

CONCILIARITY, CANONICAL HIERARCHY & INFALLIBILITY

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Conciliarity:

The Fathers agree that the Church acts through consensus. When the Apostles met in the Council at Jerusalem (Apostolic Council) (Acts. 15), the issue was whether the Gentiles needed to be circumcised after the Law of Moses; otherwise, they could not be saved. St. James the Just presided and delivered the decision after the spiritual evidence had been presented and considered; yet, it was a collective, conciliar determination. The Apostles set the example to be followed by the Church for all time in collectively resolving one of the most important Church questions.

The highest organ of authority in the Church is a council of bishops. At the local level, it would be comprised of a council of local bishops; however, a council of bishops of the entire Church would make up the Ecumenical Church.¹ A Holy Spirit-guided conciliar Ecumenical Council is the final judge of popes and patriarchs, and the Council is in the same logical relationship to the Church as the emperor is to the State. As long as the Holy Spirit guides its deliberations, the Council, not the Holy Bible, is the final arbiter of ecclesiastical issues, and its decision is not appealable to any tribunal.²

Conciliarism is pervasive throughout the One Holy Catholic & Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church. *The Rudder* states:

Since it is a fact that the dogmas of the faith are *not* (emphasis supplied) created in the Councils, but are formulated from correlation and logical arrangement and assembly of the divine truths contained in the Holy Scriptures, leading to a consensus of faith and uniform confession as a result of the conciliar definition, it is logically evident therefore that the Ecumenical Councils are to be characterised as authoritative bodies charged with the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures for the purpose of putting an end to emergent dissensions and scandals in the church. Nevertheless, their authoritative interpretation is to be judged by the word of God; for over and above the voice of the Councils there is the word of the *Holy Scriptures to serve as the criterion of the truth*, in accordance with which are to be judged ever the definitions themselves, and the decisions of the Councils.³

The Councils did not proclaim anything on their own volition; rather, they confirmed what had always been known to be true.

It is not only the Ecumenical Council that is involved. Those who transgress the canons must do penance as outlined in the particular canon violated according to Canon II of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. In an important footnote, St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain lists a number of axioms

applicable to all canons, and in (g) comments:

Conciliar or synodical canons are, respectively, those promulgated by the ecumenical councils and indeed those promulgated by the regional councils (also called synods); and, in addition thereto, those which have been written privately by certain saints. Accordingly, those promulgated by regional councils, as well as those composed by individual saints, have indeed the power of ecumenical canons. For they were examined and sanctioned by ecumenical councils - I am referring to the fourth and the sixth and the seventh - as appears in the first canon of the Fourth and of the Seventh and in c.II of the Quinisext.⁴

Thus when we say that we accept and follow the First Seven Ecumenical Councils, we also affirm our acceptance of the promulgations of those regional councils and the canons of the individual saints as were 'incorporated by reference'.

Canonical Hierarchy:

There is a certain hierarchy of canons:

Canons of the Ecumenical Councils "override those of regional, and those of regional override those of individual Fathers, especially when the latter have not been confirmed by an ecumenical council".⁵

In the absence of a canon or written law, "good custom" is to be followed as long as it is not contrary to any written canon or law and has been sanctioned by right reason and many years' prevalence, so that it takes the rank of a canon or law.⁶ No canon, law, time or custom can sanction "whatever has been wrongly decided and printed according to jurists".⁷

The Rudder (Pedalion) stands second only to the Old and New Testaments in written authority:

The holy Nicodemus comments on the efficacy of The Rudder:

"This Handbook, in effect, is next after the Holy Scriptures a holy Scripture, and next after the Old and New Testaments a Testament...

"This book, it may be said, is replete with the **everlasting bounds** (emphasis supplied) set by our fathers, and the laws which endure forever and which are above all the external and imperial laws of the Digests, of the Institutes, of the Codes, and of the Novels..."

The reason for the handbook's superiority to the external and civil laws was simple:

...the latter were issued by mere emperors, whereas the former were laid down by Councils, ecumenical and regional, through the Holy Spirit, and emperors ratified them. This book is truly, as we have entitled it, the Rudder of the Catholic Church, which when thereby steered, conveys the sailors and passengers in it, those in holy orders, I mean, as well as laymen, safely to the unruffled haven of the kingdom above.⁸

Infallibility:

It is Christ's Church that is infallible. However, it is only when an Ecumenical Council [or council for that matter] is acting under the Holy Spirit that its confirmation of Tradition is infallible, assuming the Church as a whole has accepted its decision over time. Yet, remember it is only a **True Council** that is accepted, false councils teaching heresy or rejecting some aspect of Church Tradition are "rejected by the same catholic consciousness".⁹

All of us, patriarchs, bishops, priests, deacons, and laity alike have a clear path to follow, the one exemplified by our Saviour Jesus Christ and proclaimed by His Apostles and their Successors through time. If you want to be truly an Orthodox Christian, drop whatever you are doing and follow Him. When you experience difficulties in keeping on the Royal Path, remember we're all in this together, not even the 'highest patriarch' has any right to deviate from the Spiritual Straight Line that Christ has mapped for us. Pursue Him with earnest and steady vigilance, and the Lord will bless you.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Father Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, p.253.

² *The Rudder*, Prolegomena of the First Holy Ecumenical Council, fn 1, p. 157 and see c. vi of the 2nd Ecum. C.

³ *The Rudder*, op. cit., p. xix.

⁴ *id.*, fn 1, axiom (g), at Lv. *id.*, axiom (l).

⁵ *id.*, axiom (l).

⁶ *id.*, axiom (m).

⁷ *id.*, axiom (n).

⁸ *id.*, Li.

⁹ Pomazansky. *op. cit.*, fn 19, p.36.