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ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΣ»

ΤΜΗΜΑ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑΣ ΤΟΥ ΕΘΝΙΚΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΠΟΔΙΣΤΡΙΑΚΟΥ
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**The Reception of the Theology and Work
of the First Ecumenical Council within the Context
of the Tradition of the Orthodox Church¹**

His Eminence Metropolitan Chrysostomos (Savvatos) of Messinia²

Submitting to the decision of the Standing Holy Synod of the Church of Greece appointing me as speaker at this Festive Session of the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece³, held in the context of the commemoration of the 1,700th anniversary of the convening of the First Ecumenical Council, I hasten to express my gratitude for the honor bestowed upon me and to request your prayers for the outcome of this undertaking.

The 1,700th anniversary of the convening of the First Ecumenical Council provides, on the one hand, an opportunity to re-evaluate the historical and theological data of this specific Council, and on the other, a starting point for their re-contextualization, as a process of re-appropriation of its theology and work within the 21st century. In other words, we are called to investigate how this synodal event and its decisions have been experienced in the life of the Orthodox Church and within the context of Her synodal self-awareness, as well as their significance for contemporary ecclesiological reality.

1. As has been historically recognized, the First Ecumenical Council constitutes the most significant form of expression of synodality in the history and theology of the Councils, as it expresses the catholicity of the Church. Through its convocation, its synodal structure and operation, it became the indisputable ecclesiological expression of the authority of the Catholic Church in matters of faith and canonical tradition, so that the unity of the Church might be preserved and a “multi-headed” concept of ecclesiality avoided.

¹ Address at the Festive Assembly of the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece for the celebration of 1,700 years since the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council (Assembly Hall, Athens, Holy Synod, 2 June 2025). The Church of Greece also held a similar Festive Assembly of the Holy Synod in 1925, with a keynote address by the Metropolitan of Gortyna and Megalopolis (later Metropolitan of Messinia) Polykarpos Synodinos [see journal *Ecclesia III* (1925), pp. 169-170, 177-179], on the occasion of the 1,600th anniversary of the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council.

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³ Synodal document 1284/654/18-3-2025.

As is known, the Council was convened in 325 AD in Nicaea of Bithynia, in order to confront the heresy of Arius, who, already since 319 AD, as a presbyter of the Church of Alexandria, maintained that the Son of God is the first creature or creation of God the Father, that He proceeded “from the will” (ἐκ τῆς βουλήσεως) rather than “from the essence” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας) of the Father, and therefore that there was a time when the Son did not exist (ἦν ποτὲ ὅτε οὐκ ἦν).

The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council condemned these specific heretical positions of Arius and articulated, through the Symbol of Faith (Creed), the correctness of the faith: that the Son of God was begotten “from the Father, only-begotten, from the essence of the Father” (ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῶς, ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς); that He is true God from true God, begotten not made, “of one essence” (ὁμοούσιος) with God the Father, incarnate and having assumed human nature.

This Council resolved a theological issue that had already preoccupied the Church since the 2nd century and recorded the unified and catholic faith of the Church as a continuation of the faith of the Apostles and the early Fathers – especially within the context of the biblical tradition and on the basis of the formulation of the original Christology.

For these reasons, the First Ecumenical Council is rightly regarded as the authentic expression of the synodal self-consciousness of the Church across time, since in its convocation, constitution, and operation, the criteria of synodal tradition were fully applied – criteria which, as we shall see below, confirm its full continuity with the synodal tradition and function as it had been established until that time.

2. However, the transition from localism to the universal dimension of synodality was not an instantaneous development. It required considerable effort to foster a course of convergence and, above all, a spirit of cooperation and communion among the local bishops, in order to secure the universal acceptance of its convocation, aimed at resolving a theological issue that was particularly significant in its soteriological dimensions. Moreover, the Orthodox Church, drawing upon its long-standing ecclesiological tradition and liturgical experience, has remained faithful to the application and operation of synodality. For this reason, it has never ceased to perceive its self-awareness within the bounds of the conciliar expression of its “ecclesial conscience”. Based on this self-awareness, the relationship between the Church and the Council has always been understood as one of essential identity. The Council became the sole means of infallible expression, formulation, and interpretation of the Church's faith, and at the same time the primary mode of safeguarding and affirming the unity of the ecclesial body. This unity is not a merely additive connection, but an

ecclesiological reality through which the catholicity of the Church's faith is expressed and the apostolicity of that faith is affirmed.

This synodal self-awareness of the Church governs all expressions and functions of the ecclesial body, always in reference to the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and the sacramental life of the Church. Only through this synodal function can the Church establish boundaries concerning canonical order, proclaim the truth of the Orthodox faith, and repudiate teachings or views as heretical in relation to Orthodoxy.

To accomplish these goals and objectives, the Church, whenever it deemed necessary, did not hesitate to create new forms of synodal expression for the resolution of similar local or universal issues, whether theological, ecclesiological, or canonical in nature.

In the historical course of the Church, however, there also exists an analogy, expressed as an inseparable correlation, between ecclesiastical governance and the territorial delineation of ecclesiastical jurisdictions on a local, regional, and ecumenical level. This has served as an authentic adaptation of the synodal system to the plurality of successive models of administrative organization of the Church. This process begins with the local bishop of the Local Church and the local "presbyterion" during the first three centuries, and evolves with the introduction of the Metropolitan system in ecclesiastical administration, the form of the First Ecumenical Council (325 AD), and the Patriarchal system, instituted with the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 AD) and thereafter.

In all these forms and expressions of synodality, the presidency was usually granted to the bishop of the "principal city" or to the most senior among the bishops. A large number of bishops participated, and efforts were made for decisions to be taken in "unanimity" (consensus), without excluding the possibility of "majority rule." The convocation of the Council was necessarily and consistently connected with the Eucharistic communion.

The Council, as the expression of the unity of the bishops, was grounded in the idea that each bishop is a successor of all the Apostles, just as each episcopal throne was considered the *Cathedra Petri*⁴. In this way, each bishop was to express his unity with the other bishops, as successors of the Apostles, through his participation in a Council (*corpus Episcoporum*).

⁴ Cyprian of Carthage, *De Unitate* 4.

This fact of the apostolicity and catholicity of each Local Church constituted the first step toward the universality of a Council. In this sense, the relation of the Council to the apostolicity and catholicity of the Church is also expressed, without, of course, the individual Local Churches being understood as mutually complementary parts or elements of a cumulative form of catholicity.

With the establishment of the Provincial Synod, the importance of the “bishop’s council” of each Local Church was diminished, though not eliminated⁵. This replacement of the Local Synod by the Provincial Synod is noted in Canon ⁴ of the First Ecumenical Council (325 AD), concerning the election of bishops. In practice, this procedure was ratified by the Council of Antioch in 341 AD, through “majority vote” electoral results, and by Canon ⁵ of the First Ecumenical Council regarding issues of ecclesiastical judgments and the administration of ecclesiastical justice. Nevertheless, decision-making concerning matters of faith, which could potentially lead to divisions and schisms, was not excluded from the scope of the Council’s function.

Through this procedure, the Councils ceased to be “exceptional” events of a Local Church and were established as permanent provincial assemblies, which were convened twice a year.

The prevalence of the idea of universality during the 4th century and its identification with the Christian Oikoumene provided the foundation for the Catholic Church to be understood as one body throughout all places and in every place, as “the body of the common Oikoumene” (τὸ τῆς κοινῆς Οἰκουμένης σῶμα)⁶ and despite its local geographical fragmentation. Moreover, the combination of the universality and apostolicity of the Council led to the understanding of the Council’s work as that which expresses the catholic body of the Church, that is, the faith of the Church “throughout the Oikoumene” (κατὰ τὴν Οἰκουμένην)⁷. This synodal function is already attested from the second half of the 3rd century, in the Council of Antioch (268 AD), where the bishops of the Council addressed also “...to all our fellow-ministering bishops, presbyters, and deacons throughout the Oikoumene, and to the entire Catholic Church under heaven...” (καὶ τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Οἰκουμένην πᾶσι συλλειτουργοῖς ἡμῶν ἐπισκόποις καὶ πρεσβυτέροις καὶ διακόνους καὶ πάση τῇ ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν καθολικῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ)⁸.

⁵ Council of Carthage in 249 AD and of Rome shortly thereafter (*To the Corinthians*, Letter 38, 1.1, 1 and 40, 2).

⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine the Emperor* 3, 64–67.

⁷ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8, 1.

⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* VII, 30, 2.

As previously noted, the concept of universality was closely related to its geographical dimension. Characteristically, Eusebius of Caesarea interprets the uniqueness of the First Ecumenical Council in terms of the geographical breadth of the then-known Oikoumene⁹, defining, “mystagogically” the identification of geographical universality with ecclesiastical catholicity¹⁰.

It seems, therefore, that the relationship between universality, catholicity, and apostolicity, within the functioning of the synodal institution, served, in principle, as the theological foundation for the transition from Locality to Universality in the synodal structure. Moreover, historical data, such as the spread of Arian views beyond the local boundaries of Alexandria and their penetration into Palestine and Antioch, offered the impetus for recognizing the need to convene a General–Ecumenical Council.

In this way, at the beginning of the 4th century, the ecclesiological foundations were laid for the creation of a new form of synodality, that of the Ecumenical Council, through which the original meaning of catholicity found its fullest expression in a new synodal structure, one that was characterized as Ecumenical, both ecclesiological and geographically.

In this sense, the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council by Emperor Constantine the Great was an authentic expression of the Church’s synodal self-awareness and, for this reason, surprised none of the ecclesiastical members. After all, its convocation was a necessary consequence of the inability of one or more Local Synods to resolve the broader theological issue of Arianism, a fact affirmed both theologically and historically. Although the Council remains a point of reference within the ecclesiastical tradition and in the synodal self-awareness of the Churches regarding its theological work, we must not overlook the fact that its implementation was quite difficult due to its complexity and the challenges surrounding its acceptance.

⁹ Idem, *Life of Constantine the Emperor* 3, 9, 8.

¹⁰ Cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 18, 23. The application of the term “imperial council” (Kaiserlich Synode) (D. Kretschmar, p. 49 ff.) for the First Ecumenical Council is misleading, as is the notion of “state Church” (Reichs Kirche) in Byzantium. Emperor Constantine, guided not by political but primarily by ecclesiological criteria, namely, by his understanding of the Church as “the body of the common oikoumene” (τὸ τῆς κοινῆς Οἰκουμένης σῶμα) and of bishops as “certain leaders of the salvation of the nations” (ὑπὲρ τινὰς ἀρχηγούς τῆς τῶν ἐθνῶν σωτηρίας, Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* II, 64–67), founded the First Ecumenical Council as the Council of the “Catholic Church throughout the Oikoumene” (καθολικῆς κατὰ τὴν Οἰκουμένην, cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8, 10). This ecumenical vision of the ancient Church was expressed for the first time through a special and extraordinary synodal structure, namely the Ecumenical Council. The parallel drawn between the unity of the Church and the unity of the Empire—a parallel that in the East took the form of an identification of the two institutions, at least by some circles—found its ultimate expression in the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council, yet on ecclesiological principles and terms.

It took approximately one hundred years after its convocation for the catholic and ecumenical character of its theological work to be fully accepted, and more than fifty years for the confusion caused by the efforts of various other Local Synods, as well as many Fathers and ecclesiastical writers, to reinterpret its theological position, and particularly the Creed it issued, to be overcome.

It therefore appears that the First Ecumenical Council did not mark an end, but rather the beginning of an ongoing theological discussion regarding the procedure of formulating the Church's Christology and Pneumatology from the perspective of the "universal" (κατὰ τὴν Οἰκουμένην) Church.

3. The particular characteristics of the Council, through which its universality was expressed and the catholicity of its theology and broader canonical work was recognized in the context of its reception by the subsequent ecclesiastical and patristic tradition, are also those which rendered the Council the infallible interpreter of theological tradition in the face of the Arian controversy. Moreover, the Council laid the foundations for the convergence and synthesis of the two great theological traditions of the East, namely the Alexandrian and the Antiochian, thus offering further confirmation of the ecumenical character of its theological contribution.

i) Within this process of convergence of local theological traditions, the First Ecumenical Council succeeded in expressing the one, unified faith of the "Catholic Church" in the Symbol of Faith, that is, the consensus of the whole theological tradition and of the "ecclesial conscience."

ii) The Council affirmed with its authority that theological terms *pers se*, as isolated words or expressions, bear no absolute theological weight in themselves. Rather, their authority lies in the truth of the faith which they articulate, a truth that must be consistent with previous theological and ecclesiastical tradition and be confirmed by its soteriological coherence and value. This content served as the authentic criterion for the acceptance or rejection of any dogmatic formulation, as well as its proper interpretation and affirmation over time. In other words, theological interpretation and formulation are "strong and certain" only when they are in agreement with the confession of faith, as an expression of the synodal function of the Church and not of individual persons or groups. For this reason, the agreement of theology with the Church's confession of faith is continually validated by the scrutiny of the "ecclesial conscience," which constitutes the essential function and expression of the entire ecclesial body, this body being that which ultimately discerns healthy doctrine from heretical deviation. This synodal expression of the "ecclesial conscience" is safeguarded by the visible head of the ecclesial body, the bishop of each Local Church, and is expressed

through the synodal function of the ecclesial body¹¹. This important synodal function was formally established by the Second Ecumenical Council through Canon 6, which stipulates that “heretics” may only be condemned by the Council of bishops of the Church, and not by individual persons or groups.

iii) The First Ecumenical Council boldly adopted the term homoousios, originating from the Antiochian theological tradition. Its use had been previously condemned by the Council of Antioch in 268 AD, owing to its usage by Paul of Samosata, who applied it to the Son in a manner that implied a human-like division within the divine essence –by analogy with human nature– thus effectively undermining the fullness of the Son’s divinity¹².

With the adoption of the non-scriptural (ἄγραφου) term homoousios by the First Ecumenical Council, the term received a new theological content, distinct from the Monarchian (Paul of Samosata) interpretation. At the same time, it was confirmed, on the one hand, that the Fathers of Nicaea had the boldness to transcend the earlier prohibition regarding the use of this specific term, and, on the other hand, that the Council was granted the capacity to establish the term as the foremost means of expressing the truth of the faith of the “Catholic” Church. The Son is God because He is homoousios with the Father (ὁμοούσιος τῷ Πατρί), He proceeds “from the essence of the Father” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς), and possesses the same and identical essence (ταυτὴν οὐσίαν - identity of essence) with the essence of God the Father.

Because of this specific theological contribution, the Nicene Creed became the only “adequate and sufficient expression for the refutation of every impious heresy and for the safeguarding of ecclesiastical doctrine”¹³, and the only authentic expression of the truth of the faith in relation to any other Creed issued after the Council of Nicaea and until 381 AD, as well as up to the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 AD).

4. The manner in which the Council positively “transformed” the initially negative connotations of the term homoousios within the context of theological and ecclesiastical tradition confirms the way it theologically received the preceding theological traditions (Antiochian and Alexandrian) and established them as the theological foundation of expression for the “whole” Church.

¹¹ Cf. J. Pheidas, “Patristic Theology and Ecclesial Consciousness,” *Episkepsis*, 580/29-2-2000), p. 10 (in Greek).

¹² Basil the Great, Letter 52, 1. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Synodis* 81, 86.

¹³ Athanasius the Great, *To the Bishops in Africa* 1.

This process demonstrates that:

i) Reception is directly related to the reality of the Church and is expressed “within the Church” and “through the Church.” Precisely due to this ecclesiological dimension, it is also directly connected to what we define as “ecclesial conscience,” which is grounded in the *traditio veritatis* (tradition of the truth) and finds its true worth and fulfilment mystery of the Holy Eucharist¹⁴ –as does the synodal function itself, since “Church is the name of system and synod” (Ἐκκλησία συστήματος καὶ συνόδου ἐστὶν ὄνομα)¹⁵.

The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, through the Symbol of Faith, confessed their agreement with the tradition and the faith of the Catholic Church, “which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved. For upon this the Church is founded, and whoever falls away from it neither is nor is to be called a Christian” (ἦν ὁ μὲν Κύριος ἔδωκεν, οἱ δὲ Ἀπόστολοι ἐκήρυξαν, καὶ οἱ Πατέρες ἐφύλαξαν. Ἐν ταύτῃ γὰρ ἡ Ἐκκλησία τεθεμελίωται, καὶ ὁ ταύτης ἐκπίπτων οὔτ’ ἂν εἴη, οὔτ’ ἂν ἔτι λέγοιτο Χριστιανός)¹⁶.

This connection of the Council to ecclesiastical tradition defines, on the one hand, the manner in which the Council is received within the context of the “ecclesial conscience” as *regula fidei* (rule of faith) by the plenitude of the Church, and on the other, the importance of its synodal work. This connection also confirms that the reception of the Council’s Symbol of Faith was a difficult process and provoked significant theological ferment over a period of a century and a half, until the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 AD, Chalcedon), through which the theological and ecclesiological boundaries between Orthodoxy and heresy were ultimately delineated. Reception, as a liturgical and synodal act of the Church’s life, constituted the primary means of safeguarding the ecclesiastical faith in its untainted and integral form against various heretical distortions, even of the text of the Creed itself, especially during the years 325–381 AD, amidst a “labyrinth of Creeds”¹⁷.

Already the Second Ecumenical Council affirms the faith of the 318 Fathers in its Synodal Epistle “To the Westerners” (382 AD, Constantinople). Likewise, the Third Ecumenical Council (431 AD, Ephesus), in its Canon 7, established the Symbol of Faith of the First Ecumenical Council as the

¹⁴ . See J. Zizioulas, “The Theological Problem of ‘Reception,’” *Bulletin Centro Pro Unione* 26 (1984), pp. 3–6. Cf. G. Routhier, *La réception d’un concile*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2012, with bibliography.

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Psalm 149*, PG 55, 493.

¹⁶ Athanasius the Great, Letter to Serapion I, 28.

¹⁷ Socrates, *Church History* II, 41.

criterion of Orthodoxy and affirmation of true faith¹⁸, therefore forbidding the composition or use of any other Symbol of Faith¹⁹.

A corresponding reception is found in the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 AD, Chalcedon), where, after the reading of the “Exposition of Faith” of Nicaea, the Fathers of the Council cried out: “This is the faith of the Orthodox. We all believe thus. This is the true faith. This is the holy faith. This is the eternal faith. Into this we were baptized. Into this we baptize. We all believe thus” (Αὕτη ἡ πίστις τῶν Ὀρθοδόξων. Ταύτη πάντες πιστεύομεν. Αὕτη ἀληθινὴ πίστις. Αὕτη ἡ ἅγια πίστις. Αὕτη αἰώνια πίστις. Εἰς ταύτην ἐβαπτίσθημεν. Εἰς ταύτην βαπτίζομεν. Πάντες οὕτως πιστεύομεν)²⁰. For this reason, they forbade anyone “to present or teach or deliver any other Creed to those who wish to return to the knowledge of the truth” (προσκομίζεῖν ἢ διδάσκειν ἢ παραδιδόναι ἕτερον σύμβολον τοῖς ἐθέλουσιν ἐπιστρέφειν εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας)²¹. Later, in the second half of the 6th century, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed would be introduced into the Divine Liturgy, probably by Patriarch Peter Knapheus (the Fuller) of Antioch²².

All that we have stated thus far demonstrates that the Symbol of Faith of the First Ecumenical Council became the backbone of the dogmatic teaching of the “Catholic” Church. From this perspective, both the Fourth and the Sixth Ecumenical Councils not only ratified this Creed but also regarded the Creed of the Council of Constantinople (381 AD) not as a new Creed, but as a confirmation, interpretation, and supplementation with biblical testimonies. Similar references regarding reception are found in the writings of the Fathers of the Church and in the decisions of Local Synods.

ii) Reception is also reflected within the Church’s liturgical framework, the other authentic form of expression, acceptance, and recognition of the Council’s work, within the context of the “ecclesial conscience” and Orthodox tradition²³. The earliest mention of the commemoration of the First Ecumenical Council in the Diptychs, and the celebration of a special liturgical “Synaxis,” dates back to the time of Patriarch John II of Constantinople (518-520 AD)²⁴. Under Patriarch Anthimos I (535–

¹⁸ ACO II/I, 1.

¹⁹ ACO II/I, 2.

²⁰ ACO II/I, 2. On the reception of the First Ecumenical Council, see A. de Halleux, “La réception du Symbole Oecuménique de Nicée à Chalcedoine”, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985), pp. 5–47.

²¹ ACO II/I, 2.

²² Cf. J. Pheidias, *Peter the Knapheus. The Dionysius of the Areopagitical Works*, Apostoliki Diakonia, Athens 2022 (in Greek).

²³ H. J. Schultz, *The Byzantine Liturgy*, (transl. in Greek), Athens 1998, p. 27. G. Metallinos, *The Theological Testimony of Ecclesial Worship*, Harnos, Athens 1995, pp. 37–39 (in Greek).

²⁴ Mansi, 8, 1058B-1062A and 1066A.

538 AD), we have the first synaxarial reference to the commemoration of the Synod, on May 28 and the seventh Sunday after Easter. In 582 AD, the veneration of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council as saints is also attested, with the earliest composition of an encomium to them recorded around 725 AD, or at the latest, by the 9th century²⁵.

iii) The First Ecumenical Council also recognized, for the first time, in the persons of the opponents of heresy, the “approved Fathers” and theologians of the Church (*Egregii Doctores Ecclesiae*)²⁶, invoking their theological interpretations as valid concerning the unattested and non-scriptural theological term *homoousios*, a term that until then had been “discredited” due to its problematic association with the heretical teaching of the dynamic Monarchian Paul of Samosata. The positions of St. Athanasius the Great are particularly characteristic regarding how the patristic references and interpretations were employed by the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council²⁷ to establish the use of the specific term *homoousios*, thereby reaffirming the connection of the Council’s decision with the “ecclesial conscience” and the preceding patristic and theological tradition.

The Council was the first to adopt the following hermeneutical distinction: the Symbol of Faith is the concern of the *phronema* (mindset) of the whole body of the Church, whereas its theological interpretation is primarily the work of the theologians and Fathers of the Church. In this way, the theology of the Fathers was linked to the firm foundation of the “rule of truth” (*regula veritatis*). Thus, the Symbol of Faith, which became the timeless and ecumenical criterion for distinguishing between Orthodoxy and heterodoxy for all the Local Churches of the Christian Oikoumene, also attained its “catholic” authority. The extraordinary authority of the theological contribution of the Fathers of the Church, based on the connection achieved by the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, is now confirmed by the enduring value and reception of their theology. Due to this connection, the theology of the Fathers of the Church became, after the First Ecumenical Council, the criterion of authenticity of Orthodoxy in synodal deliberations on various theological issues. This is why, at the Third Ecumenical Council (431 AD, Ephesus), we find for the first time their invocation

²⁵ BHG 1431.

²⁶ Cf. Archim. Chrysostomos Savvatos (now Metropolitan of Messinia), *The Egregii Doctores Ecclesiae and the Reliability of Their Writings*. A Contribution to the Historical-Dogmatic Investigation of the Formation of Authenticity Criteria in the Synodal Function of the Late Byzantine Period, Athens 2006 (in Greek). Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, *The Authority of the Church Fathers*. An Unpublished Epistolary Treatise, Thessaloniki 2000 (in Greek).

²⁷ See Chrysostomos Savvatos, Metropolitan of Messinia, *The First Ecumenical Council, Nicaea of Bithynia – 325 AD. Historical-Dogmatic Consideration*, Apostoliki Diakonia of the Church of Greece, 1st ed., Athens 2024, pp. 63–82 and 44–50 (in Greek).

through the so-called “usages,” drawn from various patristic “anthologies” (florilégés), that is, collections of patristic citations. Cyril of Alexandria (412–444 AD) was the first to bring forward, at the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431 AD), “the voices of the theologians” as a parallel criterion of correctness in the interpretation of the teaching of Holy Scripture, aiming at the “confirmation” or defense of the orthodoxy of the faith. Later, at the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451 AD), the “Definition of Faith” explicitly introduced the phrase: “Following, therefore, the holy Fathers... we all with one accord teach...” (ἐπόμενοι τοίνυν τοῖς ἁγίοις Πατράσιν... συμφώνως ἅπαντες ἐκδιδάσκομεν...), thus achieving agreement between the Definitions of the Ecumenical Councils and the shared, enduring consensus of the theological thought of the Church Fathers (consensus Patrum). In other words, this patristic consensus became the authoritative criterion for grounding the Orthodoxy of various theological positions, which the very body of the Church evaluated through a process of reception (receptio) through the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. as the authoritative criterion for grounding the Orthodoxy of various theological views, which assessed through the process of reception (receptio) by the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils.

This inseparable conjunction and correlation between the theology of the Church Fathers and the Confession of Faith ultimately established the exceptional authority of the Fathers of the Church, both for the orthodox interpretation of the faith and for the distinct mission of their theology throughout the entire unfolding of the Church’s theological tradition.

It may therefore be noted that the process of reception of the Creed of the First Ecumenical Council was definitively affirmed only after the passage of more than fifty years following the Council, during which attempts were made to redefine and reinterpret it. Some believed that it could be replaced by Creeds from other Local or Major Synods, though not Ecumenical ones. Indeed, extreme voices were heard claiming, for example, that the Creed could be reinterpreted by other Creeds of Local Synods or even modified. However, the agreement with the “ecclesial conscience” and the ecclesiastical (liturgical) recognition of its theological work within the framework of the synodal tradition of the “Catholic” Church confirmed that the First Ecumenical Council constitutes the first and foremost expression of ecumenical synodality, even if this was acknowledged positively only after the passage of one hundred years, and even if many disputes and problems arose, which led to divisions.

Ultimately, it appears that it is the future that confirms, verifies, and establishes within the Church the historical decisions as “Truths,” and gives them meaning and authority as expressions

of the “ecclesial conscience,” the biblical and patristic tradition, and the inestimable lived experience within the synodal function and sacramental life of the Church.

5. However, acceptance was not achieved solely with regard to the Symbol of Faith and its interpretation, but also with respect to the broader work of the Council, primarily its canonical decisions, the determination of the date for the celebration of Pascha, and the resolution of the Melitian schism, aiming, on the one hand, to resolve issues of pastoral and ecclesiastical-canonical economy, and, on the other, to bring an end to ongoing disputes.

i) It is well known that the First Ecumenical Council issued twenty canons, which pertain to matters of ecclesiastical organization (Canons 6, 7), ecclesiastical administration (4, 5, 8), ecclesiastical order and discipline (1, 2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19), the issue of the lapsi (10, 11, 12, 13, 14), matters of worship and liturgical order (18, 20), and finally matters of Christian conduct (17).

These canons were ratified by the Second Ecumenical Council (381 AD, Constantinople) and by the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 AD, Chalcedon). "Particularly noteworthy is the statement: “Let neither the faith nor the canons of the three hundred and eighteen Fathers who convened in Nicaea of Bithynia be set aside” (μη ἀθετεῖσθαι τὴν πίστιν μηδὲ τοὺς κανόνας τῶν πατέρων τῶν τριακοσίων δέκα καὶ ὀκτώ, τῶν ἐν Νικαίᾳ τῆς Βιθυνίας συνελθόντων), while the Quinisext Council (in Trullo, 691 AD, Constantinople), in its first two canons, likewise affirmed and ratified the canons of the First Ecumenical Council along with other canons of Ecumenical and Local Councils and of the Fathers. The Council characteristically stated: “It is permitted to no one to falsify the previously declared canons, to set them aside, or to accept others falsely ascribed to certain individuals who have attempted to subvert the truth” (μηδενὶ ἐξεῖναι τοὺς προδηλωθέντας παραχαράττειν κανόνας ἢ ἀθετεῖν ἢ ἑτέρους παρὰ τοὺς προκειμένους παραδέχεσθαι κανόνας, ψευδεπιγράφως ὑπὸ τινων συντεθέντας, τῶν τὴν ἀληθείαν καθηλεῦειν ἐπιχειρησάντων).

This explicit effort on the part of the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils to preserve and maintain intact the canonical work of preceding Ecumenical and Local Councils, as well as the grounding of any new canonical provision in a descriptive reference to the earlier canonical tradition, expresses, on the one hand, the ecclesial reception (receptio) of the Council’s canonical work within the framework of that specific canonical reference, and on the other hand, the catholic ecclesial consciousness regarding the content and spirit of the newly established canons, since the older and earlier canons constitute an authentic criterion for safeguarding canonical fidelity.

This principle, as an expression of reception of the canonical work of the First Ecumenical Council, is confirmed by the timeless appropriation of its canonical decisions, while it excludes any notion of abolishing this work through the enactment of new canons by later Ecumenical or Local Councils or by the Fathers of the Church.

It is characteristic that those Councils which firmly adhered to the universal ecclesiastical tradition formulated many new canons on emerging canonical issues, assigning great importance to prior canonical tradition, and in this case, to the canonical work of the First Ecumenical Council. This expression of reception affirms the emergence of an authentic continuity of canonical tradition throughout all ages of Church life.

However, authentic continuation of the canonical tradition does not preclude the possibility of modifying earlier canons, as an effort of interpretation, clarification, and renewal, which may be necessitated by the emergence or transformation of historical circumstances – provided, of course, that such a modification does not compromise the essence or spirit of the earlier canonical tradition. Therefore, the modification of prior canonical tradition does not entail its abolition, but rather the enactment of new canons by the Councils based on the spirit of the former ones, because the canons always constitute the inalienable criterion of the Church, expressing in each age the authentic conscience and lived experience of the Church. For this reason, they remain structural elements of the Church's timeless tradition.

Based on these canonical principles, the modification of Canons 4 and 5 of the First Ecumenical Council by Canons 2 and 6 of the Second Ecumenical Council represents an expression of their reception and recognition of their authority, which remains undiminished within the framework of ecclesiastical and canonical tradition. These modifications introduced to specific canons were prompted by the particular issues that required resolution, and the approach adopted to address these issues directly informed the corresponding modifications of the canons in question. The same applies to a broader set of canons of the First Ecumenical Council, which were subjected to interpretative and explanatory modifications by later Ecumenical or Local Councils and by the Fathers of the Church.

It is therefore evident that similar or related canons do not constitute parallel formulations of a portion of the same truth of the faith, but rather different applications of its fullness to distinct ecclesiastical issues and to different historical contexts, always based on the same principles and canonical presuppositions. Each canon does not express the complete and permanent application

of the truth for the particular issue in the Church’s historical life but offers a different and partial perspective of the whole truth, which the Church possesses and expresses in response to ecclesiastical questions arising in different periods.

Thus, canons established by the Church throughout its history do not fall into disuse or become obsolete with the issuance of new canons, nor are they abolished in spirit or essence, for the spirit and essence of canonical tradition must be preserved intact in every new canonical formulation²⁸.

ii) It is also well known that the First Ecumenical Council addressed the issue of determining the date of the Christian Pascha²⁹. The reason for this was the observed disagreement among the Churches regarding the timing of the celebration, a fact that Emperor Constantine characterized as “grievous and unseemly” (δεινόν τε καὶ ἀπρεπές)³⁰.

The Council, in view of the prospect of achieving a common celebration, unanimously decided that Pascha should be celebrated “on the same and selfsame day” (ἐν μιᾷ καὶ τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ) and that “all should celebrate the Paschal feast at the same time” (καὶ τὴν πασχάλιον ἑορτὴν ἅπαντας κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν ἐπιτελεῖν καιρόν)³¹, thereby rejecting the custom of the Churches of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Cilicia to celebrate Pascha “with the Jews,” that is, before the vernal equinox. At the same time, it confirmed the established practice of the majority of the Churches, which celebrated Pascha on the first Sunday after the 14th of the month of Nisan³².

This decision of the First Ecumenical Council was accepted by the Council of Antioch (341 AD) through its first canon. In addition, the same Council addressed, in a strict and unequivocal manner, all those who dared to “undermine the definition of the Holy and Great Council convened in Nicaea... concerning the holy feast of the saving Pascha” (παραλύειν τὸν ὄρον τῆς Ἁγίας καὶ Μεγάλης Συνόδου τῆς ἐν Νικαίᾳ συγκροτηθείσης... περὶ τῆς ἁγίας ἑορτῆς τοῦ σωτηριώδους Πάσχα) declaring such persons to be “deprived of communion and excluded from the Church, should they persist in contentious opposition to what has been duly and properly decreed — and this applies to the laity” (ἀκοινωνήτους καὶ ἀποβλήτους εἶναι τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, εἰ ἐπιμένοιεν φιλονεικότερον

²⁸ See J. Pheidas, *Sacred Canons*, pp. 64–66 (in Greek).

²⁹ Athanasius the Great, *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 5.

³⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3, 18.

³¹ *Ibid.* 3, 19. Sozomen, *Church History* 1, 21. See Chrysostomos Savvatos, Metropolitan of Messinia, *The First Ecumenical Council*, pp. 120–125 (in Greek).

³² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3, 18: “for we would never tolerate celebrating Easter twice in one year” (δεύτερον γὰρ τὸ Πάσχα ἐν ἐνὶ ἐνιαυτῷ οὐκ ἂν ποτε ποιεῖν ἀνεξόμμεθα).

ένιστάμενοι πρὸς τὰ καλῶς δεδογμένα καὶ ταῦτα εἰρήσθω περὶ τῶν λαϊκῶν). The canon in question was subsequently confirmed by the Sixth Ecumenical Council (681 AD), in its second canon.

The reception of this specific canon affirms the principle of the immutability of its observance, particularly under the terms established both by the First Ecumenical Council and by the subsequent determinations of the Council of Antioch (341 AD, canon 1) and the Sixth Ecumenical Council.

This canonical principle continues to be applied to the formulation of the Paschalion (Paschal Canon or computus) for the East to this day, irrespective of the calendar reform of 1923.

A particularly notable example is the decision of the “Endemousa” Synod of Constantinople in the year 1592, under Patriarch Jeremias II, which opposed the Gregorian calendar reform in the West and, in its second canon, declared its adherence to the decision of the First Ecumenical Council concerning the celebration of Pascha, as well as to the precedent set by the first canon of the Council of Antioch (341 AD)³³. The reception of this specific decision of the First Ecumenical Council, concerning the determination of the time of the Paschal celebration, ought to serve as a point of reference for any future challenge or discussion regarding a common celebration of Pascha between East and West.

It must also be recalled that, already from the 2nd century, there existed a difference in the calendrical approach to the celebration of Pascha between East and West. However, this divergence did not lead to schism or a rupture in ecclesial communion. Likewise, a coincidental concurrence in calendrical celebration cannot be construed as “imposing” a common celebration as an expression of intercommunion, nor can it be taken as signifying the elimination of existing theological and ecclesiological differences, which have always acted as an impediment to a jointly celebrated and, moreover, calendrically fixed Paschal feast³⁴.

Over the past one hundred years (1925–2025), although a common calendrical celebration of Pascha has occurred 26 times –and is expected to occur another 21 times by the year 2100– this calendrically and incidentally coincidental celebration has neither implied nor led to

³³ Cf. Christodoulos H. (Paraskevidis), Metropolitan of Demetrias (later Archbishop of Athens), *Historical and Canonical Consideration of the Old Calendarist Issue in Greece: Its Genesis and Development*, Athens 1982, p. 215 (in Greek).

³⁴ Cf. G. Bekatoros, “The Common Easter”, *Ecclesiastikos Pharos* LVII (1975), pp. 560–590 (in Greek). I. Foundoulis, “The Joint Celebration of Easter and the Liturgical Praxis of the Orthodox Church,” in *The Common Easter*, Athens 1969, pp. 61–65 (in Greek).

intercommunion or concelebration. The latter, of course, presupposes full ecclesial unity, which in turn requires the resolution of the existing theological and ecclesiological differences.

Furthermore, any modification of the temporal or calendrical determination with the aim of achieving a common or fixed celebration of Pascha between East and West requires, within the framework of the synodal and canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church, a decision of an Ecumenical Council, something which, at present, is not feasible.

This is also implied in the communiqué of the Synaxis of the Hierarchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of September 3, 2024, concerning the annual common celebration of Pascha “in accordance with the Paschalion of our Orthodox Church”, namely, the reaffirmation of the non-acceptance of the Gregorian calendar reform, the non-alteration of the principles and presuppositions established by the First Ecumenical Council, and the non-deviation from the prevailing ecclesiastical tradition. What is desirable, therefore, is not always feasible!

6. However, the celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council (325 AD), and its reception within the ecclesiastical tradition of the Orthodox Church, entails the recognition of its ecclesiological significance with regard to the concept of synodality, especially in the 21st century, and in reference to the identity markers of other Christian traditions. In our dialogical relations with the heterodox, we Orthodox are thus called to draw from the structure, the function, and the composition of the First Ecumenical Council those elements by which we may rearticulate the concept of synodality. More precisely, we are called to approach the Orthodox tradition of synodality as a creative renewal of the synodal self-consciousness of Orthodox ecclesiology, not only for those “within,” but also for those “outside,” as in the context of the contemporary Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Roman Catholics. From this perspective, Orthodox ecclesiology offers within this Dialogue a teaching on the structure and function of synodality, and on the notion of primacy (Primus) within that concrete expression of synodality, not autonomously or independently from it.

Although synodality belongs to the very essence of the Orthodox Church³⁵, it has often been misunderstood, even “within” Orthodox ecclesial life, since its ecclesiological content is not always fully accepted.

³⁵ I. Karmiris, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, Athens 1973, pp. 521 and 523 (in Greek). Archim. Stylianos Charkianakis (Archbishop of Australia), *On the Infallibility of the Church*, Athens 1965, p. 86 (in Greek).

i) The first point of misunderstanding lies in the separation of the synodal function from the Holy Eucharist³⁶, which results in the questioning of the episcopocentric character of the Council and a distortion of its ecclesiological significance. Consequently, the Council is often approached not as an ecclesial event, but rather as an assembly of an organizational or corporate nature.

ii) The second point of misunderstanding stems from a mistaken perception of the role of the First, not as a structural and necessary element in every form of synodality and expression of unity, but rather as an expression of superiority or dominant authority. As a result, in certain Local Churches, the role of the First is no longer understood as part of the synodal process, but as a self-defined and isolated element within ecclesial life alone. According to this perception, in every form of synodality, the position of the First is regarded as external to the structure of the Council, and is therefore neither defined, nor examined, nor understood as an essential component of the synodal relationship between the First and the other bishops. In such a context, the vote of the bishops (“the vote of the majority”) is no longer considered binding and necessary in its decisional function but is recognized merely as advisory.

However, in Orthodox ecclesiology, as it was safeguarded and “universally” expressed by the First Ecumenical Council, the notion of the First is not acceptable apart from the Synod, nor can the Synod be conceived apart from the First. This “golden” principle was clearly articulated in the 34th Apostolic Canon (4th century). According to this canon, the Synod and the First constitute essential and constitutive elements of episcopal synodality at every level of the Church’s life, mutually co-inhering and complementary in synodal, temporal, and local terms, and for this reason, at no point in history can the Church exist without both. These elements are not subject to reform or modernization. These elements are not subject to reform or modernization. Moreover, within the framework of Orthodox ecclesiology, and at no level of local Church life, can the existence of the Church be conceived without both the First and the Synod.

Any ministry exercised by the First can take place only within the letter and spirit of the 34th Apostolic Canon, and the Synod cannot have merely an advisory role, but must also possess a decisional character in the process of decision-making. Only then does the First of the Synod become

³⁶ Cf. John Chrysostom, *On the Obscurity of the Prophets* 2, 6. Idem, *On First Corinthians* 27, 3. Idem (spurious), *To those celebrating their first Pascha* 3, 2. Idem, *On Repentance*. Jerome, *Epistola ad Heliodorum* 12.

the expression and guardian of the unanimity or the majority (cf. 19th Canon of Antioch) of the Synod's members.

iii) The third point of misunderstanding regarding the function of synodality arises from a mistaken conception of the nature of the autocephaly of the Local Churches. Some Orthodox Autocephalous Churches have forgotten the expression of authentic episcopal synodality as a relationship also among the Local Churches, and have adopted elements of a Frankish (Carolingian) or medieval type of ecclesiology. As a result, they understand their autocephaly as an introverted, closed, isolated, and self-sufficient ecclesial reality, which leads to corresponding ecclesiological deviations, even to the point of schism, and not within the framework of a relationship of communion with all the other Autocephalous Churches – that is, not as a *communio Ecclesiarum* in which their Autocephaly is affirmed synodally and ecclesologically.

7. All these misunderstandings concerning the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome constitute the subject of study within the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics, where, under the light of the concept of synodality and within the framework of Orthodox ecclesiology, the position of the Bishop of Rome within the Western tradition is examined, together with the notion of his “universal jurisdiction.”

It has already been emphasized, within the of this Theological Dialogue, that on the basis of the 34th Apostolic Canon, the balanced and reciprocal appreciation in the relationship between the bishops and the Primus—the presiding bishop—requires the coexistence of bishops and a Primus, for there can be no Primus without the other bishops. From this perspective of mutual interdependence between synodality and primacy, and within the synodal framework, we are led to examine the existence or non-existence of primacy, considering this as the only way to address even the specific issue of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.

It has already been noted, within the context of the present Theological Dialogue, that on the basis of the 34th Apostolic Canon, a balanced and reciprocal appreciation in the relationship between the bishops and the First—the presiding bishop— requires the coexistence of bishops and the First, since there can be no First without the other bishops. From this perspective of mutual interdependence between synodality and primacy, and within the framework of synodality itself, we are led to explore the existence or non-existence of primacy, considering this to be the only possible path for addressing the more specific issue of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.

Furthermore, the recognition of a “universal Primacy” in the bishop of Rome cannot be achieved on the basis of a mistaken perception of a merely geographical understanding of a “universal Church” (*Ecclesia Universalis*), but only within the logic of an ecumenical synodality, that is, a synodality through which the “Catholic” Church (*Totum Ecclesia*) is expressed: as the “throughout the oikoumene” (κατὰ τὴν Οἰκουμένην) Church and at the same time as the communion of all the Local Churches, as *communio Ecclesiarum*. Such an understanding of the First, within the context of the “Catholic” synodality of the bishops of the “throughout the oikoumene” Local Churches, as both a dialectical and at the same time charismatic relationship, may justify the existence of a “Catholic” First, though without any additional institutional notion of “permanence” or “universality.” Moreover, the recognition of a Council as Ecumenical is not determined by its geographically universal scope, such that it would thereby permanently and exclusively define a corresponding “universal” First, but rather depends on the “Catholic” reception and acceptance of its decisions by the entire “Catholic” body of bishops of the Local Churches.

A characteristic example is found in the presidency of the First Ecumenical Council. The President of the Council, Eustathius of Antioch, after the conclusion of the Council’s proceedings, did not claim any particular prerogatives of “universal jurisdiction,” nor did he “receive” recognition of any permanent and “universal” primacy, either personally or as Bishop of Antioch. Instead, he preserved the rights and (δικαία) the order (τάξις) of his see, as they existed and were subsequently defined by the 36th canon of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council.

However, regarding the existence of synodality in relation to the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome, there arises yet another issue that is likewise ecclesiological significant. The differing understanding of the Synod in relation to Primacy is not limited merely to the distinction between its decisive and consultative character, but also concerns the election and conferral of jurisdiction upon bishops, whose episcopal governance is granted exclusively and solely by the Pope—not during their ordination but at a “secondary” moment (the pallium). This particular distinction regarding the Bishop of Rome constitutes the expression and confirmation of his “universal jurisdiction,” especially within the framework of the *missio canonica* and the distinction between “sacramental power” (*potestas ordinis*) and “jurisdictional power” (*potestas iurisdictionis*)—a topic which must also be examined within the ongoing Theological Dialogue.

The differing understanding of the Synod in relation to Primacy is not limited merely to the distinction between a decisional and an advisory role, but also concerns the process of election and

the granting of jurisdiction to bishops, who receive the governance of their dioceses exclusively from the Pope, not at the moment of their ordination, but at a “second” stage (pallium). This particular distinction regarding the bishop of Rome constitutes both the expression and affirmation of his “universal jurisdiction,” especially within the framework of the *missione canonica* and the distinction between sacramental power (*potestas ordinis*) and jurisdictional authority (*potestas iurisdictionis*), a matter which must also be studied in the ongoing Theological Dialogue. At this point, it should be noted that, even after the Second Vatican Council, this issue remains open also within Roman Catholic ecclesiology³⁷, a fact that has already been acknowledged by Roman Catholic theologians³⁸.

From this perspective, the teaching of the First Vatican Council (1870) on the “Infallibility” of the Bishop of Rome also constitutes an insurmountable obstacle within Orthodox ecclesiology. For infallibility can be considered only as a synodal expression of the “ecclesial conscience” (*ecclesiastica conscientia*) of all the bishops of the “Church throughout the oikoumene,” and not as something pertaining to “one and only” bishop (*ex sese et non ex consensu Ecclesiae*).

8. The celebration of the 1,700 years since the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council brings once again to the forefront of our theological and ecclesiological reflection, as confirmed by the present Address, the issue of synodality and the manner by which it may be recognized and accepted by the entire Christian world.

As has been demonstrated, it is a rather sensitive issue that requires dialogical understanding and consensus. It cannot be an end in itself but must be the fruit and expression of ecclesial unity, especially for the Orthodox Church and always within the context of its ecclesiological tradition and self-understanding. The Orthodox Church is both challenged and called to offer teaching and meaning to other Christian Confessions and Traditions concerning the “how” and the “for whom” (πῶς δεῖ καὶ ὑπὲρ ὧν δεῖ) of synodality, as well as in response to other contemporary anthropological issues.

³⁷ Panteleimon Rodopoulos (Metropolitan of Tyroloi and Serention), *The Hierarchical Organization of the Church According to the Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council*, Thessaloniki 1969, pp. 30–31 (in Greek). Stylianos Charkianakis (Archbishop of Australia), *The Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council*, Athens 1969, pp. 180–184 (in Greek).

³⁸ See P. Duprey, “The Synodical Structure of the Church in Eastern Orthodox Theology,” *One in Christ* 7 (1971), pp. 173 and 716 ff.

The First Ecumenical Council must always remain our point of reference and our model, not only in terms of liturgical commemoration, but above all ecclesiologically, so that we may affirm, in both practical and essential terms, its importance, significance, and necessity.

This very importance and necessity is precisely what the speaker sought to highlight. The evaluative outcome, positive or negative, is left to your judgment.

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