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The Council of Nicaea and Current Ecumenical Relations

JOHN BORELLI

An Extraordinary Anniversary and Moment in Ecumenical Relations

Christians should feel encouraged to think seriously about the current state of ecumenical relations during this year's 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, with the availability of two recently released, carefully deliberated reflections promoting the unity of the church. Significantly, as this anticipated seventeen-century anniversary was about to unfold, the Vatican's General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops released, in November 2024, the "Final Document" of the Sixteenth Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, known popularly as the "Synod on Synodality." This "Final Document," with exciting ecumenical implications, is entitled *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*.[1] Earlier in 2024 (June 13), the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity issued a truly relevant "Study Document," *The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint*.[2] As its subtitle indicates, this "Study Document" is a collection of ecumenical reflection, including responses generated thirty years ago by the invitation of Pope John Paul II to other Church leaders and their theologians, offered in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). In its concluding sections, he had invited them to a patient and fraternal dialogue on the subject of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and its role of serving the unity of all Christian communities. The "Study Document" also includes relevant findings gleaned from a multitude of ecumenical dialogues, from the 1970s to the present, on the subject of primacy and synodality, two essential dimensions of ecumenical councils.

If the Council of Nicaea, which convened in 325, was both a result of synodal practices at the time as well as a precedent, a first step, for synodality on the level of the universal church, then both the Synod's "Final Document" and the Dicastery's "Study Document," as examples of contemporary developments in the same, long historical process, can provide a wealth of suggestions for Christians today on synodal practices that can lead to greater unity within the churches and among the churches.[3] Pope Francis made these connections between the anniversary of Nicaea and current ecumenical relations in his 2024 traditional greetings to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the Feast of St. Andrew, Patron of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (November 30, 2024):

> Your All-Holiness, the now imminent 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea will be another opportunity to bear witness to the growing communion that already exists among all who are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . . This anniversary will concern not only the ancient Sees that took part actively in the Council, but all Christians who continue to profess their faith in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The remembrance of that important event will surely strengthen the bonds that already exist and encourage all Churches to a renewed witness in today's world.[4]

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Pope Francis then drew a connection with the Synod on Synodality: "The impetus for a renewed exercise of synodality in the Catholic Church will certainly foster relations between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, which has always kept this constitutive ecclesial dimension alive." He described how "an atmosphere of authentic and frank dialogue was experienced during those days" during the synod, creating an ethos of dialogue, which can serve all levels of church life and the dialogue between Orthodox and Catholic Christians.

As early as 2014, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis met in Jerusalem to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the historic meeting between Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1964, they exchanged thoughts about the upcoming anniversary of Nicaea, still eleven years away. The embrace of Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul represented a major step taken together towards greater ecumenical cooperation between the Christian East and the Christian West, cooperation of the sort known at the Council of Nicaea. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew reported that he and Pope Francis had "agreed to leave as a legacy to ourselves and our successors a gathering in Nicaea in 2025, to celebrate together, after 17 centuries, the first truly ecumenical synod, where the Creed was first promulgated."[5] Certainly the Patriarch and the Pope in 1964 and likewise their successors in 2014 could have anticipated that by 2025 such rich resources would be available for Orthodox Christians and Catholics, and for all Christians involved in the ecumenical movement, to reflect on how the restoration of a more inclusive and ecumenically open form of synodality could provide greater impetus towards Christian unity.

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Nicaea: The First Ecumenical Council, Result and Precedent

A few basic facts about the Council of Nicaea undergird its applicability to current ecumenical relations. First, we must admit that seventeen hundred years is a very long time ago. Robert Grant, a scholar of the earliest centuries of Christianity, years ago described Nicaea as marking "the end of early church history and the dawning of the Middle Ages" along with representing "a fundamental change in church-state relations." He added this humorous observation: "For centuries Roman emperors had intermittently persecuted Christians; now the Roman emperor took his seat among the bishops and discussed theology with them."[6]

There is much room for imagination when we think about Nicaea, not only because it was long ago but also because no records of its proceedings exist. We have the creed, twenty canons, and a letter to the Egyptians, that is, to the Church of Alexandria. The rest that we know comes from sources decades after the council. We do not know who presided. There

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is no indication that it was Constantine, though he is depicted prominently among the bishops. A likely candidate is Ossius, Bishop of Cordoba (Spain) and the religious adviser to the emperor. In advance of the council, Ossius, as Constantine's legate, had traveled to Egypt, Palestine, and Asia Minor to investigate for himself differences of opinion that prevented rejecting the teachings of Arius. Arius had taught that scripture shows and tradition teaches that God the Father had from all eternity willed the Son to be with him and that the Son, different from the Father, was therefore inferior to the Father. Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, had assembled nearly one hundred bishops of Egypt and Libya to agree to excommunicate Arius as a heretic. Despite this, Ossius found that support for Arius in Palestine and Asia Minor remained widespread. Ossius summoned a regional council in Antioch and forged a majority agreement on an anti-Arian formula that the father and the son were of one substance. Dissenters were suspended but would be able to repent and accept the formula when a great council convened to approve such a formula. That great council took place in Nicaea and became a precedent for reaching universal agreement.[7]

The earliest numbers for those who had attended Nicaea ranged between 250-300. Later, 318 became a standard number because it symbolically signifies a sacred representation in Greek as "TIH," referring symbolically to the cross and the first two letters in the name of Jesus. Grant felt that most of these numbers were exaggerated.[8] In addition, besides Ossius and two presbyters from Rome representing the Bishop of Rome, all the rest were bishops and presbyters from the eastern empire.[9] Despite the imbalance, on May 20, 325, the council convened; its major theological work was completed on June 19; the emperor celebrated with the bishops on July 25 his twentieth anniversary of assuming office of emperor; and most attendees were home or on their way home by July 30.

As a historical event, the Council of Nicaea was the result of the development of synodality, which characterized how local churches in apostolic and post-apostolic times made decisions, stayed connected with other churches to share news, and consulted for clarifications of teachings and practices. Canon 4 of the Council of Nicaea states:

> It is by all means desirable that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops of the province. But if this is difficult because of some pressing necessity or the length of the journey involved, let at least three come together and perform the ordination, but only after the absent bishops have taken part in the vote and given their written consent. But in each province the right of confirming the proceedings belongs to the metropolitan bishop.[10]

We can assume that a practice of this sort of synodal consultation had existed for some time. By the early fourth century, bishops representing their churches, chosen in a variety of ways in the churches, were apparently in regular contact.

As a historical event, the Council of Nicaea was the result of the development of synodality, which characterized how local churches in apostolic and post-apostolic times made decisions, stayed connected with other churches to share news, and consulted for clarifications of teachings and practices.

Between the years 60-70, the churches, founded by the apostles or their agents, were forced to reflect on the consequence that the eyewitnesses were dying out. Aside from a few letters, most of which were composed by Paul, and possibly the Gospel of Mark, the rest of the New Testament, the greater part of it, was written after the eyewitnesses were gone. The *Didache*, a first century text of collected oral traditions for catechizing Gentiles into a largely Jewish-Christian church, offers this instruction for choosing candidates to be bishops:

> Appoint, then, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men gentle and not money-loving and truthful and tested; for to you they likewise serve the unpaid public service of the prophet-teachers. Do not, then, look down upon them; for they themselves are your honored ones with the prophet-teachers.[11]

The more familiar text for Christians is the New Testament's *First Letter to Timothy*, probably composed at the beginning of the second century and addressed to the whole church and not only to an associate of St. Paul named "Timothy":

> Whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentler, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way – for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of

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> by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1-8)

Although the passage is post-apostolic by two or more generations, scholars believe that the *First Letter to Timothy* was written by someone like those who probably composed the three other gospels and other New Testament letters, who remembered the teachings of the apostles and eyewitnesses or recalled being taught by those who knew them. Thus, late as it was after the time of Jesus and St. Paul, 1 Timothy contains considerable apostolic teaching along with developments in teachings and practice within the churches based on reflection on apostolic teaching. We can imagine that, after selecting bishops through some sort of internal and conciliar process, the churches communicated the bishop's name with their nearby sister churches. The desire for unity in teaching and practice likely inspired representatives of churches, usually the overseers or bishops as part of their responsibilities, to meet from time to time. Synodality existed in local churches and developed as a practice among the churches. The great church historian of the mid-twentieth century, Hubert Jedin, observed: "By the beginning of the fourth century episcopal synods were a permanent institution, as is proved by canon 5 of Nicaea, which called for two such assemblies a year."[12] Canon 5 called for synods, gathering all the bishops in each province, twice a year, once before Lent and once in the autumn.[13]

Jedin, who prepared his handy little book, *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church*, soon after Pope John XXIII had announced a council of the universal church in January 1959, reported that there were "episcopal synods" in the second half of the second century. It is not known in what style these synods met, whether in similar ways to the account in *Acts of the Apostles* (15) of the meeting in Jerusalem of the apostles, including Peter and Paul, or more like provincial meetings of officials of the Roman Empire. In 197, Victor, Bishop of Rome, convened a synod to reach agreement on how to calculate the date of Easter, a topic which the Council of Nicaea addressed and explained 128 years later in its letter to the Egyptians. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, in 256, convened a synod of eighty-seven African bishops to gain their agreement with him on the invalidity of baptism by heretics. Early in the fourth century, there was a council of the bishops of the Spanish peninsula, in Elvira, which drew up canons on church discipline. In the West, there is evidence that by the time that Constantine was emperor in the West, secular leaders were convening councils, as he himself had done in 314 in Arles; thirty-three bishops attended one such council to address the issues of heretical baptism and the date of Easter.[14]

The Council of Nicaea was thus the result of episcopal synodality and of the involvement of Roman imperial officials in settling disputes. The claim that would be made about Nicaea was that it was different in that it had a universal or ecumenical character and in that the emperor was present, seeking a solution for the whole empire. Robert Grant commented that Nicaea was ecumenical "only in the sense that the participants came from the Roman world and, indeed, only from the eastern half of it." He reported too that "some of the earliest witnesses call the council 'ecumenical,' but the term means no more than 'Roman-imperial."[15]

Nicaea failed to settle the issues it had addressed once and for all. The creed was considered incomplete, some of its important terminology was not settled, and Arianism had persisted. The Council of Constantinople convened in May 381 by Emperor Theodosius, met to complete the Creed as we know it today, and attempted to settle some of the unresolved terminology. This second ecumenical council had fewer bishops, about 150 – all from eastern parts of the empire.[16] Besides the creed, it produced a letter and seven canons, but its other records are also lost. Ensuing general councils followed the imperial examples, rendering judgments and legislating ordinances with attached canons stating penalties for non-compliance.

In *What Happened at Vatican II*, John O'Malley evaluated the language and style of the twenty councils listed in Jedin's book, from Nicaea to Vatican I, to show how Vatican II was entirely different in language, procedure, and documentation. Up until 1962, councils were judicial bodies that heard cases and rendered judgment. They also served as legislative bodies that issued ordinances with penalties for failure to comply. O'Malley concurred with Jedin that this pattern of meeting antedated Nicaea and was adopted by bishops from local assemblies and municipal councils of the Roman Empire. Canons focused on behavior, what people said and did, and not on how people felt. The language was that of adversarial relationships. Although in the West, the role of the emperor and other lay rulers was much diminished, councils remained fundamentally legislative-juridical bodies. O'Malley offered this important insight: "It was this

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model that Vatican II implicitly rejected for itself; in so doing, it redefined what a council was."[17] Vatican II moved from dialectical language for winning arguments to the language of dialogue for finding common ground. The Synod on Synodality that Pope Francis convened from 2021 to 2024, sixty years after Vatican II, is best understood as an effort to improve on the successful new model of Vatican II, demonstrating that dialogue, as different from juridical discussions, is an open-ended process leading to ongoing consensus and developments in Christian teaching.

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Ecumenical: The Word and the Meaning

Jedin admitted that the recognition of the "ecumenical" character of the twenty assemblies listed in his book cannot be traced back to one comprehensive legislative act of the popes; rather, their ecumenical character was instead recognized by the theological schools and by actual practice.[18] In other words, recognition of these councils as "ecumenical" became a part of the tradition of the church. "Ecumenical" is a term drawn from the Greek term in Roman imperial times for the whole inhabited world, namely, the civilized Roman imperial world, *oikoumenē* (as in Luke 2:1, in which Caesar Augustus decrees a census of the whole *oikoumenē*). Participants in the twentieth-century ecumenical movement eventually settled on the descriptor "ecumenical" for what they were attempting by way of promoting conversation and cooperation across church lines. No doubt, they were aware of the use of the term to refer to the historic general councils, which indicated something but not all of what they meant by their use of the term. Johannes Willebrands, a major Catholic pioneer in twentieth-century ecumenical relations, offered a broader understanding for *oikoumenē* appropriate to the ecumenical movement. This is from his earliest reflections as a Vatican official charged with making the council called by Pope John XXIII, Vatican II, "ecumenical." First, in the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures, for example, the *oikoumenē* refers to the inhabited world over which God has dominion (Psalm 24:1). Second, in reference to the church as the New Testament people of God, it is the *oikoumenē* possessing the fullness of grace and truth on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the *oikoumenē* as a movement represents introducing the whole world into the Kingdom of God.[19] Willebrands and Cardinal Augustin Bea, appointed by Pope John as Secretary and President respectively of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, were charged with inviting representatives of other churches and Christian communities as observers to Vatican II and with providing principles for Catholic involvement in the ecumenical movement.

For centuries, the term "ecumenical" was never clearly defined with reference solely to church affairs. Each council and each church, as Christians separated over the centuries, seemed to use the term "ecumenical" to fit their understanding. For example, for Orthodox Christians the first eight general councils were "ecumenical" because they took place before the schism between the Christian East and the Christian West and because they included the participation and agreement of the ancient apostolic churches of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Differing ecclesiologies among the separated churches used "ecumenical" or "catholic" in their own ways. For Oriental Orthodox Christians – Coptic, Syrian, Armenian Christians and so forth – the first three councils until the mid-fifth century were ecumenical. These councils represented both precedents and paradigms for unity. The "Study Document" *The Bishop of Rome* acknowledges these distinct understandings and the paradigmatic character of the first several ecumenical councils:

> Theological dialogues, particularly with the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, recognize that principles and models of communion honoured in the first millennium (or, for the latter, until the middle of the fifth century), remain paradigmatic. Indeed, during that period, Christians from East and West lived in communion despite certain temporary ruptures, and the essential structures of the Church were constituted and shared. Certain criteria of the first millennium were identified as points of reference and sources of inspiration for the acceptable exercise of a ministry of unity at the universal level, such as: the informal and not primarily jurisdictional character of the expressions of communion between the Churches; the 'primacy of honour' of the

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> Bishop of Rome; the interdependency between the primatial and synodal dimensions of the Church as illustrated by Apostolic Canon 34; the right of appeal as an expression of communion (Canons of Sardica); the paradigmatic character of the ecumenical councils; and the diversity of ecclesial models. (§170)

Earlier in this "Study Document," Apostolic Canon 34 is explained as "belonging to the common canonical tradition of our Churches" and as "part of a larger collection of rules from the Church of Antioch which dates from the fourth century." The canon states that in a region there is a "first" or primate among the bishops of a province or region whom the other bishops recognize as their head, though they exercised primacy in their dioceses, and that they must not do anything important without his consent. While each bishop can only do what concerns his diocese, the regional primate "cannot do anything without the consent of all" (§99). While Canon 4 of Nicaea states that it is desirable for a bishop to be appointed by all the bishops of a province and that at least three perform the ordination, confirmation of the proceedings of the ordination belongs to the metropolitan bishop alone, the first among the bishops. The Council of Antioch was three years after Nicaea in 328. The Council of Sardica met fifteen years later.

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Looking at the history of these councils, which itself is not without controversy, one might observe that ecumenical or general councils in their efforts to forge unity did so at the cost of division. The Council of Ephesus (431) led to the isolation of the Assyrian Church of the East. The Council of Chalcedon (451) caused the separation of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The rejection of the Council of Florence (1431-1439) by the Greek Orthodox contributed to the lasting schism between Rome and Constantinople and eventuated in the Union of Brest (1596) and subsequent unions, which created thriving communities of Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with Rome out of former Eastern Christian communities not in union with Rome. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), called in response to the Reformation but coming too late to heal the division, sharpened Catholic and Protestant differences. According to John O'Malley, the interaction with Protestant delegates at Trent made absolutely clear that, thirty-five years after the outbreak of the Reformation, "the Protestants had developed and appropriated an operational paradigm that was incompatible with the corresponding paradigm of the bishops and theologians at Trent."[20] Differing understandings of how synodality serves the unity of the church became a cause for further division. Vatican I (1869-1870) led to the Old Catholic Union, built upon the already-schismatic Old Catholic Church of Utrecht, and contributed further to resentment over the exercise of primacy between Catholics, on the one hand, and Protestants and Anglicans, on the other.

Apart from the division caused by the teachings of Arius addressed by those assembled at Nicaea, there was a further divisive character to this first ecumenical council seldom noted. In the Council of Nicaea's "the letter of this synod to the Egyptians," the following resolution is explained:

> We also send you the good news of the settlement concerning the holy *pasch*, namely that in answer to your prayers this question has also been resolved. All the brethren in the East who have hitherto followed the Jewish practice will henceforth observe the custom of the Romans and of yourselves and of all of us who from ancient times have kept Easter together with you.[21]

Daniel Boyarin, a Jewish scholar who has investigated in depth the parting of the ways between Jews and Christians, has shown that the presentation of the Messiah as "the Son of Man," a title needing little or no explanation to audiences of the *Gospel of Mark*, was easily understood by Jews at the time of Jesus. The title was understood in the context of Jewish apocalyptic expectations (as in Daniel 7:13-14) of a second divine figure, a God-Man, known as the "Son of Man," who would defeat imperial beasts and establish a reign of God. This expectation under Roman occupation appealed to many Jews at the time. The apostles and other missionaries preaching the Gospel went first to Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world, and many accepted Jesus as the Messiah while maintaining varying degrees of Jewish practice. These communities of Jewish-Christians continued for several centuries. Boyarin asserts that the Council of Nicaea effectively created a schism, isolating those Jews who accepted

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Jesus as the Messiah and retained their Jewish identity from the church that Constantine was fitting to his empire. Whether one agrees with Boyarin's scholarship or not, his observations about how Nicaea represents a final parting between Jews and Christians are worthy for reviewing in the context of the council's anniversary sixty years after Vatican II and its rejection of anti-Jewish teachings of past centuries in its "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*):

> The decisions that were made in Nicaea had the effect, as well, of driving a powerful wedge between traditional Jewish beliefs and practices and the newly invented orthodox Christianity. By defining the Son as entirely on equal footing with the Father and insisting that Easter had no connection with Passover, both of these aims were realized. . . Christians who practiced Judaism, even only by holding Easter at Passover (which included practically the entire church of Asia Minor for a few centuries), especially were declared heretics. Nicaea effectively created what we now understand to be Christianity, and, oddly enough, what we now understand as Judaism, as well.[22]

Robert Grant's conclusions about Nicaea were also strongly negative: "It is the story of men who tried to achieve final solutions and total victories over their opponents and then saw their work crumble."[23] We might want to ask a different question here, in light of the achievements of more than a century of the ecumenical movement including Vatican II's "Decree on Ecumenism" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*): were not the resulting divisions caused or promoted by ecumenical councils in the past a sign that church synods, rather than being successful attempts to finalize doctrines and practices, were instead steps in stages of development and accommodation to new challenges and insights that the church encountered in each new era of its growth and expansion?

Post-Imperial Ecumenism

Perhaps one reason for the three-century hiatus between Trent (sixteenth century) and Vatican I (nineteenth century) is the long collapse of the "Holy Roman Empire," which finally came to an end in Napoleonic times. Trent was convened only after an agreement between the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor.[24] The entanglement of the secular and political authorities with ecclesiastical efforts for church unity was finally overcome in the west when Pius IX by himself summoned Vatican I. He eventually had to adjourn that council, ironically, as Italian forces seized control of Rome in the unification of Italy creating a new challenge for Catholics regarding the role of the papacy. John XXIII called for a council ninety years later that he declared to be a new council and not a re-convening of Vatican I. The times had changed, and Pope John wanted a different style of conciliarity exercised by convening bishops worldwide as he was forging a new role for the Bishop of Rome.

Not only was Vatican II different in style and language, as John O'Malley has shown brilliantly, marking a shift in discourse from confrontation to dialogue, it also represented finally the beginning of a discussion of the role of the collegiality of bishops in union with the primacy of the pope. With this change in discourse, Vatican II also marked the beginning of the Catholic Church's embrace of the ecumenical movement – seeking to heal the divisions among Christians, where previous councils had failed, while also taking the first major step of the Catholic Church toward reconciliation with Jews. In all these efforts, Vatican II was only a beginning, and like previous general councils, it did not resolve these issues by a long shot. Instead, Vatican II stated principles for the beginning of discussions and implementation of increased synodality in the church and for steps towards greater unity with other Christians, mutual understanding, and reconciliation with Jews. There were reactions to all three initiatives as major reversals of Catholic Church policy, but subsequent popes continued to promote the Council's recommendation for a continuing synod of bishops and for the ecumenical and interreligious commitments of Vatican II.

With regard to synodality, Pope Francis, who felt that the synod of bishops after fifty years needed a major new development to be effective, took the necessary and patient steps over his first ten years to allow for open discussion of synodality for the whole church, universally and locally, while not separating synodality from the equally important principle of primacy.

From the start, the Synod on Synodality followed a very different pattern of preparation engaging the worldwide church. Pope Francis also proposed a different structure, including the participation of clergy and laity as members of the synod. In the first days of the first assembly in 2023, Metropolitan Job of Pisidia, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, commented on this difference. He reviewed Nicaea and its canons and how the Orthodox safeguard this practice of a deliberative meeting of bishops, not a consultative clergy-laity assembly. He offered this observation: "In light of this, we could say that the understanding of synodality in the Orthodox Church differs greatly from the definition of synodality given by your present assembly of the Synod of Bishops." He then admitted that there were exceptions: "Nevertheless, it should be admitted that in certain historical circumstances the Orthodox Church has involved the clergy and laity in synodal decision-making." The history of Orthodox Churches living under domination, at times oppressive, is a long and difficult story. Metropolitan Job gave several examples of these exceptions due to such circumstances. He also mentioned how a theology of *communion* developed among western theologians in Tübingen in the nineteenth century influenced the Russian Orthodox to frame the

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notion of *sobornost*: a concept of spiritual unity and participation in church life that involved "all the components of the Church in its administration." This was an attempted accommodation to how Czar Peter had abolished the Patriarchate of Moscow in 1721 and put it under the control of a governing body. A sense of *sobornost* nurtured the Russian people under those circumstances. The 1917 Russian Revolution allowed the restoration of the Patriarchate.[25]

Participants in the last two plenaries of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church discussed synodality and primacy, divided between the first millennium and the second millennium. The result of the discussion of the first millennium was the 2016 document, *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church* (Chieti, Italy).[26]

The dialogue acknowledged that "Different understandings of these realities [Primacy and Synodality] played a significant role in the division between Orthodox and Catholics. It is, therefore, essential to seek to establish a common understanding of these interrelated, complementary and inseparable realities" (§5). The statement declared that the role of bishop is a fundamental principle of synodality: "Since the bishop is the head of his local church, he represents his church to other local churches and in the communion of all the churches. Likewise, he makes that communion present to his own church. This is a fundamental principle of synodality" (§10). The dialogue, in its consensus about Nicaea, specifically mentioned what has already been said about personal participation of all the bishops of a region in or written agreement to an episcopal election and consecration, which it identified as "a synodical act *par excellence*" (§12); it likewise indicated the role of the metropolitan, holding primacy, honor, and prerogative in a region, validating the election of a bishop.

When the dialogue met again in Alexandria in 2023, it issued *Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today* (Alexandria, Egypt).[27] Regarding developments in the West, namely the Protestant Reformation, this document reviewed how the Council of Trent heard the objections of the Reformers but could take no action. In particular, the document noted about Trent's proceedings that "consensus on the meaning of primacy and the rights of the primate was unattainable" (§2.2). In some places, the election of bishops continued through cathedral chapters and for other places Trent decreed that there should be provincial synods to prepare *terna* (lists of three names) of candidates to send to Rome for the pope to choose and appoint as bishops. The document also observed that the Council of Trent promoted synodality and observed how provincial synods, aimed at implementing the Tridentine reforms, took place "in Italy (e.g., Milan, 1566), in the German Empire (e.g., Salzburg, 1569), in France (from 1581), and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Piotrków, 1589)" (§2.3).

One who took Trent's mandate for synodality seriously was the Archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, who required synods in his diocese and the dioceses in the province of Milan including Bergamo, which he visited in 1575. The fortuitous outcome of this was that in 1906, a young priest of the diocese of Bergamo, Angelo Roncalli, who began teaching church history in the diocesan seminary, visited the Ambrosian Library in Milan and discovered thirty-nine bound volumes of manuscripts concerning his Diocese of Bergamo in the post-Tridentine era, including records of visitations by Archbishop Borromeo. Bishop Giacomo M. Radini-Tedeschi, Roncalli's bishop, supported him in a project to publish these records; the prefect of the Ambrosian Library, Msgr. Achille Ratti (future Pope Pius XI) approved and assisted Roncalli. Bishop Radini-Tedeschi, in addition, convened a diocesan synod, which for the early twentieth century was unusual. All this influenced the young Roncalli of the importance of synodality. He finished editing the final volume of materials in 1959, soon after becoming Pope John XXIII and announcing both a diocesan synod for the Diocese of Rome and a general council for the whole church: Vatican II.[28]

The Alexandria Document acknowledged that there are dangers when primacy is overemphasized or, when the opposite is the case, synodality is overemphasized: "The Church is not properly understood as a pyramid, with a primate governing from the top, but neither is it properly understood as a federation of self-sufficient Churches. . . Similarly, it is clear that for Roman Catholics synodality is not merely consultative, and for Orthodox primacy is not merely honorific" (§5.1). An example of the possible terrible consequence of viewing the Orthodox Church as a federation of self-sufficient churches is the bitter and divisive religious dimensions of the current war in Ukraine, which has been destructive of relations among the Orthodox Christians and of human rights.[29]

If indeed, as the Alexandria Document tells us, "The interdependence of synodality and primacy is a fundamental principle in the life of the Church" (§5.3), then what is the next step? So far, the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue has proceeded historically, and the Alexandria Document acknowledges that "purely historical discussions are not enough (§5.3). How then do we go about making a new and appropriate application of these principles today? I would suggest two steps forward based on two recent achievements by the Catholic Church. The first is considering how to implement the "Final Document" of the Synod on Synodality, not just for the Catholic Church but in service to the unity of the

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churches, and the second is to move forward with a formal review of the recent "Study Document," *The Bishop of Rome*.

The Synod on Synodality

The Synod on Synodality redefined for current times how synodality needs to be implemented throughout the Catholic Church. The "Final Document" has much to say also about ecumenism and itself represents an ecumenical step forward. In the first place, Pope Francis chose to accept the "Final Document," as prepared by synod delegates of bishops, clergy, and lay, as the final interpretation of the synod's proceeding. He declined to write an Apostolic Exhortation of his own, which has been the procedure for previous post-Vatican II synods of bishops. This should please the ecumenical partners in other churches, letting the assembly and not the pope alone provide the final interpretation. With regard to ecumenical relations, the "Final Document" calls "for mutual accountability [between the churches] for who we are, what we do, and what we teach"; in addition, it invites Catholics "to pay more attention to the synodal practices of our ecumenical partners, both in the East and in the West" (§138).

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The "Final Document" also refers to this year, 2025, and the anniversary of Nicaea as offering "an opportunity to deepen and confess together our faith in Christ and to put into practice forms of synodality among Christians of all traditions," calling among other things for "bold initiatives for a common date for Easter" (§139). Seeing the word "bold" reminds those who paid attention on October 31, 2016, to hear the encouragement that Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation at the time, offered together in Lund, Sweden, as they opened the year of commemoration of the Lutheran Reformation:

> We call upon all Lutheran and Catholic parishes and communities to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in their commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. Rather than conflicts of the past, God's gift of unity among us shall guide cooperation and deepen our solidarity. By drawing close in faith to Christ, by praying together, by listening to one another, by living Christ's love in our relationships, we, Catholics and Lutherans, open ourselves to the power of the Triune God. Rooted in Christ and witnessing to him, we renew our determination to be faithful heralds of God's boundless love for all humanity.[30]

How fitting these words from 2016 are for our commemoration of the anniversary of Nicaea in 2025! More than settlement of the date of Easter, there are a number of ways that Christians might consider bold actions to emphasize the unity they already have.

The "Final Document" draws from ecumenical language by using the expression "exchange of gifts" that arose at the time of Vatican II, first in Pope Paul VI's 1964 encyclical on the church, *Ecclesiam Suam* (§47), where he discusses "restoration and not reduction" in the unity of the church to emphasize catholicity among the diverse churches. This concept was incorporated into Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," *Lumen Gentium* (§13), also issued in 1964: "In virtue of this catholicity each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church" and "Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase." The language applies to the communion of churches within our Christian communions and among our Christian communions.

Pope John Paul II reiterated the application of the term to ecumenical relations in *Ut Unum Sint*, his encyclical on ecumenism in 1995:

> This truth about dialogue, so profoundly expressed by Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, was also taken up by the Council in its teaching and ecumenical activity. Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some ways it is always an "exchange of gifts" (§28).

Pope John Paul II applied it specifically in the context of the relationship between the churches of the east and of the west: "Communion is made fruitful by the exchange of gifts between the Churches insofar as they complement each other" (§57). The "Final Document" uses the expression "exchange of gifts" nineteen times with reference to nourishing the communion of the Catholic Church and to promoting the growing communion between the Catholic Church and

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the churches and Christian communions involved in the ecumenical movement. Implementing this new model of synodality emerging from "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission" might significantly improve relations within the Catholic Church in service to the mission of the church and relations among Christian communities in their shared witness to the gospel.

In light of our reflections on Nicaea and the role of ecumenical councils, we may now understand from our perspective sixty years after Vatican II, that this last council not only represented a change in style but may also have been a transitional council. It met at an auspicious time for change. It came fifteen years after World War II, in a period of unity among the nations of western Europe and the emergence of new nations in Africa and Asia from colonial rule. It was also a time of the global division of the Cold War, between the communist East and the democratic West.

After the Synod on Synodality, we might see a pivot from assemblies inviting all bishops and heads of religious orders to convene in synods to assemblies inviting representative numbers of bishops to attend along with representative numbers of laity and clergy as well. We might also see this model of synodality attempted ecumenically. Pope John Paul II convened religious leaders three times in Assisi to fast, walk together, and pray in one another's presence for peace. Similarly, the Bishop of Rome might offer to convene Christian leaders in a synodal fashion to address pressing concerns. On the first occasion of the World Day of Prayer in Assisi in 1986, Archbishop Robert Runcie of Canterbury observing "the vision of a new style of Petrine Ministry – an ARCIC primacy rather than a papal monarch."[31] ARCIC is a reference to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, which in its second statement of 1981, "Authority in the Church," identified the need for a universal primate as an instrument of unity for the whole church. It is obvious from that discussion that there was agreement that such primacy rests with the Bishop of Rome.[32]

The "Final Document" offers a nicely detailed theology of baptism and how participation in synodality is the right of all those who are baptized. The document also speaks of "shared synodal formation for all the Baptized," which constitutes the horizon within which to understand and practice the specific formation required for individual ministries and vocations, and it adds, "the ecumenical dimension of formation cannot but facilitate this change in mentality." Pope Francis spoke of how "the path of synodality, which the Catholic Church is travelling, is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical path is synodal."[33] In keeping with the themes of the Synod on Synodality, the "Final Document" recommends "the celebration of an ecumenical Synod on evangelization" (§138), which the Bishop of Rome might convene.

Conclusion

Catholics have a great responsibility to one another and to their fellow Christians to implement the "Final Document," to draw from how other Christians have developed synodality, and to promote with them in an exchange of gifts on this topic of synodality in ecumenical conversation and practice. The "Study Document" *The Bishop of Rome* cites numerous ecumenical reports and documents, and among them is "Declaration on the Way": a declaration of consensus prepared by a task force of Catholics and Lutherans, who reviewed several Catholic-Lutheran statements on church, ministry and eucharist.[34] The task force identified statements of agreement, agreement elaborated and documented, and remaining differences and reconciling considerations. It was a colossal task, carefully accomplished under the remarkable over-arching consensus agreement of the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church on the fundamental issue that led to the Reformation.

The "Study Document" needs its own ecumenical task force of scholars and church leaders, similar to what was done with *Declaration on the Way*, to evaluate this rich collection of materials in the "Study Document" and its recommended next steps, principles, and suggestions. This would be a truly significant legacy from the joint celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea.

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Editor's Note: An earlier version of this article was delivered as the 2025 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Lecture at the Centro Pro Unione, Rome, on January 23, 2025.

Notes

1. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG–Documento-finale.pdf.

2. https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/altri-testi/the-bishop-of-rome.html.

3. Viewing Nicaea as both a result and a precedent was suggested to me by Robin Darling Young, Associate Professor of Church History, the Catholic University of America, and a current member of the Vatican's International Theological Commission, which is "working on a document intended to shed light on the timeliness of the faith professed at Nicaea . . . invaluable, in the course of the Jubilee Year, to nourish and deepen the faith of believers and, based on the figure of Jesus, to offer insights and reflections useful for a new cultural and social paradigm inspired by the humanity of Christ" (Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission, November 28, 2024): https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/november/documents/20241128-cti.html.

4. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2024/documents/20241130-messaggio-bartolomeo.html.

5. *Asia News*, May 29, 2014, https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bartholomew-:-With-Francis,-we-invite-all-Christians-to-celebrate-the-first-synod-of-Nicaea-in-2025-31213.html.

6. Robert M. Grant, "Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea," *Journal of Religion* 55.1 (1975), 1-21; republished in *Christian Beginnings: Apocalypse to History* (Variorum, 1983).

7. Grant, "Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea," 3-5.

8. Grant, "Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea," 5.

9. "First Council of Nicaea–325," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. I, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2.

10. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. I, 7.

11. Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Liturgical, 2013), 35.

12. Hubert Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: An Historical Survey* (Paulist, 1961), 13.

13. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 1, 8.

14. Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils*, 12-14.

15. Grant, "Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea," 1, 5.

16. Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils*, 26-27.

17. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 44.

18. Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils*, 11.

19. Msgr. J. G. M. Willebrands, "Catholic Ecumenism," in *Problems before Unity* (Helicon, 1962), 3-5.

20. John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 156.

21. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. I, 19.

22. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (The New Press, 2012), 14.

23. Grant, "Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea," 12.

24. O'Malley, *Trent*, 51-73.

25. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/09/231009f.html; cf. Metropolitan Job of Pisidia, "The Experience of an Orthodox Fraternal Delegate at the Synod on Synodality," *Ecumenical Trends* 54.2 (March/April 2025): 1-5.

26. https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese1.html.

27. https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/document-d-alexandrie--synodalite-et-primaute-au-deuxieme-mille.html.

28. Peter Hebblethwaite, *Pope John XXIII: Shepherd of the Modern World, The Definitive Biography of Angelo Roncalli* (Doubleday, 1987), 53-54, 117, 240.

29. John Borelli, "Protect Ukraine's Long History of Religious Diversity." https://publicorthodoxy.org/2024/08/09/ukraines-history-of-religious-diversity/.

30. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/31/0783/01757.html#orig.

31. Mary Tanner, "Authority: Gift or Threat?" in *Unpacking the Gift*: *Anglican Resources for Theological Reflection on "The Gift of Authority"*, ed. Peter Fisher (Church House, 2002), 31.

32. See *Authority in the Church II* (1981), §33: https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-i/testo-in-inglese1.html. See also *The Bishop of Rome*, §71; §143. The latter is a reference to a 1985 Anglican-Old Catholic Dialogue in which they agreed that a universal primate "must have the obligation to convene meetings of bishops and councils at certain times and in certain circumstances, and the right to do so when he deems it necessary."

33. Pope Francis, *Address to His Holiness Mar Awa III,* 19 November 2022: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/november/documents/20221119-patriarca-chiesa-assira.html.

34. https://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/2015_usccb-elca_declaration-on-the-way.pdf.

The Nicene Creed and the Gift of Unity

DAVID CARTER

The Emergence of Trinitarian Consensus on the Road to Nicaea

During this year, the worldwide Church will celebrate the 1700th anniversary not only of the First Council of Nicaea, but also of the Creed formulated at the Council: a statement of Christian faith agreed by the bishops of the Church in council at a time of controversy about basic doctrine, particularly as relating to the divinity of Christ.

It can seem out of place in our modern secular world that anyone should be concerned about such an ancient formula of belief. But Christianity is a historical religion: not just in its longevity but in its belief that God, at certain key points across human history, has revealed his nature, his will, and his salvation for the lasting benefit of all people and peoples. Supremely, he did so in Jesus of Nazareth, who subsequently came to be proclaimed as God's messenger and son, both human and divine.

However, it took Christians a long time to decide and agree overwhelmingly on the status of Jesus as true God and true human being, uniquely in these two natures bridging the gap between the human and the divine. Right from the beginning, we are told that Jesus was regarded by many as having unique authority and teaching in a way very different from that of the official Jewish religious teachers of the time. He himself had an awareness of his authority, manifested in such sayings as "you have heard in the past... but now I say unto you" (throughout Matthew 5) and "if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). His whole message centered on the coming into existence of God's kingdom. His healings and his teaching led to speculation and disagreement as to whether he was the promised Jewish liberator, the Messiah; he questioned his own disciples on the matter, admitting to the leader among them, Simon Peter, that he was indeed that promised Messiah.

In St. John's gospel, we get the first clear hint that at least one late first century Christian community, that of the followers of the Beloved Disciple, were beginning to approach the later Christian doctrine as stated in the later expression of the Nicene Creed that Jesus was indeed the only son of God, "begotten of the Father before all worlds, begotten not made, of one being with the Father." We are also told that when Thomas, the one disciple who had missed the first resurrection visit of Jesus to his disciples, saw Jesus at his second meeting with the disciples, he broke out with the first clear affirmation of Jesus as uniquely one with God: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

Nevertheless, for many generations thereafter, differing Christian groups held differing understandings of who Jesus was. Some continued to regard themselves as Jews and follow the Jewish law fully. Others, seeing non-Jewish people having similar charismatic experiences to their own, saw the gospel of Jesus as being addressed to all people of all races (as in the "Great Commission" of Matthew 28:19, in which Jesus exhorts his apostles to "make disciples of all nations").

The early Church's increasing recruitment of non-Jewish members exposed it to currents of thinking about the world that could distort people's understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit of God (so strongly experienced from the first Pentecost onwards) and between the world and God. Much Hellenistic thought on the relationship between God and the world, after all, conceived the world as divided between a principle of chaos or even evil and the power of a good God, locked in an eternal struggle between good and evil. Those religious teachers who became known as Gnostics claimed that people had to learn to trust the good God against the influences of eternal evil. Many early Christians turned to varying Gnostic teachers who promised them salvation through particular cults.

It is the reaction to such teaching that helps to explain the strong emphasis upon God as Almighty, creator of heaven and earth and of all things seen and unseen. To the bishops meeting at Nicaea there was no equally powerful rival to the God and Father of Jesus Christ, even though Christ, as his eternally begotten Son, was associated with him in the act of creation – a point made both in the Johannine and Pauline scriptures[1] and thus echoed in the Creed.

Even among Christians who did not turn to various Gnostic teachings and cults, however, there was considerable uncertainty about how exactly to define the relationship between Jesus and the God he called "Father." Some remembered that Jesus had said, "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). At the beginning of the fourth century, a teacher called Arius cited Paul's teaching that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation, interpreting this as meaning that though Jesus had been born before any other creature made by God, he nevertheless was not fully divine.[2] In opposition to this, Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria (along with his protégé Athanasius) argued that Christ was the eternally begotten Son of God, coequal with the Father; this was the

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teaching subsequently accepted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and reinforced in later councils in 381 and 451, even as many across the Christian world continued to support the Arian position into the late sixth century.

The new Creed, reinforced in 381 at Constantinople and in 451 at Chalcedon, was in no small part a means of waging this (political as much as theological) struggle against Arianism – as it was again used in the context of modern struggles over Unitarianism and other movements that have sought to deny the divinity of Christ. It is therefore not surprising that the Creed asserts both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ so strongly, naming him "God from God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father," and it is only as such that he took on human nature, birth, and death. Two amazing truths are set side by side insofar as Christ is, as Charles Wesley confesses him (echoing the witness of Alexander and Athanasius against Arius), "Jehovah crucified."[3]

Today, the Nicene Creed is affirmed by all the varying Christian churches as a basic statement of the key basis of our common faith. The many separately organized and differently relating Christian churches are varyingly divided on matters relating to styles of worship, church organization and beliefs about the nature of the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, but they are not divided over their basic understanding of God's nature and salvation as set out in this creed.

It is easy to overlook how significant it is that churches as different from each other as, for example, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal churches confess not just the one God but also the nature and work of the three eternal partners of the Trinity. We all dare, at the Lord Jesus Christ's own invitation, to address our prayers to the Father, knowing that the Father's mercies are "over all his works" (Psalm 145:9). We all acknowledge the same one Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledging his unity of two natures, that of the eternally begotten Son of God with the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary.[4] We acknowledge that in and through Him was revealed the fullness of the divine love for us, the love of the Father who did not spare his only Son from all the dangers of human life and the Son's own steadfast willingness to undergo the many conflicts of life, culminating in his last three hours of subjection to what was probably the most terrible form of execution ever devised. Supremely, we see him to be the one who reveals the total self-giving of God and, so doing, reveals and inspires also what God created us human beings, in His own image, to be. To take up again the insight of Charles Wesley:

> Vouchsafe us eyes of faith to see
> The man transfixed on Calvary
> And know thee who thou art
> The one eternal God and true
> And let the sight affect, subdue
> And melt our broken hearts.[5]

Finally, despite our confessional and cultural divisions, we share acknowledgment of the one Holy Spirit, whose coming was prophesied by the prophet Joel and was fully realized at the feast of Pentecost in answer to the promise of the ascending Christ. We appeal together to the presence of

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Him who is the power and inspiration of the Church, in all its denominations, across the many centuries, whose power and continuing faithful creativity is experienced in every Christian assembly and movement, in every saint raised up. Important testimony to this is given in the teaching of the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II (*Unitatis Redintegratio*):

> Nor should we forget that whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian . . . can always result in a more ample realization of the very mystery of Christ and the Church.[6]

Even the smallest of communities of Christ's adopted sisters and brothers may have something powerful, meaningful, and good to contribute to the rest of us, when the Spirit promised by Christ leads us ever more fully into all truth (John 16:13).

Fuller light on the extraordinary degree of unity on this basic trinitarian understanding of God is shed by the recent (2014) International Theological Commission report on the *sensus fidei fidelium* of all baptized Christians of whatever community, emphasizing the roots of this framework in the New Testament period. We may note, for example, the decision of the early community in Jerusalem to hold all things in common. In his *Notes on the New Testament*, John Wesley questions "how came they so to act seeing that we have no indication of any command to do so. I answer it was because of the love that they had for each other."[7] This instinct, the product of the *sensus fidei fidelium* and its consequences for Christian life and conduct, was enacted well before any later theological definition of the Holy Spirit as a binding agent for the Christian community. So too, we find teaching in the early Johannine community that points to the instinct of the entire people of God for actions and beliefs that are directly inspired by the Holy Spirit: "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge" (1 John 2:20). The whole passage is deeply trinitarian, that faith being established in the Johannine church some two centuries before it received formal confirmation at the Council of Nicaea.

Nicene Faith and Contemporary Ecumenical Challenges

We are increasingly discovering, in ecumenical dialogue, how united we are in the most fundamental doctrine: our belief in the triune God and how we need to share in the common pattern of Christian discipleship focused on our service of the poorest and most neglected in our areas of common mission. Having stated this common heritage of all the churches of the triune God – whether Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or Pentecostal, whether liberal or more conservative in some particular aspects, I need to touch on one significant exception to total credal acceptance.

Early in the Middle Ages, following the Third Council of Toledo (589), the churches in the West added a single word to the Latin translation of the Creed in expressing the coming of the Holy Spirit. To the original formulation "proceeded from the Father" (*qui ex Patre procedit*) was added "and from the Son" (*filioque*). This word was added first in Spain, then adopted later by the Pope in Rome and inserted into the eucharistic liturgy.

The Orthodox churches of the East objected to this addition on the grounds that it had been adopted without consultation in a wider General Council also including their own bishops. It was that ecclesiastical sleight, more than their disquiet over attributing any authority to the idea of Christ's role in the procession and sending of the Spirit, that turned a regional anti-Arian measure into an ecumenical crisis. For indeed, eastern and western churches alike accepted the teaching of Jesus as relayed to us in John's gospel: "and I will pray to the Father and he will send you another advocate, even the Spirit of truth, who will be with you forever" (John 14:16).

In more recent times a compromise has been suggested, which speaks of procession from the Father "through the Son," a position which can find scriptural authority in John's Gospel, as shown immediately above. It is through Christ's intercession that the Spirit is sent to the Church. This suggestion has most recently been made through the international Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue. That particularly rich dialogue owes much, according to one of its Finnish interlocuters, to the fact that in certain respects the Orthodox of his homeland are the most "Lutheran Orthodox" and, by the same token, the Lutherans are the most "Orthodox Lutherans" – a fact shown clearly by the great advances made by Finnish scholars in the understanding and exposition of Luther's previously rather forgotten teaching on holiness.[8]

The Creed ends with its clear affirmation of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Again, this is a truth affirmed by all the churches, though different nuances relate to all four of these attributes. All the churches agree that our Lord's intention was the unity of the Church, for which he prayed the night before his death in terms related in chapter 17 of John's gospel. He prayed that all his disciples might be one "as you, Father, and I are one" (John 17:21). We know also from his earlier teaching that he seems to have envisaged the possibility of estrangement between churches, whether by sheer distance or otherwise, when he reminded the disciples "other sheep I have who are not of this fold. Them also I will bring and there will be one fold and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Starting from either John 10 or John 17, the unity of all Christians in one fully mutual fellowship is clearly accepted as the Lord's will, even if churches disagree about the exact structures and ministries needed for such a truly united Church.

Holiness too is accepted as Christ's will for all his disciples and their various local churches within the context

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of the one wider holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. The Church is called to be holy in its corporate life and mission and in that of each disciple. That holiness depends on what John Wesley called "pressing on to full perfection" by each Christian in the context of his or her fellowship, both within the local congregation and through the wider Church. It is something into which all Christians are to grow through fellowship with each other and, under the guidance of pastors, through mutual encouragement and the seeking of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The attributes of catholicity and apostolicity were for a long time the grounds for major dispute between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches and later between the Roman Catholic Church and those churches born at or after the Reformation. By the third century, the early churches had all accepted the principle of the threefold ministry of bishops, but from the fifth century, disagreements began to appear as to the particular leadership of the Bishop of Rome, accepted in the west but not further east where five patriarchs were all accepted as of equal status in authority over their particular areas. Over this and several other cultural, political, and theological divergences, the western and eastern churches became gradually estranged from each other, the process being marked by mutual excommunications in 1054. Yet these divided churches have continued independently in the apostles' teaching and fellowship and in the breaking of bread and prayers, fundamentals that are accepted in all the churches, even if elements of them, particularly interpretation of the exact significance of the breaking of bread, are still in certain respects divergently experienced and explained.

Above all, there is growth in common understanding of what is meant by the catholicity of the Church. It is increasingly accepted that the Christian gospel, the good news of God's unique acts in the sending first of Jesus and then of the Holy Spirit, is offered to all human beings, of whatever race or status in the world. Just as Jesus befriended people of all sorts, even enemies of his fellow Jews (such as Romans and Samaritans), so the Church also, after some initial hesitations, came to welcome Jews and Gentiles alike. Jesus's final command to his disciples, after the Resurrection, was to command them to go into all the world, finding a home for the gospel among all people. As St. Paul teaches, all Christians receive the spirit of adoption: We receive the privilege that Jesus has in his incarnation of addressing God as "Abba," Father, a term of great intimacy, allowing us to approach the Father in full trust and confidence. We also receive the Holy Spirit and his gifts in as great a diversity of ways and forms as there are ways and forms of people.

Starting from either John 10 or John 17, the unity of all Christians in one fully mutual fellowship is clearly accepted as the Lord's will, even if churches disagree about the exact structures and ministries needed for such a truly united Church.

Testimony to this lavish diversity throughout the whole (*kat' holos*) in which all participate was given at a recent meeting of representatives from five communions that now accept the overall teaching of the Joint Declaration on Justification, originally agreed to by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation at the end of 1999. (Since then, first Methodists in 2006 and then Anglicans and Reformed in 2018 have also accepted the teaching of the Joint Declaration.) In a particularly helpful statement, Dirk Lange of the Lutheran World Federation underlines the value of the Joint Declaration in our present complex, crisis ridden, global situation. He argues that the Joint Declaration is "not simply a doctrinal statement, it is a confession"; it calls us to unity in the gospel but also demands translation into differing cultural contexts, work that he calls "daunting but also exciting... with great ecclesial potential as we grow deeper into communion."[9] Thus Lange points to the way in which each communion can bring its own particular perspectives on a given subject, as Methodists bring insights from the Wesleys' and later teachers' insights on sanctification and the Reformed bring their stress on justice, divine and human. Lange himself reinforces the strong traditional Lutheran stress on the way in which God's free gift through Christ frees us from any need to worry about our salvation; free from any desire or need to earn anything, we are liberated into a life of joyful service of the needs of others. The full integrity of catholicity (of doctrine) and diversity (of emphasis and expression) is here exemplified exquisitely: Good works are not the price of salvation, they are the fruit of its free bestowal upon us. The Roman Catholic fathers at Trent need not have worried. Protestants affirm St. Paul's teaching on this matter just as fully as they do: Our eternal calling is to do "good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10).

One of the great achievements of the ecumenical movement has been to make Christians more aware of the vast

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variety of gifts and charisms that the Holy Spirit has distributed across the whole of Christendom. In 1996, in their report, "The Word of Life: a Statement on Revelation and Faith," the international Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue commission discussed the developing fruitfulness of faith in the two traditions, stressing how the continuing process of transmission of faith in varying contexts "brings forth a creative and dynamic fruitfulness so that the Church, as a living body, always develops new expressions of faith, hope and love."[10] To a key extent, it was the Decree on Ecumenism sixty years ago that set the ball rolling by stressing the many gifts, developed in other traditions, that were entirely acceptable for Catholics to receive as fully consonant with their own tradition. Catholicity is all about our ability to recognize, accept, value, and use for mutual benefit the gifts of others. We are insufficiently catholic if we cannot do that. The Roman Catholic Church has been able to receive much from the charismatic tradition despite the initial extreme antagonism between Catholics and Pentecostalists in many places. Pope Francis particularly led Roman Catholics in this respect, both in his earlier ministry in Argentina and, more recently, as Pope in Italy, where he was once greeted at a Pentecostal rally in Caserta, Italy, with the words: "Some of us believe that the Holy Spirit was behind your election as Bishop of Rome."[11]

There are many things to alarm us about the state of today's world, but even more are there grounds for hope as we see how the promised Holy Spirit has kept faithful to our basic witness to the triune God, alongside a growing awareness of how much our gracious God has given to each tradition to share with each other Christian tradition as we seek, together, to commend the Gospel to the world. One of my favorite texts in this regard is Matthew 13:52: "And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'" We both recover old and beautiful things that we may have almost forgotten, and at the same time, God raises up people and movements among us that have new light to shed on Christian discipleship and mission, as we look for the coming of the Kingdom and the new Jerusalem.

It cannot be said that the Nicene Creed has been almost forgotten, of course, but both old and beautiful it surely is. In the context of contemporary life, and even in that of the more Protestant churches where the Nicene Creed is rarely said in full, it may sound dated but it does proclaim, as I hope I have shown, the good news of the triune God who reaches down to us through His Son and his Spirit. There is hope, in and for a world for which God the Holy Spirit cares so much that He goes on endowing us so richly for its intended benefit. To God be the glory!

One of the great achievements of the ecumenical movement has been to make Christians more aware of the vast variety of gifts and charisms that the Holy Spirit has distributed across the whole of Christendom.

Notes

1. John 1:3, 1 Corinthians 8:6.

2. Colossians 1:15. However the rest of the passage makes clear that in him "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

3. Charles Wesley, "With glorious clouds encompassed round," in *Wesley's Hymns* (1877 ed.), no. 6.

4. Traditionally, the Oriental Orthodox churches did not recognize the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon of 451 and upheld instead the "one nature" (*mia physis*) of Christ as God incarnate. Modern dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox and several Chalcedonian traditions has established that there is no real difference between the Chalcedonian formula and the teaching of the Orientals on 'one nature of God incarnate' which need no longer be seen as church-dividing.

5. *Wesley's Hymns* (1877 ed.), no. 122.

6. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §4.

7. John Wesley, Homily on "The Mystery of Iniquity," cited in Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor. John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Abingdon, 1990), 112.

8. I refer to my friend from the Anglican-Lutheran Society, the Rev. Jaakko Rusama.

9. Dirk Lange, quoted in "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: 25 Years On," *Lutheran World Federation News*, February 4, 2025: https://lutheranworld.org/news/joint-declaration-doctrine-justification-25-years.

10. Cited in Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, eds, *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level 1982-1998* (Eerdmans, 2000), 627.

11. PCPCU Bulletin for 2014, Part II, 3-6.

The Problem of Primacy and the Future of Orthodox-Catholic Relations

PHILIP J. HALIKIAS

The ecclesiological topic of primacy in the twenty-first century ultimately speaks to the workings of the Holy Spirit within the church: the hierarchs, clergy, and laity therein. This Spirit was breathed upon the disciples after the resurrection as a demonstration of Christ's love for His friends, offering His peace after the resurrection. We are called to be united in the Spirit and through the Spirit so that we may truly be coworkers in the Lord's vineyard; church unity is therefore not a strategic goal but a sacred vocation. Through this mode of being we grow in the process of *theōsis*, with the key ingredients being humility, willingness, and love. In this article, I consider these ingredients closely, substantiating how they are capable of preparing a recipe for Orthodox-Catholic unity, as articulated in the recent ecumenical documents from Ravenna (2007), Chieti (2016), and Alexandria (2023).

All three of these documents have served the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church (hereafter Joint Commission), by whom they were composed, and the North America Orthodox-Catholic Consultation (hereafter Consultation). Alongside the documents themselves, we will consider how the two churches have contributed theologically to the dialogue before, during, and after the years of the documents' original distribution, which continues to demonstrate interest and reflection regarding the role of primacy in the church, as an instrument for reconciling our differences to actualize Christ's prayer "that they may all be one..." (John 17:21).

The Ravenna Document and its Reception

The document issued by the Joint Commission in Ravenna, Italy, in October 2007 was, in many ways, a groundbreaking contribution to Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. It opened with a reassuring stance on the work of the dialogue being rooted in obedience: "We give thanks to the Triune God who has gathered us – members of the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church – so that we might respond together in obedience to this prayer of Jesus" (referring to the prayer for unity in John 17:21).[1] With obedience to Christ at the heart of our work, we are called to listen to Him, through the Holy Spirit, so that we may aid in the narrowing of the division between our sister churches. The very word obedience, in Greek *hypakoē* (ὑπακοή), is from the verb *hypakouō* containing the prefix *hypo* (meaning under) and the verb *akouō* (meaning to hear/listen); thus we are to submit or heed what we hear from the teachings of our Lord in a literal and spiritual sense. This spiritual practice continues throughout history, beginning with the Apostles. The legacy and inheritance of the Apostles, as first elders and overseers (*presbyteroi kai episkopoi*), are enlivened and maintained by the episcopacy of our churches, in collaboration with the priests, deacons, and ultimately, the laity.

Taking obedience to our Lord's teachings into account, we need to pay attention to where we have been historically from an ecclesiological point of view, and what we can learn from the past. Although not unaffected by factions, the church of the first millennium was more or less unified. There were sections of Christendom that enjoyed relatively factionless relations, and other geographical locations that endured a great deal of divergence and convergence. The document expresses this through the assurance that "both sides agree that this canonical *taxis* was recognized by all in the era of the undivided Church."[2] The canonical *taxis* was indeed well established, which gave way to the role of Rome as having a service, a *diakonia*, to the church at large. The document states, "further, they agree that Rome, as the Church that 'presides in love' according to the phrase of St Ignatius of Antioch (*To the Romans*, Prologue), occupied the first place in the *taxis*, and that the bishop of Rome was, therefore, the *protos* among the patriarchs."[3]

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While the canons go on to explain the role of Rome as being a "see of honor" (*presbeia tēs timēs*), and such an understanding was maintained in the East, Roman primacy was understood to be more than symbolic or honorary in the West. It was perceived to be a genuine see of authority within the life of the church. This western paradigm of Roman primacy was related to two commonly expressed claims: (1) that the relics of Sts. Peter and Paul were present in Rome and were a source of pilgrimage by early Christians, even during the third-century persecutions; and (2) that the empire was based in Rome, and the church had been co-opted through history by the empire, first out of necessity, then out of convenience. There is a profound difference in how these contrastive understandings of primacy developed and were effectuated within the life of the church, even prior to the schism of 1054. As stated in the Ravenna Document: "they disagree, however, on the interpretation of the historical evidence from this era regarding the prerogatives of the bishop of Rome as *protos*, a matter that was already understood in different ways in the first millennium."[4]

It may sound foreign or absurd to the modern ear, but it is important to understand that the emperor maintained great influence in the church's life. When addressing conciliarity in the life of the church, the Ravenna Document contains the following clarification: Conciliarity at the universal level, exercised in the ecumenical councils, implies an active role of the bishop of Rome as *protos* of the bishops of the major sees, in the consensus of the assembled bishops, on behalf of the emperor. Although the bishop of Rome did not convene the ecumenical councils of the early centuries and never personally presided over them, he nevertheless was closely involved in the decision-making process of the councils.[5]

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So, what *could* the bishop of Rome's active role have been if the emperor had convened the ecumenical councils? We know that the emperor was able to weigh in on issues and bring the councils to a conclusion. And the emperor was in close relationship, naturally, with the bishop of Rome, for it was the patriarchate of the original pentarchy, tied to imperial rule. Even after the establishment of Constantinople and the expansion of the Eastern portion of the empire, the Western segment of the church remained close to Rome.

One additional point of clarification regarding the ecclesiology expressed in the Ravenna Document comes from the Consultation's 2009 response to it. When faced with the perceived inaccurate description and use of the term "Church" in a footnote, the Consultation states that "the Orthodox Church's self-understanding as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church is not understood by all Orthodox in exclusivist terms."[6] That is to say, "throughout the centuries, significant currents within Orthodox ecclesiology have recognized the presence of the Church's reality outside the canonical, visible boundaries of the Orthodox Church."[7] I would understand this to mean that the Catholic Church is very much recognized fully as Church. The response to the Ravenna footnote continues to highlight that "because of apostolic succession and the Eucharist, Vatican II did not hesitate to recognize that the Orthodox constitute 'Churches,' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, §14) and that they are 'sister churches,' and to assert that in their celebration of the Eucharist, the Church of God is being built up and growing" together towards the same path of desired unity.[8]

Reflections on the Chieti Document

The September 2016 Chieti Document focuses quite eloquently and importantly on the communion of the local church. The local church is a microcosm of the universal church. Regarding Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiology, the universal church cannot exist without the local church, and vice versa. Throughout the estrangement, or rift as it is also described, the East and West had points of convergence and divergence, locally and regionally, throughout the centuries. It is unquestionable that "the history of the Church in the first millennium is decisive. Despite certain temporary ruptures, Christians from East and West lived in communion during that time, and within that context, the essential struc-

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tures of the Church were constituted. The relationship between synodality and primacy took various forms, which can give vital guidance to Orthodox and Catholics in their efforts to restore full communion today."[9] To take this example from our shared history means to be introspective regarding what aspects of our relationship fostered cohesion and collaboration and what prompted dissension and fragmentation.

Our lives as Christians, Orthodox and Catholic, are supposed to follow the example of the Holy Trinity. We are interrelated beings but with unique identities. We are called to constantly communicate with each other so that we may have an active role in fostering and being in communion. The Chieti Document addresses the "'conciliarity' which reflects the Trinitarian mystery and finds therein its ultimate foundation. The three persons of the Holy Trinity are 'enumerated,' as St. Basil the Great says (on the Holy Spirit, 45) without the designation as 'second' or 'third' person implying any diminution or subordination."[10] Thus the role of *primus* signifies far more than a pyramidal effect on church leadership and decision making: It would call for a source, as the father is the source, but also for equality, as there is full equality among the persons of the Holy Trinity.

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Furthermore, the document ascertains that "synodality is a fundamental quality of the Church as a whole. As St. John Chrysostom said: '"Church" means both gathering [*systema*] and synod [*synodos*].' The term comes from the word 'council' (*synodos* in Greek, *concilium* in Latin), which primarily denotes a gathering of bishops, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for common deliberation and action in caring for the Church."[11] The Spirit is the source of life to this dialogue and work in the Lord's vineyard. The very name of "Spirit" in either Greek or Latin – *Pneuma* or *Spiritus* – indicates a breathing of life into us, God's pinnacle of creation. The synod, or council, relies on this in-spiration, "refer[ring] to the active participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church."[12]

It took time for the Ecumenical Councils to be recognized as truly being ecumenical. It is not as though the councils were convened with the invitation to "save the date for the first Ecumenical Council to be held in Nicaea, 325 AD"! While this may sound facetious, it is important to resist viewing the past only through the lens of our present understanding. Let us take a look at what the Chieti Document emphasizes concerning the reception of the Ecumenical Councils:

> The Church's understanding of the criteria for the reception of a council as ecumenical developed over the course of the first millennium. For example, prompted by historical circumstances, the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II, 787) gave a detailed description of the criteria as then understood: the agreement (*symphōnia*) of the heads of the churches, the cooperation (*synergeia*) of the bishop of Rome, and the agreement of the other patriarchs (*symphronountes*). An ecumenical council must have its own proper number in the sequence of ecumenical councils, and its teaching must accord with that of previous councils. Reception by the Church as a whole has always been the ultimate criterion for the ecumenicity of a council.[13]

These concepts of cooperation and agreement, in the decisions made at and in the reception thereafter of the Ecumenical Councils, confirm the Holy Spirit being at work in the minds, hearts, and *nous* of the Fathers of the councils. This indicates the possibility and fruits of working together to cultivate the fruits of labor within the household of God.

So, how did Rome play a key role in the church's life within the First Millennium? It was recorded that Rome historically held a position of honor, but also of *diakonia* or service to the other patriarchates from the period of the first Ecumenical Council. Such service "was enlivened by appeals and mediations requested of Rome by the East, not for Canonical administration, but rather to demonstrate the unification of the Church,"[14] thus alluding to the fact that the East did not need Rome to weigh in on doctrinal or disciplinary matters but rather sought to communicate regularly with Rome for the sake of remaining fully in communion. This refers us back to the oneness we are called to incarnate in the church, as exemplified through the relationship of love experienced within the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

Reflections on the Alexandria Document

The June 2023 Alexandria Document offered an excellent overview of historical developments connected to the ecclesiological estrangement of East and West. It highlighted developments in the Church's role throughout the eastern and

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It was recorded that Rome historically held a position of honor, but also of *diakonia* or service "to the other patriarchates from the period of the first Ecumenical Council."

western halves and then parallel empires. The document reflected on aspects of the relationship between East and West concerning primacy and synodality throughout the two millennia of the Church's life. It was observed that "Synodality and primacy need to be seen as 'interrelated, complementary and inseparable realities' (Chieti, 5) from a theological point of view (Chieti, 4, 17),"[15] indicating the merits of viewing primacy through both a biblical and canonical perspective. The section continues to observe that "purely historical discussions are not enough. The Church is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and a eucharistic ecclesiology of communion is the key to articulating a sound theology of synodality and primacy." In mirroring the communication and love of the Holy Trinity, we may be able to understand the gravity of being in eucharistic communion; tantamount to that end is clearly identifying how our ecclesiology ought to be expressed and carried out, for the relationship between bishop and synod, synod and priests, priests and laity, is called to parallel the relationship of the Holy Trinity.

It is not out of power that these delineations must be drawn up, but rather out of service. It is true that "the interdependence of synodality and primacy is a fundamental principle in the life of the Church. It is intrinsically related to the service of the unity of the Church at the local, regional, and universal levels."[16] Service reminds us of the teachings of Christ to his apostles, and of the apostles to the communities they helped to establish. Since we live in different times, "however, principles must be applied in specific historical settings, and the first millennium offers valuable guidance for the application of the principle just mentioned (Chieti, 21). What is required in new circumstances is a new and proper application of the same governing principle,"[17] while also taking into consideration that there are aspects of the Church today that are fundamentally different than that of the first millennium (not least in that we are no longer a part of an eastern or western imperial church).

Insights for Orthodoxy from the Synod on Synodality

So, where do we go from here? What can we realistically envision for the church in the twenty-first century based on the three documents analyzed, as further informed by the laity? We need not look too far, for much can be borrowed from the Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality. This three-year process has brought all walks of life throughout the Catholic Church together with the clergy of all ranks, in order to discuss and learn from each other about the pressing needs of the church: from social ministries to family life, from the participation of the laity in the sacramental life of the church to the pastoral needs of the people.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* ("working document") composed for the first session of the Synod by the Catholic General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, draws insight from the Eastern Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches with the hopes of being conscious of well-established and healthy processes for the Church's leadership and direction. The final worksheet of this document (B 3.5) asks: How can the Eastern Hierarchical Structures, Episcopal Conferences, and Continental Assemblies strengthen the "fruitful bond between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterial function of the Pastors (PD 14)"?[18] This reference to the 2014 document *Sensus Fidei* draws on the hope, inspired even then by Pope Francis, to unearth and elevate ways in which the faithful and the hierarchy of the Church can develop more deeply a sense of collaboration and ownership of the direction of the Church.

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In mirroring the communication and love of the Holy Trinity, we may be able to understand the gravity of being in eucharistic communion . . . for the relationship between bishop and synod, synod and priests, priests and laity, is called to parallel the relationship of the Holy Trinity.

It is also asked: "How can we re-think decision-making processes at the level of the episcopal bodies of the Eastern Catholic Churches and Episcopal Conferences based on listening to the People of God in the local Churches?"[19] Using the Eastern Catholic model, a sibling of the Orthodox model, would influence the Roman Catholic Church to draw more richly from the Eastern tradition of synodality while enriching this practice with the *Laos tou Theou*, the people of God.

An earlier section of the *Instrumentum Laboris* profoundly recognizes the nuances and needs that arise from truly hearing the people across cultures and tongues and socio/political/ethnic ties:

> Listening to people requires knowing how to listen to the cultures in which they are embedded, in the knowledge that every culture remains in continuous evolution. A synodal Church needs to learn how to better articulate the Gospel within local cultures and contexts, through a discernment that proceeds from the assurance that the Spirit gives the Church such a breadth that it can welcome any culture without exception. Proof of this is the fact that the local Churches are already characterised by great diversity, which is a blessing. Within them different nationalities and ethnic groups and believers from Eastern and Western traditions coexist. This richness is not always easy to live with and can become a source of division and conflict.[20]

The reference to Eastern traditions is well received by an Orthodox Christian because it is always cause for celebration when we recognize our shared faith, even though our practices differ. It was of great encouragement that the document referred explicitly to the Orthodox Churches as having a shared experience of synodality as the Eastern Catholic Churches, a tradition to which they wish to give attention in the discussions and discernment of this synodal process,[21] thus shedding light on how the church of Rome wishes to draw close to the East in this most sacred of bodies and processes.

The document does not take for granted that "there are specific and particular realities that Eastern [Catholic] Christians in diaspora face in new contexts, together with their Orthodox brothers and sisters."[22] As Orthodox, we too can share in the hopes "that the Eastern Catholic Churches in the diaspora can preserve their identity and be recognised as more than ethnic communities, i.e., as Churches *sui iuris* with rich spiritual, theological, and liturgical traditions that contribute to the mission of the Church today in a global context"[23] – thus truly joining the local church to the universal community, not segmented by ethnicity or nationality.

The Orthodox Church, for 152 years, has formally condemned the sin and divisive nature of ethnophyletism.[24] To form churches by the shared ethnicity or national background, aside from circumstance as being natural to one's homeland or out of original necessity within a diasporic community, is the antithesis of the catholicity of the church. All baptized members of the church contribute uniquely and repeatedly to the church as long as they approach their role in the church with humility, love, and a willingness to be transfigured through the body of Christ in the Eucharist and through his bride, the church. It is precisely "through one Baptism [that] all Christians participate in the *sensus fidei* (supernatural sense of the faith; cf. LG 12), which is why in a synodal Church, all the Baptised must be listened to attentively"[25] – thus expanding upon the role of the laity, reminding us in many ways of the early Church communities founded in Acts.

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Since then, the Church has continued to be cultivated worldwide. The very term *oikoumenē* refers to the Household of God. Therefore, ecumenical relations, particularly between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, is a cause for celebration. The Synod's first *Instrumentum Laboris* observes that "the ecumenical journey is an 'exchange of gifts,' and one of the gifts that Catholics can receive from other Christians is precisely their synodal experience (cf. EG 246). The rediscovery of synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church is one fruit of ecumenical dialogue, especially with the Orthodox"[26] – the document thus affirms our mutual relationship as being a source of fresh analysis and pragmatic advancements in church life.[27]

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Conclusion: Primacy Reassessed

At this point, one may be thinking, if synodality is viewed as a positive condition for the growth and revitalization of the church, particularly with the laity having a more significant and praiseworthy role in the life of the church, must primacy be reassessed in light of this development? It stands to reason that the one logically leads to the other. As John Zizioulas notes, "the reciprocal conditioning between primacy and synodality has profound theological implications. This means that primacy is not a legalistic notion implying the investment of a certain individual with power, but a form of *diakonia,* that is, of ministry in the strict sense of the term."[28] A ministry of service would be expressed and demonstrated towards the synod and to the Church at large. Furthermore, "this ministry reaches the entire community through the communion of the local churches manifested through the bishops that constitute the council or synod. It is for this reason that the primate himself should be the head of the local church, that is, a bishop,"[29] thereby connecting the see of the local bishop, i.e., Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, etc., to the people they serve first and foremost.

The process of addressing primacy *between* (and not only within) the Catholic and Orthodox churches, unfortunately, has been splintered for too long, and has only been recovered as a topic of serious, mutual consideration for a few decades. The shift in addressing primacy and synodality actualizes a process that reflects partially in what existed in the first millennium. I say partially because we are no longer churches affiliated with an emperor, who, as has been illustrated earlier, played an integral role in the primacy of a particular see, therefore, we are learning how to relate to each other, theoretically and eventually pragmatically, synodally for the first time as non-imperial churches. One major aspect of primacy in modernity that needs careful assessment is the Catholic doctrine of infallibility, which came into the life of the church after being defined as doctrine at the First Vatican Council. It is well understood that infallibility has been applied not flippantly but only with the proclamation of particular matters, as first addressed explicitly before the council vote by Monsignor Vinzenz Gasser: "since the pope is only infallible when, in solemn judgment, he defines for the universal Church a question of faith or morals."[30] Gasser had continued to say:

> The infallibility of the Roman pontiff is in practice limited as its subject, to occasions when the pope expresses himself as universal doctor and supreme judge in the chair of Peter, that is, at the centre; it is limited as to its object, to questions of faith and morals; and it is restricted as to the act itself, to occasions when he defines what is to be believed or rejected by all the faithful, thus indicating a universal acceptance or resounding denial of what has been proclaimed.[31]

This framing, notably, highlights the role of the faithful, as in the liturgy, where it is a dialogue of faith and consensus. This still leaves a sense of ambiguity and seemingly unilateral decision-making. In response to this uncertainty of both reception and practice, Fr. J. M. R. Tillard proposes a practical solution:

> A burning desire for unity has sprung up in many ecclesial communities and churches 'separated' from Rome. Would it be a serious matter in particular to affirm that the 'primate' should make sure that his definition was timely and that his own opinions were in full agreement with those of his brother bishops by using as a matter of necessity and conscience all available means of consultation, of inquiry into the *sensus fidei* and the state of theological discussion? Would it be serious to recognize also that infallibility guarantees the judgment brought to bear on the doctrine, but not timeliness of defining it? And finally, would it be a serious matter to lay down clearly that such definitions *ex cathedra* should not be made except when the apostolic faith and the communion of the churches are truly *in periculo?* And it would be for the whole body of bishops to say when the moment of danger had come.[32]

I firmly believe that, within this framework, the Orthodox Church would hold less of a contentious view of infallibility, for we too believe in the infallibility of the Ecumenical Councils, which were divinely inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. The decisions made through these very councils have been preserved throughout the millennia and incorporate topics with church relationships and theological doctrine. For example, with the Eastern and Oriental dialogue, the anathemas of Oriental saints were *added* by the churches

The process of addressing primacy *between* (and not only within) the Catholic and Orthodox churches, unfortunately, has been splintered for too long, and has only been recovered as a topic of serious, mutual consideration for a few decades.

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of the East. We are in the process of discerning how to address this delicate matter because, as a Church, we will not overturn a decision from an Ecumenical Council, nor should we think of such an action. We must be creative in the divinely inspired sense and work with the Holy Spirit to that end.

Nevertheless, some steps can be taken to address the structural and hierarchical arrangements that would be necessary for such understandably significant changes in the Church. The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation eloquently paints a portrait of what many of these steps would be, including but not limited to accepted diversity, liturgical sharing, synodality/conciliarity, mission, subsidiarity, renewal and reform, and ultimately, the role of the Papacy.[33] The following highlights are a part of the formula addressed by the Consultation:

> a) The bishop of Rome would be, by ancient custom, the "first" of the world's bishops and of the regional patriarchs... The present leadership of the pope would always be realized by way of a serious and practical commitment to synodality and collegiality.
>
> b) ... the bishop of Rome would be understood by all as having authority only within a synodal/collegial context: as a member as well as head of the college of bishops, as senior patriarch among primates of the churches, and as servant of universal communion.
>
> c) The fundamental worldwide ministry of the bishop of Rome would be to promote the communion of all the local churches...
>
> d) His universal role would also be expressed in convoking and presiding over regular synods of patriarchs of all the churches, and over ecumenical councils, when they should occur.
>
> e) In the case of conflicts between bishops and their primates that cannot be resolved locally or regionally, the bishop of Rome would be expected to arrange for a juridical appeal process, perhaps to be implemented by local bishops, as provided for in Canon 3 of the Synod of Sardica (343).[34]

It goes without saying that the Consultation is put into a fitting step-by-step process, and the preparatory actions would be beneficial in paving the way throughout the universal church for receptivity and pragmatic implementation. In the fourteen years since this document was produced, the positive step of the Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality has taken place – helping us better understand the life of all of the faithful who belong to the Household of God.

At a time when the world is more fragmented than ever, even though we boast how small it has become through social media, communication, and secular trends throughout living generations, we look to our spiritual leaders for guidance and unity. Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew had an enduring friendship, indeed, brotherhood, that spanned their shared tenure as heads of church. The way they spoke of each other was indicative of their personal friendship but also of the service to the church (and to the increasingly reconciliatory relations between Orthodoxy and Catholicism) that both leaders have represented.[35] This was indeed encouraging and heartwarming. With the recent passing of Pope Francis, a void was left within the space of the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue. We are, however, hopeful for the promising leadership and spiritual care by Pope Leo XIV, a true visionary of our time. Being an American, the Holy Father has been immersed in a pluralistic environment from birth. He has a great wealth of knowledge, lived and professional experience, within ecumenical and interfaith work, and has taken strides already in his newfound relationship with His All Holiness Bartholomew I. Pope Leo XIV, on the occasion of receiving Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and other dignitaries, proclaimed:

With the recent passing of Pope Francis, a void was left within the space of the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue. We are, however, hopeful for the promising leadership and spiritual care by Pope Leo XIV, a true visionary of our time.

> My election has taken place during the year of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. That Council represents a milestone in the formulation of the Creed shared by all Churches and Ecclesial Communities. While we are on the journey to re-establishing full communion among all Christians, we recognize that this unity can only be unity in faith. As Bishop of Rome, I consider one of my priorities to be that of seeking the re-establishment of full and visible communion among all those who profess the same faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.[36]

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This message is reminiscent of the previously discussed historical and diaconal responsibilities of the bishop of Rome. We pray that our beloved hierarchs are moved by the Spirit towards a place of unity and further ecclesial collaboration.

I would like to conclude by recalling a brief analysis by Fr. Dumitru Staniloae of the prayer "O Heavenly King" (Βασιλεῦ Ουράνιε in Greek) – a prayer particularly fitting for the dialogue of love between our sister churches, for it is through Him that we have the hope and zeal to move forward hand in hand as siblings in the one Household of God. Fr. Staniloae explains:

> In this prayer we call the Holy Spirit 'Heavenly King' because He raises us into the kingdom of heaven, where He rules as Spirit over the material things. He is 'Comforter' because He brings us comfort in the trials and difficulties of our earthly lives. He is 'the Spirit of Truth' because he shows us the true way, which is life in Christ, the incarnate Son of God, or the Truth. He is 'everywhere present' uniting everything in faith and love. He 'fills all things,' because He frees us from all want: He gives us life in God, who satisfies us completely. He is 'Treasury of good things': for all good things come from Him, and through Him we can share them with others. In this way He completes everything. He is 'Giver of life,' freeing us from the poverty of lifeless existence, giving us eternal life. We ask Him to 'come and abide in us' and to 'cleanse us of every impurity,' sanctifying us, and through this, to 'save our souls.'[37]

As the universal church is in the season of Pentecost, let us remember the gift of the paraclete, the comforter, shared with us by our Lord and Savior. The Spirit continues to breathe life and guide the church, through the Body of Christ, the people. We share, Orthodox and Catholics alike, a treasure trove of tradition, sacred sites, sacraments, and practice. Despite the nuances over the millennia, and the pains experienced, we are united in faith. May the Holy Spirit who enlivens us from within and around bring us all closer to His kingdom, His Spirit, and His Truth.

Notes

1. Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity, and Authority" [Ravenna Document], §1: http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese.html, October 13, 2007.

2. Ibid., §41.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., §42.

6. Ronald Roberson, Thomas E. FitzGerald, and Jack Figel, *The Journey Toward Unity: The Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue Statements, Vol. I* (Eastern Christian Publications, 2016), 192.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, "Synodality and Primacy During the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church" [Chieti Document], §7: https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese1.html, September 21, 2016.

10. Ibid., §5.

11. Ibid., §3.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., §18.

14. See Chieti Document, §19: "Over the centuries, a number of appeals were made to the bishop of Rome, also from the East, in disciplinary matters, such as the deposition of a bishop. An attempt was made at the Synod of Sardica (343) to establish rules for such a procedure.(14) Sardica was received at the Council *in Trullo* (692).(15) The canons of Sardica determined that a bishop who had been condemned could appeal to the bishop of Rome, and that the latter, if he deemed it appropriate, might order a retrial, to be conducted by the bishops in the province neighboring the bishop's own. Appeals regarding disciplinary matters were also made to the see of Constantinople,(16) and to other sees. Such appeals to major sees were always treated in a synodical way. Appeals to the bishop of Rome from the East expressed the communion of the Church, but the bishop of Rome did not exercise canonical authority over the churches of the East."

15. Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, "Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millenium and Today" [Alexandria Document], §5.3. http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/document-d-alexandrie--synodalite-et-primaute-au-deuxieme-mille.html, June 7, 2023.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid, §5.4.

18. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "'Instrumentum Laboris' of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 20.06.2023," §B 3.5: https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html, June 20, 2023.

19. Ibid., §B 3.4.

20. Ibid., §B 1.5.

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21. See Ibid., §B 1.3.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. This was a result of the 1872 synod chaired by Patriarch Anthimus VI of Constantinople. He was accompanied by Sophronius IV of Alexandria, Hierotheos of Antioch, Sophronios III of Cyprus, and representatives of the Church of Greece.

25. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "'Instrumentum Laboris,'" §B 1.4.

26. Ibid.

27. In this respect, the ecumenical movement itself is a laboratory of synodality. In particular, the methodology of dialogue and consensus-building experienced at various levels in the ecumenical movement could be a source of synodal inspiration.

28. John Zizioulas, "Recent Discussions on Primacy in Orthodox Theology," *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue*, ed. Walter Kasper (Paulist, 2005), 243.

29. Ibid.

30. Cited in J. M. R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, trans. John De Satgé (M. Glazier, 1983), 173.

31. Cited in ibid., 174.

32. Ibid., 178.

33. Cf. Ronald Roberson, Thomas E. FitzGerald, and Jack Figel, eds., *The Journey Toward Unity: The Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue Statements, Vol. I* (Eastern Christian Publications, 2016), 211.

34. Ibid., §211-212.

35. Pope Francis was quoted as saying: "We can thank God that relations between the Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate have grown much over the past century, even as we continue to yearn for the goal of the restoration of full communion expressed through participation at the same Eucharistic altar," and he assured the faithful that, "although obstacles remain, I am confident that by walking together in mutual love and pursuing theological dialogue, we will reach that goal" (Feast of St. Andrew address to Patriarch Bartholomew: https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/46747/pope-francis-tells-orthodox-leader-i-am-confident-we-will-achieve-full-unity).

36. Quoted in Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Leo XIV: 'A Renewed Embrace,'" *Archon News*, May 27, 2025: https://archons.org/persecution/bartholomew-leo-embrace/.

37. Dumitru Staniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 75.

Religious Nationalism in Ecumenical and Interdisciplinary Perspective: The Sixth Patterson Triennial Conference

RACHEL CONTOS

In June 2025, the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University hosted its sixth Solon and Marianna Patterson Triennial Conference, focusing on the topic of "Religious Nationalism." Every three years, the Patterson Conference fosters intellectual exchange between the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches in an ecumenical and scholarly setting, contending with a topic of contemporary urgency for three days. Other Patterson Conference topics have included: "Orthodox Readings of Augustine," "Orthodox Constructions of the West," "Tradition, Secularization, and Fundamentalism," "Faith, Reason, and Theosis," and "Nicaea and the Future of Christianity." This most recent conference on religious nationalism brought together scholars from across religious traditions and theological backgrounds, punctuated by three keynotes – one Protestant, one Orthodox, and one Catholic.

Among the unique features of this conference was the mix of scholars invited, which was interdisciplinary as much as ecumenical: Their fields included religious studies, psychoanalysis, journalism, sociology, history, and, of course, theology. In many conversations about religious nationalism, socio-historical approaches are prioritized, and it was valuable to see scholars engage at *all* levels of religious nationalism, including the theological. This intentional and painstaking interdisciplinarity allowed for a multifaceted vision of the past, present, and a future toward which we might hope to work collaboratively. Indeed, a hallmark of the Patterson Conferences is that the scholars do not merely present their own work but are invited to (and do) attend all the other sessions, eat together, and spend time together socially. This leads to collaborative mindsets, conversation threads that develop over the three days, and the sense that co-working on a complex topic like religious nationalism is both possible and necessary.

The first night of the 2025 Patterson Conference featured a thought-provoking and conversation-starting keynote by Cathleen Kaveny, a scholar of both jurisprudence and religion and a practicing Catholic. Her keynote, "Religion, Nostalgia, and Nationalism," gave the group foundational vocabulary to think about religious nationalism, particularly the concept of public "nostalgia." Kaveny argued that nationalism, which has taken many forms in history, has thrived in modernity where national projects are animated by nostalgia: a painful excess of longing for a lost past. Modern nationalist ideologies depend on nostalgia because it allows them to curate an imagined past, inspiring longing to restore a "homeland" (bounded by national borders) for the benefit of those whose home it exclusively is. We see such nostalgic nationalism, for example, in the slogan "Make America Great *Again*." This type of nationalism is distinguished by: (1) cultural alienation, wherein adherents are unable to navigate changing cultural norms; (2) vulnerability, or the felt understanding that basic structures of society are under attack; and (3) a perceived lack of a future, except in the blueprint created by the promises of the imagined past.

The second day's keynote was offered by Orthodox theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis, titled "'For the Place on Which You Are Standing Is Holy Ground': Christian Identity, National Identity, and the Claims of Territorial Exclusiveness. An Essay on Christian Delocalization." In this keynote, Kalaitzidis argued that Christian nationalism is a *closing off* of human communities (both imaginatively and spatially) to the Other, a process exacerbated by theological justifications for ethnocentricity and divine mandates for a holy people's ownership of sacralized land. Kalaitzidis's proposed solutions, on this same theological level, lifted up the Christian tradition of *metanoia* as a way of repentance and conversion that centers and sacralizes the Other and Stranger, rather than ostracizing and persecuting them. Alongside this repentant orientation, Kalaitzidis suggested that Christian churches need to practice *delocalization*, wherein communities see themselves as tied together by their participation in the freely-moving Body of Christ, rather than by geographical localities.

This keynote sparked meaningful debate around whether Kalaitzidis was arguing against any sense of culture within the Church. For example, one conference participant asked if his solutions would undermine or even foreclose the possibility of a *Greek* Orthodoxy. It became clear that Kalaitzidis was not arguing against the incarnational realities of culture, but rather against the use of these incarnational realities

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Modern nationalist ideologies depend on nostalgia because it allows them to curate an imagined past, inspiring longing to restore a "homeland" (bounded by national borders) for the benefit of those whose home it exclusively is.

(via religious sacralization of cultural traditions) to oppress the Other and Stranger or to promote national identity as subsuming religious identity. This was a helpful discussion, especially in the United States, where many Orthodox and Catholics in particular are already delocalized in some ways and relocalized in others. Speaking personally, as a Greek American, I have a delocalized Greek identity and Orthodox identity; at the same time, Orthodoxy still socializes me to think about culture and religion in highly ethno-localized ways. Kalaitzidis's keynote prompted the gathering to (1) think from a non-American perspective about localization and (2) think about their own localized biases.

The final keynote began the last day of the conference: "The 'Fragile Brilliance of Glass': A Theological Reading of Christian Nationalism," by Charles Mathewes, a Protestant scholar of religion and ethics. Mathewes first asked the participants to consider all of our dual positionality in both the academy and the Church, specifically how we can use academic resources to inform and advocate for positive, liberating change using the institution of the Church. A key refrain of this presentation was that theology, much less humanity as a whole, has not dealt adequately with the *fact* of difference. Indeed, the question of our age is how to live together in a globalized and pluralistic world. Mathewes highlighted that, within this globalized reality, theologians have the space and frameworks to think about the dual "inflow" and "outflow" crises of the nation-state–the loss of civic energy (outflow) and the increased integration of different peoples without any reconception of community or solidarity (inflow). He argued that, in the face of these shifts and in light of the fears caused by them, a doxological orientation (one seeking God's glory) both moves from fear to glory and also positions theology to bear witness to what needs to be done in the face of nationalism via the institution of the Church.

While most of this review has been dedicated to the keynotes, the rest of the session panels were no less illuminating and productive. Two sets of papers strike me as particularly indicative of the innovative and essential contributions of the conference. Pamela C. White, a scholar and practitioner of psychoanalysis, asked the participants to consider group dynamics within nationalism. She highlighted the power of a narcissistic leader to rally people toward in and out groups in the face of personal and cultural fear via the scapegoating of minorities. Marietta van der Tol built on this diagnosis with her own critiques of illiberalism, or ideologies against liberal democracy. She highlighted that antidemocratic ideologies have the power to foster coalition building where there normally would not be allegiance. These same coalitions, in turn, undermine the very institutions that uphold their freedom to exist.

Rufus Burnett, Jr. argued that "necromancy," an evocative term for the practice of consulting, listening to, and remobilizing the dead, can help the living to unpack and interrogate the anti-blackness and idolatry of whiteness that pervades modern western civilization. He suggested, for example, that W. E. B. DuBois's necromantic imagination within "The Souls of White Folk" highlights white religions' confusion of salvation with a fantasy of the white demigod, a vision of *theōsis* where one becomes not irreducibly unique, but white, male, straight, and powerful. In turn, such necromantic listening and consultation also enables a confrontation with Black suffering, forcing a re-membering of suffering bodies within the Body of Christ and a willingness to die to those theologies which would cause that suffering. In a later session, Natalia Imperatori-Lee built on this necromantic idea by sharing images and stories of Mary, the Mother of God, which undermine colonial gender logics that favor the same masculinizing ideologies Burnett highlighted. Through an *anamnēsis* (act of remembrance) of Mary in her resistant and decolonial iterations within popular piety, Imperatori-Lee argued that theologians and communities could more effectively resist colonial and nationalistic politics.

Overall, this most recent iteration of the Patterson Triennial Conferences was a beautiful mosaic of perspectives, academic fields, and methodologies in which all participants practiced thinking – not just at the same time and in the same place, but truly collaboratively – about religious nationalism, a challenge that must be faced across confessions and indeed across religions. The publication of the conference volume, in the coming couple of years, will doubtless join the other Patterson Conference volumes as essential literature for theology, religion, and ecumenical studies, allowing many more of us to engage with the lessons, questions, and calls to action articulated this past June.

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