

An Agreed Statement on Conciliarity and Primacy in the Church

For the past three years, the Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States of America has been studying questions related to the theology and practice of councils and to the exercise of primacy in our churches. Our papers and discussions prompted the following reflections, which we now offer in the hope that they will advance the work of the international Orthodox/Roman Catholic dialogue, and the wider relations among the churches, as they have advanced our own understanding of these issues.

1. In both Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology, the Church is the mystery of God-given unity among human beings, who are bound together by their faith in the risen Lord and by the transforming gift of the Holy Spirit into the divine and human fellowship (*koinonia*) we call the Body of Christ (I Cor 12.13). Joined by the Holy Spirit to the Son in his loving obedience to the Father's will, the Church manifests redeemed creation within the embrace of the Triune reality of God, calling God "Abba! Father!" by the gift of the Spirit of his Son (Gal 4.6), as it strives towards the fullness of his Kingdom.
2. Individual human persons become sharers in this mystery through sharing in the Church's profession of the apostolic faith and through baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28.19). "Born" there into the Church's life "by water and the Holy Spirit" (John 3.5), they may now "consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6.11). So the Church, in its most extensive and inclusive sense, genuinely comprises all those who profess the apostolic faith and are baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, recognizing them as "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2.19).
3. When it gathers, under the life-giving impulse of the Holy Spirit, to celebrate in the Eucharist the Son's "obedience unto death" (Phil. 2.8) and to be nourished by participation in his risen life, the Church most fully expresses what, in God's order of salvation, it is: an assembly of faithful human persons who are brought into communion by and with the persons of the Holy Trinity, and who look forward to the fulfillment of that communion in eternal glory. So the clearest human reflection of the Church's divine vocation is the Christian community united to celebrate the Eucharist, gathered by its common faith, in all its variety of persons and functions, around a single table, under a single president (*proestos*), to hear the Gospel proclaimed and to share in the sacramental reality of the Lord's flesh and blood (Ignatius, Eph 5.2-3; Philad. 4), and so to manifest those gathered there as "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet 1.4). "If you are the Body of Christ and his members," proclaims St. Augustine, "your divine mystery is set on the table of the Lord; you receive your own mystery...Be what you see and receive what you are." (Serm. 272)
4. The mystery of Christ's Church, in its fullness, is therefore most directly and clearly encountered in the Eucharistic community. Each local Church, recognized in its celebration of the Eucharist, is a full sacramental realization of the one Church of Christ, provided it

remains within the full apostolic faith and is bound in love and mutual recognition to the other communities who profess that faith. The Church in each place expresses its participation in the universal Church through its celebration of the one Eucharist and in its concern for the worldwide spread of the Gospel and for the welfare and right faith of its sister communities, as well as in its prayer for their needs and the needs of the world.

5. United with Christ and within itself by the divine gifts of faith and love and by the other charisms and sacramental events which enliven it, the Church is also "set in order," as St. Basil reminds us, "by the Holy Spirit." (*On the Holy Spirit* 39) This ordering of charisms within the community is the basis of the Church's structure, and the reason why permanent offices of leadership have been divinely established within the Eucharistic body, since apostolic times, as a service of love and a safeguard of unity in faith and life. Thus the same Spirit who unites the Church in a single universal Body also manifests his presence in the institutions which keep local communities in an ordered and loving communion with one another.
6. The two institutions, mutually dependent and mutually limiting, which have exercised the strongest influence on maintaining the ordered communion of the Churches since apostolic times, have been the gathering of bishops and other appointed local leaders in synods, and the primacy or recognized preeminence of one bishop among his episcopal colleagues.
 - a. Synods - whether held at the provincial, national or universal level, whether standing bodies (such as the *synodos endemousa* of the Ecumenical Patriarchate), regularly convened gatherings, or extraordinary meetings called to meet some historic crisis - are the faithful community's chief expression of the "care for all the Churches" which is central to every bishop's pastoral responsibility, and of the mutual complementarity of all the Body's members.
 - b. Primacy - whether that of the metropolitan within his province, or that of a patriarch or presiding hierarchy within a larger region - is a service of leadership that has taken many forms throughout Christian history, but that always should be seen as complementary to the function of synods. It is the primate (*protos*) who convenes the synod, presides over its activities, and seeks, together with his colleagues, to assure its continuity in faith and discipline with the apostolic Church: yet it is the synod which, together with the primate, gives voice and definition to the apostolic tradition. It is also the synod which, in most Churches, elects the primate, assists him in his leadership, and holds him to account for his ministry in the name of the whole Church (*Apostolic Canons* 34).
7. The particular form of primacy among the Churches exercised by the bishops of Rome has been and remains the chief point of dispute between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, and their chief obstacle to full ecclesial communion with each other. Disagreement has often centered on the way in which the leadership exercised by Peter in expressing and confirming the faith of the other disciples (Matt 16.17f.; Lk 22.32; John

21.15-19) is to be realized in Church life. The Orthodox have emphasized that the role of Peter within the apostolic college is reflected principally in the role of the church. Roman Catholics have claimed for the bishops of Rome, since the fourth century, not only the first place in honor among their episcopal colleagues but also the "Petrine" role of proclaiming the Church's apostolic tradition and of ensuring the observation of canonical practices.

As our Consultation has suggested in its earlier statement, "Apostolicity as God's Gift in the Life of the Church" (1986; par. 12), "There is no intrinsic opposition between these two approaches." The Orthodox do accept the notion of universal primacy, speaking of it as a "primacy of honor" accorded to a *primus inter pares*; at the same time, they cannot accept an understanding of the role of the primate which excludes the collegiality and interdependence of the whole body of bishops, and in consequence continue to reject the formulation of Papal primacy found in Vatican I's constitution *Pastor Aeternus*. Engaged since the Second Vatican Council in further development of the doctrine of Papal primacy within the context of a collegially responsible episcopate (see especially *Lumen Gentium* 22-23), the Roman Catholic Church is presently seeking new forms of synodal leadership which will be compatible with its tradition of effective universal unity in faith and practice under the headship of the bishop of Rome.

8. The fullest synodal expression of the Church's universal reality is the gathering of bishops from various parts of the world in "ecumenical council," to deal with questions of urgent and universal importance by clarifying and defining the "ecumenical" faith and practice of the apostolic tradition (see the statement of the International Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church" [New Valamo, 1988] 54). The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches agree in recognizing the seven great councils of the early Church as ecumenical in character and import. Because the circumstances of their convocation, their preparation and membership, and the process of their subsequent recognition by the Churches vary, history offers us no single juridical model of conciliar structure as normative. Still, the acceptance of the binding authority of certain councils by the apostolic churches in worldwide communion - however and whenever that acceptance becomes clear - constitutes for the whole Body of Christ an event of charismatic unity at the highest level. It is in the reception of a common faith, especially as that faith is formulated by the ecumenical councils, that the Churches experience most authentically the unity in the Lord that is the foundation of Eucharistic communion.

Brighton, MA
October, 1989
39th Meeting