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# Getting from Conflict to Communion

## Ecclesiology at the Center of Recent Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogues and the 2016 Orthodox Council of Crete

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther published ninety-five theses in which he expressed his grievances with his own Catholic Church. To mark this anniversary, I set out a while ago to write a list of ninety-five grievances with my own Orthodox Church. I quickly wrote my first twenty-two objections and then I suddenly stopped. Where would this exercise take me, if I got to twenty-two so quickly and so passionately? Would I have as much love as Martin Luther's love for his own Church to be able to list ninety-five grievances and yet attempt remain in it—something that I admire greatly? Although I abandoned this exercise after twenty-two points, one thing became clear: my theses all boil down to the tension between two types of ecclesiology: inclusivist and exclusivist. The thought and practice of the majority of laity, clergy, monastics, theologians, and bishops represent the inclusivist position, while a small yet influential minority of ultraconservative monastics and bishops impose the exclusivist stance, a closed attitude in both pastoral life and ecumenism. These intra-Orthodox dynamics came into the spotlight at the Holy and Great Orthodox Council that took place in Crete in 2016. Future ecumenical dialogues—which now have a conciliar mandate—depend on the reception of this Council.

This article first briefly outlines the history of the Orthodox-Lutheran dialogue to show its progress and document its ecclesiological turn. Then, to anticipate the direction of future dialogues, I focus on three ecclesiological themes that were prominent in Crete: the designation of Western Christians as “churches,”

the interference of worldly (political) concerns with church unity, and Orthodoxy's commitment to ecumenism.

#### ORTHODOX-LUTHERAN DIALOGUE

In 1558 Patriarch Joasaph II of Constantinople sent Deacon Demetrios Mysos to Wittenberg to learn about the Reformation. The deacon stayed with Philip Melanchthon for several months in 1559, and together they worked on a Greek translation of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon then addressed the Ecumenical Patriarch in writing, hoping that Orthodox and Reformers would come together, united by their common allegiance to the decisions of the early councils and patristic writings, as well as by their tense relations with Catholicism and Islam.<sup>1</sup> After Melanchthon's death in 1560 cut short this encounter and thus the translation of the Augsburg Confession never reached the Patriarch, in 1573, several theologians from Tübingen established the first major Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue with Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremias II in correspondence form.<sup>2</sup> On receiving the professors' letter in 1574, the Patriarch established a committee of Orthodox theologians to discuss the Augsburg Confession and respond. The Lutheran theologians then replied in 1577; the Patriarch responded in 1579 and the professors wrote back in 1580. The entire correspondence, totaling nearly three hundred pages, was published in Wittenberg in 1584.<sup>3</sup>

The tradition begun in the sixteenth century continued in modern Lutheran-Orthodox bilateral dialogues. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Russian Orthodox Church have engaged in dialogue since 1959; other local dialogues followed suit. Beginning in 1967, both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) began the process of expanding these local dialogues to a global level. This gradual process bore fruit with the establishment of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the LWF and the Orthodox Church, which first met in Espoo,

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<sup>1</sup> John Travis, "Orthodox-Lutheran Relations: Their Historical Beginnings," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 29, no. 4 (1984): 304.

<sup>2</sup> Risto Saarinen, *Faith and Holiness: Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue 1959-1994* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 16.

<sup>3</sup> See more in Travis, "Orthodox-Lutheran Relations," 305-7.

Finland, in 1981.<sup>4</sup> Over the years, the Orthodox-Lutheran dialogues have reached agreements regarding essential topics such as trinitarian theology, the apostolic authority of ecumenical councils, the inspiration of Scripture, and soteriology. This international dialogue took a decisive ecclesiological turn in 1990, and since then, the Joint Commission discussed the following themes: *The Ecumenical Councils* (1993, Sandbjerg, Denmark), *Understanding of Salvation in the Light of the Ecumenical Councils* (1995, Limassol, Cyprus), *Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy* (1998, Sigtuna, Sweden), *Word and Sacraments (Mysteria) in the Life of the Church* (2000, Damascus, Syria), *Mysteria/Sacraments as Means of Salvation* (2002, Oslo, Norway), *Baptism and Chrismation as Sacraments of Initiation into the Church* (2004, Durau, Romania), *The Mystery of the Church: The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church* (2006, Bratislava, Slovak Republic), *The Mystery of the Church: The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church* (2008, Paphos, Cyprus), *The Mystery of the Church: The Nature, Attributes and Mission of the Church* (2011, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Germany), and a discussion of the theme of *Ordained Ministry/Priesthood in the Life of the Church* without producing a final statement (2015, Rhodes, Greece).<sup>5</sup>

When the time came to evaluate the work of the Joint Commission, a May 2011 inter-Orthodox meeting in Athens issued a generally positive report and committed itself to continuing the dialogue. It did not hesitate to refer to Lutherans as “Church.”<sup>6</sup> The dialogue continued on this ecclesiological path

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the history of the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue, see Council of EKD, *Wort und Mysterium: Der Briefwechsel über Glauben und Kirche 1573 bis 1581 zwischen den Tübinger Theologen und dem Patriarchat von Konstantinopel* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1958). Reinhard Thöle and Martin Illert, *Wörterbuch zu den bilateralen theologischen Dialogen zwischen der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und orthodoxen Kirchen (1959–2013)* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Documents of the Joint Commission are available at <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue/> and <http://www.strasbourg-institute.org/en/dialogues/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue/>.

<sup>6</sup> Theodoros Meimaris, “Thirty Years of the International Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Lutherans (1981–2011): Evaluation and Prospects,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 58, nos. 1–4 (2013): 189–91.

up to the latest meeting of the Preparatory Committee in Nicosia in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Co-chaired by LWF vice president Bishop Dr. Christoph Klein of Romania, and Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the committee analyzed the Draft Statement of Rhodes (2015) and enriched it by providing new perspectives on the theme of Ministry/Priesthood as Lutheran and Orthodox members saw it reflected in the Bible, the early Church, and the Middle Ages, focusing on the relationship between the ordained and royal priesthood and between the episcopate and apostolic succession. Moreover, the committee made its own preparations to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation during the seventeenth Plenary Session of the Joint Commission in Helsinki, Finland, November 7–14, 2017.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of that meeting’s formal agenda, discussions will undoubtedly revolve around the Council of Crete.

#### THE 2016 COUNCIL OF CRETE AND ITS PREPARATION

The Council reaffirmed the Orthodox commitment to ecumenism, thereby giving the Lutheran-Orthodox bilateral dialogue a conciliar mandate. Unfortunately, the document on “The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”<sup>9</sup> (hereafter, “On Ecumenism”) also took some steps backward. Whereas preconciliar drafts referred to Western Christians as “churches,” the final document used expressions such as “historical designations of churches and confessions,” which were meant to appease ultraconservative concerns but in the end satisfied no one. To better understand Crete’s ecclesiology and its historical origins, in the remainder of this article I focus on three themes as they have evolved over the last hundred years: the designation of Western Christians as “churches,” nationalistic pressures, and commitment to ecumenism.

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<sup>7</sup> As a general description of these dialogues, Saarinen notes a reluctance of Orthodox participants to commit to a concrete ecclesiology, be it a eucharistic or a communion ecclesiology. Even when Lutheran participants opened up to the possibility of integrating external marks such as apostolicity and ordained ministry, the Orthodox retreated further back into canonical forms of school theology, which hindered the progress of the dialogue. Saarinen, *Faith and Holiness*, 263–65.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lutheran-orthodox-commission-celebrate-reformation-anniversary>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.holycouncil.org/official-documents>.

## CHURCH AND CHURCHES

The Council of Crete promised to be pastorally oriented and not proclaim any new dogmas. But practical realities are always rooted in theology and in turn influence theology. In addressing pastoral situations—some of which have prompted my twenty-two theses—and ecumenical dialogues, the Council tried to accommodate two competing ecclesiologies. On the one hand, it displayed traits of what I would call an inclusivist ecclesiology that regards the Orthodox Church as the fullness of the *Una Sancta*—the Church—but sees others, to differing degrees, as also part of the Church. This inclusivist ecclesiology is reflected in the preconiliar drafts, the views of the majority of participating bishops, most of the Orthodox faithful and representative theologians.

On the other hand, the Council also adopted what could be regarded as an exclusivist ecclesiology that regards Orthodoxy as the totality of the *Una Sancta* in which other Christians have no place. This exclusivist ecclesiology represents the root cause of Crete's hesitancy to refer to Western Christians as "churches," a hesitancy rooted in the insistence of a minority of bishops representing a smaller—but vocal—group of faithful, especially monastics. Because in official dialogues Orthodoxy is oftentimes represented by some of its more conservative elements, the statements issuing from these dialogues are as minimalist as possible and participants justifiably fear rejection by the so-called traditionalist circles within Orthodoxy. Pantelis Kalaitzidis identifies the latter primarily with the council of elders of Mount Athos who have forcefully replaced the rest of Orthodoxy as the judges of Orthodoxy, in the sense that they claim an authority that was not delegated to them. Their 2012 "Confession of Faith" denounces ecumenism as a heresy and refers to the bishops involved in ecumenism as heretics and apostates. Hence the monks at Mount Athos do not consider themselves under the obedience of these specific bishops.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, in April 2014, Metropolitans Andrew and Seraphim of the Church of Greece wrote an eighty-nine-page letter to "His Excellency Francis, Head of

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<sup>10</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Quelques réflexions conclusives au term du colloque," *Contacts* 243 (2013): 624–25.

State of the Vatican City, Rome,” in which they denounce what they perceive as numerous heresies and false doctrines related to the papacy—thirty-one such teachings in just one paragraph! To date, the Greek Synod has not disciplined the two Metropolitans and they continue to oppose ecumenism and the Council of Crete.

These ultraconservative circles are not confined to Mount Athos and some insular bishops. The issue is so pressing that the delegates of all autocephalous Orthodox churches that met in 1998 in Thessaloniki declared that they “unanimously denounced those groups of schismatics, as well as certain extremist groups within the local Orthodox Churches themselves, that are using the theme of ecumenism in order to criticize the Church leadership and undermine its authority, thus attempting to create divisions and schisms in the Church.”<sup>11</sup> Without similar bold references to “schismatic” and “extremist” groups, Crete’s document on ecumenism attempts to preserve this idea in paragraph 22, adding that individuals should not consider their authority higher than that of a council: “The Orthodox Church considers all efforts to break the unity of the Church, undertaken by individuals or groups under the pretext of maintaining or allegedly defending true Orthodoxy, as being worthy of condemnation. As evidenced throughout the life of the Orthodox Church, the preservation of the true Orthodox faith is ensured only through the conciliar system, which has always represented the highest authority in the Church on matters of faith and canonical decrees (Canon 6, 2nd Ecumenical Council).”

In the aftermath of the Council of Crete, some few but very vocal Orthodox priests and bishops in Greece protested the Council, gathered followers, and stopped commemorating the bishops who signed the document on ecumenism. In response, the Ecumenical Patriarchate officially appealed to the Greek Synod to discipline these clerics, but to no avail.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas FitzGerald and Peter Bouteneff, eds., *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Harare; The Report of the WCC Orthodox Pre-Assembly Meeting and Selected Resource Materials* (Geneva: Orthodox Task Force, WCC, 1998), 136.

Three of the four churches that ended up absenting themselves from Crete, namely, the Patriarchates of Georgia, Bulgaria, and Russia (Antioch did not have insurmountable difference in this regard), also advocated these positions before the Council of Crete. I cannot identify any distinguished contemporary Orthodox theologian who would advocate this exclusivist position, despite the ultraconservatives' undocumented claim that this position is in accordance with the Orthodox tradition and the Fathers.<sup>12</sup>

These two opposing ecclesiologies resulted in internally contradictory statements. For example, the first paragraph on the document on ecumenism refers to the Orthodox Church “as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church”—in other words, the *Una Sancta* confessed in the Creed—without any qualification that would make this statement less exclusivist. But throughout the rest of the document, it clearly treats Western Christians as belonging to the Church, sometimes accepting their historical designation as “churches” (par. 6) or even speaking outright of the WCC as made up of “non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions” in paragraph 16. These compromises that the Council of Crete ended up adopting proved unsatisfactory. Here are just two examples. Instead of acknowledging the Church's lack of unity as the inclusivist position would, the Council referred to the quest for “the unity of all Christians” (par. 5) so as not to give the impression that the Church can be anything other than one, as exclusivist ecclesiology claims. Furthermore, in paragraph 6 the Council affirms:

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<sup>12</sup> The clearest synodal instance of the exclusivist position came after the Council on November 15, 2016, when the Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church adopted a declaration on Crete's document on ecumenism. In my opinion, the declaration is gravely lacking a solid theological foundation, honesty, and good will. Delving into obscure incursions into theories of created grace, models of Christian unity that Crete explicitly rejected, and Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism (the only quote provided in the entire document), the Bulgarian Patriarchate affirms without offering any evidence: “With regards to the search for the ‘lost unity of all Christians’ expressed and asserted in paragraph 5, we deem this unacceptable and inadmissible, inasmuch as the Orthodox Church never lost its internal unity despite heresies and schisms which represent a breaking away from the Body of the Church, by which the Body does not lose its initial ontological integrity, which consists in the ontological indivisibility of Christ's Hypostasis. . . . No heretical or schismatic community can be called ‘Church.’ The presence of a multitude of churches is unacceptable, according to the dogmas and canons of the Orthodox Church” (Pravoslavie.ru; December 2).

In accordance with the ontological nature of the Church, her unity can never be perturbed. In spite of this, the Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her, and believes that her relations with them should be based on the most speedy and objective clarification possible of the whole ecclesiological question, and most especially of their more general teachings on sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession.

First, the ecclesiological themes mentioned at the end of paragraph 6 represent the focus of the Joint Lutheran-Orthodox Commission, underlining the relevance of the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue today. Second, the document leaves the expression “ontological nature of the Church” unexplained but seems to oppose a theoretical and ontological reality of the Church that remains one with the historical and phenomenological reality of a disunited Church. The theological and pastoral consequences of this opposition are significant and the Council should have been more concerned with the effects of their statement than with reaching a compromise.<sup>13</sup> Other examples of expressions meant to replace the straightforward term “church” are the rather confusing and historically inaccurate description found in paragraph 20 of the Council’s *Encyclical*, which speaks of “those who have severed themselves from communion with [the Orthodox Church],” as if all Western Christians originated in a schism from Orthodoxy (certainly not the case of Lutherans!), and the preferable expression, “the rest of the Christian world” used in the document on ecumenism paragraph 8. This latter expression, however, is not ideal either, since it projects a negative identity on Western Christianity. Churches do not define their identity as *non-other*, but in fairness, such expressions are sometimes unavoidable.

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<sup>13</sup> Georges Florovsky—though not solving the problem—was much more nuanced when he wrote about the tragedy of schisms in which the Church remains in a sense united but also suffers from schisms, the paradoxical character of division, and the abnormal state of a disunited Christianity, where no theology can properly explain how we are “separated brethren”—a paradox that deals with both our unity and our disunity. Georges Florovsky, “The Tragedy of Christian Divisions,” in *Ecumenism I: A Doctrinal Approach, Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Emeritus Professor of Eastern Church History, Harvard University*, vol. 13 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 28–33.



Clearly, referring to Western Christians as “churches” represents a contested point today, highlighting the tensions between inclusivistic and exclusivistic ecclesiologies. This is a very recent phenomenon, however. As early as 1902, the Ecumenical Patriarchate consulted all major Orthodox sees on the initiation of dialogue with the West. In 1904, Patriarch Joachim III of Constantinople issued a letter that included the responses of the other Orthodox sees, calling for a dialogue with the Western churches, which he called “*holy local Churches of God*.” Most notable is the unprecedented 1920 invitation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate “unto the *Churches of Christ everywhere*” to form a fellowship (*koinonia*) of churches.<sup>14</sup> This invitation, which became programmatic for the ecumenical movement, included a request for common agreement: “we earnestly ask and invite the judgment and the opinion of the other sister churches in the East and of the *venerable Christian churches in the West* and everywhere in the world.”<sup>15</sup> This initiative was the result of an intra-Orthodox consultation process and all local Orthodox churches felt the urgency to act together toward Christian unity. Hence, the 1923 Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople first proposed the idea of a Pan-Orthodox Council; in 1930 a preparatory commission was set up in Vatopeti on Mount Athos, unfortunately with limited results.<sup>16</sup>

The next major development in Orthodoxy’s relationship with the West was the founding of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. All Orthodox churches were invited to be founding members and, indeed, some accepted right away, while the rest waited until 1961 to join the WCC,<sup>17</sup> having only transitory qualms about referring to others as “churches” and

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<sup>14</sup> Gennadios Limouris, ed. *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports of the Ecumenical Movement 1902–1992* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 9–11.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Damaskinos Papandreou, “Pan-Orthodox Conferences,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 25–26. Given the general negative attitude of today’s Athonite monks toward the Council, it is rather ironic that this council was first prepared on Mount Athos.

<sup>17</sup> The Church of Albania, which at that time could not exist legally within its territory, joined the WCC in 1994.

being involved in ecumenism. These transitory qualms refer to the Orthodox churches behind the Iron Curtain that invoked ecclesiological reasons for not joining the WCC at the 1948 synod that took place in the USSR. Their concerns were answered shortly thereafter in 1950 at Toronto, when the WCC stated that its members recognize in other churches elements of the true Church but are not obligated to recognize them as churches in the full sense of the term.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, by this point referring to others as “churches” had become a contested issue and the WCC successfully offered a reply that all Orthodox accepted. This theological question, however, was also motivated by a political isolationist attitude toward the West as Communist regimes dictated, an attitude that would partially change by the 1960s. While the ecumenical question was an older theological theme, with the 1950 Toronto statement, it became a central one. Georges Florovsky was one of the influential figures who tailored this statement.<sup>19</sup> Other Orthodox theologians of the first rank from that period, such as Nicholas Afanasiev, Paul Evdokimov, and Dumitru Staniloae, embraced this attitude of openness and illustrated Orthodox theology at its best, in dialogue with other churches.

It is impossible to present here a full account of the ecclesiologies of these theologians. Their main principles can be summarized thus: Florovsky pointed out that some heretics were received into the early Church without the

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<sup>18</sup> The Council of Crete referred explicitly to this important event and its contemporary relevance in the document on ecumenism, par. 19: “The Orthodox Churches that are members of the WCC regard as an indispensable condition of their participation in the WCC the foundational article of its Constitution, in accordance with which its members may only be those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior in accordance with the Scriptures, and who confess the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in accordance with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is their deep conviction that the ecclesiological presuppositions of the 1950 Toronto Statement, *On the Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches*, are of paramount importance for Orthodox participation in the Council. . . . *No Church is obliged to change her ecclesiology on her accession to the Council. . . . Moreover, from the fact of its inclusion in the Council, it does not ensue that each Church is obliged to regard the other Churches as Churches in the true and full sense of the term* (Toronto Statement, § 2).”

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Baker and Seraphim Danckaert, “Georges Florovsky,” in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education; “That They All May Be One”* (John 17, 21), ed. Pantelis Kalaitzidis and Thomas FitzGerald (Oxford/Volos: Regnum Books International / Volos Academy Publications, 2013), 214.

re-administration of baptism, and their orders were recognized as valid, so those heretics were in a practical sense members of the Church. Their sacraments were validly performed “by virtue of the Holy Spirit.” Consequently, he distinguished between the canonical and charismatic boundaries of the Church. He identified the first boundary, the canonical boundary, with the unified early Church and its continuation today—the Orthodox Church—and the second one, the charismatic boundary, with the entirety of Christianity. Moreover, according to Florovsky, “the unity of the Church is based on a twofold bond—the ‘unity of the Spirit’ and the ‘union of peace’ (cf. Eph 4:3). In sects and divisions the ‘union of peace’ is broken and torn apart, but in the sacraments the ‘unity of the Spirit’ is not terminated. This is the unique paradox of sectarian existence.” Thus, because of the work of the Holy Spirit outside the canonical Orthodox Church, Florovsky did not hesitate to refer to Western Christians as “churches.”<sup>20</sup>

Afanassieff considered that assemblies that have a valid Eucharist are fully Church, as is the case with the Roman Catholic Church, which he regarded as a local church of the same *Una Sancta* as the Orthodox Church. Their dogmatic differences (including in regard to the papacy) simply caused a canonical separation but did not create an essential schism.<sup>21</sup>

Staniloae, however, placed more emphasis on the current doctrinal divergences and considered that they create schisms. He regarded the Orthodox Church as the fullness of the Church because it has the fullness of truth, while other denominations belong to the *Una Sancta* in different degrees, depending on how close they are to the fullness of the Church as found in Orthodoxy. On this issue, Evdokimov added the memorable words, “We know where the Church is, but we cannot judge where the Church is not.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Georges Florovsky, “The Boundaries of the Church,” in *Ecumenism I*, 13:37–42. Georges Florovsky, “St. Cyprian and St. Augustine on Schism,” in *Ecumenism II: A Historical Approach, Collected Works*, vol. 14 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 48–51.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolas Afanassieff, “Una Sancta,” *Irénikon* 36, no. 4 (1963): 436–75. Nicolas Afanassieff, “L’Eucharistie, principal lien entre les Catholiques et les Orthodoxes,” *Irénikon* 38, no. 3 (1965): 337–39.

<sup>22</sup> See more in Radu Bordeianu, *Dumitru Staniloae: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (New York/ London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2011), 199–205.

But the official attitudes of various Orthodox churches were not as open as those of their theologians. Internal Orthodox struggles—based primarily in secular politics, not theology—also complicated the relationship with the WCC after the New Delhi Assembly of 1961, when churches from communist countries joined the WCC. First, there was the suspicion that churches from the Eastern bloc became WCC members to further the communist propaganda of their countries: they gave the impression of openness, peace, and understanding, while using the WCC meetings as opportunities to gather information about the West. Second, the Russian Orthodox Church justified its membership in the WCC not as a common initiative with the West (which would have been a political faux-pas) but by its decision to seek Christian unity virtually by canonical absorption within Orthodoxy. Third, the internal quarrels among Orthodox delegates increased because they rarely met outside the limited pre-Assembly meetings, due mainly to their inimical geopolitical situations. Fourth, the tension between Orthodox representatives and the WCC became more pronounced when Orthodox refused to sign common statements and the number of separate Orthodox statements increased; when the Orthodox did not share in eucharistic services with Protestant members; when Orthodox delegates became increasingly dissatisfied with the nature of the unity that the WCC was seeking and with its voting procedures. The number of autocephalous Orthodox churches was unlikely to increase, but the WCC continued to admit a great number of Protestant churches as members, thus limiting the impact of the Orthodox delegations who were easily outvoted.

The tensions between Orthodoxy and the WCC ran high, affecting the Orthodox stance, not toward ecumenism as such, but toward ecumenical institutions, as reflected in the long process of preparation of the 2016 Crete Council. Thirty years prior to Crete, the 1986 Third Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference in Chambésy unanimously adopted the first set of draft documents.<sup>23</sup> Among them, the statement on *The Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement* affirmed that

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<sup>23</sup> The Conference was unable to agree on the issue of the diaspora, which ended up being dropped from the Council's agenda. These drafts underwent a major revision in 2015 and the updated texts were publicized for consultation with the faithful. In this sense, the Orthodox Theological Society of America gathered an impressive number

an essential Orthodox witness and its specific theological contribution will be weakened, if we cannot find within the WCC the necessary conditions which will enable the Orthodox Churches to act on an equal footing with the other WCC members. . . . Concern is expressed about the ongoing enlargement of the WCC, resulting from the admission of different Christian communities as new members. . . . Consequently it is necessary to make new adjustments within the Council.<sup>24</sup>

In 1997 and 1998, respectively, the Georgian and Bulgarian Patriarchates withdrew from the WCC. In response, at its eighth assembly in Harare (1998), the WCC created a Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. The 2006 Final Report of the Commission deals with common prayer at WCC gatherings, decision making by consensus (a significant Orthodox contribution!), and theological criteria for churches applying for membership in the WCC. Although opinions could differ regarding the real changes that this report has brought about, the willingness of the WCC to accommodate Orthodox concerns is exemplary. This good will proved enormously influential on the Council of Crete's positive attitude toward the WCC. The Council's document on ecumenism affirms:

16. One of the principal bodies in the history of the Ecumenical Movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC). Certain Orthodox Churches were among the Council's founding members and later, all the local Orthodox Churches became members. . . . The Orthodox Churches of Georgia and Bulgaria withdrew from the WCC, the former in 1997, and the latter in 1998. They have their own particular opinion on the work of the World Council of Churches and hence do not participate in its activities and those of other inter-Christian organizations.

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of Orthodox scholars who responded to the pre-conciliar drafts, first online at <https://publicorthodoxy.org/archives/otsa-special-project-on-the-great-and-holy-council/>, and then in print in *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Theological Reflections*, ed. Archimandrite Nathanael Symeonides, Faith Matters Series (New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Par. 11, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/member-churches/special-commission-on-participation-of-orthodox-churches/first-plenary-meeting-documents-december-1999/third-panorthodox-preconciliar-conference>.

17. The local Orthodox Churches that are members of the WCC participate fully and equally in the WCC, contributing with all means at their disposal to the advancement of peaceful co-existence and co-operation in the major socio-political challenges. The Orthodox Church readily accepted the WCC's decision to respond to her request concerning the establishment of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, which was mandated by the Inter-Orthodox Conference held in Thessaloniki in 1998. The established criteria of the Special Commission, proposed by the Orthodox and accepted by the WCC, led to the formation of the Permanent Committee on Consensus and Collaboration.

As Peter de Mey observed, "Whereas the 1986 text reflects the growing dissatisfaction of the Orthodox churches about certain aspects of the WCC policy, the 2015 draft and the approved conciliar statement express satisfaction about the work achieved by the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it should offer our Lutheran partners an explanation for the Orthodox hesitation regarding ecumenism: it was not primarily due to bilateral dialogues or theological reasons but to Orthodox participation in the WCC and geopolitical motivations.

All of this, of course, played into the issue of who can be designated "church," a theme that has evolved over time in significant ways. While the pre-conciliar drafts leading up to Crete consistently used the term "church" for Western Christians, a major shift took place with the 1976 first Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambésy, which produced a draft titled, "The Relationship of the Orthodox Church to Other Christian Churches and Communities." Noteworthy is the addition of the term "communities" without a clear explanation as to how churches are different from communities. At the insistence of the conservative party, the 2016 Council would introduce a similar expression, namely, "churches and confessions" (pars. 6, 16). Why add "and communities" or "and confessions" when previous documents referred only to "churches"? The explanation might be found in the major event that took place shortly before 1976, namely, the Second Vatican Council, which

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<sup>25</sup> Peter De Mey, *Parallel Agendas of Vatican II and Crete I? A Close Look at 'Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World'* (forthcoming).

introduced the distinction between “churches” and “ecclesial communities” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 22). Let us briefly turn to that council.

As a WCC observer at Vatican II, Nikos Nissiotis advocated on behalf of Protestant churches, supporting those Catholic bishops who considered that the Council should speak of other Christians from the perspective of their own charismatic activity, not from the point of view of what is lacking in them from a Catholic perspective. These same bishops proposed that the Council should not refer to Protestants as “communities” and “groups” arising from the sixteenth-century crisis—as initially proposed—but as “ecclesial communities.”<sup>26</sup> They also wanted to respect the self-identification of some Christian families, such as the Anglicans, who refer to themselves as a “communion.” Moreover, Nissiotis emphasized the “ecclesial” aspect—meaning that the churches of the Reformation are, indeed, churches possessing an ecclesial character.<sup>27</sup> While from the Catholic perspective, the expression “ecclesial communities” was intended as a theological step forward, from an Orthodox perspective this same expression is a step backward. The distinction between “churches” and “communions” (or its equivalents) is a Catholic novelty that found its way into Orthodox vocabulary to manifest an exclusivist ecclesiology. Ironically, it is the ultraconservative party within Orthodoxy that designates the West as “communions” and not “churches,” unaware that this is actually a recent Catholic influence.

#### POLITICS AND NATIONALISM

One of the most unpleasant aspects of the Council of Crete was the undue influence of politics, nationalism, and worldly concerns on its work. It is an unavoidable subject because of its relevance to the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue, but I will only address it briefly here.

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<sup>26</sup> Nikos Nissiotis, “Ecclesiology and Ecumenism of the Second Session of the Vatican Council II,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 10, no. 1 (1964): 20–26. Nikos Nissiotis, “Is the Vatican Council Really Ecumenical?,” *The Ecumenical Review* 16, no. 4 (1964): 367.

<sup>27</sup> See also: J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 314–15. Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 30–32.

Under the guise of theological and procedural objections, four of the fourteen unanimously recognized autocephalous Orthodox churches did not attend the Council of Crete. The following Patriarchates—Bulgaria, Antioch, Georgia, and Russia—announced their non-participation between June 1 and June 13, just three days before the opening ceremony. Their absence was a significant blow to a Council that intended to be pan-Orthodox but ended up without representatives of most Orthodox faithful, numerically speaking. This absence was not merely symbolic; it also influenced the Council’s works. Whenever the conciliar deliberations led to calls to change draft documents, participants were warned that if they made substantial changes to the documents that all autocephalous churches had pre-approved, then the absent churches would not accept the conciliar decisions. The four absent churches held the Council hostage. In the aftermath of the Council, this proved to have been a futile effort, since the Bulgarian Patriarchate officially declared: “The first important conclusion is that in comparison with their pre-conciliar versions, the documents voted upon and adopted by the Crete Council have undergone certain significant changes, insufficient for their pan-Orthodox acceptance.”<sup>28</sup> Because of this, the Council was prevented from going far enough, and failed to satisfy the absent churches. Why were these churches absent in the first place?

The Kyiv Patriarchate—which is not recognized by any other Orthodox church but which claims a significant portion of the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine and is seeking Constantinople’s recognition—issued a statement that straightforwardly addressed the Council’s political ramifications:

Regretfully, under the influence of external secular considerations, the Churches of first Bulgaria, then Antioch, Moscow, and Georgia, announced just days prior to the Council the impossibility of their participation. . . . There is little question that the Moscow Patriarchate’s position was a main factor in their decisions.

Despite official assurances of wishing to participate in the Council, the Moscow Patriarchate was not, and is not, interested in this. . . . Wishing to dominate World Orthodoxy, the Moscow Patriarchate fights against [Constantinople’s preeminent role in the Council and Orthodoxy in general]. The confrontation of

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<sup>28</sup> November 2016 declaration analyzed above.



the Moscow Patriarchate with Constantinople, its effort to dominate World Orthodoxy as the “Third Rome,” was the main cause for both the drawn-out preparations for the Council and the attempts to postpone it at the last moment.

. . . We deeply regret the response of the Church of Moscow, to employ ethnophyletism (the primacy of ethnical issues over church matters) and etatism (servility to state power) to divide and separate, to the harm of its own flock and the entire Orthodox Church.<sup>29</sup>

The references in this quote to “external secular considerations” or related expressions refer to both the worldly ambitions that hinder Orthodox unity and the tense diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Russia. Certainly, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intrusion into Eastern Ukraine motivated in part the Ukrainian Parliament’s intervention. Ukrainian autocephaly would greatly reduce the influence that the Russian political regime exercises through the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate’s jurisdiction over Ukraine. Constantinople is currently considering this petition, which, if approved, would weaken the Russian Patriarchate and strengthen Constantinople’s authority. Thus, the above references to Moscow’s worldly interests are certainly not meant to be one-sided, as if the Ecumenical Patriarchate did not succumb to similar motivations.

One respected theologian who denounced the political motivations of intra-Orthodox tensions is Paul Gavrilyuk, who wrote that

the Patriarchate of Moscow, scarred by the Soviet totalitarian regime, appears to be repeating history by aligning itself with the propaganda machine of Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian state. Constantinople sees the council as the means of consolidating its authority; Moscow fears that its status as the largest Orthodox church numerically may be diminished by the conciliar process. . . . The long hand of Moscow was discernible behind [Antioch, Bulgaria, and Georgia’s decision to be absent from the Council].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Press Center of the Kyiv Patriarchate, July 1.

<sup>30</sup> Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “Church Council Meets Despite Absence of Four Patriarchates under the Sway of Russia,” *America* (July 7, 2016); <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/historic-orthodox-council-meets-despite-absence-four-churches>.

These are just two of the many examples of Orthodox institutions and theologians who spoke openly about the undue influence of worldly interests on the Council. In light of these considerations, the Council of Crete's reminder that the 1872 Council of Constantinople condemned ethno-phyletism as an ecclesiological heresy<sup>31</sup> resonates strongly.

The Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue will have to seriously consider the role of politics in ecclesial matters, especially since both our churches have suffered over the centuries from the state's hindering of church unity. What applies to the Orthodox today has certainly applied to Lutherans in the past. It is important to remember that not only did Pope Leo X excommunicate Martin Luther but Emperor Charles V also outlawed him. In this sense, in their 206-page report titled, "The Reformation in Ecumenical Perspective" (August 9, 2016), the German Catholic Bishops' Conference admitted the role of political figures in the exacerbation of divisions during the Reformation era.

The Orthodox further complicated the already-strained relationships between Lutherans and Catholics. For example, in sixteenth-century Poland where the Catholic authorities mistreated religious minorities, Protestants and Orthodox became allies in their common struggle for justice. Rome was rather aggressive in that context, culminating with the 1596 Union of Brest Litovsk, which included both religious and socio-political aspects. That same approach extended further East, toward Russia. Rome attempted to create an alliance with Poland and Russia against the Ottomans, but with the secondary motive of bringing these two Eastern powers under its own sphere of influence. In response, the Ecumenical Patriarch chose to solidify the role of the Russian Orthodox Church by raising its status to that of Patriarchate in 1589—a move also meant to counter Rome's influence in the East, even though it meant the weakening of the anti-Ottoman alliance at a time when the Ecumenical Patriarchate was suffering greatly under Ottoman rule. The Ecumenical Patriarch's gesture encouraged Protestants to continue their dialogue with Orthodoxy.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Encyclical" I.3.

<sup>32</sup> See Travis, "Orthodox-Lutheran Relations," 306–8.

Clearly political and ecclesial matters were closely intertwined and, unfortunately, the actions of the Orthodox world contributed to the further distancing between Lutherans and Catholics. In contrast to times past, today there are no notable instances of political interference in Catholic-Lutheran relations, and the Orthodox do not act as arbiters of Western churches, so the time is ripe to set aside historical shortcomings and recognize their role in the exacerbation of our ecclesial differences. To do that, Lutherans and Orthodox need to overcome an important hurdle, namely, the theological and political anti-Western attitudes among ultraconservative Orthodox and the rising nationalistic trends in the Western world, so that politics, nationalism, and worldly concerns do not contribute to our division today.

#### COMMITMENT TO ECUMENISM

As shown above, throughout the conciliar preparatory process the attitude toward various ecumenical institutions fluctuated. Commitment to ecumenism, however, remained consistent, as the decision to invite observers from other churches demonstrated practically.<sup>33</sup> Relevant to our topic was the presence of the Rt. Rev. Donald McCoid, former Lutheran co-chair of the Lutheran-Orthodox Commission.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, however, the observers were only allowed to attend the opening and closing sessions. They had too few opportunities to interact with the Orthodox bishops and influence the Council even indirectly. But if Crete 2016 was just the beginning (or rather, modern restoration) of pan-Orthodox conciliarity, even a timid involvement of observers is a welcome improvement.

Another practical proof of Orthodoxy's commitment to ecumenism came shortly after the Council, in September 2016, when the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church

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<sup>33</sup> "Decision of the Synaxis of the Primate of Orthodox Churches, Chambésy, 21–28 January, 2016," par. 8, in Nathanael Symeonides, ed., *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Discussions and Texts* (New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2016), 111–13.

<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Vatican appointed two observers to the Council: Cardinal Kurt Koch and Bishop Brian Farrell—president and secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, respectively.

and the Orthodox Church met in Chieti, Italy. Three of the four Churches that were absent from Crete, namely, Antioch, Georgia, and Russia, came to the meeting, despite having disagreed with Crete's document on ecumenism. Their presence in Chieti both challenges the argument that ecumenism was the central reason for their absence from Crete<sup>35</sup> and illustrates Orthodoxy's ecumenical commitment.

The Council's commitment to dialogue is also reflected in the text of the document on ecumenism:

4. The Orthodox Church, which prays unceasingly "for the union of all," has always cultivated dialogue with those estranged from her, those both far and near. In particular, she has played a leading role in the contemporary search for ways and means to restore the unity of those who believe in Christ, and she has participated in the Ecumenical Movement from its outset, and has contributed to its formation and further development. . . . Hence, Orthodox participation in the movement to restore unity with other Christians in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is in no way foreign to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church, but rather represents a consistent expression of the apostolic faith and tradition in new historical circumstances.

5. The contemporary bilateral theological dialogues of the Orthodox Church and her participation in the Ecumenical Movement rest on this self-consciousness of Orthodoxy and her ecumenical spirit, with the aim of seeking the unity of all Christians on the basis of the truth of the faith and tradition of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils.

Noteworthy here is the positive use of the term "Ecumenical Movement," despite ultraconservative pressures and past tensions. Furthermore, the recognition of different degrees of estrangement in the expression "far and near" reflects an inclusivist ecclesiology that regards all Christians as belonging to

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<sup>35</sup> Nicolas Kazarian, *The First Test for Orthodox Unity after the Holy and Great Council: The Chieti Document*. <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2016/10/18/the-chieti-document/>. The Antiochian Patriarchate's absence was motivated primarily by its lack of eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and only marginally by its reservations toward the document on ecumenism.

the *Una Sancta* to different degrees. The same document then unequivocally affirms that “all the local Most Holy Orthodox Churches participate actively today in the official theological dialogues, and the majority of these Churches also participate in various national, regional and international inter-Christian organizations, in spite of the deep crisis that has arisen in the Ecumenical Movement” (par. 7). The statement then takes a welcome practical turn, addressing the absence of some national churches from dialogues,<sup>36</sup> which should not impede the continuation of the ecumenical process or the pan-Orthodox recognition of these dialogues:

9. The contemporary bilateral theological dialogues, announced by the Pan-Orthodox meetings, express the unanimous decision of all local most holy Orthodox Churches who are called to participate actively and continually in them, so that the unanimous witness of Orthodoxy to the glory of the Triune God may not be hindered. In the event that a certain local Church chooses not to assign a representative to a particular dialogue or one of its sessions, if this decision is not pan-Orthodox, the dialogue still continues.

“The dialogue still continues.” These are hopeful words for Orthodoxy in general and for the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue in particular. Churches and theologians who are favorable to ecumenism need to move forward, continue along the journey toward unity, and not let ultraconservatives slow them down. Perhaps the Council of Crete has accomplished this crucial feat: it has demonstrated that the “traditionalist” elements within Orthodoxy will not be satisfied with any compromise and that seeking such compromises is unsatisfactory for all involved. It is unrealistic to think that ultraconservatives would agree with any statement by a pan-Orthodox Council or with ecumenical agreements. In the laudable effort to include them, the rest of Orthodoxy is missing the opportunity to respond to the pressing needs of the Church today and advance on the path toward unity. Leaving ultraconservatives behind is, indeed, a bold call. But living out an exclusivist ecclesiology in pastoral life results not merely in theologians composing lists of grievances with their

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<sup>36</sup> For example, in 2007 the Russian Patriarchate withdrew its representatives from the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue in Ravenna but subsequently returned to the table.

Orthodox Church. More important, exclusivist attitudes create untenable pastoral situations, forcing the separation of our churches on mixed marriages so that Christians find it impossible to commune together; these attitudes leave their clergy few means of ministry even to the sick and dying. They make us afraid to respond to today's challenges. Yet the Holy Spirit continues to work today. Moving forward is both an intra-Orthodox and an ecumenical necessity.

The Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue will thus continue on an optimistic note, knowing that the hesitations of the Crete Council were mainly due to intra-Orthodox dynamics, negative experiences at the WCC that have now been addressed, and worldly concerns that overshadowed the ecclesiological concerns which are now front and center. The Council of Crete brought into the open these issues that previously had only been suspected. This is an important first step in solving the conflict. It will be a long journey to communion. Now with a conciliar mandate, "the dialogue still continues."