

A timely commentary by a distinguished Greek theological scholar (a member of the State Church of Greece) on the serious problems posed by the so-called “Great and Holy Synod” scheduled to convene on the Island of Crete in June of 2016. Professor Tselengides specifically approaches, below, the Synod’s putatively Orthodox document regarding the Church’s relationship to non-Orthodox Christians with a straightforward, perspicacious, and uncompromising spirit of critical evaluation that deserves our careful examination.

Initial Observations on the Document
“Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”*

by Dr. Demetrios Tselengides
Professor *Emeritus* of Theology,
University of Thessaloniki

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This document evinces systematic theological inconsistency and self-contradiction. Thus, in article 1 it proclaims the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Orthodox Church, regarding her—quite correctly—as the “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.” However, in article 6 it presents a formulation antithetical to the foregoing article 1. It states, predictably enough, that “The Orthodox Church acknowledges the existence in history of other Christian Churches and confessions which are not in communion with her.”

This raises a legitimate theological question: If the Church is One, according to the Symbol of Faith and the self-understanding of the Orthodox Church (article 1), then how can we speak about other Christian Churches? It is obvious that these other churches are heterodox.

Indeed, the Orthodox cannot call the heterodox churches “Churches” at all, since from a dogmatic point of view it is not possible to talk about a multitude of “Churches” with different dogmas and, indeed, differences on many theological issues. Consequently, since these “Churches” remain unshakeable in their false beliefs, it is not theologically correct for us to recognize in them—and institutionally, at that—an ecclesiality apart from that of the “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.”

In the same article (6), there is a second serious theological contradiction. At the beginning of this article, the following point is made: “With respect to the ontological nature of the Church, it is impossible for her unity to be disrupted.” But at the end of the same article, it is stated that the Orthodox Church, through her participation in the ecumenical movement, has as “an objective goal the paving of the way that leads to unity.”

At this point, the question arises: Since the unity of the Church is a given, then what kind of Church unity is being sought in the context of the ecumenical movement? Is there perhaps a suggestion that Western Christians return to the One and only Church? But no such idea is apparent either in the letter or in the spirit of the document. On the contrary, in fact, the impression is given that there exists an acknowledged division in the Church and that the frame of reference for those engaged in dialogues is the sundered unity of the Church.

Article 20 also gives rise to theological confusion by its unclarity. It reads: “The prospects for conducting theological dialogues between the Orthodox Church and other Christian Churches and confessions are always defined on the basis of the canonical criteria of established Church Tradition (Canon 7 of the Second Oecumenical Synod and Canon 95 of the Quinisext Oecumenical Synod).”

However, Canons 7 of the Second Synod and 95 of the Quinisext Synod pertain to the recognition of the baptism of specific heretics who display an interest in joining the Orthodox Church. But from the letter and the spirit of this document, considered from a theological standpoint, we detect no mention whatsoever of any return of the heterodox to the Orthodox Church, the only Church. On the contrary, without a pan-Orthodox decision on the subject, the document takes the baptism

of the heterodox for granted. At the same time, it deliberately ignores the historical fact that the contemporary heterodox of the West (Roman Catholics and Protestants) have not one, but a whole host of doctrines which differ from the Faith of the Orthodox Church (aside from the *Filioque*, created Grace [in the Mysteries], the primacy and infallibility [of the Pope], a rejection of Icons and of the decisions of the Oecumenical Synods, etc.).

Justifiable questions are also raised by article 21, in which it is stated that “the Orthodox Church ... has a favorable view of the theological documents published by the [Faith and Order] Commission [of the World Council of Churches]...regarding the rapprochement of the Churches.” We should observe, here, that these texts have not been assessed by the Hierarchies of the local Orthodox Churches.

Finally, in article 22 the impression is given that the Holy and Great Synod that is going to be convened prejudices the infallibility of its decisions, since it thinks that “the preservation of the true Orthodox faith is safeguarded only through the Synodal system, which since ancient times has been for the Church the competent and final arbiter in matters of faith.” This article overlooks the historical reality that, in the Orthodox Church, the ultimate criterion [in matters of faith] is the vigilant dogmatic conscience of the plenitude of the Church, which in the past validated Oecumenical Synods or [in some cases] even assessed them as “robber synods.” The Synodal system does not of itself safeguard, in a mechanical fashion, the correctness of the Orthodox Faith. It does so only when the Bishops in a Synod have acting within them the Holy Spirit and the “Hypostatic Way,” that is, Christ, in which case they are in practice, as “fellow-wayfarers,” “following the Holy Fathers.”

General Evaluation of the Document

From all that is clearly written and suggested in the foregoing document, it is evident that those who inspired and composed it are undertaking an insitutional legitimation of Christian syncretism and ecumenism through a decision by a pan-Orthodox Synod. This would, however, be catastrophic for the Orthodox Church. For this reason, in all humility I propose its universal retraction.

I also have a theological observation on the document “The Mystery of Marriage and Its Impediments.” In article 5.1 it is stated: “The marriage of Orthodox with heterodox is forbidden, in accordance with canonical exactitude, and cannot be blessed (Canon 72 of the Quinisext Synod *in Trullo*). It can, however, be blessed by accommodation and out of loving-kindness, under the express condition that the children of such a marriage be baptized and raised in the Orthodox Church.”

Here, the express condition, “that the children of such a marriage be baptized and raised in the Orthodox Church,” conflicts with the theological affirmation of marriage as a Mystery of the Orthodox Church, and this because it presents childbearing—in connection with the Baptism of children in the Orthodox Church—as legitimizing the solemnization of mixed marriages, something clearly prohibited by a Canon of an Oecumenical Synod (Canon 72 of the Quinisext Synod). In other words, a non-Oecumenical Synod like the future Holy and Great Synod is relativizing the explicit decision of an Oecumenical Synod. And this is unacceptable.

Furthermore, if a solemnized marriage does not produce any children, is such a marriage theologically legitimated by the promise of the heterodox spouse to make his or her putative children members of the Orthodox Church?

For the sake of theological consistency, paragraph 5.1 should be deleted.

*Source: “Πρώτες Παρατηρήσεις ἐπὶ τοῦ Κειμένου ‘Σχέσεις τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας Πρὸς τὸν Λοιπὸν Χριστιανικὸν Κόσμον,’” http://epomeni-tois-agiois-patراسi.blogspot.gr/2016/02/blog-post_88.html. Translated by Archimandrite Patapios, Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, St. Gregory Palamas Monastery, Etna, CA.