



Orthodox Observers at the Second Vatican Council and Intra-Orthodox Dynamics

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Abstract

Since Vatican II was convened as an ecumenical council, most Orthodox autocephalous churches initially refused to send observers without full voting rights. For non-theological reasons, Russia was the exception that sent observers to the first session. Other Orthodox churches followed suit at later sessions. Despite their inability to vote or speak at plenaries, Orthodox delegates contributed to the Council's documents, ecumenical openness, attitude towards communism, and from a humanitarian perspective. By granting Orthodox observers a prominent role, Vatican II represents a model of ecumenical integration in the conciliar process.

Keywords

Constantinople, ecclesiology, ecumenism, Orthodox Church, Orthodox observers, Soviet Union, Vatican II, World Council of Churches

Prior to his election as Pope John XXIII, Angelo Roncalli was an apostolic delegate for 20 years in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. This ecumenical encounter with the Orthodox Church may have inspired the pope's dream of convening the Second Vatican Council in a spirit of openness.¹ At the conclusion of the celebration

1. Michael A. Fahey, *Orthodox and Catholic Sister Churches: East is West and West is East* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1996), 6. For a detailed description of Roncalli's interaction with these Eastern contexts before his papal election, see

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of the week of prayer for Christian unity, on January 25, 1959 in the Basilica of St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls in Rome, John XXIII announced the plan for his pontificate. Together with a council for the Diocese of Rome and the revision of the Code of Canon Law, the Pope announced an ecumenical Council for the pastoral and ecumenical aims of “the enlightenment, edification, and joy of the entire Christian people” and “a renewed cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated Churches to participate with us in this feast of grace and brotherhood, for which so many souls long in all parts of the world.”² Arriving at various points during the Council, Orthodox observers from various jurisdictions enhanced the Council’s ecumenicity, and Vatican II became a standard of conciliarity and ecumenical integration of observers. However, Orthodox and Catholics had to overcome numerous challenges along the way.

The First Session

The immediate Orthodox reaction to John XXIII’s announcement of the new ecumenical council was rather negative. The Orthodox were suspicious that this council would simply ask their representatives to sign “reunion formulae” as was the case before Vatican I when Pius IX exhorted Orthodox bishops to come to the Council and renew the union with Rome that their predecessors signed at Lyons and Florence.³ Additionally, they believed that for Vatican II to be an ecumenical council, all churches should be represented by bishops with full voting rights,⁴ and not merely by observers who—the Orthodox feared—would be mere spectators giving the illusion of ecumenicity.

Thomas F. Stransky, introduction to *Towards the Healing of Schism: The Sees of Rome and Constantinople: Public Statements and Correspondence between the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate 1958–1984*, ed. E. J. Stormon (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 6–9.

2. I quote here the original address as the Pope delivered it, and not the official edition modified by the Curia, which replaced “Churches” with “communities,” “participate” with “follow,” and “feast” with “search.” See Giuseppe Alberigo, “The Announcement of the Council: From the Security of the Fortress to the Lure of the Quest,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II: Towards a New Era in Catholicism*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 1–54 at 15. See also Alberto Melloni, Federico Ruozi, and Enrico Galavotti, eds., *Vatican II: The Complete History* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2015), 44.
3. Stransky, introduction to *Towards the Healing of Schism*, 2, 9.
4. Richard Gaillardetz explains that twentieth-century Catholic theology has attempted to honor the Orthodox conditioning of ecumenicity upon universal reception, and thus distinguish between the seven ecumenical councils of the largely undivided Church and the general councils of the Catholic Church after the schism, thereby counting Vatican II among its general councils. While this practice represented the norm before the Reformation, it is by no means generally accepted among contemporary Catholic theologians. And yet, Pope Paul VI set a recent precedent for the distinction between ecumenical and general councils in his letter to Cardinal Willebrands on the occasion of the seven hundredth anniversary of the Second Council of Lyons, “numbered six among the general synods celebrated in the West.” See *AAS* 66 (1974): 620, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/AAS-66-1974-ocr.pdf>. See also Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 198–99.

This is evident in the comments of the Associate Director of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Nikos Nissiotis, who eventually attended all four sessions of Vatican II as a World Council of Churches (WCC) observer.⁵ Writing during and after the Council, he expressed the opinion that the term “ecumenical” includes a multitude of churches that are not in communion with Rome for canonical, disciplinary, and non-doctrinal reasons and, consequently, their bishops should have the ability to vote if the Council were to be truly ecumenical. Nissiotis also questioned Rome’s decision to replace Eastern and Oriental Orthodox episcopal participation with observers.⁶ In his mind, in the context of an ecumenical council, “the title of observer is, from an ecclesiological standpoint, unacceptable.”⁷ While in an ideal situation that might be the case, I do not find Nissiotis’s remarks justified in the context of the disunited Christianity in which he writes. Ecclesiologically it was impossible to give Orthodox bishops voting rights and practically it is doubtful that they would have accepted such an invitation. The abnormal and painful reality of Christian disunity impeded the Catholic Church from recognizing full voting rights to non-Catholic observers, despite its desire for other churches’ input. It was the best that could realistically be done, if the Council were to move forward as ecumenically open as John XXIII intended it.

Although all Orthodox churches shared these hesitations, their response to the invitation to send observers to the Council differed greatly.

Constantinople

As Mauro Velati asserts, the Pontifical Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU) decided not to invite individual local churches to send observers to the Second Vatican Council, but only to approach large Church bodies that would later work out the details internally. Since Rome regarded Constantinople as having primacy within Orthodoxy, the Vatican considered it sufficient to invite Constantinople, which in turn would coopt the other autocephalous Orthodox churches. In response, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras convened a Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes in September 1961, which decided that, in future relations with non-Orthodox Churches, all Orthodox churches would act in unison, including the decision to send Orthodox observers to Vatican II. Since the prospects of Orthodox participation at the Council looked bleak

5. Nissiotis repeatedly regretted that Vatican II missed the opportunity of being a truly ecumenical council, even with limited non-Catholic participation especially on the discussion of ecumenism where those already present as observers could have had voting rights. See Nikos Nissiotis, “Report on the Second Vatican Council,” *The Ecumenical Review* 18 (1966): 190–206 at 200–1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1966.tb02111.x>; Nissiotis, “Comité Central du Conseil oecuménique, Genève, 8–17 février 1966: Rapports sur le 2e Concile du Vatican,” *Istina* 11, no. 2–3 (1966): 247–60 at 256. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from French and Italian are mine.

6. Nikos Nissiotis, “Is the Vatican Council Really Ecumenical?,” *The Ecumenical Review* 16 (1964): 357–77 at 360, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1964.tb00909.x>.

7. Nikos Nissiotis, “Comité Central du Conseil oecuménique,” 257.

due to internal Orthodox dissensions, SPCU Secretary Johannes Cardinal Willebrands visited Constantinople in February 1962 to personally invite the Church of Constantinople to send observers and to enlist its help in inviting the other autocephalous Orthodox churches. Departing from the practice of dealing only with larger Church bodies, Willebrands also visited the Orthodox churches of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Greece, and Cyprus, and then traveled to Constantinople for a second time in June 1962. Although convinced of the Patriarch's good intentions and desire to send observers, Willebrands lamented Athenagoras's "lack of persuasive power" with other Orthodox churches.⁸ Several further Catholic and Anglican attempts were made to convince the Patriarch to send observers, but just days before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Athenagoras convened a synod that declared it impossible to respond positively to SPCU's invitation. The Patriarch informed Rome of his inability to send observers, citing the lack of consensus with the other autocephalous Orthodox churches.⁹ A second possible motivation for Athenagoras's negative response is that prior to the opening of Vatican II numerous Catholic theologians had expressed reservations about the sincerity of the Curia to have an ecumenically open council. Sharing in this suspicion, Constantinople might have tried to avoid the embarrassment of withdrawing its observers in case of a failed council by refusing to send observers from the outset.¹⁰

A complex situation emerged. Theologically, since the ecclesiological status of observers was unclear and there were no guarantees that the Council would indeed be ecumenically open and not another attempt at reunion through absorption of Orthodoxy within the Catholic Church, the climate was far from ideal. Practically, Athenagoras of Constantinople was inclined to send observers to Vatican II and tried to convince the other Orthodox Churches to do the same, but several autocephalous Orthodox churches opposed him. Limited by Rhodes I's decision that all Orthodox should act in unison, Athenagoras was thus unable to send observers to the Second Vatican Council. Interestingly, the key to understanding Constantinople's difficult position was actually found in Moscow.

Moscow

As a result of the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, we can now get a glimpse of the political calculations made by the Soviet regime through its fluctuating attitude towards the Second Vatican Council and the

8. Mauro Velati, *Separati ma fratelli: Gli osservatori non-cattolici al Vaticano II (1962–1965)* (Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino, 2014), 96–98.
9. Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Struggle for the Council during the Preparation of Vatican II (1960–1962)," in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II*, 167–356 at 326; J. O. Beozzo, "The External Climate," in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II*, 357–404 at 404.
10. Alberto Melloni, "Between Ostpolitik and Ecumenism: Relations between Rome and Moscow during Vatican II," in *The Holy Russian Church and Western Christianity*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Oscar Beozzo (London, Maryknoll: SCM, 1996), 89–100 at 96–97.

Orthodox Church in the USSR and worldwide.¹¹ After the Second World War, Moscow and the Vatican did not have diplomatic relations and their attitude towards each other was inimical. In 1949, the Holy Office publicly excommunicated all communists and their sympathizers, considering their membership in the Communist Party a grave sin.¹² In 1951, the *Grand Soviet Encyclopedia* defined the Papal State as “an oppressor of free human thought, a messenger of obscurantism, a tool of Anglo-American imperialism, and an active instigator of a new imperialist world war.”¹³ Both attitudes were soon to change.

The Moscow Patriarchate initially reflected the anti-Western, isolationist policies of the regime. Gradually, however, Soviet intelligence contemplated the possibility of using ecumenical encounters to carry its own counter-propaganda and enlarge its religious and political spheres of influence, especially among the nations that were still nonaligned during the Cold War. This shift happened within thirteen years.

Reflecting the first isolationist attitude, the Moscow Patriarchate and all other Orthodox Churches from the Communist Bloc did not join the WCC at its inauguration in 1948, despite the fact that, on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Churches of Cyprus and Greece, as well as the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of the USA became WCC founding members at that time. When the Soviet regime later abandoned its isolationist attitude, the Moscow Patriarchate was accused of “not using all the enormous possibilities it has at its disposal,” Metropolitan Nikolai was replaced as the head of Department of External Relations, deposed from his episcopal see, and died within a year.¹⁴ Consequently, by the time of the WCC’s 1961 New Delhi Assembly, most Orthodox churches from the Eastern Bloc became WCC members.¹⁵ Here, Nikodim—the new head of the Department of External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate—met with representatives of the Orthodox Churches of Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland, “informing” them of Moscow’s refusal to send observers to Vatican II because of Rome’s hostility towards the Soviet Union. His motivation was political, and not theological in nature.¹⁶ The Moscow

11. Information regarding the political calculations of the Soviet regime, the Russian Orthodox Church’s response, and the full extent of the latter’s suffering remain incomplete, but hopefully the future will reveal further insights into these issues of utmost importance.

12. Melloni, Ruozzi, and Galavotti, *Vatican II: The Complete History*, 235.

13. Quoted in Anatolij Krassikov, “The Second Vatican Council in the Context of Relations between the USSR and the Holy See,” in *Vatican II in Moscow (1959–1965): Acts of the Colloquium on the History of Vatican II; Moscow, March 30–April 2, 1995*, ed. Alberto Melloni (Leuven: Library of the Faculty of Theology K.U. Leuven, 1997), 313–30 at 315.

14. Adriano Rocucci, “Russian Observers at Vatican II: The ‘Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs’ and the Moscow Patriarchate between Anti-Religious Policy and International Strategies,” in Melloni, *Vatican II in Moscow (1959–1965)*, 46–57.

15. The Orthodox Church of Albania was the only exception, due to its virtually total elimination by the militant atheist regime.

16. He also stated in a tone that today could only be characterized as disingenuous and ethnophyletist, i.e. the prioritizing of nationality over Orthodox unity: “Russian Orthodox Christians cultivate the finest fraternal sentiments toward the Roman Catholic Church and

Patriarchate suspected that the Vatican had not yet invited it to send observers due to political reasons,¹⁷ so an anonymous article entitled *Non possumus*, published in the official *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* stated that the Patriarchate could not send observers.¹⁸ Later, Vitaly Borovoi (who would eventually become an observer) revealed that the primary meaning of *Non possumus* was, “we are not permitted”¹⁹ by the state.

This position resulted from the Soviet regime’s suspicions of a concerted Anglo-American effort to use the Vatican and the WCC in their opposition to socialism. Furthermore, since Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras came from the United States, the regime also saw Vatican II as an American effort to unite Orthodoxy around Constantinople—and not Moscow—in order to combat communism. To counteract the action of the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Soviet apparatus allowed the representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate to attend the first Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes, mentioned above.²⁰ At Rhodes, it was the Russian Patriarchate that insisted that all autocephalous Orthodox churches should act in unison in their interaction with the West. This system of unanimity under the guise of Orthodox unity was in fact the USSR’s tactic to control the entire Orthodox world. As Borovoi explained, without the Russian delegation’s intervention in Rhodes, Constantinople and the other Greek churches would have sent their observers to the Second Vatican Council and the Russian Church would have remained isolated in its opposition. Instead, Constantinople became unable to act without Moscow’s accord. He concluded, “The key to solve the problem of Orthodox observers is now in Moscow, it is not in Constantinople.”²¹

Although Nikodim opposed Constantinople’s inclination to send observers to Vatican II at the first Rhodes conference, back home he affirmed his conviction that Anglicans, Protestants, and various Orthodox Churches around Constantinople would send observers to the Council. He recommended that the Moscow Patriarchate send its own observers so that Constantinople did not represent the entirety of Orthodoxy.

toward its hierarchy and faithful. But the Russian Church does not approve of the activity of the Vatican in the political sphere. In this area the Vatican often shows itself hostile to our country. We, the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church, are loyal citizens of our country and we have an ardent love for our fatherland. This is why anything done against our country cannot improve our mutual relationship.” Quoted in Beozzo, “The External Climate,” 404.

17. Melloni, “Between Ostpolitik and Ecumenism,” 96–100.

18. “*Non possumus*,” *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 5 (1961): 73–75.

19. See Emmanuel Lanne, “La Perception en Occident de la participation du Patriarcat de Moscou à Vatican II,” in Melloni, *Vatican II in Moscow (1959–1965)*, 111–28 at 111–12. Similarly, Anatolij Krassikov—a Soviet journalist charged to cover the Council not from a theological perspective, but as “a broad ecclesiastical campaign against communism”—considers that *Non possumus* “should be read in context as a ‘cry of the soul,’ and not as an expression of distrust towards John XXIII.” Krassikov, “The Second Vatican Council in the Context of Relations between the USSR and the Holy See,” 319.

20. Roccucci, “Russian Observers at Vatican II,” 46–58.

21. Quoted in Roccucci, “Russian Observers at Vatican II,” 66–67.

Moreover, by showing “good will,” Russia’s eventual condemnation of the Council would not be regarded as mere propaganda and—in Nikodim’s words—“no one could accuse us of ‘blind and unrooted’ ‘political’ hate towards the Vatican, as often happens now.”²² It seems that Nikodim anticipated that Moscow would condemn Vatican II before the Council even took place, and he was preparing the grounds for that response.

Simultaneously, the Protestant churches that had already agreed to send observers would have found themselves in a delicate position if no Orthodox representatives were present at the Council, especially in the context of the Cold War. That is why Willem Visser ’t Hooft, the first secretary general of the WCC, was determined to ensure the participation of the newest WCC members from the Eastern Bloc to the Second Vatican Council. He assured Willebrands that, despite its public statements, the Moscow Patriarchate had not yet made a decision whether to send observers or not, and advised him to meet with Nikodim.²³

A meeting took place on August 11, 1962, shortly before the opening of the Council, where Nikodim reassured Willebrands that Moscow had not yet decided whether to send observers or not; it would decide only when it received an invitation directly from the Holy See, and not through Constantinople, which was quite revealing of the tension that characterized intra-Orthodox dynamics. Encouraged by Moscow’s openness to send observers, Willebrands mentioned the situation of Catholic bishops in the USSR who had not yet received permission from the Soviet regime to travel to the Council. Nikodim was unable to offer any guarantees in this regard, but promised to mediate a meeting between Willebrands and an official from the Commission for Religious Affairs. He added that if Willebrands came personally to Moscow, his visit would be beneficial for both Churches,²⁴ which seemed to insinuate that the participation of Catholic bishops from the USSR at the Council would be conditioned upon Willebrands’s visit to Moscow.²⁵ Willebrands was so needed in Moscow that Nikodim guaranteed that the Patriarchate would not oppose the invitation of Orthodox theologians from the Russian diaspora, who openly denounced the Soviet regime.²⁶

Thus, undermining Constantinople’s primacy within Orthodoxy and Rome’s practice to invite larger bodies that would later work out the delegates internally, the Russian Patriarchate established a direct dialogue with Willebrands and invited him to travel to Moscow to address the following difficulties:

22. Quoted in Roccucci, “Russian Observers at Vatican II,” 59.

23. Johannes Willebrands, “Le rencontre entre Rome et Moscou: Souvenirs,” in Melloni, *Vatican II in Moscow (1959–1965)*, 331–38 at 333.

24. Willebrands, “Le rencontre entre Rome et Moscou,” 333–35.

25. The Vatican made a similar effort previously, in April 1962, when Msgr. Francesco Lardone, apostolic delegate in Istanbul, contacted the Soviet Ambassador in Ankara, despite a lack of official relations between the Holy See and Moscow. The Soviet Ambassador (Rjov) communicated that his government agreed to allow Russian Catholic bishops to attend the Council. On the basis of this reply, Lardone approached other ambassadors from the Eastern Bloc, and so a total of 35 Catholic bishops from the Eastern Bloc attended the first session of the Council. Beozzo, “The External Climate,” 402–3.

26. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 102.

1. Would the Council condemn communism?
2. Would Catholic bishops from communist countries be allowed to participate in the works of the Council?
3. What would be the implications of inviting observers from communist countries vis-à-vis the growing number of communist sympathizers engaged in socialist movements in the West?²⁷ It was important to address emerging communist movements in the West because, as Jurij Karlov—the first Ambassador of the USSR and later of the Russian Federation to the Holy See—clarifies, the interaction between the Vatican and the Soviet government was initiated by the Italian Communist Party, which then continued to function as advisor and intermediary.²⁸

At the same time, Cardinal Augustin Bea—the first SPCU president—considered the possibility of conditioning the invitation of Russian Orthodox observers by the Soviet government’s permission for Catholic bishops to attend the Council and its promise not to impede other communist countries to give similar permissions. Bea ultimately decided not to address the government directly, not even in the case of Catholic bishops, but only the Moscow Patriarchate, since the government did not have the competence to send Orthodox observers,²⁹ and the Orthodox churches—which already suffered persecution—should not be punished for the faults of the communist regimes.

Therefore, just days before the opening of Vatican II, between September 27 and October 2, 1962, Willebrands traveled to Moscow in an unofficial capacity. Regarding the possibility of condemning communism, he reassured the Patriarchate that the Council would not take the old, condemnatory position, but it would adopt a pastoral attitude, as John XXIII promised in his convocation address. He explained that the Council would discuss the relationship between church and state only in general terms, without references to specific states. Bishops would be free to express their opinions, and Willebrands was neither willing nor able to give any guarantees regarding what the bishops would say or what the Council would decide. Moscow was willing to move forward even without Willebrands’s guarantees, and as Willebrands later recounted, “the Metropolitan would never again ask [for such guarantees].”³⁰ Upon

27. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 98–101.

28. Jurij E. Karlov, “The Secret Diplomacy of Moscow and the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council,” in Melloni, *Vatican II in Moscow (1959–1965)*, 295–301 at 295–97.

29. Willebrands, “Le rencontre entre Rome et Moscou,” 333–35.

30. Willebrands, “Le rencontre entre Rome et Moscou,” 336. Most historians affirm that the Vatican (represented by Tisserant—Dean of the College of Cardinals—and Willebrands) repeatedly met with Nikodim and that the latter asked for guarantees that communism would not be officially condemned, but the Vatican representatives could not offer such guarantees, as Willebrands himself stated above. However, there is an alternative Lefebvrist reading of these historical events, according to which the Council’s liberty to condemn communism was restricted due to an accord signed by Nikodim and Tisserant at

Willebrands's return to Rome, on October 4, Cardinal Bea officially invited the Moscow Patriarchate to send observers to the Council. On October 10, the Russian Synod responded positively. The day after Vatican II began, on October 12, two Russian Orthodox observers arrived at the Council, namely Archpriest Vitaly Borovoi, a representative to the WCC and Church historian from Leningrad, and Archimandrite Vladimir Kotliarov, who worked in the Russian mission in Jerusalem.³¹ They were "accompanied"³² by so-called "guardian angels" from the KGB.³³

The Russian Synod's decision to send observers was not without complications. Borovoi and Melloni opened up the possibility that, assuming that the other Orthodox churches would send observers and wanting to avoid the embarrassment of being the only church that did not do so, the Synod publicly committed to sending observers. Afterwards, the Moscow Patriarchate received a telegram stating that Constantinople would not send observers, but it was too late to rescind Moscow's commitment.³⁴ Interestingly, Constantinople's telegram arrived late because the Soviet regime withheld it from the Russian Synod until the latter made its public announcement based on the assumption that it acted in unison with the other Orthodox churches.³⁵ But Rocucci provides a second historical detail that obfuscates this description of events. He states that earlier in September 1962 Willebrands actually told Nikodim that Constantinople was not going to send observers. Nikodim replied that each local Orthodox Church

Metz, in August 1962. See Giovanni Turbanti, "Il Problema del comunismo al Concilio Vaticano II," in Melloni, *Vatican II in Moscow (1959–1965)*, 157–58. In disagreement with these Lefebvrist considerations, I concur with most historians who ascribe the Council's refusal to condemn communism not primarily to this alleged accord or to the presence of Orthodox observers (though the latter's presence contributed as well), but to other factors that I address later in this article.

31. Willebrands, "Le rencontre entre Rome et Moscou: Souvenirs," 337–38. See also Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 104–5. Despite all these efforts to ensure Moscow's presence at the Council, Borovoi's contribution was rather unimpressive. He claimed that, as a result of his intervention, Catholic Patriarchs were moved to a prominent place in front of the cardinals, reflecting that at stake was a prefiguration of a Catholic–Orthodox unity guaranteeing the place of Patriarchs and their relationship with the pope and cardinals. See Lanne, "La Perception en Occident," 127.
32. Lanne writes about the discomfort that Russian Orthodox guests from exile felt in the presence of Boris Nelubin and N. Anfinouguenov, the latter's behavior and remarks betraying his role in the KGB, where he was a captain and later retired as a colonel. Lanne, "La Perception en Occident," 118–19.
33. See Ricardo Burigana and Giovanni Turbanti, "The Intersession: Preparing the Conclusion of the Council," in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion: Third Period and Intersession: September 1964–September 1965*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 453–616 at 499.
34. Vitaly Borovoi, "The Second Vatican Council and its Significance for the Russian Orthodox Church," in Alberigo and Beozzo, *The Holy Russian Church and Western Christianity*, 130–42 at 134.
35. Melloni, "Between Ostpolitik and Ecumenism," 96–100.

was free to act independently of Constantinople,³⁶ so Moscow was determined to act separately from other Orthodox churches and send its own observers. As mentioned above, Nikodim's ironic reply was contrary to the Rhodes agreement for the Orthodox to act in unison—a decision insisted upon by none other than the Moscow Patriarchate. Clearly, Moscow did not inform Constantinople of their gradual shift on the issue of Orthodox observers at Vatican II. Forced by Moscow's silence and the Rhodes decision to present a unanimous Orthodox attitude, Athenagoras of Constantinople—the most ardent supporter of sending observers—informed the Vatican that, unanimously, all autocephalous Orthodox Churches would not send observers,³⁷ only to witness days later Moscow's presence at the Council.

Russian Diaspora

Russian Orthodox émigrés teaching at St. Serge Institute in Paris had significant contact with Catholic colleagues associated with the Dominican Ecumenical Center Istina in Paris and with the Benedictine monks of Chevetogne,³⁸ so their invitation to the Council was a natural development of these relationships that had already borne ecumenical fruit. However, St. Serge was led by Bishop Cassien (Bezobrazov), who was under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate—the latter being unable to send observers. Hence, Bishop Cassien attended the Council from the beginning as an SPCU guest, and not as an observer proper. Later, Paul Evdokimov and Nicholas Afanasiev replaced him at the fourth session.³⁹

In the United States, the Russian diaspora under the leadership of Metropolitan Leonty (Turkevich) was not recognized by Constantinople. So Constantinople's inability to send observers did not prevent Alexander Schmemmann⁴⁰ and Nicholas Arseniev (fourth session) to represent both their Church and St. Vladimir's Seminary in Yonkers,

36. Roccucci, "Russian Observers at Vatican II," 65.

37. Komonchak, "The Struggle for the Council," 326.

38. Lanne, "La Perception en Occident," 122–23.

39. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 107. See also Melloni, Ruoizzi, and Galavotti, *Vatican II: The Complete History*, 278. Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology influenced the Council's texts on the local church as the fullness of the Church in communion with other local eucharistic assemblies and the priestly character of the laity; the participating bishops were required to read his works. Olivier Rousseau, preface to Nicolas Afanassieff, *L'Église du Saint-Esprit*, trans. Marianne Drobot (Paris: Cerf, 1975), 8–9. See also Lanne, "La Perception en Occident," 125.

40. Congar graciously credits Nissiotis and Schmemmann with the pneumatological turn of the Council. At an informal dinner where they commented on an early draft of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the two Orthodox observers said, "If we were to prepare a treatise *De Ecclesia*, we would draft a chapter on the Holy Spirit, to which we would add a second chapter on Christian anthropology, and that would be all." Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit: He is Lord and Giver of Life*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1983), 2:66. See also Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 443n171.

NY.⁴¹ In practice there was no difference between official observers and guests of the SPCU, so the distinction between “observers” and “guests” was simply nominal.⁴²

Second to Fourth Council Sessions

After the first session of the Council, the SPCU and Visser ‘t Hooft enlisted the help of the Russian Patriarchate to achieve greater Orthodox participation at the Council. Moscow sent out letters to all Orthodox Patriarchs, including Athenagoras, inviting them to send observers to the second session, ensuring them of Moscow’s positive experience at the first session, of the benefits of a full Orthodox representation, and reassuring them that “the presence of observers does not mean that they agree with everything that happens in the Council or that they recognize the ecumenical character of the Council.”⁴³ This was an unusual gesture, given that Constantinople has the primacy of honor within the Orthodox world and is thus expected to be the see that summons the other jurisdictions regarding pan-Orthodox issues, but Moscow was challenging this type of primacy.

Other similar calls for participation followed from all over the Christian world. For example, John Moorman, an Anglican delegate, wrote about his encounter with Athenagoras: “I urged him to think of our little band of Observers, only 30–40 against 2,500, and to realize how much we needed their help.”⁴⁴ But the hurt in Constantinople was too deep due to the Vatican’s decision to invite Moscow directly and Moscow’s unilateral action despite their insistence at Rhodes that all Orthodox should act in unison. So strained was the relationship that the Ecumenical Patriarchate sent neither a congratulatory message nor representatives to the coronation of the new Pope, Paul VI, on June 21, 1963. Unsurprisingly, Constantinople maintained that the observers were nothing more than simply “spectators” and invoked the upcoming second Rhodes conference as the venue of deciding whether to send observers or not.⁴⁵

41. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 107–9.

42. Hilari Ragner, “An Initial Profile of the Assembly,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, *The Formation of the Council’s Identity: First Period and Intersession; October 1962–September 1963*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 169–232 at 180.

43. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 234–35.

44. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 237.

45. See Alberto Melloni, “The Beginning of the Second Period: The Great Debate on the Church,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 3, *The Mature Council: Second Period and Intersession; September 1963–September 1964*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 1–116 at 20–21. Moreover, Archbishop Iakovos of America criticized the Vatican for sending invitations to local Orthodox churches as a sign of the latter’s intention to break Orthodox unity and undermine the prestige of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Church of Greece characterized Moscow’s decision to send observers as “ill-intended,” giving the impression of a disunited Orthodoxy especially after the first Rhodes conference, and offending the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other autocephalous churches. Lanne, “La Perception en Occident,” 117–18.

A second Rhodes conference was convened primarily as a consequence of the first session of Vatican II. It began on September 26, 1963, three days before the second session of the Second Vatican Council. Representatives of the Orthodox Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, and Cyprus considered it useless and even dangerous to send observers, since such a gesture would put the Orthodox on equal footing with Protestants. On the contrary, in light of its positive experience at the first session of the Council, Moscow convinced representatives from Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia to vote in favor of sending observers, even though these churches would not end up sending observers to the second session.⁴⁶ Despite their differences, all delegates agreed to allow each autocephalous church to establish a “dialogue on equal footing” with the Roman Catholic Church and to send observers to Vatican II as long as they were not bishops, but lay or priests.⁴⁷ And yet, with the exception of the Georgian Patriarchate that was under Moscow’s direct influence by virtue of their belonging to the USSR, no additional Orthodox Church sent observers. André Scrima, a Romanian monk living in France and an experienced ecumenist, was not sent as an observer but as a personal representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch at the second session of the Council.

The attitude would soon change with the common pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1964, where Paul VI met with Athenagoras, reinforcing Constantinople’s place as the “second Rome” and paving the way for the presence of observers representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the last two sessions of the Council.⁴⁸ The delegation was comprised of Archimandrite Panteleimon Rodopoulos, Archpriest Ioannis Romanides (both from Holy Cross Seminary in Brookline, MA), and Archimandrite Maximos Aghiorgoussis, who at that time was the rector of the Greek Orthodox parish in Rome and would later become the Metropolitan of Pittsburgh, PA. In addition to these representatives associated with the Greek-American diaspora, André Scrima’s status was updated from personal patriarchal representative to official observer. The Patriarchate of Alexandria was the only one to follow Constantinople’s example and send observers to the third session. Serbia and Bulgaria would do the same at the fourth session of Vatican II.⁴⁹

46. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 241–43.

47. Jan Grootaers, “Ebb and Flow between Two Seasons,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, *The Formation of the Council’s Identity*, 516–65 at 544–45.

48. Giuseppe Alberigo, “Conclusion: The New Shape of the Council,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 3, *The Mature Council*, 493–511 at 507. The two leaders established regular visits and dialogues and in 1971 expressed their common desire for “a common sacramental cup.” See Fahey, *Orthodox and Catholic Sister Churches*, 7–10.

49. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 357, 66–68. See the official correspondence between Cardinal Bea informing Athenagoras about the invitation of other Orthodox churches, as well as Athenagoras’s responses (including the sending of three representatives) in E. J. Stormon, ed., *Towards the Healing of Schism: The Sees of Rome and Constantinople; Public Statements and Correspondence between the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate 1958–1984* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 77–79. For the participation of the Orthodox

Some Contributions of the Orthodox Observers

These delegations to the last three sessions of the Council influenced its works in various ways. Similar to the other non-Catholic observers, Orthodox representatives were not allowed to speak or vote in plenaries, but they attended public sessions and general congregations. They could not participate in the works of various commissions, but were informed of their results at weekly meetings organized by SPCU.⁵⁰ Significant mutual interaction also happened informally in private meetings and during encounters in the corridors and the two large nonalcoholic coffee bars, humorously dubbed Bar-Jonas and Bar-Abbas.⁵¹ Nissiotis praised “the attitude of the great majority of the bishops, being ready to listen to voices from outside the Council from other Churches and to present some of them as their own points in the plenary sessions,”⁵² concluding that the Catholic bishops present went through “a veritable school of ecumenism.”⁵³ On their part, Orthodox observers experienced a Council that was not exclusively an internal Catholic matter, but, in Cassien’s words, “the voices which the Council had uncovered give it dimensions that transcend the Catholic Church.”⁵⁴ Moreover,

churches of Georgia (second to fourth sessions), Bulgaria, and Serbia (fourth session), see Lukas Vischer, “The Council as an Event in the Ecumenical Movement,” in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition: The Fourth Period and the End of the Council; September 1965–December 1965* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 485–540 at 529.

50. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 78. For more on this subject, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012), esp. 39.
51. Melloni, Ruozzi, and Galavotti, *Vatican II: The Complete History*, 81. A third snack bar, “Bar-Nun” was added for the second session to serve women, but it remained largely unused.
52. Nikos Nissiotis, “Ecclesiology and Ecumenism of the Second Session of the Vatican Council II,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 10, no. 1 (1964): 15–36 at 35.
53. Nissiotis, “Comité Central du Conseil oecuménique,” 255. According to Nissiotis, the ecumenically open character of the council was challenged by the presence of the empty papal throne, which constantly reminded those present that the pope can (and did), through a *motu proprio*, undo the decisions of the bishops present (259). Elsewhere, Nissiotis laments that the pope could set significant limits to the discussions of the bishops, such as when he affirmed in the beginning of the third session that the discussion of the papacy and episcopal collegiality must take place within the limitations of Vatican I, which resulted in rather contradictory statements on these two subjects. Consequently, at the end of the third session, the pope overrode the votes of the absolute majority of bishops present, despite being absent from the works of the Council. Nikos Nissiotis, “Mouvement oecuménique et Vatican II, un point de vue orthodoxe,” *Istina* 11, no. 2–3 (1965–1966): 313–24 at 316–17.
54. Quoted in Grootaers, “Ebb and Flow between Two Seasons,” 522–23. Similarly, Paul Evdokimov wrote, “The impressions of the observers were unanimous: when they found themselves acting not as spectators but taken into the midst of the work itself and invited to take part in it, as well as expressing their views with complete freedom in private groups or in the commissions, they had the impression that they were witnesses to a real historical event.” Quoted in Giuseppe Alberigo, “Transition to a New Age,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition*, 573–644 at 586.

Nissiotis considered that Vatican II had an ecumenical character in the sense of challenging other churches to critical self-examination in light of the Council's achievements, to renewal leading to a new evangelism, and to common repentance for our lack of common action in the world—a “para-heresy” of which we are all guilty.⁵⁵

Besides his persistent pneumatological contributions,⁵⁶ Nissiotis insisted on considering the Orthodox as “Church” in the full sense of the term and lamented the Vatican's use of the plural form, “Churches,” implying disunity. As a WCC representative, he also advocated on behalf of Protestant churches, supporting the bishops who considered that the Council should not speak of other Christians from the point of view of what is lacking in them from a Catholic perspective, but from the perspective of their own charismatic activity. These same bishops proposed that the council should not refer to Protestants as communities and groups arising from the sixteenth-century crisis, but as ecclesial communities.⁵⁷ Nissiotis's remark is an important reminder that the expression “ecclesial communities,” inadequate though it may seem today, was intended to be a step forward from “communities” and “groups.” Moreover, Nissiotis emphasized the “ecclesial” aspect—meaning that the churches of the Reformation are,

55. Nikos Nissiotis, “The Main Ecclesiological Problem of the Second Vatican Council and the Position of the Non-Roman Churches Facing It,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 2, no. 1 (1965): 31–62 at 62.

56. See for example Nissiotis, “The Main Ecclesiological Problem of the Second Vatican Council,” 49–50.

57. Nissiotis, “Ecclesiology and Ecumenism,” 20–26. For Nissiotis's deeper account of the significance of the use of plural in reference to Orthodoxy and for the relationship with the Oriental Orthodox Churches, including the acknowledgement that the schism was due to terminological reasons, see Nikos Nissiotis, “Orthodox Reflections on the Decree on Ecumenism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 3, no. 2 (1966): 329–42 at 330–33. Nissiotis's participation at the Council must have been very intense since, after a September 22, 1964 discussion on the role of Mary as the Mother of the Church, Congar noted about Nissiotis that he “spoke at length in English, but was quite obscure. Once again, he gave voice to all his complexes and proved that he is *absolutely not* a man for dialogue. In addition, he is irritating, negative, and extreme. Father Scrima, who was alongside me, suffered while listening to him.” Quoted in Giuseppe Alberigo, “Major Results, Shadows of Uncertainty,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion*, 617–40 at 632. In my opinion, Congar's view—while justified—is quite harsh and does not reflect the intensity with which Nissiotis's heart was beating for the Church universal, especially for the Catholic Church as it opened itself up ecumenically. He was willing to patiently support the Catholic reform effort, as when he reported on the Council, “almost all the objections that the Orthodox have to the limited Roman view in the schemata *de ecclesia* and *de oecumenismo* have been made clearly and sometimes with extraordinary force by cardinals and bishops, with one exception perhaps, which is for the moment at least impossible in practice, namely the objection to the conception of the primacy of the Pope ... it is precisely here that the Orthodox East must show patience and spiritual solidarity with those inside the Roman Church who are eager to overcome this difficulty and contribute to the re-establishment of the broken communion between Rome and the other churches.” Nissiotis, “Is the Vatican Council Really Ecumenical?,” 367.

indeed, churches (they have an ecclesial character) and the Council Fathers wanted to respect the self-identification of some Christian families, such as the Anglicans, who refer to themselves as “communion.”⁵⁸

The Romanian monk André Scrima was one of the often-unsung contributors to the Council. As Melloni aptly stated, he “had a marginal status but a decisive role.”⁵⁹ Scrima emphasized the Eastern view of the relationship between the Scriptures and the life of the church, especially the liturgy, which is “the Christian mystery in act”⁶⁰ in which tradition is located. Cardinal Suenens even suggested that the pope consult Scrima before his final intervention before the last round of discussions on *Dei Verbum*.⁶¹ Scrima also encouraged the Melkite archbishop Neofito Edelby to speak boldly on the interpretation of Scripture in the Spirit in whom (not only in which) it was written, and the need to read Scriptures filled with the Spirit within the liturgy. One can hardly exaggerate the importance of Edelby’s intervention, which he characterized as being in accord with the Orthodox East.⁶²

Moreover, during the third session, when the role of Virgin Mary as “Mediatrice” was discussed, Scrima was asked to write a short paper which ended up enjoying wide

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58. See also for a definition of ecclesial communities: J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 314–15; Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 30–32; and *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), 22, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.
59. Melloni, Ruozzi, and Galavotti, *Vatican II: The Complete History*, 10. See also Sorin Selaru, “La synodalité et l’autorité au niveau régional dans l’Église: de *Lumen Gentium* au *Document de Ravenne*,” *Irénikon*, no. 2 (2015): 181–200 at 184–88, https://www.academia.edu/28025014/Synodalité_et_autorité_au_niveau_regional_dans_lEglise_de_Lumen_Gentium_au_Document_de_Ravenne.
60. Giuseppe Ruggieri, “The First Doctrinal Clash,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, *The Formation of the Council’s Identity*, 233–67 at 257–58.
61. Christophe Théobald, “The Church under the Word of God,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition*, 275–362 at 331; Gilles Routhier, “Finishing the Work Begun: The Trying Experience of the Fourth Period,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition*, 49–184 at 56–57.
62. Unfortunately, for lack of space, the contribution of Oriental Orthodox bishops cannot be analyzed here. As far as Patriarch Athenagoras was concerned, they represented the East at the Council. During his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he told the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, “You represent all of us. Thank you!” Evangelista Vilanova, “The Intersession (1963–1964),” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 3, *The Mature Council*, 347–492 at 487. See also Hanjo Sauer, “The Doctrinal and the Pastoral: The Text on Divine Revelation,” in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion*, 196–232 at 223. Thomas J. McGovern, “The Interpretation of Scripture ‘in the Spirit’: The Edelby Intervention at Vatican II,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999): 245–59 at 245–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114009906400302>.

circulation.⁶³ He was concerned that a dogmatization of Mary's role would result in unnecessary theological speculation and a proliferation of undue devotional practices that would stand in tension with the more meditative, liturgical, and pneumatological character of the experience of Mary in the East. As a result of his intervention, the Council added several pastoral and spiritual designations for the Virgin Mary.⁶⁴

Lastly, when Paul VI surprised everybody with his intention to promulgate *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite) by the end of the third session, Scrima pointed out that the document did not correspond to the Orthodox reality, which did not regard its national churches as "particular churches" that are disunited and need to find their way back to Roman unity under the papacy. He also protested that the decision to establish *communio in sacris* was unilateral, without Orthodox consultation. Stating that Orthodoxy does not allow eucharistic sharing even *in extremis*, Scrima and the other Orthodox observers convinced Yves Congar to freeze the approval process for fear of taking false steps towards unity. After further consideration, a new phrase was inserted in *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 29 at the request of Orthodox observers, stating that eucharistic sharing with the East can occur only "after consultation also with the hierarchs of the separated churches."⁶⁵

It is, however, much more difficult to estimate the role that Orthodox observers played in the Council's avoidance to condemn communism, as well as the larger question, of whether the Council's lack of condemnation of communism is indeed significant. Given the above considerations about Moscow's insistence on this issue, as well as the consistent debates between some of the Council Fathers on the one hand, and the pope, the SPCU, and their supporting bishops on the other hand, I consider it a significant aspect of the Council's history. Less debatable, however, is that intra-Catholic dynamics were of primary importance regarding the Council's avoidance of a condemnation of communism; that does not nullify the role of Orthodox observers. One of the bishops who was very involved in the Council from the beginning, but later denounced it as heretical and founded the Society of St. Pius X in 1970, was Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905–1991). He became the leader of a vocal conciliar minority, which criticized all reforms and the Council's refusal to condemn communism. Lefebvre wrote about communism in his *Open Letter to Confused Catholics* 111: "The most monstrous error ever to emerge from the mind of Satan ... has official access to the Vatican,"⁶⁶ meaning that the Soviets had forced Tisserant and Willebrands not to

63. Luis Antonio G. Tagle, "The 'Black Week' of Vatican II (November 14–21 1964)," in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion*, 388–452 at 446.

64. Joseph A. Komonchak, "Toward an Ecclesiology of Communion," in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion*, 1–94 at 57.

65. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (November 21, 1964) 29, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_orientalium-ecclesiarum_en.html. See Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 445–48.

66. Marcel Lefevre, *An Open Letter to Confused Catholics* (Herefordshire, UK: Fowler Wright, 1986), quoted in Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, 34.

condemn communism—a reading of historical events with which I have disagreed earlier in this article.

Contrary to the Lefebvrist position, most historians of the Council today would agree with Massimo Faggioli's argument that the Council's refusal to condemn communism was due first and foremost to "the historical fact that the bishops from communist Europe beyond the Iron Curtain begged the council not to issue a condemnation of communism."⁶⁷ Along the same lines, Giovanni Turbanti considers several reasons. First, the Catholic bishops from the Eastern Bloc played a major role in the Council's avoidance of a condemnation of communism both because of their precarious situation at home and because the Council was their first opportunity since 1945 to realistically present their situation to the world.⁶⁸ Second, Tisserant presided over the subcommittee responsible for the redaction of *De animo* and he eliminated all references to communism and to denunciations of the persecutions in communist countries. Third, the terms of the meetings between Willebrands and Nikodim became known to a number of key influential figures, which served as a deterring factor. Fourth, John XXIII's discourse set a tone of openness that went counter to the tendency to condemn various facets of modernity, including communism; even during the last days of the Council, when this issue was still debated, Paul VI had to personally intervene and remind the conciliar Fathers of his predecessor's intention in convening the Council as pastoral, without appealing to anathemas and condemnations.⁶⁹ Paul VI and the Council remained steadfast in their commitment to an affirmative attitude to the world, rather than following the precedents set by Pius IX's *Syllabus Errorum*, the canons of Vatican I, and Pius X's anti-modernist stances in his encyclicals and the oath against modernism that he made mandatory for clergy, religious superiors, seminary professors, and so on.

A major test came during the discussions on *Gaudium et Spes* at the last session of the Council, when many voices still fiercely advocated an explicit condemnation of communism.⁷⁰ At the insistence of Archbishop Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II), without explicitly condemning communism, the Council expressed its negative attitude toward atheism.⁷¹ Needless to say, these discussions put the Catholic and Orthodox delegates from the Eastern Bloc in a difficult position, since their countries

67. Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, 30–4 here at 34. For the direct and indirect discussions about communism, its intrinsic atheistic character, the possibility of condemning it in various schemas, and the effects of such condemnation on the Catholic bishops and faithful in the Eastern Bloc, see Turbanti, "Il Problema del comunismo al Concilio Vaticano II," 147–56, 62–82.

68. Turbanti, "Il Problema del comunismo al Concilio Vaticano II," 187. See also Routhier, "Finishing the Work Begun," 148.

69. Turbanti, "Il Problema del comunismo al Concilio Vaticano II," 159–83.

70. See, for example, Routhier, "Finishing the Work Begun," 148–53; Peter Hünemann, "The Final Weeks of the Council," in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition*, 363–484 at 398–99.

71. Melloni, Ruozi, and Galavotti, *Vatican II: The Complete History*, 234–35.

of origin were led by militant, oppressive atheist regimes. Lastly, in the latter days of the Council, Paul VI convened a small group of Council leaders to ensure a non-condemnatory stance.⁷² As a matter of fact, the discussions continued so intensely until the last days of Vatican II that Archbishop Nikodim of the Moscow Patriarchate arrived only at the last minute at the closing ceremonies of the Council, after being assured that Vatican II did not condemn communism.⁷³ Thus, while the primary reasons for the Council's avoidance of a condemnation of communism lie within the Catholic Church itself, the Orthodox observers from behind the Iron Curtain also played an undeniable role in this regard.

While one might be inclined to look at the Orthodox contribution strictly in the Council's documents, it is probably more important to emphasize the humanitarian consequences of their presence at Vatican II. Shortly after the opening of the Council, fifteen Ukrainian Catholic bishops protested that Moscow allowed Russian Orthodox observers to participate at the Council, but Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj remained imprisoned for seventeen years and was the only survivor of the eleven Ukrainian Catholic bishops sent to Siberia, as part of USSR's oppressive dissolution of the Byzantine Catholic Church in its territories.⁷⁴ Cardinal Testa transmitted to the Russian observers John XXIII's personal request to the Soviet regime to grant amnesty to Slipyj, a request that they transmitted forward.⁷⁵ Consequently, Khrushchev released the Metropolitan to live in Rome, provided he would not engage in political activities.⁷⁶ Thomas Stransky recalls his presence at the Grottaferrata Melkite monastery north of Rome, just weeks after Slipyj's release:

For the first time in 17 years, the splendidly robed archbishop fully celebrated the Eucharist in the high Slavonic rite. Willebrands, Arrighi and I witnessed the tears of the archbishop, the tears of the monks and the tears of each other. In his late '80s, Willebrands judged the Slipyj episode one of the most gratifying in his long secretariat service. Also for me.⁷⁷

72. Turbanti, "Il Problema del comunismo al Concilio Vaticano II," 159–83.

73. Hünemann, "The Final Weeks of the Council," 398.

74. Their protest appeared in several newspapers—including *La Croix*—on November 22, but the Ukrainian bishops did not intend to publish their protest in the press; it was meant solely for their fellow bishops. Lanne, "La Perception en Occident," 120–1.

75. Krassikov, "The Second Vatican Council in the Context of Relations between the USSR and the Holy See," 319. Previously, the Vatican enlisted the help of the American journalist and peace advocate, Norman Cousins, who obtained an interview with Khrushchev. Cousins's plea on behalf of Slipyj proved unsuccessful. See Gerald P. Fogarty, "The Council Gets Underway," in Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, *The Formation of the Council's Identity*, 69–106 at 101–103.

76. Borovoi, "The Second Vatican Council and its Significance for the Russian Orthodox Church," 134–35.

77. Thomas F. Stransky, "Vatican II: Recollections of an Insider" (lecture, Vatican II after Fifty Years Symposium, Georgetown University, October 11, 2012), <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/n9kssnivy8ru3cr771bn>.

The Lifting of the Mutual Excommunications of 1054

While Orthodox observers were making these contributions to the Council, a third Rhodes Pan-Orthodox Conference took place in 1964. It decided that each local Orthodox Church would now be free to initiate its own relationship with Rome, opening the door for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to establish its own relationship with the Vatican, without the involvement of other local Orthodox Churches.⁷⁸ Indeed, Constantinople started acting unilaterally. Steps were taken for Athenagoras to visit the Council as head of a pan-Orthodox delegation, but that visit never materialized.⁷⁹ Moreover, Paul VI and Athenagoras gave prominence to the ancient expression “sister churches” in regards to the Catholic and Orthodox Churches,⁸⁰ reintroduced in modern times in the Patriarch’s correspondence with John XXIII and then picked up in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 14.⁸¹ Even more boldly, in February 1965, Patriarch Athenagoras took the initiative and invited the pope to seek significant gestures of rapprochement, chief among them being the removal from memory of the mutual excommunications of 1054.

While representatives from Constantinople and Rome worked out the details, Willebrands met between November 21 and November 24 with the Russian, Bulgarian, and Serbian observers to inform them of the upcoming declaration. Previously, Athenagoras had sent telegrams to the rest of the autocephalous Orthodox churches informing them of the decision and explaining that no prior consultation was necessary among all the Orthodox, since this gesture affected the Church of Constantinople alone, and not the other churches (an allusion to the limited scope of the mutual excommunications of 1054), and the declaration did not involve canonical changes or reestablishing communion with the Catholic Church. The Greek and Romanian churches protested Constantinople’s unilateral gesture, which they regarded as having pan-Orthodox significance, contrary to Constantinople’s claim. Other reactions from the Orthodox world were of benevolent prudence and the hope of establishing a thorough theological dialogue in view of unity.⁸² However, Athenagoras’s gesture disclosed that he trusted neither the process of consultation with other Orthodox churches, nor the principle of unanimity that other Patriarchates have recently abused, so he acted unilaterally.

The ceremonies took place in both the patriarchal basilica in Constantinople and in Rome during the concluding vigil of the Council on December 7, 1965.⁸³ After the

78. Stransky, introduction to *Towards the Healing of Schism*, 11.

79. Alberigo, “Major Results, Shadows of Uncertainty,” 631. See also Selaru, “La synodalité et l’autorité au niveau régional dans l’Église,” 187.

80. The famous 1920 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere” used the expressions “sister churches” internally, in reference to the Eastern Orthodox churches.

81. For more on the ecumenical relevance of the concept of “sister churches,” see Will Cohen, *The Concept of “Sister Churches” in Catholic-Orthodox Relations since Vatican II* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016).

82. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 357, 637–38.

83. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli*, 357, 630–36.

reading of *Dell'Ambulante in dilectione* that cancelled the mutual excommunications of 1054, Paul VI and Metropolitan Meliton of Heliopolis embraced each other while the assembly enthusiastically applauded this significant ecumenical gesture, now solemnized by the Council.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The process of inviting observers to the Second Vatican Council was a tumultuous one. Only one Patriarchate (that of Moscow—under communist persecution!) sent representatives to the first session, the other early participants being SPCU guests (e.g. Cassien), representatives of the WCC (Nissiotis), or from churches whose canonicity was not universally recognized (e.g. Schmemmann). Moreover, Constantinople proved ineffective in securing a common Orthodox response to Rome's invitation to send observers, despite a first Rhodes conference that should have prevented divergent Orthodox attitudes. It turned out that the principle of unanimity was Moscow's tactic to challenge Constantinople's primacy, as Borovoi concluded after Rhodes I: "The key to solve the problem of Orthodox observers is now in Moscow, it is not in Constantinople."⁸⁵ In spite of these challenges, the Orthodox contributions to the documents and attitudes of the Council, the additional humanitarian benefits, the Orthodox–Catholic rapprochement,⁸⁶ and the lifting of the 1054 mutual anathemas were all invaluable contributions of the presence of Orthodox observers at the Council.

After more than 50 years, it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to provide an objective assessment of these events. Unlike us today, the above-mentioned protagonists lived at a time when the Soviet regime attempted the creation of "a society without religion," and more than two thousand Orthodox churches were closed down. Khrushchev himself promised to exhibit "the last Soviet priest" on Soviet TV as an "odddity,"⁸⁷ which in fact meant that he intended to eliminate all the Orthodox priests,

84. Melloni, Ruoizzi, and Galavotti, *Vatican II: The Complete History*, 236–37.

85. Quoted in Rocucci, "Russian Observers at Vatican II," 66–67.

86. The positive experience of the observers began the process of a favorable reception of Vatican II in Orthodoxy and a new attitude towards the Catholic Church emerged. Naturally, the pastoral and theological implementation of this new attitude will continue for the decades to come and an opportunity to prove it came just recently. In June 2016, the Orthodox Church convened a Holy and Great Council in Crete, inviting ecumenical observers to be present. The Vatican responded promptly by appointing two observers to the Council, namely Cardinal Kurt Koch and Bishop Brian Farrell as president and secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, respectively. Their role, however, was limited to passive spectators at the opening and closing sessions. While this invitation is an encouraging sign of ecumenical Orthodox openness, Vatican II remains the standard for theological depth, synodality, involvement of theologians, consultation with other churches, and the prominent role of observers in the conciliar process.

87. Karlov, "The Secret Diplomacy of Moscow and the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council," 300.

until the last one would be made a public spectacle. These conditions obliged the Russian Orthodox Church to carefully seek external contacts. Participation at the WCC and Vatican II took the Church out of isolation, raising the prestige of the Patriarchate abroad and thus strengthening it in the eyes of the state, which was now forced to decrease its persecution of the Church.⁸⁸ At the same time, for fear of undoing this progress, the delegates had to act “in such a way as not to make false moves and mistakes which would lose openings,”⁸⁹ as Borovoi put it. Anastacia Wooden has convincingly shown that Borovoi was a complex ecumenical protagonist, who was dedicated to his church in an extremely precarious context.⁹⁰

Thus emerges a complex image of a Church doing its best to survive the reality of an inimical Soviet regime. On the one hand, it is justifiable to be indignant about the collaboration of a powerless Church with an unstoppable regime; the detailed reporting practices of Church representatives; the negative impact that Soviet external politics had on pan-Orthodox unity; the realization that theological explorations on Christian unity pale in importance compared to geo-political calculations; the political powers’ interest to keep various Orthodox jurisdictions separate and Christian churches disunited, as well as the process of translating this inimical rhetoric to grass-roots level under the guise of religious discourse and Pan-Orthodox unanimity; and last but not least the indignation at the suffering of the innocent. On the other hand, it is impossible to deny the good intentions of Church representatives who collaborated in the interest of survival—their own and that of the rest of the Church; the Church’s need to become visible internationally, since the militant atheist regime could not eliminate a Church that had prestige abroad; and the desire to make their suffering—indeed martyrdom—known to their brothers and sisters in Christ in the West.

Author Biography

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88. Roccucci, “Russian Observers at Vatican II,” 46–60.

89. Borovoi, “The Second Vatican Council and its Significance for the Russian Orthodox Church,” 137.

90. Anastacia Wooden, “‘The Agent of Christ’: Participation of Fr. Vitali Borovoy in the Second Vatican Council as an Observer from the ROC,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 36 (2016): 1–27, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss4/2/>.