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## Purification of Memory in the Spirit of Love: An Examination of the Ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and Joseph Ratzinger

### Abstract

The Russian Orthodox theologian, Nicolas Afanasiev, in his writings has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of the Orthodox-Catholic relationship in the years prior to Vatican II and also during the work of the Council. Joseph Ratzinger was one of the experts at Vatican II. Not only did Ratzinger have a deep impact on the Council's understanding of the church, he was also deeply influenced by it. In this essay we examine the ecclesiology of Afanasiev and of Ratzinger, now supreme pontiff of the Catholic Church. Both write on eucharistic ecclesiology, but arrive at different conclusions. Afanasiev understands that the separation of church organization from the eucharistic



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assembly was a severe blow in the life of the Christian community. Ratzinger teaches that the separation of the doctrine of the eucharist from ecclesiology represents a distortion in theology. In spite of the differences in their theological positions, they believe the churches must go beyond their doctrinal differences if they are to be united. This can be done only through a purification of memory strengthened by an effort of love. For Afanasiev, love, not juridical power, is the first and last principle to be used in ecumenical dialogue, and for Ratzinger, this means overcoming the “confused tangles of history.”

### Keywords

Nicolas Afanasiev, Joseph Ratzinger, universal ecclesiology, eucharistic ecclesiology and communion

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### Introduction

The eucharistic ecclesiology of Orthodox theologian, Nicolas Afanasiev, with its emphasis on the unity of faith, on communion, and the relationship between the local and universal churches, exerted great influence on Catholic theology prior to Vatican II. He attended the Council as an official observer and was also present when the anathemas from the eleventh century were lifted by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I. In his essay, “*Una sancta*,” written “to the memory of John XXIII, the Pope of Love,” Afanasiev expressed great hope for the reunification of the Christian churches when Vatican II was convoked. Concern with the sinful division of Christianity, Afanasiev saw the eucharist as the source of unity. He applied his understanding of the eucharistic assembly to exploring the nature of division and the possibilities of reunion between Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

While Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was still prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), his preference in ecumenical endeavours was for a slow, realistic and theologically attentive approach. As a result, he was very critical of shortcuts towards unity. Critical of the various approaches to ecumenism that relied on sociological or political models, Ratzinger believed it was unlikely that full Christian unity would happen in the near future. However, as Pope Benedict XVI, he has confirmed his commitment to Christian unity as a priority in his pontificate. Not only does Ratzinger seek to correct a wrong interpretation of the Council's ecclesiological vision, he also wants to stress Vatican II's conception of the local churches. In his ecclesiology, Ratzinger moves from an emphasis on the church as the mystical body of Christ to the church as the sacrament of salvation. This leads to his understanding of the importance of the eucharist as the foundation of the church.

This paper seeks to examine the eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and Joseph Ratzinger. It attempts to demonstrate that in spite of their differences, both believe that the impasse in the dialogue between Orthodox and Catholic Churches can be overcome by "a purification of memory" in "a spirit of love" which is also rooted in the eucharist. It is this purification of memory through the effort of love that will enable the process of healing to take place in their ecumenical efforts to achieve unity. Afanasiev categorizes his understanding of the church into two fundamental types: universal and eucharistic.

### **Universal Ecclesiology**

Universal ecclesiology based on the principles laid down by Cyprian of Carthage gradually replaced eucharistic ecclesiology. It teaches that only the universal church possesses fullness, which means that the local churches wouldn't possess fullness. The principle of unity of the universal church consists of "a multiplicity united in peace" of the bishops. For Cyprian, "the

principle of the unity of the episcopate is the principle of the unity of the universal church. The unity of the Church demands the unity of the bishops, and the unity of the bishops protects the unity of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, “The bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop, and if anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

To Cyprian and the early church fathers, the church is one because Christ is one. Cyprian with his Roman background was precise in juridical formulae and thus for him, the essential unity of the church is found in the one Christ. At the same time, the actual unity of the many local churches “is preserved in the one episcopate which all bishops share, the one throne of Peter which all bishops occupy.”<sup>3</sup>

Universal ecclesiology implies that outside the episcopate there is no church. As such, Afanasiev believes that the schism existing between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches is perpetuated by uncritical acceptance of Cyprian’s formula. He writes: “this doctrine [universal ecclesiology], and above all the doctrine on the unity of the Church and on the principle of this unity, has greatly supported the division.”<sup>4</sup> Thus there can be no hope of reunion between Orthodox and Catholic Churches

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 12. For a detailed biography of Afanasiev, see Aidan Nichols, OP, *Theology in the Russian Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> M. Edmund Hussey, “Nicholas Afanassiev’s Eucharistic ecclesiology: a Roman Catholic viewpoint,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12, no. 2 (March 1, 1975), 236.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 11.

from the perspective of universal ecclesiology which teaches that local churches are rooted in the universal church, for this means that no local churches separated from the universal church can remain as church. Regarding the status of Orthodox and Catholic Churches, universal ecclesiology would convince each of them that there can only be one true church and not two. Hence, an ecumenical dialogue based on universal ecclesiology is doomed to fail.

In sum, universal ecclesiology based on the principles formulated by Cyprian of Carthage is not the primitive structure of the church, but a development caused by external factors in the Christian community during the time of Constantine. A universal ecclesiology implies the idea of primacy, but Afanasiev prefers priority given to the local church. He believes that a return to the eucharistic ecclesiology of the early church can help to heal the rift between Orthodox and Catholic Churches and to recover the unity that was there from the very beginning.

### **Eucharistic Ecclesiology**

According to Afanasiev, “in the apostolic age, and throughout the second and third centuries, every local church was autonomous and independent – autonomous, for it contained in itself everything necessary to its life; and independent, because it did not depend on any other local church or any bishop whatever outside itself.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore he asserts: “the local church is autonomous and independent, because the Church of God in Christ indwells it in perfect fullness. It is independent, because any power, of any kind, exercised over it would be exercised over Christ and His Body. It is autonomous, because fullness of being belongs to the

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Afanassieff, “The Church which Presides in Love,” in John Meyendorff, ed., *The Primacy of Peter: Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 107.

Church of God in Christ, and outside it nothing is, for nothing can have being outside Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Christ is fully present in the eucharist, each local church together with its bishop during eucharistic celebrations manifest the full body of Christ. Afanasiev teaches that “Where the Eucharist is, there is the Church of God, and where the Church of God is, there is the Eucharist. It follows that the eucharistic assembly is the distinctive empirical sign of the Church.”<sup>7</sup> As such, the limit of the church is determined by the limit of the eucharistic assembly.

The bishop was not excluded because he is “the distinctive empirical sign of the local church.” In fact the bishop is “included in the very concept of the Eucharist.”<sup>8</sup>

However, Afanasiev is critical of universal ecclesiology that maintains the principle of unity in the episcopate which lies above eucharistic assembly. For him, the role of the bishop is important for the church, but it does not manifest the church entirely. Although nothing can stand above the local eucharistic assembly, Afanasiev also maintains that the *Una Sancta* (the Church) is not subordinate to the local church and thus maintains a proper balance between the universal and local aspects of the church. He writes:

“Each local church would unite in herself just the local churches, for she possessed all the fullness of the Church of God and all the local churches together were united because the same Church of God dwelt in them all. (...) It is the union of the Church of God with herself, through diverse representations. Within eucharistic ecclesiology the principle of the union of the local

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,109.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

churches is that of the unity of the Church of God, which is found in the local church herself.”<sup>9</sup>

Therefore what was celebrated in one church was also celebrated in others as they all possess the fullness of the church of God. The local churches were not provincial in nature, but possess a universal nature.<sup>10</sup> Hence separated churches are also in some ways in communion with the Church.

According to Afanasiev, both Orthodox and Catholic Churches celebrate the same eucharist and so he contends that the two communities are united in spite of dogmatic differences. Cyprian, however, claims that separated churches are not in communion with the Church (*Una Sancta*) and as such their sacraments are not valid. Unfortunately both Orthodox and Catholic churches adopted Cyprian’s position. Each considered itself the true church and thereby dismissed the other as having a “diminished existence of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> But Afanasiev considers such a position to be untenable because “the nature of the Church presupposes that either she exists in her fullness or she does not exist at all, but there can be no partial existence nor can there be vestiges existing here and there. The Church is one in all the fullness of her nature and she is the only true Church, and it is not possible to have the Church where there is error.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Radu Bordeianu, “Orthodox-Catholic dialogue: retrieving Eucharistic ecclesiology,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 2 (March 1, 2009), 242 – 243.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 8. Bordeianu argues that ironically

According to the Nicene Creed, the church is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” and thus Afanasiev insists that the church is always one in spite of differences. He writes: “if one recognized the quality of church in the other part of the divided church, one would be minimizing the importance of dogmatic differences, leaving them integral as they are. If one or the other parts are both the church, then this means the sacraments are celebrated and salvation is possible in both, for this is the purpose of the church.”<sup>13</sup> In his ecclesiology, Afanasiev stresses less doctrinal differences, but emphasizes that:

“For eucharistic ecclesiology, the orthodox church and the catholic church are both Churches, or to be more exact, each local church of both groups remains a Church – as it was before so it is after the ‘separation.’ I put ‘separation’ in quotation marks for it did not take place and there is no separation. The Church of God is forever and remains one and unique. The break in communion was not able to produce the division of the Church which, by her very nature, cannot be divided into parts.”<sup>14</sup>

Afanasiev believes that the East-West schism did not affect union at the deeper level. Thus Orthodox and Catholic Churches are still united in essence, even though they still lack eucharistic

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Afanasiev did not accept different degrees of belonging to the church and thus he implicitly followed Cyprian’s position that there is no church outside the universal Church; see: Radu Bordeianu, “Orthodox-Catholic dialogue: retrieving Eucharistic ecclesiology,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 2 (March 1, 2009), 243.

<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 5 – 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



communion, because he thinks that the separation is based on canonical principles:

“our separation, even if provoked by dogmatic differences, nevertheless has a canonical character. The separation always remains but on the surface of ecclesial life and never extends to its depths. Our canonical division (provoked by dogmatic differences), a division that in turn has given rise to even more profound dogmatic differences, has despite all of this never entirely broken our eucharistic unity. Although this unity does not find concrete expression for reasons of canonical order, we are not able to transform in reality our ecclesiological *koinonia*, our fellowship.”<sup>15</sup>

Eucharistic unity remains intact in spite of doctrinal differences. While acknowledging that exclusion from the eucharist happens when there is a schism, Afanasiev argues that:

“The nature of the break in communion indicated that the local church deprived of communion with the other churches ceased to exist for the latter, for there were no longer links by which this communion could be realized. But such a church did not cease to remain in itself the Church of God despite its isolated situation. If we think that such a local church is no longer the Church, we reject the only distinctive sign by which we can judge the existence of a Church: where there is the eucharistic assembly, there is Christ, and there is the Church of God in Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “The Eucharist: The Principal Link between the Catholics and the Orthodox,” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings*

Thus in the ecclesiology of Afanasiev, the churches scattered throughout the world remain one with the rest as manifested in the eucharistic celebration. In other words, the unity of the churches depends primarily on the same eucharist being celebrated in different local churches. They are not dependent on local communities, doctrinal uniformity, episcopal union or even the bond of love. Afanasiev laments that both Orthodox and Catholic Churches have forgotten these eucharistic principles and instead have focussed on their doctrinal differences. He calls for a return to the eucharistic ecclesiology of the early church as this will eventually lead to a unity when believers from the two churches receive the eucharist. This means that as long as there is a valid eucharist in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, the unity was never completely broken – the link is found in the eucharist.<sup>17</sup>

Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology has been criticized for its one-sidedness manifested in congregationism and he has also been accused of favouring the local church over the universal church.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, his understanding of eucharistic ecclesiology has an ecumenical significance in explaining the idea that the problems of a divided church cannot be separated from the issue of the eucharist. Influential in the Roman Catholic Church, Afanasiev was the only Orthodox theologian whose work was mentioned in the documents of Vatican II. In *Lumen Gentium* we see the importance of the eucharist in the life of the church because it signifies and effects unity in the

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*from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Radu Bordeianu, "Orthodox-Catholic dialogue: retrieving Eucharistic ecclesiology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 2 (March 1, 2009), 245.

<sup>18</sup> Anastacia Wooden, "Eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and its ecumenical significance: a new perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 4 (September 1, 2010), 544.

church: Really partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. "Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread." In this way all of us are made members of His Body, "but severally members one of another."<sup>19</sup>

The fundamental idea in eucharistic ecclesiology is that the local church contains the fullness of the church. *Lumen Gentium* also expresses this perspective:

"In any community of the altar, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, there is exhibited a symbol of that charity and 'unity of the mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation.' In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. For 'the partaking of the body and blood of Christ does nothing other than make us be transformed into that which we consume.'<sup>20</sup>

As we can see, Vatican II affirms that the one church is fully present in the local church. However, it also emphasizes the principle that local churches are part of the universal church – they are not autonomous and independent, as taught by Afanasiev. *Lumen Gentium* affirms that:

"The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful. The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model of the universal Church, in

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<sup>19</sup> 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](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), no. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 26.

and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church.”<sup>21</sup>

The statement above means that the local church is just a portion of the universal church. Afanasiev sees the eucharist as the source of unity, but Vatican II sees the pope as the “principle and foundation of unity”, and the eucharist as a sign and means of fostering that unity.

### **Spirit of Love**

Putting aside all dogmatic differences, Afanasiev urges both churches to work towards strengthening their common bond in the eucharist in a spirit of love:

“By an effort of Love, the orthodox church *could* reestablish communion with the catholic church, the dogmatic divergences notwithstanding and without demanding that the catholic church renounce the doctrines that distinguish her from the orthodox church. (...) Certainly, to attain this the effort in Love is necessary, a great sacrifice, an element of self-renunciation. To restrict the doctrine of the power of the pope within the limits of the catholic church would be, for the church of Rome, the result of a great sacrificial spirit toward the goal of reestablishing the union-of-the-churches-joined-in-Love.”<sup>22</sup>

In view of the above, Afanasiev urges the Orthodox and Catholic Churches to act in the spirit of love to renew their communion in spite of disagreements over many aspects of church life and teaching. Not minimizing the importance of dogmatic formulations nor advocating doctrinal relativism or indifferentism, Afanasiev believes differences can be resolved

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., no. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 25 – 26.

through the power of charity. He claims that Christians “have forgotten that ‘our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect’ (1 Cor 13:9). When Love is raised higher than knowledge, then knowledge itself will be perfected. Knowledge is not opposed to Love and Love does not exclude knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> Thus Orthodox and Catholics need to strengthen the bond of love in order to re-establish eucharistic communion.

When Afanasiev wrote about “the agreement in Love of the local churches,” he was not referring to love as an emotion or general friendliness.<sup>24</sup> Love for him was a commitment, an effective binding force:

“If the power founded upon love is insufficient in actual life, which has lost the principle of love, it is on the contrary completely sufficient in the Church, where love is the first and the last principle. Juridical power is a substitute for love in actual social life, a substitute as perfect as possible in a very imperfect life. In the Church, perfect love dwells, there is no need for such a substitute.”<sup>25</sup>

In sum, Afanasiev contends that the main difference between universal ecclesiology and eucharistic ecclesiology is in the principle of unity of the local churches. Universal ecclesiology stresses the fullness and unity of the Church in the multitude of local churches and is guaranteed by the episcopacy. Eucharistic ecclesiology, however, stresses the fullness of the one Church

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, “*Una sancta*” in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Anastacia Wooden, “Eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and its ecumenical significance: a new perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 4 (September 1, 2010), 554.

manifested in each local church. Convinced that eucharistic ecclesiology existed in the early church, Afanasiev saw it as a primordial way of being church. Universal ecclesiology, borrowing ideas and structures from the civil society, gradually replaced eucharistic ecclesiology. This “slippage of the Eucharist from the central, defining action of the Church to merely one of many services performed” caused the meaning of the eucharist to be obscured.<sup>26</sup> Afanasiev understood that one of the most serious problems in the life of the church was due to “the separation of the structures and organization of the Church from the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist.”<sup>27</sup> In the same way, Ratzinger claims that the separation of the doctrine of the eucharist from ecclesiology represents a distortion in theology.

### **Ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger**

Joseph Ratzinger has said: “that the separation of the doctrine of the eucharist and ecclesiology, which can be noted from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, represents one of the most unfortunate pages of medieval theology ... because both thereby lost their centre. A doctrine of the eucharist that is not related to the community of the Church misses its essence as does an ecclesiology that is not conceived with the eucharist as its centre.”<sup>28</sup> The institution of the eucharist is the making of a covenant and thus it is the concrete foundation of the new people. This means that the people come into being through its covenant relationship with God. Jesus brings his disciples into his communion with God and also into his mission to draw all

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Anastacia Wooden, “Eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and its ecumenical significance: a new perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 4 (September 1, 2010), 555.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality,” *Concilium*, 1965, vol. 1, 28.

people at all times and places to himself. These disciples become a “people” through communion in the Eucharist.<sup>29</sup>

The Old Testament theme of covenant is appropriated by Jesus and receives a new centre – communion with Christ’s body. Thus the church, the people of the new covenant, takes its origin from the Eucharist; the church is regarded as the people of God only through its communion with Christ. It is only this relationship with Christ that allows men and women to gain access to God. Ratzinger writes:

“the Eucharist, seen as the permanent origin and centre of the Church, joins all the ‘many,’ who are now made a people, to the one Lord and to his one and only Body. The fact already implies that the Church and her unity are but one. It is true that the many celebrations in which the one Eucharist will be realized also point ahead to the multiformity of the one Body. Nevertheless, it is clear that these many celebrations cannot stand side by side as autonomous, mutually independent entities but are always simply the presence of one and the same mystery.”<sup>30</sup>

Influenced by Henri de Lubac, Ratzinger asserts that the church as the mystical body of Christ refers to the eucharist. St Paul and the early fathers also connected the idea of the church with the eucharist. Eucharistic ecclesiology implies that Jesus’ Last Supper is the event that founded the church:

“the Eucharist (...) determines the fundamental constitution of the Church: Church lives in eucharistic communities. Her worship service is her constitution, for by her very nature she is service of God and

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 28.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

therefore service of men, the service that transforms the world.”<sup>31</sup>

The mass is the church’s form through which it develops the new relationship of multiplicity and unity. This means that the ecclesiology of local churches has its origin in the formulation of the eucharistic ecclesiology.<sup>32</sup> Thus we see also Ratzinger’s ecclesiology seeking to clarify the role of the local churches through an understanding of the church as a sacrament of salvation and the Eucharist as the foundation of the church.<sup>33</sup>

Ratzinger emphasizes that the church is not a human construction. We can only receive the church from where it is really present: “from the sacramental communion of his Body as it makes its way through history.”<sup>34</sup> This leads to his preference for an ecclesiology of *communio*.

### **Ecclesiology of Communion**

Joseph Ratzinger teaches that the concept of *communion* lies “at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding” insofar as it is the Mystery of the personal union of each human being with the

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 17 – 18. Claude Geffré is more radical when he writes: “the visible belonging to the church guaranteed by the confession of the same creed and the communion in the eucharistic body of Christ can be a sacrament of an invisible belonging to Christ, who transcends the borders of the visible church and who may coincide with belonging to the other great non-Christian traditions.” Claude Geffré, “Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion,” in Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 104.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Rome and the Eastern Churches* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 359–360.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), *Ibid.*, 20.



divine Trinity and with the rest of mankind, initiated with the faith, and, having begun as a reality in the Church on earth, is directed towards its eschatological fulfillment in the heavenly Church.”<sup>35</sup> This concept of communion must be understood in the biblical sense, and in the biblical context, communion has theological, Christological, soteriological and ecclesiological characteristics.<sup>36</sup>

There is also this sacramental dimension as acknowledged by St Paul: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (1 Cor 10:16 - 17). Thus the ecclesiology of communion forms the basis for Eucharistic ecclesiology. Ratzinger writes:

“In the Eucharist, Christ, present in the bread and wine and giving Himself anew, builds the Church as His Body and through His Risen Body He unites us to the one and triune God and to each other. The Eucharist celebrated in different places is universal at the same time, because there is only one Christ and only a single body of Christ. The Eucharist comprehends the priestly service of ‘repraesentatio Christi’ as well as that network of service, the synthesis of unity and

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on 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](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html).

<sup>36</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy). <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfeccv2.htm>.

multiplicity which is expressed in the term 'communio'.<sup>37</sup>

Communion has two dimensions: the vertical that is communion with God and the horizontal that is communion with one another. Christians must understand that communion is a gift from God given to us through the paschal mystery. Ecclesial communion is both invisible and visible. The invisible reality refers to our communion with the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The visible reality is our communion with one another as sharers in the divine nature, in the passion of Christ and in the same faith. In the church on earth, there is this close relationship between the invisible and visible aspects of communion. The link between these two dimensions of communion, invisible and visible, constitutes the church as the sacrament of salvation. From this sacramentality, Ratzinger argues, the church is open to missionary and ecumenical work. It is sent out to the world to spread the mystery of communion which is essential to its nature: "to gather together all people and all things into Christ; so as to be for all an *'inseparable sacrament of unity.'*"<sup>38</sup>

Another important point that Ratzinger makes is the idea that the church is a communion of saints. This communion brings spiritual solidarity among the members of the church when they are members of one body. The invisible element means that communion exists not only among those still living, but also between those who have died in Christ in the hope of rising again.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion." [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_28051992\\_communiois-notio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communiois-notio_en.html), no.4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., no. 6.

Ratzinger's understanding of communion became the official ecclesiology when he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Meanwhile, the word "communion" was interpreted differently by different people. But he regards these different interpretations as "handy slogans." Ratzinger says that like the expression "People of God," the word "communion" became a slogan, its meaning distorted and devalued when people only emphasized the horizontal aspect and abandoned the vertical dimension. In this case the ecclesiology of communion was reduced to a concern with relations between the local churches and the universal church. The egalitarian emphasis on equality in communion was gaining popularity. In "Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity," Ratzinger expressed his concern clearly:

"Those who speak today of an 'ecclesiology of communion' generally tend to mean two things: (1) they support a 'pluralist' ecclesiology, almost a 'federative' sense of union, opposing what they see as a centralist conception of the Church; (2) they want to stress, in the exchanges of giving and receiving among local Churches, their culturally pluralistic forms of worship in the liturgy, in discipline and in doctrine."<sup>40</sup>

In this erroneous understanding, according to Ratzinger, communion is seen as "emerging from a network of multiple communities." He is opposed to the horizontal idea of communion with its emphasis on the idea of "self-determination within a vast community of churches" that dominates the thinking of the church.<sup>41</sup> Ratzinger admits the need to correct the imbalance and excessiveness of Roman

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<sup>40</sup> Lecture by H.E. Cardinal Ratzinger at the Bishops' Conference of the Region of Campania in Benevento (Italy) on the topic: "Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity." [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfait\\_h\\_doc\\_20020602\\_ratzinger-eucharistic-congress\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfait_h_doc_20020602_ratzinger-eucharistic-congress_en.html).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

centralization. But he reminds us that questions of this sort should not distract us from the main task of proclaiming Christ to the world. He rightly asserts that the church should not be proclaiming itself but God.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time Ratzinger insists that communion is related to the universal church, understanding the importance of ecclesial hierarchy and papal primacy. Thus there are criteria to be met for Christian communities to be qualified as a “valid church.” These criteria center on the requirements of valid ministerial orders and the celebration of a valid eucharist. Above all, for Ratzinger, communion with Rome is an important prerequisite.<sup>43</sup>

Ratzinger was criticised for his assertion concerning the priority of the universal church: “The universal Church in her essential mystery is a reality that ontologically and temporally is prior to every particular Church.” He replies to the criticism by saying that “the ontological priority of the universal Church - the unique Church, the unique Body, the unique Bride -vis-à-vis the empirical, concrete manifestations of various, particular Churches is so obvious to me that I find it difficult to understand the objections raised against it.”<sup>44</sup> Those objections are possible only if we look at the church with its shortcomings and not as something willed by God. For Ratzinger, these

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<sup>42</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy). <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfeccv2.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 83.

<sup>44</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy). <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfeccv2.htm>.

oppositions are “theological ravings” by people who see the church only as a human institution. Thus “in this case one has abandoned not only the ecclesiology of the Fathers, but the ecclesiology of the New Testament and the understanding of Israel in the Old Testament as well. It is not just the later deuterio-Pauline letters and the Apocalypse that affirm the ontological priority of the universal Church to the particular Churches.”<sup>45</sup>

### Priority of the Universal Church

When the ecclesiological concept of communion is applied analogously to the relationship between the universal church and particular churches, Ratzinger vociferously asserts the priority of the universal church. He dismisses the idea that the particular church is a subject complete in itself. According to Ratzinger:

“In order to grasp the true meaning of the analogical application of the term *communion* to the particular Churches taken as a whole, one must bear in mind above all that the particular Churches, insofar as they are ‘*part of the one Church of Christ*’, have a special relationship of ‘*mutual interiority*’ with the whole, that is, with the universal Church, because in every particular Church ‘*the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active*’.”<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, Ratzinger insists that the universal church is not merely the sum of all the particular churches or a federation of churches. It is also not the result of the communion of all the churches, but “it is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on 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](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html), no.9.

to every *individual* particular Church."<sup>47</sup> The universal church is the mother and not the offspring of the particular churches.

In its original and first manifestation, the church is universal. The local churches that have arisen in different places are particular expressions of the one unique Church of Jesus Christ. "Arising *within* and *out of* the universal Church, they have their ecclesiality in it and from it."<sup>48</sup> Ratzinger argues that the relationship between the universal church and the particular churches is a mystery, and cannot be compared to any human organization. We become members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church through faith and baptism. However we do not belong to the universal church in a *mediate way*, through belonging to a particular church. Instead we belong to the universal church in an *immediate way* although we enter it through a particular church. Ratzinger says "from the point of view of the Church understood as communion, this means therefore that the universal *communion of the faithful* and the *communion of the Churches* are not consequences of one another, but constitute the same reality seen from different viewpoints."<sup>49</sup> This means that when one becomes a Catholic through a particular church, one automatically belongs to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Ratzinger's ecclesiology though focused on the eucharist is different and even contrary to the ecclesial vision of Afanasiev who favoured the local churches over the universal church. As an Orthodox theologian, Afanasiev is naturally wary of the principle of primacy in ecclesiology. Ratzinger, on the other hand, stresses the ontological priority of the universal church and the necessity of communion with Rome. Be that as it may, below is a letter written by Ratzinger which reveals his true feeling regarding the relationship between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Here we see Ratzinger concurring with

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., no.10.

Afanasiev on many points regarding efforts to forge greater unity between the two churches.

### **Purification of Memory**

In his letter to the Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland on 20 February 2001, Joseph Ratzinger expresses his cognizance that the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church belong to one another. Therefore none of the doctrinal disputes is insurmountable. Ratzinger thinks that the obstacle that stands between the two churches is not so much a question of doctrine as the memory of old hurts that alienates the two communities: “the power of the confused tangles of history seems to be stronger than the light of faith that ought to be transforming them into forgiveness.”<sup>50</sup> This means that both churches need a purification of memory to begin the process of healing that might lead to unity.

Many people believe that the main obstacle to the full restoration of unity between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church lies in the pope’s primacy of jurisdiction. Ratzinger thinks this is a problem of language. The pope’s jurisdiction over the whole church is based on honour not in the worldly sense, but in the sense of service and obedience to Christ. The pope presides over the church in charity. This *agape*, expressed fully in the eucharist, is connected to the theology of the cross, which is the deepest expression of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Joseph Ratzinger also claims that without the primacy of the pope’s jurisdiction over the whole church, the Catholic Church would long ago have split into various national churches or to various different rites. This would make it impossible to have a general view of the ecumenical situation. The primacy of the pope makes possible the steps of reconciliation towards unity.

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<sup>50</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 232.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

Ratzinger believes that the problem of autocephalous churches (“self-headed” Eastern Orthodox churches whose primates do not report to higher authorities) shows “the necessity for an instrument of unity” which must also be “correctly balanced with the independent responsibility of the local Churches.”<sup>52</sup>

Orthodox believers were offended when Ratzinger asserted that it is not appropriate to refer to the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church as two “sister Churches.” He explains that the term “sister Churches” refers to particular churches only. It is a matter of setting the plural “churches” and the singular “the Church” in the right relationship to one another.<sup>53</sup> In the *Credo* we confess that there is only one Church of Christ, which of course exists concretely in many particular churches. At the same time these particular churches form part of the one Church. Therefore, according to Ratzinger, to speak of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church as sister Churches would be “setting up a plural above and beyond which no singular is apparent. A dualism would remain at the ultimate level of the concept of ‘Church,’ and the one Church would thus become a phantom, a utopia, whereas bodily existence is the very thing that is essential to her.”<sup>54</sup>

Ratzinger laments that the term “universal Church” is very often misinterpreted when he insists on the ontological and temporal precedence of the universal church over the particular churches. To interpret this understanding as favouring Roman centralism is “complete nonsense,” according to Ratzinger. He adds that the local Church of Rome is a local church that is entrusted with a special responsibility for the whole church, “but she is not herself the universal church.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 239. Ratzinger is following the teaching of Vatican II which attempted to depict the one Church of Christ as united in *koinonia*. Before the Council, the Catholic Church identified



Maintaining the ontological and temporal priority of the universal church over the particular churches is “not a declaration that the local Church of Rome should seek to acquire as many privileges as possible,” Ratzinger insists.<sup>56</sup> It is not a question of the distribution of power, but it is about the mystery of the church.<sup>57</sup>

For the Orthodox Church to be in communion with Rome, Ratzinger suggests that the only condition is that they accept

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itself with the one true Church implying that other Christians are living outside the Church. The Council fathers applying the theology of *koinonia* used the term “subsist in” rather than “is” to depict the relationship of the Church of Christ to the Catholic Church. This means that instead of saying the Church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church, Vatican II teaches that the Church of Christ *subsists in* the Catholic Church. The aim of this new understanding of the church is to avoid sociological identification of the church with the present structure of the Roman Catholic institutions. It also avoids implying that the Eastern Churches that are not in communion with Rome are not real churches. The Decree on Ecumenism also states that other Christian communities contain elements of the true Church. Thus members of these ecclesial communities are saved “through the mediation of their communities, and not in spite of them.” This change in language from *est* to *subsistit* allows the possibility of expressing the reality of the church as transcendent and not merely a sociological structure. Other Christian communities are also recognised as having elements of the church, its spiritual and mystical reality. See Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) and Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., Eamon McManus, Ann Riggs, *Introduction to Ecumenism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 68 – 69.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

the teachings of the primacy of the pope during the first millennium.<sup>58</sup>

Ratzinger stresses the importance of apostolic succession in preserving the unity of the church. Both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church have accepted that the church came into existence from the Scripture. The bishops by virtue of their sacramental consecration and ecclesial tradition personify this unity of the church. This church unity, Ratzinger claims, is based on the concept of *successio apostolica*, intrinsically part of the structure of the church, as expressed since the second century.<sup>59</sup>

The structural unity between the two churches has not been destroyed. Afanasiev would be delighted to hear this. Perhaps this is the reason why Ratzinger says that Rome should not demand from the East to accept the doctrine of papal jurisdiction other than the one formulated during the first millennium.

Ratzinger understands the Orthodox Church's aversion to papal primacy, but he thinks that they developed an incorrect interpretation of the Petrine Office. According to the Orthodox point of view, the development of *monarchia papae*, papal monarchy, destroyed the ecclesial structure and as a result, the primitive church was replaced by something different. This means that the Western church is no longer under the bishops in their collegial unity. Instead the church has become a "centrally organized monolith" and the idea of a perfect society has replaced the idea of succession. According to Ratzinger, the Orthodox Church has developed the mistaken idea that, in the Catholic Church, the faith that is handed down no longer serves as a normative rule. It is no longer a rule that can be interpreted with the consensus of all the local churches. The Eastern Church

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<sup>58</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principle of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 199.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.245.

has thus held that in the Catholic Church, the will of the supreme pontiff creates a new authority.<sup>60</sup>

This understanding by the Orthodox Church was reinforced in 1870 by the Catholic teaching on the primacy of jurisdiction exercised by the bishop of Rome. On the one hand, only tradition serves as a valid source of the law.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, the source of the law appears to come from the will of the sovereign who creates new laws that are binding on all. The Orthodox Church thus believes that the sacramental structure of the church has been replaced by a new concept of law; the papacy, which is not a sacrament but only a juridical institution, has set itself above the sacramental order.<sup>62</sup> Thus the Eastern Church rejects papal authority.

The Orthodox Church also contends that the Roman Catholic understanding of papal primacy, with its insistence on the universal jurisdiction of the papacy, goes against the eucharistic foundations of the church.<sup>63</sup> Since the eucharistic communities are wholly the body of Christ under their bishops, they are “fundamentally equal and may not be subordinated to one another.” The Orthodox Church admits that historically Rome played a prominent role among the five ancient patriarchates: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. However, they challenge traditional Catholic understanding of the role of the patriarch in Rome.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principle of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 292.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 47. Russian Orthodox theologians stress the notion of *sobornost*, the organic unity of the whole Church. This unity applies particularly to the relationship between bishops and the whole Church. The bishop is the presider of the local

The Orthodox Church is opposed to the Catholic tradition of papal primacy, with its strong emphasis on the universal jurisdiction of the pontiff. It believes that the authority of the patriarch was “an expression of synodality” and bound to the communion of the churches.<sup>65</sup> It has rejected the notion of Roman primacy that assumes a “supra-episcopal authority,” as well as “any primacy understood as a power *over* other local bishops and their Churches.” Instead, for the Orthodox Church, the essential form of primacy lies in the synod of bishops.<sup>66</sup> Simply put, primacy lies in the episcopacy it belongs to.

According to Joseph Ratzinger, the removal of the anathema of 1054 reflects a holy and historic responsibility that goes beyond mere courtesy.<sup>67</sup> It is an important historical action involving the dialogue of love and the theological dialogue. Quoting the Metropolitan Meliton’s words, Ratzinger states that the act of reconciliation brings “no modification whatever in the status of dogma, in the existing canonical order, in the liturgy or in the life of the Church. (...) It does not mean a restoration of the sacramental community.”<sup>68</sup> The fundamental aim of the event was the restoration of ecclesial love – a community of love between bishopric and bishopric, between church and church. Ratzinger claims that this ecclesial love “is not yet a

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eucharistic community in relation to the Church he serves. This authority is always “exercised *within* rather than *above* the Church.” See *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>67</sup> This refers to the mutual lifting of excommunications in a joint Catholic-Orthodox declaration, approved by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople, read simultaneously on December 7, 1965, at a public meeting of the ecumenical council in Rome and at a special ceremony in Istanbul.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principle of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 209.

sacramental community but possesses in itself the necessary dynamism to become such. It is to be regarded as an actual ecclesial union that binds churches as churches.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This restoration of love means that, as St. Paul says, we must forget the past (Phil 3:13). Memory has the dangerous power of causing the poison of yesterday to become the poison of today. Thus Ratzinger says that reparation of the past can take place through a “purification of memory.” This means amending our past mistakes through the concept of forgetting, the purification of memory that will serve to heal the wounds. In practical terms, both churches erase from memory the excommunication that took place in the past. Forgetting is forgiving.<sup>70</sup>

This purification of memory taught by Joseph Ratzinger is what Nicolas Afanasiev has been urging those who work for the reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. For Afanasiev, dogmatic divergence is of secondary importance, because reconciliation is about forging the bond of love that is already there in those who are baptized in Christ.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

