

**A Common Response to the Joint International Commission
for the Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the
Orthodox Church Regarding the Ravenna Document: “Ecclesiological and
Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial
Communion, Conciliarity and Authority”**

By the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, 2009

At its meeting in Ravenna on October 13, 2007, the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church approved a document entitled “Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority.” This text is the first statement adopted by the Joint International Commission since a statement on “Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion” was approved at Balamand, Lebanon, on June 23, 1993. It explicitly pursues matters discussed in the earlier texts adopted by the Joint International Commission decades ago at Rhodes (1980), Munich (1982), Bari (1987) and Valamo (1988).

Our own Consultation has for the last several years been engaged in a broad discussion on the question of primacy and conciliarity. In the past we have issued two statements on this subject: “Apostolicity as God's Gift in the Life of the Church” (1986) and “An Agreed Statement on Conciliarity and Primacy in the Church” (1989).¹ Our Consultation has also offered responses to the statements of the International Commission adopted at Munich, Bari and Valamo.² Having followed with interest the work of the Joint International Commission, and having studied the Ravenna document at four recent meetings, the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation now wishes to continue its practice of offering to the International Commission a common response to its most recent text.

We welcome the fact that the Joint International Commission has been able to issue a new text that draws upon its earlier ecclesiological statements. The adoption of the Ravenna document is an encouraging sign that the international dialogue, which has faced significant difficulties in the recent past, has been able to resume its study of ecclesiology and present an approved statement on that important topic. The document awakens hope that further challenging ecclesiological issues, including “the question of the role of the bishop of Rome in the communion of all the Churches” (45) may be addressed fruitfully by the Joint International Commission in the years ahead.

Drawing heavily and wisely on Scripture and the Fathers of the Church, sources recognized by both Churches as authoritative, and appealing as well to the agreement reflected in past statements of the Joint International Commission, the Ravenna document presents an ecclesiology in which various dimensions of the life of the Church are seen as complementary rather than anti-

¹ These statements are available in John Borelli and John H. Erickson, eds., *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press; Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 125-130, 152-155.

² For these responses see *ibid.*, 65-68, 105-111 and 143-149.

thetical. The Document attempts to balance conciliarity (or synodality), rooted in baptism and even more fundamentally in the Holy Trinity, and authority, rooted in the authority of Christ Himself, which requires service rather than domination, and belongs to what the document refers to as the “deep-seated nature” (10) of the Church.

The document extends the concept of conciliarity and presents it as more than simply a gathering of bishops. It sees each of the baptized as a member of the Body of Christ having his or her place and proper responsibility within the Eucharistic *koinonia*. (7) The whole community, not just the bishops, bears “the conscience of the Church (*ekkesiastike syneidesis*)” or the “sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*).” Thus each of the baptized, and not just the bishops, exercises a form of authority in the Church. This recognition bears implications for the exercise of synodality in the Church, but this significant observation is not explored further. Rather, the document quickly passes over the implications of the authority of the baptized to discuss the authority of bishops as exercised in councils.

Against this background (Part I), the second half of the Ravenna document takes the important step of arguing that both conciliarity and authority are needed at each of three levels within the Church: the local level (here understood as a diocese), regional levels (Episcopal Conference; province, metropolitanate, patriarchate [25]), and the universal level.

The Local Level: Orthodox and Catholics agree on the basic understanding of the Church as a “community gathered together in the Eucharist, presided over, directly or through his presbyters, by a bishop legitimately ordained into the apostolic succession...” (18). A strength of this section is the identification of communion as the “frame in which all ecclesial authority is exercised” and the “criterion for its exercise.” The local Church is therefore conceived as “synodal” or “conciliar” in its structure (20). This section once more extends synodality and conciliarity beyond the ordained to include the active participation of the laity. However, their active participation is said to be exercised through “many forms of service and mission” (20); nothing is said about their participation in governance, for example the participation of laity in the selection of bishops. Thus, although synodality shows itself “in relationships of solidarity, mutual assistance and complementarity” in addition to service and mission, the question remains as to how the baptized exercise authority.

One serious question not addressed in this document, and perhaps beyond its immediate scope, deserves attention in future reflections on the issue of conciliarity (synodality) and authority: What is the status of the local parish? The local Church, presided over by a bishop, today can encompass hundreds of local eucharistic assemblies and perhaps thousands of square kilometers. In this context, how is one to understand the local parish ecclesologically? The bishop is primarily a Eucharistic person. The Eucharist only takes place locally; there is no universal celebration of the eucharist. If, then, our understanding of the local Church and the presidency of the bishop is rooted in the image given to us by St. Ignatius of Antioch, how is that image affected when the bishop rarely, if ever, visits the local parish? What is the ecclesiological standing of the presbyter who presides over the local celebration of the Eucharist? How, then, should conciliarity be understood within the local Church, given the reality of the modern diocese? The important observation of the document that communion, conciliarity, and synodality “is the frame in which all

ecclesial authority is exercised” (20) should also at some point be extended by reflection on the relationship of the diocese and the parish.

The Regional Level: The section examining the regional level cites various expressions of communion, e.g., ordination conferred by three or more bishops, or at least two, ordination into apostolic succession, and concelebration. Regional synods manifest the “collegial nature of the episcopate at the service of the communion of Churches” (25) and they are governed by the principle of consensus and concord. It is true that at such synods “only bishops have a deliberative voice,” but the statement could usefully have noted that traditional practice of both our Churches allows for significant roles for other clergy and laypeople. The document states that each bishop is a judge and is responsible for his own diocese, but it does not discuss issues of episcopal accountability, an accountability to the bishop’s own community of believers as well as to regional and other synods. While strong in its description of expressions of communion at the regional level, this section does not adequately deal with the role of the “first” (*protos*) of each of these regions. One would expect here a discussion of how metropolitans and patriarchs function.

For example, out of concern for financial accountability, the fourth ecumenical council (Chalcedon in 451) required each diocese to have an *oikonomos* (canon 25), to “administer the Church’s goods with the advice of his own bishop” so that “the administration of the Church will not be without checks and balances, the goods of the Church will not be dissipated, and the priesthood will be free from all suspicion.” But what happens if a bishop fails to appoint an *oikonomos*? The seventh ecumenical council (II Nicaea in 787, canon 11) developed elaborate enforcement mechanisms: If a bishop fails to appoint an *oikonomos* for his Church, the metropolitan of the province may intervene directly. So also, if a metropolitan fails to appoint an *oikonomos* for his Church, the patriarch may do so. Here the Church’s usual insistence on the authority of the bishop within his diocese or the metropolitan within his province is superseded by its concern for financial integrity and accountability at all levels of Church life.

Where the document identifies new configurations of communion between local Churches, namely new patriarchates and autocephalous Churches in the East and episcopal conferences in the West (29), saying that they are not merely administrative subdivisions but expressions of the spirit of communion in the Church, it leaves many questions unexplored. For example, it does not address the question debated among Catholics regarding the ecclesiological status of episcopal conferences.

Importantly for an ecclesiology of communion, the document asserts that “the Church is not just a collection of individuals, it is made up of communities with different cultures, histories, and social structures” (30). This points to the complexity of the Church, for it is not simply a communion of ecclesial structures such as local Churches and even regional ecclesial groupings, but it is also a communion of communities constituted by more natural and human factors such as language, nationality, history, and culture. The Church’s catholicity embraces all this diversity and transfigures it in Christ and the Holy Spirit so that those factors do not threaten the unity of the Church.

The text remains at the level of principle rather than practice. It leaves aside practical discussions of the exercise of authority at this level. For example, it would be interesting to see how the au-

thority of regional councils is related to the authority of a bishop within his diocese. Also, the treatment of the whole people of God is weaker in this section than it is in the other two sections.

The Universal Level: The section introduces the discussion of the universal level by citing various activities that can only occur at this level, for example, the ability to modify the Creed, or change a fundamental point regarding the form of ministry. Local Churches cannot “celebrate the Eucharist in willful separation from other local Churches without seriously affecting ecclesial communion” (33). Ecumenical councils have been a recognized means of governance at the universal level. These councils were recognized as ecumenical when their common faith formulations became binding for all the Churches and all the faithful, for all times and all places (35). The ecumenicity of the decisions of a council does not depend simply on who calls it or who attends it, but is recognized through a process of reception “of either long or short duration, according to which the people of God as a whole ... acknowledge in these decisions the one apostolic faith of the local Churches, which has always been the same and of which the bishops are the teachers and the guardians” (37). This description of ecumenicity once again situates the teaching of bishops within the context of the whole people of God. The people of God as a whole in its collective *sensus fidelium*, discerns the authenticity of the teaching. As the text says, the Churches “are bearers of and give voice to the faith” (38). This active role of discernment and enactment is what includes all the faithful in conciliarity and synodality (38).

The document affirms that the bishop of Rome was the *protos* among the patriarchs, but notes disagreement regarding the prerogatives of the bishop of Rome in the first millennium and the manner in which primacy was exercised. The principle that the document offers to govern this exercise is that “primacy ... must always be considered in the context of conciliarity, and conciliarity likewise in the context of primacy.” Throughout, the document attempts to include the whole Church, not just the bishops within the exercise of conciliarity.

The document ends with questions that remain to be answered: “What is the specific function of the bishop of the “first see” in an ecclesiology of *koinonia* and in view of what we have said on conciliarity and authority in the present text? How should the teaching of the first and second Vatican councils on the universal primacy be understood and lived in the light of the ecclesial practice of the first millennium?” These are the questions that drive all discussion of papal primacy.

Conclusion: We find much to commend in the Ravenna document and welcome its publication. The document identifies conciliarity with the entire Church, not just in episcopal councils. It draws an analogy among the three levels of communion: local, regional, and universal, each of which appropriately has a “first” with the role of fostering communion, in order to ground the rationale of why the universal level must also have a primacy. It articulates the principle that primacy and conciliarity are interdependent and mutually necessary. It provides both a sacramental and Trinitarian basis for the *koinonia* of the Church. It identifies ministry as a service of communion. It attempts to broaden the basis of authority wherein each of the baptized exercises an authority proper to that person’s *ordo* in the Church, and it invites us to reflect on the fact that just as primacy and conciliarity are interdependent, so are the processes of reception and teaching.

At the same time our Consultation also judges that some issues mentioned in the text are in need of further dialogue and clarification. Like any analogy between the eternal God and created beings, the analogy between the order (*taxis*) which exists among the three persons of the Holy Trinity and the order (*taxis*) which exists among local Churches requires further explanation and development. The Ravenna text does not make sufficiently clear the ecclesiological status of regional expressions of primacy and synodality. Even at regional levels, and not only at the universal level, the limits and exercise of authority by the “first” are also not made clear. The document’s historical treatment of apostolic succession and of ecumenical councils lacks precision and may occasion oversimplification and misunderstanding. The understanding of the local parish within the context of the modern diocese or local Church is in need of study.

Finally, we take exception to the contents of the Ravenna document’s sole footnote: “Orthodox participants felt it important to emphasize that the use of the terms ‘the Church’, ‘the universal Church’ and ‘the Body of Christ’ in this document and in similar documents produced by the Joint Commission in no way undermines the self-understanding of the Orthodox Church as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, of which the Nicene Creed speaks. From the Catholic point of view, the same self-awareness applies: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church ‘subsists in the Catholic Church’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 8); this does not exclude acknowledgement that elements of the true Church are present outside the Catholic communion.”

We find this footnote inaccurate. First, we think that its two assertions do not adequately represent the ecclesiology of either the Orthodox or the Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church’s self-understanding as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church is not understood by all Orthodox in exclusivist terms. 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. Also, to assert that “from the Catholic point of view the same self-awareness applies” misrepresents Catholic ecclesiology at and since the Second Vatican Council, in spite of the Ravenna document’s reference to *Lumen Gentium* 8. Because of apostolic succession and the Eucharist, Vatican II did not hesitate to recognize that the Orthodox constitute “Churches,” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14) 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. To our Consultation, these two points of view point to the fact that the ecclesiological issues regarding mutual recognition raised at Bari still require resolution.

The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation hopes and prays that the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church will continue to progress, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in its discussion of complex and disputed ecclesiological questions in the years ahead.

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