



## Meetings About Meetings

Impressions of the OTSA-Fordham Meeting  
in Preparation for the Great and Holy Council of 2016

Gregory Tucker

*Note: Short papers from the conference may be found on the blog of Fordham's Orthodox Christian Studies Center at [publicorthodoxy.org](http://publicorthodoxy.org)*

When Orthodox scholars get together, we rarely talk directly about the future. But occasionally the pressing needs of our time demand such a conversation. The near future is an exciting time for Orthodoxy: His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch has called a representative council of bishops to convene in Istanbul next spring, and many hope that this meeting will mark the beginning of a unified effort to address the manifold issues facing the Church in (post-)modernity. But the deliberations of a recent gathering of Orthodox scholars in New York, which discussed the Council's agenda, suggest that this hope might remain unfulfilled.

The idea of convening a substantial delegation of Orthodox theologians to consider the agenda for the forthcom-

ing Great and Holy Council was first mooted at an intensive study day on this theme, hosted by the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University in October 2014. At that meeting, a hand-picked panel of twenty-five international scholars agreed to pursue further dialogue, and the Center directors George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou took that proposal to the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA), who agreed to collaborate. At the subsequent gathering, members of OTSA and their guests were invited to proffer papers on topics related to the Great and Holy Council, and several papers on adjacent topics were also accepted.

As a result, this year's annual meeting of OTSA was cosponsored by the

Orthodox Studies Center, and the resources available through the Center and its benefactors enabled the gathering of a far larger delegation than in the past. This included several prominent international theologians, among them Pantelis Kalaitzidis, director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Greece; Nicholas Kazarian of the Institut de théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge, Paris; and Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), from the United Kingdom. Gayle Woloschak, OTSA president and member of the WHEEL advisory board, acknowledged the great significance of the new partnership between OTSA, which is recognized by the Assembly of Orthodox Canonical Bishops of North America, and the Center at Fordham, which is rapidly gaining high repute as a major academic locus of Orthodox Studies in the English-speaking world.

The agenda of the OTSA-Fordham meeting was set by that of the forthcoming Council—fixed as long ago as 1976. There are ten topics on the agenda (fasting regulations, impediments to marriage, the calendar, ecumenical relations, the ordering of the diptychs, autonomy and autocephaly, the process for granting autocephaly, the presence of Orthodox Churches at the World Council of Churches, and issues of “peace, freedom, brotherhood and love among peoples and the suppression of racial discrimination”), but it is known that not all of them are to be discussed at the Council, and not all can expect to achieve the consensus required to effect change.

The conference was built around a combination of traditional presentations and panel sessions—a new format for OTSA, in which five scholars were invited to make prepared comments on a given topic before a wider conversation commenced with questions and comments from the floor.

This arrangement provided an opportunity for an honest assessment of the conciliar agenda and contemporary issues facing Orthodoxy in America. Despite moments of disagreement and tension, it was encouraging to see experts in their respective fields engaging one another openly and addressing contemporary topics directly, with a shared commitment to the well-being and growth of Orthodoxy.

Fordham’s Manhattan campus opened its doors to a much-expanded audience for the conference’s keynote address, the annual Florovsky Lecture, given this year by His Eminence, Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia. Metropolitan Kallistos delivered a characteristically erudite and witty presentation on his chosen theme, “The Decisive Importance of Councils in the Life of the Church,” considering both the history of conciliar theology and the current state of affairs. In his wide-ranging lecture, he commented at length on the popular question of whether the forthcoming Council should be anticipated as another Ecumenical Council. Outlining various criteria for ecumenicity, His Eminence concluded that only the reception of the council as “ecumenical” by the Church as a whole could secure such status, adding that, “when and how and where the Truth is made manifest in the Church, we cannot predict.”

In the course of the main proceedings, discussion focused on several key topics. The first of these were autocephaly and the so-called “diaspora”—matters of utmost importance to those of us living outside the boundaries of traditional Orthodox canonical territories, but also affecting those in modern nation-states, such as Ukraine. The conference expressed a strong desire that the needs and challenges of the diaspora should be represented directly to the Council, and while it seems that

some bishops from outside the traditional territories will be involved (for instance, the number of bishops of the Patriarchate of Antioch who reside within the territories of that autocephalous church is too small to fill their allotted quota of representative seats at the Council, so they will need to take bishops from their diaspora churches), this will not be as the result of a conscious effort to respond to the situation of Orthodoxy globally.

The conference also debated the appropriateness of the term *diaspora* for describing the situation of Orthodox Christians located outside traditional canonical territories, especially in North America—and the use of the term for that purpose was almost unanimously rejected. An informal survey of those present showed that very few of the scholars regard themselves as part of a diaspora community and many felt that viewing the Church here as merely an offshoot of ancient patriarchal sees inhibited the ability of the Church to grow and embed itself in the context in which it finds itself today.

An update was given on the discussions of the Assembly of Orthodox Canonical Bishops of North America, created at the instigation of the Pre-conciliar meetings with the purpose of considering how to bring Orthodoxy in the United States to unity. While the hierarchs continue to note their increased fraternal love, it appears that nationalist and ethnic interests remain as insurmountable stumbling blocks in the path to unity, with the North American jurisdictions unable even to agree that an administratively unified and canonically regular Church in North America should be the immediate goal of conversations. Encouragingly, this situation was met with widespread criticism among the conference delegates, who identified both the historical contexts which have

produced the present situation (multiple emigrations of Orthodox populations to America and the administrative presuppositions of Byzantium), and the theological and missiological imperatives for resolving the current crisis.

A closely related conversation focused on the need for the Church to engage the challenges of modernity, rather than dismissing them and retreating into an idealized past. This theme appeared in almost all the panel sessions held across the two days and revealed considerable differences of opinion between the OTSA members as to what such an engagement would entail. Some spoke of this project as primarily an exercise in uncovering and reiterating the tenets of Orthodoxy to an increasingly deaf and uninterested world, and continuing to oppose what appears to be a deviation from the path carved out by the Orthodox Church. Others advocated for new approaches to fresh challenges. This requires that we no longer rely on the idea that every possible question concerning the proclamation and implementation of the Gospel has been answered by the Church in the past, but that we rather recognize the need to live the patristic life by embedding the Gospel in our culture. Only in this way can Orthodoxy respond with maturity and humble confidence to the seemingly permanent new realities of pluralistic cultures and globalization, which were unimaginable even in the recent past.

These discussions, and the “panel of experts” format of the conference’s plenary sessions, highlighted the importance of involving educated specialists in contemporary conversations, so that those conversations might be informed by the labors of research and learning. The conference noted that the pre-conciliar process has involved experts and non-hierarchs, including North Amer-

ican Orthodox theologians such as the late Protopresbyter John Meyendorff and Archpriest John Erickson, but expressed concern that it appears that the Council itself will consist only of bishops—a departure from the practice of the ancient councils. Many conference delegates also lamented the absence of the laity in general and women in particular in the conciliar structures.

The most heated discussion of the conference took place during the panel session on “Canonical Impediments to Marriage,” and surrounded, unsurprisingly, the issue of same-sex marriage and the place of LGBTQ persons in the Church. The conversation was somewhat energized by the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court on the constitutional right of persons to enter same-sex marriages, which coincided with the first day of the meeting. The clamorous debate over this topic revealed how divisive it is within the Orthodox community, and brought into the open the reality that the Church’s theologians are in disagreement and confusion over current mainstream teaching and disciplinary practices within Orthodoxy. But it also revealed more important realities: that the intellectual life of the Orthodox Church is diverse and lively, that there is a willingness to debate and discuss among those Orthodox who have devoted their lives to intellectual pursuits, and that investing resources in creating contexts for such conversations should be a priority for the Church.

The topics that took center stage at the OTSA-Fordham conference have also shown something else about the forthcoming Council that really is of the greatest importance: the agenda is way off the mark. Rarely in the course of the two-day discussions did the dialogue stick within the bounds of the topics defined by the conciliar agenda and expounded in the pre-concil-

iar documents. Frequently, following vivid, informed debate, the topics appeared to be inward-looking, pedantic, and outdated. While the hierarchs will attempt to agree on the order of precedence among themselves and whether even to recognize the existence of the hierarchies that minister to millions of Orthodox Christians across the globe, they will almost certainly remain silent on the plague of Orthodox nationalism and of the cooperation of the Church with totalitarian secular power, the rise of theological fundamentalism, and the violence which continues to erupt between groups of Orthodox Christians. It seems unlikely that the Council will address the widespread corruption by political power that afflicts many clergy in traditional Orthodox lands; nor will they address tragic moral failures of global proportions, such as the modern-day enslavement of sex workers and the refugee crises that dominate life in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and increasingly, Europe. This is to say nothing of the narrowly ecclesiastical issues such as the comprehensibility of liturgical languages and a resolution of the dispute over the calendar. Rarely is the parish priest confronted by a parishioner lamenting, “Father, I have not slept for worrying about the order of the diptychs,” as Metropolitan Kallistos quipped in his lecture, but perhaps that parishioner does lose sleep because of the schizophrenia induced by a Church that refuses to allow the Gospel to transfigure the realities of the world we experience, preferring an imaginary alternative with hypotheticalal issues.

In short, the recent meeting in New York highlighted the need for the Orthodox Church to engage in an intelligent, rational conversation with modernity. One delegate made a comment to the effect that, unless the Orthodox Church makes modernity and post-modernity its own, modernity and post-modernity

will happen to the Church, and we will have no resources to control the outcome. While some commentators and participants in the conference have expressed the desire only to see a peaceful Council come to pass, in the hope that its mere occurrence will herald a renewal of Orthodox witness in the modern world, I hold out for the Holy Spirit to bring about something far

greater—genuine conversations about hard questions, which do not degenerate into apologetics, politicking, and character defamation. That hope is perhaps for now too great, considering the restriction of the 1976 agenda. So what are we to make of next year's Council? I shall leave the last word to Metropolitan Kallistos: "Don't expect too much—if it happens..." ✱



*Gregory Tucker* is a PhD candidate at Fordham University. He received his BA and MSt from the University of Oxford and his MA from St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary. His research interests lie in the areas of Patristic and Byzantine theology and liturgy. He has recently completed a survey of the history and theology of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (*Orbis*, forthcoming 2016).

#### STATE OF AFFAIRS

## Religion and Politics in Russia: an Insider's View

**Xenia Loutchenko interviewed by Christopher Stroop**

*The prominent Russian journalist and commentator on religion and society Xenia Loutchenko and I sat down over coffee at a Moscow cafe on May 8, 2015. During our interview, we discussed the meaning of Christian politics; religion and politics in Putin's Russia; her work unpacking connections between American and Russian social conservatives, including a former Fox News employee's work on a far right Russian Christian media project; and what she would like American audiences to know about the*

*state of Russia's predominant Church. The author of Mothers: Priest's Wives on Themselves and Their Lives (Matushki: Zheny sviashchennikov o zhizni i sebe, [Nikeia: 2015]), Loutchenko is a regular contributor to the independent Orthodox Christian media outlet Pravmir (Orthodox World), which publishes a limited quantity of its material in English, and a contributor to liberal Russian news outlets such as Colta. I have translated the interview from Russian and edited it for length and clarity.*