THE HOLY AND GREAT COUNCIL OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AS A MANIFESTATION OF SYNODALITY

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that has been convened on Crete on 20-26 June 2016 can be regarded as a genuine manifestation of synodality. Our paper will first present the notion of synodality of the Church according to the texts of the Holy and Great Council. Then it will reflect on the Holy and Great Council as a process of synodality: from its preparation towards its convocation, deliberations and the process of its reception. Finally, it will discuss contemporary problems of synodality within the Orthodox Church as manifested at the gathering of the Holy and Great Council.

Synodality of the Church according to the texts of the Council

In his opening address at the inaugural session of the Holy and Great Council on 20 June 2016, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew gave a very accurate definition of what synodality in the Orthodox Church is, starting by recalling the words of St. John Chrysostom for whom “the term ‘church’ is defined as a system and synod”¹. Therefore, according to the Ecumenical Patriarch, synodality is intimately linked to the nature of the Church and assures its unity:

“The synodal institution that we are today called to serve in its supreme form derives its origin from the depths of the mystery of the Church. It is not merely a matter of canonical tradition, which we have received and preserve, but of fundamental theological and doctrinal truth, without which there is no salvation. In confessing our faith in the holy Creed in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, at the same time we proclaim her synodality which incarnates in history all those characteristics of the mystery of the Church, that is to say, her unity, holiness, universality and apostolicity. Without synodality, the unity of the Church is severed, the sanctity of its members is reduced to mere individual morality and articulation about virtue, catholicity is sacrificed in favor of particular individual, collective, national and other secular interests or intentions, and the apostolic message falls prey to various heresies and ruses of human reason.”²

From there, the Ecumenical Patriarch concluded that “the Church is by nature ‘synodal’ because it is the ‘Body of Christ’ and the ‘communion of the Holy Spirit,’ which ‘constitutes the

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¹. John Chrysostom, Commentary on Psalm 149, 1.
entire institution of the Church,’ as we chant on the great feast of Pentecost.’” He also reminded that according to the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church, synods and councils should meet regularly in order to administer the Church:

“Following the model of the Apostolic Council and motivated by a consciousness that it comprises the Body of Christ and communion of the Holy Spirit, the early Church exalted the synodal institution as the supreme and final arbiter of its life, not only in exceptional circumstances of dubiousness and disputation, but also as a means of administration on a permanent basis. Thus, the First Ecumenical Council instituted regular biannual synods (Canon 5) to settle differences among Church members, both bishops and other clergy. Moreover, a series of local councils determined the method of Church administration by formulating the Sacred Canons, which since that time also constitute the law of the Church. From that time, only synodal decisions – and not positions or opinions of individuals or any kind of groups – carry validity and authority for the members of the Church both on administrative as well as on doctrinal matters.”

The Ecumenical Patriarch stressed that synodality is the fundamental principle for Church unity as well as the correct frame for primacy, since there cannot be primacy without synodality:

“The synodal institution became not only the supreme arbiter for the life and faith of the Church’s members, but also the visible bond of communion between the local Churches on both the regional and global levels. The Metropolitan and Patriarchal system developed in the early Church was grounded on synodality, as this was defined by the 34th Apostolic Canon, according to which all bishops in every eparchy or broader geographical area must always make decisions in the presence of the ‘first’ among them, regarding him as their ‘head,’ while he too must always decide and act in agreement with them. This golden rule of synodality has ever since also defined the understanding of primacy in our Orthodox Church, which it promotes as a model for all Christian churches and confessions.”

The Ecumenical Patriarch also expressed the necessity of conveying the Holy and Great Council in link with the practice of synodality, stating 4 major theses:

1. “Synodality constitutes an expression and demonstration of the mystery of the Church itself.”

2. “The convocation of the present Council was also mandated by reasons to settle internal matters of the Orthodox Church.” With regards to this thesis, the Patriarch reminded that the system of autocephaly has its roots in synodality, in the ancient institution of the pentarchy, and therefore he stated that while “this structure is canonically and ecclesiologically correct, the danger of its conversion into a kind of ‘federation of Churches,’ each of which promotes its own interests and ambitions – which themselves are not always of a strictly ecclesiastical nature – renders necessary the application of synodality.”
1. The problem of the so called “Orthodox diaspora” which led to the not strictly canonical situation whereby more than one Bishop exists in one and the same city or region ought to be resolved through a synodal decision.

2. The Orthodox participation in Ecumenical Movement for the restoration of unity between Christians on the basis of decisions reached at Pan-Orthodox conferences ought to be confirmed by a Council in order to formulate a uniform position of the Orthodox Church.

The Ecumenical Patriarch also addressed the problem of fundamentalism which exists within the Orthodox Church today and saw the root of its problem in the lack of synodality. He reminded:

“Our faith is interpreted and proclaimed infallibly only in synodal manner by the Church. Unfortunately, however, there is in our time, the widespread phenomenon of certain groups or individuals who lay claim to infallibility for themselves in the interpretation of the Fathers and of the Orthodox faith and proclaim all those who disagree with them as ‘heretics,’ arousing the faithful sometimes even against their canonical shepherds. In this context, which could prove extremely dangerous for the unity of the Church, people tend to forget that the boundaries between heresy and Orthodoxy are defined synodally, and only synodally, whether it is a matter pertaining to old or more recent teachings. No individual or institution except the sacred Councils is able to pronounce views or positions as ‘heretical,’ thus claiming for himself infallibility.”

The texts of the Holy and Great Council repeated some of these fundamental theses. For instance, the Encyclical underlined that “the Orthodox Church, in her unity and catholicity, is the Church of Councils, from the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15.5-29) to the present day. The Church in herself is a Council, established by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, in accord with the apostolic words: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15.28).”

Similarly, the Message affirmed that the Orthodox Church is not merely a federation of local Churches, but one ecclesial body that should be administrated in a synodal way:

“The Orthodox Church expresses her unity and catholicity ‘in Council’. Conciliarity pervades her organization, the way decisions are taken and determines her path. The Orthodox Autocephalous Churches do not constitute a federation of Churches, but the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Each local Church as she offers the holy Eucharist is the local presence and manifestation of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. In regard to the Orthodox Diaspora in various countries of the world, it was decided to continue with the institution of Episcopal Assemblies until such time as canonical rigor can be implemented. These assemblies are composed of the canonical bishops appointed by each Autocephalous Church and these bishops continue to remain subject to their respective Churches. The due function of these Episcopal Assemblies guarantees respect for the Orthodox principle of conciliarity.”

3. Encyclical, 3.

The message also underlined that “during the deliberations of the Holy and Great Council the importance of the Synaxes of the Primates which had taken place was emphasised and the proposal was made for the Holy and Great Council to become a regular Institution to be convened every seven or ten years.” By saying this, the Holy and Great Council has perhaps initiated a new era of synodality in the Orthodox Church on the universal level. Therefore, we can hope that the Holy and Great Council will become in the future a synodal institution of the Orthodox Church worldwide.

The important text on the Relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world also responded to the problem of fundamentalism by stating that only the synodal institution, according to the Orthodox tradition, is empowered to deliberate in orthodoxy and heresy:

“The Orthodox Church considers all efforts to break the unity of the Church, undertaken by individuals or groups under the pretext of maintaining or allegedly defending true Orthodoxy, as being worthy of condemnation. As evidenced throughout the life of the Orthodox Church, the preservation of the true Orthodox faith is ensured only through the conciliar system, which has always represented the highest authority in the Church on matters of faith and canonical decrees.”

The Holy and Great Council as a process of synodality

While reflecting on the notion of synodality of the Church, it is extremely important to take into consideration not only the texts and the acts of the Holy and Great Council, but also look at this significant historical event as a process of synodality: from its preparation towards its convocation, deliberations and the process of its reception.

Indeed, the First Panorthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference of Chambésy in 1976 established a method for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council. A secretariat for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council was established at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy. It ought to receive proposals from each Patriarchal or Autocephalous Orthodox Church in relation to each of the ten topics that had been retained on the agenda and to produce a report that ought to be subsequently examined by an inter-Orthodox preparatory committee convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch and that ought to meet as many times as necessary until a consensus would be reached between the various Patriarchal and Autocephalous Orthodox Churches on the specific subject.

The text that thus reflected the consensus reached was then sent by the secretariat to the Holy Synod of each local Orthodox Church to be ratified, or to be commented on once again. The final comments of each Church ought to be sent to the secretariat, which took them into account for the final text, which ought to be discussed and adopted by a panorthodox pre-conciliar conference convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch. This consisted the last step for the development of texts on the different topics of the agenda and the Council ought to discuss and

5. Relations, 22.
approve them on the last instance. This shows the long and complex process of the preparation of the Holy and Great Council, based on the principle of consensus, which was by itself a synodal process. It was not the fruit of some individuals, or of one local Church. The whole process of preparation of the Holy and Great Council was in itself an expression of synodality of the Orthodox Church as a whole.

When the Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches gathered in Constantinople at the see of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, at the Phanar, in March 2014, it adopted the rule that all decisions in the Council’s work will be taken unanimously on the principle of consensus. This of course can be seen as an innovation, since according to canon 6 of the First Ecumenical Council, speaking about the election of bishops, synodal decisions ought to be taken by a majority of vote. But this innovation wanted to avoid the appearance of any schism in the Orthodox Church, and intended that a consensus could be reached through a synodal process. The principle of consensus reflects of course the ideal situation. Nevertheless, canon 6 of the First Ecumenical Council can be a life saver in some cases, in order to avoid a dead end, when it states: “If, however, to the common vote of all, though reasonable and in accordance with an ecclesiastical canon, two or three men object on account of a private quarrel, let the vote of the majority prevail”.

The Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches that met in Chambésy in January 2016, which finally approved the six topics on the agenda of the Council”, taking into account the difficult political situation in the Middle East and especially the tense relations between Turkey and Russia in particular at that time, decided unanimously to convoke the Holy and Great Council at the Orthodox Academy of Crete from 18 to 27 June 2016. The Synaxis also adopted the text of the Regulation of the organization and operation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. According to the latter, delegations of each local Orthodox Church each ought to be composed of 24 of her bishops, as decided at the Synaxis of the Primates of 2014, and “may be accompanied by special advisors, clergymen, monks and lay people, but the number of these cannot normally exceed the number of six members, as well as three assistants for each Church” (Article 3). Moreover, a Panorthodox Council Secretariat was established, “composed of a hierarch of each delegation and the Secretary for the preparation of the Holy and Great Council, which supervises the work of the Secretariat” (Article 6). Although the regulations prescribed one vote per Church, the discussions and deliberations were extremely free in order to reach a consensus between the Churches. Perhaps, one can say that the Holy and Great Council was the one who emphasized and encouraged the most the process of synodality.


7. 1) The Orthodox diaspora; 2) Autonomy and the manner of its proclamation; 3) The sacrament of marriage and its impediments, 4) The importance of fasting and its observance today; 5) The relationship of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world; 6) The mission of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world.
With regards to the absence, at the very last moment, of four local autocephalous Churches at the council\(^8\), one should not forget on the one hand the process of preparation of the documents, in which all the Churches without exception had been involved, and on the other hand the process of reception of a council. For instance, most of the hierarchs of the oikoumene did not participate in the deliberations of the Ecumenical Councils. What granted them the ecumenical character was not the universal representation of the episcopate, but the reception of a council by the oikoumene. Therefore, with regards of the process of reception of the Holy and Great Council, one should hope that its documents will finally be accepted in due time by the entire Orthodox Church, that is to say by all the local autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

### Problems of synodality within the Orthodox Church as manifested by the Holy and Great Council

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church is a genuine icon of the contemporary Orthodox Church, with all her theological and spiritual wealth, but also with all her contemporary problems. The absence of four local autocephalous Churches at the council was the reason of a severe critique by some people who stated that the Holy and Great Council has not been a pan-orthodox one as it was planned to be. Some even saw in this absence a certain failure of the council. Nevertheless, we see in this absence the symptom of an illness in the practice of synodality in the Orthodox Church. While addressing a group of professors and graduate students from the Skopje in April 2018, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew stressed that when a Synaxis of Orthodox Primates is being convened, the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s attempt is to put all subjects on the table and to discuss them with honesty and sincerity in a synodal way. He recalled that at the last Synaxis of the Orthodox Primates in January 2016 in Chambésy, all issues were discussed, even when some difficulties arose, and the pre-conciliar texts were approved. It was decided unanimously to convey the council on Crete. Everyone signed the decisions, and then, without saying anything during five months, at the last moment four Churches decided not to come. Nevertheless, the Council took place since all had agreed to convey it and had signed the decisions together.

The problem or danger in the contemporary exercise of synodality in the Orthodox Church would be to consider that there could be a synodality without a primate. But the canonical tradition of the Church stipulates that there cannot be a synod without a primate neither a primate without a synod.

The paradigm of synodality is found in Apostolic Canon 34 which offers a description of the correlation between the protos and the other bishops of each region (at the regional level):

> “The bishops of the people of a province or region [ethnos] must recognize the one who is first [protos] amongst them, and consider him to be their head [kephale], and not do anything important without his consent [gnome]; each bishop may only do what concerns his own diocese [paroikia] and its dependent territories. But the first [protos] cannot do anything without the

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\(^8\) The Churches of Antioch, Russia, Bulgaria and Georgia did not participate.
consent of all. For in this way concord [homonoia] will prevail, and God will be praised through the Lord in the Holy Spirit”9.

The synodality, as it was expressed on the regional level in the metropolitan system, has become the paradigm for synodality within the patriarchal system and within the system of autocephaly which derive from the metropolitan system. It should be also the paradigm for synodality at the universal level, since there has never been any other model of synodality within the Orthodox Church.

But within the practice of synodality at the regional level, it was always the prerogatives of the protos, of the metropolitan to convey the synod according to the canonical tradition. Canon 19 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council reminded the ancient canonical of the Church that “bishops [ought] to meet twice a year in convention somewhere in each province, wherever the bishop of the Metropolis [i.e. metropolitan] designates”10. The same was repeated by canon 8 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council stating that “synods or councils of the bishops in each province must be held every year in whatever place the bishop of the metropolis [i.e. metropolitan] may designate”11.

But, according to the canons of the Church, participating in a synod is not merely a privilege of the bishops of a region, but an obligation. Bishops, members of the Synod, cannot ignore the convocation without a major reason. Canon 40 of the Council of Laodicea stipulates that bishops that have been convoked to a synod can be absent only for a serious reason (for instance illness or due to a great age)12. For this reason, Canon 19 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council and canon 8 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council stipulate that bishops that ignore their convocation to a synod, although being in good health and free from every indispensable and necessary occupation, ought “to be reprimanded in a brotherly way”13.

When considering the process of convocation of the Holy and Great Council, we can definitely say that it reflected a spirit of great synodality, since it was not only the decision of the protos to convey the council, according to his canonical prerogatives, but his decision was taken in consensus with all the other primates of the local autocephalous Orthodox Churches gathered at the Synaxis of Primates (Chambésy 2016). Therefore, the unilateral decision of four local Churches to withdraw from this unanimous decision to convey the Holy and Great Council contradicts the very spirit of synodality and synodal decisions. Furthermore, their absence at the

Holy and Great Council, without any pertinent reason, is contrary to their obligations vis-à-vis the very fundamental principles of synodality, as expressed and normalised in the holy and sacred canons of the Orthodox Church. It shows also a total ignorance, or even a rejection, of primacy on the universal level within the Orthodox Church, regarding her not as one Church, but rather as merely some kind of confederation or communion of independent local (or even national) Churches, which contradicts the very spirit of Orthodox ecclesiology, as it has been stated by the Holy and Great Council.

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To conclude, one should stress, when reflecting on the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, that its success is that it actually took place. This historical event should be perceived and received as a genuine manifestation of synodality at the beginning of the 21st century. Facing tendencies towards fragmentation, isolation or division, it has desired to witness the Orthodox Church as One. It has reminded that is within synodality that the unity and the orthodoxy of the Church is guaranteed. We hope that the greatest contribution of the Holy and Great Council is to have initiated a new era of synodality in the Orthodox Church at the universal level, at an epoch of globalisation, when the pastoral problems encountered by each local autocephalous Church, due to a growing secularisation of the world, is very much similar and need a common synodal response.