

Critique of the Church through the Prism of the Panorthodox Council¹

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Speaking about the Panorthodox council, which is as much expected as it is debated, we should put it into a more general context of other councils of the Orthodox Church. Some people, especially those who are afraid of this council, say it would be an ecumenical council, the eighth one, given there have already been seven ecumenical councils. Because eighth is a special number loaded with eschatological expectations, they say it will be probably the last one and connected with the coming of the antichrist. As the antichrist scares them so the upcoming council does. Alas, this council is not going to be an ecumenical one. Even if it was, it would not be clear whether it is the eighth in sequence, but maybe ninth or even tenth. Indeed, according to the testimony of St Maximos the Confessor in the seventh century, the council of Lateran in 649 that condemned Monothelitism, was ecumenical². Another council, held in Constantinople in 879-880, ended the schism between the western and eastern Churches caused by the disputes around election of St Photios to the patriarchal throne. It thus demonstrated the same power of reconciliation that the earlier ecumenical councils did, and therefore was received by many in the Orthodox world as ecumenical³. The famous “Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs” (1848), for instance, referred to it as ecumenical (§6). The same may apply to the so-

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1. The paper is based on the talk “The Pan-Orthodox Council: Behind the Iconostasis” delivered on April 16, 2016, at the Christ the Savior parish of the Orthodox Church in America in Cincinnati, OH.

2. See *Opuscula Theologica et Polemica* (CPG 7697.11), *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 91, col. 11.137–140.

3. See, for instance, the thesis by KONSTANTINOS VASILAKIS, “The Ecumenical Status of the Council of Constantinople (879-880),” defended in 2011 at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School.

called “hesychast” councils held in the fourteenth century. Their definitions have been accepted by the Orthodox church unanimously as well, which makes one think of their ecumenical authority. So, if we trust St Maximos, St Photios, and St Gregory Palamas, the upcoming council, if it was ecumenical, would be probably not eighth, but ninth, tenth, or even eleventh. It would be then deprived of its eschatological flavour.

Nevertheless, it is not so important how many ecumenical councils have taken or will take place, if we believe that Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday (Heb 13:8), and that the gates of Hades will not overpower the church (Matt 16:18). The fear of the eighth council stems from distrust in the Church. It dwells on the unconscious belief that the Church's Head and Spirit can be remote from her to protect her. People who have such a fear, effectively admit that the Church can be decapitated and deprived of the Spirit: turns to a beheaded and soulless body, which can be only dead.

Anyways, as it has been mentioned, the upcoming council is not going to be ecumenical. It looks more like a conference of representatives from the local Orthodox Churches. The idea of every single ecumenical council was to summon all bishops of the entire Church. Of course, not all of them could come because of the problems of transportation; those who stayed outside the Roman empire, could not always cross its borders. Nevertheless, all of them were supposed to come, thus securing the pleroma of the Church to take infallible decisions. This council will be attended only by a strictly limited number of bishops from each local Church, even though they do not have any difficulty of crossing the borders or getting on the plane. Let us make some calculations. Each local Church is supposed to send 24 representatives most. Moreover, the Orthodox Church in America will not send its representatives, as it is not recognised as local by some Churches. It means that the maximum number of the participants will be 336. In reality, however, the number of representatives will be less. This will make the participation in the Panorthodox council matching the number of the fathers of the Second council in Nicaea (787), but this is only in absolute numbers. The maximal possible number of bishops participating in the Panorthodox council will constitute only 35% of all Orthodox canonical bishops in the world. Again, the real percentage will be less. This will be not enough to represent the pleroma of the Church. Moreover, only the vote of the entire delegations will matter, and not the votes of individual bishops. This means that the bishops will not represent their dioceses, but their local churches, which is an-

other difference with the ecumenical councils. All this will make the Panorthodox council qualify not for an ecumenical one, but for a conference of representatives.

Another reason why this council is not ecumenical, has to do not so much with form, as with content: unlike all ecumenical councils in the past, this one is not going to solve or even touch any serious theological issue. Moreover, it can happen only if any serious issue is avoided. Thus, the outcome of the Panorthodox council in Crete is going to be different from the outcomes of the legitimate ecumenical councils. The latter produced urgent theological documents, horoi or definitions, and canons that the Church was unable to adopt in any other way save the ecumenical council. The value of the ecumenical councils consisted in the documents they produced. It seems that the upcoming council is not going to be like that - primarily because the conservative circles in the Church are scared of such decisions. The Church hierarchs, in turn, are scared to scare the radical conservatives. In result, they hesitate to produce any document, which would go beyond the perimeter of the documents adopted so far at various ecclesial fora. Indeed, if we read the projects of the documents proposed for the upcoming council, they are the watered down versions of the texts, which have been discussed and adopted by the synods, their committees, and their subcommittees during last decades. Not a single document of the council seems to be different from the piles of other texts produced by the Church bureaucrats. The nature and purpose of these documents are not to change the Church or even to challenge it, but to explain and justify the status quos, which many in the Church seem to enjoy.

Even though the points of the documents prepared for the council have been well known since the 1960s, when its preparation began, there is a new wave of criticism regarding them. However, this criticism misses an important feature of the upcoming council - it is not really about the documents, but about other things. The main outcome of the council is not going to be a set of the texts, but the council per se. The very fact that the Panorthodox council can happen and the bishops from different local Churches can come together, is its most important outcome. The Council will demonstrate us that we as Orthodox can summon it and conclude it without scandals. This outcome will be important as such - we should not underestimate it.

There is another outcome of the council, which I would like to highlight. This is the very process of preparation of the council. This process has already bene-

fited the Church. The benefit of it is not less, if not more than the expected benefits of the council as such. The process of the preparation to the Council functions, as it were, as an x-ray machine for the body of our Church. Such machines reveal the internal problems of the body unseen otherwise. In the same way, the process of the preparation of the council has demonstrated the internal problems of the contemporary Orthodox Church. They would have remained unidentifiable without the council and the process of getting to it. Probably, it was providential that the process of the preparation for the council took so long, over fifty years, because during this time we had many chances to check the health of the Church's body.

Having said this, I would like to ask a relevant question: can the body of the Church have internal fractures and other diseases? Our everyday experiences in the Church demonstrate that there are problems in the body of the Church. That we can identify such problems is not a problem at all. Moreover, this is an important indication that the ecclesial body is not ephemeral or imagined - it is alive and breathing. Such an observation corresponds to the Orthodox teaching that the Church is a theandric organism consisting of divine and human elements. When the Church has problems pertinent to her human side, she is real and true. If she does not, she is rather docetic, not real. Only those ecclesial bodies, which wrestle all the time with problems, can be the Church. The problems that the Church faces have never been minor. They have been so severe that would have destroyed any purely human organisation. But the Church survives them, which means she is headed by Christ and imbued by the Spirit. I will dare to assume that the more severe are the problems, the more churchly is the body that struggles with them. We the Orthodox, therefore, should not be afraid to recognise the problems, which are pertinent to our Church. Recognition of the problems of the Church is a part of the recognition of the Church *per se*.

Another connected question is: can the Church err? The answer to this question depends on what we understand as the voice of the Church. What is the voice of the Church? We the Orthodox believe that every voice in the Church, when it is single, can err. Unlike in the Roman Catholic Church, even the Patriarchs for us make false theological statements. Actually, in the history of the Church, most heresies were promulgated by the Patriarchs. Even the councils that pretended to be ecumenical, erred. This was the case, for instance, with the council of Hieria in 754, which promoted iconoclasm. This was a large venue. Only the council of Chalcedon in 451 had more delegates than this one. It gath-

ered with the self-awareness that it is a truly ecumenical council. And yet it turned to be false. How then the Church does not fail, if every single voice in her can fail? This is because the Church always speaks in many voices. Moreover, in order not to fail, the Church *must* speak in many voices. Only the polyphony of the Church can secure her infallibility. Only when the voices abandon their hierarchical solitude and join together, they utter truth.

What are these many voices of the Church and how they come together to witness truth? The *pleroma* that endorses the polyphony of the Church is the process of reception. It is the reception of the Church's voices by all members of the Church. The way how we receive the many voices of the Church secures that these voices testify truth. Securing truth is not a one-way road - it always goes two ways. On the one hand, they are the voices uttered by the people of God and those in various hierarchical structures. On the other hand, it is a feedback, the way how we respond to those voices.

Our response to the voices should be not only parenetic, but also critical. In responding to the voices of the Church, we should take them seriously and responsibly. That is why we are allowed to criticise the shortcomings of the Church - it is an essential part of our reception of the Church's voices that secures the Church's infallibility. Our role in the Church as citizens of the Kingdom of God is similar to our role as members of the civil society. On the one hand, we need to be devoted to our heavenly *politeia*. On the other hand, we should avoid any paternalistic model of citizenship. Our contribution to the common good of the Church should be responsible and constructive.

This understanding will lead us to answering the question: can we criticise the Church as the body of Christ? In order to answer this question, we need to immediately clarify that criticising the Church is not the same as criticising Christ or the Spirit. Our critique should apply to the human side of the Church only. When we avoid criticising the Church under the excuse of not touching the holy, we thus undermine the humanity of the Church. It means that we not only can, but we should criticise the Church, because this would be a token of our participation in the reality of the theandric organism of the Church, and of our appreciation of the double divine-human character of the Church. When we criticise the Church, we are serious about her and we recognise her fullness and integrity.

We are eligible to criticise the Church, because the Church is us. We are human beings, and as such we constitute the intrinsic part of the reality of the

Church. As far as we fall, our shortcomings are a part of the Church. By recognising the shortcomings of the Church we recognise our belonging to her. If we do not recognise the ecclesial faults, we admit a distance between the Church and ourselves. We then effectively expel ourselves from the Church, and we fail to understand what is the Church. Therefore, by associating ourselves with the Church and by acknowledging ourselves a part of the Church, we acknowledge the faults of the Church. Following the same rationale, we also learn how to deal with the acknowledged faults of the Church. We should deal with them as with our own sins: remembering that by criticising the Church we criticise ourselves. Just as in the case with our own sins, we should confess the shortcomings of the Church with pain. We should not satisfy ourselves with critique only, but we have also to do something to correct them. As we do not want to misrepresent ourselves in the eyes of others when we sin, so we should not make the shortcomings we observe in the Church an entertainment.

As any other function or faculty in the Church, the function of critique can be easily abused. We can end up in criticising the Church as if she was a solely human design. We can even enjoy criticism and get addicted to it. This happens when we assume that we are better than what we criticise. But we are not, because, as I have mentioned earlier, we are the Church. We cannot be better than what we criticise. When we assume that we are better than what we criticise in the Church, we again create a distance between ourselves and the Church, exactly as in the case when we do not dare to touch the Church critically. Both approaches are unhealthy. The healthy criticism is always done with pain and responsibility. The combination of dare and responsibility in the Church's critique is encoded in the canons that deal with criticism. They, on the one hand, urge the members of the Church to criticise other members and the leadership. On the other hand, they require that the accusations should be double checked (Apost. 75).

This double approach is a part of the bigger picture of the ecclesiological reflections throughout the twentieth century. This century has been branded as "the century of ecclesiology"⁴. Indeed, "ecclesia" became the key word in the most theological treatises of the last century. Among the main questions of the

4. See OTTO DIBELIUS, *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche: Geschichte, Betrachtung, Umschau und Ziele*, Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1927.

most ecclesiological inquiries in this period has become, how we explain the gap between the Church as we believe in her and the Church as she appears to us through our everyday experiences of living in her. Quite a number of observers within the Church have noticed this gap. Many tried to explain this gap, which critique tries effectively to bridge⁵.

We should not be overoptimistic about solving the Church's problems. The Church has been and will be always like what she is now. If we study the history of the Church carefully, we will find out that the Church has already, sometimes repeatedly, demonstrated the weakness we try to tackle. The purpose of the struggle with the Church's problems therefore is not to solve the problems, but by trying to solve them to become better and more mature members of the Church. Solving the Church's problems is like Sisyphus's labour - it never reaches the solution of the problem. But it does not mean that it is meaningless: it makes us stronger, more mature, more members of the Church. Through the contribution to the common good of the Church, we turn to responsible citizens of the Kingdom of God. We come to the Church as outsiders, and in the end of our life, we need to become her insiders. This transformation is not something granted, but achieved with great pain and labour. This labour is the Sisyphus's one of wrestling with the Church's weaknesses, which make us stronger. As every next generation of the Church's members have to get mature, they need to repeat the same exercise of solving the Church's problems. The next generation will do it again.

In the light of what has been said about the faculty of criticism in the Church, what are the problems that the x-ray machine of the upcoming Panorthodox council has highlighted? Here I would like to indicate only some of them. One is what I would call "jurisdictionism". This happens when the local Churches, which exercise sovereign jurisdiction, function as independent corporations that struggle to protect their corporate rights and privileges. Many current inter-Orthodox conflicts are in their nature similar to the clashes of interests in the world of big corporations. Like, for instance, the conflict between the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch over the Orthodox parish in Qatar. This conflict of corporate interests has endangered the very possibility of the Panorthodox council.

5. See CYRIL HOVORUN, *Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles on Church Awareness*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 95-124.

Another issue that the preparation to the Council has brought up is diverse between theology and the Church's administration. The documents that the Council will consider, have been prepared not so much by the theologians, as by the Church bureaucrats. Some hope that the council will utilise a sort of theological periti, who were highly instrumental during the Vatican II. However, I believe this is unlikely to happen. It should be said that there was an attempt to consult theologians, when the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew gathered them at the Phanar January 2016. This was a helpful initiative, but not sufficient to address the deficit of theological input to the Council.

Radically conservative reactions to the Council constitute another problem. Reception of the voices of the Church is important, as we have mentioned earlier. In this case, however, we deal with the reactions to what has not happened yet. The radically conservative reactions have highlighted the problem of culture wars in the modern Orthodoxy. These wars have been exported to our Church from outside, and they threaten the unity of the Church. They constitute a new divide within her, between the so-called conservative and so-called liberal Christians. They try to eliminate the other side of the divide. The culture wars within Orthodoxy have produced new Orthodoxies and new heresies. For the "conservatives", whatever is conservative looks like Orthodox, and the whatever is "liberal" is in effect heretical. The same applies to the liberal side of the divide. The two factions constantly look for opportunities to anathematise each other. This is instead of learning to share the same Churchly space. This divide has become exacerbated in the wake of the upcoming Council.

Last but not least, there is a problem provoked by the war in Ukraine. It has continued the war in Georgia in 2008. In both cases of the recent European wars, they have been inter-Orthodox, with the Orthodox killing the other Orthodox. Not a single Orthodox Church reacted to this. scandal The propaganda has presented both wars as geopolitical wrestling between the East and West, which is a misrepresentation of both conflicts. In result, the geopolitical rationale has prevailed over the moral judgements in accordance with the Gospel. I think this is a major challenge for the global Orthodoxy. The council, unfortunately, chose not to discuss it. Even more unfortunate is that if the council decided to tackle the Ukrainian issue, it would not happen in the foreseeable future. Even the Churches who rebuke the Russian-Ukrainian war, prefer not to utter their standpoint, in order to make the Council happen. I think this is a problem that

the council has highlighted. I would formulate this problem as prevalence of the issues of (the eastern) identity over basic morality.

In conclusion, the Council will be good for the Church whatever decisions it will embark upon. It has already brought to the Church a plenty of benefits. Among them a more precise diagnosis of the diseases inside the Church's body. The council is provocative, but not in the sense, in which the radical conservatives perceive it. It urges us to better understand ourselves: where we are, what we are, and where we go.