

## An Orthodox approach to the theme of Synodality

# The Church Fathers and Consensus

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### Synodality and unity of the Church

The Orthodox like to call themselves the "Church of the Councils", together with the "Church of the Fathers", and point to their synodal consciousness and *consensus Patrum* as distinctive features of their tradition. For the Orthodox, conciliarity is an integral part of ecclesial faith and is expressed in theology and liturgy, rather than in law. Its origins date back to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), which became the criterion for the subsequent development of the Eastern synodal system.

To understand the Orthodox conception of synodality, however, it is necessary to understand the constitution of the Orthodox Churches. Each Orthodox Church is erected on the principle of "territoriality" (existence in a geographical territory) and enjoys internal pastoral and administrative autonomy. At the same time, on a broader level, it is bound by the principle of synodality regarding the proclamation of dogmas or the application of norms and practices (e.g., admission or not of women to priestly ministry), since the normative authority of the General Councils prevails.

The "Church is a synod," wrote John Chrysostom. For Orthodoxy, a synod is not an event that interferes with ordinary life, but the celebration of the encounter of the body of the faithful with the Lord. Without practicing synodality, the Church does not exist as "one" and "catholic." An *a-synodal* Church tends to privilege an individualistic faith, subject to individual interests and "opinions". Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew noted in his address

to the Council of Crete (2016) that "[t]he atrophy of the synodal institution on a Pan-Orthodox level contributes to the development of a sentiment of self-sufficiency within the individual Churches and in turn leads them toward introspective and self-absorbed tendencies - namely, to a sense that "I have no need of you." <sup>1</sup>

### **A Eucharistic Conciliarity**

In the Orthodox tradition there is a close link between synodality and the Eucharist. Theologian Panayotis Nellas observes: "[A synod of bishops] is, in its substance, a liturgical act. Just as in the divine liturgy (*ed.* the eucharistic celebration) a local Church is constituted and revealed in the context of a concrete community, so in the Synod, where all local Churches meet and walk together, the universal Church is constituted and revealed".<sup>2</sup> Orthodoxy has always seen the Eucharist as a model of synodal organization: Bishops (as heads) and priests, together with deacons and the people (as body), celebrate their unity in the faith *together*. The bishop is also the one who represents the unity of his community in relation to other Churches. Without the Eucharistic experience, synodality therefore loses its ecclesial character and risks becoming a gathering of those concerned with "religious affairs".

To better understand this movement, it is necessary to recall the "territoriality" of the Church. A local Church is called to proclaim and live the Gospel truth fully. This impels her to open herself to other Churches in an evangelical witness of openness which, for Chrysostom, unites the world and gathers what has been divided. In addition, since a bishop's authority flows from his presiding at the Eucharist, one can speak of equality among local Churches, since all the Eucharists are equal (no Eucharist is *more* valid than another). For this reason, Ignatius of Antioch acclaimed that "where there is the bishop, there is the multitude".

### **Synodality and ecclesial governance**

If synodality is the norm that preserves truth and unity at the local level, it must also be so at a general level (pan-Orthodox and pan-Christian). The whole Church professes the faith synodically, reinforcing a unity already lived locally.

Regarding synodality, Orthodoxy often looks to *Apostolic Canon 34* (a fourth-century legislative norm of Eastern origin that regards relations between the Churches) to indicate the interaction between the "*primus*" of a synod and the other synod members. This canon exhorts: "The Bishops of each nation [territory] must recognize the one who is first among them and consider him their head, doing nothing significant without his agreement ... but the first among them must do nothing without the consensus of all. The action of a Synod in concord brought into being in this way by the Church is for the glorification of God the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit." Thus, from this it follows that synodality is modeled according to Trinitarian communion and primacy according to fatherhood. It is essential to recognize the "*primus*" of the synodal assemblies, because the Father is only one (therefore no kinds of co-presidency or co-primacy are envisaged, because there are not two "Fathers" in the Trinity). Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas explains: "Primacy, like everything else in the Church, even the being of God (the Trinity) is relational." This explains how the "*primus*" is "*a sine qua non* condition for the synodal institution and therefore an ecclesiological necessity. Likewise, the synod is therefore a prerequisite for the exercise of primacy."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, synodality is an indispensable expression of *being Church*, of the unity of the people of God and of the participation of all in the proclamation of the faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Bartholomew, *Opening Address, June 20, 2016*. <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/opening-ecumenical-patriarch>

<sup>2</sup> P. Nellas, *The Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church* (in Greek), in «Synaxi» 133 (2015), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> J. Zizioulas, *Recent discussions on Primacy in Orthodox Theology*, in W. Kasper (ed.), *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue*, Paulist Press (2006).