

Overcoming their estrangement

interview by [Charles C. Camosy](#)

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(RNS) The Great and Holy Council of the Eastern Orthodox churches concluded Sunday (June 26). There was no shortage of controversy leading up to the council. The churches of Bulgaria, Russia and Georgia didn't attend. The Ukrainian Church asked for independence from the Russian Church. Many wondered if the council's decisions would be valid.

In the end, cooler and more charitable heads prevailed.

This, according to the spokesperson for the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the Rev. John Chryssavgis, whom I was fortunate enough to interview. Chryssavgis did his doctoral studies at Oxford in 1983, and in 1995 he moved to Boston and became a professor at the Holy Cross School of Theology. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: For those unfamiliar, would you describe the Holy and Great Council?

A: The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church was conceived almost 100 years ago, while preparations for its convocation began about 60 years ago. Its purpose was to bring together the 14 autocephalous (self-ruling) Orthodox churches together to present a more credible message and unified voice in response to contemporary global challenges.

Q: How historically rare is such a council?

A: In the history of the church, there has never been such a comprehensive and representative assembly of Orthodox churches and bishops. In the first millennium, there were only five churches (the ancient patriarchates, including Rome), which were controlled by an emperor that convened and underwrote (though he did not chair) such councils, while also imposing their decisions throughout the empire.

Today, there are 14 churches. Almost all of them (with the exception of the Ecumenical Patriarchate) are national churches, with sometimes very narrow ethnic concerns. All of them were isolated for a number of decades, and even centuries, as a result of social and political upheavals.

Q: Can you give us some highlights or stories from the council?

A: For me, the most obvious highlight was observing the bishops (25 from each church) speaking openly and honestly to one another, learning about their respective circumstances and contexts. On several occasions, I heard bishops saying: “I had no idea this was happening in Nigeria (or Albania, or Poland).”

One consequence of the walls of estrangement that existed between the various churches was that each of them developed — or responded to the modern demands of the West — at a different pace. Where, for example, we are quite accustomed to seeing images of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew working closely with the pope for many years, other churches (such as Bulgaria and Georgia) have struggled to communicate or cooperate with any Christian church whatsoever, withdrawing from the World Council of Churches in recent years. The same is true of the Patriarchate of Moscow, whose primate Patriarch Kirill met with Pope Francis earlier this year, only to return to a church protesting (even threatening schism) over his “heretical” flirting with the Vatican.

So this sort of uneven evolution required a council to establish some fundamental guidelines for the Orthodox Churches.

Q: I heard there was debate about the legitimacy of the council from a small minority of Orthodox Churches. What is your take on this debate?

A: There was much debate — even controversy — until the opening of the council. But then, as if the miracle of Pentecost was replaying before our eyes, the bishops began to speak; and they spoke in new tongues — by which I mean the language of humility and reconciliation, of charity and generosity. Bishops who arrived at the council were able to dialogue and debate with civility and compassion.

The experience was like watching a child take its first steps. It may look awkward and even graceless; those watching may fear that the child could falter or fall. But then, once the child walks, there is admiration, even jubilation and gratitude.

The council was a first step in an unprecedented journey of rediscovering the conciliar process in the church. Councils are part of the Orthodox Church's DNA; but we must relearn to practice what we preach.

There were various explanations offered by the churches that were absent. I respect not only their right but also their reasons, which surely stem from internal issues and pressures within their communities. However, my regret is that the leaders of these churches withheld their faithful from being a part of a consequential and even sacred moment in the history of our church.

The council was the first council of the 21st century. There will no doubt be more opportunities for such councils, and hopefully these will not take as long to prepare and organize. Thankfully, however, councils have now been revitalized and re-institutionalized in the life and order of the Orthodox Church.