

Concord and Discord in Search for Harmony

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Throughout history, the Church has seen many contentious issues pose challenges to her structure and teachings. In the process of discernment that naturally followed every such disruption, the Church wisely listened to and considered the multiplicity of voices within the choir of Orthodoxy. Some of these voices were in discord with the initial stance of the Church, others in concord. Voices in discord, however, were nonetheless important for achieving a Spirit-guided resolution—a more satisfying harmony. In this essay I shall attempt to map the process the Church has followed in resolving the apparent dilemma posed by both concord and discord. I will argue that only the dogmas of our faith are irreformable, and therefore debate on any issue other than these dogmas cannot simply be shut down by the pronouncements of hierarchs, theologians, or social media influencers.

The Process

Orthodoxy distinguishes between irreformable dogma, authoritative teaching, and theological opinion (*theologoumenon*). The accepted process for addressing non-dogmatic issues, both in the review of authoritative teaching and in the assessment of theological opinion, reveals holy tradition to be a dynamic mode of revelation according to the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox Church rejects the idea, prominent in fundamentalist circles, that all has been revealed and that there is nothing further to be received

or explored. Christ himself said: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” (John 16:12–13)

The Church can never say, “That’s it; there is nothing more to be said.” There is always more to be said, and if the Church is to be true to herself, then this must always be said, without fear or favor, and listened to before either acceptance or rejection. On non-dogmatic issues, theoretically, there is no end to this process of discernment. Censorship must be an idea entirely alien to us, and even a formal declaration should not be used to gag dissenting voices. While matters are still “in process,” the Church must always and repeatedly listen before speaking. Dissent is distinct from formal teaching, and an inability to recognize the difference can only reflect the poor level of Christian education in the Church—another crucial issue, but not for consideration here.

The Church has a form of due process for all these concerns. This process is grounded in studying, listening, and open debate on an ongoing basis, even while official teaching remains unchanged. Before we proceed to the details of this due process, there is a prior question to consider: not how decisions are made, but for whom they are made.

Who is the Audience?

Whom is the Church addressing when she makes these declarations or pens these encyclicals? Do hierarchs just teach for the household of faith, or do they witness to the world as well? This is clearly a false choice: they and all Christians more generally are called to be lights to the world (Matthew 5:15). How does this work out in a pluralist, secular, liberal democracy, where Christians are called to be leaven (Matthew 13:33) and to transform not only their own lives by grace but also the culture, civic life, and legislature?

Secularity has accustomed many, including Christians, to concede—reluctantly or otherwise—a distinction between what a democratic state allows and what the Church either approves or disapproves. The recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the US, allowing states to determine access to abortion rather than the federal government, is illustrative. The buck has been passed constitutionally but little else has changed. Historically, the Orthodox Church has embraced the “symphony” model of critical partnership with Christian rulers, but this hardly applies in the contemporary West, where religion has been more or less relegated to the private sphere and rulers have only accidental and personal commitments, if any, to Christianity. The equivocation of some Christian leaders on the issue of abortion, both Orthodox and heterodox, itself reflects the division of opinion on the licit or illicit power of a democratic state to legislate for or against traditional Christian teaching on the sanctity of life, human dignity, and the flourishing of persons. So, with this impasse, we must return to our question: how does the Church decide on *any* contested issue?

Conciliarity in the Early Church

Perhaps the most striking and original Christian dispute—which, if not

resolved, could have dealt a divisive death blow to the mission of the early Church—was whether Gentile converts were obliged to observe the requirements of the Jewish Law. A prototypical ecumenical council met in Jerusalem around AD 48 (Acts 15:1–21), at a time when the only settled canon of Scripture was the Old Testament. A basic underlying question for the council was, *does this question concern an irreformable aspect of the Christian dispensation, or is it a matter for authoritative teaching in which new revelatory insights and experiences from our brother Paul call us to make fundamental changes in how we assess the Mosaic Law?* We learn from Acts that there was much debate, listening, and referencing of the Scriptures. The final decision was not to require observance of the Torah by Gentile converts, but only that they should “abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood” (20).

The Jerusalem Council met to consider what Gentile Christians should observe and no one else. Although there was no intention that the Roman state might be influenced by this decision, we might also reflect that Israel, before the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, never considered the organs of state power to be independent of its faith and life, even after submission to a foreign pagan power, and so this belief and ideal was never entirely lost. Saint Paul (Romans 13:1–7) and Saint Peter (1 Peter 2:13–17) both taught obedience to the state in all things good and honest. Doubtless they were referencing Christ himself, in his famous teaching about rendering to both Caesar and God what each is due (Mark 12:17). Yet what exactly is due to “Caesar” in any place or time? Supporting the state when it upholds virtue and punishes vice is one thing, but what happens when Church and state clash, particularly on intensely personal matters? This can lead to a radical polarization and division

within society, indicating a chronic failure to maintain shared values and correlative governance.

Conciliarity after Jerusalem

The studying, the praying, and the listening of the Jerusalem Council became the gold standard for all subsequent ecumenical councils, which were no less free from robust disagreement and even occasional personal animosity. Nevertheless, the bishops gathered, studied, listened, prayed, and decided. Whether a council of bishops meets to review established practices or beliefs or to consider entirely new questions, this same process should be followed, and the council's proceedings disseminated to all, whether in agreement or disagreement. It is no failure to leave some questions unanswered and in need of further study, listening, and prayer. Simply reiterating historic decisions without looking at unaddressed questions prompted by new evidence and improved understandings developing over time is bound to fail.

For some Orthodox Christians, such a conciliar process, in which nothing is taken off the table, is a fearful and threatening prospect—particularly, perhaps, for those who have embraced Orthodoxy as a refuge (as they see it) from compromised worldly accommodations and corruptions. From this constituency comes the idea that there is nothing good “in the world,” but this sometimes approaches a neo-gnostic deprecation of a world created good by God. Often the distinction between “world” and “worldly” is lost. Discernment is called for, but not a default rejection of insights and truths developing from beyond the Church's jurisdiction, and which will inevitably impact on its deliberations. Often the fathers challenged the world in which they lived, but they never ceased to listen to it, affirming



that which was good even when it challenged their preconceptions. This openness and discernment lay at the very heart of the Jerusalem Council and all subsequent gatherings.

Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles. 14th century. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

If attentiveness and humility are central to the process of discernment and decision making, can the deliberations of a council ever be final or exhaustive at any given stage, aside of course from irreformable dogma? Clearly this is not the case. Historically, certain council decisions and definitions subsequently proved to be authoritative, but other issues remained unresolved. There was always the need for further discussion as new questions arose. The first three councils proclaimed the apostolic faith in respect of the divinity and humanity of Christ in the single person of the Logos. The Fourth Ecumenical Council moved on to explore further the hypostatic union, yet history shows that the precise manner of this union required further study. Sometimes councils make authoritative and binding decisions that melt away over time without the need for conciliar amendment. Only Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, now

follow Acts 15:20 literally, abstaining from both blood products and blood transfusions. Blood transfusions were of course unknown in antiquity and most Orthodox Christians today do not feel obliged to abstain from steaks that have not been thoroughly exsanguinated or from blood puddings (black puddings in the UK). No council of bishops will meet to condemn such behaviour, nor is it likely that such a council would meet to condemn usury, centuries after this former sin has been quietly forgotten in the interests of capitalism and consumerism.

Conciliarity Today: The Four Levels and the Gospel Key

Are we then any nearer to understanding how councils of bishops should work today if they wish to approach difficult issues with the same integrity, honesty, humility, and attentiveness as their forebears? From the historical record adumbrated only briefly here, I believe we are.

Orthodox Christianity has very few dogmas—those irreformable, infallible definitions and confessions of the indefectible Orthodox Catholic Church over time. All Christians consider the manner of our salvation by the death and resurrection of Christ to be of extreme importance; but the Church has never dogmatized any of these biblical so-called atonement theories. The decisions of the Council of Jerusalem, as we have seen, were not considered to be matters for the application of handed-down revelation, hitherto dogma for every Jew (in any case, the Lord had revealed otherwise to Saint Peter at Joppa, as recounted in Acts 10, and this sealed the matter). The council's decisions were wise and appropriate at the time for the mission of the Church, and these decisions have mostly endured, but not entirely; for example, those concerning blood have not. Dogmas, however,

stand solid as blocks of marble, and these are the rocks of faith upon which we stand (Matthew 7:24–27). We might call these dogmas first-level foundations, binding without qualification.¹ They reference Scripture as interpreted by the holy fathers and in the context of holy tradition. The ongoing task of the Church is understanding these dogmas better, particularly when they are challenged, and this leads to doctrinal explorations and elucidations. These are second-level doctrines, admitting of some fluidity in conceptualisation and expression over time.

A good example of a second-level doctrine would be that of Leontius of Byzantium.² He took the Chalcedonian Christological definition, along with those of the three preceding councils, to extrapolate that the single person who is the incarnate Christ has no human personhood except that of the divine Logos. Christ's fully human nature is enhypostasized (loosely, "incorporated") in the person of the Logos. In short, there is no distinct human Jesus and divine Christ,³ two persons, as Nestorius falsely taught. Rather, there is only one divine person, the Logos, one of the Trinity, and in the incarnation he possesses two natures, one fully human the other fully divine.

Moving on from the first and second levels, there arise third-level questions of praxis—that is, application to Christian living and discipleship. These questions must always be asked of every dogma and doctrine or else we shall sever Christian living from Christian believing, with both then decaying into rotteness, corruption and death. If we live in the light of the resurrection and wish to attain to salvation, these third-level questions are, therefore, vital. They concern all the challenges and questions of every place and time. Orthopraxy must always follow Orthodoxy.

¹In this scheme, "levels" do not indicate a hierarchy of importance but rather a process sequence.

²Brian Daley, ed., *Leontius of Byzantium: Complete Works* in Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³The often encountered distinction between the so-called Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith in the German Protestant school of biblical studies in the Anglo Saxon world always strikes this author as neo-Nestorian in character.

The way forward from this point into faithful discipleship is impossible to discern without using the key given to us in the gospel. This key has two connected incisions to unlock the door of our hearts to God, a door which must be opened freely from our side when he knocks (Rev. 3:2). These two incisions are cut from the cross of God's universal, unbreakable, unqualified, unconditional love, and—in that love—from our own personal crosses as we love without limitation and discrimination. If someone approaches the Church, therefore, whether as yet a Christian or not, and has the love of God in his heart—evidenced by the selfsame characteristics of divine love in his or her loving, service, and truth telling—then this person has the two-fold gospel key, even if yet unaware. To love sacrificially, and to be in the love of God, is to become progressively enhypostasized in the Logos, in Christ. It is what the Orthodox mean by theosis or deification. This is the Orthopraxy arising from the Orthodoxy of the Fourth Ecumenical Council.

Finally, there is a fourth level to acknowledge. This level includes those yardsticks or canons which regulate the life of the Church so as to uphold the integrity and consistency of its witness in relation to the other three levels. Additionally, this level includes the penitentiaries that local bishops often write or adopt, which offer pastoral guidance to confessors in the care of the penitent faithful. These and other local bylaws constitute practical guidance. In level

four, we also have the lives and writings of the saints, to provide practical and spiritual guidance in living out the faith of the Church. Orthodoxy knows that the love of God has to be given practical expression in a decent and orderly manner so that it does not suffer erosion through the fallen aspects of our human faculties and social life. These are all the concerns of the fourth-level elements.

In the light, then, of these four levels and the twice-cut gospel key (that is to say, Christ's love for mankind and our own very human love, modeled after his example), bishops and believers alike must work out not only their own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), but also how they might facilitate the salvation of others. Every discerning consideration, every pronouncement, every action of the faithful and their clergy must have the love of God *and* the love of humans, of both God *and* their sisters and brothers, at its heart. In the absence of this perfect, divine love and progressively perfected human love, only "sounding brasses and clanging cymbals" will be heard (1 Corinthians 13:1). In the love of God, however, concord can embrace discord and, perhaps, learn something from that encounter in new and harmonious symphonies of the Spirit. If Christians cannot speak and act in the God who is love and for love, however, then let them be silent and measure their actions accordingly.

May the good Lord have mercy on us all! ✨



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