

Everyone, Let Us Prepare the Council Together

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The first part of this essay appeared in Issue 20 of *The Wheel* (Winter 2020). “Tous, préparons ensemble le Concile” was first published in *Contacts* in 1971. All notes are added by the translator.

IV. Towards an Efficacious Council on Specific Points

The council should devote itself to resolving two major problems, the solutions of which cannot be delayed: one internal to Orthodoxy, that of the Diaspora; the other concerning the relations between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Orthodox.

a) The Organization of the Diaspora

The Diaspora is where Orthodoxy must be especially self-aware in order to participate in ecumenical activity; yet the Diaspora is becoming, in the most scandalous way, an issue, a battlefield, the place where the fault lines that I described in the beginning are particularly sharp.

For this reason, the organization of the Diaspora is today absolutely necessary and at the same time impossible. In particular, it poses unambiguously the problem of the universal structures of the Church, concerning which, as we know, the Second and Third Romes are opposed.

In order to break the deadlock, some fundamental principles must be accepted by all the Orthodox churches during the preconiliar period:

1. *The definitive solution to the problem of the Diaspora must be conciliar. Any canonical quibbling here can only hide ulterior motives, since the Diaspora is a radically new phenomenon, without canonical precedent, and this problem involves all the Orthodox churches and can only find a peaceful solution by their agreement. The situation in America is sufficient to prove that the great majority of sister churches share this point of view. The Patriarchate of Moscow has helpfully given a boost to history, since it has posed the problem in an inescapable way despite all inertia—but it cannot resolve it alone. The solution will come from preconiliar and conciliar collaboration in America and in the whole of Orthodoxy.*

2. *It is therefore important that any unilateral decision taken by an autocephalous church concerning the Diaspora be clearly posited as provisional, and that, during the preconiliar process, everyone speak with everyone else. The new American church already seems to assert itself less as an established autocephaly than as a call to autocephaly, inseparable from a call to dialogue with the other Orthodox communities in America, within the framework of the universal structures of the Church. In Western Europe, the*

fact that the Ecumenical Throne has provisionally taken the multinational archdiocese of Russian origin under its canonical protection should in no way prevent it from opening an amicable dialogue with the Patriarchate of Moscow on account of its origins.

3. *There will be no solution to the problem of the Diaspora without giving the floor to the Diaspora itself.* During the period of preparation for the council, all the members of the Diaspora, whatever their jurisdictional situation, should receive from their sister churches and from the Ecumenical Throne not only the right but the duty to express themselves, to meet, and to seek together. Dare I write it? Not only the right but the duty to commune together. In the Diaspora, the preconciliar phase should be marked by a *general jurisdictional armistice*. As a result, the difficulties, the tensions, the oppositions themselves, without being denied, will be brought *within the Church*. If we believe in the Beatitudes, we know that forgiveness of offenses is more spiritually effective than anathemas.

In any case, the preparation of the council must de facto accelerate the phenomena of encounter, convergence, and cooperation in the Diaspora, across fault lines that are losing importance in regions where there are not enough communities of sufficient size and where the youth discover themselves to be above all Christians and Orthodox Christians. These initiatives, insofar as they come from lay Christians, must never be isolated from the bishops, but must cooperate with them, so that they may cooperate with each other.

4. *In the event of a particularly acute crisis in a given region, the churches which are less directly involved in the conflict*

should take the initiative in missions of study and reconciliation, always within the preconciliar perspective. For example, with regard to the American situation in which Slavic Orthodoxy and Hellenic Orthodoxy confront one another, I am thinking of the Patriarchate of Antioch and the Romanian Church.

5. *All organization of the Diaspora in Western Europe, that is to say, on the territory of the Patriarchate of Rome, should take into account the situation of ecumenical expectancy and convergence.* This is not a matter of creating an Orthodox uniatism, but of finding the humble and open forms which permit Orthodoxy to play its part as yeast (or a thorn in the flesh!) in service of the undivided Church. In contrast, America is, ecclesiologically speaking, for everyone. . . .

Preparation such as this would undoubtedly enable the council to give the Diaspora an organization at once coordinated and diversified, in which everyone could find a place.

b) Union With the Non-Chalcedonian Churches

Four meetings between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian theologians have been increasingly positive and constructive.¹ They have brought to light the common rock of an apostolic and patristic vision expressed in identical ecclesial structures. They have shown that the non-Chalcedonians, through different formulations, have overcome Monophysitism for their part, while the Chalcedonians have taken on board the great Alexandrian intuition of the real deification of the human being without neglecting his complete freedom. It seems most important that preparation for the council should include a

¹ Clément here refers to the four unofficial meetings in preparation for an official dialogue between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches: at Aarhus in 1964, Bristol in 1967, Geneva in 1970, and Addis Ababa in 1971. These meetings paved the way for 20 years of official dialogues which led to mutually deepened understanding and respect, and agreement on key issues. The process stalled, however, and little official progress has been made since the mid-1990s.

study of ways and means toward a *declaration of union* which the council itself would consecrate.

In order to preserve its transcendence with respect to both East and West, Orthodoxy should simultaneously, in this preconciliar phase, finally establish a substantive theological dialogue with the Catholic Church, bracketing for the moment the problem of the opening of communion (or a certain kind of “intercommunion”). The latter issue is a problem which, as we have seen since the solitary decision of the Russian Church in 1969, can only divide the Orthodox and bring them back to the polemics of the past, when their duty is to work for a common deepening with those Catholics who have a sense for both mystery and freedom.

Establishment of union with the non-Chalcedonian East, substantive dialogue with the Christian West (because the dialogue with Rome does not exclude anyone): thus, the historical and existential way of the West and the contemplative and ontological way of the East will maintain their equilibrium within the Orthodox consciousness as a witness to the undivided Church.

The union of Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians, enacted by the council, would put into practice a properly Orthodox ecumenism, which would neither identify Truth with formulae nor relativize it, but would be rooted in the ecclesial experience of Life.

V. The Problems That Divide

It is not a question of ignoring them—they are known to everyone—nor of polemicizing about them, which would paralyze the preconciliar dy-

namism. Courage will be needed along the way, during the period of reflection preceding the council, to clarify the various positions patiently without suggesting a conclusion prematurely. Even the council cannot reach conclusions and will not meet for this purpose. But if we acknowledge certain theological and spiritual foundations, if we try to listen and respect others, to discover their true face instead of remaining with the idea that we had of them, then we shall see more clearly that the solution will come when God wills and in the manner that pleases him. In short, it is a matter of applying among the Orthodox, to the problems which divide us, the methods that have proven themselves between Christians in ecumenical dialogue. The matter should be all the easier since the Orthodox have full unity of faith and sacraments between them!

The problems that divide seem to fall into two principal domains:

1. Political Problems

The Orthodox of the various churches live in diverse societies, even different civilizations, which are sometimes opposed, although the impact of the technological-scientific revolution is common to them and the traditional God is also dying in the East. . . . Despite their diversity, it is likely that the Orthodox can agree on a number of *metapolitical* principles: the Church is in the world but not “of the world,” or again: the Church-in-the-world is in transfiguration, but through the cross; eschatological tension and the refusal of idols, *Kyrios Christos* not *Kyrios Caesar* (Caesar has as many names in the West as in the East); the Church as an “impatient” force (according to the criteria of the world) of blessing and sancti-

fication, its close link with different peoples, its spiritual responsibility for each of them, the secret strength of the Eucharist and of "Eucharistic people," so that Christians are "the salt of the earth" and "the soul of the world"; ecclesial communion, one and diverse in the image of the Triune-Unity, as the foundation, yeast, and fullness of the demand of communion that now binds human beings; the absence of a "theology of ownership," the sacrament of the brother, the poor, as an indispensable complement of the Eucharist, the message of justice and social liberation of the prophets of Israel and the Greek and Latin fathers; the way of the values of asceticism and gratitude; the cure of political neurosis through the active love advocated by the gospel.

Beyond this, each church has its own experience, which others must listen to with respect. The divergent positions must thus be exposed in all honesty, and if we cannot approve of them, we must refrain from judging them. We must also abstain from any artificial synthesis. It will soon be understood that triumphalism, like accusation, cannot convince. The Church is crucified in history, not to disqualify history, but to translate it into the kingdom by the grace of the cross and of crucified human beings, of their sacrificial, given lives.

2. The Structures of the Universal Church

In this domain in particular, the "re-opening" of the council should indicate a "ceasefire" of polemics. The period of preconciliar reflection, in fact, should allow above all a calm exposition of the positions at hand, to identify the problematic nodes and to locate the true disagreements.

What seems to me even more important is a methodological study that is properly scientific (in the sense of an investigation without a hidden agenda) of certain theological, canonical, and historical data points, concerning which confused notions still remain. It is essential, not only for inter-Orthodox relations, but also for relations between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, to know, for example, how the unity and universality of the Church were expressed during the first millennium and particularly in the later ecumenical councils, where a true awareness of ecclesial ecumenism operated rightly. It would be essential also to know how this unity and universality were expressed during the Byzantine period and the early modern age, before the nation-state movement. It must be admitted that the sense of the universal Church and its structures has been singularly blunted in contemporary Orthodoxy by the blockade of Orthodoxy and nationalism, the confusion of autocephaly and independence, and the unilateral development of "Eucharistic ecclesiology." Anti-Roman polemics, contemporary inter-Orthodox quarrels, the inaction of some and the "cynicism towards life" of others, have prevented a serene recourse to tradition. In no other area, perhaps, has a certain ahistorical spirit in the Orthodox world done so much damage. With a legalism far more squalid than that of Rome, so often denounced, we fight over the canons without asking ourselves what they mean, instead taking a supposedly traditional stance on situations which in fact are new. In this respect, the Orthodox have much to learn from their tradition, provided that they listen to it honestly, not to justify themselves, but to face incontestable novelties in the same spirit. Nothing more or less is expected

from the preparation of the council than a serious study of these problems within the perspective of a new inter-Orthodox ecumenism!

VI. Towards New Methods of Preparation

Until now, the preparation of the council has suffered in the first place from the multiplicity and juxtaposition of the subjects under consideration, so that at the current rate, their examination would last for dozens of years and the awareness of the Church would fall asleep under a quilt of paperwork. Hence, there is a need to review the *agenda* and to concentrate on a precise, limited, stirring program of the type just mentioned above, for example. But the preparation of the council has suffered from another evil, much more serious because it is of not only a practical but an ecclesiological nature: everything is left in the hands of the “apparatus” of the Church, that is to say, prelates whose good will nobody calls into question, but of whose necessary “diplomatic” preoccupations nobody can be ignorant either. The number of theologians who regularly participate in the work of the preparatory commission is incredibly small. As for the laity engaged in the world but passionately attached to the Church and preoccupied with her future—no one has dreamed of appealing to them. Meanwhile, we celebrate “*sobornost*” and denounce Roman clericalism. Throughout this time, the discomfort already caused among the Christian people by the ecumenical policy of the same “apparatus” of the Church, a policy never explained to the faithful, worsens: how many of them know that their church belongs to the World Council of Churches, what it does there, and what this means?

More serious is the fact that these members of the “apparatus” might use the studies and meetings made necessary by the preparation of the council to make decisions now about an aspect of the organization, or life, or discipline of the Church. One would then be in the presence of a real *abuse of power*, because no valid decision can be taken except by the council itself or by preliminary meetings of a conciliar kind, that is to say, where the *pleroma* of the Church is represented.

The preconiliar process will not be able to avoid the extension of a schism of the “Old Believer” type; it will not be able to overcome certain clandestine temptations to abuse of power; it will only be able to become fecund when it associates itself broadly with the People of God.

What is needed is not only a genuine circulation of information but also an effort at listening to this People. On the basis of a brief and dynamic program, clarifications, a presentation of problems, questionnaires, and themes for reflection must be established, not only by bishops, but also by theologians and lay leaders in close collaboration with them, so that they may be widely diffused, not only at the level of eparchies and schools of theology, but in the widest view, in the youth movement, in the Orthodox intelligentsia, and finally, in the parishes. The Orthodox press, from the great theological journals to the humblest parish bulletins, should open regular columns for these exchanges. Wherever possible, a “Book of the Council” would be solemnly opened in each parish, for the faithful to record their suggestions, criticisms, and questions with complete freedom. Because the very concrete problems of the pedagogy of

the faith and pastoral care, on which the preparation of the council should concentrate, could not fail to awaken the “instinct of Orthodoxy” in the People of God.

At the same time, in this phase of preconciliar reflection, one must try to “de-provincialize” Orthodox life by circulating information about the council from one region to another, from one church to another.

A whole series of preparatory meetings would thus be organized where, around the bishops, priests, monks, theologians, and responsible laity would always be represented. Multifarious gatherings could be realized either regionally or by bringing together Orthodox belonging to distant churches or on the pan-Orthodox scale: by inviting representatives of sister churches to regional synods or assemblies of clergy and laity, where they exist, by meetings of theologians, by gatherings of priests confronted with similar pastoral difficulties, by youth congresses organized, for example, by *Syndesmos* (which, as we know, welcomes students in theology when, in a church, youth movements do not exist), by pilgrimages to the high places of Orthodoxy, especially to its great monastic centers. . . . The recent creation of an *inter-Orthodox center* in Athens constitutes, in the preconciliar perspective, an exemplary initiative.

At the same time, the preparation of the council should be a preparation of prayer. It is important that certain monastic communities devote themselves to it, that the faithful reflect on it in their personal or family prayer, that a petition to this effect be introduced into every Eucharistic celebration, during which we might also commemorate not only the primate

of the autocephalous church and the bishop of the place, but also the Ecumenical Patriarch and all the other Orthodox patriarchs, in order to give the faithful a consciousness of their belonging to the universal Church. So many other suggestions are possible! The faithful will find them as long as we invite them. . . .

In short, everything that Orthodox theologians are accustomed to write about the phenomena of “reception” must be found in these phenomena of preparation: the synergy of the episcopate and the people, the integration of ministries and charisms, the setting in motion of ecclesial communion, “vertically” in both directions, between the episcopate, clergy, and faithful, “horizontally” in all directions, among the different churches.

Then it will be seen that the preparation of the council is as important as the council itself.

Then fears and prejudices will have no more reason to exist: for either life will germinate and the council will be the fruit, or the preparation will fail and the council will not take place.

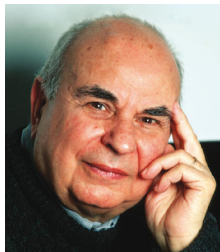
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If we have allowed the *kairos* to move past a certain fullness, the present anguish, by the grace of the cross, can become another *kairos*. To grasp this is to realize that the historical burdens need not in themselves be fatal. If it is a question of singing the glory of God and the glory of the sanctified human being, if it is a question of recalling the mysteries of salvation and of their awakening human beings, then the ruptures we described in the beginning are relativized. Hell is nothing before the joy of the resurrection, said Saint Isaac the Syrian. What

weight will the absurd hell of our divisions possess when it becomes necessary to find words both very ancient and very new to express to the people of today that Christ is risen—to make them alive, forever? If the churches of the East know that they will be heard when they say all they need to say and all they have to say in the political arena, why would they not have recourse to their best theologians, or spiritual authorities, even those who are quite nonconformist, when it comes to those realities that are worth only thirty denarii to the powerful of this world? The conflict of the Second and Third Romes cannot be overcome by the mediation of the more humble churches, but those rich in labours and promises, whether in southeastern Europe, the Hellenic world, the Arab East, or the Diaspora—churches which all refuse “papism” and profoundly venerate the Russian Church and know what they owe to Athenagoras I and his importance in rallying Orthodoxy. And could we not ask our “Old Believers” to cease cursing for a minute, to explain themselves (this is the very demand that the monks of Athos have just presented to the young hegumen of Stavronikita), to listen to the explanations of others and, perhaps, ultimately, to participate in the construction of the house to the best of their ability?

Has not the moment come to restore the necessary collaborations, to address the new Patriarch of Moscow, a man of silence and prayer, who knows that the stature of his church depends not on pride but on painful fidelity? Has not the moment come to strengthen decisively the Secretariat of the Council, to allow it to awaken the attention of the People of God? Has not the moment come for Patriarch Athenagoras I, the only person who can do so, to make a solemn appeal to the Orthodox youth of the whole world to mobilize for the Council?

Because nothing will happen if nobody takes responsibility. Nothing will be done without the creative affirmation, around its bishops, of a God-bearing people. The call launched by the Ecumenical Patriarch in his visits to the sister churches must now be reflected in the depths of the Church. Every person, like the signatory of these lines, has the duty to repeat it. Today, the call is addressed primarily to the laity, who are all called to become theologians. The call is addressed to theologians of profession and life, to men and women responsible for bearing witness to and transmitting the faith, to the youth, to all who are young according to the Spirit. Because you, too, are the Church, this council convoked permanently by the Lord. ✱



Olivier Clément (1921–2009) was a French lay Orthodox theologian who devoted his life to the study of Christian spirituality and ecumenical rapprochement. Raised in an agnostic household, he was baptized into the Orthodox Church in 1951. For many years, he was a professor of moral theology at Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. He wrote more than thirty books.