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## Innovation in the Guise of Tradition: Anti-Ecumenist Efforts to Derail the Great and Holy Council

[publicorthodoxy.org/2016/03/22/innovation-in-the-guise-of-tradition-anti-ecumenist-efforts-to-derail-the-great-and-holy-council/](http://publicorthodoxy.org/2016/03/22/innovation-in-the-guise-of-tradition-anti-ecumenist-efforts-to-derail-the-great-and-holy-council/); accessed 22 March 2016.

The documents approved by the Primates of the Church for the Great and Holy Council are not particularly controversial. They are the product of consensus, negotiated over decades, that often repeat previous declarations rather than addressing the more challenging questions that face the modern Church.

The one possible exception is the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church With the Rest of the Christian World*, which seeks to clarify the purpose of the Orthodox Church's engagement in the ecumenical movement. Because the document censures ecumenical obstructionists, it has seen the lion's share of criticism from certain self-described traditionalists.

Much of this criticism relies on a highly selective and reductionist appropriation of our rich canonical tradition to justify simplistic ideological conceits.

For example, Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus, in a wide-ranging condemnation of the Great and Holy Council took particular exception to use of the term "church" for non-Orthodox communities in the document about ecumenism. From his point of view, assigning the term "church" to Roman Catholics and Protestants simultaneously validates their "heresies" and undermines the truth claims of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. It is noteworthy that the Metropolitan did not produce any Patristic witness for his objection to this term. But, then, he couldn't—the fathers routinely applied the term "church" to communities that they considered heretical.

A far more serious objection to the document on ecumenism has been lodged by His Eminence, Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos of Nafpaktos, the author of many important books on Orthodox spirituality. Writing an open letter to the Synod of Greece, the Metropolitan points to an inconsistency in the document, which simultaneously claims that the "unity of the Church cannot be shattered" but, at the same time, implies that Christian unity was lost for some Christians after the Ecumenical councils.

The most spirited of the Metropolitan's objections to the document on ecumenism, however, concerns clause 20, which specifies that the Church follows the canonical tradition (Constantinople 381 Canon 7 and Quinisext Canon 95) regarding the admission of converts to Orthodoxy who are coming from other Christian traditions.

Metropolitan Hierotheos requests that the text be altered to make clear that converts to Orthodoxy who were not baptized "by three immersions and emersions according to the Apostolic and Patristic form" must be baptized anew. From his perspective, while Roman Catholics might properly confess the Trinity in baptism, the current ritual form of their baptism is in violation of the Patristic tradition.

At issue is a distinction that the canons make between Arians, who can be admitted into the Church via Chrismation, and other heretics, particularly the Eunomians, who must undergo baptism. Both canons note in their condemnation of the Eunomians that the group only performs a single immersion. According to Metropolitan

Hiertheos, Eunomians must be rebaptized not only because of their errant theology but also because of the errant form of their ritual.

To clarify, the Eunomians were a radical sub-sect within a broader Arianism. Because the Arians tacitly accepted the divine character of Christ (even if they did not confess Him to be co-essential with the Father), they performed three immersions in baptism as commanded by the Gospel. But the Eunomians were so radical in their rejection of Orthodox teaching that they flatly denied any divine character to Christ or the Holy Spirit, and that is why they performed only a single immersion (in the name of the Father alone). For this reason, the canon's description of Eunomian single immersion should be understood adjectivally—a ritualized reflection of their heresy. And, indeed, no Byzantine canonist ever interpreted the error of the Eunomians to be primarily an error of ritual itself; their error was the rejection of the Trinity.

What is more, no Byzantine canonist or apologist ever thought that Latin theological errors, such as the *filioque*, were so great that they required rebaptism. Neither Balsamon nor Chomatenos (the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>-century canonists who were the first to deny the Eucharist to Latins), nor even St. Mark of Ephesus ever suggested that the Latins should be baptized before admission to the Church.

In other words, Metropolitan Hierotheos has adopted a decidedly "innovative" reading of the canons and history to build his case against heterodox baptism.

To be clear, Metropolitan Hierotheos is not the first to attempt to apply the canons against Eunomians to Western Christians. During the Ottoman period, an especially divisive Patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril V, issued an edict calling for the baptism of Catholic converts

to Christianity because of the inadequacy of their ritual. In fact, Metropolitan Hierotheos cites Cyril's edict as the lone proof for what he audaciously calls the "entirety of ecclesiastical tradition."

What Metropolitan Hierotheos does not tell us in his letter is that the edict of Cyril V was denounced by other Orthodox leaders at the time and that Cyril was deposed by his own Metropolitans for having issued it.

Today, none of the fourteen autocephalous churches in the Orthodox world officially require baptism for Trinitarian Christians who convert to Orthodoxy. Nor should they.

The earliest post-biblical attestation we have for the Christian rite of baptism comes from the *Didache*, which quite explicitly prefers that baptisms occur in rivers but allows for both immersion in still water (the dominant Orthodox practice) or sprinkling on the head (the dominant Roman Catholic practice). Moreover, subsequent Patristic authors allowed for ritual and symbolic variation in baptism, so long as the confession of faith was Trinitarian (e.g. St. Gregory the Dialogist, Ep. 1.41).

In sum, the self-proclaimed "traditionalists" are demanding that the Great and Holy Council abandon the historical and canonical practice of the Orthodox Church in order to ward off an imaginary dilution of Orthodox purity. Their claims are couched in the language of Apostolic and Patristic tradition but, ironically, their position is dangerously innovative.

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