

REPORT

Living Tradition: Continuity and Change as Challenges to Churches and Theologies

The 21st Academic Consultation of the *Societas Oecumenica*, Malta, 5-10 May 2022

After unforeseen postponements due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 21st Academic Consultation of the *Societas Oecumenica* finally took place on the island of Malta from the 5th to the 10th of May 2022. Members and friends of the *Societas Oecumenica* gathered at the Archbishop's Seminary in Rabat to reflect on the ecumenical significance of Tradition and the challenges posed to churches and theologies by its twin principles: continuity and change. The goal of the 21st Academic Consultation was to offer churches, academia, and society insights into how our respective identities as Christians, largely shaped by a critical conversation with what has been passed down to us, impact our reconciliation process.

The opening lecture – *The Breadth of Tradition: Giving the Past a Future* – delivered by the President of the *Societas Oecumenica*, **Prof. Dr. John Berry** (University of Malta), in the Aula Magna of the old university building in Valletta on the evening of the 5th of May, introduced the central theme of the consultation. Prof. Berry started by explaining Tradition as a theological concept. Then he referred to the three main challenges faced by Tradition: the misunderstanding of Tradition; the rejection of Tradition; and the challenges and opportunities of pluralism. Towards the end of his lecture, Prof. Berry analyzed Tradition in connection to orthodoxy and orthopraxis. His final reflections emphasized that Tradition and hope are intimately linked: “Hope makes room not for repeating what has already been said, but for new promises, interpretations and renewed relationships.”

Next morning, **the first plenary session** of the consultation focused on ***Theologies of Tradition: Handling continuity in different churches and denominations***. The goal of the session was twofold: to investigate how different Christian churches and denominations understand Tradition and to bring their views into conversation to create space for mutual enrichment and

ecumenical growth. In her presentation, **Prof. Dr. Alina Pătru** (University of Sibiu) reflected on the meaning of Tradition in Orthodox theology, particular attention being given to the way the neo-patristic authors approached the accumulated wisdom of the past. According to Prof. Pătru, in Orthodox theology Tradition is conceived of as a living reality and refers to the concrete and dynamic ways in which Christ and the Spirit enter human life. **Prof. Dr. Joseph Famerée** (Université Catholique de Louvain) detailed the Roman Catholic understanding of Tradition considering the teaching of Vatican II. Particularly relevant was Prof. Famerée's remark that it is the vocation of the entire people of God to safeguard the Catholic Church's continuity with the Tradition coming from the Apostles. **Prof. Dr. Jennifer Wasmuth** (University of Göttingen) explored the dialectical understanding of Tradition in Lutheranism: Tradition is preserved via a negation of Tradition. Her presentation engaged with various Protestant authors: from Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon to modern and contemporary theologians. **Prof. Dr. Markus Iff** (Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach) ended the first plenary session with a paper on continuity and Tradition from the perspective of Protestant Free Churches. Prof. Iff explained that even though Free Churches do not elaborate a clear understanding of the notion of Tradition, they see themselves as faithful to the heritage of the biblical and apostolic traditions. Such a continuity is provided by a series of principles of hermeneutical, liturgical, ecclesiological, and spiritual nature.

In the afternoon of the 6th of May, **the second plenary session – *Captivities of tradition: Dealing with traditionalism and fundamentalism*** – offered ecumenical responses to the many challenges posed to churches and their quest for unity by unhealthy forms of attachment to Tradition and traditions. Both speakers in the session addressed the question of how Tradition and traditions are to be understood as to avoid fundamentalism and the excessive adherence to a past-oriented outlook on life. **Prof. Dr. Rade Kisić** (University of Belgrade) dealt with the phenomena of traditionalism and fundamentalism in Eastern Orthodoxy, showing that the eschatological orientation of Christian Tradition calls into question any resistance to change, novelty, and renewal. **Prof. Dr. Ivana Noble** (Charles University) looked at the misinterpretation of life-bearing Tradition in times of crisis, which confronted Christianity with various forms of fundamentalism, populist ideologies, and conspiracy theories. Prof. Noble argued that the spiritual practice of discernment helps Christian distinguish

between what is life-bearing in a Tradition and what is not. She claimed that, if the concept of 'living Tradition' proved to be helpful in the past, today's churches and societies need to embrace a 'discerning Tradition'.

The third session of the consultation – ***Changing traditions: Preserving identity through discontinuities*** – brought forth case studies to exemplify how various churches experience and reflect on changes in their ecclesial life and theology. Scheduled for the 7th of May, the session was divided into two sub-sessions. **Prof. Dr. Riccardo Burigana** (L'Istituto di Studi Ecumenici, Venice) and **Prof. Dr. Rolf J. Pöhler** (Theologische Hochschule Friedensau) were the two speakers of sub-session I. Prof. Burigana reflected on the ecumenical debate on Tradition during the Second Vatican Council, particular attention being given to the drafting process of *Dei Verbum* and to the Fourth Assembly of Faith and Constitution in Montreal (1963). Prof. Pöhler discussed the topic of continuity and change from a Free Church perspective. He looked at the search for identity amidst changes and discontinuities in three distinct free church communities: the German Baptist Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the New Apostolic Church. Sub-session II included presentations by **Dr. Evgeny Pilipenko** (SS. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Postgraduate Studies, Moscow) and **Prof. Dr. Myriam Wijlens** (University of Erfurt) & **Prof. Dr. Simone Sinn** (WCC/Ecumenical Institute of Bossey). Dr. Pilipenko addressed the issue of doctrinal development in Orthodox Christianity. The questions he answered in his presentation were related to the agent of doctrinal development and the compatibility between doctrinal development and ecclesial unity. In their joint presentation, Profs. Wijlens and Sinn reflected on change in moral discernment processes, with particular emphasis on insights provided by the 2021 study document *Churches and Moral Discernment: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia* by the Faith and Order Commission.

The fourth session –*Dynamics of Tradition: Living faith in changing times* – sought ecumenical answers to the many challenges faced by Christians in changing contexts. The first sub-session, which took place on the 9th of May, included a lecture by **Prof. Dr. Kati Tervo-Niemelä** (University of Eastern Finland) followed by a response offered by **Rev. Dr. Mark Zammit** (University of Malta). The lecture of Prof. Tervo-Niemelä focused on continuity and discontinuity of faith in families based on the result of a research project that gathered information from five countries: Finland, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and

Canada. She looked at the factors that explain continuity and discontinuity of faith by using mixed methods, which rely on survey data collection and three-generation family interviews. In his response, Dr. Zammit highlighted the fact that two interwoven elements are involved in the process of faith transmission in families: Tradition and culture. For their successful transmission from one generation to another, a few aspects need to be considered: the human person as agent of both; their historical and progressive nature; the importance of the community as people of God in the transmission of Tradition and culture. **Rev. Dr. James Hawkey** (Westminster Abbey) was the speaker of the second part (10th of May) of the fourth session. His lecture showed that, even though a lot of ecumenical progress on the issue of Tradition has been realized over the past decades, much more needs to be done so that churches can find coherence between their internal lives as churches and the way they relate externally with one another. Only by doing so, a united Christian voice can emerge to deal with the many challenges of contemporary societies. The respondent to Dr. Hawkey's lecture was **Dr. Adalberto Mainardi** (Monastic Communities of Bose and Cellole), who stressed, among other things, that particular attention should be given to the theme of ecumenical tradition. An ecumenical tradition is not a tradition among the many traditions of Christian Churches; it is rather a way of re-orienting all Christian traditions, without getting rid of their legitimate diversity.

The concluding lecture, delivered by **Prof. Dr. William Henn** (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome), explored the role of Tradition in ecumenical dialogues. Prof. Henn referred to the ecumenical efforts of overcoming the dichotomy between Scripture and Tradition, to the effective employment of Tradition in inter-Christian dialogues, the role of Tradition in the WCC document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), as well as to criteria for discerning authentic Tradition, which is a human-divine reality, from false traditions, which are merely human constructions.

The central themes of the consultations were discussed in small groups during **the short paper presentations**. More than thirty junior and senior scholars from all over Europe engaged in conversations, reflecting on Tradition considering pneumatology, hermeneutics, traditionalism, inequality, liturgy, canonical boundaries, patristic and modern theology, martyrology, the Eucharist,

ecclesiology, nationalism, freedom, ecclesial unity, spirituality, religious education, synodality, spiritual ecumenism.

Dr. Pavlo Smytsnyuk (Institute of Ecumenical Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv) joined **the membership assembly** online to reflect on the Russian-Ukrainian war and its impact on ecumenical relations. During the assembly, the members of the *Societas Oecumenica* decided to organize the 22nd Academic Consultation in Warsaw (Poland) from the 5th to the 10th of September 2024. The theme of the next consultation is dedicated to the 1700th anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325). In Malta, a new Standing Committee was elected: Dr. Johannes Oeldemann (Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institut in Paderborn) – President; Dr. Heta Hurskainen (University of Eastern Finland) – Secretary; Prof. Dr. Piotr Kopiec (John Paul II Catholic University in Lublin); Prof. Dr. Jennifer Wasmuth (University of Göttingen); and Dr. Viorel Coman (KU Leuven). Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit (Utrecht University) was nominated advisory of the Standing Committee; Drd. Agnes Slunitschek (Universität Würzburg) will continue to serve the *Societas Oecumenica* as a treasurer.

Dr. Viorel Coman

Former Secretary of the *Societas Oecumenica*