotov soberly speaks of them:

“The Second Ecumenical Council in 381 in Constantinople completely met the ideal: neither the emperor was present nor his representatives. This was, in the true sense of the word, a **‘council of hierarchs.’** Still, even here things were not completely quiet and peaceful: some of the meetings resembled, to St. Gregory the Theologian, a council of herons.”¹³

Basically, “each council remained unpredictable, despite all due preparations and even pre-drafted scenarios, as it was sometimes the case.”¹⁴

9. Another prejudice about the Councils creates a difficulty, namely **“the role of the people.”** This implies the idea that there is some sort of “referendum” or “plebiscite” when we talk of a reception that takes place in the living body of the Church.¹⁵ However, to the question “what is the role of the people” it must be stated that the people express themselves through their Bishop. The people are not absent, for when the Bishop does not rightfully express his people, then a new Council is called. This was exactly how the council in Florence/Ferara was rejected—not only by the people, but, more importantly—through the Council. (We will return to this point later.)

10. Another suggestion was expressed recently, namely that it might be more accurate (for the Orthodox) to say that we are not able to have an Ecumenical Council today, in the model of early Christendom, not because we don’t have an emperor to call it (for it can be, and was, called ‘consensually’), but **because we don’t have a Pope who wouldn’t be there.**¹⁶ However, in the first millennium there were attempts to have the Pope at the Councils. On December 25, 449, Pope Leo besought emperor Theo-

¹² See more in Michael Whitby, “An Unholy Crew? Bishops Behaving Badly at Church Councils”, in: *Chalcedon in Context*, pp. 178-196.

¹³ V. Bolotov, *of the Ecumenical Councils*

¹⁴ Cyril Hovorun, “Conciliarity and the Holy and Great Council.”

¹⁵ Indeed, the final decisions of such an institution as a Council “must be tested through their reception by the communities before they can claim full and true authority. Like everything else in an ecclesiology of communion, authority must be *relational*.” (J. Zizioulas, “The Church as Communion,” *The One and the Many*, Sebastian Press 2010, p. 56.

¹⁶ John Behr, ‘Communion and Conciliarity’, the ‘Sir Daniel and Countess Bernardine Murphy Donohue Lecture, 2011, published in Pontificio Instituto Orientale, *Album Accademico 2010-2011*, 48-59.

dosius to summon an episcopal council in Italy, since this was the only sure means of checking the disorder affecting the whole Church, and of preserving the integrity of the catholic faith.¹⁷ Early in the following year the emperor requested that a Synod should meet under the presidency of the Pope in Italy, and the dispute brought to an end.

Thus, the question is posed: **what is the true nature of a synod?** If we should wish to say that synodality is possible only within the Church, then, **we must seek the meaning of “synodality” beyond the criteria that we mentioned previously**—in other words, beyond legalistic perfection and institutional validity.

So, let us see how our Church does perceive synodality.

Ecclesial Synodality

1. The term “synod” has an interesting history. This Hellenic word, σύνοδος (**syn-odos**), was popular in the classical literature. In the classical Antiquity, it frequently occurs in the works of such authors as Euripides, Aristophanes, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and others. ἐκκλησία and σύνοδος were similar public phenomena. The deeper significance of the word σύνοδος is found in St. John Chrysostom. In order to emphatically stress his belief in the conciliar nature of the Church, this holy father identifies the Church with the synod (ἐκκλησία γὰρ συνόδου ἐστὶν ὄνομα - Εἰς τὸν 149ον Ψαλμόν, I). Thus, in the ancient Church, from synodality as a political phenomenon, we are led to synodality as theological one. Thus, **the Church** goes beyond the political meaning that we observe in the ancient Hellenes and Romans (forum, elected representatives, republic, decision-making in the senate, etc.) and **it links the notion of “synod” to Eucharistic judgement**—something that eventually leads the Holy Fathers to link the term “synod” to Christ Himself or the Holy Trinity—that is, to theology.

2. **Consequently, for the Church “synodality” relates to Christ and the Holy Spirit, and not to any democratic procedure**, as in the ancient Graeco-Roman world; it becomes an event, and in fact, with the Fathers of the Church it is linked to the **Pentecost** (notice how Byzantine iconogra-

¹⁷ Leo, *Ep*, LIV. Cf. R.V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Study*, SPCK London 1953, p. 92.

phy depicts the councils as being in the image of Pentecost; this is of special significance.) **For the Christian faith, synodality (conciliarity) is therefore not human-centered, but Christ-centered** and is not dependent on the judicial achievements of an institution—great though they may be—but on “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” It is for this reason that the Council is named “**hagia synodos**” (holy council): not on account of its virtues, but because it is **related to the most holy God**.¹⁸

3. For the Church, synodality is not the individual affirmation of any person, no matter how “saintly” one may be in his lifetime; it has to do with the **conciliar celebration of the Church**. Synodal identity is entirely **vanished if isolated**, for its ontological condition is relationship. It should be noted that, in the case of many Ecumenical Councils, **none of the bishops were invited personally**,¹⁹ since all were *invited through their regional metropolitans or exarchs*. On the other hand, none of the Ecumenical Councils had the right to neglect the Epistles of the five patriarchs nor to violate the announced catalogue of themes.

4. As elucidated during the Ecumenical councils and contrary to Western theology of conciliarity which spoke of “primacy” over “conciliarity”, Orthodox theology—as **developed by iconophiles and the other theologians**—perceives the Truth that the saints experience, as well as the glory that envelops them, as the “relational” reality of God. **A true council is the one which does not seek automatic verification in any way, but a reception of the Churches. Synodality-conciliarity involves a partaking and communion between the Churches.** When one Council seeks its own truth, it loses its ecumenicity (e.g., Councils in 449 and 754), because in the long run, the future decides about the past. **Any conciliarity that hinges its own virtues, morality, qualifications, proceedings etc. is wrong**, and has nothing to do with the synodality of our Church. From these observations, it becomes obvious that the par excellence **source of synodality-conciliarity is found in the Divine Eucharist**. Let us elaborate somewhat on this position.

¹⁸ Thanking to its affirmation from the, all the elements of the Synod had also acquired the name “holy” (commemoration, horos, fathers, etc), even though by nature they are not holy.

¹⁹ The sole exception was St Augustine, whose lone case was due to his personal reputation.

5. In the imperial *sacra* of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (read at the first session), in one phrase, we understand the connection between synodality and Eucharist. **The Eucharist hands down the testament of faith while synodality safeguards it from deviations, by offering a correct hermeneutical framework.** “On this account we have, by the good will and permission of God, caused you, his most holy Priests, to meet together—you who are **accustomed to dispense his Testimony in the unbloody sacrifice** [i.e., the Eucharist]—that **your decision may be in accordance with the definitions of former Councils** who decreed rightly, and that **the splendor of the Spirit may illumine you in all things.**”²⁰

That’s how the double ending of the Ecumenical Councils is interpreted: panegyric acceptance of those who correctly believe in Christ, something that is affirmed in the Eucharistic unity, and in the cutting off from the body of the Church of all those who deviate from the faith (sanctioned by Eucharistic excommunication).

All Church Councils—*episcopal*, *local* and *ecumenical*—were never above nor against, but always *in* the Church, dependent always on the *ecclesial reception* of the Councils’ decisions by the entire Body.

II. Authority of the Councils and conciliarity today

We have said that there is no criterion of Truth other than conciliar one. This means that in the Church, we do not have teachings, except only in the sense of those which have been verified through a Council. Today few people would even notice this differentiation. Here we deal with **the problem of who, in the end, expresses the truth of the Church against the individuals or groups who pretend to express the truth of the Church.**

From this observation springs a series of truths that are relevant to our subject:

1. The first one is that in this way, a **Council is a solution (way out) of any problem.** If we do not say this, we will omit the truth which is in the very hypostasis of our Church. Such was always the life of the Church, and we cannot erase such a great truth. “Maybe you are correct, maybe

²⁰ «...Συνηγάζομεν ὑμᾶς τοὺς ὀσιωτάτους αὐτοῦ ἱερεῖς, τοὺς διατιθεμένους τὴν διαθήκην αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ θυσίαις ἀναμάρκτοις...» (Mansi xii, p. 1003.). *The Divine Sacra sent by the Emperor Constantine and Irene to the Most Holy and Most Blessed Hadrian, Pope of Old Rome*, in: Labbe and Cossart Concilia, Tom. VII., col. 49. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, Volume XIV*, p. 530.

not, but the Council will decide.” But if the Council is not in the right, another Council is needed to do this. The Council of Hieria (754) was “replaced” (corrected and rejected) by the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787). This was an essential moment. Ultimately, who has the right to decide? One says this, another that. During the 5th century A.D., discussions were taking place about the Nestorianism. For years Nestorius (patriarch of Constantinople, 428–31) accused Cyril of being a heretic, while Cyril wrote him letters: *To Nestorius, “my brother and concelebrant.”* And at the Council of Alexandria he called him “brother and concelebrant.” If Cyril claimed that he possessed the Truth, he would not wait for a Council. It was only after Ephesus (431) that he ceased calling him “brother and concelebrant.” If a contemporary council disputes (or negates) an Ecumenical Council, a new Ecumenical Council should say its word about that.

2. Considering that in the Orthodoxy of today, where the **denial of institutions** is widespread, it is necessary to demonstrate the constitutional character of the Church. Contrary to St. Cyprian of Carthage in the 3rd century, St. Basil the Great in the 4th century, and many others, who always scrutinized his beliefs through the Councils, various charismatics of today pretend to already know what and where the truth is.

a) Let us mention the example when the Church of Carthage faced schism due to the arbitrariness of some confessors who relies upon their own authority to challenge the authority of the Episcopacy, misusing the tradition that originated in the Church of Carthage and approved by the Councils in Numidia around 200 AD, that confessors may, on their request, receive into the church those who have fallen or been excommunicated by a Bishop. As it is known, St. Cyprian did not approve of that practice considering that the question of those fallen away should be solved by a Council. Several such confessors of the faith, taking advantage of Cyprian’s absence, began issuing various letters (*libelli pacis* = letters of reconciliation) to the fallen in the time of oppression, and there was a considerable number of them. Very importantly for our topic, **Cyprian advised the fallen not to approach Communion until a Council has been convened, but to accept rather the status of penitents in the Church.**

b) St. Basil the Great differentiates a *heresy* from a *schism*, which was contrary to the belief of the Council of Carthage (under St Cyprian), who sought the new baptism of heretics (anabaptism). **St. Basil says that they**

should not be baptized, but he suggests that a “greater” (μειζον) synod be called (a Council with a greater number of Bishops) so that they could rightfully decide.

c) At the beginning of the 4th century we note that *councils* received a much greater significance, and St. John Chrysostom is an indicative example. “The second and final exile of John Chrysostom (404) was based on the consideration that his return from his first exile (403) had not been annulled by a council. His enemies produced a canon to support their argument: canon 18 of the council of Antioch (341). John’s followers were quick to point out that this was a canon emanating from an Arian council directed against the saintly Athanasius.”²¹ In *Palladius Vit. Joh. Chrys.*, in a dispute before the emperor Arcadius one of John’s followers challenges their enemies to say that they *subscribe to the faith of the council* (that had decreed this canon.)²²

d) The same logic urged Theodoret of Cyrus, who had been condemned at Ephesus (449), to prove his orthodoxy through a Council. “He had written in praise of the Tome; he had brought his case to the notice of prominent officers of state, and urged them to persuade the new Emperor to summon a General Council, that the cause for which he stood might be vindicated.”²³

e) Interestingly, Theophanes in his *Chronographia*, describes how Patriarch Germanus, after emperor Leo convened a *silentium* in 730 against the holy and venerable icons, to which he had also invited the most holy patriarch Germanus, whom he thought he could persuade to sign a condemnation of the icons, Germanus expounded correctly the true doctrine, resigned from the episcopacy, surrendered his *pallium*, and said: “If I am Jonah, cast me into the sea. **For without an ecumenical council it is im-**

²¹ Peter Van Nuffelen, “The Rhetoric of Rules and the Rule of Consensus,” in: *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, p. 248.

²² *Vit. Joh. Chrys.*, IX 20, IX 60; SC 341, 183-184. Cited in Peter Van Nuffelen, *Ibid*.

²³ Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon...*, p. 124. “When his case came before the Council, the Bishop pleaded that he should be allowed to explain his faith, but there were those many in the assembly who, unable to forget that this was he who had dared to attack the blessed Cyril and had been the friend of Nestorius, again and again shouted him down, and demanded that he should pronounce forthwith a direct anathema on his former friend. This at last he did, and, Marcian having confirmed the Council’s verdict, Theodoret was reinstated as Bishop of Cyrus (Sellers, *Ibid.*; cf. Mansi, vii. 185ff.)

possible for me, O emperor, to innovate in matters of faith.²⁴

Similar examples may be found in many other councils. Therefore, each individual can be asked: “Who are you, Sir, that you are above the Council? How will you prove that you are right?”

3. By the same token, none of the Councils understood their task to be that of a systematic theologian, who “systematizes” faith (the 7th Ecumenical council is a good example.) On the contrary, **the function of the council institution in the Church was and remains a *communio* (κοινωνία) in faith in the Eucharist.** Thus, there should exist a transferring and applying (injection) of the dogmas in the contemporary era—for dogmas have life. Every epoch and generation is called to live by the dogmas in its own manner, without introducing new dogmas. Ever since the first centuries in the Church, Orthodox Bishops from the ends of the universe would come to the Holy and Great Council as bearers of charisma of the cosmic transfiguration of the world, and not as “delegates” from a series of ethnic Churches; as hierarchs of the *conciliar-catholic* episcopacies, which are identified with the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

4. And it is for the same reason that the Church had bestowed the ecumenical authority to the Bishops but also to some Holy Fathers. Many people nowadays would say that one Saint was sole bearer of Truth. For example, one of the participants in the debate in Crete recalled **St. Maximus the Confessor** (580-662), who at one moment in history was, so to speak, the sole bearer of Truth in the Orthodox East. In response to this we should point out that this is a logical problem. Namely, even though **it is true that St. Maximus at that given time expressed the Church, we can say that it was so *de facto* only because the Sixth Ecumenical Council *a posteriori* occurred to proclaim it.**

6. The Council expresses the faith, and the faith must also be expressed through the Council. The God-bearing fathers and theologians were “instruments of the Spirit” not as an indication of their virtues, but because in the Holy Council they “delivered the mystery of theology plainly to the Church.” **It is the affirmation of a father in the Holy Council that justifies the title of “ecumenical teacher”.** Before undergoing the corruption

²⁴ *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, Translated with Introduction and Commentary by C. Mango and R. Scott, Oxford 1997, p. 565.

of pietism, the Orthodox had no difficulty whatsoever with the reverence of the Holy Councils.

The case of St. Athanasius the Great is an eloquent example. For forty years (330-370), he labored ascetically both in the East and in the West, with all his might in order to protect the “homoousion,” but it was at the Council of 362 in Alexandria when he approved the confession of “Easterners” (“**three hypostaseis in one physis**”). St. Athanasius the Great spoke the truth; but had the First or Second Ecumenical Council not come to justify it, how would we have known that he was speaking the truth? The great significance of this Council of St. Athanasius in 362 (this hierarchy—let’s be reminded!—two decades before the Second Ecumenical Council stressed the need of an *amendment* to the Nicaean Creed) lies in the fact that **two opposing groups were brought to acceptance and confession not simply of the Nicaean faith, but to a new interpretation of this faith**. Thanks to this, we have “Neo-Nicaeans” (for instance, the great Cappadocian Fathers), as well as the “neo-Chalcedonians,” and in the 20th century the “Neopatristic” theologians (Georges Florovsky, Justin Popovic, John Meyendorff—just to name a few), etc. This conciliar methodology of healing a schism, clearly applies the principle *re-reception* or *new-reception* of the faith of the Fathers.

Therefore, someone must confirm that something *is*. Without a Council we cannot be certain about anything and without a Council the Church would be disassembled. Would any of the abovementioned Fathers have been a saint, if they had been accepted as teachers from individual groups, but had not received confirmation of the Holy Councils? The answer is most probably no. The rulings issued by universal Councils became binding on all Christians.

Concluding remarks

I have attempted to discuss some of the most fundamental questions I saw touched on in the recent comments on the Holy and Great Council in Crete. There is an overabundance of false information regarding some important aspects of the Great Council, such as: the *composition* of the Council, the *number* of its participants, the way of *signing*, the significance of episcopal *signatures*, the issue of *voting*, etc. Some even today with unquestionable certainty express *a priori* judgments on these issues without consulting historical data that contradict them. These contentions, too,

require comment, because the questions they raise are very broad and are connected with misunderstandings that have a wider circulation.

There is, for example, a divergence of opinion between the position of Met. Hierotheos of Nafpaktos,²⁵ on the one hand, and other scholars such as Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Messinia,²⁶ and especially Metropolitan Maximos Vgenopoulos, on the other, as to the role played by the *episcopacy* in the Councils. It appears that the subject “bishop-council” remains a controversial one, particularly with regard to the Holy and Great Council.

Although I have been concerned with details such as those relating to historical questions, my aim was to set out once again the basic perspective of conciliarity, which in summary are as follows:

a) The number of participants was never decisive for the significance and reception of an Ecumenical council, and it is *incorrect to say that all bishops were invited at these Councils*.²⁷

b) The principle *one bishop–one vote* (εἷς ἀνὴρ–μία ψήφος)²⁸ was not absolute (the Acts of the Councils are clear in this respect, and the role of *acclamation*²⁹ must be taken into consideration). Actually, both at Chalce-

²⁵ “As for the new ecclesiology explicated by Crete it is nothing less than a new, insidious Papalism. First of all, it solidifies the idea that one bishop (in this case the Patriarch of Constantinople) can call a Council. Secondly, and even more perniciously, it degrades the role of bishops in that no one bishop had a vote at all; all had at best was a chance to voice a concern about his particular church’s final vote. A type of muted veto if you will. Thirdly, only a select few bishops were allowed to attend –not invited. Because the entire college of bishops were not invited then it implies that they are not equal and hence not real bishops.” (Met. Hierotheos Vlachos: Texts of “The Holy and Great Council” Distinguished by “Creative Ambiguity” and Other Flaws: <http://www.monomakhos.com/met-hierotheos-vlachos-texts-of-the-holy-and-great-council-distinguished-by-creative-ambiguity-and-other-flaws/>)

²⁶ Οι αποφάσεις της Αγίας και Μεγάλης Συνόδου και το πρόβλημα της πρόσληψης (réception) αυτών, <http://www.amen.gr/article/oi-apofaseis-tis-agias-kai-megalis-synodou-kai-to-provlimatis-proslipsis-rception-afton>

²⁷ Cf. Anna Crabbe, “The Invitation List to the Council of Ephesus and Metropolitan Hierarchy in the Fifth Century”, JTS 32, pp. 369-400.

²⁸ Cf. the structure: εἷς ἀνὴρ–μία ψήφος established by some modern thinkers and assumed by some Serbian bishops. This implies the subject-object split and locates the question of Truth in the bridge between the conciliar universality and the individual topicality (bishop as deciding on behalf of his diocese).

²⁹ At Chalcedon, the Creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople, and Cyril’s letters to Nestorius (*Obloquentur*) and John of Antioch (*Laetentur coeli*) were received with acclamation. Leo’s Tome was also greeted with shouts of approval. On the other hand, not attention was paid to the Illyrians who pleaded that mercy should be shown to the heads of the Synod of Ephesus, and even

don and in Crete, the acts of meetings are composed of both the sermons or the addresses and acclamations: both being essential to the conclusions. This helps to explain the fidelity of Crete to the Ecumenical Councils.

c) The *signatures* had more of a *symbolic value* (which is not little) than an essential role (for example, in the Acts of the Councils we see that some bishops' signatures are put at some sessions while on others they are absent, and nobody mentions that as a problem).

d) *Voting* at the Councils was principally determined by the vote or stance of the head (primate or senior bishop) of delegations of the local Churches. Wider geographical regions, such as patriarchate or archdiocese, would sometimes express themselves with one vote per region and in that way they expressed their *consensus* or φρόνημα; a good example is the Patriarchate of Alexandria at Chalcedon³⁰. Ancient synods were meant to be consensual. So, the primary purpose of the holy canons was to remove obstacles to the emergence of a true consensus, and not the creation of a fully-fledged procedure.³¹ This does not, however, imply that procedure played no role at all.

e) *Not signing* a conciliar decision (or opposing them) by *particular* bishops (remember Roman legates) would not affect the final outcome of a Council or its reception.³²

* * *

The Holy and Great Synod is the par excellence a *communio eccle-*

to Dioscorus. Cf. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, p. 111.

³⁰ Ancient Epitome of Canon 30 of Chalcedon has the following: "It is the custom of the Egyptians that *none subscribe without the permission of their Archbishop*. Wherefore they are not to be blamed who did not subscribe the Epistle of the holy Leo until an Archbishop had been appointed for them. Cf. Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p. ?

³¹ Cf. Peter Van Nuffelen, "The Rhetoric of Rules and the Rule of Consensus," in: *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, p. 257.

³² "Like the Senate the council was a deliberative assembly, each bishop having equal rights in its discussions. Like the imperial magistrate who presided over the Senate, the principal bishop first read out a program designed to keep discussion to the point at issue. The assembled bishops were then interrogated and each offered his *sententia*, his official response. **A final vote was usually not necessary, for the *sententiae* most often issued in unanimity, the result of previous negotiation.** The unanimous decision was circulated among the faithful in a synodal letter. Bishops then felt themselves bound to abide by the decisions thus promulgated." (Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*, Collegeville, Minnesota 1983, ctp. 23).

siarum, “the communion of churches”; it is the zenith of conciliarity, not only because it offers the Churches the most visible and tangible union—Eucharistic and doctrinal unity in Christ and the Holy Spirit—but also because it constitutes **the portrayal of the Kingdom of God**. That is what the teaching of the Fathers aspired to, which is the conciliar verification of their theology. This point is forgotten and overlooked by many contemporary theologians, even Orthodox ones, who especially in our day tend to relate synodality to ideological declarations.

A Council, **as a feast, a criterion, and an event of the Church**, is an opportunity for all to refresh and update the charismatic and dogmatic experience of the Church. In modern culture, where the existential question of man and society is posed in a strident way, the contribution of the Orthodox Church, which claims to be “**the Church of the Councils**” (Florovsky, Karmiris, Schmemmann), can be great. A Church that acts in a conciliar/synodal way has to do with man, and not with an ideological movement. The new conciliar/synodal era enables us to take concrete steps to increase the voice of the local Churches in the witness and governance of the universal Church.

Under such ecclesial conscience, the bishops of the Council in Crete displayed a self-conscious awareness (*phronema*) in maintaining direct continuity with the work of previous Councils (which they cited in their Message, Encyclical, and other documents.) I hope that the entire Orthodox world will grasp that the Council is not a conference of administrative directors or experts, but a gathering of Bishops: those who have an empirical function of spiritual paternity.

Let me conclude with a quote from the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council in Crete.

*Therefore, the Holy and Great Council of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church constitutes an authentic witness to faith in Christ, the God-man, the Only-begotten Son and Word of God who, through His Incarnation, through all His work on earth, through His Sacrifice on the Cross and through His Resurrection, revealed the Triune God as infinite love. Therefore, with one voice and one heart we address this message of “the hope that is in us” (cf. 1 Pet 3.15) not only to the sons and daughters of our most holy Church, but also to every human being, “whether near or far off” (Eph 2.17).*³³

³³ From the *Encyclical* of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, Crete 2016.