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Orthodoxy and Ecumenical Dialogue after Crete Synod (2016) and Social Ethos Document (2020): History, Critical Positions and Reception

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Abstract: In this study, I will analyse the position of the Orthodox Church(es) towards the ecumenical dialogue in accordance with the documents approved by the *Synod of Crete* (2016), but also with the social document *For the Life of the World* of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (2020). After a brief presentation of the important moments of the historical journey for the meeting of the Synod, I will present the most important internal and reception issues of it. In the following, I will present the reason for the publication of the social document and the relation with the Synod of Crete. In the last part of the study, I will deal critically with a theological synthesis on the following topics: ecclesiological self-identity, Trinitarian baptism, the quality of being a Christian, the Orthodox Church and the Churches, ecumenism for dialogue, for witnessing, and cooperation. Of course, in the end, I will present the most important conclusions.

Keywords: Orthodox Church; Holy and Great Council; Crete; For the Life of the World; ecumenism; dialogue; Christian Mission



Citation: Marcu, Doru. 2023. Orthodoxy and Ecumenical Dialogue after Crete Synod (2016) and Social Ethos Document (2020): History, Critical Positions and Reception. *Religions* 14: 936. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070936>

Academic Editor: W. J. Torrance Kirby

Received: 28 June 2023
Revised: 14 July 2023
Accepted: 17 July 2023
Published: 20 July 2023



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1. Introduction

The general theme of this study is the involvement of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement, in accordance with the decisions of the *Holy and Great Council of Crete* from June 2016, but also with the *Social Ethos Document* approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in March 2020. The documents approved in Crete are essential for understanding the inter-Christian dialogue, but also for defining the ecclesial self-identity of the Orthodox Church. Considering the diversity of the themes present in these documents approved in Crete, I stopped at those that refer to the ecumenical dialogue. The document approved in 2020 presents the social ethos of the Orthodox Church in the perspective of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, dealing with the relation of Orthodoxy with the non-Orthodox world. From the point of view of the method, I considered that a conceptual interpretation of the ideas presented in these documents is necessary. That is why I will stop at the analysis of the following key themes: ecclesiological self-identity, Trinitarian baptism, the quality of being a Christian, the Orthodox Church and the Churches, ecumenism for dialogue, for witnessing, and cooperation. The intention is to present the theological development of these themes as they emerge from these selected documents.

Obviously, this study also has certain limits of analysis. Because the topic of ecumenism involves inter-Christian relations, contact with other religions did not come to the attention of this study (See: [Boldişor 2015](#); [Tsompanidis and Ziaka 2020](#); [Kazarian 2020](#); [Dumitraşcu 2022](#)). Although two other major social events are currently troubling our world—like the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine—these are not the subject of my presentation; I am even convinced that at least in the case of war, there are religious and ecumenical implications. Regarding the sources, it should be known from the beginning that some are written by Romanian theologians, being much more accessible to me than those written in English or French.

As I always say, the image I will give to the reader belongs to me and is a personal one, without wanting to influence anyone if he or she already has a different point of view. My experience as a student at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in Leuven (2015–2016) led me to ask myself a lot of questions about inter-ecumenical relations. This article answers some of them.

2. Holy and Great Council in Crete. The Historical Journey

In a positive way, the Christian world of the twentieth century was marked by numerous meetings that wanted to analyse the real situation of divided Christianity. Within Orthodoxy, the initiatives were diverse, especially from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

In the first millennium, the Christian Church was organized into five patriarchates: Patriarchate of Rome, Patriarchate of Constantinople, Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Patriarchate of Alexandria, and Patriarchate of Antioch—known as the Pentarchy. After the separation of the Patriarchate of Rome, inside the Orthodox Church, we had only four traditional patriarchates (See: [Hovorun 2017](#), p. 91). However, throughout history, other autocephalous national churches were added. Thus, at the time of 2016, the Universal Orthodox Church had, from a canonical-administrative point of view, fourteen autocephalous churches, including the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, Patriarchate of Alexandria, Patriarchate of Antioch, Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Russian Orthodox Church, Church of Cyprus, Church of Greece, Serbian Orthodox Church, Romanian Orthodox Church, Polish Orthodox Church, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Georgian Orthodox Church, Albanian Orthodox Church, and the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church.

Between 16 and 26 June 2016, a long-awaited event took place within the Orthodox Church. On the island of Crete, the representatives of 10 autocephalous Orthodox churches met in a synod called the “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church”.

And, yet, how did the idea of a pan-Orthodox meeting come about? Undoubtedly, the situation in the other Christian churches was also an example for the Orthodox Church, which considers itself to be truly the Church of Christ. There are written texts, right at the beginning of the twentieth century, from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in connection with the intention to meet at the pan-Orthodox level: in 1902, 1904, or 1920 (See: [Patelos 1978](#); [Hooft 1982](#); [Vasilevich 2020](#)).

Beyond these intentions, an Orthodox Christian meeting, with the participation of some representatives of the Orthodox Churches, was only held in 1923 in Constantinople at the Pan-Orthodox Congress (See: [Ioniță 1981, 2013, 2014](#); [Scriban 1923, 1924](#)). Specialists in the history and theology of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church believe that the official beginning of this long process was situated around the conference of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission at the Vatoped Monastery in Holy Mount Athos. We note, therefore, that this meeting, held between 8 and 23 June 1930, can be seen as a first step in the realization of the Synod of the Orthodox Church in the modern period (See: [Ioniță 2016a](#), pp. 28–29).

An intermediate step was the First Congress of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology, held in Athens on 29 November and 6 December 1936. It seems that at this time, professors of Orthodox Theology were pondering, among other things, what the future Synod of the Orthodox Church would be called ([Alivisatos 1939](#), pp. 256–97). Also, a new stage could be considered the Moscow Orthodox Conference, organized by the Russian Orthodox Church in July 1948, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the proclamation of the independence of the Russian Orthodox Church (See: [Actes de la Conférence des Eglises Orthodoxes 1950, 1952](#); [Kalkandjieva 2015](#), pp. 307–44).

Indeed, the year 1961 was the most important point for the design of the Holy and Great Synod of Crete. On this date, under the direct coordination of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, the First Pan-Orthodox Conference was held in Rhodes, between September 24 and October 1, where the official beginning of the preparation of the Synod was set. At this moment, a catalogue of topics, systematized in eight groups, was approved

(See: [Soare 1961](#); [Chițescu 1961](#); [Stan 1961](#)). The Second Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes, between 26 and 29 September 1963, discussed the possibility of sending representatives to the second session of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the initiation of an official theological dialogue with this Church (See: [Nica-Târgovișteanul 1963](#)). At the third Pan-Orthodox Conference on 1–15 November 1964, the participants had on the agenda the whole topic of dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, but also the possibility of dialogue with the Anglican Church and with the Old Catholics ([Nicolaescu 1964](#)). At the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Conference, this time held at the new Ecumenical Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, in Chambésy, Switzerland, between 8 and 16 June 1968, the theological preparation for the future Synod of Orthodoxy was taken to another level. At this meeting, the fixation of the terminology and the specification of the process of preparation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church were discussed. It was decided, among other things, to set up an Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission for the Synod, which was given the task of preparing the discussion materials on the basis of the answers received from the Churches. Also, at this meeting, the organization of a series of Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conferences was approved ([Stan 1968](#)). In accordance with what was discussed at the Chambésy meeting, the first session of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission for the Holy Synod took place between 16 and 28 July 1971 ([Plămădeală 1971](#)). A few years after this moment, the First Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conference was organized, between 21 and 28 November 1976 ([Plămădeală 1977](#); [Bria 1977](#)). The second Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conference, also held in Chambésy on 3–12 September 1982, focused on the elaboration of the first topics ([Ciobotea 1982](#)). The Third Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conference was prepared by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission on 15–23 February 1986 (See: [Ioniță 2013](#), p. 112), and also took place in Chambésy between 28 October and 6 November 1986 ([Plămădeală 1986](#); [Alexe 1986](#)).

The Fourth Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conference took place between 6 and 12 June 2009 ([Ioniță 2009](#)). If we consider that the third conference took place in 1986, it turns out that a period of 23 years passed between these two moments. During this time, three more meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission took place between 10 and 17 November 1990, between 7 and 13 November 1993, and between 28 February and 6 March 1999 ([Ioniță 2013](#), pp. 120–22).

The convention of the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conference was due to the decision of the Synaxis of the Primate and Representatives of the Orthodox Churches in Constantinople/Istanbul between 10 and 12 October 2008 (See: [Ioniță 2016a](#), p. 33; [Mesajul Întâistătătorilor Bisericii Ortodoxe 2008](#)). A few months after the fourth presinodal conference, the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission held two meetings, the first between 9 and 17 December 2009, and the second between 22 and 26 February 2011 ([Ioniță 2013](#), pp. 128–34).

The next Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches took place between 6 and 9 March 2014, in Constantinople/Istanbul, where it was decided to set up the Special Inter-Orthodox Commission, which was tasked with revising the texts approved at previous pre-synodal conferences (See: [Sinaxa Întâistătătorilor Bisericii Ortodoxe 2014](#)). There were three meetings of this commission that were organized (29 September–4 October 2014, 15–21 February 2015 and 29 March–3 April 2015), followed by the Fifth Pan-Orthodox Presinodal Conference, held in Chambésy from 10 to 17 October 2015 ([Ioniță 2016b](#)).

Between 21 and 28 January 2016, the last Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches decided that the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church would take place between 18 and 26 June 2016 at the Orthodox Academy in Crete. At the same time, the Synaxis adopted the text of the *Organization and Working Procedure of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church* ([Ioniță 2017](#); [Synaxis of the Primate of Orthodox Churches 2016](#)).

For those who do not know closely the history of this synod, it must be said that the final documents, approved in Crete, represent nothing more than the final version of

texts approved in the conferences or commissions mentioned above. In other words, some documents were already drafted from the past years, but in Crete only some additions or changes were made to them. It would certainly have been a practical impossibility to write them in full in the short time devoted to the Synod.

3. The Internal Problems

With the convocation of the Holy and Great Synod of Crete, the Orthodox Church entered a new stage of its history. Given that this process lasted more than half a century, I believe that the meeting taking place was an event in itself (Gallaher 2017).

At the same time, this desire for the autocephalous Orthodox Churches to meet at the highest level has also brought to light the internal problems. Although it was intended to be a Pan-Orthodox Synod, that is, to represent the voice of Orthodoxy worldwide, in the end the name of the Holy and Great Synod/Council is one that covers the historical reality of the event in Crete. Consequently, due to the non-participation of four autocephalous Orthodox Churches—the Russian Church, the Church of Georgia, the Church of Bulgaria, and the Patriarchate of Antioch—this synod in Crete could not have the title of a Pan-Orthodox Synod (Chapnin 2016, p. 374). Although all fourteen autocephalous Orthodox Churches participated in the pre-synodal meetings, the absence of the four Churches mentioned only demonstrated to the entire Christian world the non-unity of institutional Orthodoxy.

The absence of the Russian Orthodox Church raises the biggest issue regarding the value of this synod (Gallaher 2021, p. 70). What remains unacceptable is the image that the Russian Orthodox Church displayed before the Synod of Crete. Although the Synaxis of the Primate of the Orthodox Churches in January 2016 announced that the meeting in Crete should take place between 18 and 26 June 2016, a few days before this time, these Churches announced that they would no longer participate, for various reasons. Thus, on 1 June 2016, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church announced that it would no longer participate (Leviev-Sawyer 2016), followed by the Patriarchate of Antioch on June 6 (Antiochian Secretariat 2016), and the Church of Georgia on June 10. On June 13, just 5 days before the convocation of the Synod, the great Orthodox Church of Russia announced that it will not attend the synod (On the Situation Caused by the Refusal of Several Local Orthodox Churches 2016).

The relationship between the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church should be highlighted. We know that the two Patriarchates dispute their leading role in the Orthodox world. On the one hand, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople considers itself *primus inter pares*, by virtue of the millennial tradition. On the other hand, the Moscow Patriarchate did not hesitate to consider itself *the third Rome*, in terms of the majority of Orthodox Christians and Russian bishops in the Orthodox world. Some theologians and analysts talk about the Americanisation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which leads to disagreements with Russian geopolitics. Unfortunately, the position of the Russian Orthodox Church on the war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, is the most regrettable example of the politicization of a majority national church.

4. The Approved Official Documents

In the Orthodox Church, most of the time, there is no official position on certain current issues, but there are instead clerics or academic theologians. However, the Synod of Crete put forward eight texts that are used as references when someone is interested in the position of the Orthodox Church on the topics analysed. I am not discussing here the agenda of the synod, which is quite heavily criticized by some (Kattan 2020, p. 423). Of the eight documents, six are considered official documents, each with a separate title, and two are nothing more than a message and an encyclical. In this regard, I reproduce the official titles of these documents, as follows:

- *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* (Encyclical 2016);
- *Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* (Message 2016);
- *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* (The Mission 2016);
- *The Orthodox Diaspora*;

- *Autonomy and the Means by Which it is Proclaimed*;
- *The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments* ([The Sacrament 2016](#));
- *The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Today*;
- *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* ([Relations 2016](#)).

5. Reception or Synods after the Synod ([Sooy 2016](#))

The decision to convene this synod, in the absence of the already mentioned autocephalous churches, raised problems in the camp of those who did not participate. We can talk about a clear boycott of the convention of the synod, but also about a reaction to reject it. Unfortunately, some of the documents were not signed by all the bishops present at the synod ([Seven Metropolitan withheld Signatures 2016](#)). Also, not long after the end of the Synod, the Churches not represented at the Synod considered that they should assume their non-participation and thus gave their opinion on this synod: the Patriarchate of Antioch on 27 June 2016 ([Statement of the Secretariat of the Holy Synod 2016](#)), Bulgarian Patriarchate on 15 November 2016 ([Declaration of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church 2016](#)), Patriarchate of Georgia on 22 December 2016 ([Final Decision of the Church of Georgia 2016](#)), and the Moscow Patriarchate in July 2016 ([Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church 2016](#)) and December 2017 ([Resolutions of the Holy Bishops' Council 2017](#); [Hilarion of Volokolams 2020](#)). We do not understand why they did this considering they refused to participate. No doubt these objections have their purpose, but what we cannot accept is the isolation of these churches from the other 10 autocephalous churches ([Heller 2017](#), p. 300; [Kattan 2020](#), p. 423). Probably because of this absence, we find in the *Encyclical* a subtle critique of the principle of autocephaly ([Encyclical 2016](#), I. I.5).

Regarding the reactions of theologians, we can remember some of them by considering the following aspects: the number of participants ([Rentel 2017](#); [Perşa 2017b](#)), the voting method ([Gallaher 2017](#), p. 39), the role of the Primates ([Şelaru 2018](#)), the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch ([Panaiotopulos 2019](#)), the absence of the four autocephalous churches ([Sonea 2016](#); [Bordeianu 2017](#)), etc. There were also some signs from the monastic world, especially from Mount Athos, considered the spiritual centre of the Orthodoxy (December 2016 and June 2017 ([Enciclica Comisiei Sfintei Chinotite 2016](#); [Message de la Synaxe Double du Mont Athos 2017](#))), who spoke out against certain ideas in the approved documents, especially those related to ecumenism and mixed marriages. At least for the situation in Romania, the Chancery of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church published a question-and-answer brochure explaining some synodal statements or post-synodal reactions ([Despre Sfântul și Marele Sinod din Creta 2017](#)). It should be noted that this brochure has also been translated into English ([On the Holy and Great Council of Crete 2017](#)). For a more positive perspective, we can mention some post-synodal conferences that appreciate the conduct of the Holy and Great Synod of Crete, such as in Cluj, Romania: The International Conference “The Holy and Great Synod—eschatological event or canonical normality”, held between 25 and 28 April 2017 ([Vlaicu and Răzvan 2018](#)); or in Thessaloniki, Greece: The International Conference of Orthodox Theology, held between 21 and 25 May 2018 ([The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church 2018](#)).

6. A New Step: Social Ethos Document

Questionless, the document titled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, published in March 2020, demonstrates continuity with the documents approved in Crete ([Irvin 2020](#); [Sonea et al. 2022](#)). The document was produced by a special commission of scholars appointed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew ([Frost 2020](#)). The publication has the blessing of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The principal editors were David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis ([For the Life of the World 2020](#); [Hart and John 2020](#)).

Immediately after the Synod of Crete, some theologians criticized the lack of a social vision in the approved documents, considering the need for a special document in this regard ([Vasilevich 2017](#); [Morariu 2019](#); [Kattan 2020](#)). Given the difficult dialogue at the

pan-Orthodox level, the Ecumenical Patriarchate took the initiative to approve the social ethos document without consulting the other Orthodox Patriarchates. Unfortunately, the reception of the document may present some problems as there was no consultation before publication. For example, in Romania, the document was translated by two Romanian Orthodox theologians from abroad and was accepted by a publishing house that does not belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church (See [Pentru Viața Lumii 2020](#)). Moreover, the official website of the Romanian Patriarchate does not contain any information regarding the appearance of this document. Although the document officially represents the vision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, it unofficially represents the vision of the Universal Orthodox Church ([Dumitrașcu 2022](#), p. 409; [Thermos 2022](#), p. 5). However, an example from recent history is the Moscow Patriarchate, who published two important documents in 2000, without consulting the other Orthodox Churches, one document about social vision and the other about interfaith dialogue: *The Basis of the Social Concept* ([The Basis 2000](#); [Ică and Germano 2002](#), pp. 185–266) and *Basic Principles of Attitude to the Non-Orthodox* ([Basic Principles 2000](#)).

The title of the social document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, *For the Life of the World*, is a biblical one ([Black 2022](#)), taken from the Gospel of John (6:51), but it is also known from the book of the Russian theologian and priest Alexander Schmemmann ([Schmemmann 1998](#); [Hovorun 2022](#), p. 347; [Irvin 2020](#), p. 14). At the same time, we should mention the theme of the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Vancouver (1983): *Jesus Christ—the Life of the World* ([Gill 1983](#)).

7. Ecclesiological Self-Identity

The presence of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical movement has led to a greater assumption of our own Christian tradition and understanding ([Kalaitzidis 2009](#)). To use ecumenical expressions, I can accept that this exchange is receptive ecumenism ([Murray 2008](#); [Ware 2008](#); [Coman 2016](#)). Participation in dialogue means sharing and receiving or learning, even if sometimes we do not make it very obvious ([Burgess 2021](#), p. 22; [Gallaher 2021](#), p. 74).

The central dogma of Christianity remains as communion with the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ([Relations 2016](#), l. 19). According to the most accepted theologians, the Church cannot be defined but described. The mentioned documents speak about the Orthodox Church as the authentic successor of the Apostolic Church confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and confirmed by the teachings of the Holy Fathers ([For the Life of the World 2020](#), l. 50). Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, is the founder and head of the Church ([Relations 2016](#), l. 2), according to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures ([Relations 2016](#), l. 19). The Church is based on the Apostolic Tradition and on a sacramental experience ([Message 2016](#), l. 1; [Encyclical 2016](#), l. I.2), with the Divine Liturgy and the Eucharist at its centre ([For the Life of the World 2020](#), ll. 5, 8, 12), but also on the decisions of the Seven Ecumenical Councils ([Relations 2016](#), l. 18.). It is also stated that at the pan-Orthodox level, the Orthodox Church is composed of 14 autocephalous churches ([Encyclical 2016](#), l. I.5). In other words, according to these realities, the Orthodox Church has a “profund ecclesiastical self-consciousness” ([Relations 2016](#), l. 1). However, this ecclesiological self-identity should not be understood as the transition accepted by the Roman Catholic Church from *est* to *subsistit* ([Lumen Gentium 1964](#), l. 8). In other words, from an Orthodox point of view,

“the Orthodox Church knows who she is. She participates in the ecumenical movement having the conscience that she is the one, holy, catholic and Apostolic Church” ([Sonea 2017b](#), p. 131).

There is a difference between the unity of the Church, which is attributed to Jesus Christ, and the unity of Christians, who are separated for various reasons ([Sonea 2017a](#), pp. 17–18). We confess the unity of the Church, according to the Creed, but we admit that Christians do not share the same unity ([Limouris 2020](#), p. 340). Moreover, the expression “the lost unity of Christians” was replaced in the documents with “the lost unity of all

Christians" ([Relations 2016](#), l. 5; [On the Holy and Great Council of Crete 2017](#), pp. 33–34). This expression is no different from this one: "unity among Christians" ([Basic Principles 2000](#), l. 2.1).

8. Trinitarian Baptism

The issue of the recognition of baptism performed outside the canonical Orthodox Church is closely related to two other aspects: the quality of being a Christian and the ecclesial character of non-Orthodox communities. Unfortunately, the current practice of baptism is not unanimously accepted or officiated by all the autocephalous Orthodox churches. In order to become a member of the Orthodox Church, in some cases re-baptism is practiced, in others not (See [Mihăiță 2013](#), p. 63; [Marcu 2022a](#), pp. 145–48; [Basic Principles 2000](#), l. 1.17).

This issue of accepting baptism outside the canonical Church would have deserved to be debated at the Synod of Crete ([Stavrou 2016](#), p. 217; [Kasper 2000](#); [Phidas 2002](#); [Erickson 2011](#); [Boldișor 2019](#)). In the documents approved in Crete, the Holy Sacrament of Baptism is not mentioned at all, not even when the dialogue with other Christians is presented. In another sense, commenting on the documents from Crete, St. Chinotite of the Holy Mount Athos refuses to accept baptism outside the Orthodox Church. The theologian Peter Heers is of the same opinion, affirming that there is no possibility to accept baptism outside the canonical Orthodox Church ([Heers 2016](#)).

The problem is quite delicate, because not accepting the baptism of these communities means that non-Orthodox Christians are deprived of the possibility of salvation ([Ladouceur 2016a](#)). However, an important step is taken by the document approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which mentions in two places the common baptism of Orthodox and non-Orthodox, which is that one performed in the name of the Holy Trinity ([For the Life of the World 2020](#), ll. 52, 54). This recognition has not been overlooked by other theologians ([Coulter 2021](#), p. 33; [Gabriel 2020](#), p. 12; [Gallaher 2022](#), p. 399). In any case, this position of acceptance does not contradict the Russian one ([Basic Principles 2000](#), l. 1.15).

9. The Quality of Being a Christian

Undoubtedly, the documents are full of references or expressions that consciously indicate the existence of a Christian part outside the communion with the Orthodox Church. We can give the following examples, even from the documents of the Russian Orthodox Church: "a divided Christendom", "divided Christians", "non-Orthodox Christians" ([Basic Principles 2000](#), ll. 1.16, 1.20, 4.1), "the Christian populations—Orthodox, Ancient Eastern and other Christians" ([Encyclical 2016](#), l. VI.18), "non-Orthodox Christians" ([Encyclical 2016](#), l. VII.20; [Message 2016](#), l. 3), "the rest of the Christian world" ([Encyclical 2016](#), l. VII.20), "the indigenous Orthodox and other Christians" ([Message 2016](#), l. 4), "fellow Christians" ([The Mission 2016](#), l. D.3), "Orthodox Christians with non-Orthodox Christians" ([The Sacrament 2016](#), l. II.5), "other Christians", "seeking the unity of all Christians", "theological dialogue with other Christians", "the Orthodox Church dialogues with other Christians", "the Orthodox Church in her relations with the rest of the Christian world", "the Orthodox Church and the rest of the Christian world" ([Relations 2016](#), ll. 4–6, 8, 20), "the Orthodox Church earnestly seeks unity with all Christians", "the Church seeks sustained dialogue with Christians of other communions", "all Christians", "the Orthodox engagement with Christians of other communions", "a sustained dialogue with other Christians", and "the Church can stand with other Christians" ([For the Life of the World 2020](#), ll. 51–54).

According to these expressions, we can say that there is the Orthodox Church with its Christian members, and that there are also other Christians who do not belong to the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, no one can explain how there could be Christians outside the Church. If people are called and considered Christians only in the Church, according to this logic, there are no Christians outside of it ([Marcu 2018](#), p. 37).

Regarding this idea, we come to the definition of the quality of being a Christian. What makes me or the other Christian? Is this a canonical particularity or a moral assessment? (See [Popa 2018](#), p. 499). The Romanian theologian Cristian Sonea questions the quality of those Christians who are not in the Orthodox Church, and rhetorically asks whether we should accept the position of conservative groups and deny them the quality of Christians:

“Common sense and the experience of the common living with them for hundreds of years would tell us that they are not pagans or non-Christians and we certainly cannot regard them as equal to non-Christians” ([Sonea 2017b](#), p. 132).

Also related to the recognition of the quality of being a Christian remains the acceptance of the practice of *oikonomia* in the case of mixed marriages. If in the case of marriages between an Orthodox Christian and a non-Christian, *akribeia* is required and this union is not accepted in any circumstances; however, marriages between an Orthodox and a non-Orthodox Christian may be accepted in some cases ([The Sacrament 2016](#), l. II.5.ii). I believe that this difference between non-Christians and non-Orthodox Christians is based on the acceptance of baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity, without which no one can be considered a Christian. Otherwise, we cannot explain this differentiation between a non-Christian and a non-Orthodox Christian ([Perşa 2018](#); [Jovic 2020](#)). It is interesting the answer of the Chancery of the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which, beyond the fact that it mentions this acceptance of inter-Christian marriages since 1881, considers that *oikonomia* is accepted for an Orthodox Christian in order not to live in fornication and not for the non-Orthodox Christian. If so, the question remains why the same economy is not accepted for the person who marries a non-Christian. I believe that the answer should have been more nuanced and direct, namely that a non-Orthodox person is considered a Christian ([On the Holy and Great Council of Crete 2017](#), pp. 26–30). Of course, there are also theologians who do not accept this distinction and who consider that there is no difference between pagans and non-Orthodox ([Heers 2017](#)). Looking at the other documents, we can see that the Russian Orthodox Church accepts mixed marriages ([The Basis 2000](#), l. X.2). The Social Ethos Document only assumes the decisions from Crete ([For the Life of the World 2020](#), l. 21).

10. The Orthodox Church and the Churches

One of the most problematic statements of the Synod of Crete remains the acceptance of the title “Church” of Christian communities that are not in communion with the Orthodox Church. The official phrase is as follows:

“The Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her” ([Relations 2016](#), l. 6).

If we look in the Russian documents, we notice that the title “Church” is used directly only for the Orthodox one: “the Orthodox Church and other Christian confessions”, “the dialogues conducted by the Russian Orthodox Church with other Christian confessions”, “the Russian Orthodox Church maintains co-operation with various Christian denominations and international Christian organisations”, and “the relations of the Russian Orthodox Church with non-Orthodox Christian communities” ([Basic Principles 2000](#), ll. 2.1, 4.2, 5.5, 6.1). Instead, in the documents from Crete, but also in the document approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we find the following expressions: “other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions”, “non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions” ([Relations 2016](#), ll. 6, 16), “all Christian communions”, “other major Christian churches”, “ecumenical relations with other Christian confessions”, “various Christian confessions”, and “other non-Orthodox Christian bodies” ([For the Life of the World 2020](#), ll. 53–55, 58).

In accordance with the above, we can say that the interpretation may be different. The first one would be that accepting the historical name of “church” for non-Orthodox communities is only a sociological convention, without a theological value ([Perşa 2017a](#), p. 141). The second interpretation is that based on the recognition of common baptism in

the name of the Holy Trinity, and their status as Christians, that a community can be called a “church” (Kalaitzidis 2016, p. 290). Obviously, much more should be explained in regard to what it means to be a non-Orthodox Church, but still a Church. This expression somehow resonates with Dumitru Stăniloae’s perspective. He assumes that the other non-Orthodox churches are incomplete, but still in relation with the Church *Una Sancta* (Stăniloae 2012, p. 66). I think we need an official classification of these communities by virtue of their history. Bilateral dialogues are worth mentioning here, but unfortunately most of the time the decisions are not translated or implemented. Moreover, you cannot fail to state that there is a difference between traditional churches and those that have been formed much more recently. This classification would help us at a theological and pastoral level for a much more achievable dialogue (Marcu 2017, 2022b, pp. 196–214). The documents from Crete recall the ecumenical forums in which the Orthodox Church is also involved, especially in the WCC. In the absence of a clear mention of the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, the reactions of Catholic theologians are understandable (De Mey 2016; Phan 2021). In the same note were reactions from Orthodox theologians (Moga 2018, p. 22; Gallaher 2022, p. 400).

Beyond the moment of Crete, the new document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate nominates important churches or Christian denominations, though in two different contexts, when it mentions their descendant relationship with the Orthodox Church (*For the Life of the World* 2020, l. 53), but also when September 1 is remembered as a day of prayer for God’s creation (*For the Life of the World* 2020, l. 68). It should be noted that this day is also mentioned in the *Message of the Holy and Great Synod*, but without any reference to the other churches or Christian communities (Message 2016, l. 8.). We now turn our attention to the dialogue, as defined by these documents.

11. Ecumenism for Dialogue

According to the documents approved in Crete, the presence of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical movement in general, but especially in the WCC, is appreciative. Many theologians who are involved in ecumenical dialogue refer to this official assumption (Ladouceur 2016b, p. 33; Gallaher 2017, p. 48; (Archbishop Job (Getcha) of Telmessos 2017, p. 287); Crişan 2020, p. 61; Moga 2018, p. 22; Bordeianu 2017, pp. 518–19; Nifon of Targoviste 2020, p. 456). The principal words used to describe the Orthodox implication within the world and the ecumenical movement are “dialogue” (Encyclical 2016, ll. 17, 20; Message 2016, ll. 3, 4; The Mission 2016, l. D.2; Relations 2016, ll. 4–15, 20, 23), “witness” (Encyclical 2016, ll. 2, 6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 20; Message 2016, ll. 1–3; The Mission 2016, ll. E.3, F.9; Relations 2016, ll. 6, 9, 23, 24), and “cooperation” (The Mission 2016, l. A.2, F; Relations 2016, l. 7). It should be noted, however, that the term ecumenism is avoided in official documents (De Mey 2016). This term is not found in Russian documents or in the social ethos document. Most likely, this word has been avoided not to affect the reception of the texts. For those who do not support this presence in ecumenical and bilateral dialogues, the term ecumenism has become an obsession (Marcu 2018, p. 39).

In a dialectical way, to the accusation that the synod of Crete proclaimed ecumenism as a new dogma, the Romanian Orthodox Church offered the following answer:

“Neither this council, nor any other Orthodox Synod has ever declared ecumenism as a dogma of faith, just as no autocephalous, canonical Orthodox Synod has ever declared ecumenism as “pan-heresy”” (*On the Holy and Great Council of Crete* 2017, p. 37).

Unofficially, the Russian Orthodox Church has been opposed to using this word since the pre-synodal meetings. Here, it should be said that Patriarch Kiril of the Russian Orthodox Church attended an ecumenical meeting with Pope Francis in February 2016, but in June 2016 he refused to meet with Orthodox Patriarchs. This is politico-diplomatic ecumenism (Gallaher 2019b). However, the same three keywords are used in the *Social Ethos Document*, which expresses the essence of the term ecumenism: “dialogue” (*For the Life of the World* 2020, ll. 49, 51, 53–56, 58–60, 81), “witness” (*For the Life of the World*

2020, ll. 9, 12, 34, 44, 48, 54, 55, 57, 78, 80, 81), and “cooperation” (*For the Life of the World 2020*, ll. 7, 14, 59, 61, 69). The theology of dialogue is based on the image of God in every human being and on the incarnation of the Son of God (Mihăiță 2013, p. 61). The person who refuses dialogue opposes the work of communion between God and human being.

12. Ecumenism for Witnessing and Cooperation

From a personal perspective, the union of the Churches should not mean the loss of identities and the adoption of others. Unity in diversity can be accepted in the cultural and even liturgical elements, but clearly diversity in truth needs a common centre. As presented above, the Orthodox Church has an ecclesiological self-identity, which should be that centre, but unfortunately the institutional non-unity of the autocephalous Orthodox churches blocks this potentiality. I totally agree with the formulation “to restore unity with other Christians in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” (*Relations 2016*, l. 4), but no one clearly explains how we need to understand this integration or return. Also, the Russian document sustains this return (*Basic Principles 2000*, l. 2.3). In other words, when you claim this, you should explain very clearly what is meant by “in no way is she able to accept the unity of the Church as an inter-confessional compromise” (*Relations 2016*, l. 18.). This *ecumenism in return* was noticed and criticized by other non-Orthodox theologians (*De Mey 2016*; *Heller 2017*, p. 297; *Augustine 2021*, p. 8).

Conversely, this *ecumenism in return* is somehow overcome by the support of an *ecumenism for witnessing and cooperation*, of those “who call upon the name of Jesus”, “through their Trinitarian baptism and confession of the faith of the Councils” (*For the Life of the World 2020*, ll. 51, 54). Much more, it is acknowledged that a conversion “to some cultural “Byzantinism”” (*For the Life of the World 2020*, l. 51) is not desired. Ultimately, we need persistence in dialogue but also an evaluation of it, regardless of its form or of the partner. In Crete, it was clearly stated that ecumenical dialogue and decisions must be regularly evaluated by the Orthodox Communion (*Relations 2016*, l. 9). We note, in this sense, the contribution of His Beatitude Daniel of the Romanian Orthodox Church (*Archbishop Elpidophoros (Lambriniadis) of America 2020*, p. 443). But, in the current situation, 7 years since the meeting in Crete, can we hope for a new one or are we waiting another half century or more for the next Synod?

The involvement of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement needs critical evaluation, on the one hand for the implementation of the decisions taken at the ecumenical level, and on the other hand for the continuation of the dialogue (*Neacșu 2018*, p. 368). Unfortunately, this internal evaluation has always been lacking, using double hermeneutics, as the theologian Ioan Moga rightly points out (*Moga 2018*, p. 23). Moreover, due to the lack of a real-time presentation of decisions at the ecumenical level, anti-ecumenical groups have been formed within Orthodoxy (*Tsompanidis and Ziaka 2020*, pp. 380–82). Most of the time, they use inherited patterns without any solid theological basis. For example, in some discussions about the documents approved in Crete, I discovered that some protesting priests did not read them.

In order to stop this internal disorder, the Synod of Crete considers them fundamentalists, condemning them (*Relations 2016*, l. 22; *Basic Principles 2000*, l. 7.3). However, this official and synodal condemnation should not honour us. From a personal perspective, the mere mention would have been enough to make them aware that they are on the verge of communion with the Church. However, taking the idea of the theologian Brandon Gallaher, keeping the proportions, we can argue that within a certain limit this tension between ecumenism and anti-ecumenism is a creative one (*Gallaher 2019a*, p. 280). If we look at the document *For the Life of the World*, this language of condemnation of the so-called “fundamentalists” is not found. The solution is to involve all members of the Church in the ecumenical dialogue, in communion with each other and for the others (*For the Life of the World 2020*, l. 60). The correct information, in real-time for the believers, is the duty of the clergy in order to avoid internal tensions (*Porumb 2014, 2018*; *Sonea 2021*; *Marcu 2023*).

13. Conclusions

One of the first conclusions is the difficult historical process of the Synod. The historical presentation of the most important stages in the history of this synod had the role of emphasizing how important it is that the meeting took place.

The second conclusion is that the autocephalous Orthodox churches are in a real synodal or conciliar crisis. No matter how much we praise the meeting in Crete, the non-participation of the four mentioned churches, especially the Russian one, is an important administrative issue which uses the principle of autocephaly. In front of ecumenical partners, our credibility is critically low with such deficiencies. A non-unity of institutional Orthodoxy cannot be able to implement bilateral or ecumenical agreements. However, internal unity is the most important thing now, especially since we have the situation with the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (2018), but also the unfortunate position of the Russian Orthodox Church towards both autocephaly and Putin's war on the territory of Ukraine.

Thus, the approval of the synodal documents can only be a step forward for the Orthodox Church. Even if the reception is problematic in the Churches that did not come to Crete, in the present moment their approval is sufficient. The leading role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate should be seen, beyond the moment of Crete, in the approval and publication of the social document *For the Life of the World*. Beyond the controversies of the documents, the importance of the ecumenical dialogue for the Orthodox testimony was officially approved. No matter what one or the other will say, for those of us who are involved in this dialogue, these texts will always be important reference points.

However, the self-identity of the Orthodox Church provides enough space for dialogue with other Christians. Whether or not we use the term ecumenism, the reality of dialogue is present in the documents and on a practical level, between Christians of various affiliations. Of course, there is a need to reaffirm, periodically, this commitment for dialogue in order to be able to move forward in the much-desired and long-awaited unity or communion.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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