

Council press briefing
with Abp. Job of
Telmessos and Fr.
John Chrysavgis.
Photo: John Mindala.



CONVERSATIONS

“In the Council, Discussion Has Been Vigorous and Challenging”:

Interview with John Chrysavgis

Note: During the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, *The Wheel* conducted an exclusive interview with the Rev. Dr. John Chrysavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Throne, theological advisor to the Ecumenical Patriarch, and Director of the Press Office of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the Council. Fr. John was interviewed on the island of Crete by Dr. Gayle E. Woloschak, who sits on *The Wheel's* advisory board and participated in the work of the Press Office at the Council. Gregory Tucker prepared interview questions.

Gayle Woloschak: Father John, thank you for taking time out of your hectic schedule to talk to *The Wheel* at this exciting time in the life of the Orthodox Church.

John Chrysavgis: I appreciate the unique work that *The Wheel* has done in maintaining a website and a blog about the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. Getting the word out—in a sincere and solemn manner—to the faithful as well as to the broader community about the work of the Council is vital, both for a balanced understanding of what took place at the Council and also for the process of reception of its documents and decisions.

GW: First, we would like to ask you to reflect on one aspect of the ongoing conciliar process. After the publication

of drafts of the six proposed Council documents several months ago, Orthodox theologians around the world began a period of intensive reflection on these texts and produced a large number of important commentaries, drawing on their wide range of expertise. Much of their work was undertaken as part of a special project arranged by the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA), and the results were made available immediately online at publicorthodoxy.org and in print. Other commentaries have been printed and posted on blogs and websites in several official languages. We have heard that some serious theological discussion has already taken place in the opening days of the Council but the first document to be discussed—“The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World”—has received only light editing, despite the serious concerns

expressed by scholars. To what extent are the bishops aware of and engaging with these commentaries and the work of professional theologians outside their own group?

JC: The official documents for consideration by the Council that had been unanimously approved by the primates of the Church were released in January 2016. The members of the Council are fully aware that there has been on-going discussion about the Council documents and in fact welcomed it. This Council has been associated with unprecedented discussion on the documents with specific commentaries given at every level from national churches to eparchies to parishes, from clergy and laity, even to theologians, as you rightly observe. It has really been remarkable. I don't know if this has ever taken place to quite such an extent at any other point in the history of the Church. Everyone is invited to comment; everyone is interested; and everyone awaits the decisions of the Council.

The hierarchs at the Council have undoubtedly heard and been exposed to this discussion, much of which will be in their minds as they review the documents this week. In the Council room, discussion of the documents has been vigorous and challenging, but also transparent and respectful. The final documents are still being modified and will be approved by consensus of the Council members for publication and dissemination toward the end of the Council.

However, your question also alludes to a deeper issue, if not a problem, in our Church. It is very important for all of us to engage in conversation about issues in the Church, without feeling threatened by such an open exchange and dialogue. And the truth is that

hierarchs and scholars have not traditionally been partners in the journey toward a more unified and more informed Church. It is my hope and prayer that this Council may be yet another small step toward that goal.

GW: Related to the influence of lay theologians on the work of the Council is the issue of the so-called "diaspora." Several of the episcopal delegates, who were carefully chosen by their synods to attend the Council, exercise their ministry outside the territories of the ancient patriarchates, and a great many more were educated there. In addition, several members of the Press Office staff and other auxiliary staff and resources come from these regions. Does this perhaps signify a greater openness among the Council fathers toward the "diaspora" communities—even a willingness to embrace them as other than a diaspora, and swiftly to resolve the canonical issues which continue to impede the Church's mission? Is the life of the Orthodox Church in the "diaspora" perhaps spoken of so often and so easily as a problem to be solved by the historical canonical churches that its many gifts and opportunities have been overlooked?

JC: Prior to the Council many comments were forthcoming about the diaspora document, which would impact most of the Orthodox Churches throughout the world. Discussion of the diaspora document during the Holy Council was also lively, with some modifications proposed and incorporated by the delegates. The hierarchs are certainly aware of the pressing problems of the diaspora and are more or less in agreement about the establishment of canonical normality in churches of the diaspora, but there is no unanimity among them about exactly how this should be achieved. Of course, we will not know the result

until later this week, but it is clear that this is an important issue for the hierarchs because of its broad-ranging impact both now and in the future.

But I would like to suggest very humbly that it is almost escapist for us in the United States to wait for an answer to our situation. The answer was given [at the pan-Orthodox pre-conciliar meeting] in Chambésy, Switzerland several years ago, in 2009, when the decision was taken by all of the autocephalous Orthodox churches to establish assemblies of bishops in several regions throughout the world.

The creation of the episcopal assemblies in the diaspora is a provisional and transitional measure that affects all churches in the non-traditional Orthodox countries, including the United States of America. In fact, the Assembly of Bishops in the U.S. is one of the most active throughout the world. However, the measure is provisional because the goal is to work toward the reality of one Orthodox bishop in one city. By discussing the documents on diaspora and autonomy, the Holy and Great Council is advancing the cause not only of global, but also local pan-Orthodox unity.

Any inactivity or delay in responding to the mandate of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches with regard to the work of the Assembly is simply an excuse that betrays the responsibility of church leaders to their faithful. I don't know how to put it more simply than that.

GW: On Monday, we heard some very strong words from Archbishop Chrysostomos of Nova Justiniana and All Cyprus in his opening speech to the Council, concerning the serious problem of fundamentalism in the Orthodox Church. He said that “the fundamentalist groups, the fanatics—among whom are found both theologians and hierarchs, and who themselves do little, and who are pretty much everywhere in the Orthodox world today, equally merit serious consideration: not only on account of the delay in convening the Holy and Great Council, but also on account of the danger threatened [by them]. The opposition of these groups to every notion of rapprochement with other Christians has indirectly affected even our local councils, which have attempted and continue to attempt to make profuse amendments to the texts and regulations of the documents that

Opening session of the Council. Photo: Romanian Orthodox Church/Robert Nicolae.



were prepared by the pre-conciliar meetings. We have no illusions. For these groups, we have been found to be mired in heresy and apostasy.” In the press briefing on Tuesday, you also spoke boldly about the need to articulate new answers to the many issues which today confront the Church, formulating “an inspiring, a prophetic, a constructive, a consoling word to its people throughout the world.” Can you comment on the way the Council has begun to think about the rising influences of Orthodox fundamentalisms (Biblical, Patristic, Byzantine, anti-Western) and the extent to which the delegates are willing to engage the most urgent issues of the day?

JC: I have heard Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus speak on several occasions to his fellow primates, and now to the members of the Council. He speaks clearly and boldly, hitting the nail on the head each time. As you rightly point out, he commented on the problems of rising fundamentalisms in the Orthodox world and concerns about how best to face these issues. The document on “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” helps to address some of these concerns, but similar discussion has also followed related to the document on fasting.

It is clear that the bishops—as pastors and leaders—understand this problem, which has proved toxic in Orthodox church life. It is not a new phenomenon; in fact, it has always been with the institutional church, probably as a result of waning standards among church leaders and of the efforts of Christian faithful to lead consistent spiritual lives in the Church. But as the bishops in the Council underlined, there needs to be a closer connection between the charismatic and the canonical in the Church, a closer connec-



Council press briefing with Fr. John Chrysavgis. Photo: Sean Hawkey.

tion between the institutional and the missionary aspects of the Church.

GW: Finally, Father John, much media attention has been focused on the small but significant number of autocephalous churches which decided at the last minute to withdraw from participation in the Council’s sessions this week. There seems to be a growing opposition between those attending the Council, who continue to insist on its legitimately pan-Orthodox character and binding authority irrespective of the attendance of particular local churches this week, and those who insist that there can be no pan-Orthodox council without preexisting unanimity on all matters, and who therefore consider this council to be, at best, another stage in the pre-conciliar process which has been ongoing for many decades. How much confidence do the Council fathers have that their deliberations will be taken seriously by all Orthodox churches? And what historical significance do you attribute to the Holy and Great Council at this stage?

JC: Certainly the documents of the Council will generate further discus-

sion in the Church and in the broader community. The ultimate acceptance of the Council will come about when it is received by the people of the Church—not, mind you, only by the leaders and churches that were absent. Many of the hierarchs, including the Ecumenical Patriarch, have expressed hope that this council will mark the renewal of conciliarity at a global scale in the Church, with councils continuing to occur periodically in years to come. In his opening message to the Council, His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew expressed this: “Only insurmountable historical circumstances can justify the inactivity of the synodal institution on any level, including the global level.” With this in mind, we are surely justified in hoping that conciliarity will become a normal process for the Church, in the future as it was in the first millennium, and thus continue the work begun at this council.

The Church teaches that the salvation offered in Christ brings healing to humankind and transfiguration to the whole creation. In this cosmic vision there must be no place for isolationism or sectarianism, triumphalism or obscurantism, nationalism or imperialism. Moreover, in a world that is witnessing the most horrendous humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, the Church should have a word of hope and consolation.

That was the miracle of Pentecost, the feast on which the Holy and Great

Council began with a celebration of the Holy Eucharist by all the Orthodox primates. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples—broken and confused after the turmoil and scandal of Christ’s crucifixion—were inspired by the gentle and renewing breath of the Spirit, which called them all to unity. And they were called to share the good news “to the ends of the earth.” We should remember that they were “called” to unity, which means that unity is the goal and the gift; it is not the starting point or the way.

Similarly, on the feast of Pentecost, the primates and bishops of the Orthodox churches throughout the world are meeting in council as the successors of Christ’s disciples in order to implore and invoke the Spirit of God—which, as we sing in an Orthodox hymn at Pentecost, “fills all things that are lacking”—in order to affirm and demonstrate their unity, and in order to empower and energize them to be a credible witness to the Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection in the contemporary world. But in order for this to happen, the bishops must be assembled—as the disciples were 2,000 years ago—“in the same place, together.” It is helpful to remember that the Greek word for council (*syn-odos*) means precisely “being on the same road with one another.” That is my own prayer, and that of many Orthodox faithful, for the Holy and Great Council.

GW: Father John, thank you for your time. ✱

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