

FIRST WITHOUT EQUALS

A Response to the Text on Primacy of the Moscow Patriarchate

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In a recent synodal decision,¹ the Church of Russia seems once again² to choose its isolation both from theological dialogue with the Catholic Church and from the communion of the Orthodox Churches. Two points are worth noting from the outset, which are indicative of the intent of the Church of Russia's Synod:

First, its desire to thwart the text of Ravenna,³ claiming seemingly theological reasons to justify the absence of its delegation from the specific plenary meeting of the bilateral commission (an absence dictated, as everyone knows, by other reasons⁴); and

¹ Reading and citing from the English text. "Position of the Moscow Patriarchate on the problem of primacy in the Universal Church," as published on the official website of the Patriarchate of Moscow:

<https://mospat.ru/en/2013/12/26/news96344/>

² Characteristic examples of other instances of such isolation include the absence of the Patriarchate of Moscow from the Conference of European Churches, as well as the now established strategy of the representatives of this Church to celebrate the Divine Liturgy separately from the other representatives of Orthodox Churches by closing themselves within the local Embassies of the Russian Federation whenever there is an opportunity for a Panorthodox Liturgy in various contexts.

³ His Eminence Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Messina has dealt with this matter in a recent article published on December 30, 2013, on the website:

<http://www.romfea.gr/diafora-ekklisiastika/21337-2013-12-30-03-52-35>.

⁴ As for what exactly occurred in Ravenna in 2007, and the painful impressions recorded by Roman Catholic observers, see the analysis of Fr. Aidan Nichols in his book *Rome and the Eastern Churches*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press,

Second, to challenge in the most open and formal manner (namely, by synodal decree) the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate within the Orthodox world, observing that the text of Ravenna, on which all the Orthodox Churches agreed (with the exception, of course, of the Church of Russia), determines the primacy of the bishop on the three levels of ecclesiological structure in the Church (local, provincial, universal) in a way that supports and ensures the primacy and first-throne Orthodox Church.

The text of the position of the Moscow Patriarchate on the "problem" (as they call it) of Primacy in the universal Church does not deny either the sense or the significance of primacy; and up to this point, it is correct. In addition, however, it endeavors to achieve (indeed, as we shall see, in an indirect way) the introduction of two distinctions related to the concept of primacy.

1. Separation between ecclesiological and theological primacy

The first differentiation contrasts primacy as it applies to the life of the Church (ecclesiology) and as understood in theology. Thus the text of the Moscow Patriarchate is forced to adopt the novel distinction

2nd edition, 2010, pp. 368-9: In October 2006 [sic], the commission resumed its discussions at Ravenna, though the event was marred by a 'walkout' on the part of the Moscow patriarchate's representative. Bishop Hilarion's protest was caused not for once by the wrongdoings, real or imagined, of the Catholic Church but by the presence of a delegation from the Estonian Orthodox church, whose autocephaly, underwritten by Constantinople, is still denied in Russia. His action demonstrated, of course, the need precisely for a strong universal primacy so as to balance synodality in the Church." Elsewhere the author writes: "[t]he decision of the Moscow patriarchate in October 2007 to withdraw its representatives from the Ravenna meeting... was not only an irritating impediment to that dialogue; it was precisely the sort of happening that makes Catholics think the orthodox need the pope as much as the pope needs them." (p. 369)

between on the one hand the 'primary' primacy of the Lord and on the other hand the 'secondary' primacies ["various forms of primacy ... are secondary"] of bishops, although later in the same text it will be suggested that the bishop is the image of Christ [cf 2:1], which seems to imply that the two primacies identical or at least comparable, if not simply identified. Even the scholastic formulation of such distinctions between 'primary' and 'secondary' primacies demonstrates the stealthy contradiction.

Moreover, the desired separation of ecclesiology from theology (or Christology) would have destructive consequences for both. If the Church is indeed the Body of Christ and the revelation of the Trinitarian life, then we cannot talk about differences and artificial distinctions that shatter the unity of the mystery of the Church, which encapsulates the theological (in the narrow sense of the word) and Christological formulations alike. Otherwise, church life is severed from theology and is reduced to a dry administrative institution, while on the other hand a theology without repercussions in the life and structure of the Church becomes a sterile academic preoccupation. According to Metropolitan John of Pergamon: "The separation of the administrative institutions of the Church from dogma is not simply unfortunate; it is even dangerous."⁵

2. The separation of the different ecclesiological levels

⁵ "The Synodal Institution: Historical, Ecclesiological and Canonical Issues," in *Theologia* 80 (2009), pp. 5-6. [In Greek]

The second differentiation which in our opinion is attempted by the text of the Moscow Patriarchate pertains to the three ecclesiological levels in the structure of the Church. It is here, it seems, that the entire weight of that text hangs. The text states that the primacy of the local diocese is understood and institutionalized in one way, while on the provincial level of an autocephalous archdiocese it is understood in another, and on the level of the universal church in yet another way (cf. 3: "Due to the fact that the nature of primacy, which exists at various levels of church order (diocesan, local and universal) vary, the functions of the primus on various levels are not identical and cannot be transferred from one level to another").

As the Synodal decision claims, not only do these three primacies differ, but even their sources are different: the primacy of the local bishop stems from the apostolic succession (2:1), the primacy of the head of an autocephalous Church from his election by the synod (2:2), and the primacy of the head of the universal church from the rank attributed to him by the diptychs (3:3). Thus, as the text of the Moscow Patriarchate concludes, these three levels and their corresponding primacies cannot be compared among themselves, as done by the text of Ravenna on the basis of the 34th Apostolic canon.

What is clearly apparent here is the agonizing effort in the present Synodal decision to render primacy as something external and therefore foreign to **the person of the first-hierarch**. This is what we consider to be the reason why the position of the Moscow Patriarchate insists so greatly on determining the sources of primacy, which always differ from the person of the first-hierarch, in such a way that the first-hierarch is

the **recipient**, rather than the **source** of his primacy. Does perhaps this dependence also imply independence for the primacy? For the Church, an institution is always hypostasized in a person. We can never encounter an impersonal institution, as the primacy might be perceived without a first-hierarchy. It should be clarified here that the primacy of the first-hierarchy is also hypostasized by the specific place, the local Church, the geographical region over which as first-hierarchy he presides.⁶ It is important at this point to observe the following logical and theological contradictions:

- (i) If the First-Hierarchy is a recipient of (his) primacy, then primacy exists without and regardless of the First, which is impossible. This appears very clearly in the reasons proffered for the primacy on the provincial and ecumenical levels. For the provincial level, the source of the primacy is considered to be the provincial synod; but can there be a synod without a First-Hierarchy? The dialectical relationship between the First-Hierarchy and the synod, as formulated by the 34th canon of the Apostles (as well as the 9th and 16th canons of Antioch, according to which a synod without a first-hierarchy is considered incomplete), is abrogated for the sake of a unilateral relationship where the many comprise the First, contradicting all reason that recognizes the First both as the constitutive factor and guarantor of the unity of

⁶ Thus, while the Patriarch of Antioch has for a long time resided in Damascus, he remains the Patriarch of Antioch since Damascus lies within the geographical jurisdiction of that church.

the many.⁷ A second example of logical contradiction is presented by the Diptychs. Here the symptom is perceived as the cause and the signified mistaken as the sign. The Diptychs are not the source of primacy on the interprovincial level but rather its expression – indeed, only one of its expressions. Of themselves, the Diptychs are an expression of the order and hierarchy of the autocephalous churches, but such a hierarchy requires the First-Hierarch (and then a second, a third, and so on); they cannot in some retrospective way institutionalize the primacy on which they are based.

In order to understand this innovations more clearly, let us look for a moment at what all this would mean if we related and applied them to the life of the Holy Trinity, the true source of all primacy ("Thus says God, the king of Israel, the God of Sabaoth who delivered him; **I am the first**" Is. 44:6).⁸

⁷ Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Recent Discussions on Primacy in Orthodox Theology," in the volume edited by Walter Cardinal Kasper, *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue*, New York: The Newman Press, 2006, pp. 231-248. Also see Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Eucharistic Ecclesiology in the Orthodox Tradition," *Theologia* 80 (2009), p. 23. [In Greek]

⁸ I have personally dealt with this subject during a lecture at the Holy Cross School of Theology in Boston: "Indeed, in the level of the Holy Trinity the principle of unity is not the divine essence but the Person of the Father ('Monarchy' of the Father), at the ecclesiological level of the local Church the principle of unity is not the presbyterium or the common worship of the Christians but the person of the Bishop, so to in the Pan-Orthodox level the principle of unity cannot be an idea nor an institution but it needs to be, if we are to be consistent with our theology, a person." (<http://www.ecclesia.gr/englishnews/default.asp?id=3986>)

The Church has always and systematically understood the person of the Father as the First ("the monarchy of the Father")⁹ in the communion of persons of the Holy Trinity. If we were to follow the logic of the text of the Russian Synod, we would also have to claim that God the Father is not Himself the cause without beginning of the divinity and fatherhood ("For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." Eph. 3.14-15), but becomes a recipient of his own "primacy." Whence? From the other Persons of the Holy Trinity? Yet how can we suppose this without invalidating the order of theology, as St. Gregory the Theologian writes, or, even worse, without overturning – perhaps we should say "confusing" – the relations of the Persons of the Holy Trinity? Is it possible for the Son or the Holy Spirit to "precede" the Father?

ii) When the text of the Synod in Russia refuses to accept an "ecumenical prelate" ("universal hierarch") under the pretext that the universality of such a hierarch "eliminates the sacramental equality of bishops" (3:3) it is merely formulating a sophistry. As to their priesthood, of course, all bishops are equal, but they neither are nor can be equal as bishops of specific cities. The sacred canons (like the 3rd canon of the Second Ecumenical

⁹ In his *3rd Theological Oration*, St. Gregory the Theologian writes: "As for us, we honor Him as the monarchy" (ΒΕΠΕΣ, 59, p. 239). The concept of monarchy corresponds to "the order of theology" (*5th Theological Oration*, p. 279). The All-Holy Trinity does not comprise a federation of persons; So we should not be scandalized when the Theologian himself of the Fathers speaks of the monarchy and primacy of the divine Father.

Council, the 24th of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, and the 36th of the Quinisext Council) **rank** the cities, attributing to some the status of a Metropolitanate and to others the status of a Patriarchate. Among the latter, the further attribute to one primatial responsibility, to another secondary responsibility, and so on. Not all local Churches are equal, whether in order or in rank. Moreover, to the extent that a bishop is never a bishop without specific assignment but rather the presiding bishop of a local Church – that is to say, he is always the bishop of a specific city (which is an inseparable feature and condition of the episcopal ordination) – then bishops too are accordingly **ranked** (that is to say, there is a particular rank attributed to a Metropolitanate and another to a Patriarchate; a particular rank is attributed to the ancient Patriarchates, as endorsed by the Ecumenical Councils, and another attributed to the modern Patriarchates). Thus, within such an order of rank, it is inconceivable for there not to be a first-hierarchy.¹⁰ On the contrary, in recent times, we observe the application of a novel **primacy**, namely a primacy of **numbers**, which those who today invoke the canonical universal primacy of the Mother Church dogmatize about a rank that is untestified in Church tradition, but rather based on the principle *ubi russicus ibi ecclesia russicae*, that

¹⁰ This argument has been clearly articulated in the article by John Manoussakis, entitled "Primacy and Ecclesiology: The State of the Question," in the collective work entitled *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, edited by Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos, New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, p. 233.

is to say "wherever there is a Russian, there too the jurisdiction of the Russian Church extends."

In the long history of the Church, the first-hierarchy was the bishop of Rome. After Eucharistic communion with Rome was broken, canonically the first-hierarchy of the Orthodox Church is the archbishop of Constantinople. In the case of the archbishop of Constantinople, we observe the unique coincidence of all three levels of primacy, namely the local (as Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome), the regional (as Patriarch), and the universal or worldwide (as Ecumenical Patriarch). This threefold primacy translates into specific privileges, such as the right of appeal and the right to grant or remove autocephaly (for example, the Archdioceses-Patriarchates of Ochrid, Pec and Turnavo, etc.), a privilege that the Ecumenical Patriarch exercised even in decisions not validated by decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, as in the case of modern Patriarchates, the first of which is that of Moscow.

The primacy of the archbishop of Constantinople has nothing to do with the diptychs, which, as we have already said, merely express this hierarchical ranking (which, again in contradictory terms the text of the Moscow Patriarchate concedes implicitly but denies explicitly). If we are going to talk about the source of a primacy, then the source of primacy is the very person of the Archbishop of Constantinople, who precisely as bishop is one "among equals," but as Archbishop of Constantinople is the *first-hierarchy without equals* (primus sine paribus).