Synodality and Church: An Indissoluble Relationship
A Reflection on the Forthcoming Holy and Great Council

In Orthodox ecclesiology, the nature and mission of the church is often pervasively presented from the framework of koinonia. As such, not only is the church preeminently seen as a fellowship of believers - or, indeed, as a broadly, a fellowship of the entire created realm with God - but the claim is also made that all ministries within the church - including how the church is administered - need to be contextually conditioned. Indeed, a fundamental criterion judging the justifiability of any activity taking place within the life of the church is the extent to which it reveals and upholds koinonia. It is from within this communal context that the indisputable koinonia for ecclesiology is underscored since it is only in this context that the communion between local churches - or as is often presented, the synodality of local churches, or 'in space' - is actualised and preserved. In this way, synodality or conciliarity is seen to be concomitant with the communal life of the church. It is from within this doctrinal perspective that the concomitance of the forthcoming Holy and Great Council constitutes and absolutely necessarily.

The Orthodox teaching on the indissoluble relationship between koinonia and the local and regional church is clearly also a feature of Holy and Great Council. The practice of synodality, for example, is already apparent in the New Testament, in which an Apostolic Council recorded to have taken place in Jerusalem to decide upon how the New Testament church would receive newly converted Gentiles into its fold. Act 15:15-29. In line with this basic tenet, modern Orthodox scholarship in ecclesiology highlights the role the council played in the life of the early church as early as 1655, for example, Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis) of Australia had already observed: "If at any time you see from a group, from its origin to the present, the idea of the synodal system, it would cease automatically to be church." These same sentiments were expressed more recently in January of this year at a preconciliar meeting of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew which referred to synodality as an "essential dimension of church life, as a central function of the ecclesial body and as a principle of unity in the church... that is maintained in the communion of churches in time and space." Beyond the exercise of synodality on a local and regional level, Orthodox Churches today recognise as 'ecumenical' a fellowship of believers - or, in a wider context, koinonia. The resulting communion of the autocephalous Churches, however, will then allow for a more intentional commitment amongst themselves thereby advancing the unity of the churches together in one place. This institution enable the Orthodox Churches together to Christian ideals relating to peace, justice and freedom and discrimination. Essentially, these two items can be divided into three more general areas of concern: namely, into topics dealing with inter-Orthodox relations, responses to some contemporary pastoral issues and thirdly, the engagement of the Orthodox Church with other Christian Churches and the world at large. It was agreed that a text would be prepared for each of these issues which would ultimately be submitted to the Holy and Great Council for approval.

Not surprisingly, the Orthodox Churches have not been able to agree on a common text for some of the topics under discussion. They have not, for example, agreed on the reference to the 'primitive' nature of marriage; 7. adaptation of church regulations on fasting; 8. relations of the Orthodox Churches with the rest of the Christian world; 9. Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement; topics 8 and 9 were subsumed into one at a Special Inter-Orthodox Committee meeting which met at the end of April, 2015; 10. the contribution of local Orthodox Churches to Christian ideals relating to peace, justice, freedom and discrimination. Ultimately, the significance of this gathering will manifest a more intentional commitment to the expression of the Church's communion, more precisely its self-sufficient predilection - which in the end will be its death - towards a restoration of koinonia - an expression of the Church's communion, more precisely its communion with the Holy Spirit, leading its people, through Jesus Christ, to an encounter with the living God.

For this reason, it is highly significant that the faithful may pray for the Holy and Great Council. This is not to prove to be a 'theophany' namely a genuine sign of the continued presence of Christ within the life of the church but, rather, a more compelling a voice for the life of the world today.

2. Monthly delivered by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the occasion of the 33rd Annual Schmemann Lecture, St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, February, 1, 2016. This can be accessed at: http://www.allholyfathers.org/press_badge/33rd_annual_schmemann_lecture
3. For this stage, the Holy and Great Council has been scheduled for June 16-27, 2016. It is to be put of the Council's agenda will be to hold this Council at the Church of St Irene in Istanbul, the place where the 2nd Ecumenical Council had taken place in 381. However, due to political tensions between Turkey and Russia, the venue was changed so as not to hinder the presence of the Orthodox Church in Russia at this Holy and Great Council.
4. The Holy and Great Council will end on the occasion of the Rhodes in 1961, there were over 100 items on the agenda.
5. This was done at the presence of the Ministry of the Orthodox Church of Russia, Bulgaria and Georgia.
7. Monthly delivered by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the occasion of the 33rd Annual Schmemann Lecture, St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, February, 1, 2016. This can be accessed at: http://www.allholyfathers.org/press_badge/33rd_annual_schmemann_lecture
8. For a more extensive analysis on how different Orthodox Churches view the relevance of the Councils, see Philip Kariatlis, "The Future Pan-Orthodox Council: To Be Or Not To Be?", The Greek Australian VEMA, vol. 26 (2015), 1 (November, 2015). 10

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