

# THE ŒCUMENICAL SYNODS<sup>1</sup>



**T**he polity of the Orthodox Church rests on twin pillars: the local Hierarch and the Synod. The function of the Hierarch as it relates to polity is one of administering his Diocese, of assuring that it remains spiritually and materially sound on a day-to-day basis, and of assuring that the parishes under his Ὡμοφώριον (*Ōmophóriion*) are likewise sound, for the sake of the salvation of the souls of the men and women in his charge. Assisting the Hierarch in his spiritual tasks are special charismata that are bestowed by God's Grace at the moment of his Consecration.

The Synod, the other of the twin pillars, is the system of governance involving matters other than day-to-day Diocesan administration and oversight. This is so since the Hierarchs of the Orthodox Church rule and carry out their functions collegially, that is, in full harmony with one another. For twenty centuries, this form of governance and guidance has, with God's blessings, maintained the absolute integrity of Orthodox Christian doctrine and teaching and of the Orthodox Christian way of life.

Like Her Founder, the Church has both Divine and human aspects.<sup>2</sup> In Her Divine aspect, the Church is perfect and flawless. She is perfect and flawless, for example, in Her teaching, in Her Holy and Salvific Mysteries, and in the boundless Grace continually poured down upon Her and Her members by Christ God. In Her human aspect, however, She struggles for perfection, since Her members are beset by the problems that afflict all of fallen humanity: conflict, discord, hostility, rivalry, ignorance, jealousy, a dearth of love, overweening pride, and so

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<sup>1</sup> Reverend Dr. James Thornton, *The Œcumenical Synods of the Orthodox Church: A Concise History*, (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2007), pp. 13-23.

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos writes, "...[T]he Church is not an organisation, but the Divine-human Organism" (Hierotheos, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Esther Williams [Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1998], p. 168).

forth. Through exhortation and education, She combats these passions, and yet, despite Her efforts, they sometimes succeed in gaining significant ground in Church life, leading to division. When division threatens to impair Her mission, the Church often overcomes it through Her Synods. We see such an occasion in the earliest years of the Apostolic Church, when there was disagreement as to whether it was necessary for non-Jewish converts to Christianity to adhere to all Mosaic customs and institutions. Since great numbers of Greeks and other Gentiles were then entering the Church, the question was a pressing one. To resolve it, a Synod was convened in the year 51 wherein the Apostles gathered together in Jerusalem under the presidency of Saint James, the Brother of the Lord, the Bishop of the Church in that city. Various points of view were discussed, after which a decision was made that Gentile converts need not submit to the whole of the Mosaic Law. Having been guided in their deliberations by the Holy Spirit, all of the participants came to agreement and were brought once again into complete harmony with one another.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the first great Synod, the Apostolic Synod, brought oneness of mind and heart to the Church and averted a possible crisis.

Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky (1888–1988) writes:

From profound Christian antiquity, local councils of separate Orthodox Churches gathered twice a year, in accordance with the 37<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles. Likewise, often in the history of the Church there were councils of regional bishops representing a wider area than individual Churches....<sup>4</sup>

These local Synods dealt with problems and concerns common to all of the Hierarchs in attendance, and sometimes issued condemnations of heresies that plagued the Church at the time. And while they did not possess a *de jure* authority outside of their own regions, they often deeply influenced the Church as a whole and thus took on a *de facto* authority that transcended their local jurisdictions and extended to the

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<sup>3</sup> See Acts 15:1–31.

<sup>4</sup> Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. and ed. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose and the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), p. 40.

Universal Church. Apart from dogmatic questions, many Holy Canons derive from local Synods and were later embraced by the entire Church. Local and regional Synods still function to this day exactly as they did centuries ago.

We must begin our consideration of the Œcumenical Synods by dispelling

an error commonplace in contemporary Orthodox thinking: namely, that in the Orthodox Church, Ecumenical Synods are a *magisterium* (a misguided parallelism holds that what the Pope is to Roman Catholicism or what the Bible is to Protestantism, the Ecumenical Synods are to Orthodoxy) or a panacea.<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate authority in questions relating to Orthodox dogmatic teaching resides in what is known as “*consensus Patrum*” (“the consensus of the Fathers”) or “τὸ φρόνημα τῶν Πατέρων” (“*tó phrónēma tón Patērōn*,” “the mind of the Fathers”) and not, as popular misconception has it, in the Œcumenical Synods as such. According to the Anglican Patristic scholar George Leonard Prestige (1889–1955),

The real intellectual work, the vital interpretative thought, was not contributed by the Councils that promulgated the creeds, but by the theological teachers who supplied and explained the formulas which the Councils adopted. The teaching of Nicaea, which finally commended itself, represents the views of intellectual giants working for a hundred years before and for fifty years after the actual meeting of the Council.<sup>6</sup>

In arguing that the theology of the Church Fathers had great influence on the Œcumenical Synods, Metropolitan Hierotheos cites the examples of Saint Athanasios the Great at the First Synod; Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa at the Second Synod; Saint Cyril of Alexandria at the Third Synod; Saint Max-

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<sup>5</sup> Hieromonk Patapios, Archbishop Chrysostomos, and Bishop Auxentios, *The Church of Patristic Tradition: Statement on the Supposed “Anti-Patristic” Nature of Our Ecclesiology of Resistance: A Response to the Orthodox Christian Information Center Website* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> G.L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics: Six Studies in Dogmatic Faith, with Prologue and Epilogue: Being the Bampton Lectures for 1940* (London: S. P. C. K., 1940), pp. 3–4.

imos the Confessor at the Sixth Synod; and Saint John of Damascus at the Seventh Synod.<sup>7</sup> If anything, as Metropolitan Hierotheos goes on to maintain, it is the great Fathers that attained enlightenment and deification who gave validity and authority to the Synods, rather than the Synods validating the Fathers. For example, in his letter to Nestorios of Constantinople, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says: “Following in all points the confessions of the Holy Fathers which they made (the Holy Ghost speaking in them), and following the scope of their opinions, and going, as it were, the royal way...”<sup>8</sup> In the Definition of Faith drawn up at the Fourth Synod, these two phrases occur: “renewing the unerring faith of the Fathers”<sup>9</sup> and “following the holy Fathers.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, the Definition of Faith of the Sixth Synod speaks of “following closely the straight path of the holy and approved Fathers.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, in the fourth session of the Seventh Synod the following statement was read aloud:

But we, in all things holding the doctrines and precepts of the same our God-bearing Fathers, make proclamation with one mouth and one heart, neither adding anything, nor taking anything away from those things which have been delivered to us by them. But in these things we are strengthened, in these things we are confirmed. Thus we confess, thus we teach, just as the holy and ecumenical six Synods have decreed and ratified.<sup>12</sup>

It was the theology articulated by the Fathers, then, that underlay the proceedings and definitions of the Œcumenical Synods. It has been justly observed that even the Second Synod, which seems at first sight not to qualify as truly Œcumenical, was a “council of Saints,” among whom we find such illustrious figures as Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Amphilochios of Iconium and Saint Cyril I of Jerusalem. Does this mean that, in the end, Œcumenical Synods are not really necessary, and that the truth could have been made

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<sup>7</sup> See Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Ἡ Ἀποκάλυψη τοῦ Θεοῦ* [*The Revelation of God*] (Lebadeia, Greece: Hiera Mone Genethliou tes Theotokou, 1991), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.

manifest without them? Protopresbyter Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (1893–1979) offers this intriguing answer:

Strictly speaking, to be able to recognize and express catholic truth we need no ecumenical, universal assembly and vote; we even need no “Ecumenical Council.” ... This does not mean that it is unnecessary to convoke councils and conferences. But it may so happen that during the council the truth will be expressed by the minority. And what is still more important, the truth may be revealed even without a council. The opinions of the Fathers and of the ecumenical Doctors of the Church frequently have greater spiritual value and finality than the definitions of certain councils.<sup>13</sup>

What Father Florovsky says is correct but needs to be complemented by the following statement from the fourth session of the Seventh Synod:

Fulfilling the divine precept of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ, our holy Fathers did not hide the light of the divine knowledge given by Him to them under a bushel, but they set it upon the candlestick of the most useful teaching, so that it might give light to all in the house<sup>14</sup>—that is to say, to those who are born in the Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, it was for the good of the Church as a whole that the Ecumenical Synods were convoked.

As we noted previously, the Ecumenical Synods are often thought of as the highest authority in the Orthodox Church. But although there are Canons that enjoin regular meetings of Hierarchs in a given province (for example, Canon v of the Synod of Nicæa, Canon xix of the Synod of Chalcedon, Canon vii of the Third Synod of Constantinople, and Canon xx of the Synod of Antioch), there are no such Canons regulating the convocation or organization of Ecumenical Synods. In light of this, the following remark of Father Florovsky has much to commend it: “It will be no exaggeration to suggest that [Ecumenical] Councils were never regarded as a canonical institution, but rather as occasional

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<sup>13</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1972), p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. St. Matthew 5:15; St. Luke 8:16, 11:33.

<sup>15</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, p. 540.

*charismatic events.*<sup>16</sup> That is to say, “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they have witnessed to the Truth, in conformity with the Scripture as handed down in Apostolic Tradition.”<sup>17</sup> What makes them authoritative is that they both *bear witness to* and *defend the truth*; they do not so much *define* as *express* the truth. This they could not have done without the antecedent labors of the Fathers, who themselves testified to the same truth that was revealed to the Prophets and the Apostles.

Having said all of this, we must emphasize that the Œcumenical Synods nonetheless occupy a place of paramount importance in the Orthodox Church. Let us now briefly summarize the work of these Synods. Held between 325 and 787, they were summoned by the ruling Roman (Byzantine) Emperors to defend the Church when the fundamentals of Christian belief and teaching came seriously under threat. It often happened that certain heresies, all involving directly or indirectly the Person of Jesus Christ, loomed so large in the Christian world that they required a decisive response on a scale that encompassed the whole of Christendom, one that made crystal-clear to everyone precisely where the True Church of Christ stood and why She stood there. The dogmatic theology that derives from Œcumenical Synods, in the words of Metropolitan Hierotheos, “is polemic, which means that it has been created mostly to oppose the heretics who have appeared and distorted the theology of the Church, with direct consequences for man’s salvation.”<sup>18</sup> It has “direct consequences for man’s salvation” because each system of belief dictates its own unique way of life. And so, to the ancient Christian dictum “*Lex orandi, lex credendi*” (“As we worship, so we believe,” or more literally, “The law of worship is the law of belief”) we must add, “*Lex credendi, lex vivendi*,” “As we believe, so we live.” Thus, the debates about theology that seem (for example, to some secular historians) as quibbling over minor or abstruse questions were not quibbling at all, and the questions were neither minor nor abstruse. The debates involved issues of *life versus death*.

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<sup>16</sup> Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Hierotheos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church*, p. 123.

To the reader unacquainted with Church history, it may seem as if the period of the Œcumenical Synods was one of continuous controversy and strife, even of confusion. However, let us keep in mind that the period stretching from 325 to 787 comprises nearly five centuries, and if we include the Synod of 879–880 and the Palamite Synods of the fourteenth century, more than a thousand years. The human mind, contemplating events over so great a span of time, tends to telescope or compress all of the salient occurrences so that they appear as one long period of constant upheaval. In truth, however, long intervals of relative quiet were the norm for most subjects of the Christian Empire of Byzantium, and only relatively infrequently was the Church forced to act officially and in worldwide concert to confront the corrupt conjectures of heretics.

The great heresies condemned by the Holy Œcumenical Synods were Arianism, Macedonianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, and Iconoclasm. Condemned also were other heresies, oftentimes offshoots or variations of the aforementioned major heresies, although sometimes wholly unrelated heresies. All of the Holy Œcumenical Synods were held in the Christian East, the center of the Roman Empire in those centuries, in the cities of Nicæa, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. Each was presided over by a Roman Monarch or by his appointed representatives. (The Emperors and other laymen in attendance, it should be said, could participate in the discussions, but could not vote, since that privilege belonged exclusively to the Hierarchs.)

There is often a misunderstanding of the Œcumenical Synods on the part of sectarians, who seem to believe that the various aspects of the Faith set forth by the Œcumenical Synods were in some way innovative at the time, that is, new beliefs or new syntheses of beliefs. These sectarians appear to think that prior to the First Synod of Nicæa, for instance, the Church did not fully apprehend the Divinity of Christ Jesus. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, the declarations of the Œcumenical Synods expressed the ancient Faith in its fullness, “that faith

which has been believed everywhere, always, by all,”<sup>19</sup> in the words of Saint Vincent of Lérins. That Faith may have been more precisely articulated by the Œcumenical Synods than was the case theretofore, which acted to clear away any confusion arising from ignorance or misunderstanding. However, the exact Faith set down by them had nonetheless been believed and taught by Christians from the beginning, from the time of Pentecost. The Holy Fathers of the Great Synods “did not seek to find the truth, making conjectures by reasoning and imagination, but in order to confront the heretics they attempted to formulate in words the already existing revealed Truth....”<sup>20</sup>

As we shall see in the following chapters, the true innovators were the purveyors of heresy, who apparently were led astray by an overly rationalistic theological methodology, while ignoring the source of Christian Tradition, the spiritual and ascetic method of the Holy Apostles and Holy Fathers, which begins with the acquisition of Christ-like purity and imparts enlightenment mystically. That Christian Tradition, as Father Florovsky says, “is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a *charismatic*, not a historical, principle.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, Christian Tradition springs from Divine revelation, communicated through mystical processes, conjoined with the processes of the intellect.

In addition to the Œcumenical Synods, which we will examine in this text, history records a number of false synods or councils, assembled by heretical authorities for the purpose of misleading the Christian flock. The *Latrocinium* (“Robber Council”) of Ephesus was one such false synod, called in 449 to promote Monophysitism. The Council of

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<sup>19</sup> Vincent of Lérins, “A Commonitory for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelities of All Heresies,” trans. the Reverend C. A. Heurtley, in *The Works of Sulpitius Severus/ The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins, for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelities of All Heresies/ The Works of John Cassian*, Vol. XI, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser., of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Hierotheos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church*, p. 214.

<sup>21</sup> Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, p. 47.



Hieria assembled by Iconoclasts in 754 was another such false synod, as was the infamous Council of Ferrara–Florence of 1438–1445, in which the Papacy sought, but failed, to devour Orthodoxy by extortion, bribery, and threats of violence. While such false gatherings elicited the support of many for a short time, each was finally rejected by the Church. Father Pomazansky states:

True councils—those which express Orthodox truth—are accepted by the Church’s catholic consciousness; false councils—those which teach heresy or reject some aspect of the Church’s Tradition—are rejected by the same catholic consciousness. The Orthodox Church is the Church not of “councils” as such, but only of the *true* councils, inspired by the Holy Spirit, which conform to the Church’s catholic consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

False synods, called explicitly to proclaim false teachings, were obviously not guided by the Holy Spirit, but were inspired by a spirit of evil and conformed to a consciousness in opposition to truth.

In contrast to the distorted theories and interpretations of heretics and of their false synods, the decrees of true Œcumenical Synods, to borrow from Father Pomazansky once again,

express *the harmony of Sacred Scripture and the catholic Tradition of the Church*. For this reason *these decrees became themselves, in their turn, an authentic, inviolable, authoritative, Œcumenical and Sacred Tradition of the Church, founded upon the facts of Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition*.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the decisions of true Œcumenical Synods settled questions in dispute, and settled them for all time, binding all Orthodox Christians. Moreover, what makes a Synod authentic and Œcumenical is not the number of Hierarchs attending, not a consciousness that it is Œcumenical at the time it is convened, and not any requirement that every local jurisdiction of the Church be represented in it, but that it remain faithful to and express the authentic Orthodox Christian Tradi-

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<sup>22</sup> Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, p. 41, n. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

tion, that its criterion is truth, and that it be recognized by the Church as such.<sup>24</sup> Father Florovsky expresses this beautifully when he asserts,

The teaching *authority* of the Ecumenical Councils is grounded in the *infallibility* of the Church. The ultimate “authority” is vested in the Church which is for ever the Pillar and the Foundation of Truth.<sup>25</sup> It is not primarily a *canonical* authority, in the formal and specific sense of the term, although canonical strictures or sanctions may be appended to conciliar decisions on matters of faith. It is a *charismatic* authority, grounded in the assistance of the Spirit: *for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us.*<sup>26, 27</sup>

Metropolitan Hierotheos underscores the foregoing when he quotes Saint Maximos the Confessor with regard to the dogmatic pronouncements of the Ecumenical Synods: “The right faith validates the meetings that have taken place, and again, the correctness of the dogmas judges the meetings.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Henry R. Percival, “General Introduction,” *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 1 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>26</sup> Acts 15:28.

<sup>27</sup> Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hierotheos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church*, p. 215.