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John Meyendorff on the Unity of the Church

Abstract

John Meyendorff's ecumenical teaching was addressed to Protestant's as well as Roman Catholic's relationship with the Orthodox Church. He sought unity of the church by contending that the Orthodox is the true Church of Christ. This essay elaborates on this theme by exploring Meyendorff's thought on the Great Schism of 1054, his understanding of the nature of authority in the church and in particular, the primacy of Peter.

Keywords

Great Schism, primacy, *filioque*, Photius, Fourth Crusade, Scholasticism, Origen



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Introduction

John Meyendorff was a great ecumenist and had contributed much as a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC). He also acted as a moderator of the WCC Faith and Order Commission from 1967 to 1975. His writings on Roman Catholicism are balanced, objective and thoughtful. Robert Slesinski claims that Meyendorff was a great gift to his church and his “fertile mind was committed to serious reflection and was coupled with a scrupulous intellectual honesty. It afforded his work a serene, irenic character not hesitant to tackle the great vexing ecumenical questions of our age, arising from some of the saddest pages of Christian ecclesiastical history.”¹ Although Meyendorff’s ecumenical teaching was addressed to Protestants, the themes of some of his reflections concern the relationship between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Therefore, such reflections have great relevance for Catholics who wish to understand the position of Orthodoxy on ecclesiastical issues.

Meyendorff sought unity of the church by contending that the Orthodox is the true Church of Christ. This essay elaborates on this theme by exploring Meyendorff’s thought on the Great Schism of 1054, his understanding of the nature of authority in the church and in particular, the primacy of Peter.

Unity Through the Orthodox Church

Meditating on John 17: 21, “. . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me,” John Meyendorff believes that the search for unity constitutes a fundamental and positive aspect of church history. He urges Christians to

¹ Robert Slesinski, “John Meyendorff: A Churchman of Catholic Outreach.” *Diakonia* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 1994), p. 8.

demonstrate their unity in God so that they can invite non-Christians to share in this union. Unfortunately, our Christian history has been marked by discord and division. It seems that the Father has not heard the prayer of his Son and the salvation brought by Christ has not brought peace in the world. The gospel message seems like one doctrine among others and till now, only a fraction of humanity has been converted to the Christian faith. The Christian missionaries were the first to be aware of this “scandal” and sought to be “ecumenical,” that is to make Christians aware of this separation among those who professed their belief in Christ and the presence of conflicts and mistrust among the different Christian churches.²

It is in the light of ecumenism that Meyendorff writes on the history of the Orthodox Church. In seeking the gospel and the church in its divine reality, we also try to understand the historical problems that tore Christianity apart. This is an important issue especially in Asia and Africa where Christians are not natural inheritors of the conflict between the Greek and Latin Churches.

Meyendorff believes the Orthodox Church occupies a unique place in that it has kept a distance from the conflicts which continue to divide the Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches. In ecumenical debate, the Orthodox Church sees itself as the guardian of the faith that originated from the Apostles and the Church Fathers.³ Meyendorff claims that the Orthodox Church remains the church of continuity and tradition and because of its fidelity to Scripture and tradition, it maintains its orthodoxy as well as its catholicity. Therefore as a condition for union, the Orthodox Church insists that all Christians must return to Orthodoxy, the faith of the first ecumenical councils. This reunion would involve a return to the sources of the faith, which means fidelity to Revelation. It also involves

² John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and its Role in the World Today* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), p. vii.

³ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

distinguishing the difference between the tradition of the church and human traditions, which tend to obscure Revelation.

Meyendorff believes that the merit of the Orthodox Church lies in its willingness to examine its conscience and the refusal to accept human institution or even formulation of Christian dogma as infallible. The Orthodox Church contemplates on Scripture, the word of God spoken by human beings, not only in its literal sense, but also through the power of the Spirit, which inspires us.⁴

Catholicity and Apostolic Truth

Orthodox Christians claim to be “Catholic” but not “Roman” or “Papal”. Meyendorff urges Orthodox Christians to recover the sense of catholicity demonstrated in St Ignatius of Antioch’s letter to Smyrnaeans, “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church,” which means “the fullness and the universality of salvation revealed in Christ within the Church.”⁵ The original meaning of catholicity is the acceptance of the whole truth regarding divine presence in Jesus Christ. Catholicity was a sign of the presence of Christ in the Word, the Eucharist or in the Christian assembly. It was not synonymous with universality or geographical expansion. Later catholicity meant those who hold the right doctrines, the orthodox as opposed to the heretics and schismatics.

As it is Christ through the Spirit that makes the church “catholic”, we can say that no human being can create “catholicity.” We can only cooperate with divine grace to show our concern for the salvation of souls. Meyendorff maintains that one can be a Christian only as a member of the Catholic

⁴ Ibid., p. x.

⁵ John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1983), p. 7.

Church and through “a continuous effort at manifesting the catholicity of the Church.”⁶ This suggests that no church is fully catholic, even in apostolic times, because we are all journeying towards that fullness of catholicity, which is yet to come. Protestants believe that all Christian churches are partial manifestations of catholicity. Hence, there are ecumenical meetings where Christians come together to share what they have in common and also to discuss their differences. For the Protestants, catholicity is shared in different degrees by all Christian denominations.

The Orthodox Church, however, believes itself to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. These four characteristics come from Christ and the Holy Spirit. But the claim to be catholic and orthodox is valid only to the extent that the church remains faithful to the apostolic truth. Meyendorff admits that there were times when the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century has “present to the world an image of divisiveness, of theological unawareness, of missionary passivity, of dependence upon socio-political concerns.”⁷ He classifies this as second order of betrayal; the first order of betrayal occurs when the whole church has totally changed its apostolic structure. Perhaps he had the Roman Catholic Church in mind regarding the first order.

The catholicity of the Orthodox Church is manifested in its liturgy, canonical tradition and theology. However, due to human inconsistencies, this catholicity can be obscured in practice. Nonetheless, Meyendorff believes that at this present time the Orthodox Church has the best opportunity to present to the world the true Christian message. The ecumenical movement presents a forum for the Orthodox Church an opportunity to reach out lovingly to the other Christian communities by expressing its catholicity.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Unfortunately, the impasse in ecumenism in its organizational form is due in part to the inability of the Orthodox Church “to express their message in an effective way, with sufficient love to make the hard truth accepted and understood by those who miss it.”⁸ In other words, the Orthodox Church has failed to convert all the other Christians to the one true Church of Christ. This is to be expected because divisions and conflicts are common even in the early church. St Paul says, “Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine” (1Cor 11:19). Arguably, the most painful conflict in Christianity was the Great Schism of 1054 because since then, the Eastern and Western Churches have been like two separated lungs.

Schism

Rightly regarded as one of the most tragic event in church history, the separation between Byzantium and Rome has shaped the destiny of the churches in the East and West and this separation endures till today. It was in 1054 “that all the elements of disunity which had come to light over the centuries were first concentrated into a single event.” It marked one of the greatest misfortunes in Christian history. This date marks the birth of a distinctly Western-Latin Church which has turned its back on the East. Despite this tragic division in 1054, Meyendorff rightly asserted that it is a “romantic fallacy” to think that there was an undivided church in the beginning.⁹ Congar also claimed that the rupture between East and West was the product of cultural, political and religious conflicts

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and its Role in the World Today* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1996), p. 35.

rather than the result of a single episode.¹⁰ In fact, there were a series of heresies and schisms from the start over Christological issues, which affected Egypt, Ethiopia, Armenia and Syria. In the ninth century, the Greco-Roman world was already divided along linguistic and political lines.

Linguistics, cultural, political differences, in addition to deep theological conflicts worked together to sharpen the division. In spite of the division between the Greek and Latin Churches, they continued to manifest their catholicity and did not allow themselves to be transformed into national churches. Meyendorff admitted that although the Orthodox Church claims to be the only true church of Christ, it has witnessed the restriction of its cultural and geographical vision because it was identified with the Byzantine world. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church believes that the Roman Church had lost its “doctrinal and ecclesiastical balance,” which eventually led to the Protestant Reformation. Among the various factors of division, Meyendorff believes that the theological factors were the most difficult to overcome. Till today, these theological issues constitute a major obstacle to Christian unity.¹¹ First we will look at the non-theological factors.

Start of the Conflict – Non-theological Factors

According to Meyendorff, the conflict between the Greek and Latin Churches began with the founding of the Carolingian Empire in the West. When the marriage between Charles and the Byzantine Empress was called off, the Frankish king decided to destroy Constantinople’s claim to universal jurisdiction by accusing them of heresy. The heresy was that the Eastern emperor worshipped images (icons) and confessed that

¹⁰ Brett E Whalen, “Rethinking the schism of 1054: authority, heresy and the Latin rite,” *Traditio* 62, (January 1, 2007), p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father by the Son” – the question of the *filioque*.¹²

Furthermore, the new empire in the West was dominated by “caesaropapism” – the exercise of supreme authority over ecclesiastical matters by the secular ruler. Meyendorff writes: “it seems that the Frankish court was influenced by the example of the iconoclastic emperors of Byzantium, whose theology was taken over by Charlemagne, at least in part – and it was intended to supplant both the traditional empire (in the East) and the papacy.”¹³ Fortunately the Roman Church was against Charlemagne’s theological attack on Byzantium. Meyendorff acknowledges the efforts of Pope Hadrian I (772 – 795) and Leo III (795 – 816) to preserve the unity of the church, if only for a short time, by defending the Council of Nicea and rejecting the *filioque*.

A consequence of the creation of Charlemagne’s empire was the development of a new type of Christianity by northern Europeans who have little knowledge of Byzantium theology. Meyendorff also blames the Byzantines for despising

¹² Ibid., p. 37. The *filioque* (and the son) clause was added to the Nicene Creed by the Latin Church: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” The clause was introduced into the Creed in Spain in the sixth century to strengthen the anti-Arian position of the Spanish Church. Charlemagne used it against the Greeks and Rome finally accepted it around 1014. Photius considered the *filioque* as the “crown of evils”, “an illegitimate interpolation” which destroys the authority of the Father and “relativizes the reality of personal, or *hypostatic existence*, in the Trinity.” Maximus the Confessor teaches that the Son is not the origin of the Spirit; the Father alone is the origin of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. At the Council of Florence, the Western Church attempted to accommodate Greek and Latin formulations; it “adopted a basically Augustinian definition of the Trinity, while affirming that the Greek *formulations* were not in contradiction with it. This, however, was not a solution of the fundamental issue.” See John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), pp. 91-94.

¹³ Ibid., p. 38.

Carolingian learning and culture. In fact, Emperor Michael III regarded Latin as a “barbarous and Scythian tongue.”¹⁴ The East regarded the West as intellectually inferior and could not take their theological position seriously. That may be true, but the Church of Rome was able to maintain the bridges between the East and West because it had preserved enough Greek tradition and it was the only religious authority respected by the Franks. Some scholars believe the solution to the schism is to recover the common tradition that was disintegrated.

The separation between the East and the West in the ninth and eleventh centuries took place “when the political aims of the Frankish Empire became confused with the canonical pretensions of the popes and both found themselves united in a common opposition to the East.”¹⁵ Meyendorff claims that in the eighth, tenth and eleventh centuries, the popes were merely puppets of the Western emperors who were bent on adopting the ideals of caesaropapism. However, there were exceptions – great popes like Nicholas I in the ninth century, Gregory VII (1073 – 1081) and Leo IX (1049 – 1054) fought vigorously against secular domination of the church, which eventually led to the triumph of the papacy over the empire and brought a new awareness of Roman papacy. Rome saw itself as more than just a patriarchate of the West and more than just an apostolic see among others. In other words, its primacy of authority must be transformed “into a real power of jurisdiction, universal in scope and absolute in nature.”¹⁶

Meyendorff views these exceptional pontiffs not as a sign of church leaders succumbing to the temptation of domination, but as a sincere attempt to liberate the church from secular control. In addition, these popes fought against simony, raised the standard of clerical conduct, and the result of these efforts was the birth of a new Western Christian civilization.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Unfortunately, these capable pontiffs, mostly from Northern Europe, had little knowledge of the Greek Fathers, and were not well disposed towards the East. Latin and Western in their outlook, they got along well with the Western emperors to the detriment of the East. In Meyendorff's opinion, "the controversy between *Sacerdotium* and the *Imperium* appeared to be more of a political than a religious quarrel."¹⁷ In other words, the conflict between the church and the state was more political than theological. The popes were shrewd enough to turn the emperor's own weapons against him by adopting his strategy and plan to reduce the status of the old Roman Empire as well as Constantinople.

Orthodox historians will not doubt the sincerity of the popes, but they will question the theological basis of such political manoeuvres which go against the spirit of the gospel and traditional ecclesiology. Hence, the Orthodox Church rejects the medieval model of papacy, which is authoritarian and absolute. This rejection of the absolute nature of the papacy appeared later in the form of secularism and anti-clericalism in the West. Further, the failure of the popes to extend their control of the Eastern Church only served to strengthen the uniformity and monolithic nature of Western Christendom.¹⁸

Meyendorff regards Nicholas I (858 – 876) as one of the greatest popes in the Middle Ages who tried to reform the Eastern Church in good faith for he believed that he had the right to do so based on the absolute power and universality of the Roman see during that time. It was on this point that Nicholas I had clashes with the Eastern Church.¹⁹ Nicholas was determined to strengthen Roman centralization by diminishing the powerful Byzantine patriarchate. The opportunity came when the supporters of Ignatius of Constantinople wanted the ex-patriarch to revoke his abdication in 857 to the great

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

scholar, Photius. They appealed to Rome for help. In Meyendorff's opinion, this move was an "unprecedented act of difference" by the Byzantine Church towards the Roman see.²⁰ Photius reacted against this interference by Nicholas I by accusing the pope of heresy and broke off communion with him. Not before long, Photius was disposed due to a revolution in Byzantium. With the help of Rome, Ignatius returned to head the patriarchate in Constantinople. Thus, Photius was condemned and Rome asserted its supremacy once more. But later Ignatius turned against Rome and died in 877 before Pope Hadrian II could excommunicate him. Having reconciled with Ignatius, Photius returned to the patriarchate in that year when Ignatius died.

Fortunately peace and harmony was restored when the successor of Nicholas I and Hadrian II, Pope John VIII, did not pursue the policies of his two predecessors. He respected the Greek liturgy and the exclusion of the *filioque* in the Creed.²¹ The Legates of Pope John VIII at the Council of Constantinople (879 – 880) also supported the restoration of Photius and condemned the inclusion of the *filioque* in the Creed. Photius was grateful to Pope John VIII for restoring unity to the church and considered him a good example to those who had doubt about Rome's sincerity. The Council of Constantinople became the model of unity for Orthodox and Catholics – it is a "unity in faith to which the Roman primacy may indeed bear witness, but of which it cannot itself be the source."²² Such is Meyendorff's view on the primacy of Rome.

From the tenth century to the eleventh century there was peace between the Eastern and Western Churches. But Meyendorff notes that during this period, the papacy was deteriorating while the Byzantine Church was flourishing with missionary expansion and cultural progress. The Byzantines could now

²⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

²¹ Ibid., p. 45.

²² Ibid., p. 46.

ignore the pope as he was not in a position to enforce his authority. To widen the gap further, an incident occurred that led to more conflicts between the two churches. The *filioque* was sung in the Credo of the mass during the coronation ceremony of the German emperor Henry II by Pope Benedict VIII. Thus, from the beginning of the eleventh century, “there was no longer any *communio in sacris* between Byzantium and Rome.”²³

Meyendorff believes the controversy over the *filioque* as well as other problematic issues could be settled easily as before. But the tragic is that East and West had ignored each other for such a long time that there was no longer any determination to seek reunion. They had lost the common ground, which in the past kept them together. Furthermore, the lack of a common language led to a different understanding of the nature of the church. Rome believed it was the sole custodian of the Truth while the Eastern Church believed the Spirit of Truth resides in the whole church and expresses himself through ecumenical councils.²⁴

There was an attempt at reunion when Patriarch Michael Caerularius, on behalf of the emperor, sent a letter to Pope Leo IX, seeking communion with Rome. But when the Roman legates arrived in Constantinople, though welcomed warmly by the emperor, were refused an audience with the Patriarch. Caerularius questioned the authenticity of the legates’ papal letters because Leo IX was in prison in Italy and was in no position to sign those documents. The legates reacted by excommunicating the patriarch and his priests for omitting the *filioque* in the Creed and for not enforcing the rule of celibacy on the clergy among other things. It was a dramatic affair: the legates entered into Hagia Sophia during the celebration of the liturgy and placed the decree of excommunication on the high

²³ Ibid., p. 47

²⁴ Ibidem.

altar. In return, Caerularius excommunicated the Roman legates.²⁵

Despite the dramatic outcome, Meyendorff claims that this event of 1054 did not end all contacts between the Eastern and Western Churches. In fact, the other Eastern patriarchs still maintained communion with Rome for a while. Conflicts between the two churches began mainly with political issues, as described, but soon theological issues came into play, and the final break came with the Crusades.

The Crusades

In Meyendorff's opinion, the Fourth Crusade was responsible for destroying the last traces of church unity. The Venetian fleet supposedly bringing the Crusaders to the Holy Land went instead to Constantinople to loot the city of its treasures. Considered one of the most disgraceful events in history, the Western world was enriched by this sacking and by installing its own Venetian patriarch, Thomas Morosini, who occupied the throne of Photius with the approval of Rome. In addition to theological differences between the Greeks and Latins, national hatred now made reunion in the future seem impossible.²⁶

During this time, the popes kept insisting on having unity in ecclesiastical matters. Although the Byzantium Church was against political union, it was not against union with the Latin Church based on ancient canons and ecclesiastical custom. The East insisted on holding ecumenical council, which it believed would lead to the victory of Orthodoxy. In fact, the

²⁵ Ibid., 49. See John H Erickson, "Leavened and unleavened: some theological implications of the schism of 1054," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (January 1, 1970), 157. According to Erickson, "for most Byzantine churchmen of the 11th and 12th centuries the principal point of disagreement with the Latins was not papal primacy or *filioque* but rather the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist."

²⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

meeting of the council at Ferrara and then at Florence (1438 – 1439) symbolized a moral triumph for the East. Unfortunately discussion broke down on many issues, not least, the *filioque*. Further, when pressurized by the impending Turkish threat, the Greek delegates submitted themselves to Rome. Upon returning home, confronted by the wrath of the people, the Greek delegates repudiated their submission to Rome. Eventually, the Byzantine Empire collapsed when the Ottoman ruler, Mohammed II, entered Constantinople as a conqueror. Gennadios Scholarios, the new patriarch, officially repudiated the Union of Florence.²⁷

From the eleventh century onwards, the emperors were in favour of reunion with Rome because of the political advantage it would bring. However, for non-political reasons, the patriarchs were equally consistent in opposing reunion with Rome because they believed that they were the custodians of the true faith.²⁸ At this point, Meyendorff doubted reunion would be possible even if theological issues were reconciled. He believes that agreement must be based on the basis of common tradition. Bishop Kallistos Ware says it was the “disintegration of a common tradition” and “the problem is to find the original kinship in the common past.”²⁹

Most of the discussions concerning reunion in the thirteenth century were focused on political considerations and not on religious ones. Hence, the Byzantium Church was marginalized. Meyendorff believes doctrinal issues concerning the Holy Spirit and the nature of the church are the fundamental reasons for the schism between the East and the West. Efforts at reunion failed because the basic issues of doctrinal differences were never dealt with in depth. The West mistakenly thought that

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁹ Kallistos T. Ware, Bp, “Scholasticism and Orthodoxy : theological method as a factor in the schism,” *Eastern Churches Review* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 1973), p. 16.

once the Emperor John V was converted to Catholicism, the rest would follow suit. But it did not work that way; the West was wrong regarding the existence of Byzantine caesaropapism.

Scholasticism

It was theological reasons such as the approval of the *filioque* in 1274, doctrinal formulations and definitions of Roman Catholicism based on Scholasticism that rendered union between the Greek and Latin Churches seemingly impossible. Yves Congar believes it was no accident that the rise of Scholasticism in the twelve-century led to the worsening of the schism between East and West. He was referring to the change from patristic to scholastic world-view. Congar says it was a change from a predominantly “essentialist” view of the world to a “naturalistic” view; a change from a universe of “exemplarist causality” to a universe of “efficient causality.” The first view means that things receive their reality from “a transcendent model in which they participate” and the second view means that we search for truth in existing things themselves, in empirical studies. It was also a change from “synthetic perception” to “an attitude of inquiry and analysis.”³⁰

There was also a change from learning in the monastery to learning in the university: we move from the cloister to the lecture hall for study – from doing mystical and contemplative theology to the scientific study of theology. In the monastery, theological study was integrated with liturgy and prayer, but scholastic theology in the university depended very much on personal research rather than acceptance of tradition.³¹

To put it simply, the twelve-century Western theologian appealed to reason and logical proof in his studies of divinity while the Eastern theologians relied more on tradition as

³⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

³¹ Ibidem.

embodied in the Fathers. Theology became a science in the West, which was unthinkable in the East. Eastern scholars emphasized on the personal experience of the saints. St Gregory Palamas, for example, in his *Triads*, invokes the living experience of holy men whom he regards as the real theologians. Echoing this idea, for Evagrius of Pontus, theology was a matter of prayer and not philosophical training.³²

Thus, to the Orthodox, the experience of the saints is what theology is all about. Western theology appeared to the Greeks as “too self-confident” and as “insufficiently sensitive to the necessary limitations of all human language and conceptual thinking.”³³ Orthodox theologians believe that in scholastic theology, the mystical and apophatic aspects are neglected. Whether these charges against the scholastics by the Orthodox were justifiable or not, it remains true that the rise of Scholasticism and the changes it brought in regarding theology had contributed greatly to the alienation between the East and West. Ware considers Scholasticism a significant factor in the rupture of our common tradition.

Meyendorff also points out that not all of scholasticism was disruptive, as there were political factors that were supportive of union. In fact, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the Byzantine Emperors had made several attempts to re-establish ecclesiastical communion with Rome so as to gain Western support against the Turks. As mentioned before, Meyendorff believes that theological issues kept the two churches apart. The conflict is centred on the question of ecclesiology – the understanding of what it means to be church. He argues that if the Eastern and Western Churches possessed a common ecclesiastical criterion, other issues could easily be solved.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Ecclesiology – Unity in Faith

As we have seen, Meyendorff is of the opinion that the lack of a common ecclesiology is responsible for the schism. The Orthodox appeals to the authority of tradition and the West appeals to the authority of the pope.³⁴ Both sides failed to understand each other's position. While accepting the Apostle Peter as head of the church, the East questions the nature of this succession. It refuses to accept Rome's claim of exclusive right to this succession because there is no evidence of such right in the New Testament regarding the ministry of Peter. The Orthodox recognizes the universal primacy of the Roman Church, but this primacy is not due to Peter's death in Rome. Roman primacy was not an exclusive and divine privilege coming from the Lord himself. This privilege came from the church itself – "a *de facto* authority which the Church had formally recognized by the voice of its councils."³⁵ This means that the pope is not infallible and the council is above the pope. The presence of the pope and representatives of other episcopates is necessary for the council to be ecumenical. Christ addressed to Peter: "you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Mt 16: 18) and "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21). These commands of Jesus, Meyendorff argues, do not refer exclusively to the

³⁴ John Meyendorff, *The Legacy of St. Vladimir's*, ed. J. Beck, J. Meyendorff, and E. Silk (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1990), p. 15: Meyendorff believes that "There is no Orthodoxy without Holy Tradition, which implies communion in Spirit and in truth with the witness of the apostles and the fathers, based upon the belief that, by the power of God and in spite of all historical human weaknesses, there was and there is an uninterrupted, consistent and continuous Holy Tradition of faith held by the Church throughout the centuries. This belief in Tradition is not identical with simple conservatism. Holy Tradition is a living tradition. It is a witness to the unchanging Truth in a changing world."

³⁵ John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and its Role in the World Today* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), p. 191.

bishop of Rome. It is Jesus' acknowledgement that Peter has confessed his divinity when they were on their way to Caesarea Philippi. Peter is the rock of the church only to the extent that he is faithful to what he professes. This means that anyone who has made this profession of faith will be the rock of the church. This is the teaching of Origen and Church Fathers. All bishops are to proclaim the true faith and hence, they are all "*ex officio* the successors of Peter."³⁶ This Orthodox conception of the Petrine office is clearly spelt out in the teaching of St Cyprian of Carthage in the third century. Thus, the controversy between East and West is due primarily to different understanding of the nature of the church and its authority.

The Orthodox Church views the church as a communion in which God is present "sacramentally." The church is thus a sacrament in which "the death and resurrection of the Lord are 'commemorated' and by which his Second Coming is proclaimed and anticipated." The fullness of this reality is present in every local church where the Eucharist is celebrated. The bishop in the Orthodox Church is not a successor of any particular apostle and therefore, it matters little if the church has been founded by Peter, Paul or John. The function of the bishop is to teach according to the apostolic tradition in which Peter is the spokesman. This episcopal function is the same whether it is in Rome, Moscow or Constantinople. God does not grant all special privileges to one particular see, but gave the fullness of his power to all. Hence, the local churches are not isolated but are united by the "identity of their faith and their witness to the truth."³⁷

Since the third century, synods of bishops were organized to solve common problems and gradually a certain order of precedence emerged with Rome occupying the first place among equals, followed by Constantinople. But this universal primacy is not of an ontological nature, it can be modified

³⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

according to circumstances. This primacy of the universal church also does not reduce the importance of the local churches. The difference between the Greek and Latin Churches, according to Meyendorff, is that the Roman Catholic Church, based on the First Vatican Council definition (1870), teaches that the pope possesses doctrinal infallibility and immediate jurisdiction of all the faithful. The bishop of Rome is the “visible criterion of Truth and the unique head of the universal Church, without however possessing any sacramental powers different from those of other bishops.”³⁸

The Orthodox Church, however, believes that no power can exist by divine right outside the local churches in a diocese. The relationship between bishops is governed by ecclesiastical norms that can be changed. In other words, the norms are man-made and not God-given. The consensus of the church or the ecumenical council is fundamental to Orthodoxy regarding the criterion of truth. As such, the Orthodox Church cannot accept the doctrine of papal infallibility so dear to the Roman Church.

Meyendorff teaches that the unity of the church is, above all, the unity in faith, and not uniformity in organization. This unity is not dependent on external or visible manifestations. He writes: “the reunion with the Church of the churches, separated from it presupposes, necessarily and absolutely, their agreement with it in the faith.” Therefore, in his opinion, future dialogue between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches must “necessarily hinge on the role still left in Roman ecclesiology for the local church and the episcopate.”³⁹ This implies that Rome must give greater freedom and autonomy to the local churches and individual dioceses. In other words, the local bishops must be given more power and authority to make decisions. The bishops of the Orthodox Church, on the other hand, must look for different and creative ways to express the common witness.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Meyendorff is hopeful that dialogue is still possible between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches due to the two churches being united by a long and common biblical and patristic tradition. One of the hopeful signs is that the Catholic Church has rediscovered the importance of understanding itself as “communion,” a concept that is central to Orthodox ecclesiology.

Church as Communion

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) teaches: “The concept of *communion* (*koinonia*), which appears with a certain prominence in the texts of the Second Vatican Council, is very suitable for expressing the core of the Mystery of the Church, and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology.”⁴⁰ The idea of the church as communion finds its basis in the Scripture where the concept of *koinonia* (κοινωνία) can be translated as “participation”, “association”, or “contribution.” Christians are called into *koinonia* with Christ and with one another through faith and baptism. The Eucharist is described as a *koinonia* in the body and blood of Christ and

⁴⁰ “Some Aspects of the Church understood as Communion, ”http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html, no.1

The Kenyan Catholic priest, Vitalis Mshanga, proposes a “primacy in communion” according to which the pope together with all the believers act as custodian of the faith. The model allows the pope particular primacy like any other local bishop and also universal primacy on the basis of the principle apostolicity. This primacy in communion is a combination of service in love and juridical power to govern the church. Such an arrangement ensures unity of the church as well as freedom for the local churches. The church becomes a consultative or democratic body, it seems. See Vitalis Mshanga, “You are Peter: a critical analysis of the Orthodox view of papal primacy in view of an alternative way of exercising papal primacy,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 1 (December 1, 2010), pp. 131-133.

the ministers of the gospel are united in *koinonia*. In the sharing of goods and financial resources, Christians are engaged in *koinonia*. Thus, the idea of *koinonia* can be applied to many aspects of Christian life.⁴¹ Further, the faithful belong to the church only when they are in communion with their bishop, and the bishops recognized other bishops as being in communion with themselves and with the universal church. Only serious offence like a schism can break the communion between churches.

Avery Dulles claims that “The Church of Rome, by reason of its historical links with Peter and Paul, who had been martyred there, and perhaps also by reason of the political prestige of the city, its wealth, and its strategic importance as a center of communications, gradually came to be recognized as having a universal primacy, the exact nature of which was as yet somewhat undefined.”⁴² This is also Meyendorff’s understanding of the nature of Rome’s primacy, that it was a matter of political and economic considerations and certainly not of divine sanction. Meyendorff elaborates Roman primacy as order and organizational efficiency. However, in times of controversy, Dulles argues, venerable fathers such as Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, chose to consult Rome. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Rome seldom makes mistake regarding dogmatic formulations.

Because of the prestige of its location, the concept of church as communion was gradually undermined when Rome became stronger. By the end of the first millennium all the churches in the West was under the jurisdiction of Rome. However, in the East, Constantinople was the dominant church as the churches in Alexandria and Antioch lost their status due to heresy or

⁴¹ Avery Dulles, S.J., “The Church as Communion,” in: Bradley Nassif, editor, *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 128.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

schism. The revival of Roman law in the West served to strengthen papal power and reciprocity among equals was not taken seriously. Dulles writes: "The vertical lines of authority from Rome to the bishops replaced the horizontal lines of communion among bishops and among churches."⁴³ Eventually the pope was viewed as the supreme and universal bishop of the church.

Scholastic theology also undermined the importance of communion because the understanding of communion became spiritualized. The significance of communion is narrowed to the reception of the sacrament: it "was a mysterious grace-relationship of the individual with God." This means that receiving the Eucharistic bread and baptism was not seen as bringing one into communion with the local church and its bishop, but "rather into a universal, undifferentiated communion of grace."⁴⁴ In this regard, communion was considered interior and not an external manifestation. Interestingly, with this spiritual understanding in communion, the Protestants began to develop the idea of the invisible church against Roman domination.

Rome reacted against the Reformers by emphasizing the juridical aspect of the church – the church as the centralized body in which all the members, bishops, priests and laity are subject to the authority of the pope. The local churches became administrative branches under the pope who is absolute in power. The ecumenical councils are also restricted in their power to control the pope. It is now the pope who controls the council.⁴⁵ As we have seen, this goes against Orthodox ecclesiology.

While Rome developed its understanding of the papacy along juridical lines, Orthodox theology held fast to the idea that the church as a divine institution whose internal existence could

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*

not be defined in juridical terms. Meyendorff writes: "For them the Church was, first of all, a sacramental communion with God in Christ and the Spirit, whose membership – the entire Body of Christ – is not limited to the earthly *oikoumene* ("inhabited earth") where law governs society, but includes the host of angels and saints, as well as the divine head."⁴⁶

In recent times, there were Catholic theologians before Vatican II who sought to revitalize the church by going back to its patristic source. They had a vision of the church as "an interpersonal communion, patterned on the mutual relations of the divine persons in the Trinity". This idea is close to Orthodoxy. Here the local church celebrating the Eucharist presided by the bishop is viewed as the "paradigmatic realization of the Church."⁴⁷ The bishops as heads of the local churches receive their power directly from Christ himself through the sacrament of ordination. Constituting a college, all the bishops are responsible for the direction of the whole universal church. In other words, there is co-responsibility because authority is shared among the bishops.

The idea of church as communion is taken up in the teaching of Vatican II and the church is likened to a sacrament and within this communion each local church is called to share its gift with others. Together with the pope, all bishops are linked to one another in communion. The pontiff is regarded not as an

⁴⁶ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), pp. 79-80. Meyendorff also asserts that the Byzantines were not juridically incompetent and were aware that certain canons reflect the divine nature of the church. Further, Roman traditions were always present in Byzantium and there were Latin canon lawyers who advised the emperors on decrees concerning the church. But these lawyers understood their role as subordinated to the divine nature of the church. They recognized that there "was no canonical legislation in heaven."

⁴⁷ Avery Dulles, S.J., "The Church as Communion," in: Bradley Nassif, editor, *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 131.

absolute ruler but as a moderator who presides over in charity. He helps to maintain legitimate diversity and is a symbol of unity. Communion theology, thus, is used to correct the extreme positions of centralism and clericalism in the church, which have developed in recent years.⁴⁸ Vatican II has encouraged the local and regional churches to develop their distinct characteristics within the universal church. Most of the ideas about communion are spelt out in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. One of the most significant changes that occurred during the Second Vatican Council is the introduction of the vernacular in the liturgy.

Recognizing the importance of ecumenism, Vatican II is determined to build on the incomplete communion that now exists among Christian communities, in the hope of achieving full communion. The Catholic Church's emphasis on Scripture, Tradition, baptism and works of charity, which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, can act as a bond of communion between other Christian communities that lack apostolic heritage and the universal church. Dulles rightly claims that this vision is particularly relevant to relationship with the Eastern Churches. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* states: "These Churches, although separated from us, possess true sacraments, above all by apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are linked with us in closest intimacy."⁴⁹ The Decree also acknowledges that some churches may have better appreciation of the divine mystery and express it better than others:

It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁴⁹ The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, no. 15.

expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting. Where the authentic theological traditions of the Eastern Church are concerned, we must recognize the admirable way in which they have their roots in Holy Scripture, and how they are nurtured and given expression in the life of the liturgy. They derive their strength too from the living tradition of the apostles and from the works of the Fathers and spiritual writers of the Eastern Churches. Thus they promote the right ordering of Christian life and, indeed, pave the way to a full vision of Christian truth.⁵⁰

Both Congar and Meyendorff saw it clearly that communion derived from the triune God is fruitful and helps in maintaining diversities and distinct characteristics of each party. In the universal church, we must have both universal and local bonds. The church is like a chorus of many voices which requires a universal bond to maintain harmony and some autonomy to prevent monotony. The “diverse but concordant liturgies, spiritualities (...) law and doctrine” reflect the profound mystery of God⁵¹, and all should be invited to share and participate in this divine life without losing our cultural and spiritual identities. Related to this idea of communion is the touchy issue of the Primacy of Peter, which we have briefly discussed earlier.

Primacy of Peter

At the root of the debate on the division between East and West is this question: “the institution guaranteeing the truth, or

⁵⁰ Ibid., no. 17.

⁵¹ Avery Dulles, S.J., “The Church as Communion,” in Bradley Nassif, editor, *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 139.

Truth itself?"⁵² Meyendorff acknowledges that the Second Vatican Council had recognized this problem. The Roman Catholic Church had attempted to solve this issue by re-emphasizing conciliarity, reaffirming the ecclesial context of Peter primacy and redefining it by taking into consideration the view of Orthodoxy and others as well. In spite of this goodwill, the issue remains because Vatican II teaches that:

(...) the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is understood together with the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter as its head. The pope's power of primacy over all, both pastors and faithful, remains whole and intact. In virtue of his office, that is as Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme and universal power over the Church.⁵³

The Catholic Church has only reaffirmed its stand on the primacy of Peter. Nonetheless, Meyendorff gives credit to the Catholic Church for elaborating on the meaning of the local church, its Eucharistic structure and the role of the people of God. The Roman Church also stresses that the normal exercise of papal powers must be done in collaboration with other bishops. In meeting the Orthodox ecumenical patriarchs, Pope Paul VI emphasized "equality and primacy of honor" and referred each other as "sister-churches."⁵⁴ In spite of this fraternal feeling, Meyendorff claims that this gesture did not resolve all other issues, such as the anathemas of 1439, condemning the Orthodox for not accepting the decrees of the Council of Florence.

⁵² John Meyendorff, editor, *Primacy of Peter* (Crestwood N, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), p. 7.

⁵³ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - *Lumen Gentium*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, no. 22

⁵⁴ John Meyendorff, "St Peter in Byzantine Theology" in: idem (ed.), *Primacy of Peter* (Crestwood N, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), p. 8.

The Eastern Churches had always acknowledged the particular authority of Rome in ecclesiastical affairs but they did not see this as an affirmation of the right to absolute power. The Byzantines never understood the great authority of Rome as supreme and absolute. The prestige of Rome is due only to the Petrine character of the church. Although the East recognizes the pope as the successor of Peter and Peter is recognized as the head of the church, it is not considered “decisive.”⁵⁵ This means that other apostolic sees such as Jerusalem, Constantinople or Antioch have also the right to claim the title of successor of Peter.

The establishment of Petrine and Pauline apostolicity and Rome’s position as the capital city gave the Bishop of Rome first place among equals, but only with the consensus of all the other churches, Meyendorff insists. Therefore, in the East, the “*personal ministry of Peter* and the problem of his *succession*” were two distinct questions.⁵⁶ This leadership position is not based on divine rights but on human consensus, which can be changed. The Orthodox claims that their understanding of the Petrine ministry comes from Scripture and the early church fathers.

Origen and the Fathers

Based on Mt 16:18, Origen interprets Jesus’ command as a consequence of Peter’s profession of Christ’s divinity on the way to Caesarea Philippi; Simon became the rock on which the church is established as the result of this profession. Thus, Origen teaches that those saved by faith in Christ also receive the keys of the Kingdom. This means that the successors of Peter include all believers because Christ did not give the keys of the Kingdom to Peter alone. St. John Chrysostom and St.

⁵⁵ Idem, p. 68.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

Augustine also affirmed the faith of Simon and believed that “in a certain sense all those who share the same faith are his successors.”⁵⁷

Regarding episcopal ministry in the Patristic tradition, St Cyprian of Carthage teaches, as part of the catholic tradition, that the “See of Peter” is being present, not only in Rome, but in every local church. In other words, it is the essence of early church teaching that the local bishop is the teacher of his flock and thus, fulfils “sacramentally, through the apostolic succession, the office of the first true believer, Peter.”⁵⁸ Hence, it is understandable that even after the Schism of 1054, Orthodox theologians still regard Peter as the “coryphaeus” (κορυφαῖος) or the chief, acknowledging his important function in the foundation of the church. But they did not equate this recognition as endorsing papal claims of infallibility.

Photius, the great patriarch in the ninth century, recognized Peter as the “coryphaeus of the Apostles.” Even though he betrayed Christ, Peter was not deprived of his leadership in the apostolic college. Thus, Photius aligns the foundation of the church with the confession of Peter. The Lord gave the keys to Peter as a reward for his confession, which laid the foundation of the church.⁵⁹ St Gregory Palamas, in the fourteenth century, regarded Peter as the “first of the Apostles,” comparing Peter to Adam. Palamas claims that by giving Simon the name “Peter” and by building on him his church, Christ made him “father of the race of the true worshippers of God.” Like Adam, Peter was tempted, but he repented and was forgiven by Christ and thus, became the supreme pastor of the whole church. Although Peter belongs to the “choirs of the apostles,” he is distinct from others because he “bears a higher title.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 74. John H Erickson, “Leavened and unleavened : some theological implications of the schism of 1054,” *St Vladimir's Theological*

Peter is indeed the apostles' corpyphaeus and the foundation of the church. Nonetheless, Meyendorff reiterates that textual evidence in favour of Peter's primacy in no way supports Roman ecclesiology. Although Peter was the leader of the apostolic college, this authority depends on his faith. In other words, he can lose it, which he did, but was restored after his repentance.⁶¹

According to the teaching of Cyprian on the Petrine office, there is no plurality of episcopal sees, but only one chair of Peter and all the bishops have a share in it. This is the essence of Orthodox understanding of the succession of Peter in the church. On the level of "*analogy* existing between the apostolic college and the episcopal college" there exists another succession because of the need to organize the church as an institution or "ecclesiastical order" as Meyendorff puts it.⁶² The power of this second succession is determined by the Councils and therefore, the authority of Peter is not God-given, but comes from the Councils. It appears to the Orthodox Church that Roman ecclesiology emphasized rather disproportionately this analogical aspect of Peter's and has neglected the idea that the succession of Peter is in the person of the bishop in every local church.⁶³

While acknowledging that establishing the earthly church with juridical terms was necessary, Meyendorff insisted that these legal concepts cannot exhaust the profound reality of the Church of God. The organization of the church could also be determined by the Councils at times. He hopes that the Latin Church would restore this balance between Peter as the

Quarterly 14, no. 3 (January 1, 1970), p. 156: John Erickson claims that "Papal primacy (or rather preeminence) is never directly attacked. Even Michael Cerularius refers to the Pope with the greatest respect and prefers to cast the blame for the whole affair on his old enemy Argyrus, the Byzantine military governor in southern Italy, or else on the 'Franks.'"

⁶¹ Ibidem.

⁶² Ibid., p. 89.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 90.

universal primate and also as the head of the local church. The Orthodox Church can contribute to this restoration by further research into its own ecclesiological tradition that originates in primitive Christianity.

In sum, the ideas of Meyendorff on the primacy of St. Peter have great relevance and significance for Catholics. Meyendorff was appreciative of the strength of the Roman Catholic position on the papacy, while he also wishes to emphasize Orthodox theological convictions and objections to Catholic understanding. Recognizing that Peter did occupy a special place in the church according to scripture and tradition, Meyendorff, however, disagrees with how this primacy and the extent to which the Petrine power is being interpreted and practised by Roman Catholics. In his view, episcopal sees rose in prominence due more to political reasons than divine providence. For the good running of the church, primacies were needed as they were a political expediency. Therefore, every bishop is a successor of St Peter and participates in the Petrine Office. Such is the Orthodox view generally.

The Petrine Office should be juridical and collegial at the service of the people of God. The ecclesial rights and dignity of the local churches need to be protected, as demanded by the Orthodox Church, but not at the expense of juridical rights that are needed to keep the church together. It remains to be seen in the future how the Petrine office can accommodate the demands of the Orthodox Churches in order that the church can be one. Meyendorff welcomes the idea of "sister churches," an expression that means the East and the West share a common ecclesiastical heritage based on a valid episcopate and Eucharist. Rome, of course, cannot accept the idea that the Petrine Office can be shared by other bishops vis-à-vis the pope. Nonetheless, the notion of sister churches, used by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras I, favoured also by Pope VI and Pope John Paul II, can be explored for further critical reflection.