

Church of the Ecumenical Councils, Church–State Divided?

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We have been taught that the Orthodox Church is the “Church of the Ecumenical Councils.” Liturgically, we celebrate this reality, and the culmination of this liturgical reality is held on the first Sunday of the Great Lent: the Sunday of Orthodoxy. On this day, we proudly gather and celebrate an event that was first organized by Empress Irene who, in keeping with the tradition of the Byzantine Empire, gathered the leaders of the church to settle a dispute that was dividing the empire. This council held in 787 did not resolve the conflict and another ecclesiastical council needed to be called by Empress Theodora in 843. The seventh Ecumenical, and all Ecumenical councils, were not called by the leaders of the Church but by a secular authority to settle the internal conflict that was dividing the church and the empire. Perhaps we should refer to the Orthodox Church as the Church of the State-Called Councils. This reality must be articulated in the present cultural divisions that the Orthodox Church experiences, especially in light of the present worldwide pandemic. Perhaps things would look different if the president of the United States or some other secular leader called for a council to settle the dispute. What we saw was the division of each jurisdiction in the United States and local Orthodox churches in the world. The voices of some within Monastic community, who live in isolation, argued that the state, science, and reason were not to be listened to and must be resisted. This is a marked change from the history of the Orthodox Church, the Church of the Councils, incarnational theology, and the church that was instrumental in emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in the landmark World Council of Churches’ document on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry. The worldwide pandemic became the worldwide polemic that highlighted the political realities and divisions that exist in the Orthodox Church.

Alexei Krindatch conducted a survey titled “Ten Questions and Answers about the Pandemic’s Impact on American Orthodox Christian Parishes,”¹ which points to the division of the political reality of the academic and theological climate for authentic dialogue in the Orthodox Church today. Two questions elucidate the divide: question 7, “How widespread were the conflicts in parishes caused by disagreements regarding various restrictions brought on by the pandemic?” and question 8, “Did parishes make an effort to educate their members about the COVID-19 pandemic and/or encourage them to get vaccinated?” His findings showed that 81% of the parishes surveyed in the study had mild to severe conflicts. Question 9 may indicate the recent divide between the church and science, as only 16% of all parishes invited medical professionals to speak about COVID-19, and the clergy from only 31% of the surveyed parishes publicly encouraged their parishioners to vaccinate. Although this survey by Krindatch, is a snapshot of a moment in time, it nevertheless indicates the hindrances to open, honest, and academic dialogue in the contemporary Orthodox Church not only in the United States but worldwide. We have recently seen this in Greece where the government threatened to order the church into compliance and threatened the shutdown of the Greek

¹ <https://orthodoxreality.org/reports/>

Church in Canada.² I could only imagine what would have happened if the “Holy Fathers” told the emperor that they would not accept his order to meet in Nicaea in 325.

The worldwide pandemic gave the Orthodox Church the opportunity to critically introspect its history and legacy and the pressing question of God’s revelatory actions in time and space. Instead, the debate allowed a political polemic and not a reasoned theological and historical analysis of the place of science and theology. Science was seen as the enemy, and the reasoning given to humanity by God was replaced by a despotic fear and blind obedience. Blogs, and many other social media sites, became the battleground for those who were in “lockdown,” and there was no emperor who could call the church into council to settle the debate. Instead of embracing the opportunity, many took to defending illogical arguments, calling for adherence to the holy tradition simply. Fear, the tool of the evil one, was operative, and dialogue, change, and reasoning became heretical and anti-orthodox.

The question now is where do we go from here? Is the Orthodox Church to continue to be held in captivity to a non-critical reading of its history? Is the question of economic security and fear of debate causing our leaders to fold and keep silent and watch as people suffer and die not only of the current pandemic but the pandemic of ignorance? There is One Truth, and Christ has shown that truth. The Orthodox Church is proud to proclaim and liturgically read the words found in 1 Corinthians 1:21–23:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Have the Orthodox forgotten their history in Nicaea in 355–366 where the emperor Valens “faced a serious military revolt by one of Julian’s generals, Procopius. During this rebellion, Valens recalled bishops that had been exiled (including Athanasius) in the hope of securing wider support. In such circumstances, pragmatism overcame the general support for the Homoiousians. Valens’ pragmatism provides an important key for understanding theological development in this period.”³ History does not require blind obedience but an objective analysis and pragmatically reasoned discernment. This is the holy tradition that the Orthodox proclaims when they gather as the body in Christ in council: “The Grace of the Holy Spirit has assembled us today. . . .” The Church of the Councils has much to learn from its past and must be approached in the fear of God with faith and love, not with the fear of political retribution or economic insecurity. Does the Orthodox Church need an emperor to bring it out of the ignorance of exile?

² See: “The Greek Orthodox Church told priests [on] Monday not to observe the Greek government’s edict to close houses of worship, as a part of the country’s new, tightened coronavirus restrictions.”

<https://nypost.com/2021/01/04/greek-orthodox-church-tells-priests-to-defy-lockdown-measures/> “Toronto Public Health (TPH) has issued revised COVID-19 guidelines that ban the offering of Holy Communion to the faithful.” <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/07/09/temporary-ban-on-holy-communion-in-toronto/>

³ Lewis Ayres. *Nicaea and its Legacy: An approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. (Oxford University Press, 2004) p.169.