

Orthodox leaders hold historic council

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For the first time in 1,200 years, and after 55 years of preparatory conversations, the Holy and Great Council of the Eastern Orthodox churches met—though without representatives of four churches, including the largest. Leaders at the council came to consensus on an encyclical covering issues that all of the Orthodox churches had deemed priorities.

The historic summit of the 14 Orthodox member churches was called by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who is considered first among equals. The gathering aimed to promote unity among the faithful who had become separated by geography, language, and customs and to help the churches speak with harmony on major issues facing them and other faiths.

But the Russian Orthodox Church, which alone accounts for about two-thirds of the 250 million to 300 million Orthodox believers around the world, did not send its leaders to the June 20–26 meeting on the Greek island of Crete after calling for the session to be postponed a week prior to its opening.

Three smaller churches also did not attend: those of Bulgaria, Georgia, and the Damascus-based Patriarchate of Antioch. (The Antioch Church did not attend because of a dispute with the Jerusalem Patriarchate over who has jurisdiction over the Orthodox in Qatar.)

Yet even with an incomplete list of participants, the council—which began on the day the Orthodox celebrated Pentecost—was still the largest held by the Orthodox churches in all of history, said John Chryssavgis, spokesman for the council. Interest from many in Orthodox churches shows they want more unity than they now have.

“It is painful that they’re not all here,” Chryssavgis said, stressing that all 14 churches had signed the consensus documents prepared for the council. “We’re talking about hundreds of signatures by each church committing to the council.”

The churches' absence came against a backdrop of larger tensions within Orthodoxy. Traditionalists oppose any change despite growing pressure to make some adjustments. And in the past quarter century, the rich and powerful Russian church has become an influential player on the international religious scene.

The Orthodox are organized as national churches with jurisdiction within their national borders. The ecumenical patriarch is the symbolic head but only has administrative power over his own flock of fewer than 3,000 congregants in Turkey.

"Orthodoxy doesn't feel like one church," said Carol Lupu, a theologian and former adviser to the Serbian church, which had called for the summit to be postponed but ultimately sent its delegation.

The Orthodox first considered holding a council in 1961, shortly before Catholics opened the Second Vatican Council, which passed several modernizing reforms. Preparations dragged out over the years as theologians worked on consensus documents. The initial list of about 100 issues to consider was whittled down to the six documents approved in January, covering the mission of the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox diaspora, autonomy, fasting, ecumenical relations, and marriage.

In the document on ecumenical relations, some traditionalists objected to using the word *churches* for other denominations, insisting that Orthodoxy is the only "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."

Yet the encyclical commits to dialogue with other Christians: "Through this dialogue, the rest of the Christian world is now more familiar with Orthodoxy and the authenticity of its tradition. It also knows that the Orthodox Church has never accepted theological minimalism or permitted its dogmatic tradition and evangelical ethos to be called into question."

Prior to the council, the churches acknowledged in the document on the Orthodox diaspora that they cannot solve the problem of overlapping jurisdictions in countries where immigrants of different ethnic groups each have their own church and bishop. The association of Orthodox bishops in France, for example, lists ten different churches among its members.

The encyclical states that "the principle of autocephaly cannot be allowed to operate at the expense of the principle of the catholicity and the unity of the Church."

The encyclical also covers topics such as globalization, environmental issues, and the plight of refugees.

Bartholomew sees this council as the first step toward restoring these consultative meetings, which were more regular in times before the Great Schism of 1054 between Rome and Constantinople.

“The Ecumenical Patriarch is saying this is a huge step toward that; it should be a beginning to many, many more councils,” Chryssavgis said. “We’re taking the first steps very slowly.” —Religion News Service; the *Christian Century*

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