

# Theological Foundations for Eparchial Pastoral Councils: An Eastern Perspective

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2004

The Christian East is widely recognized as representing a way of living out the Christian faith that is quite different from the Western or Latin experience. The Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* emphasized that this Eastern distinctiveness, far from being a threat to the Church's unity, needs to be preserved as a richness, as an alternative manifestation of the faith. This applies not only to differences of ritual and discipline, but even to theological formulations:

In the study of revealed truth East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and confessing divine things. It is hardly surprising, then, if sometimes one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed them better. In such cases, these various theological formulations are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting (#17).

An examination of the theological foundations of pastoral councils from an Eastern perspective is a worthwhile endeavor, as it will yield insights that are not necessarily self-evident in the Latin tradition. It is also important because of the existence of Catholic Eastern Churches in our country alongside the Latin Church. Although they constitute a minority of the Catholic faithful in the United States, they are bearers of traditions of the Christian East without which the full catholicity of the Church is obscured.

## A. The Conciliar Nature of the Church

Any presentation of Eastern perspectives on a particular theological theme will necessarily draw upon Orthodox sources.<sup>1</sup> For the Orthodox, the theme of synodality or the conciliar nature of the Church, often described with the Slavic word *sobornost*, is of capital importance, intimately related to their understanding of the Trinity, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the very constitution of the Church. Russian lay theologian Aleksy Khomiakov (1804-1860)<sup>2</sup> furnished the classical definition of *sobornost*. For him, the term contained an entire confession of faith, expressing the reality of the Church as a mystery of unity, as the gathering of believers in love and freedom in the image of the Trinity.

Khomiakov saw even the discernment of truth as a constant exchange among all the members of the Church as it moves through history. No individual can possess the fullness of truth. Every individual

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1 For a thoughtful collection of papers on the theme, "What is Eastern Catholic Theology?," see *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 39 (1998) n. 1.

2 Studies on Khomiakov and his ecclesiology include: Arseniev, Nicholas S., "Alexey Khomyakov," *Saint Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 5 (1961) 3-10; Geraldo Cioffari, *La sobornost nella teologia russa: La visione della chiesa negli scrittori ecclesiastici della prima metà del XIX secolo* (Bari, 1978); Paul Patrick O'Leary, *The Triune Church: A Study in the Ecclesiology of A. S. Xomjakov* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1982); Mary Grace Ritchey, "Khomiakov and His Theology of Sobornost," *Diakonia* 17 (1982) 53-62; and Joost Van Rossum, "A. S. Khomiakov and Orthodox Ecclesiology," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35 (1991) 67-82.

is free to express his or her understanding of the faith, but Christ alone is able to express this truth fully. Therefore, every theologian must be subject to the judgment of the Church, the ecclesial community, as a kind of collective consciousness within which the full truth resides. In Khomiakov's words, "the partial insight that each Christian has in his own measure finds its fullness only in the organic opinion of all." Even bishops are both teachers and disciples of their flocks: they too submit their theological opinions to the whole Church and must listen to the voice of the Church they govern.

## **B. Understanding of the Trinity**

This conciliar understanding of the Church is based on the Eastern approach to Trinitarian theology. In contrast to the West, which has tended to begin with the single divine nature and subsequently consider the distinctiveness of the three divine persons or *hypostases* within the Trinity, the East has tended to begin with the three divine *hypostases* and only subsequently consider the single divine nature. The Eastern approach results in an emphasis on God as a communion of persons who are distinct from one another yet totally and perfectly transparent to one another, united in perfect love. God is within God's very self a community; God is social, even conciliar.

For most Easterners, this understanding of the Trinity is directly linked to what is expressed in the term *sobornost*. With humanity created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26), we too must in some sense be an image of the Trinity as a communion of love. The image of God does not reside then in human individuals but in the relationships that exist among them; the triune likeness can be realized only in an interpersonal community. Every human community – whether it be a parish, family, diocese, work place, or social club – has as its vocation to be transformed gradually by grace into an image of the Trinity where unity and diversity, freedom and solidarity, are reconciled in harmony.<sup>3</sup> This image of the Trinity is precisely what the Church is called to be; only within this communion of love can Christians be saved. As Khomiakov once wrote, "We know that if any one of us falls he falls alone; but no one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her, and in unity with all her other members."<sup>4</sup>

## **C. The Role of the Holy Spirit**

Another distinctive aspect of Eastern theology is the understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Orthodox theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon has identified two pneumatologies, one more typical of the West and one more typical of the East, that can be traced back to the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> The first pneumatology, predominant in the West, views the Spirit as given to certain individuals as a strength that allows them to accomplish particular works, a mission. The Church is then a people dispersed or sent out to build the Kingdom of God. According to the second pneumatology, more characteristic of the East, the Spirit is the creator of communion, whose main effect is to create community by gathering people together rather than dispersing them for mission.

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3 Kallistos of Diokleia [Timothy Ware], "The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity," *Sobornost Incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 8:2 (1986), 6-23.

4 *The Church is One* (Seattle: St Nectarios Press, 1979), 40.

5 Zizioulas, John, "Implications ecclésiologiques de deux types de pneumatologie," *Communion Sanctorum, Mélanges J.-J. Von Allmen* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), 141-154.

Here, it is not individuals creating the Church but the Church making individual identity possible; true personal identity emerges only in and through community. The primary manifestation of this communion in which persons find their identity is the Eucharist, for here the community's true nature is revealed in its fullness.

The division between East and West was followed by the independent preservation and development of these two strands of the tradition. In the West, there grew a spirit of activism upon seeing the Spirit primarily at work in individuals, but in the East, pneumatology became linked to the in-gathering of the faith community at the Eucharist. The Eucharistic community was the context in which the Spirit works, even a manifestation of the future kingdom. Missions, although not excluded, were always subordinate to the Eucharist; the first task of missionaries was to build a church edifice because the Eucharistic assembly was meant to carry out the missionary task. Here everything is seen in terms of relationship.

#### **D. Exercising Ministry within Community**

The emphasis on relationship applies also to ministry, which, in the East, is inconceivable outside a community context. Every ordination must take place within the Eucharistic celebration where all the ministries are present. The bishop can ordain, not because of a special personal power, but because he is president of the Eucharistic community assembled in the Spirit's power. Ordination is not conceived of as a separation from the community, but as the bestowal of a new position within it. The East even insists that ministers be solidly grounded in concrete permanent human relationships. In most cases, the options available to the candidate for priesthood are the permanent bonds of marriage (for parish priests) or those of monastic life. The Eastern understanding of the Trinity, of the Church as an image of the Trinity, and the role of the Spirit as the creator of the communion that constitutes the image underlie this emphasis on relationship.

Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae (1903-1993) drew some interesting ecclesiological conclusions from the Orthodox approach to trinitarian theology and the activity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> He saw ordained ministry as having a special mission to foster the unity of the Christian community, exercised in the context of communion. The priest holds a local liturgical community in unity by representing or embodying all its members in the sacrifice of the Lord. The bishop maintains unity between the priests of his diocese, represents Christ in this larger area, and ordains priests for it. The unity of the entire Church is maintained through the communion of all the bishops among themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Staniloae's understanding of the Church as a reflection of the communion of the Trinity underlies his assertion that Christ left a communion of apostles, and their successors the communion of bishops, for the guidance of the Church rather than a single apostle and his successors. Just as the communion within the Trinity is the mode of its unity, so communion is the mode of the unity of the Church. Every bishop must be integrated both into the life of his local church and into the communion of the episcopate to fulfill his function of fostering the Church's unity.

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<sup>6</sup> For a collection of theological essays by Staniloae in English translation, see *Theology and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> *Teologia Dogmatic Ortodox* (Bucharest: Biblical Institute, 1978), 2:241.

Reflecting on ordained ministry in the context of the natural synodality of humanity created in the image of the Trinity, Staniloae insists that any ministry in the Church can exist only in relation to the whole ecclesial body:

The Church conceived as a living organism, held in unity by the Holy Spirit understood as interpersonal relation in the Church, as a personal fluid flowing from Christ the Head [and] linking the members to one another and to the Head, makes impossible the conception of the exercise of a function, or of any gift in the Church, outside the relation with the whole ecclesial community. ... The Holy Spirit conceived as relation between all believers and all ministries makes individualism in general or hierarchical exclusivism impossible.<sup>8</sup>

## **E. Discerning the Truth in a Communion of Faith**

Staniloae applies the same principles to the process by which the Church discerns the true faith. This discernment cannot be limited to the hierarchy, but must involve the entire ecclesial community:

An unlimited truth like that of revelation cannot be contained and made fruitful by isolated individuals in a brief existence, but only through a many-sided approach, by multiple capacities united among themselves; this is a common work of the multitudes of the faithful and of generations, animated by the same faith in the same truth, by love for it and therefore by the desire for solidarity between them, by the desire to assimilate all that which each member of the community grasps by helping each other in its realization, by imitating the better ones. The experiences and insights obtained by individuals become a good of the community, and this good in its turn is assimilated and made fruitful by each individual, who, although he strives to move beyond the individual aspect, brings something of his own to the understanding and living of the common truth.<sup>9</sup>

A special communion exists among those ordained to the same ministry. This is most clearly shown in the communion of the episcopate and is expressed in its synodal structure. The communion of the episcopate not only reflects the basic synodal structure of the entire Church, but also images to the Church that the Trinity as communion of persons is the source of all holiness and grace. Staniloae emphasizes that the synodality of the episcopate has meaning only within the wider context of the communion of the believing community. These are not two communions, but two aspects of the same reality dependent upon one another. He describes episcopal communion as a small circle within a larger one that remains open to the larger one. The episcopate is necessary for the whole body, yet sustained by the body.

In this model, the communion of the episcopate exists within the mutual love of the general communion of the Church. The hierarchy not only teaches the faithful, but also learns from them and profits from the richness of their experience. The faithful receive the teaching of the hierarchy and deepen and nuance these principles in the context of their own geography and history.

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<sup>8</sup> "Sfântul Duh și sobornicitatea Bisericii," *Ortodoxia* 19 (1967), 47.

<sup>9</sup> "Autoritatea Bisericii," *Studii Teologice* 16 (1964), 186.

Metropolitan John Zizioulas has also drawn a number of ecclesiological implications from the Orthodox understanding of pneumatology.<sup>10</sup> In his view, neither Catholic nor Orthodox theology has really thought through the implications of considering the Holy Spirit as more than an adjunct to the Church enlivening a pre-existing structure, but as *constitutive* of the Church, that is, as actually making the Church exist. Indeed, it is the role of the Spirit to constitute Christ as a corporate being; in the Spirit's power, Christ does not *have* a body but *is* a body, which is the Church. For Zizioulas, the Church is manifested as this corporate Body of Christ first and foremost at the Eucharistic assembly over which the bishop presides.

If pneumatology is to be taken as constitutive of the Church, there will also be implications for the ordained ministry and particularly for the role of bishops. First, every form of ministry must be seen as intimately connected to the community:

The mystery of the Spirit is one of personalization and this means that in dividing the Church into "orders" he renders her a relational entity in which every member is charismatic precisely because he is a member, i.e., related to the others, and this without confusion of ministries. This is a paradox and the only way we can express this is, it seems to us, by calling ministry a specificity of relationship within the body.<sup>11</sup>

For Zizioulas, the ministry of the local church converges on the person of the bishop. The bishop is not only a part of the community, but is inconceivable without his own community.

The role of the bishop is intimately linked to the preservation and expression of the catholicity of the Church, understood as the transcendence of all divisions among the disparate groups within the community, a role manifest most clearly at the Eucharistic assembly that must bring together persons of all ages, sexes, professions, etc. It is here that the Church is revealed most clearly to be catholic. Catholicity also implies the transcendence of all divisions among the various orders within the community. No ministry can be understood as outside or above the local community, and no charism can be possessed individually, even if it can be exercised only by individuals.

The mining of this Eastern tradition played a significant role in the Western liturgical, biblical, and patristic renewal that came to fruition at the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant observers at the Council successfully lobbied for a greater emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the conciliar documents, and a stronger ecclesiology of communion, moving away from the older concept of the Church as a juridical society. Melkite Eastern bishops took the occasion to describe the close relationship between the clergy and laity in their tradition and to call for a greater appreciation of the laity's role in the Church.<sup>12</sup>

One of the results was the provision in the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishop in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, for the establishment of diocesan or eparchial pastoral councils. The existence of such councils had no precedent in the legislation of the Latin or Eastern Catholic Churches, but such

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10 Several essays by Zizioulas on these themes have been published under the title *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

11 "The Pneumatological Dimension of the Church," *International Catholic Review* 1 (1974), 151.

12 *L'Église Grecque Melkite au Concile: Discours et notes du Patriarche Maximos IV et des Prélats de son Église au Concile oecuménique Vatican II.* (Beirut: Dar-Al-Kalima, 1967), 269-275.

councils reflect a deeper appreciation of the insights of the Christian East about the nature of the Church and the role of the Holy Spirit and laity in its life. Certainly, from an Eastern perspective such councils are no mere appendage to the life of a diocese, but a manifestation of an essential aspect of what the Church is in her inner life. Even though the council has a consultative rather than deliberative role, its existence reveals the fact that the bishop exists not only for the Church but also within the Church. The Christian East would insist that no bishop, indeed no human being, is self-sufficient or has on his own a complete knowledge of the truth, a clear grasp of the problems facing his community. In an honest and fruitful exchange of information and points of view with the faithful of his diocese, the bishop will be able to learn from the pastoral council and come to a clearer discernment of what he is called to do as the point of unity of all the faithful in his pastoral care. As a permanent structure of a particular Church of God, the eparchial pastoral council can be a vital element in building up the communion of love that Christians are called to be, in the image of the Triune God.

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