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Complexity as an Approach in the Issue of Primacy in the Church

Abstract

The topic of primacy is one of the key issues in ecclesiology. For many centuries it caused debates in the Church. However, there is still no consensus on this issue. Today the principal controversies over the problem of primacy are focused in the sphere of history and canon law. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that an appeal only to the resources of historical and canonical polemics leads the discussion into a dead end, at least within the space of church policy pragmatics. We need to find new perspectives to move on the discussion on the new level. The article suggests one possible perspective on the issue of primacy associated with the attention to the complexity. The notion of 'complexity' does not at all point to a confusion arising from difficulties in seeking a solution to a problem or description of a phenomenon. It rather points out that there are several different and incompatible approaches and perspectives existing concurrently and the phenomenon studied suffers a reduction if these approaches are not taken into account. The author successively examines three

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situations in which complexity is manifested. In the first part, he points to the insufficiency of the dominant in the Orthodox ecclesiology Eucharistic model, and introduces the concept of the social nature of the Church. In the second part, he describes the complexity of primacy connected with distinction between the primacy of authority and the primacy of honor. Finally, in the third part, author links the complexity of primacy to the complexity of the socio-political environment within which the Church has exited through her history.

Keywords

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Primacy is one of the most discussed and debated issues in Christian ecclesiology today. In recent decades, the primacy issue is raised as a key to Pan-Orthodox conferences and commissions and in Orthodox-Catholic theological dialogue[1].
In the Russian Orthodox Church, we are working at this topic too. The Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission has set up a special Working Group which includes theologians, experts in canon law, church historians and liturgists. A considerable work has been carried out to generalize and systematize studies and a number of texts have been drafted, giving the

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[1] Pan-Orthodox conferences and commissions: Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference (Chambesy 2009), Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Comission (Chambesy 1990, 1993, 2009, 2011), Conference of Canon Lawyers (Chambesy 1995). Joint International Commission for the theological dialogue between The Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church (Beograd 2006, Ravenna 2007, Crete 2008, Vienna 2010, Rome 2011).

background of the issue and considering the existing theories and models of primacy.

Even a cursory look at the problem makes it clear that principal controversies over the problem of primacy are concentrated in the sphere of history and canon law. Arguments set forth by the sides in this polemic, for all their apparent objectivity and scientific character, are conditioned by different confessional or local traditions observed in interpreting the same canons and historical facts. Therefore, it is hardly possible to settle the dispute on primacy on the basis of historical and canonical polemics, at least within the space of church policy pragmatics.

For reaching an agreement on the problem of primacy in the Church, it seems to be more productive to consider other fields of problems and subjects and aspects of this problem. I would like to share with you some considerations concerning this subject.

What I propose to consider in my paper is an attempt to problematize the issue of primacy rather than to offer ready-made proposals for its resolution.

The Eucharistic and social nature of the Church

At present it is the Eucharistic ecclesiology in this or that variety that has become the dominant ecclesiological model in the Orthodox Church. Since its inception it has been subjected to serious criticism and has been considerably changed, but its principal insight into the Church as constituted by the Eucharist has remained intact.

This insight is based on the words of St. Paul: *The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread* (1 Cor. 10:16-17), That is, the people of God who assemble for the Eucharist to partake of the Body of Christ are united in one Body with Christ thus becoming the one Body of Christ. And one Body of Christ, according to St. Paul, is the Church (1 Cor. 12:27).

Archpriest Nikolay Afanasyev developed this idea in this way. In the empirical reality, the Church is revealed in the *Eucharistic assembly*. The fullness of the Church as the Body of Christ is present in the Eucharistic assembly so far as it is present in the Eucharist. Localized in space, the Eucharistic assembly of the people of God led by its presiding person (proestos) represents *a local church.* In this sense it is an empirical manifestation of the Church in a specific place. Accordingly, a local church represents the Church in its fullness.[2]

These theses as amended for a broad interpretation of the Eucharistic assembly and the local church are relevant to Eucharistic ecclesiology to this day. Thus, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon identifies the presiding person with the ruling bishop while a local church with a diocese. For him a local church does not cease to represent the Church in her fullness.[3] I will not consider the views of Afanasyev and Zizioulas in detail or the criticism against them since both are common knowledge today.

Serious difficulties with the Eucharistic ecclesiology begin when it concerns the growing complexity of the Church's administrative structure in history. The Eucharistic logic cannot essentially explain the existence of church associations larger then local churches, such as metropolises, exarchates and patriarchates. It is equally impossible to explain how, with all bishops considered equal, there may be such ranks as metropolitans and patriarchs and generally any primacy: indeed, if a local church contains all the fullness of the Church of Christ then there can be no authority over it and it should be

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[2] See details in works of Nicolay Afanasyev: *Церковь Духа Святого*. – Париж. 1971 and *Трапеза Господня*. – Киев. 2003

[3] See, Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion*. – Crestwood, NY. 1985, pp. 247, 251. A similar approach is found in: Шмеман А., *прот. О "неопапизме"* // Собрание статей. 1947-1983. – Москва. 2009; Maximos, metropolitan of Sardes. *The Oecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church*. – Thessaloniki. 1976.

autonomous and independent of other local churches.[4] To speak about primacy within the basic affirmations of Eucharistic ecclesiology means to speak about primacy within a local church and this primacy certainly belongs to its ruling bishop. How then one can speak of primacy on the universal scale?

Each of the above-mentioned authors tried to find a possible way out of this critical situation. But the both ways out have proved to go beyond the Eucharistic logic. Thus, Afanasyev addressed the subject of communion between local churches and the emergence of a hierarchy of communion with the primacy of authority and love.[5] In Zizioulas, primacy also emerges in the context of communion but at a council of bishops with each representing his local church (a council implies that somebody should preside over it).[6]

The insight compelling one to look for a solution outside the Eucharistic logic has proved right on the whole. However, the idea to link then this solution with the Eucharistic logic has led to a controversial situation since within this logic the problem of primacy has an unequivocal solution whereby it is meaningless to speak of primacy outside a local church. I will take the liberty to offer a different approach to this problem.

The Church as an assembly apart from the Eucharistic dimension actualized in the *Eucharistic assembly* has also a social dimension expressed in the *church community* as an institute which participates in socio-political relations. In this

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[4] Afanassief N. *The Church which presides in Love* // The primacy of Peter. – Crestwood, NY. 1992, pp. 109

[5] See details in: Afanassief N. *The Church which presides in Love*, p. 112-113 и Афанасьев Н., прот. *Церковные соборы и их происхождение.* – Москва. 2003, сс.31-33.

[6] See details in: John (Zizioulas), metropolitan of Pergamon. *Primacy in the Church: An Orthodox Approach* // Sourozh 84 (2001), pp. 9-10; Иоанн Зизиулас, митр. *Современные дискуссии о первенстве в православном богословии* // Петрово служение. Диалог католиков и православных. – Москва. 2006, сс. 263, 269-270

case a bishop becomes the governing administrator over a church community while the life of the community as a social institute becomes subject to the logic of socio-political process, which has no points of intersection whatsoever with the Eucharistic logic. This view of a local church as a social institution makes it possible to explain the existence of church administrative structures going beyond a local church. It also explains the actual inequality of administrative powers of patriarchs and ordinary bishops as well as the possibility of law in the Church (which for Afanasyev is completely ruled out[7]). In the logic of socio-political process, bishops should not be necessarily equal.

The social dimension of the Church does not at all cancel the Eucharistic one. A bishop is *at the same time* the one who presides over the Eucharistic assembly and who administers over the church community. A local church is *at the same time* a Eucharistic assembly (in a broad sense) and a community as a social institution.

As head of the Eucharistic assembly, every bishop exercises the power to celebrate the Eucharist and sacraments, to ordain and suspend clergy, to excommunicate and to accept in communion, to preach, to open new churches and to consecrate them. In this respect, all bishops are equal.

In the social dimension, bishops exercise *administrative* power which depends on the structure of the association of local churches to which they belong. In this respect, the administrative powers of a patriarch or a metropolitan exceed the authority of an ordinary bishop.

In each of these dimensions of the Church, primacy is defined in its own way: in the Eucharistic dimension, primacy exists only on the level of a local church, while in the social dimension, primacy is possible beyond a local church, within larger church

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[7]   See details in: Афанасьев Н., прот. *Церковь Духа Святого*, сс. 283-284, 288

administrative entities. Therefore, there is a complexity of primacy already on the level of ecclesiology.

The primacy of honour and the primacy of authority

Another perspective I would like to deal with is distinction between the primacy of authority and the primacy of honour. Let look at each of them.

Authority in a broad sense is understood as someone's commonly accepted and non-formal influence based on his knowledge, moral dignity, experience and other qualities. This influence applies to diverse fields of public and private life. It consists of two parts: the qualities and knowledge of the bearer of authority himself and common appreciation on the part of those who resort to his authoritative opinion.

In a more narrow sense, described as authority is one of the way to wield power. This way is special in that it is voluntary and non-coercive. Authority does not imply coercion; it is not subject to the logic of power coercion. Authority is always vulnerable since it cannot exercise its power without voluntary and forceless acceptance by those to whom this power is addressed. This is how it differs from domination. Accordingly, *the primacy of authority* belongs to the one who is actual authority for others as well.

Fr. Nikolay Afanasyev rightly observes that the primacy of authority develops from communication[8]. Indeed, in any communication there is always a certain hierarchy made up of the one who listens and the one who speaks, that is, the first to speak in this case. Authority in communication develops more often when there is a need for assistance: in finding a solution to a disputable issue in church doctrine, order or discipline, in case of the need to install the bishop for a local church, in case of clergy moving from one church to another, etc.

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[8]   Афанасьев Н., прот. *Церковные соборы и их происхождение*, с.31

The authority of a particular church is often determined not only by actual resources it is ready to offer to those in need but also the preconditions which point to its ability to act. These preconditions can be made up of diverse factors – political, economic, demographic, cultural, intellectual (for instance, the existence of theological schools), and even mystic (like, for instance, the place of Sts Peter's and Paul's martyrdom).

An important part is played by the established tradition of solving particular questions or giving aid to other churches.

It should be noted that a primary church has often proved to find itself rather vulnerable in face of other churches, since they are the ones who assess its service when they decide to appeal to it or not for aid and authoritative witness. Besides, as a primary church can be wrong with regard to the very ways of giving aid to the churches in need, the reception of its actions by other churches remains essential.

The principal danger that awaits the primary church is the turning of its own authority into domination, the imposition of its power without a possibility for a voluntary choice. Another danger is the turning of communication into monologue (which may or may not be accompanied with coercion). In any case, the question in point is power coercion which leads to a breach in communication and a loss of primacy (when primacy is not seen by others as such). A vivid example of monologue is the persistence with which the Church of Constantinople claims the right to govern the diaspora, though the age-old practice of the presence of autocephalous Orthodox churches in the diaspora shows that the case made out by Constantinople is not accepted by most of them.

Among the distinctive features of the primacy of authority is its dynamic character. It is manifested in the fact that primacy in case of the loss of authority goes to another church (as was the case with the Church of Rome after its rupture of communion with other churches), on the one hand. The primacy of authority works only in the configuration of churches which

participate in communion and thus recognize this authority, on the other.

Originally *the primacy of honour* represented the formalized primacy of authority at a concrete moment in history. And though we first read about the primacy of honour in Canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople (381), the formalized authority is visible in some earlier church canons as well. Thus, Canon 6 of the Council of Nicaea (325) fixed a special role of the chairs of Alexandria, Rome and Antioch. Canon 3 of the Council of Sardica points to special powers exercised by the Church of Rome in the field of justice (we do not discuss how far these powers extended).

Canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople (381) states that 'the Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honour after the Bishop of Rome; because Constantinople is New Rome'. Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon (451) reaffirms the high status of the chair of Constantinople, stating that it has equal privileges with that of Rome and occupies the second place as the chair of the city 'which was honoured with the imperial office and the senate'.

Not the least role in forming the primacy of honour was played by the fact that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The high status of the imperial capital city had to be formally reflected in the hierarchy of churches. This determined the hierarchical rise of the chair of Constantinople, which earlier (before the capital was transferred to that city) was subject to the Metropolis of Heraclea. The status of the capital made the chair, which had no as rich tradition as, for instance, the neighbouring Ephesus, authoritative by virtue of a potential base of resources, especially administrative and political, which allowed Constantinople to give aid to other churches.

By the time of the Council of Chalcedon, we can see five authoritative chairs in the head of the Christendom – those of Rome, which had a very manifold authority, Constantinople, which enjoyed first of all the political authority, especially in

the East, Alexandria and Antioch, chairs with old traditions and strong theological schools, and Jerusalem, whose authority radically rose with the development of pilgrimage to holy places.

In 541, Emperor Justinian published a list of 'all the holy patriarchs of the whole earth' in his Novel 109, which included the five heads of the five Churches: of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. This list became the basis for a model known as Pentarchy. The same list became the formal basis for forming the diptych of the Churches, which reflected their precedence in honour over one another.

Justinian's list was accepted by the Council in Trullo (691-692) in its Canon 36. But by the time of the Council, the political map of the Christendom had seriously changed as Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem had been seized by the Arabs and had left the Empire[9], which led to a considerable weakening of their influence (after the Arab conquests in the Middle East, Eastern patriarchs were normally elected and often resided in Constantinople). And the city of Ravenna, on the contrary, rose in its political importance. But these changes did not affect in any way the canonical status the chairs of these cities in the church hierarchy.

Since that moment, the tradition of forming the diptych can be said broke off from the tradition of formalizing the actual authority of churches. Consequently, autocephalous churches would be added to the diptych mostly by the time autocephaly was recognized, taking into account the existence of patriarchal office (today's diptych has two varieties, those of Moscow and Constantinople).

At present the diptych is formed only on the grounds of primacy of honour and completely ignores the primacy of authority. This leads to a conflict between the formal principle of honour and the non-formal principle of actual authority in

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[9]   Alexandria was captured by the Arabs in 642, Antioch in 638 and Jerusalem in 637.

communication between churches. The conflict becomes especially acute at the moment when the both kinds of primacy begin to be applied to different churches.

Thus we can see that in the issue of primacy there is a complexity manifest in the combination of the primacy of honour and the primacy of authority.

Complexity of the socio-political environment

The third perspective I am going to consider in my paper links the complexity of primacy to the complexity of the socio-political environment within which the Church has exited through her history.

The principal premise of this link is the social dimension of the Church I described above. This premise is reinforced by the fact that the Church in her administrative organization has always used as a guideline the civic (secular) organization, especially in the East.

It should be noted in the first place that the time when the primacy of the chair of Rome was formally sealed to be followed by the chair of Constantinople in the second place (381) was notable for its rather homogenous political environment. The Church existed mostly in the united political space of the Roman Empire and the primacy of the chair of the capital city as a kind of symbol of the Empire appears quite natural in that situation. The move of the capital city's functions to Constantinople did not at all mean that the New Rome became equal to the Old Rome in its rights and privileges. Therefore, Constantinople remained in the second place. Full legal equality between Rome and Constantinople was officially confirmed only in 421[10].

The first complexity however emerged already at that time and was associated with the way in which primacy in the East and

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[10] L'Huillier, Archbishop Peter. *The Church of the Ancient Councils.* – Crestwood, NY. 1996, p. 271

West was determined. While the East adhered to the logic of the political significance of the throne city, the Roman way upheld a completely different logic –that of the origin of the chair of Rome from St. Peter[11]. In 382, the Council of Rome chaired by Pope Damasus (366-384) adopted the following order of principal chairs whose rank was conditioned by its relation to St. Peter: Rome, Alexandria and Antioch – the chairs mentioned in Canon 6 of the Council of Nicaea (325). These are two different and incompatible kinds of logic for defining primacy.

Later on the emergence of complexity was linked with the complexification of the political context as after the death of Emperor Theodosius the Great (346-395) the empire finally broke into two parts and in the late 5th century its western part disintegrated under the onslaught of barbarous tribes. Rome got out of the emperor's hand and the popes of Rome, who by that time had become landlords among other things, sought to take over the city in the new situation. In the period of its political independence from the empire from 476 to 537, the chair of Rome did much to consolidate its model of church primacy linked with its origin from St. Peter. In the period of the Acacian schism (484-519), the idea of primacy of the chair of Rome appropriated by virtue of its apostolic origin became popular in the East as well[12]. Many Eastern Orthodox Christians appealed to it in the hope to find protection from the oppression by the Monophysites.[13]

In the East, already under the Emperor Justin (518-527), patriarchs of Constantinople in their official documents were vested with the title 'ecumenical'. And Emperor Justinian (527-

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[11]   Дворник Ф. Идея апостольства в Византии и легенда об апостоле Андрее. – Санкт-Петербург. 2007, с.28; also: Мейендорф И., прот. Рим-Константинополь-Москва. Исторические и богословские исследования. – Москва. 2005, с. 14.

[12]   Дворник Ф. *Идея апостольства,* с. 154

[13]   F. Dvornik cites letters from Eastern Christians to the pope in which Rome is recognized as an apostolic throne, which the pope as Peter's successor: Дворник Ф. *Идея апостольства*, сс. 142-148

565) in one of his constitutions (530) calls the chair of Constantinople the head of all churches (Cod. Just. I.2.24). Apparently, the primacy of Constantinople in this case should be understood as extending to the territory of the Roman Empire, most probably only to its eastern part. In Constantinople the title 'ecumenical' was really given pan-imperial rather than universal significance. It is evidenced by the disputes with Rome at the turn of the 6th century over the designation of patriarchs of Constantinople as 'ecumenical' and by the subsequent use of this title in Constantinople.[14]

The polarization between Rome and Constantinople continued later on as well. The drafters of *The Epanagogue*, the code issued under patriarch Photius (858–867, 877–886), ascribed primacy to the chair of Constantinople on the grounds of decrees adopted by previous Councils. According to Title III of the Code, the throne of Constantinople 'adorned with the imperial power' was declared to be the first in keeping with 'conciliar decrees' (*Epanagogue,* Title III, 9). However, this primacy of Constantinople extended to the territory of the empire with its Greek-speaking and later Slavic world.

By that time the popes of Rome had already had an independent state of their own (beginning from 750) while the chair of Rome of the Carolingian Empire subjected to its jurisdiction all the churches of the West. Actually, the Christendom was divided between the two empires and, ecclesiastically, between the two chairs, each existing within its own logic of primacy.

The rupture of communion with Rome restored the situation of political homogeneity in the Eastern Church. The primacy of Constantinople in the so-called Byzantine commonwealth[15] was not challenged. Despite the emergence of independent states

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[14]   См. например: Карташев А.В. *Вселенские соборы*. – Минск, 2008
[15]   See details about the Byzantine Commonwealth in Obolensky Dimitry. *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500-1453* - London, 1974

and autocephalous churches in the Balkans in the period from the 9th to the 13th century, that region in which the Orthodox Church dominated, had one political center in Constantinople.

The situation changed with the conclusion of the Union of Florence and the Ottoman conquest of Asia Minor and the Balkan Peninsula. Reacting to the Union, the Russian Church declared autocephaly – independence from Constantinople.

After Constantinople was conquered by the Ottomans in 1453, the sultan used the Islamic law to place all his Orthodox Christian subjects under the patriarch of Constantinople who was given the status of *millet-bashi*. However, from the 16th to the early 18th century, the supremacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople actually did not extend to all the Christians in the empire because the traditions of church autonomy continued in the Ottoman Empire.[16]

At the same time, the Moscow State saw in the 16th century the spreading of the idea of Moscow as a Third Rome. Though this idea failed to find any usage in the church, its very emergence pointed to the fact that Moscow was ready to reconsider the issue of church primacy. This is another testimony to the fact that the political complexity which resulted from the destruction of the Byzantine world, led to the emergence of a

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[16]   Thus in 1557 the autocephalous patriarchate of Pec (Serbian Church) abolished by the Ottomans was restored. In the later 17th century, the archbishop of Cyprus managed to get from the sultan the status of Millet Bashi similar to that of the patriarch of Constantinople and to become the religious leaders of Christians in Cyprus. After Egypt was incorporated in the Ottoman Empire in 1517, patriarch Joachim of Alexandria (1487-1569) was granted a firman by Sultan Selim, which asserted his patriarchal privileges and protected him from the arbitrary rule of the civil authorities. Patriarch Joachim's successors Meletius Pegas (1590-1601), Cyril Loukaris (1601-1620) not only pursued a policy independent from Constantinople but for some time governed the patriarchate of Constantinople. Just as patriarch Dositheus II of Jerusalem (1669-1707) was the recognized leader (but formally not the head) of the Orthodox millet.

new complexity in the problem of primacy in the Church as well.

It was only in the period from the 18th to the mid-19th century that the patriarch of Constantinople can be said to exercise dominance in the territory of the Ottoman Empire (in particular, the autocephalous patriarchate of Peč and the archdiocese of Ochrid were abolished respectively in 1766 and 1767). The Russian empire in that period saw the abolishment of the patriarchal office and the church's subjection to the state. Actually from the 18th to the mid-19th century there were in the Orthodox world two more or less self-sufficient church domains.

The emergence of independent national states in the Balkans in the 19th century generated additional political and ecclesiastical contexts and made the situation more complex once again. And the development of the diaspora in the 20th century as a significant church political actor only added to the complexity. Meanwhile the new complexity of the political milieu was not at all taken into account in determining primacy.

To this day the Church of Constantinople makes her case for primacy as if the homogenous political milieu of the Empire continued to exist while autocephalous churches in national states belonged to the united Byzantine world. However, both the Empire and the Byzantine world are no more, nor there is any unified political center of universal Orthodoxy.

Many autocephalous churches have their dioceses in the diaspora throughout the world. Old patriarchates exist in countries with predominantly non-Orthodox population and not always in favourable conditions. At the same time the Russian Church and churches in the Balkans continue in countries with predominantly Orthodox population, building up their political, cultural and intellectual influence. In the Orthodox world of today there are over a dozen independent poles, each living in its own socio-political context.

To this day these factors have not been taken into account in considering the issue of determining the primacy. Reliance on

canons created in a unipolar political environment does not allow settling the problems of unity in today's multi-polar ecclesial world. New conventions are needed to regulate the life of the world Orthodox community and to maintain its unity.

Conclusion: Complexity as a method

In conclusion I would like to share with you some considerations of methodological nature.

Today's approach to the construction of theories and models is special in that we can no longer disregard the methodological criticism of major universal patterns characteristic of the second part of the 20th century. This criticism has become part of the intellectual discourse today and we have to take it into consideration and to somehow respond to it.

Anyway, ignoring this criticism is an anachronism today in the scholarship milieu. Besides, it can be regarded as coercion in the ethical domain and can lead to a crisis in mutual understanding.

The above certainly concerns the problem of primacy in the Church. It seems that healthy criticism and, first of all, self-criticism as to the historically conditioned approaches to primacy can open up new opportunities in resolving this problem.

Out of all possible strategies of criticism with regard to the universal patterns, I dwelt in my paper on the interest in complexity[17] so characteristic for the thinking of the later 20th and early 21st century.

The notion of 'complexity' does not at all point to a confusion arising from difficulties in seeking a solution to a problem or

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[17]   Classical examples of consideration for complexity include Thomas Kuhn in philosophy (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962), Jacque Derrida in semiotics (*Limited inc.*, 1988), Friedrich August von Hayek in economy (*The Fatal Conceit*, 1988), Danilo Zolo in political theory (*Democracy and Complexity*, 1992).

description of a phenomenon. It rather points out that there are several different and incompatible approaches and perspectives existing concurrently and the phenomenon studied suffers a reduction if these approaches are not taken into account. But the skill of a theoretician lies in his ability to take this complexity into consideration as much as possible in his theorizing.

The aim of my paper is to show the complexity present in the subject of primacy which cannot be ignored if there is to be an acceptable solution of the problem. I offered only three possible perspectives for looking at the problem. Certainly, there may be other perspectives as well.

In my view, the solution of the problem of primacy in the Church should become a result of new conventions which are to be worked out by Christian communities of various traditions. These conventions are called to consider the modern problems of primacy, not only old approaches to it.