

## **Apostolicity as God's Gift in the Life of the Church**

1. In the creed we confess the Church to be "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." What is meant by this term? Modern scholarship, reflected in many joint and common statements of the ecumenical dialogue, has advanced discussion of this question in several important areas. For example, historical-critical study of the Bible has called attention to the ways in which the word *apostolos* is used in the New Testament as well as to the distinctive role of the Twelve and to the place of Peter in the New Testament. So also, historians of doctrine have called attention to the importance of the struggle against gnosticism in the second century for the development of the concept of apostolic succession.
2. In 1985 the North American Orthodox/Roman Catholic Bilateral Consultation took up the study of apostolicity. Our papers and discussions prompted the following reflections, which we offer now particularly with the hope that they will help to advance the work of the International Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation as it moves forward in its own discussion of apostolicity.
3. It is not our intention simply to repeat or even to summarize the many scholarly foundational studies on apostolicity, though at times we shall call attention to points raised in them. Rather, we wish to examine certain other aspects of this subject, for we are convinced that, as Orthodox and Roman Catholics, we share a perception of apostolicity and of its implications for church structures which in some sense has united us even during periods of mutual antagonism. By trying to articulate this shared perception, we hope to carry our own discussion of apostolicity beyond the points of agreement convergence already reached by others involved in ecumenical dialogue.
4. Biblical scholarship has drawn our attention to the fact that the New Testament understanding of apostolicity is not so one-dimensional as both our traditions have sometimes appeared to presume. The differing theological emphases found there--St. Paul's claim to apostolic title or the tendency in Luke-Acts to identify the apostles with the Twelve--suggest that there is a continuing need for theological reflection on apostolicity, a task to which we today are also called.
5. In biblical language apostles are those who have been sent out to perform a task in the name of another. They are endowed with the authority and freedom to act authentically on behalf of the one who sent them. Apostles in the New Testament are witnesses to the risen Christ who are explicitly commissioned by him to spread the gospel of his resurrection to the world and to promote, in his name, the active presence and power of God's kingdom. We call the Church apostolic first of all because the Church continues to share this mission in history, continues to be authorized by the risen Lord, through its continuing structures, as his legitimate representative.

6. For Orthodox and Roman Catholics, therefore, that the Church is apostolic is not simply a statement but an object of faith. The creed says "I believe one holy, catholic and apostolic church." Like the Christ-event, this apostolicity is a gift from God given once for all; its content is not of our making. As biblical scholars have observed, the apostles were unique and irreplaceable in their witness to God's decisive intervention in human history. At the same time, this apostolic gift has an eschatological dimension, particularly--but not exclusively--when the Twelve are identified as apostles. The apostle appears as a uniquely authoritative figure not only at the foundation of the Church but also as a companion of the eschatological Christ at the judgment of the last day. This eschatological dimension does not only mean that the Church, founded on the Twelve, awaits its perfect form at the end of God's plan for history. It also means that the Church shares now in the finality, the irrevocable fullness, of God's action within the changes of history, precisely because the Twelve have passed on to the Church their witness to the presence of God's kingdom in the risen Lord and their role as authoritative heralds of his coming in history.
7. These two dimensions of apostolicity--the historical and the eschatological--cannot be separated, and certainly in our lived experience as Orthodox and Roman Catholics they have always been held together. Indeed, one of the characteristics of God's gift of apostolicity is that it manifests the events of the end to the present time. This is seen clearly in the pattern of the eucharist, where the Holy Spirit brings the reality of the resurrected Christ to the Church, and it is visible also in the tradition of iconography, which brings to bear upon the present life of the Church both the historical past and the power of the world to come. Apostolicity thus is not reduced to simple reference to the past, nor is it referred only to the reality of a future age. It means that here and now the life of the Church-- whether expressed in authoritative teaching, in judgment and discipline, or in the eucharist itself--is being molded, corrected, and governed by what has been received from the past and by what is awaited at the last day.
8. We frequently speak of our faith as apostolic, by this usually stressing that its content has been received from the apostles. This understanding of the apostolic faith took on particular importance in the Church's struggle against gnosticism in the second century, when it came to be described as a deposit left by the apostles and handed down with the communities founded by them. But there has never been any need to understand this deposit as an inert object, relayed in purely mechanical fashion from generation to generation by duly authorized ministers. Rather, it remains a living confession. We see the paradigm of this in Peter's response to Christ's question, "Who do men say that I am?...Who do you say that I am?" The apostolic faith of Peter appears not only in the content of the confession--"Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God"--but also in the very act of confessing.
9. It is primordially within the mystery of Christian initiation that apostolicity is continually experienced in the life of the Church and in the life of each Christian. The baptismal act of receiving and giving back the Church's confession of faith (traditio/redditio) marks each Christian's entry into and appropriation of the apostolic life and faith of the Church. As an

essential element in the life of the whole Church and of every Christian, apostolicity therefore is by no means unique to or limited to the realm of hierarchical ministry. For just as we share by baptism in the royal and prophetic priesthood, so also by this baptismal confession we too become bearers of the Church's apostolicity.

10. In our consultation attention was drawn to at least two corollaries which may follow from this understanding of apostolic faith: (a) the apostolicity of ministry is generally seen as derived from the continuity of the community as a whole in apostolic life and faith; the succession of ministers in office is normally agreed to be subordinate to that ecclesial apostolicity, (b) Apostolicity seems to consist more in fidelity to the apostles' proclamation and mission than in any one form of handing on community office. These observations alert us once again to reducing apostolicity simply to forms and institutional structures. Yet we also must resist any temptation to locate apostolicity in what is merely individual or in what falls outside the mediated nature of the divine economy--as happened and still happens, for example, in the gnostic claim to immediate experience. Apostolicity is experienced not in a-temporal isolation but rather in the Church's social nature as a community of faith and in its historical continuity and permanence--even in concrete forms and patterns once given the Church's life by its relation to the civilization of the Greco-Roman world.
11. Within this social and historical experience of the apostolic Church, how do we as Orthodox and Roman Catholics conceive of those structures which attest to and assure the unity of the churches in their apostolic confession? Here historians have called attention to certain differences of approach which may characterize our churches. Yet we are uncomfortable with any assessment that would too sharply polarize differences, as though at every point--even those on which at first glance we would appear to be united--we were in fact divided by hopelessly irreconcilable mentalities.
12. In the Eastern churches there has frequently been an emphasis on the fullness of each church's apostolicity and, indeed, "petrinity," and there has been criticism of the Roman Church, for tending to localize these qualities in a single see. The Roman Church, on the other hand, has strongly emphasized the need to express the unity of the Church's apostolic faith through concrete structures and practice and has criticized the Eastern churches for losing sight of this need. Such differences of approach should not, however, be presented as evidence of an irreducible opposition between "local church" and "universal church." This dilemma is an artificial one which arises at least in part when we are unwilling to see the same qualities present in both the local and the universal, albeit realized in different ways. The image of Peter within the apostolic college is reflected in the life of each local church; it is also reflected in the visible communion of all the local churches. There is no intrinsic opposition between these two approaches.
13. In examining the Church's historical relationship to civil society, scholars have also contrasted a "principle of accommodation" in the East to a "principle of apostolicity" in the West. Yet at a time when East and West were united in one Christian Roman Empire, neither

approach necessarily excluded the other, for both pointed and aspired to universality. It was in Rome after all, the imperial capital, that Peter and Paul, "first enthroned of the apostles, teachers of the oikumene," bore witness to the apostolic faith even until death. (Troparion of the feast of SS. Peter and Paul in the Byzantine rite). And in the East, it was not abstract principle of conformity to civil structures that prevailed. Rather, the concrete structures of a universal empire were used to express the Church's universality. Also instructive here are ways in which the themes of diversity- in-unity and ordered harmony are developed in the many Byzantine treatises on the "pentarchy". What is envisioned is by no means simply an institutional unity, but an organic unity.

14. These points are offered in the hope that they will clarify and facilitate our common approach not only to the question of apostolicity but also to the question of primacy. Taken together, they call us to exercise particular caution in our use of theological language. When distinctions have been made or noted-- as was done above, for example, in distinguishing the content and the act of apostolic faith--we must resist the temptation to leave them in a state of opposition. Unless the distinguished elements are recombined in their proper relationship and proportion, the integrity of the underlying theological reality is lost and the spiritual experience of this reality in both our traditions is travestied. There is not need to claim that what may characterize one tradition in a particular way exhausts the content of that tradition or, in turn, must be absent from another tradition as a matter of course.
15. The historical study of apostolicity also calls us to examine carefully the ways in which we present our respective histories. This has particular importance when we are speaking of that historical continuity we each claim as bearers of the apostolic faith, or when we recount those particular incidents in our histories--for example, the monothelite controversy in the seventh century--which may reflect different understandings of apostolicity. In such contexts we can easily forget the achievements of our common theological reflection and retreat once again--consciously or unconsciously--into what is less than the fullness of truth. We must not be too quick to identify this kind of retreat with that fearless confession of the apostolic faith "in season and out of season" which binds us all as Orthodox and Catholic Christians.

Brighton, MA  
November 1, 1986  
33rd Meeting