
PRIMACY AND SYNONODALITY IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH – PATTERNS OF A COMPLEX CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM

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Abstract: *DUE TO THE RELEVANCE OF THE TWO TOPICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL SPACE, WE HAVE DECIDED TO FOCUS THERE ON THE WAY HOW THEY CAN BE USED IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY AND ON THEIR RELEVANCE FOR THE ECUMENICAL FIELD. LITERATURE LIKE THE ONE PROVIDED BY DIFFERENT MIXT CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX COMMISSIONS OF DIALOGUE HAS BEEN TAKEN INTO ATTENTION TOGETHER WITH DIFFERENT OTHER INFORMATION PROVIDED BY SCHOLARS FROM SPACES LIKE THE ORTHODOX, PROTESTANT OR CATHOLIC ONE. IN THE SAME TIME, WE HAVE TRIED THERE TO PUT AN EMPHASIS ON DIFFERENT ECCLESIOLOGICAL ASPECTS NECESSARY BOTH FOR THE SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH AND FOR THE WAY HOW THIS ASPECT CAN BE VALORIZED IN THE ECUMENICAL DISCOURSE.*

Keywords: PRIMACY, SYNODALITY, PAN-ORTHODOX COUNCIL OF CRETE, JOHN MEYENDORFF, COMMUNION.

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Introduction

There are always crises in the society and Church and they will always be (Peyrous, Bernay, 2022, p. 9). In order to overcome some of them, both the representatives of the two ones seek constantly solutions. Some of them are related with the self-understanding of a structure, others with its interactions in the social space. In the Christian space, the synodality (as it is expressed in the Orthodox tradition), or the conciliarity, if we would like to use the term preferred by the Protestants (Valliere, 2012, p. 10) could represent a solution to some of them. Therefore, we will focus in our research on



the topic and on its relationship with another important one, namely the primacy (*Serving Communion*, 2019, p. 101).

The main goal of this research will be therefore to answer the question: how to balance primacy and synodality in the church? In the same time I will try there to define the two ones, to see different perspectives that existed about their relationships, and to offer a personal reflection on the topic. In order to fulfil this task I will also use different representatives authors from different Christian backgrounds and to compare their ideas. The reflection aim will be therefore the one to investigate two relevant topics for the understanding of Christianity and its meaning and in the same time to emphasize their ecumenical role.

Primacy and synodality – the undergrounds of a complex problematics

As it has been already mentioned crises are not something new in the Church. Some of them brought to scissions and schisms. Still, as Fr. John Meyendorff shows:

„These various schisms cannot be regarded merely as evidence of an inescapable tendency towards fragmentation on the part of the churches. The Greek and Latin Churches both continued to exhibit the signs a trued Catholicity.” (Meyendorff, 1981, p. 140)

In the same time, the understanding of schisms and their cause is also linked with an important aspect that defines its role, namely is need for being self-critical (Ward, 2017, p. 164). Moreover, it requests to see and understand the dynamics of the development of the Church and its organisational structures. It makes a scholar that aim is to deal with such a topic also to take into consideration terms like the *Liquid Church*, anticipated by theologians like Daniel Hardy as related with the cultural dynamic of its evolution (Hardy, 2001, p. 110) and analysed by theologians like Pete Ward (Ward, 2017).

What the common group Orthodox-Catholic Saint Ireneus Group stipulated in its recent document is the fact that:

„Both Eucharistic experience and canonical tradition show that primacy and synodality depend on one another. In the Eucharist, the fundamental expression of the ecclesial life as a whole, the community and the proestos presiding over it (the bishop or a presbyter delegated by him) are in an interdependent relationship: the community cannot celebrate the Eucharist without a proestos, who, in turn, should not celebrate without a community. In the canonical tradition, a description of the correlation between the “First” and the other bishops is formalized on the regional level in Apostolic Canon 34 (cf. §§ 7.4 and 14.7): the bishops of each province cannot do anything important without the consent of their head, who, from his side, cannot do anything without the consent of all. Primacy and synodality must not be played off against one another. On the contrary, they must be considered as inseparable and as complementing each other in the service of the unity of God’s church.”(*Serving Communion*, 2019, p. 101).

The liturgical situation should surely be reflected also in the administrative life of the Church. Synodality should be therefore part of its practical life. The consent of all should therefore be the principle that brings together the two aspects in a symphony of life. It should constitute, according to some theologians the principle that brings directly to the first centuries of the life of the Church and reminds about the apostolic succession, which was also perceived in a conciliary form (Zizioulas, 1985, p.204). As it is not the purpose of this paper to argue with the author of this affirmation, namely the Metropolitan of Pergam, John. D. Zizioulas, we will just mention it among other aspects that should be surely taken into consideration in a historical and theological approach such as this one.



The historical investigation of the way how the relationship between primacy and synodality was understood lead the aforementioned Catholic-Orthodox group of work to arrive at the following statement:

„Together, we affirm that we have much to learn from one another concerning issues of primacy and synodality. The Catholic Church has been able to sustain a strongly functioning primacy, even if some of its manifestations are viewed as problematic by the Orthodox. The Orthodox, on the other hand, have mostly been able to preserve strong synodal structures at local, regional, and more recently, global levels, even if these at times result in difficult situations that give Catholics pause. Thus each side exhibits both strengths and weaknesses, which we can all acknowledge.” (Serving Communion, 2019, p. 109)

For sure, as it is mentioned there, the Orthodox are called to see in the Catholic side the way how it can be built and consolidated a functioning primacy without totally agreeing with such an idea, and on the other side, the other part is called to see how the local synodal structures were able to be used at a local, regional and more recently at a global level. One most understand that, like in the practical implementation of a political model, there does not exist a perfect form of organisation of the life. Moreover, it as the same document emphasized it, there should not be idealized the first millennium of Christianity from the point of view of organisation.¹

From the Early Church to nowadays – evolution of the concepts

In fact, taking into account the historical aspect of the organisation of the Church, one may see the fact that this aspect, although it has some similarities with the contemporary society it was, at least at the beginning of the Church, different from the point of view of the centralization of the power. As an Orthodox, I stay moderate in the assumptions related with this aspect, but I am also conscious of the affirmations of historians like Paul Valliere who insist on the fact that:

„Early Christianity was not centralized. First Christian churches were tight-knit local fellowships, neither created nor governed by a central directorate. Nevertheless, these early communities, or at least an appreciable number of them, maintained a surprisingly far-reaching network of relationships with each other, resisting what must have been the ever-present temptation to absolutize the local fellowship (Valliere, 2012, pp. 20-21; Strand, 1991, pp. 139-160; Hertlig, 2001, pp. 15-43).”

In an attempt to address the rhetorical question one could try to see which was the first, the primate or the synodality. For sore the two ones are linked. While Churches like the Jerusalem were respected, having, as it can be seen in the moments like the one of the Apostles Council, a kind of a honorary primacy due to the fact that the Lord lived there, and later, this does not affect the idea of synodality. All the disciples came around and debated topics like the circumcision or the attitude that should be adopted in relationships with the pagans who convert to the new faith in the Resurrection of Jesus and the decision was unanimously accepted despite of the fact that, at the beginning of the day there were different opinions brought into the debate. Therefore, it could be surely say that the two ones were linked without having a “primacy” of one of them. Moreover, their relationship was rather complementary and the primacy of the oldest Apostle, James the old was not related with jurisdictional matters, but with the respect that came as a consequence of the fact that he was at the time the elder of the team. Not even Peter, that will be later considered the founder of what the Rome will use in a different and complex way as a model of primacy will context this quality.

¹ „In Orthodox-Catholic dialogue there is a strong tendency to idealize the first millennium. However, in the 506 years between 337 and 843 there were 217 years of schism between Rome and Constantinople, so that one cannot simply speak of an “undivided” Church of the first millennium. Nevertheless, the experience of the first millennium can be highly inspiring in re-establishing communion between our churches (cf. chapter 7).” (Serving Communion. 2019, p. 43).

Noticing this aspect, one could ask himself when it was the moment when these separations appeared and received the shape that they still have it until nowadays. A glimpse of the potential answer can be seen in Peter Norton's approach dedicated to the evolution of the episcopal elections between 3rd and 6th centuries. He offers there a complex landscape of the situation starting from the comments of Evagrius. Thus, there underlined here the following aspects with relevance for the understanding of the evolution of the Church

„Evagrius' comment raises an interesting point: in the larger cities, the size of the clergy, including its many lower orders, combined with the financial resources of the church, would have constituted a not insignificant social resource. At Alexandria, for example, in the early fifth century, the parabolani, a lower order of clergy whose job it was to minister to the sick, numbered some 500–600, while at Antioch in the time of Chrysostom there were some 3000 regular recipients of charitable funds from the church. At the top of this edifice sat the bishop. Thus although the clergy never wore the cingulum, the official's belt of office in the secular world, it is not unrealistic to claim that in episcopal elections, we are looking at the choice of important functionaries within the secular state (Norton, 2007, p. 4).”

If we take into account the fact that Evagrius lived approximatively between 345 and 399 (Bunge, 1997; Bunge, 2000), this means that in in the fourth century this structure already existed. In order to arrive in such a form, it was most probably necessary to pass at least a few decades. In all this time, the structure, the organisation, the statute of each category defined its role and increased in importance and intensity. And Alexandria, although was a very important centre, it was only a local one. The fact that this was the situation there does not means mandatory that it was the same in all the important centres of the Empire. Most probably they arrived to a certain similar model in the beginning of the fourth century and due to the relevance that this centre had upon the Oriental side of the Christianity and in some times also on the capital that Constantin the Great offered to the Empire, namely the Constantinople. Somewhere in between the tolerance edict and the 4th ecumenical Council from Chalcedon (Dîncă, 2015) when there will arrive a schism between this centre and the other ones from the Christian space, this model and probably similar ones were exported. What is to be noticed in relationship with this point is the fact underlined by Valliere that there are two categories of conflicts that gave rise to conciliarism, namely the ones involving the discipline and the ones involving the doctrine.² This approach of the topic, based on its utility comes out from the way how it is perceived. It delimitates its use from the abusive one and it comes to make it more understandable.

Regarding the primatialism and its relationship with the aforementioned topic some authors say that its origins must be searched not in the first centuries of the Church but in „the experience of the Western church in the Middle Ages. (Valliere, 2012, p.119)”. Unfortunately the limits of space of this research does not allow us to have a deeper approach on the topic, like also on the fact that the „Orthodoxy today exists in a post-imperial environment, even if many Orthodox have been slow to accept the fact.” (Valliere, 2012, p. 247) An aspect that must also be underlined due to the fact that, despite of the claim of traditional Churches like the Catholic and the Orthodox ones pretend to be the ones more deeply linked with conciliar traditions like the other Christian ones (some voices from the Orthodox space even transform this in a title of glory), as Valliere mentions:

² „The conflicts that gave rise to conciliarism are often divided into two classes: conflicts involving doctrine and those involving discipline, that is, conflicts over what Christians should believe and how Christians should behave.” (Valliere, 2012, p. 56).



„A few Protestant churches did a better job of preserving conciliar structures than their catholic cousins in early modern period. The Presbyterian system and Methodist connectionalism are cases in point. But the scope of Protestant Conciliarism was limited by the divisions within Protestantism. Hence Protestantism, while in some ways responsible steward of conciliarism, lacked ample ecclesial space for its exercise, while the catholic traditions, which possessed the amplitude, allowed conciliarism to be eclipsed by dubious alternatives. (Valliere, 2012, p.10; Washburn, 2020, pp. 21-40)”

Of course, this idea could be also debated. What it must be said is the fact that both Catholics, Orthodox and Protestant have searched for the conciliarism and saw it as a feasible model of solving the problems of the Church, of the organisation of its structure and in the same time, in case of a good understanding of it, as a way of understanding also the primacy, from a pragmatic point of view.

Conclusions

As it has been stipulated in the document of Saint Ireneus group of Orthodox-Catholic dialogue (*Serving Communion*, 2019, p. 101), primacy and synodality should be seen as complementary not as in a relationship of concurrency. Both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church have something to learn one from the other. First one about the way how primacy can be applied in a complex content, second how the conciliarity has constituted a way of surviving and organising the Church without excluding the idea of primacy, but transforming it in a matter of honour and in a rather theoretical principle than in a practical one. In my opinion in the understanding of this complex topic, both of them should take a look to the historical evolution and the outcomes of the two topics (in order to understand when, where and how they appear and how influences like the Roman system of the diocese came to influence their order) and in the same time to see how the fear and the desire to stay away from the idea of primacy has brought to a different model of conciliarity (in the Protestant space). I think also that the two ones could be well balanced in the Church when their understanding will be rather an administrative than a doctrinary one and when their role would be not inasmuch an absolute one, but rather a practical one. If this aspect would be taken into account the aspects like primacy will not constitute stumbling rocks in areas like the Orthodox one (where different Churches still debate about the role played by one or by other in the decision-making process) and in the same time the synodality will not represent a fact so difficult to accomplish (it should not be forgotten the fact that the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete took place after a long period where there was nothing similar in the Orthodox space and some of its decisions suffered because of the difficulty to bring together the heads of different local Churches). (Morariu, 2016a; Morariu, 2016b, Morariu, 2018; Morariu, 2019; Morariu, 2021). At a spiritual level, I would say that any approach dedicated to the topic should not put on the first place the administrative aspects, the pride of a person or a community or its role, but the prayer. In this situation, the balance will surely be easy to achieve.

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