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The Orthodox Church has held its first Holy and Great Council in over 1,200 years. If its hierarchs want it to be a success, they will have to follow up soon with another one. “Soon” is a relative term in the Orthodox Church, where ancient debates seem as if they took place yesterday, and preparations for this summit took 55 years before the gathering could open last week in western Crete.

The word “success” also comes with qualifications because this council was not complete — four of the 14 autocephalous Orthodox Churches refused to attend. Its debates behind closed doors laid bare deep divisions in a tradition-bound Christian family struggling with modernity.

But the Orthodox have taken the all-important first step and seem ready to continue on this path. Several hierarchs have called for further summits, and Romania’s Patriarch Daniel has offered to host the next one in seven years’ time. It may take up to a decade before the primates come together again, hopefully in full number, but that seems brief in view of the challenges they face.

“The Church is figuring out how to be a global Church,” said Elizabeth Prodromou, an American political scientist and special consultant to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the spiritual centre of the world’s 250-300 million Orthodox. “The responsibility of this council was to recover, recapture and express in contemporary form the tradition of councils in the Church,” said Prodromou, one of only three women among the 290 delegates. “The council wasn’t just a single event, but part of a process.”

Some Catholic commentators described this meeting in advance as “Orthodoxy’s Vatican II”, a faulty parallel because it suggests a major event followed by a dramatic *aggiornamento*. The process begun in

Crete was not meant to introduce immediate changes but was designed to become the way in which the Church slowly responds to the modern world. The obstacles to long-term success are many and solutions to some may only come after several more councils. “This is our way of talking things through, but we haven’t done it in a long time,” explained Brandon Gallaher, a University of Exeter theologian and subject expert at the council.

One obstacle is governance. Unlike the Catholic Church under one pope, the Orthodox Churches are organised on national lines with 14 equal primates. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the driving force behind the council, is the first among those equals and needs consensus for major decisions. The Orthodox rejected the principle of a pope at the Great Schism of 1054, so their idea of consensus is deeply rooted. But does consensus mean absolute unanimity or a large majority? The powerful Moscow Patriarchate, which dwarfs all other Orthodox churches, insisted on the first definition and cited boycotts by three others – Bulgaria, Georgia and Antioch – as its reason for not coming to Crete.

The 10 churches present pushed ahead, insisting this was still a valid council and noting that, while not all councils were fully attended in the past, all Orthodox churches eventually “received”, or accepted them. Since no definition can be imposed, the churches may need a better way to find consensus. Councils are major events and even holding them every 10 years may not be enough.

Carol Saba, council spokesman for the absent Church of Antioch, has suggested copying the decision-making model of the G8 group of industrial nations, who meet informally once a year to discuss major world problems they cannot solve alone. These regular sessions could be a synaxis, or lower level meeting of primates. “If you have conciliarity without a decision-making model, you have what is now happening in Crete,” Saba said in his law office in Paris.

Council spokesman Fr John Chryssavgis said the delegates were thinking in terms of more councils. “All the bishops see this not as a one-off event,” he said. “When the councils become more normal, it will get easier.” It would still be difficult to get all 14 Churches to meet. “Not every Church has moved in the same direction, the same distance and the same pace as all of the others,” he said. “For me, that’s the main reason why a council is needed. It clarifies where people are up to.”

Politics is another obstacle, as the Crete boycott showed. For centuries, Orthodoxy has had two poles, Greece and Russia, and the rivalry between Constantinople and Moscow is the backdrop to many tensions. The Russian Church, reinvigorated (with help from the Kremlin) after communism’s collapse, has blocked or put brakes on several initiatives that would end up strengthening Bartholomew’s position. Its last-minute boycott came even though it vigorously put its own stamp on the documents prepared for the council’s approval.

“Moscow is still attached to a sense of imperial grandeur and is not backing the universal mission advocated by Bartholomew,” Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant’Egidio movement, said just before the summit opened. “Bartholomew wants to relaunch the Orthodox mission in the world, taking stock of the world’s problems and portraying the image of a united Church. The Russian vision, however, is restricted within its imperial confines, the confines of their great country.”

Another obstacle — how to respond to modernity — apparently also played a role in Russia’s absence. Russian Patriarch Kirill returned to Moscow from his unprecedented meeting with Pope Francis in

Havana last February “to a great deal of opposition, resistance and protest, even threats of schism”, said Fr Chryssavgis. This kind of opposition is strong in Orthodox monasteries, where it reflects deep suspicion of Rome and a vision of a faithful Orthodox world set against a decadent West. It is strong in Russia and Greece, but not only there.

The issue of ecumenism sparked off the most heated debate of the council, with a traditionalist minority led by the Greeks trying to deny that other Christian denominations were actually Churches at all. That failed, and the final document reaffirmed support for working with other Churches and denounced fundamentalist campaigns “allegedly defending true Orthodoxy”.

Although the number of “zealots” is small, concern among delegates about these hardline preachers on social media — a problem all faiths face now — moved the council to keep journalists away and even ban delegates from taking photos or videos in the conference hall. “They’re afraid the zealots will find out what they’re saying,” Gallaher said.

Along with the problems, the week’s worth of meeting and talking also highlighted positive points often not well known even in the wider Orthodox world. One such development was the growth of missionary activity, especially in Africa, where clergy have left behind the traditional ethnic focus and gone out to evangelise. Prominent among them was Archbishop Anastasios, who has revived the Church in Albania after a decade of expanding its reach in East Africa.

Archbishop Alexander of Nigeria, one of the few delegates who met the media, sounded like Pope Francis when he urged delegates to show more dynamism and spoke about how Africa suffered under continued economic colonialism by rich countries.

Elizabeth Prodromou said there was only “a thimbleful of women” at the council — herself and two nuns — but there were signs the all-male clergy was slowly changing there as well. She even got a friendly greeting from an abbot of Mount Athos, the holy mountain that bans all women from entering. “It suggests there’s a view of the Church that isn’t about four walls but of the Church in the world,” said Prodromou, a married Greek- Cypriot-American who teaches at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Boston.

During his flight back from Armenia, Pope Francis was asked how he assessed the council. “Positive!” he responded. “It marks a step forward, it was not 100 per cent, but still a step forward ... You do what you can with your first step. The sheer fact that these Churches held a meeting to look each other in the eye, pray together and talk, is very positive. I am grateful to the Lord. There will be more present at the next meeting.”

Tom Heneghan writes for The Tablet from Paris.

Tom Heneghan-The Tablet