

An Appeal on the Future of Pan-Orthodoxy

May 15, 2018

The Leavetaking of Pascha

To His All-Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, and Ecumenical Patriarch; to the Most-Blessed Primates of the Most-Holy Local Orthodox Churches:

Christ is risen!

Your All-Holiness,

Your Beatitudes,

In June of 2016, approximately two years ago, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church convened in Crete after fifty years of conciliar activity amongst the local Churches. However, the hope that the Council would have strengthened the bond of love that exists between the members of the Body of Christ was not realized. The reception of the Council remains uncertain and divisive, placing communion amongst the local Churches of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church at risk. In the spirit of over fifty years of invested conciliar activity, and calling the events surrounding the Council to mind, we respectfully petition Your All-Holiness and all Primates of the Orthodox Churches to incline your ear and listen to our appeal.

During a course on conciliar theology and the reception of the Holy and Great Council at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, under the supervision of Very Rev. Dr. Alexander Rentel and Rev. Dr. Nicolas Kazarian, we have tried to live up to the principle of conciliarity and consensus through the writing of this joint appeal. As seminarians of different Orthodox jurisdictions, we have worked together and are committed to advancing the conciliar experience through dialogue and cooperation. We consider this appeal to be part of the reception process of the Council.

Striving for Pan-Orthodox Unity

Having studied the pre-conciliar process leading up to the Holy and Great Council in Crete, we recognize that there is a shared desire for a deepened unity among the local Orthodox Churches. While supporting and admiring this all-important goal, we note with sadness that this sought-for unity is yet to be fully realized. Even referring to the Council as the Holy and Great Council is

contentious, as not every local Church recognizes it as such. The absence of several local Churches from the Council, among them the local Churches of the majority of our seminarians, demonstrates the painful reality of this present imperfect expression of unity. For to what else has our Church been called, than to achieve not just formal unity, but perfect unity: “that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one,” (John 17:22-23).

The concerns that the absent Churches had prior to the Council, as well as the concerns expressed by the local Churches in the process of receiving the Council, require a continued process of dialogue. This dialogue, reflecting on all stages of the Council in Crete, should help clarify how to proceed with future conciliar activity, beginning with a review of its structure and process. Without a clearly agreed upon structure and process for conciliar activity at the pan-Orthodox level, it is difficult to adopt decisions and documents that will be received by all.

Drawing upon our experience of attempting to work in a conciliar manner in this course, we greatly appreciate the difficult nature of conciliar work. The drafting of this appeal itself was a challenge for all of us. But we have learned that the conciliar process is a microcosm of the Christian life. Through it we learn how to better speak the truth to each other, challenge each other, compromise with each other, and forgive each other. The constant challenge of navigating and honoring each person's thoughts proved to be not only difficult in execution but incredibly time consuming. This has shown us that considerations of time and commitment are fundamental challenges to the conciliar process.

To address these challenges to conciliarity, we suggest that a stronger emphasis should be placed on more frequent gatherings of the hierarchy of the Church. The conciliar process cannot be rushed. The reality of the Church's diversity, with members hailing from all the ends of the earth, requires that time be spent in face to face dialogue and debate. Contact between the bishops of the Church can only provide a surer ground for communion and unity of mind. As the Apostle Paul writes: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind,” (Philippians 2:1–2). The Council of Crete ended with a promise to gather on a more regular basis in the future; to this we heartily say “Amen.”

Raising Pan-Orthodox Awareness

The conciliar work of the Church is as fundamental as liturgizing, pastoring, and teaching. In seminary we are trained in each of these fields; however, we do not yet regularly practice the skill of conciliar activity. We suggest coming together more regularly for local and international conferences following the tradition set by the First Congress of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology, which first convened in 1936 and suggested that Orthodox faculties hold meetings every other year in order to

discuss pertinent challenges. Further, we recommend a renewed and specific emphasis on the exchange of students between the Orthodox faculties, and the creation of laboratories of the conciliar life within theological faculties. We also suggest cultivating institutions or centers of pan-Orthodox theological education, wherein Orthodox Christians from throughout the world come together to study and pray. All of this would go far in raising awareness of the necessity and potential fruit of conciliarity, and developing the culture of conciliarity that is so necessary for this work.

Renewing Pan-Orthodox Engagement

We are the body of Christ, and individually members of it (1 Cor. 12:27). Taking encouragement from the Apostle Paul, “that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25), it is crucial to think carefully about how we cooperate with one another, each in our distinct roles in the life of the Church. While we look to the headship exercised by our hierarchs in rightly teaching the word of truth, we also insist that no fruitful work of the Church can be separated from the life and involvement of all of its members. With this in mind, future conciliar activity would benefit from a formal examination of the roles which laity, deacons, and priests could play in the conciliar process. This could lead to the possibility of them having a formal voice in council. We recommend that local Churches advance the study of this topic, and note that the established Assemblies of Bishops exist as a promising starting point for this work. The success of the pan-Orthodox organization IOCC, under the auspices of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, is an excellent example of the first-fruits of laity, clergy, and hierarchy cooperating at a pan-Orthodox level to address real-world issues.

The Council in Crete took place due to a longing to come together in order to discuss common needs facing each local Church and to offer real solutions. The cataclysmic political and social changes of the 20th and 21st centuries provide the Orthodox Church with an opportunity to examine its position in a rapidly and constantly changing world. However, as the time came for the Council to begin, many of the significant issues originally on the agenda were dropped from the discussion. We recommend returning to the original and stirring spirit of the conciliar movement begun in the early 20th century. This return should be a rebirth of attending to the contemporary quandaries of mankind. In a world where Christianity is no longer the norm, the Church should have the courage to directly and openly address pertinent issues, working together to arrive at practical solutions through the conciliar process, while trusting always in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In order to engage with today's diverse intellectual climate, the Orthodox would do well to include in our discussions frank recognition of areas in which the Church fails to embody its ideals. For as it stands, the situation of disunity calls to mind St. Paul's words to those who know and teach God's law but miss the impact of God's words. For, as it is written to the Churches, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Romans 2:24).

Seeking to embody the spirit of Pentecost and knowing that the Most High “dispensed tongues of fire, calling all to unity,” (Kontakion of Pentecost) we promote the further cultivation of a common theological language for dialogue between the local Churches. This common language should be rooted in the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Fathers, and our common conciliar heritage. In realizing this dialogue, we will fulfill the commandments of Christ, “drawing all the world” (Apolytikion of Pentecost) into His net. We particularly encourage the use of theological faculties as seed-beds for cultivating dialogue in curricula, in institutional outlook, and in opportunities for students of different backgrounds to personally engage with and learn from their Orthodox brothers and sisters, increasing their love for each other. As our Lord said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

In this spirit of love, we pray that the local Churches may continue to “come together in common and individually—through grace, in one faith of God the Father, and of Jesus Christ His only-begotten Son... under the guidance of the Comforter, in obedience to the bishop and the elders with an undivided mind” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* 20).

Your All-Holiness,
Your Beatitudes,

We offer this Appeal to you in all humility, knowing that the heavy weight of your unique ministry withing the Orthodox Churches. For you, your ministry, your work, we offer up our prayers to the Almighty God. We also ask for your hierarchical blessing and your prayers.

In our risen Lord,

The members of the class Canon Law 342, Spring Semester 2018
St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary