

PRIMACY, CONCILIARITY, AUTOCEPHALY AND THE “NEGATIVE” IDENTITY DEVELOPED IN MODERN ORTHODOXY

Moving now to the endangered unity in the Orthodox Church, having heard by Rev. Prof. Giacomo Puglisi about the conciliar process in the Catholic Church,¹ I would like as a prelude to remind you what a great Christian thinker, Bl. Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*: “*Plurality* - in other words *conciliarity* – that does not lead to *unity* is **confusion**. *Unity* that does not depend upon *plurality* (i.e. *conciliarity*) is **tyranny**”.²

The Church of **Rome** declined the practice of granting autocephaly to her (western) jurisdiction, because she realized that this may give a higher priority to *political principles* as well as *culturalism*. The division with Protestantism was due to the denial of a possible ecclesial autonomy by the Church of Rome (1517), and few years later (1596) moved to the «unionist» Council of Brest-Litovsk. In reality, «autonomy» received entirely different path, compared to what later happened in Eastern Christianity, both in form and in content, when the Eastern Catholic Churches were *united* with Rome, thus accepting the reality of «*Liturgical Ritus*», but remaining further away from the reality of a real *Eucharistic union*.

The Church of **Constantinople**, within a geopolitical context of the last two centuries, *took the risk* of granting Autocephaly. However, the Orthodox people, falling under the Protestant influence and driven by the ideals of modernity, turned autocephaly they were granted into an *ecclesiastical culturalism* and a political nationalistic ideology!

The authentic Orthodox *witness* in today’s world, especially after the recent events in Africa revealed this real *ecclesiological problem*. What lies behind this present crisis is related to a distorted understanding of *primacy* and *conciliarity*. To these primary markers of Orthodox ecclesiology one further element came into the fore and need also to be examined: *autocephaly*. And I will start from this secondary, but important, issue.

Autocephaly

My Greek Orthodox Church two centuries ago started a series of schismatic situations, causing in fact a wave all over Eastern Europe of uncanonical nationalistic independent Orthodox Churches. Autocephaly, originally thought as the necessary step for the people’s national identity and aspirations, is now considered, at least by all Greek theologians, as the unfortunate move that contributed to the heresy of *ethnophyletism* and nationalistic tendencies in the Orthodox Church.

The present Ukrainian crisis has revealed, and brought to the surface, yet another problem, indirectly related to primacy: *Uniatism*. This structure within the Catholic Church – historically developed mainly in the geographic area of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – has, rightly or wrongly,³ negatively affected the progress of the bilateral dialogue between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. Today, most of us consider these Churches no longer as an obstacle, but maybe as bridges towards Orthodox-Catholic unity.⁴

The new situation in Ukraine, with the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox in that country, unexpectedly brought also a wider *ecumenical revival*.⁵ And ironically enough with the contribution of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community.⁶

Conciliarity

Conciliarity and primacy are two important aspects of Christian ecclesiology.⁷ Conciliarity is more or less an expression of the Church’s *charismatic* nature. By the

same logic, the concept of *primacy* for centuries now – mainly in Protestant theology, but in the recent past also in some parts of modern Orthodox theology – is associated only with the *institutional* expression of the Church. Nevertheless, it is to be found both in the New Testament and in patristic theology of the undivided Church, where it acquired not only a canonical legitimation, but also a theological foundation.⁸

In the early stages of Christianity, the Church functioned as a corporate entity, a real “body of Christ.” Gradually, however, all the canonical decisions were taken without a real *consensus* by the entire Christian community. The 3rd millennium, with the enormous scientific and technological development, sooner or later will increase the horizon of the *conciliar process* in its proper and authentic use.

Pope Francis’ initiative to start an authentic lengthy conciliar process in the Catholic Church, engaging the entire “people of God,” will not only remove yet another obstacle towards a eucharistic union with her Orthodox “sister” Church; it will remind us – and alert us for – the profound meaning of our Orthodox ecclesiological identity.

Primacy

The most serious theological issue at stake, however, for our Orthodox witness is a diaconal *primacy*. The informal refusal within contemporary Orthodoxy to accept a Church with a visible head (a *Πρώτος*) destroys the basis of the Church’s unity. The imperative necessity of having a *primus* at a *universal* level, is based on the existence of primacy in liturgy – if we believe that *lex orandi lex est credendi* – in all levels of ecclesiastical life: autocephaly, metropolitan, episcopal even at a local parish level. Any novel perception of Church unity, based primarily on power, (arithmetic superiority), which is currently discussed on the basis of the Holy Canons’ inability to solve recent geopolitical situations, and of course mainly promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church on the basis of Moscow being the capital of a currently dominant empire, as previously was the case with the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the city of New Rome, the capital of the Roman empire, can hardly have any ecclesiological justification.

Orthodoxy’s negative identity

Unfortunately, for many centuries, especially in the second half of the second millennium, we Orthodox have unconsciously developed a “*negative*” Orthodox identity: we are not what the Bible and our Tradition have left us as a legacy, but what the others, mainly the Catholics, are not, *i.e.*, without a primacy, the visible expression of the Church’s unity, accompanied of course by conciliarity. In addition, the Christian East lost, unconsciously of course, the main point of reference to her identity, *i.e.* the “*oneness*” of the Church of Christ.

It is not accidental that the very name she was given is “*Orthodoxia*,” right doctrine, with little or minimal reference to “*catholicity*”. It was inevitable, therefore, to develop an attitude of introversion, a very conservative approach to her missional responsibility, something that was mainly limited to the preservation of her rich “tradition,” and a reserved stance towards ecumenism, the main goal of which is the quest for *unity*, the overcoming the scandal of ecclesial separation and schism, and the restoration of the “One” Church of Christ.

Quite naturally then, the Orthodox conceived of their Church more as the “Church of the Fathers,” or the “Church of Tradition,” than as the “Church of Christ.” Another determinant of her identity, namely the Orthodox Church as the “Church of the Synods,” actually lost its validity, historically by defying the last two Synods (jointly with the

Church of Rome, *i.e.* with the West), those of Lyon and Ferrara-Florence (sticking to her “doctrinal” rather than “conciliar” identity, *i.e.* defending the Church’s right doctrine). And most recently by the last-minute withdrawal of certain autocephalous Churches from the prepared for nearly a century Panorthodox Synod, the main goal of which, as it was officially announced, was the affirmation of the *Orthodox unity*.

To conclude, we Orthodox should revisit our witness to the entire world, both within and outside our canonical boundaries, on the basis of an authentic *ecclesiology* with its principal expression of *unity*, and especially *catholicity*, manifested in the Bible (“*that we may all be one*”), in the Creed (in which we confess that we believe in “*One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church*”), and in our liturgical tradition (unceasingly praying “*for the union of all*”). Fortunately, this was reaffirmed by the HGCOG declaring that “*the Church does exist for herself, but for the world.*” And, of course, the Orthodox should abandon any ethnophyletic – even nationalistic – cultural element in their identity. And last, but not least, abandon an ideological understanding of “*Orthodoxia*,” mostly used not traditionally, ecclesiologicaly, and theologicaly, but against the western use of “*Catholic*” of our Western sister Church as their identity mark.

As a first practical step towards a Eucharistic reunion with the Catholic Church, allow me to make a personal recommendation on the basis of what I presented above: Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew– in view of the approaching 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea and their expressed wish to celebrate together Easter and possibly a truly ecumenical council – should unilaterally restore a kind of ecclesiastical unity between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople, following the example of their predecessors, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras, in lifting the anathemas of 1054.

¹ Giacomo Puglisi, “The conciliar process in the Catholic Church. Model of an authentic ecclesiastical organization of the Church of Christ?”

² Paris, Seuil, 1962, p. 269.

³ Uniatism, as the most reliable Greek Catholic scholar, and expert in Byzantine liturgy, the late Robert Taft, pointed out, “far from restoring the broken communion between East and West...led to new divisions” (“Anamnesis, Not Amnesia: The ‘Healing Memories’ and the Problem of ‘Uniatism’,” December 1, 2000 Lecture at the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, at www.american-catholicpress.org/Father_Taft_Anamnesis_Not_Amnesia.html).

⁴ See my “Orthodox-Catholic and Greek Catholic Relations after the Ukrainian Crisis,” in V. Latinovic-A. Wooden *Stolen Churches or Bridges to Orthodoxy? Volume 2 Ecumenical and Practical Perspectives on the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Dialogue II*, Palgrave 2021, 253-267.

⁵ For the origins of Uniatism one can consult the most reliable treatment on the issue, written by a Russian historian and theologian (of Ukrainian origin, born in Odessa), G. Florovsky. He started his chapter on “Uniatism” in the second part of his *Ways of Russian Theology*, with the following accurate assessment: “The Unia was less an act of religious choice than cultural and political self-determination. Neither reasons of faith nor of doctrine were fundamental to the secession of the bishops. The early Uniates were quite sincere in contending that ‘they did not change the faith.’ They felt they were only transferring jurisdictions and seem really to have believed that the ‘Latin faith’ and the ‘Greek faith’ were identical.” (http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/way_russian_theology_florovsky.htm#).

⁶ The Primate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Sviatoslav (Shevchuk) acknowledges: “we consider our Mother Church to be the Church of ancient Constantinople,” (“There is No Frenzy Against Catholics in Constantinople,” Interview with Patriarch Bartholomew in the French *La Croix*, March 1992).

⁷ The concept of conciliarity is understood both in the broadest sense of the term (inclusiveness, participation, universal consultation on theological and practical aspects of church life, etc.), and in its narrow meaning, namely that of the order of ecclesiastical administration.

⁸ More on this in (Metropolitan of Pergamon) Joannis Zizioulas, "Recent Discussions on Primacy in Orthodox Theology," in Walter Kasper (ed.), *Il ministero petrino. Cattolici e Ortodossi in dialogo*, Citta nuova: Roma 2004, pp. 249-264. Also (Metropolitan of Silyvria) Maximos Vgenopoulos, *Primacy in the Church from Vatican I to Vatican II: A Greek Orthodox Perspective*, Ph.D. dissertation at Heythrop College, London 2008.