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THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE
ACCORDING TO HOLY AND GREAT COUNCIL
OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN CRETE (2016)*

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the question of the ecclesiastical recognition of the other Christian communities in the context of nowadays discussions within the Orthodox communities, after the Holy and Great Council in Crete (2016). We will look closely at the relation between the Church unity and the unity of faith, as understood by the Orthodox Churches, as well as at the meaning of the “the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches” with which the Orthodox Church is not in communion, stated by the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world* (ROCC). In the end, we will argue that ROCC if understood properly, could constitute the basis for the ecumenical dialogue on Orthodox.

Key words: Holy and Great Council; Unity; Unity of faith; ecumenical dialog.

The last great event from the life of the Orthodox Church was the Holy and Great Council, which took place in Crete, in July 2016. The opportunity of its organization was first mentioned in 1902 and the process was started for real at the first pan-Orthodox Council from Constantinople 1923. The first formal preparations were made in Rhodes, in 1961. Between 18th and 27th of July 2016, the autocephalous Orthodox Churches gathered in a great

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* The paper is an extended summary of the paper entitled “The Issue of the Ecclesial Recognition of the Other Christian Communities according to document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* adopted by the Holy and Great Council, Crete, 2016,” presented in the conference of Societas Oecumenica, held in Helsinki, between 25-30 August, 2016, at the Finnish Orthodox Cultural Centre Sofia, under the theme *Just Do It? Recognition and Reception in Ecumenical Relations*.

council, after a very long period of time, if we think that the last ecumenical council was held in Nicaea in 787. We also must mention the fact that the representatives of four Orthodox Churches (the Church of Antioch, The Russian Church, the Bulgarian Church and the Georgian Church) did not participate in the council. The themes discussed were: *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in today's world; The Orthodox Diaspora; Autonomy and the Means by which it is proclaimed; The Sacrament of Marriage and its impediments; The importance of fasting and its observance today; Relations of the orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world.* There was also formulated a *Message* and the *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*.¹

The text *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world* (ROCC) generated the most vivid controversies within the Orthodox communities, from fundamentalist ones to the ones that considered the text to be lacking theological importance and close contact with the realities of the world we live in. All these brought about again the theme of the *ecumenical* dialogue. The arguments used within the debate prove that there are a lot of unclear issues regarding this subject. There are serious confusions on this matter and those who fight it use harsh words which certainly do no good to the Church. Expressions such as “heresy,” “pan-heresy,” “anathema,” “masonry,” “demonic possession,” “saint nation,” “excommunication,” “curse,” “exorcism,” “Satanism,” “Orthodoxy or death,” “radicalism,” “extremism,” and many others draw a dishonorable image for the members of the Church of Christ.² For these reasons, we believe that we should remember once again what is the theological meaning of the ecumenical dialogue.

We won't pretend that we can clarify the matter completely, but we will try to offer a few more explanations regarding the meaning of the “of seeking the unity of all Christians” (ROCC, art. 5) and the acceptance of “the Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her” (ROCC, art. 6). These are only two of the formulas that generated concern among the objectors of the Council.

¹ Holy and Great Council Pentecost 2016. Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, accessed 27.02.2017, <https://www.holycouncil.org/>.

² See: Sinodul Tâlhăresc, “Sinodul pan-ortodox” din Creta 16-27 iunie 2016, accessed 27.02.2017, <http://sinodultalharesc.tk/category/conferinte/>; Apărăm Ortodoxia, accessed 27.02.2017, <http://aparam-ortodoxia.ro/2016/12/05/vietuitorii-si-credinciosii-schitului-sfanta-cuvioasa-parascheva-resping-erezia-cretana/>.

1. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE “SEEKING THE UNITY OF ALL CHRISTIANS”

According to some of the objectors, through the expression “of seeking the unity of all Christians” (ROCC, art. 5) or “to restore unity with other Christians” (ROCC, art. 4), the Holy and Great Council suggests that the unity of the Church was lost at a certain point and, as a consequence, through the ecumenical dialogue we pursue the restoration of this unity. Indeed, if we appeal to non-theological definitions of the word ecumenism we will find such interpretations. For instance, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, to be ecumenical means “encouraging the different Christian Churches to unite”³, or according to *Oxford Living Dictionary*, ecumenism is “The principle or aim of promoting unity among the world’s Christian Churches.”⁴ However, from an Orthodox point of view, these definitions aren’t accurate. Understanding the ecumenical dialogue as a movement for “promoting unity among the world’s Christian Churches” or a movement whose purpose is the unification of all the Christian churches, one may understand that at a certain point in history the unity of the Church was destroyed and must now be restored, and the ecumenical movement would have an essential role in this endeavor. *Unity* is an existential feature of the Church, together with holiness, sobornicity and Apostolicity and it cannot be destroyed. This truth is clearly expressed by the document of the Council: “In accordance with the ontological nature of the Church, her unity can never be perturbed” (ROCC, art. 6). The Church is One for it has one Head, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit Who makes Christ present within it is one, the consecrating grace which sanctifies and completes the nature is one, and the Holy Trinity Whose life in communion is anticipated within the Church is one. To destroy the unity of the Church would be equal to the division of Christ or of the Holy Trinity. Hence, the unity of the Church is ontologically linked to the unity of God and this unity present and lived within the Church is God’s gift for us. The faithful are rejoicing, they are becoming saints and they perfect themselves within this unity. Then why does the document of the Council speak of the “seeking the unity of all Christians” (ROCC, art. 5) or “to restore unity with other Christians” (ROCC, art. 4)?

³ See *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed 27.02.2017, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ecumenical>.

⁴ See *Oxford Living Dictionary*, accessed 27.02.2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ecumenism>.

Such a formulation suggests that there is a difference between the unity of the Church and the unity of Christians. The faithful participate to the unity of the Church as its members and they remain in this unity so long as they confess the Apostolic faith, maintain uninterrupted the Apostolic succession, the integrality of the Apostolic life, expressed in the Eucharist in its highest form, the dogmatic, canonic and Eucharistic communion with the other local Orthodox Churches. In the divine-human organism, which is the Church, each faithful resembles a living cell that becomes an integrating part of the body and lives in Christ a life full of the sanctifying grace. To the extent to which these objectives are fulfilled, a local ecclesial community may be called Church and is the visible manifestation of the one Church in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, not all Christians confess the same faith. As far as the Orthodox Church is concerned, at the basis of the separation of the Church lies heresy and schism. However, can we truly claim that once somebody leaves the church, due to heresy or schism, that person can no longer be called a Christian and becomes a heathen? The practice of reaccepting heretics and schismatics back in the Church, established by the ecumenical synods (can. 7, Second Ecumenical Council, 381; 95 Quinisext Ecumenical Council) shows that there were clear differences among various heresies, not to mention between heretics and heathens. Also, the life of the Church has proven that an obvious distinction has been made between the heretic himself and those that followed him.

The Holy and Great Council referred to the lost unity of Christians as to a reality obvious for everybody. A lot of people declare themselves to be Christians and are no longer in communion with the One Church and in this respect the unity of the Christians is lost. Hence, because some decided to leave the Apostolic faith, one may sadly observe the destruction of the *unity of faith* of the Christians. However, the fact that a part or more broke from the Church of Christ, does not affect the ontological (natural) unity of the Church.⁵

Orthodoxy is a stranger to the theory of the “branches” according to which in all the Christians denominations there are sprigs of an unseen universal Church. Also, practices such as “intercommunion” and “Eucharistic hospitality” cannot be found within Orthodoxy. According to these non-Orthodox practices, although the existence of differences in faith is acknowledged, as well as the disunity in faith, however, a “feast of love” is promoted, which, as basis of the inter-confessional dialogue may lead in time to

⁵ Cristian SONEA, “The ‘Open Sobornicity’—An Ecumenical Theme in the Theology of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae,” *Roczniki Teologiczne*, 63 (2016), 7: 134 f.

the unity of faith. Orthodoxy cannot separate its discourse referring to the unity of the Church in several “typologies” of the unity: “the unity of love,” “the Eucharistic unity,” “the unity of faith,” as the ecumenical Protestant discourse is structured. As a secondary mention, this view made possible the closing of theological agreements between different Protestant communities, according to which believers may Commune in these communities born from the Reform, that signed the agreement, and, in some cases, the pastors from different Protestant traditions may co-celebrate liturgy. For the Eastern theology the unity of faith and the Eucharistic unity are linked ontologically with each other. The first is the condition for the receiving of the Eucharist, and the second is the confirmation for being into a unity of faith within the Church and in a spiritual unity with God and with all the other members of the Church. The fact that Orthodoxy chose not to embrace the practice of “intercommunion” and that of the “Eucharistic hospitality” is a proof of the understanding that it gives to the other ecclesial communities with which it interacts through dialogue. They are communities that move away from the Church, some farther, some nearer, but for which the Church has the duty to confess the Apostolic faith.

At the same time, we must be aware of the fact that Orthodoxy comes into contact with a manner of understanding the ecumenical dialogue that it cannot embrace. In the Protestant world, the idea of “denominationalism” is central and, as a consequence, the problem of the Christian unity is usually perceived in terms of understanding or *inter-denominational reconciliation*. For the Orthodox the fundamental ecumenical problem is that of the division as a consequence of heresy or schism. Orthodoxy cannot accept the idea of the “equality of confessions” and cannot see the Christian unity as an accommodation or inter-denominational negotiation. Those who parted must come back to the Apostolic faith or they must discover in their own ecclesial frame the “elements” of the Apostolic faith. The role of Orthodoxy in the ecumenical dialogue is to give testimony for the Apostolic faith in those cultural and ecclesial environments alienated from it.

2. THE CHURCH AND THE OTHER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The participation of Orthodoxy in the ecumenical movement is not a matter of ecclesial identity. *The Orthodox Church knows who she is*. She participates in the ecumenical movement having the conscience that she is the one, holy, catholic and Apostolic Church. The problem occurs when the Church

must “define” its partners in dialogue. What are the other Christian communities for the Orthodox? How can they be named?

How the other Christian communities should be named is the concern of all those who participate today to the debate generated by the decision of the Holy and Great Council to accept, in art. 6 of the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world*, “the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches” with which the Orthodox Church is not in communion. The acknowledgement of the fact that there are Christian communities which, along the years, called themselves churches made several Orthodox laics and monks to state that the Council from Crete betrayed Orthodoxy. The Council, by acknowledging the existence in history of communities that call themselves churches, acknowledged the existence of several Churches, which contravenes to the Orthodox ecclesiology.

Still, what are the other Christian communities? How do we relate to the other Christians with whom we interact daily, especially in a pluri-confessional environment such as the one we live in. What are the Catholics, Protestants or the groups born from the radical reform to us? Are they similar to non-Christians? Are they pagans? Common sense and the experience of the common living with them for hundreds of years would tell us that they are not pagans or non-Christians and we certainly cannot regard them as equal to non-Christians. “Pagan” or “non-Christian” behaviors may often be found in many of our Orthodox believers, but we do not speak here of a moral assessment. Or, what are the communities of ecclesial type to which they belong? This question was also asked during the meetings of the Council.

In the early or even the more recent history of the Church, there have been a number of documents in which those belonging to Western Christianity were called *Christians* and their communities were called *churches*, even though they were not Orthodox. Thus, Saint Mark Evgenikos, Archbishop of Ephesus, who rejected the Unionist Council of Florence, speaks of the “Western Church of Rome” (τῆς δυτικῆς Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Ρώμης [*tēs dytikēs Ekkleisías tēs Rōmēs*])⁶, that separated herself from the Orthodox Church by adopting dogmas that were not in accordance with the Tradition. Representatives of the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem participated in the Synod from Constantinople, in 1484, the first Synod in which the Council of Ferrara-Florence was condemned. Nevertheless, the term *Church* is used in the special service performed when receiving those of

⁶ Sf. MARCU EVGHENICUL, *Opere*, vol. I, București: Paters 2009, 252.

other faiths back to the Orthodox Church, stating that those who return from Catholicism should give up the heresies, the dogmas and the “rest of the customs and traditions of their *church* (καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ἐθῶν τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ἐκείνων [*kai tōn loipōn ethōn tēs Ekklesiās ekeinōn*])⁷. This was not only generally stated by the Synod, but it had been part of a liturgical formula used in Church for centuries. Plus, in the encyclical of the Patriarchs of the East from 1848, as an answer to Pope Pius IX, several names were used to refer to the Western Church: “the Roman Church,” “the Church of Rome,” “The Western Church.”⁸ Moreover, the same encyclical states: “We have all the reasons to expect from his Sanctity wisdom, as the true successor of Saint Peter, of Leon the 1st and Leon the 3rd, who wrote on eternal tablets the unchanged Godly Creed—which will again unite the Churches of the West (τὰς Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Δύσεως [*tas Ekklesiās tēs Dýseōs*]) with the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Because the Apostolic Church is waiting for the return of the Shepherds that apostatated together with their flocks...”⁹. These are simply just some of the conciliar documents recognized by the Orthodox Church that use the word *church* when referring to communities of other faiths. Henceforth, the Great Synod of Crete follows this tradition of using the *historical name* of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions.¹⁰ Of course, the objectors of the document do not embrace these positions although there are even old texts that mention the existence of the church of Latins.

We made this brief presentation in order to show how the non-Orthodox communities were called and perceived in time. What we observe is that the document, in this respect, does not bring any dogmatic innovations, but, if we were to follow the evolution of this formula in the documents concerning this topic issued before the Council we notice that the Holy and Great Council was rather reserved in acknowledging *per se* the ecclesiality of the other Christian communities. In 1971 the document on the *Economy in the Orthodox Church* spoke about “the ontological existence of all the Christian churches and confessions,” the document *The Relationship of the Orthodox Church with the entire Christian world* from 1986 mentioned the “acknowledgement of the existence *de facto* of the Christian churches and confes-

⁷ Ioannis KARMIRIS, *Ta Dogmatiká kai Symboliká Mnemeia tēs Orthodóxou Katholikḗs Ekklesiās* [*Ta Dogmatiká kai Symboliká Mnemeia tēs Orthodóxou Katholikēs Ekklesiās*], vol. II (Athēnai: [Athēnais]: [own effort], 1953), 988.

⁸ Ibid., 915 ff.

⁹ Ibid., 918.

¹⁰ Răzvan PERȘA, “Sfântul și Marele Sinod—între dezbateră fundamentală și fundamentalistă,” *Revista Renașterea*, 2016, 9 (September): 8.

sions,” the version from 2015 of the pre-Council document spoke of the fact that it “acknowledges the historical existence of other Christian churches and confessions,” and the final formula adopted by the Council is: “The Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her.” What really supposes this expression is what was confessed through the life and practice of the Church until now. The Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (ROCC, art. 1) that accepts the fact that other communities have named themselves churches in time.

In our view, this manner of expressing things, perhaps ambivalent or unclear as far as the recognition of the other Christian communities is concerned, has a lot to do with what we may call an inclusivist theology, without, at the same time, facing the risk of causing division within the Orthodox Church. Although the Orthodox Church is not in a Eucharistic communion with the other communities, it seeks to confess the Unity of the Church of Christ with the purpose of accomplishing the unity of faith of all the Christians in the One Church.

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DIALOG EKUMENICZNY WEDŁUG ŚWIĘTEGO I WIELKIEGO SOBORU
KOŚCIOŁA PRAWOSŁAWNEGO, KRETA 2016.
KILKA REFLEKSJI

Streszczenie

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Słowa kluczowe: Święty i Wielki Sobór; jedność; jedność wiary; dialog ekumeniczny.