ORTHODOXY

and the

ROMAN PAPACY

Ut Unum Sint and the Prospects of East-West Unity

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Introduction

The issue of ecclesiology, and not minor liturgical and administrative adjustments, or even ecumenical statements, will finally solve the problem of Christian unity.

John Meyendorff

Meyendorff’s words, now nearly a half-century old,⁠¹ are seen to be more and more correct with each passing decade. Spoken in the middle of the Second Vatican Council, the landmark ecclesiological and ecumenical event of the twentieth century, the truth of these words has been recognized by Orthodox and Catholic theologians in a variety of ways. Both sides have increasingly come to wrestle with questions of what constitutes the Church as such as well as other important questions of synodality, canonical territory, episcopacy, and especially primacy at the regional and international levels. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, much progress on ecclesiological issues may be noted, but much work remains to be done.

Nowhere is that dynamic of successful work-in-progress more clear than in the continuing efforts of both Catholics and Orthodox to grapple with the question of the Roman papacy. Among those issues that continue to divide the Catholic Church from the Orthodox

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Church—the two largest Christian bodies in the world—the question of the papacy is widely acknowledged by both Catholics and Orthodox to be the most significant stumbling block that remains to unity between these two Churches.

On the Catholic side, no less a figure than Pope Paul VI himself frankly acknowledged in 1967 that the papacy is “undoubtedly the gravest obstacle to the path of ecumenism.” In 1971, the theologian Emmanuel Lanne argued that “there is no doubt that the primacy of Rome is the principal obstacle standing in the way of a reconstituted unity with the Orthodox Churches. Other differences are not negligible . . . but the Orthodox regard these as essentially ‘papist innovations’ which stem from the pretensions of the See of Rome.” The Eastern Jesuit George Maloney would write in 1979 that “no greater obstacle toward reunion exists than the question of papal primacy . . . No one can doubt that this remains the key issue.” The 1980s evidently saw little progress since the 1988 Valamo Statement of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue (JIC) between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church declared that “the question . . . [of] the primacy of the bishop of Rome . . . constitutes a serious divergence among us . . . which will be discussed in the future.” Finally and perhaps most authoritatively, Walter Cardinal Kasper, head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) in Rome, confirmed that “the only seriously debated theological issue between us and the Orthodox Church . . . is the question of Roman primacy.”

On the Orthodox side, the French Orthodox layman Olivier Clément argued that “the problem of the papacy is certainly the most difficult one today in the ecumenical dialogue, particularly between Catholicism and Orthodoxy.” This was seconded in 1997 by the prominent Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, who acknowledged that “the most important and at the same time the most difficult problem in the Roman Catholic–Orthodox relations is undoubtedly that of papal primacy.” Later that year, the prominent Ukrainian Orthodox hierarch, Bishop Vsevolod Majdansky wrote that “the most important difficulty between the Catholics and the Orthodox is the
question of the basis, the significance, and the practical exercise of the ‘universal primacy’ of the Bishop of Rome.”

From the time of the Second Vatican Council, then, until the close of the twentieth century, there was an emerging consensus on the key issue about which Catholics and Orthodox disagree. This consensus is perhaps seen most clearly in the fact that the JIC, established officially in 1979, issued its first agreed statement in 1982 on eucharistic ecclesiology but quickly realized that primacy and especially papal primacy were the most significant issues. These issues were placed at the top of its agenda for several years before the JIC was sidetracked by the “Uniate” problem (that is, by the re-emergence of the long-suppressed Eastern Catholic Churches, especially in Ukraine and Romania, where they had been forced into the underground by a collusion of Communist politicians and Orthodox hierarchs, each acting for different motives but both motivated by fear and animus) in the last decade of the twentieth century and first five years of the twenty-first.

By 2005, however, the JIC would carefully begin its work again, with a full meeting in Belgrade in September 2006. That meeting was a quiet success—though at the end of that meeting, there was a substantial if little noticed or understood conflict between Orthodox participants themselves. That conflict again came to the surface at the most important meeting to date, that of Ravenna in October 2007, where Hilarion Alfeyev, then the Russian Orthodox bishop of Vienna and head of the Russian delegation to the dialogue, objected to what he saw as an attempt in the dialogue to unjustifiably elevate the role and authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, about whom there is no clear consensus on the part of Orthodox canonists and ecclesiologists. Hilarion’s objection led him to take the Russian delegation out of the Ravenna meeting as he protested that “the Orthodox participants are not authorized to ‘invent’ an ecclesiological model for the Orthodox Church similar to the one existing in the Roman Catholic Church in order that the Patriarch of Constantinople could occupy a place like the one the Pope occupies in the Church of Rome.” In another article, Hilarion was even more explicit in saying that some Orthodox “rather regard this primacy as purely honourable, while
others give certain coordinating functions to the patriarch of Constantinople and see him as highest court.”

This 2007 “Ravenna Statement” has generated considerable discussion among ecumenists as well as raised several issues among the Orthodox participants themselves. Alfeyev’s question of the place and prerogatives of Constantinople’s patriarch has not been resolved but, thankfully, has not kept the JIC from continuing to meet, as it did again in full session in October 2009 in Cyprus. That Cyprus meeting, whose groundwork had been laid by a committee of the JIC meeting in Crete in 2008, resulted in a working statement, “The Role of the Bishop of Rome in the Communion of the Church in the First Millennium,” which continues to be discussed by the JIC and will apparently be released during their next meeting in September 2010 in Vienna.

The role of the pope in the first millennium is, as Pope Benedict XVI himself said in a November 2009 letter to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “certainly complex, and will require extensive study and patient dialogue if we are to aspire to a shared integration of the traditions of East and West.” Emerging scholarship on the papacy during the first millennium offers considerable hope that a way forward can be found.

All this work on the papacy was prompted by a historic and unprecedented request in Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (*UUS*). While the papacy of John Paul II was revolutionary in many ways—as George Weigel has convincingly documented—the zeal for Christian unity manifested by John Paul II was among his most singular hallmarks. In *UUS* he would note: “This is an immense task . . . which I cannot carry out by myself. Could not . . . Church leaders and their theologians . . . engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject . . . ?”

While many Protestants have responded, only a tiny handful of individual Orthodox theologians have done likewise. No single canonical Orthodox *Church* has responded, either through its synod, chief hierarch, or other official entity.

I propose an answer to John Paul II which was developed by listening and then responding to numerous Orthodox voices on the ques-
tion of the papacy. This proposal does not pretend to be the definitive answer to the problem of the papacy, nor the only such answer. It is offered in the hope that it will be of use in the long, complex, and difficult work of finding that unity which Christ wills for his Church. It is also offered in response to the request made of theologians in *Ut Unum Sint*, where the pope notes that the process of working for unity must be carried forward with prudence and in a spirit of faith, [and] will be assisted by the Holy Spirit. If it is to be successful, its results must be made known in appropriate ways by competent persons. Significant in this regard is the contribution which theologians and faculties of theology are called to make by exercising their charism in the Church. (§81)

This study is concerned with both Catholic and Orthodox "audiences." In attempting to hold together Orthodox and Catholic concerns about the papacy, I have sought to fulfill the “task” set forth in Michael Magee’s recent and superb work on patriarchates:

[T]he task that was left unfinished at the time of the great Schism between East and West, of effectively incorporating the notions of papal Primacy and the Patriarchal institution into a workable synthesis, by means of a mutual refinement of the underlying ecclesiological principles of each with the effective elimination of potential contradictions, is thus perhaps the single most important key to re-union between East and West.27

Such a synthesis and mutual refinement (what Thomas Norris has called “a comprehensive ‘view,’ a description of a dynamic continuity avoiding the Scylla of corruptive innovation and the Charybdis of a statuesque immobility”28) must, it seems to me, avoid two (at least) obviously deadly traps. The first I would call “radical conservatism,” which, in essence, is a Catholic refusal to countenance any substantial or serious changes to the papacy to accommodate Orthodox concerns but is rather a demand that the papacy be accepted *tout court* as it is.29 The second I would call “radical rejectionism,” which, in essence, is an
Orthodox refusal to consider unity with Catholics until and unless all problems the Orthodox perceive in the Catholic Church, chief among which is, of course, the papacy, are rejected by Rome and swept away in one ironically grand—and presumably final—act of papal omnipotence. Neither is a serious response to the papacy; both seek to evade reality.

Though what is advanced here is indeed something new, I have sought to ensure that the resulting model of papal primacy will be recognizable to, and reconcilable with, Catholic and Orthodox Tradition: a creativity not ex nihilo but ex traditione. In this regard, I have in mind to follow the counsel of the eminent Catholic ecclesiologist and ecumenist, Yves Congar, who has said that “the great law of Catholic reform will begin with a return to the principles of Catholicism. It is necessary to interrogate the tradition and to dive back into it, understanding that ‘tradition’ does not mean ‘routine’ nor even, properly, ‘the past’. In mining Catholic tradition, as Congar counsels, I do so with the following goal in mind:

It would seem that what is needed at the present time is an inquiry into how the patriarchal institution might be understood so as to be reconcilable with defined Catholic dogma, in a manner acceptable also to our separated Eastern brethren because of its rootedness in sources shared by them, supported by the facts of the first millennium, fully consistent with the significant developments in ecclesiology provided by the Second Vatican Council, and open to the new possibilities that the future affords.

Orthodox problems with the papacy, then, will be given every possible consideration here, but Catholic problems with any proposed reform of the papacy to deal with Orthodox concerns must and will be given serious consideration also. Stated simply, it is unacceptable to the Catholic Church simply to disregard the more acutely difficult aspects of the papacy by flatly rejecting them out of hand or demanding that they simply be suppressed or abolished. Such an approach fails to acknowledge seriously and responsibly the organic nature of Tradition which one can never summarily dismiss or disregard without doing vi-
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Oherence to it and the ecclesiological rupture that would be brought about by destroying (or even disregarding) so central a part of the Catholic Church’s very structure and self-understanding. For these reasons, then, one simply cannot deal with difficult aspects of the papacy as so much historical detritus to be rubbed as outmoded, inconvenient, or ecumenically infelicitous. Rather, one must deal with the office as it has developed and is today received and understood by the Catholic Church and, only after having done so, propose reforms to it.

Moreover, because of the inherent institutional “conservatism” (in a non-ideological sense) of the Church of Rome, subjecting the papacy to such a treatment of radical rejectionism would almost inevitably render impossible any prospect of being taken seriously by those to whom it most directly and immediately pertains, namely the bishop of Rome and his Curia. While Walter Cardinal Kasper, former president of the PCPCU, has noted that, in reforming the papacy, “far-reaching developments are possible,” he is quick to note that reforms must not touch “that which is essential and indispensable to the Petrine office.” It is with the Roman Curia in mind, and, more important, with respect for the received Tradition of the Church of Rome, that I propose that we move forward, not backward, allowing the papacy to undergo several “developments” so that, in the end, it becomes more fully the instrument of unity it is supposed to be.

Before proposing such developments, I begin by situating UUS in its historical context and then briefly reviewing its contents. The second chapter provides a survey of the major Orthodox literature on papal primacy, particularly that of the postwar period, taking note of what work has been done and then carefully enumerating the problems with the papacy from an Orthodox perspective.

The third chapter advances a multi-part proposal for the renewal of patriarchal structures within the Latin Church as the necessarily first move for the reform of the papacy. After an initial “apologia” for continued use of the title “Patriarch of the West” against the rather unexpected Roman decision of February 2006 to de-list the title “Patriarch of the West” from the 2006 Annuario Pontificio, the third chapter reviews Catholic theological writings on the importance of a Roman
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patriarchate—writings that owe their origins to the article of no less a figure than Pope Benedict XVI, writing as Joseph Ratzinger in the late 1960s.

This review of Catholic perspectives on patriarchates is then followed, in the fourth chapter, by a review of how Orthodox patriarchates are structured and function. I review ten such patriarchates—the four original eastern members of the “pentarchy” (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem), three “Oriental” Orthodox patriarchates (Coptic, Armenian, and Syrian), and three more “modern” patriarchates (Moscow, Sofia, Bucharest). This chapter is the first serious, recent study of patriarchal polities of which I am aware.

With this twofold survey of Catholic and Orthodox perspectives on patriarchates in mind, the fifth chapter then proposes the creation of six continental patriarchates within the Latin Church and the attendant institutions that go along with them, chiefly a permanent synod and a full synod. The extensive historical survey in this chapter illustrates that the Roman Church has, for much of its history, had such synodal bodies even if they have often functioned under different names.

Once the many aspects of the papacy currently thought of as “papal” but actually “patriarchal” in nature have been returned to the regional patriarchates and local Churches, the “papal” functions qua papal in the Church will be clearly visible. The sixth and final chapter returns to UUS for a renewed understanding of how the pope qua pope would function in a reunited Church where East and West are again in full communion. Here the proposal is made for the creation of a permanent “ecumenical synod” that, under papal presidency, would consist of all the patriarchal heads of Churches and would gather together to assist the pope in maintaining the unity of the one Church of God.