

THE RECEPTION OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Bishop Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Podolsk

One of the stumbling blocks in the dialogue between Orthodox and Oriental-Orthodox Churches is a disagreement on the question of the recognition of the Ecumenical Councils. The Orthodox recognise seven Ecumenical Councils while the Oriental Orthodox recognise only three: the Council of Nicea (325), the Council of Constantinople (381) and the Council of Ephesus (431). This situation leaves us with two questions. The first is whether the restoration of eucharistic communion between Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches means that the latter have to recognise the last four Councils. The second is whether it is possible to have an alternate understanding of the Ecumenical Councils in the united Church. To address this question we will try to define what Ecumenical Councils are and what role they played in the fourth to eighth centuries.

1. What is an Ecumenical Council?

First of all it must be made clear that *the Ecumenical Council should not be regarded as the highest authority* in the Church. During the three centuries which preceded the first Ecumenical Council (325) the Church did not have Ecumenical Councils. Furthermore, since the seventh Ecumenical Council (787) the Orthodox Church has existed without Ecumenical Councils. The highest legislative and executive authority in each local Orthodox Church belongs to *the local Council of that Church*; in the time period between such Councils this authority is held by the official head of the Church (Patriarch, Metropolitan or Archbishop) and its Synod. Each local Orthodox Church is independent and self-governed. The Ecumenical Council can therefore become an inter-Orthodox forum

to coordinate activities of the autocephalous Churches, but at the present time such an institution does not exist and Churches make their decisions independently: heads of Churches inform each other about decisions taken, and the coordination of Church activity on the inter-Orthodox level generally takes place through an exchange of letters.

Secondly, *at no time did Ecumenical Councils constitute the highest authority of the Orthodox Church*. Their main role in the fourth to eighth centuries was to refute heresies that disturbed Orthodox *oikoumene* (universe) from time to time. Some Ecumenical Councils also produced canonical (disciplinary) rules that were necessary at that particular time. But it is quite misleading to say that the Orthodox Church of the fourth to eighth centuries lived from Council to Council. Each local Church settled its own day-to-day agenda at the local level. The decisions of Ecumenical Councils were not binding to the Churches until approved by their own local Councils. Thus *very often the local Councils of an individual Church and not an Ecumenical Council became the highest authority in addressing the main questions of the Church's life and theology*. Of course, positions and opinions of the other Churches were taken into account, but insofar as they did not contradict the position of that individual Church.

Thirdly, *Ecumenical Councils were not "ecumenical" in the literal sense of that word*. In those days the term *oikoumene* generally referred to the Byzantine empire; Churches outside of the Byzantine world did not normally take part in Ecumenical Councils, and those Councils did not have much impact on them. A Church that did not take part in an Ecumenical Council could, however, express its own attitude to it at its own local Council, and affirm or reject the decisions taken on the ecumenical level. Therefore, although Ecumenical Councils had an inter-Orthodox character, not all local Churches accepted them immediately.

The definitions of the Ecumenical Councils began with the formula "It was pleasing to the Holy Spirit and to us" (cf. Acts 15:28), pointing to the cooperation (*synergia*) between the Holy Spirit and

humans in producing dogmatic definitions. In no case is it really possible to determine where the activity of the Holy Spirit ends and that of human reason begins. However, one thing is obvious: the dogmatic definitions were composed by humans and with the help of human language. Theologians made certain proposals and then participants of the Ecumenical Council agreed or disagreed with them. It is also obvious that the dogmatic formulations dealt with mysteries that could not be easily expressed in human words. The essence of the dogmas belongs to the realm of the divine while it is humans who have to search for adequate expressions.

The same dogma can therefore be expressed in different words. For example, the dogma of Christ as both God and Man was expressed differently at the third and fourth Ecumenical Councils. The third Ecumenical Council spoke of "one nature" of God the Logos after God's nature was united with human nature in the person of Christ, while the fourth Council spoke of "two natures," which retained their main characteristics in the person of Christ. As Sebastian Brock puts it:

For both these poles of the Christological spectrum, Christ was fully God and fully Man, of one substance with the Father and with mankind. But because of different conceptual models of Christ's saving mankind, they inevitably brought forth two different Christological formulas which at first glance appear to contradict each other but in fact seek to explain the same inexpressible mystery from different points of view.¹

2. Reception of the Ecumenical Councils in the Early Church

The question of the reception of the Ecumenical Councils has been widely discussed by theologians and church historians during recent decades. Following the Second Vatican Council, and because of the research on the topic of reception done through the

¹ S. Brock, "The Christology of the Church of the East," forthcoming in *Parôle d'Orient*.

World Council of Churches, reception has been the subject of many studies in the Western church press.²

These studies have revealed the following factors in the reception process:³

1. Local Churches did not accept the Ecumenical Councils passively or automatically. On the contrary, the Churches had to decide on the destiny of each Council. Such questions as whether or not to accept it, whether to accept it as Ecumenical or as local, whether to accept all its decisions or only some, were left to the local Churches. The process of reception assumed an active discussion over each Council and its decisions in every local Church, and not a passive obedience to an Ecumenical Council. This is why the process of reception could sometimes be very painful, accompanied by heated disputes, disturbances, and the interference of civil authorities.
2. The reception of an Ecumenical Council presupposed not only the official promulgation of its teaching by Church authorities but also its acceptance by theologians, monks, and lay persons. The whole of the church community was involved in this process.

... As in the case of Nicea I, Chalcedon, and the rest of the so-called Ecumenical Councils of the first millennium, reception takes place through a more or less complicated process. ... These cases of reception of conciliar decisions by the Church

2 See M. Ashjian, "The Acceptance of the Ecumenical Councils by the Armenian Church, with Special Reference to the Council of Chalcedon," *The Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970): 348-62; J. Coman, "The Doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon and its Reception in the Orthodox Church of the East," *The Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970): 363-82; A. Grillmeier, "Konzil und Rezeption: Methodische Bemerkungen zu einem Thema der oekumenischen Diskussion der Gegenwart," *Theologie und Philosophie* 45 (1970): 321-52; Idem, "The Reception of Chalcedon in the Roman Catholic Church," *The Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970): 381-411; L. Stan, "On the Reception of the Decisions of Ecumenical Councils by the Church," Councils and the Ecumenical Movement, *WCC Studies* 5 (Geneva, 1968): 68-75; W. Kuppers, "Reception, Prolegomena to a Systematic Study," Councils and the Ecumenical Movement, *WCC Studies* 5 (Geneva, 1968): 76-98.2.

3 See W. Henn, "The Reception of Ecumenical Documents," in *La Reception y la communion entre les Iglesias, III Coloquio Internacional* (Salamanca, 1996): 2-4. See also J. Meyendorff, "What is an Ecumenical Council?" *SVTQ* 17 (1973): 259-73.

were neither in fact, nor understood by the Churches to be, accomplished by a merely juridical act of acceptance by Church officials; rather, the juridical act was viewed as initiating a spiritual process of reception by the whole community.⁴

3. In each specific case, the process of reception was twofold, involving both giving and receiving. Reception itself was in fact a consensus between the givers and receivers. A single local Church, a group of Churches, a Church party, or even a single person (such as an emperor, theologian, or bishop) could be "givers." For example, at the first Ecumenical Council the Emperor Constantine and the party of "homoeousians" became the "givers." At the third Ecumenical Council the givers were St Cyril of Alexandria and his supporters, at the fourth Ecumenical Council Pope Leo the Great and a group of theologians that accepted his definition of faith, at the fifth Ecumenical Council Emperor Justinian. The local Churches, basing their decisions not on the authority of the "givers" but on their own theological analysis, became "receivers."
4. The degree of each local Church's own theological grounding influenced the process of reception of the Ecumenical Councils. Whether or not a local Church had theological movements that were in sympathy with the prevailing theology of the Council also played a significant role. And if a local Church was not familiar with a particular heresy and did not take part in combating it, the Council's decisions might have seemed irrelevant, or at least uninteresting to that Church.
5. Linguistic factors also influenced the process of reception in the local Churches. For example, not all dogmatic formulae of the Greek-speaking Churches could be translated adequately into Latin or the national languages of the East (Coptic, Ethiopian, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, etc.). This was at the root of many misunderstandings. The difficulty in translating Greek terms *hypostasis* and *physis* into Syriac is a good example of this. The term *hypostasis* in Greek (particularly Cappadocian) theology

⁴ E. J. Kilmartin, "Reception in History: an Ecclesiological Phenomenon and Its Significance," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984): 38.

came to mean the concrete person of Jesus Christ—God the Logos, while the term *physis* referred to Christ's human or divine nature. But translated into Syriac this sense was lost because the Syriac term *qnoma*, which renders hypostasis, meant the individual realization of nature (*kyana*). That is why Syrian authors usually spoke of a nature and its *qnoma*. Thus the "monophysite" Severus of Antioch wrote that one *qnoma* necessarily meant one nature, while the extreme "dyophysites" proclaimed two natures having two *qnoma*. The Chalcedonian formulation of "one *qnoma*—two natures" was rejected by the majority of Syrian Christians because in Syriac it sounded illogical.

6. Political factors also played an important role. Here reference can be made to the national movements against Byzantine ecclesiastical and political power in Egypt, Armenia, and Syria in the fourth to sixth centuries. "During those centuries Middle Eastern Christians who were not of Greek origin treated Chalcedonians as 'melchites,' 'emperor's men.' Chalcedonian Orthodoxy tended to coincide with the cultural, liturgical and theological tradition of the Constantinopolitan Church, losing contact and communication with the ancient and respected traditions of Egypt and Syria," says John Meyendorff.⁵
7. Finally, there was the influence of personal factors. When the teaching of a Church hierarch became the teaching of an Ecumenical Council, theologians and bishops who were his personal enemies or disagreed with his activity tried to influence their Church's opinion against the Council's reception. For example, the refusal of the Antiochene party to accept the decisions of the third Ecumenical Council arose primarily out of the personal disputes between Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch. Being dismayed by the way the Council was orchestrated by Cyril, John anathematized him and rejected the Council's decisions. Yet after 433, when Cyril and John signed a conciliatory agreement, the Antiochenes accepted the Council.

5 "Khalkidoniti i monofiziti posle Khalkidona" [Chalcedonians and Monophysites after Chalcedon], *Vestnik Russkogo Zapadno-Evropejskogo Patriarshego Ekzarkhata* 52 (1965): 223.

The reception of the Ecumenical Councils was thus a process that demanded time and was influenced by many different factors. The decisive point was not the Council itself but the inter-Orthodox consensus about its reception. Normally this consensus was reached after the Ecumenical Council and it was based on the decisions of local Councils.

It is also necessary to add that the reception of an Ecumenical Council itself means more than just the acceptance of its theological importance by a particular local Church. It means that the local Church must be prepared to treat this Council as its own, i.e., to include its Fathers in the dyptichs, to anathematize those whom the Council condemned as heretics, to incorporate the canonical formulations it has produced. Whether a local Church did or did not take part in the Council is not of great importance. What is important is that the local Church fully adopt and assimilate the legacy of the Ecumenical Council; only in this case can we say that reception has actually taken place.

3. Historical Examples

To help illustrate what has been said so far, we shall now look at the process of reception of a number of Church Councils held from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries.

Our first example is the first Ecumenical Council, held at Nicaea in AD 325 under the leadership of the Emperor Constantine. This Council denounced Arianism and declared the Son of God to be of one substance (*homooousios*) with the Father. Official repudiation of Arianism, however, did not mean that the Arian teachings were eradicated from the Church. On the contrary, it was after the Council of Nicaea that the Arian bishops came to power throughout the Christian Orient. During the decades between the Council of Nicaea and the 381 Council of Constantinople, the disputes between Nicenes and anti-Nicenes, the "*homooousian*," "*homioousian*" and "*homoean*" parties took place. "The Nicene faith was fully approved only after fifty-six years of disturbances marked by Councils, excommunications, exiles, imperial interfer-

ence and violence," says Yves Congar.⁶ In some Churches the process of the reception of this Council lasted even longer. For example the Church of the East accepted it only eighty-five years later, in 410, at the local Council of Seleucia.⁷

Our second example is the Council of Ephesus of AD 449, which was summoned by the Emperor Theodosius as an Ecumenical Council. The key role at this Council was played by Dioscorus of Alexandria. Eutyches, who had been previously condemned as a monophysite heretic, was reinstated, and Dioscorus's enemies from among the moderate dyophysites (namely Flavian of Constantinople, Eusebius of Doryleum, Ibas of Edessa and Theodoret of Cyrhus) were deposed. The Council's acts received the emperor's approval, which meant that Dioscorus won the battle. And yet when the Pope's legates, who supported Flavian, returned to Rome and informed Pope Leo of the proceedings, the local Council of Rome proclaimed all resolutions of this "Ecumenical" Council powerless. Later on other local Churches joined in supporting Rome's position, and at the Council of Chalcedon the 449 Council of Ephesus came to be proclaimed the "Robber Council." Therefore the decisive role in the ultimate invalidation of the Council belonged to one local Church, in this case the Church of Rome.

The third example is the Council of Chalcedon in 451. It is known as the fourth Ecumenical Council, yet it has never been accepted by the entire Christian oikumene. This Council saw the deposition of Dioscorus and the victory of "dyophysite" Christology. But some Churches rejected the Chalcedonian definition of faith, seeing it as a step back to the Nestorianism that had been condemned earlier. The strongest opposition to the Council rested in the outlying districts of the Byzantine Empire as well as outside its boundaries, in Egypt, Syria, and Armenia. But even in the capital the Council of Chalcedon was treated in various ways. Emperor Marcian (450–457) and Emperor Leo (457–474) supported it, but

6 Cf. Y. Congar, "La réception comme réalité ecclésiologique," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 56 (1972): 372.

7 S. Brock, "The Christology of the Church of the East."

the position of Emperor Zeno (475–491) was more ambiguous and cautious. In the hope of reconciling the “monophysites” with the “dyophysites” he promulgated the “Henotikon,” a general statement of faith which was completely silent about Chalcedon. In this way each local Church was given the right to accept or ignore the Council, and the common basis of faith for the Church lay in the first three Ecumenical Councils.

Concerning the reception of the Council of Chalcedon in the second half of the fifth century, the Church historian Evagrius says:

In those days the Council of Chalcedon was neither proclaimed in the holy Churches nor openly rejected. Each Church leader acted in the way that he thought was legal. One camp supported all of its acts and formulas, did not correct its definitions and could not imagine how it was possible to change even a letter [Chalcedonians]. A second party not only rejected the Council of Chalcedon and all its acts but also anathematized it together with the Tome of Leo [extreme anti-Chalcedonians]. A third group, basing themselves on Zeno’s “Henotikon,” disputed among themselves the issue of one or two natures. Some of them stuck to the letter, others [moderate anti-Chalcedonians], inclined to peace, called each Church to be responsible for its own fate and urged the Church leaders not to have communion with each other.⁸

Even over a century later, in AD 553, when the next Ecumenical Council was summoned with the intention of reconciling these parties, the process of the reception of the Council of Chalcedon had not been complete. In fact it remains incomplete to this day, as some Churches accept the Council and others do not.

We come to our last example, which is the Council of Florence-Ferrara (1438–89). It had all the characteristic traits of an Ecumenical Council and was the most representative, as far as its attendance is concerned, in the entire history of Christianity. Delegates from all the Churches, including the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Metropolitan of Moscow, were present, not to mention the

⁸ Evagrius, *Church History* III, 30.

Byzantine Emperor. At this Council the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Churches signed an Act of Union: the only Orthodox delegate who did not sign it was St Mark of Ephesus; the other 33 delegates all put their signatures under the act of reunion with Rome.

However, when returning home the delegates that had signed the Union met with different reactions to the Council on the side of their ecclesial communities. On July 5, 1441, two years after the Council, Isidore, Metropolitan of Moscow, who had represented the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council, celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin. It was two years after the Council. During the Liturgy he commemorated the Pope, and the Act of Union with Rome was read aloud. Noone present expressed disagreement; on the contrary, as it is written in the chronicles "the boyars and many others kept silent and Russian bishops also kept silent and looked as if they were asleep." However after three days Vasily Vasilievich, the Grand Prince of Moscow, proclaimed Isidore a heretic and gave orders to have him arrested. At this point "all the bishops of Russia woke up; princes and boyars and many Christians began to call Isidore a heretic."⁹ Now under the threat of death, Isidore was therefore forced to reject the Union, yet he stayed firm and finally escaped to Rome. The Council of Ferrara-Florence was rejected in Russia because of the intervention of the civil authorities.

Subsequently, rejection became more widespread. In 1442, the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem rejected the Union with Rome and called the Council of Florence "dirty, tyrannical and uncanonical." In 1450 the Church of Constantinople anathematized the Council of Florence, and Patriarch Gregory Mammas, who had supported the Union, was deposed. Thus it took the local Churches of Russia, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and finally Constantinople (Churches that were in fact represented at the Council by delegates) about ten years to express their attitude

9 A chronicle cited in: A. Kartashev, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvi* [History of the Russian Church], vol. 1 (Paris 1959), 356.

to this Council, which in its day had been summoned as Ecumenical.¹⁰ This consensus was reached without another Ecumenical Council: each local Church had an opportunity to make up its own mind and take its final decision on the issue.

4. Theses on the nature of Ecumenical Councils and their significance for the Church today

Our exploration of the process of reception of the Ecumenical Councils leads us to the following nine theses:

1. While all members of the Universal Church of Christ must accept the essence of the dogma of the Ecumenical Councils, alternative interpretations of an Ecumenical Council within families of local Churches does not seem impossible, provided this refers only to an alternative understanding of the verbal formulae and not of the teaching itself.
2. It is not necessarily reasonable to demand from the Churches that did not take part in an Ecumenical Council that they accept all the dogmatic formulae of that Council. Similarly, if a local Church was unfamiliar with a certain heresy and thus did not develop theological terms and arguments against it, this Church might not be prepared to accept as its own the legacy of the Ecumenical Council which faced that heresy. Nevertheless such a Church might well accept the Council as far as its own local Council would consider it useful.
3. The Orthodox Church is a living body that continues its theological research based on an ever fuller study of its own heritage. Modern scholars have access to sources that were not available to ancient theologians. Moreover, some events of history are liable to be interpreted differently today. For example, it is possible that one or another Council of the early Church could be accepted as an Ecumenical Council in addition to the seven that are already recognized. On the other hand, it may also be possible to reconsider certain acts of an Ecumenical Council if, based on the theological study of previously unavailable materials, it is

10 The Roman Catholic Church still considers Florence an Ecumenical Council.

found out that the decisions taken were in some way imbalanced or inadequate.

4. Such reconsideration, demanding the activity of Church's *collective mind* (through new Ecumenical Councils, local Councils etc.) would not imply the rejection or misinterpretation of Church Tradition. Nor would such re-estimation suggest that the Church denies the activity of the Holy Spirit at Ecumenical Councils, or that it seeks to outrage Holy Fathers who took part in the Councils. History reveals several cases where the Church condemned persons whom a previous Ecumenical Council had accepted as Orthodox. For example, the fifth Ecumenical Council condemned three theologians whose teachings were accepted by the fourth Ecumenical Council.
5. It is also possible to justify a theologian or a Church leader who was condemned at an Ecumenical Council, e.g., in instances where previously unavailable evidence indicates that such a condemnation was based either on unauthentic texts or on a misinterpretation of authentic ones.
6. There is an opinion that the Church has no right to return to the acts of the Ecumenical Councils for reconsideration. Yet history indicates otherwise. For example, when Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch signed their Formulary of Reunion in AD 433, they were in fact reconsidering the third Ecumenical Council, rejecting the most extreme features of the Alexandrian Christology, which had prevailed there. The definition of faith of the fourth Ecumenical Council was based on the Formulary of 433, and in this sense it represented a new stage in Christological development. The *Horos* of the fifth Ecumenical Council in turn reinterpreted that of the fourth Ecumenical Council using the "twelve chapters" of St Cyril, in which he spoke against Nestorius and his Christological terminology. Finally, the same fifth Ecumenical Council condemned the theological works by Theodoret of Cyrhus and Ibas of Edessa, which means that it reinterpreted the decision of the fourth Ecumenical Council concerning these theologians.

7. In fact, the opinion that subsequent generations must refrain from critical analysis of the Ecumenical Councils' heritage denies the Holy Spirit's continued activity in the Church, insofar as it presupposes that the Spirit was active only in antiquity and not today. Furthermore, this view places the Ecumenical Council above the Church itself. In reality there is no dogmatic definition which forbids the Church from reconsideration during continued stages in its development. Naturally the Church cannot abolish or entirely revise the dogma of an Ecumenical Council, but it can come to a new interpretation that might in turn lead to a re-estimation of those anathemas that were based on previous interpretations of the same dogma.
8. The acts and definitions of the Ecumenical Councils constitute a great heritage of the Orthodox Church, one which determines the life of the Church up to the present day. But it is necessary to treat this heritage creatively and understand and appropriate it again in each new historical period. It is impossible for the Church to repeat the same formulae century after century without any attempt to understand them through its new experience. Such attempts may well lead to new discoveries and thus new decisions. To reject this process is to pronounce a death sentence on Church theology, Church life and finally on the Church itself.
9. It is necessary to mention that between Ecumenical Councils, i.e., during the process of reception, Church leaders belonging to different theological groups often broke eucharistic communion with each other. But this was not the norm. There were notable theologians who called for eucharistic communion based on a certain "minimum" which did not demand absolutely identical dogmatic formulations. St Basil the Great stood for the divinity of the Holy Spirit, yet in the effort to retain peace inside the Church of his day he did not confess this out loud, neither did he demand it as a prerequisite for communion:

Let us then seek nothing more, but merely propose the Nicene faith to the brethren who wish to join us. And if they agree to this, let us demand also that the Holy Spirit shall not be called a

creature, and that those who do so call him shall not be in communion with them. But beyond these things I think nothing should be insisted on by us. For I am convinced that by longer association together and by mutual experience without strife, even if there should be need of some addition being made for clarification, the Lord who works all things together unto good to such as love him will give it.¹¹

In this way, St Basil the Great understood that different Churches could have different levels of theology: the things acceptable in the eyes of some could seem unacceptable innovations for others. But "by longer association together and by mutual experience," and, he implies, through eucharistic communion together, those previously unacceptable formulations might come to be acceptable. For St Basil, the most important thing was Church unity. "It is good to unite what has been separated. If we should be willing to condescend to the weaker, whenever we can do so without causing harm to souls, we will reach that union."¹²

5. Possible objections

The theses set out above are not final. Their aim is to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the process of reception. In such a discussion, however, our proposed theses might elicit certain objections:

1. It can be argued that the Ecumenical Councils were summoned in order to clarify dogmatic truth; the Churches that did not accept a Council showed themselves to be outside the truth and thus cut themselves from the body of the Church. To this we would respond that we have studied the process of reception only from a historical point of view, i.e. we did not touch the essence of the dogmatic truth proclaimed at Ecumenical Councils. We also based our argument on the point that *the same dogmatic truth could be formulated differently*, and that some-

¹¹ Epistle 113.

¹² Ibid.

times dogmatic formulations can contradict each other even as the truth which they deal with is the same.

2. Some may say that we ignore the idea of the Universal Church because according to our scheme each local Church seems to be absolutely independent. We can refer here to the two different views on the way the Universal Church operates: Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox). According to the Western view, the unity of the Church is guaranteed by a single administrative system and by subordination of all to the Pope. Thus an inter-Church Council whose acts are approved by the Pope could be treated as an Ecumenical Council. According to the Eastern view, the Universal Church is a *community of autocephalous local Churches*. Thus for Universal Church, a Council accepted by all local Churches is Ecumenical; for a local Church, a Council, which it has accepted together with the other local Churches is Ecumenical. Our analysis has kept to the second scheme, deriving our arguments from the point that local Churches act on a historical stage, making their decisions independently, and the Universal Church is the totality of local Churches that act independently, although in agreement with each other. The guarantee of this agreement is not an administrative structure but unanimity in the questions of faith and doctrine.

6. Is it necessary for the Oriental Orthodox to accept the Seven Ecumenical Councils?

If we apply our theses to the dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches, we can come to the following preliminary conclusions:

1. To re-establish eucharistic communion with the Orthodox Church it is necessary for the Oriental Orthodox to express their positive attitude to *the teaching of the seven Ecumenical Councils*, even if some word formulae of the last four Councils might possibly remain alien to their own theological tradition. In this sense the eighth item of the "Second General Statement on Christology" sounds unsatisfactory and ambiguous. This states:

Both families accept the first three Ecumenical Councils, which form our common heritage. In relation to the four later Councils of the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox state that for them the above points 1–7 are the teachings also of the four later Councils of the Orthodox Church, while the Oriental Orthodox consider this statement of the Orthodox as their own interpretation. With this understanding, the Oriental Orthodox respond to it positively.

The actual position of the Oriental Orthodox concerning the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh Ecumenical Councils is not expressed here. We think that while the Oriental Orthodox could continue to use their own dogmatic terminology and consider ours unsatisfactory, they nevertheless must accept that the dogmas of the Ecumenical Councils mentioned do not contradict their own teaching. Only such theological agreement can provide a genuine basis for reunion.

2. This agreement does not mean that the Oriental Orthodox must accept all seven Ecumenical Councils absolutely and unconditionally. The Oriental Orthodox are not prepared to sign the dogmatic formulations of the later four Ecumenical Councils, as their theological terminology remains alien to them. *We must not demand that the Oriental Orthodox accept the fifth, sixth, and seventh Ecumenical Councils absolutely and unconditionally*, because they did not take part in those Councils and thus the problems discussed were alien to them. For example, it is not reasonable to expect that the Oriental Orthodox will use the seventh Ecumenical Council in their theology of icons, as they did not experience in their midst the heresy of iconoclasm and had no need to develop theological arguments for the veneration of icons.
3. The Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches parted because they did not find agreement in the reception of the Council of Chalcedon. Thus theological dialogue between the two families must be centered on this Council alone. We must not demand that the Oriental Orthodox accept this Council as their own. But they must be invited to accept that the Christological

formulae of that Council do not contradict the teaching of the ancient undivided Church. On the other hand, the Orthodox need to accept that Oriental Orthodox Christological terminology can also be maintained, as it reflects the terminology of the third Ecumenical Council. Such an agreement would represent the bare minimum that would permit (according to St Basil's principle) the reinstitution of eucharistic communion. Only in this case would it be possible to say that the theological dialogue has been completed. From that point, the Churches may turn to the questions of history, ecclesiology and procedure (e.g., the lifting of anathemas, veneration of saints, etc.).

7. Conclusion

The theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches has now come to the most difficult point: *the process of reception of its results is now launched in the local Churches*. The discussions about the documents signed at Chambésy show that in wide ecclesiastical circles the results of theological disputes are liable to be treated differently. Now each local Church needs wisdom and good will to assess the dialogue basing itself upon its own tradition. The fullness of the Church, including its official leaders, theologians, and congregation must agree with this evaluation.

Each local Church needs to be open to see that sometimes the same dogmatic teaching is hidden under different theological formulae. It is necessary to be able to treat the legacy of the Ecumenical Councils creatively and to understand their teaching through new sources and materials that are available now.

The Lord said, "The spirit blows wherever it wills" (Jn 3:8). It is impossible to limit its activity to one time or one theological tradition inside the Christian Church. Among the saints venerated by the Orthodox Church there are those who did not accept the Council of Chalcedon. One example is St Isaac of Nineveh, who belonged to the Church of the East (considered as "Nestorian"). He lived in the seventh century but he accepted only two Councils

(his Church rejected both the Council of Ephesus and Council of Chalcedon). The Church of Georgia venerates St Peter of Iberia who struggled against the Council of Chalcedon.¹³ St Peter lived in the fifth century but accepted only three Councils (his local Church rejected the Council of Chalcedon). Therefore it is possible not to accept some of the Ecumenical Councils and yet not only remain Orthodox but be venerated as an Orthodox saint. Does this not suggest that an alternative understanding of Councils in the Church is possible? It would then follow that if there is an agreement on the basic doctrinal matters, reunion with the Churches that for historical reasons do not accept certain dogmatic formulations of the Ecumenical Councils also seems possible.

13 Cf. J. Meyendorff, "Chalcedonians and Non-Chalcedonians: The Last Steps to Unity," SVTQ 33 (1989): 326.13

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