

Note: Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou is a political scientist specializing in the intersection of religion, democracy, and security. She has worked as an advisor for international and nongovernmental organizations on religious freedom. As one of four women who attended the 2016 Holy and Great Council in Crete as an expert consultant, she agreed to speak with Patricia Fann Bouteneff about her experience there.

“Coworkers in the Service of the Church”

Interview with Elizabeth Prodromou

How did you come to be at the Holy and Great Council? What was your official role there?

I attended a meeting of scholars at the Phanar [the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch] in January 2016. Our group advocated passionately for the council to take place—because there was still some uncertainty about whether it would happen—and we implored His All-Holiness to do whatever pos-

sible to make the council an inclusive assembly, representing the fullness of the ecclesial body. Next thing I knew, I had been appointed as one of six expert consultants on the delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. That made me one of four women in total who were at the council as official participants: two with the delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, one with the Church of Albania, and one with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

As I understand it, I was appointed by virtue of my service to the Church and, most especially, because of my academic, government policy, grassroots, and ecumenical work, which aligns with several of the council’s specific agenda items. I was surprised, humbled, excited, and overwhelmed to be appointed. I felt it was an extraordinary responsibility that in some ways was too big for me to bear. There were going to be so few of us women at the assembly. Each day at the council, I thought, “I’m in this assembly. I’m an Orthodox Christian. And I am a woman. I am bringing every other woman—all Orthodox women—into this assembly with me.” So, it was not just I who was there: it was we.

Did people at the council treat you that way?

Oh, no, I don’t think so—at least, no one expressed it in those terms. But



people did ask me how it felt to be going to the council as an Orthodox woman. So the feeling of bringing all Orthodox women with me was in my heart the whole time. It seemed to me that His All-Holiness was listening at the Phanar meeting—and others were, too. The inclusion of women and laypersons alongside hierarchs and clergy as part of the fullness of the assembly was an expression of the love of the *ekklesia*. That was amazing, it was inspiring, it was hopeful.

Was that your common experience throughout the council itself?

Not always. My experience of the council was inspiring, complex, and at times exhausting. The exhaustion was mostly related to the confusion and sadness at experiencing a feeling unfamiliar to me in the Church: simply put, at least in the earliest days of the assembly, I frequently felt a palpable sense of strangeness. Not that I felt strange being there—my sense of thanks, humility, and conviction and belief in the teachings of our Church made me feel that I had been invited to the right place, the right time, the right gathering—but I most definitely felt that I was seen by many of the other participants as a stranger.

I have tried to make sense of my impressionistic experiences in the first days after arriving. I can't say that it was easy to decipher them, but I came to discern that I was encountered by many there as a stranger because I am a woman. I'm not unfamiliar with serving the Church in many different contexts. I'm not unfamiliar with engaging with priests and hierarchs for the good of the Church. So I hadn't anticipated that the council would be an environment that would evoke an unfamiliar feeling. Yet both active and passive signaling and interactions

made it clear that I was seen by some as stranger there. It was an environment of high ecclesiastical politics, of church "officialdom," and it was overwhelmingly, hegemonically male. Even some people that I know well acted quite differently toward me, with a kind of formalism, with a kind of distance, with a kind of awkwardness and unnaturalness that was very confusing, saddening, and spiritually exhausting.

Can you give an example?

An instructive instance is when I was walking toward a group of individuals that I know, in the days before the formal beginning of the council. It was clear from a distance that we had all caught sight of one other. But as I approached, I realized from their glances and positioning that the circle in which they were talking was not going to open for me to join—literally, the circle was closed. So I passed by and we did not greet one another. This happened in an informal environment, outside the formal space of the assembly, but the message was clear. This experience of being a stranger in the Church left me heavy-hearted at times. Initially it threw me back on my heels.

In an environment where, in fact, you should have been totally at home, as much as anybody could be.

That's right. It was very exhausting spiritually, because it was repeated throughout the week in differing contexts and through differing forms of communication. It felt to me like an experience of being seen with the eyes but not with the heart. This sense of "You're with us, but not of us," was something that I had not anticipated, especially given the openness and kindness and inclusiveness expressed by His All-Holiness. Weren't we four women meant to be part of—not sepa-

rate from—everyone who was assembled for the council?

I realized that this sense of being *seen*, but *not seen*, of being *with*, but *not of*, was not my imagination. In fact, I realized that others who witnessed the dynamic understood this, because they displayed a compassion that I appreciated as a form of welcome and inclusion. These were individuals who were seeing with their eyes and their hearts, and they showed this in gestures and conversations, directly and indirectly. Their efforts were heartening. They made me hopeful that we all can be Church, that we are Church.

On the morning of the second day, a monk offered me a bottle of water. We had not met or even exchanged a word before. Quite discreetly and effortlessly, but visibly, he remained standing while most of the hierarchs, monks, and clergy around him sat down. He turned to me as we were all still taking our seats. I understood that he was making a deliberate gesture—he had to be—since we were just about to begin, so it wasn't "water time." The semiotics of the entire exchange were fascinating and effective: his was a gesture of kindness, connection, inclusion. I thanked him, we both smiled, and we sat for the assembly. And there was something symbolic in the offering of water, given how we understand the sanctity of water in our faith. Those seated around us—who, throughout the previous day, had ignored my existence (nary a hello, no response to my greetings, no eye contact—as though they didn't even see me as a carbon-based being)—looked at him, looked at me, and then at the next break, they began to greet me, some with a word, some with a nod, and we began to converse throughout the remainder of the week. Through

this small gesture, which was in fact a huge gesture, I realized that, suddenly, I had "appeared." My invisibility was replaced by being seen as a person—yes, as a woman, but as an Orthodox Christian member of the assembly. It was also an important lesson for me, because his gesture reminded me that I shouldn't withdraw into myself, but should reach out even to those who might seem closed off. Above all, his gesture reminded me of the extraordinary impact of kindness as an offering in how we treat one another on a daily basis.

It seems sad that someone had to break the ice publicly for everyone else to feel it was OK to acknowledge a person's existence.

I think we all need to realize that we are not just in the Church, but instead, we are of the Church. This distinction is what struck me about the "icebreaker" experience, as you put it. I didn't go into the council thinking, "There are only going to be a few women there and it's going to be a strange experience." That's not how I feel in service to the Church, though I realize that there are some people who view women as strangers. But the "shunning"—because I was not prepared for it and had not experienced it in such a fashion—made it all the more obvious, palpable, and striking. That's not how I live in the Church, and it is not how the Church should be. Upon praying and thinking about this, I believe it is important to speak truthfully. We need to reject the use of gender to exclude, to wound, to fracture the Church as a place of loving fullness. Likewise, I think it's absolutely essential to appreciate, speak about, and replicate the kindness and commitments of those who show that they understand these dynamics and that they reject women's exclusion.

The council made me ponder certain paradoxes at work in the Church. First, for me, the Church is a place of freedom; the gospel reminds me of the elation of being free. And so, the reminders, restraints, and limitations that I experienced at the council because of gender stood at odds with my understanding of the gospel message. These limitations and exclusions and fractures are the antithesis of our theology. They are the products of cultural inheritances and patriarchal practices (in the anthropological and cultural sense of the word). We need to become more theologically literate, so that we live our theology and avoid the traps of cultural practice that weaken our theology.

Another kind of paradox on which I reflected, throughout and since the council, was provoked by what I call the 500-yard stare—you know, when someone is looking at you but they're not seeing you. I experienced this on a daily basis at the council. I came to understand that people would see me with their eyes (as a woman) and not with their hearts (as a fellow Orthodox Christian gathered with them to do the work of the Church). This 500-yard stare gives you the feeling of being viewed, but not being seen—of being viewed, but being invisible. This presence-absence paradox was striking.

The paradox of the otherness of gender—of being a woman, the very visibility of being not-a-man—rendered me invisible for many who were there. It made me wonder about my own ideas, expectations, and behaviors in seeing-yet-being-unseen. I realized that, as a woman, I could be present and, paradoxically, perhaps more intensely present, by virtue of being a woman—because most everyone else was a man. Yet my presence, seen only from the perspective of gender, ren-

dered me absent, and became a mechanism of exclusion. I realized that it is just as easy to see with the heart as it is to see, mistakenly, only with the eyes; and when I experienced the contrast, I so much appreciated those interactions that came from the heart, which also reinforced my own commitment to seeing others with the eyes of my heart.

In fact, one of my most precious take-aways from the council was these paradoxes. I am so thankful that the council offered me this opportunity to reflect on gender in ways that I could never have experienced otherwise. I thank God for that experience, however exhausting and complicated, and I praise the courage of those who supported the presence and inclusion of women at the council—His All-Holiness, of course, and Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, and Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem, among others, since theirs were the delegations that included women.

Regarding women and the council, what I found most hopeful was that all of the paradoxes that I mentioned became less intense over time. The biggest lesson I would share is that how we understand gender difference and women and the Church is a form of limited understanding: to put it colloquially, our understanding is more in our heads than in our hearts. I saw this “heads-hearts” distinction in the evolution of the ethos and *phronema* of the council over the course of a week. At the outset, there was a kind of meta-formalism that arose because there hadn't been a council since the eighth century. So there was a steep learning curve about what it meant to be council. As the awkwardness and unfamiliarity began to dissipate, the micro-experiences of otherness and strangeness (with gender being a crit-

ical part of that) also began to be ameliorated.

So, the strangeness for everybody came from the fact that there were so many different Orthodox from so many different jurisdictions in such close proximity?

From two things, I would say. Number one, yes, there were so many Orthodox from all over the world who for the first time were looking into each other's faces. There was the image and likeness of Christ from Africa to Asia to the Americas to Europe: people seeing each other and realizing that we are a church. We are a global church. I don't think most people had any inkling. Most of us live in our own space. We may travel, but the kind of encounter we had in Crete is very rare. You could see this dawning on people, that, in our time, we really are a global church. We're no longer a church divided between the "Old World" and the "New World"—instead, we're a church of the world.

The second factor was the reality that the Church hasn't been holding councils. Even though we have local assemblies and synods, no one had any lived experience of this kind of grand, Pan-Orthodox Great Council. We suddenly found ourselves living something we'd only read about—and people didn't really know how to live that; there were no experiential reference points. It was something that could only become familiar by happening. So, the unfamiliarity began to be replaced by familiarity, as the council actually unfolded, as it happened. The change in awareness, consciousness, mindset, *phronema*, could only happen by the activity of the council, by being council; and, yet, for the council to happen, there had to be a sense of the need for that mindset change. It was

faith—a belief in the hope and potential of the council, and our belief in the hope and salvation of Christ and in the Church—that enabled the council to happen. And it was the event and experience of the council that gives hope for a continuing mindset change. The Holy and Great Council is no longer an abstraction, and the reality of the council will allow for future Holy and Great Councils. Does that make sense?

It does. I guess that was partly the purpose of the council: people coming and confronting the sheer richness and diversity of Orthodoxy.

Yes, the council was an experience of our unity in diversity. Over the course of the deliberations of the assembly, there was an unmistakable transformation that expressed the realization that we are unified and enriched by our diversity as Church. This reality was breathtakingly clear in the deliberation that I had thought might be the least interesting and exciting—the agenda item on fasting—but turned out to be one of the most extraordinarily rich and thought-provoking discussions. It demanded that we open our hearts.

What makes you say that?

Because it started out with hackneyed questions such as, "Should we change fasting rules?" and "Can the canons even be changed, and how would we do it?" These were addressed with well-hewn answers along no-change versus change and inflexible versus flexible lines. But all of that changed when people began talking about the reality that many Orthodox Christians confront daily shortages or absence of food. In my discipline, we call that "food insecurity." Having an intense discussion about whether you need to keep the strict fast or the more flexible

fast when people are starving, when they are living under constant conditions of food deprivation, was a reminder that rigid fasting rules can become either arrogant or tragi-comical. People who are starving may have no meat, no dairy, no oil—so these fasting rules make no sense under certain circumstances which, unfortunately, are widespread enough in our world. We were reminded that many Orthodox Christians labor under conditions of food insecurity. It was really interesting to hear from hierarchs, particularly from Africa, that discussions about whether or not we can eat meat make no sense for most of their communicants. It's not just that there's no meat; there's no food. It was fascinating to see other hierarchs realize, "I live in a completely different reality than you do, but we're both Orthodox Christians; my struggles with fasting rules mean something completely different than your reality." There was a humility that emerged in those discussions. They were a compelling example of how we Orthodox don't know what our fellow Orthodox Christians experience because, number one, we've never met them, so number two, we haven't learned to put ourselves in their place.

And the council helped with that. I watched the delegations come in. They initially spoke almost exclusively among themselves, with the exception of bilateral conversations between hierarchs across delegations, who might know one another. Then, little by little, delegations began speaking to each other, across delegations, so instead of these concentric circles of delegations, touching each other but not overlapping, we began to change, and the circles broke down, becoming one huge circle—a huge circle that was sometimes messy and contentious, but a circle nonetheless.

At what points were you supposed to speak up, at what points were you able to speak up, and what happened when you did?

The consultants were not given formal speaking roles in the assembly, but could contribute to the work of the assembly. We could submit comments, questions, suggestions, or revisions to the texts. We could do that in writing, or by speaking to the secretariat directly. We could also propose changes for consideration by the assembly, based on deliberations and meetings of our consultant groups. If something came up that you wanted to present as a consultant, you could either give it to a hierarch or you could go to the secretariat and ask that it be addressed in the assembly. I offered suggested amendments to the human rights and religious freedom segments of the text by sending a written message during the assembly, which was delivered to the front, to the Ecumenical Patriarch. This was standard practice in the assembly. The consultants could write things down and hand them to runners, who would take them to the front. Sometimes they were acknowledged and maybe other times they weren't. These were the mechanics of the daily work of the council.

The photograph here [at the beginning of this interview] involves this kind of "bricks and mortar" work of the council. I submitted some suggested revisions for consideration, regarding language on religious freedom, and this became part of the assembly's discussion of the relevant texts. At one of the breaks, I went to the front of the assembly auditorium to discuss with His All-Holiness. Archbishop Anastasios was at his seat, finishing some notes. I had already written some suggested revisions for consideration by the assembly, and I shared them with His

All-Holiness (I had already sent the notes to him, requesting that they be introduced into the ongoing textual reviews). He took my notes and we went over to Archbishop Anastasios. We had a focused, thorough, free-flowing discussion about the proposed adjustments to the text. I was pointing things out: “Here we need this, here we need that.” And they were saying, “OK, explain that.” I talked about international legal formulations on religious freedom, explaining what documents the language would be drawn from. We wordsmithed the proposed textual amendments, which were then submitted to the assembly after the break, as part of the regular process of proposed revision, review, discussion, and conclusion. When we first began talking, Archbishop Anastasios said, “We are very pleased that you are here, that you are all here.” And I said, “It’s such an honor to be here at the council, and I am humbled, as a woman, to be part of the work of the assembly.” And he said, “We wanted you all to be here.” It was so welcoming and so kind and so pastoral—just what you would want from a hierarch. His All-Holiness was, as always, welcoming, pastoral, kind, and focused on the work at hand. The way in which they engaged me—asking for clarification, precision, and doing the work of the Church with pastoral focus—was inspiring to me. There was not the least inkling of being a stranger: just all of us there, at that moment, doing the work of the council.

That moment was very funny because of the reactions of passers-by. Most were trying to get outside for the break, because it was hot and the morning’s work had been intense, but you could see that sometimes they did a double-take: the gendering in the reactions to that collaborative moment was a bit funny, but also encouraging, because people were witnessing

the natural reality of “doing the work of the Church” regardless of gender. People in the background were puzzled about what was going on. That was one of those moments where all of the insider–outsider, stranger–familiar differences dissolved, because we were just doing the work of the assembly.

Was the puzzlement because it was unusual to have a consultant talking to the primates?

No, there were other conversations between hierarchs and consultants. I think it was because I was a female, obviously engaged in a collaborative conversation on the texts of the assembly with the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Albania. I think these few minutes, maybe 15 minutes in total, indicated to everyone who saw us that we are all capable of participating in the work of the Church. In that moment, I was very visible, as a woman, working *for* the assembly and *with* the assembly, working with His All-Holiness and Archbishop Anastasios. That was a moment of revelation: “We are all here, male and female, and we are all doing the work of the assembly, we’re serving God.”

It’s a picture that speaks volumes. The fact that the Ecumenical Patriarch is holding his staff of office and the text in the same hand, and looking on so intently, while Archbishop Anastasios seems to be taking notes.

Yes, he was working on the Greek version of the English revisions that we were making. He was showing that to us.

That photo is very meaningful to me. It shows a moment of *what we could be* as a Church—or perhaps what we actually are, without always understanding what we are. But also the potential



for what we should and could be as a Church. For me, it is extremely positive and enlivening and hopeful. And it contrasts with the photo I took from my seat at the back of the assembly hall [above], which, in some ways, is an image far more familiar to people than the other one, which shows coworkers in the service of the Church.

Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to bring up?

One thing I would say is how profoundly thankful I was to the hierarchs who supported the presence of women at the council. The smallness of our numbers was a striking reminder to everyone of the lack of gendered presence. If there had been no women there, no one would have thought of us. But the fact that there was this little thimbleful in an ocean made our visibility even greater—but also made the absence of all the rest of us greater.

Paradoxically, the issue of our absence was reinforced through the contrasting presence of just a few of us women. I hope that's a good thing.

It appears that one has to be courageous on the issue of including women in the life of the Church, and I thank God for the courage of those hierarchs who are committed to the fullness of the ecclesial body. In general, I think it's difficult for us to imagine the weight of the crosses that they carry. If bringing four women to the assembly is part of that weight, then I'm thankful that they are willing to bear that weight. And, I pray that, whenever I am called to serve the Church—as a woman, in academia, in diplomacy, in public policy, in parish life, and in the global Church—I carry with me in my heart all women, so that we are all present, and so that discussions about “women in the Church” will take on different meaning, because we will *all* be Church. ✱

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