

Russian Orthodox Church praises global council boycotted by leaders

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue

The Russian Orthodox Church, whose boycott of a major summit of Orthodox Christian leaders threatened to slow down efforts to promote greater unity, has declared the meeting “an important event in the history of the conciliar process.”

The church’s synod, in its official reaction to the June 20–26 Holy and Great Council in Crete, also said the meeting could not be called “pan-Orthodox” because four of the 14 independent Orthodox member churches did not attend.

The Moscow Patriarchate, which represents between half and two-thirds of the world’s 300 million Orthodox, has been disputing the summit’s pan-Orthodox character since announcing its boycott in early June. Officials at the council said Russia’s Patriarch Kirill could not come to Crete because archconservatives in his ranks opposed it.

But the synod took a more positive approach by calling the session “an important event” and asking its theological commission to study the six documents the council approved and report back on its findings.

In the diplomatic way the Orthodox churches communicate with one another in public, these comments mean Moscow has not closed the door on further efforts to bring the churches closer together.

Orthodoxy is a loose network of sovereign—the official word is *autocephalous*—member churches organized along national lines, each with its own leader.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the Orthodox based in Istanbul, has no administrative authority over the members. He championed the idea of the council to bring church leaders together at the highest level for the first time in over 1,200 years.

The four absent churches—Antioch, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Russia—stayed away because of disagreements with the documents drawn up for approval and because of a jurisdictional dispute between Antioch and Jerusalem.

Bartholomew insisted on going ahead with the council anyway because he felt the Orthodox churches, which had grown apart and somewhat isolated from one another during the turbulent 20th century, needed to revive their conciliar tradition and seek a more unified response to the challenges of the modern world.

“This sort of uneven evolution required a council to establish some fundamental guidelines for the Orthodox churches,” said John Chryssavgis, council spokesman, after the summit.

No follow-up meeting was decided, but Romania offered to hold the next summit in seven years.

“There will no doubt be more opportunities for such councils,” Chryssavgis said. “Hopefully these will not take as long to prepare and organize.” —Religion News Service

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