The local Council of Moscow of 1917–1918 is without doubt the greatest event in the recent history of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was the first council convoked since 1667 and the result of an astonishing renewal—scarcely known until then—of Russian Orthodox theology at the beginning of the twentieth century. This council addressed, with exceptional courage, the myriad questions that the evolution of society was presenting to Christians: Church government, mission, preaching, liturgy, monasticism, parochial life. Many of the problems then raised still seem particularly relevant today: the role of the laity in the Church, the place of women, the position of the Church in society, the unity of Christians. Some of the decisions taken at that time allowed the Russian Church to survive the Soviet period and formed the basis for its present renewal. These include the reestablishment of the patriarchate and church councils and parish renewal.

But over and above the council’s results is its deliberately “conciliar” method, in the spirit of sobornost, so dear to Russian tradition—anxious always to place adequate emphasis on the charism of each part of the Church: bishops, priests, the laity. This is most extraordinary in many respects. Without attempting to idealize one period with respect to another, in this case the “Moscow” period vis-à-vis that of the “synodal,” the council posed in a new light each one of the questions noted above with constant reference to the fathers and to earlier councils, while seeking to adapt to the society of its time. Unfortunately, historical circumstances prevented the assembly from finishing its work. It is the task of the Russian Church to continue the reflections begun by the Council of Moscow, with due regard to the context of that period as well as the present situation.

Thus it is with gratitude that we extend our blessing to this monograph on the Council of Moscow of 1917–1918 and recommend it to readers. Ten years ago, access to the archives of the council was made available, and its acts and decisions were published. Since then several studies have been made—both in Russia and abroad—on this important page in the history
of the Russian Church. However, no author has, until now, undertaken a synthetic presentation, both historical and theological, of the amplitude of what was at stake at the Council of Moscow.

Now it has been done with the publication of this book, which proposes an ecclesiological reflection not only on the council’s decisions but also on its composition and its functioning, as well as on its reception, especially by the theologians of the emigration, known as the “Paris School.” The book thus fills a gap and is a landmark in the study of this council. In it, Father Hyacinthe Destivelle demonstrates both an unparalleled knowledge of the Russian Church and a most discerning understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology. His work is truly a study in ecumenical theology. Without ever slipping onto the beaten tracks of a critical or comparative approach, it addresses with keen insight the very questions that the Russian Church itself is asking today.

A first edition of this work was published in Italian in 2003 by Qiquajon editions of the monastery of Bose and it will soon be available in Russian. We give thanks to God that it is now available at the Editions du Cerf, which for decades now has contributed to publication of works of the Russian tradition in the French-speaking world. This has included publication in the prestigious Cogitatio Fidei collection, which included L’Église du Saint Esprit by Nicholas Afanasiev in 1975. This French version has the added interest of offering in an appendix a full translation of the council’s decrees, making this volume a most valuable tool for further study. Apart from its scholarly merits, this book bears witness to the emergence of a new generation of theologians, and is a sign of hope for the future of relations between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

+ Hilarion
Metropolitan of Volokolamsk
and Chair of the Moscow
Patriarchate Department for
External Church Relations

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If the purpose of writing a preface to a book, above all, is to attract the attention of the public to its importance, presenting the work of Hyacinthe Destivelle, *The Moscow Council (1917–1918)*, is the easiest of tasks. It is a singular effort, indispensable for anyone who wants to understand the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church. More broadly, this study should interest all those engaged in theological reflection in the field of ecumenism. Ecumenical studies must necessarily include the concepts of the synodal and conciliar aspects of the Church, both of which were analyzed in depth and received some original solutions during this council. We rejoice, too, that the study in question is accompanied by a translation—for the first time in a western language—of *The Definitions and Decrees of the Sacred Council of the Russian Orthodox Church*, as well as the *Statute of the Local Council of the Orthodox Church of All Russia*. A study such as this, then, is altogether worthy to take its place in the *Cogitatio Fidei* series, which has in part continued the collection of ecclesiological studies *Unam Sanctam* founded by Yves Congar.

**A Tool for Understanding the Russian Orthodox Church of Yesterday and Today and of Its Ecclesiology**

Without a shadow of doubt, the present study can be classed alongside the annotated edition of the *Spiritual Regulation* of Peter the Great, by Father C. Tondini in 1874.¹ We have here in Destivelle’s book a magisterial study that will facilitate understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church as it evolved in time in an even more fundamental way than what can be found in the work of Tondini. The latter published a document of the tsar that was, to be sure, normative, while we have here in Destivelle the acts of a council that is, as has been so often and justifiably said, the historical equivalent of Vatican II.
The page of a fierce and seemingly endless persecution of the Church in Russia has at last been turned, and the Russian Orthodox Church has already entered upon a period of reconstruction and renewal, which should allow it quickly to take pride of place in world Orthodoxy. All the same, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev echoed an opinion prevalent in his Church, when he wrote:

The questions posed by the Council of 1917–1918 continue to await their answers. They are as pertinent today as then. It seems to me that we cannot really make progress in many areas of church life without examining the heritage of this Council, and evaluating both its decisions in the context of our contemporary situation and our contemporary situation in the light of its decisions.  

Thus it is of the utmost importance that researchers gain access to such valuable documents up to now never translated in the West. Apart from those engaged in research, all readers would benefit from a real introduction to this council, carefully situated in its historical, social, and theological context. What is more, they will be able to study the actual texts of its decisions.

In 1917, the Russian Church was freed from the straitjacket of Peter the Great’s *Spiritual Regulation* and from control by the lay chief procurator of the government within the Holy Synod. Autonomous for the first time in its history vis-à-vis the state, it set about reconstructing its institutional life and redefining its authentic mission. We shall see how the council reestablished the patriarchate suppressed by Peter the Great. But we shall also learn—and this is less widely known—how this same council took on the reform of dioceses and parishes and their network of schools; how it aimed at upholding the monastic life, especially in the case of educated monks, from whose ranks the bishops were normally selected; and how it discussed relationships with the Old Believers and with other Christian churches in an approach already pre-ecumenical. Regarding more fundamental issues in Christian life, the directives of the council concerning preaching and mission are of special interest. At that time, just as today, Russia contained important minority religions, for example Islam and Buddhism as well as indigenous groupings among whom a very
active mission was developing. The reforms adopted by the council in the area of theological studies were equally important as were the efforts made to renew Church discipline and restore life to the liturgy. This latter question remains just as relevant today as in the past, for liturgy celebrated in Slavonic remains incomprehensible to the majority of the faithful. This listing—and it is not exhaustive—of the themes treated at the Moscow Council should convince readers of how apposite is the comparison between this council and Vatican II: both dealt with the most pressing of contemporary issues!

Destivelle examines each of these complex questions, freely citing historians such as Leroy-Beaulieu and Freeze, both of whom paid special attention to interactions between the Orthodox Church and Russian society. He is equally alert to the theological reception of this council during the Soviet period and by the Russian theologians of the emigration, in particular those associated themselves with the Saint Sergius Theological Institute in Paris—among others, Florovsky, Bulgakov, Afanasiev, Schmemann, and Meyendorff.

Naturally, the author does not speculate as to what the future will be, but his work will remain, for a long time, indispensable for all who are interested in the future of the Russian Orthodox Church, a future that will most certainly refer to this council and be guided by its orientations.

A Tool for the Study of an Event That Is Important and Promising for Ecclesiology

The Moscow Council of 1917–1918 was indeed a local council, but it is of truly universal import. First of all, it allows us to observe, in its most technical details, how an Orthodox Church sets about reforming itself. By this very fact, it gives the lie to those who caricature Orthodoxy, believing it a dead tradition. On the contrary, this council shows that tradition in the Orthodox Church is a living reality. Freed from its constraints, it can once again link up with the reforming precedents established by this council. In his celebrated work Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église, Yves Congar demonstrated, at that time, to what extent this reform was truly evangelical and how, without it, hope for the unity of Christians would lose its momentum.
In 1917–1918 the Russian Orthodox Church actually began reforming its institutions, and by so doing, offered a remarkable example to the rest of the Christian world. Churches are not divided simply by what they teach. They can also be separated by the place that elements not emanating from pure divine law occupy in their definitions. The Orthodox Church undertook this reform inspired by an intuition far ahead of its time, one with a most important ecumenical value.

The council anticipated the extraordinary ecumenical convergence that is beginning to emerge today in the efforts for Church unity. This convergence was enunciated for the first time at Lausanne in 1927, on the occasion of the first World Conference on Faith and Order. This is what was said:

In the constitution of the primitive Church, is to be found the episcopal charge, the council of elders, and the community of the faithful. Each one of these systems of Church organization (episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational) was, for many centuries, accepted in the past, and is practiced today by many Christian communities. Each of these is regarded by its tenants as essential to the good order of the Church. Consequently, we hold that, under certain conditions, yet to be elucidated, they ought to take, simultaneously, their respective places in the organization of a reunited Church.8

This recommendation was put forward again, as we know, by the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM) document of Faith and Order at Lima in 1982.9 The text was adopted by the representatives of all the member Churches, that is to say by those of the Orthodox Churches and those of the Catholic Church, which as full member of this Commission of the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, represents a third of its delegates.10

There can be no doubt that it was the Orthodox Church that pioneered these perspectives in its Council of 1917–1918—even before they were put forward at Lausanne.11 In reestablishing the patriarchate, which was suppressed by Peter the Great, the council reestablished the authority of “one” in the Church. Simultaneously, by introducing the elective and representative principle at all Church levels including the parishes, and by prescribing the election of bishops in their dioceses, it also reestablished the authority of “all.” The composition and functioning of the local coun-
cil, which wields supreme authority in the Russian Church, illustrates very well the remarkable way in which the principles that the BEM were to enunciate had already been anticipated and put in place by the 1917–1918 Council. All diocesan bishops were *ex officio* members, and they were accompanied by two other elected clerics, one of whom was a priest, and by three members of the laity, also elected. All members of the council had a deliberative vote, but the bishops had a special role in function of their ministry because “the general laws or the decisions touching on fundamental principles” had to be approved specifically by three quarters of the bishop members of the council. If, after amendment by the council, the proposition was rejected by the bishops a second time, it could not be adopted. We can see the sheer originality of this procedure, which is in no way comparable to the two-house parliamentary system, in which each house has its own members and separate sessions. Neither can we describe the bishops’ action as a right of veto, for this right is in principle exercised by an external body on a deliberating assembly.

If it is always possible to question the appropriateness of the institutions set in motion by the Council of 1917–1918, it is impossible not to appreciate the courageous effort at reform, even though it was never concretely realized. Neither would it be right to see in it a democratization of the Church, according to a political reading such as that of Kartashev, who—strongly influenced by the context of his times—appears to overstate matters. More seriously still, it would be myopic not to recognize the council’s raising of a fundamental question posed to all those Churches that seem to pay little heed to the fundamental rights of the baptized based in the sacraments. To ignore this would be tantamount to renouncing the elaboration of a canon law with an ecumenical orientation. In the Catholic Church, a project along this line, *Lex Ecclesiae Fundamentalis*, acclaimed in the wake of Vatican II, came to nothing, and the revised *Code of Canon Law* of 1983 almost entirely neglected this perspective, in spite of several serious publications on the matter. The problem appeared to be an inability to surmount the conceptual dichotomy, community/society, which the Council of 1917 resolved in impressive fashion.

This present study was conducted conjointly at the Institut supérieur d’études oecuméniques at the Catholic Institute of Paris under my direction, and at the Saint-Serge Institute of Orthodox Theology, under the direction of the professor of modern history of the Russian Orthodox
Church, Prince Dimitri Shakhovskoy, Professor at the University of Haute-Bretagne; the second reader was Professor Nicholas Lossky (University of Paris-Nanterre). The jury by unanimous vote judged that the work undertaken by Hyacinthe Destivelle will remain for many years an indispensable tool for an understanding of the Russian Church and its future, and, more widely still, for reflection on the theology of communion. Even though much has still to be said about this latter, it is henceforth looked upon as the ecumenical model par excellence of ecclesiology.

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INTRODUCTION

In Russian, the single word sobor\(^1\) is used to designate both the council and a church building. As an adjective, the word qualifies, in the creed, the third element of the Church: soborniy. This manifests the close link that, in Russian thought, unites the Church and the council—to the point that sometimes the two tend to become confused. As for the Church, it is by nature conciliar, and the council manifests the very essence of ecclesiality.

No Russian council shows this more clearly than the local Council\(^2\) of the Russian Orthodox Church\(^3\) held in Moscow from August 15 (28), 1917, to September 7 (20), 1918.\(^4\) The most obvious result of this council is the restoration of the patriarchate. Undoubtedly, this remarkable decision was the most important for the immediate history of the Russian Church, but in reality the exceptional character of the council rests in its very existence. After two centuries of silence, the Russian Church, for the first time since the Great Moscow Council of 1666–1667, had once more made its voice heard. The particular quality of this council is due also to its preparation, which lasted twelve years, during which time all the bishops were invited to prepare reports. Three commissions held sessions. Countless articles and manifestos were published by a press that displayed an astonishing vitality. This council was likewise unique in its composition: an assembly of 564 members, which included 299 elected laity representing every aspect of Church life, and all enjoying a deliberative vote. It was unique too because of the quality of its members, some of whom—Evgeniy N. Trubetskoy or Sergius N. Bulgakov, for example—gave witness to the remarkable renewal of Russian theology at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was singular also because it raised numerous questions that concerned the entire Church, questions that today appear amazingly relevant: the place of the laity, missionary work, preaching, the role of women in the Church. Finally,
This council was exceptional because of the disruptive context in which it was held: a world war and a communist revolution that began a persecution of Christians to a degree unsurpassed until then. A great number of the council members—bishops, priests, monks, laity—were to die as martyrs during and especially after its deliberations, thus transforming this council into a true council of witnesses to the faith, into the largest assembly of future saints in the history of the Russian Church.

The object of this study is to present the Council of 1917–1918 from the point of view of its decrees. A presentation from the historical perspective or from that of its acts—or again from the viewpoint of one of its members—would likewise have been a possibility. The choice made can be justified for several reasons. First of all, the republication in 1994 of the only official version of these decrees allowed us, in spite of its imperfections, to have access to fairly well defined documents, whereas the acts of the council are, at present, accessible only with some difficulty. At the same time, it gave us the opportunity to provide a complete translation of these documents. This translation appears as appendices to this volume. On the other hand, this council has such an aura about it and has been praised to such an extent that it has been proclaimed “Russia’s Vatican II,” at times confusing topics for debate with the council’s decisions themselves. For this reason, it seemed important to show what had in fact been defined: its decrees—the fruit of compromises after lengthy discussions—were often formulated in a truly balanced fashion. Finally, the decrees alone allow us to make objective comparisons with subsequent decrees issued by the Orthodox Church in Russia and in Europe, and thus to envisage, beyond its undeniable historical importance, the truly theological reception of this council.

Given that our main aim is to present the council, the study of its decrees and their reception is preceded by three parts whose object is to explain the council’s origins, to trace its remarkable preparation, and to explain its composition and its functioning, especially as concerns the process of decision making according to its statute (which we shall also offer in translation in the appendix).

The council would be an enigma without a brief presentation of its historical context (part 1). This will enable the reader to understand its causes and its origins, for the situation of the Russian Church at the beginning of the twentieth century is a paradox. On the one hand, it was “in paralysis”—to employ Dostoevsky’s vocabulary—by the iron-clad ad-
ministrative strictures imposed during the synodal period. At the same
time, however, it was experiencing a renewal in every domain—the pro-
motion of the idea of conciliarity, sobornost’, being one of its more positive
fruits. The Council of Moscow, before being an antidote to this paralysis, is
most certainly the result of this renewal.

The council was preceded by twelve long years of preparation (part 2).
In fact, it was in 1905 that the Council of 1917–1918 began in reality, in the
context of “Bloody Sunday” and the edict proclaiming religious tolerance,
due to the simultaneous initiative of members of the Church and of the
first constitutional government. We shall see from texts of the memoranda
of the first three principal authors of the conciliar process that their moti-
vations were, in reality, very different. In 1906, on the basis of a comprehen-
sive enquiry sent to the bishops, a “preconciliar commission” launched its
first proposals, synthesized in 1912 by a “preconciliar consultative commit-
tee.” But it was necessary to wait for the revolutionary upheaval of 1917 be-
fore the Church, put in a most unusual situation by the abdication of the
tsar, could seriously put her mind to the business of the council. Aided by
the Provisional Government and in conjunction with the Holy Synod, a
Preconciliar Committee prepared the convocation of the council. This was
scheduled for August 15 (28), 1917. It would not be possible to understand
the council without these twelve years of preparation, which permitted the
commissions to submit projects which were often the fruit of many years of
work. Ultimately, even if it had been impossible to convoke the council, the
preparatory work in itself would have been an event of exceptional interest.

Following this historical introduction, a synchronic look at the com-
position and functioning of the council will be necessary, in order to under-
stand the context of its decrees (part 3). In fact, the prime interest of the
council is, without doubt, its statute. The Preconciliar Committee, after
many debates, had opened up the council to nonepiscopal clerics and to the
laity, elected on a representative basis by a three-degree system, and, as in
the case of the bishops, having a deliberative vote. In order to safeguard
episcopal authority the original procedure, nevertheless, reserved for the
bishops—gathered as a distinct unit within the council—the right to veto
decisions taken at a plenary assembly. The real composition of the coun-
cil, reflecting the Russian Church on the eve of the revolution, was shot
through with all the varying currents of thought about the Church at that
time. However, the common external threat contributed to the cementing
of these different forces that sought above all to maintain the Church’s survival right through the three sessions held between August 15 (28), 1917, and September 7 (20), 1918.

The placing of events in perspective allows us to enter into the main part of this work: an attempt at a synthetic presentation of the council’s decrees (part 4). These latter are for the most part the fruit of compromise, after intense debates in commissions and plenary assemblies, prepared during twelve years of reflection in diverse preconciliar commissions and in the press. Naturally, only a systematic study of the debates, their context, and the various reports would afford an understanding of the implications and the import of each of these decrees. Our study—opting for a synthesis rather than for a thesis—will limit itself to a commentary on the actual texts of these decisions, referring to the context only when obscure points need clarification. This general presentation of the decrees will allow us to understand better, beyond their apparent disorder, the profound unity and the underlying theme. In fact, adopted in haste and according to an agenda constantly interrupted by circumstances, the official version of the decrees is not exactly a well-structured whole. Nevertheless, three important areas can be discerned: the conciliar organization of the Church, with—at every level—an introduction of the principle of conciliarity; the renewal of pastoral activity and the reform of Church discipline; and, finally, relations of the Church with the state and with the revolution.

Lastly, it would be a paradox not to study the reception of a council that in actual fact claimed to lay great emphasis on conciliarity, understood not simply as according absolute power to the institution—even to that of a council—but as a true way of life for the Church as a whole. Thus it will be necessary to attempt an evaluation of the reception of the council’s decrees, not only in Church practice, but also from the theological viewpoint (part 5). This evaluation is by no means easy, first of all because these decisions were never widely circulated nor always honestly recorded, and on the other hand, because political conditions made their application well nigh impossible. Nevertheless, we shall try to see to what extent these decrees were able to be applied, not only in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, but also in western Europe; and to present the judgments of some well-known theologians on the work of the Moscow Council of 1917–1918.