

Ecclesiology

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III. Ecclesiology

III/1 The Nature and Marks of the Church

I. 1. By its very nature the Church is intimately related to the mystery of the Triune God who reveals himself in Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph. 5:32). It is “the treasure house of God’s ineffable mysteries” (John Chrysostom, hom. 16.3 in 1 Cor. – PG 61.134).

No explicit and complete definition of the term “Church” is to be found in Scripture and tradition. What we find are many images and symbols from which in an indirect way the nature of the Church can be known.

According to the Scriptures, the Church is “the body of Christ” (Rom. 12:4f; 1 Cor. 12:13.27), “the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:10), the “household” or “temple” of God (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:19; 1 Cor. 3:16f), the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9), the bride of Christ (cf. Mk. 2:20; Mt. 25:1ff; Rev. 21:2), God’s “vineyard” (Is. 5:7).

Tradition also provides descriptions in which one or other aspect of the Church is emphasized: it is episcopal in structure, it has a priestly and charismatic character, it is a communion of believers, it is composed of all the true believers of all the ages, it is the human race united in the God-man.

2. The Church, therefore, by its very nature is no mere human fellowship, no passing phenomenon of human history. It is rooted in God’s eternal decision and plan for the benefit of the world and the human race. In the Old Testament it was prefigured in Israel and announced in advance by the prophets to be the coming people of God of the New Covenant in which God would establish his final and universal sovereignty on earth (Is. 2:2; Jer. 31:31). In the fullness of time it became a reality in the incarnation of the Word of God, through the proclamation of the Gospel, the choice of the Twelve Apostles, the institution of the Lord’s Supper, Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection, as well as through the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for the sanctification of the Church and the equipment of the Apostles for their work.

3. Thus the Church founded by the Lord on earth is the Body of Christ, with Christ as its Head, a divine-human organism; a community which can be described and perceived and, at the same time, an inward and spiritual relationship between its members and its divine founder and among themselves. As the pilgrim people of God, the Church lives on earth in expectation of its coming Lord until the ful-

filment of the Kingdom of God. It exists and lives both in heaven, in those already made perfect who there celebrate the victory, and on earth in believers who fight the good fight of faith (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6). In one aspect the Church is invisible and heavenly, in the other it is earthly and visible, a community and organism with a pastoral and priestly ministry, which is structurally linked with the Apostles, with abiding dogmatic and ethical principles and a constant ordered worship, a body in which clergy and laity are differentiated.

In the Church, the new life in Christ is a reality in the Holy Spirit; in it the grace and divine life of the Head is given to all members of the Body for their sanctification and salvation.

4. The Church established by the Lord on earth cannot, therefore, be merely something inward, an invisible fellowship or an ideal and indefinable Church of which the individual churches are only imperfect images. Such a conception of the nature of the Church is in contradiction to the spirit of Scripture and tradition; it destroys the real content of revelation and the historical character of the Church.

II. Dogmatic expression is given of the nature of the Church in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, as confirmed by the 4th Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon. In this creed the confession of faith in the Triune God is followed by the confession of faith in “the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” (Mansi 7.112).

1. The Church is *one*, for just as Christ the Head of the Church is one, so, too, there is also one body animated by the Holy Spirit, in which Christ as Head and believers as members are united. In this body all the local Churches are united to one another by the unity of faith, worship and order. The unity of faith and worship represents the bond which binds believers with the Redeemer and with one another, in love and peace and finds expression in the confession of the same faith and in celebration of the same liturgy, insofar as it rests on dogma. The unity of order takes the form of the exercise of leadership on the basis of the same principles and the recognition by believers of one ministry and one authority in accordance with the canonical rules, namely the episcopate which has a conciliar structure.

If the members of the Church perceive the truths of faith in various ways, this does not destroy or diminish the unity of faith; nor does this happen if the Church sometimes exercises patience towards people who depart from the unity of faith and order, and does not exclude them from the body of the Church, for pastoral considerations and in the exercise of “economy”.

Although the Church, the Body of Christ, has many members, therefore, these nevertheless all constitute one body and are united in an indivisible unity. The Lord prayed for this unity in which the unity of believers is grounded in the unity of Father and Son (Jn. 17:21) as an image of the Triune God. “For Father, Son and Holy Spirit have one will. Thus it is his will also that we, too, should be one, when he says: That they all may be one as you and I are one” (John Chrysostom, hom. 78.3 in Jo. – PG 59.425).

2. The Church is *holy* since Christ its Head is holy and gave himself for it “that he might sanctify it ... that the Church might be presented before him in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that it might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25–27). Christ made the Church the “household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6); he gave it fellowship and share in his holiness and grace and in his divine life; he “who sanctified the people through his own blood” (Heb. 13:12). Christians are therefore also called saints (Acts 9:13).

The fact that members of the Church sin does not nullify the holiness of the Church. The Fathers were agreed in condemning those who because of immoderate and ascetic tendencies took the view that the Church is a community made up exclusively of completely sanctified members.

3. The Church is *catholic*, since Christ its Head is the Lord of all things. It is predestined to extend to the whole creation, over all peoples and through all ages (Mt. 28:20; Mk. 16:15; Acts 1:8). This is the external quantitative meaning of catholicity.

The Church is called catholic in the inner qualitative sense of the word because although it is scattered over the whole earth, it is always and everywhere the same. It is catholic, because it has the “sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1; cf. 1 Tim. 6:20), continues in the original tradition of the Apostles and truly continues and preserves “that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all” (Vincent of Lerins, commonit. 2 – PL 50.640). The Church is catholic therefore in the sense that it is the orthodox, authentic and true Church.

According to Cyril of Jerusalem, “the Church is called catholic because it extends over all the world from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all those doctrines which ought to come to the knowledge of mankind, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the entire human race, rulers and those governed, learned and unlearned; and because

while it deals exhaustively with and heals every kind of sin of soul and body, it also possesses in itself every form of virtue which can be named, in deeds and words and in every kind of spiritual gift” (catech. 18.23 – PG 33.1044).

4. The Church is *apostolic*, since its divine founder was the first “apostle” (Heb. 3:1; cf. Gal. 4:4), and because it is built upon “the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20).

The mission of Jesus has a wider context: the Son is sent into the world by the Father, and he himself sends the disciples (cf. Jn. 20:21) to whom he says: “He who hears you hears me” (Lk. 10:16). After their death the mission is continued by the Church, the inheritance of truth entrusted by the Lord to the Apostles is preserved and passed on in the spiritual life, in the celebration of the sacraments and in doctrine. The apostolic doctrine preserved by the Church is the inner aspect of its apostolicity. Its other element is the unbroken series and succession of pastors and teachers of the Church, starting from the Apostles, which is the outward mark and also the pledge of the truth of the Church. These two elements of apostolicity, the inner and the outer, support and condition one another; if either one or the other is lacking the essential apostolicity and fullness of truth of the Church are impaired.

The four dogmatic marks of the Church mutually interpenetrate each other in indissoluble unity and point to the indestructibility and infallibility of the Church, the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Nature and Marks of the Church” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Chambésy/Geneva, August 29, 1977

Signatures

III/2 The Unity of the Church and the Local Churches

1. The Church is the one indivisible Body of Christ in which the believers, as members of this Body, are united with Christ as its Head and with one another. The supreme expression and the perennial source of this unity is the sacrament of the Eucharist, communion

with the Body and Blood of Christ: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17).

2. The one Church on earth exists in the many local Churches whose life is centred on the celebration of Holy Eucharist in the communion with the lawful bishop and his priests. “Let all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father, and the priest as you would the apostles... Let that eucharist be held valid which is offered by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has committed this charge” (Ignatius of Antioch, Smyrn. 8.1 – PG 5.582)

3. The spread of the Christian faith to different lands and among many peoples and the consequent rise of a multitude of local Churches did not abolish the unity of the Church nor does their existence now do so, so long as the local Churches maintain pure and unadulterated in the harmonious disposition of all, the faith transmitted to them from the Lord through the Apostles. Unity in faith is the supreme principle of the Catholic Church: “The Church ... has received from the apostles and their disciples the faith ... in one God, the Father Almighty ... and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God ... and in the Holy Spirit... The Church has received this proclamation... Although scattered throughout the whole world, it carefully preserves it as if living in one house. It believes it just as if it had but one soul and one and the same heart, and proclaims and teaches and hands it down, with perfect harmony, as if it possessed only one mouth” (Irenaeus of Lyons, hear. 1.10.1–2 – PG 7.549, 552).

4. As a fellowship of believers united around the bishop and the priests and as the Body of Christ, each local Church is the manifestation of the whole Christ in one particular place. It represents the sacramental reality of the whole Church in its own locality. For it is in no divided form, that the life, that has been given to the Church by God the Father through the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit, is given to the local Churches; each local Church, on the contrary, has that life in its fullness. Thus, for all the differences in custom and usage, the life of the local Churches is in essence one and the same: “There is one body and one Spirit, ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all...” (Eph. 4:4–6). There are not many bodies but the one Body of Christ, undivided and whole, in each place. This unity of life in the local Churches reflects the unity of the Holy Trinity itself.

5. The local Churches recognize in one another the same reality and they affirm their essential identity, above all by the unity of faith, fur-

thermore by the unity of their liturgical and sacramental life, their unity in the basic principles of canonical order and of Church government, as well as by the unity of the episcopate. Authentic expression has been given to these basic principles in the canons of the seven Ecumenical Synods and the acknowledged local synods or they are attested in the Fathers of the Church. Since the Church in this present time still awaits deliverance from all evil and must therefore pray God so to deliver it, to make it perfect in his love and bring it together from the ends of the earth into his Kingdom (Didache 10.5; 9.4), the local Churches must devotedly maintain the essential unity given to them, and constantly struggle against the forces of sin and division.

6. In the course of history, the local Churches, which in specific geographical regions have established a deeper unity with a particular bishop as principal head, affirm and practice their fellowship by the common reception of the eucharistic gifts by their members, by the exchange of visits between their leaders and representatives, by the interchange of messages of greeting, as well as by mutual aid and intercession, and in other ways in accordance with the distinctive gifts received by each. Each is careful to observe the rule forbidding intervention or meddling in the domestic affairs of the others.

7. On matters of faith and other common concerns, i. e. where issues arise which concern them all and exceed the competence of each individual Church, the local Churches take counsel together and make common decisions, faithfully observing in such synods the order of honour and rank canonically established in the Church. They do so, above all, in ecumenical synods, which are the supreme authority in the Church, the instrument and the voice through which the Catholic Church speaks, whereby there is a constant effort to preserve and strengthen its unity in love.

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Unity of the Church and the Local Churches” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Bonn, August 24, 1979

Signatures

III/3 The Boundaries of the Church

1. The love of God and his purpose of salvation are unlimited and embrace all men of all times in the whole of creation, for it is his will “that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). In accordance with the divine plan of salvation, it is in and through the Church founded by God and not at a distance from it and independent of it that man comes to partake of salvation, for in the Church is found the divine truth, to it the Saviour has entrusted the means of achieving beatitude; the Church is the sure way to salvation and eternal life. Salvation is offered to believers in the Church by the Holy Spirit which abides always in it. This is why Irenaeus also says: “For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace” (Irenaeus of Lyons, haer. 3.24.1 – PG 7.966).

2. Because of sin, not everyone accepts the saving grace of God and comes to the fellowship of the Church. But not all those who do come to the Church confess the divine truth as revealed by Jesus Christ in the fullness of time. Journeying through history, the Church of Christ has become divided into many Churches which disagreed with each other because the faith and doctrines handed down from the Apostles were debased. Today Christian Churches and confessions differ not only in unessential respects, but also do not teach the same in even fundamental points of Christian doctrine. This led among other things to the false and unacceptable theory that the true visible Church, the Church of the age of the Apostles and Church Fathers, no longer exists today but that each of the individual Churches retains only a portion, greater or less, of the true Church and that none of them, therefore, can be regarded as a genuine and essentially complete representation of the true Church.

3. But from the day it was founded right down to our own day, the true Church, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, has gone on existing without any discontinuity wherever the true faith, worship and order of the ancient undivided Church are preserved unimpaired as they are reflected and formulated in the definitions and canons of the seven Ecumenical Synods and the acknowledged local synods and in the Fathers of the Church.

4. Our Joint Commission gives heresy and schism the appropriate significance and regards communities which continue in heresy and schism as in no sense as efficacious sites of salvation parallel to the

true visible Church. It nevertheless believes that the question of the Church's boundaries can be seen in a larger light. Since it is impossible to set limits to God's power whose will it is that all should find salvation and come to know the truth and since further the Gospel clearly speaks of salvation by faith in the unique Son of God – "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life" (Jn. 3:36) –, it can be considered as not excluded that the divine omnipotence and grace are present and operative wherever the departure from the fullness of truth in the one Church is not complete and does not go to the lengths of a complete estrangement from the truth, wherever "God Himself is not called in question", wherever the source of "life, the Trinity, is sincerely proclaimed and the mystery of the divine economy in the incarnation is acknowledged" (Petrus III of Antioch, Letter to Michael Cerularius of Constantinople 14 – PG 120.805, 808).

5. On this view of the question of the Church's boundaries, where the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ is understood in a wider sense, all who believe in Christ are called to seek lovingly, sincerely and patiently to enter into dialogue with one another, and to pray unceasingly for the restoration of the Church's unity in faith and full fellowship so that the Lord God may lead all to know the truth and to attain the fullness of unity.

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on "The Boundaries of the Church" represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Bonn, August 24, 1979

Signatures

III/4 Authority of the Church and in the Church

I.

1. The origin and basis of the authority of the Church as a fellowship of God with man is the power and authority of its Lord and Head Jesus Christ, which he received from his Father (cf. Mt. 28:18; Lk. 10:16). The Lord exercised this power and authority related to the work of salvation in his earthly life and passed it on to the Apostles after his resurrection – through them to the bishops – and the whole Church (Mt. 28:19–20; Jn. 20:21).

The Lord, who had promised the Church that he would remain with it “always, to the close of the age” (Mt. 28:20), also sent it “another Comforter”, “the Spirit of Truth” (Jn. 14:16–17; 15:26; 16:13), in order that he would always remain in it and lead it into all truth. That is why the Church is called “the Church of the living God, pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

2. The Church exercises its power and authority in the name of Jesus Christ and in the strength of the Comforter living within it. That is why it carries out the task given to it in an authoritative manner by the spiritual strengths that fill it in all its members, that is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23), not though by using external coercive means.

3. In exercising authority constituted this way, the Church leads its members to recognize godly truth set forth with full power and leads its members to appropriate it in the freedom to which “Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1) and in obedience. The recognition of the truth occurs under the influence of the Holy Spirit, but the truth sets us free (cf. Jn. 8:32) because “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

II.

1. The authority of the Church, which is borne by the entire Church as the Body of Christ, became evident as, in the course of time, through proceedings and decisions, Holy Scripture and holy tradition were preserved from all sorts of heretical falsehoods; the canonical books of the Holy Scriptures were distinguished from false ones and the canon of Holy Scripture was fixed; the living transmission of the faith was guarded, interpreted and passed on; the confession of faith was formulated, completed and established; the basic principles of ministerial office and of the constitution were fixed; and the order of worship and the life of the whole Church was established.

2. A continuous task of the Church is the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture does not stand above the Church; it came into being in it. As the Church lives in the light of the witness of Holy Revelation, so Holy Scripture is also understood and interpreted in connection with living tradition in the Church and with its decisions regarding issues of faith. That is why only that doctrine is true – beyond the difficulty of expression bound to specific time and conditioned by language – that agrees in its essence with Holy Scripture and

holy tradition. In expressing its authority in dogmatic decisions, the Church always rests on both, that is on Holy Scripture and holy tradition, by preserving the testimony of both and deepening their understanding.

3. Here the unanimous teaching of the Fathers and teachers is also of special significance for the Church. In their writings, the Apostolic Tradition, whose inspired written witness is Holy Scripture, is preserved and interpreted. The Church accepts as authoritative witness of the truth the unanimity of the Fathers (cf. Vincent of Lerins, *commonit.* 3; 28 – PL 50.641, 674–678, and the whole tradition of the Fathers).

III.

Specific bearers and organs of authority in the Church are:

1. The bishop who in apostolic succession lawfully presides over the local Church. St. Ignatius of Antioch clearly expressed the position and task that the bishop has in his position as bearer of authority when he said that whosoever obeys the bishop accepts the authority of God, for the bishop represents and bears within himself the authority of God (*Magn.* 3.1–2; 6.1; *Trall.* 2.1 – PG 5.664f, 668, 676), whereby he always acts collegially with the presbyters whom he appointed: “As the Lord did nothing without the Father with whom he is one neither by himself nor through the apostles, therefore shall you do nothing without the bishop and the presbyters” (*Magn.* 7.1; cf. *Eph.* 4.1; *Trall.* 3.1; *Smyrn.* 8.1 – PG 5.668, 648, 677, 713).

In the power and the authority of the grace of the episcopal office, the bishop guards the purity of the doctrine of the faith of the Church, maintains its canonical order, is the administrator of the sacraments and through preaching leads the flock entrusted to him to the pastures of salvation of evangelical grace. In his Church, the bishop acts in unanimity with the presbyterium and the people who, in turn, follow the bishop as their evangelical shepherd. According to St. Cyprian, the Church is “the people who are united with the bishop, and the flock that clings to their shepherd. You must therefore know that the bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop” (Cyprian of Carthage, *ep.* 66.8 – PL 4.406/419).

2. The synods of the Church, in particular the Ecumenical Councils. In the councils each of the bishops represents his own Church by virtue of his episcopal office. The resolutions of the councils, though, claim and have authority as far as they have the consent of the Church, which is represented by the assembled bishops (cf. Acts 15).

IV.

1. The authority of the Church is also connected with the common consciousness of the faith of the Church. This is the unanimity of faith of clergy and people, the broadest witness of the whole (*plērōma*) of the Church taking part in the responsibility of transmitting truth kept intact and unadulterated. The common understanding of the faith of the Church also forms, among others, the decisive criterion for the recognition of the Ecumenical Councils as such and of their Fathers as true interpreters of the faith of the Church, which they canonically represent.

2. The common consciousness of the faith shows itself in diverse ways. It finds its expression with the confessors and martyrs, the desert fathers and the mystics, the holy monastic fathers, the believers gifted with a charisma and generally with all who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation and who are also called to bear witness to the Gospel in the world, in worship and in other expressions of the life of the Church.

3. Finally, it needs to be emphasized that authority at all levels and exercised in all ways presupposes the Spirit of truth, love, humility and liberty. Only thus will the authority of the Church and in the Church be exercised as a blessing for its life and its ministry to the world. For the Lord of the Church, to whom is given all power and authority in heaven and on earth, exercised this power as one who served (cf. Lk. 22:27; Jn. 13:14–17). That is why the authority of the Church must have a serving character and in all things be focused on the building up of the Body of Christ and its growth in love (cf. Eph. 4:11–16).

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Authority of the Church and in the Church” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Moscow, September 20, 1981

Signatures

III/5 The Infallibility (Unerring) of the Church

The real and true God (Jn. 3:33; 17:3; Rom. 3:4; 1 Thess. 1:9) sent his Son, who is himself the Truth (Jn. 14:6), “for us men and for our salvation”, which will be realized in the Church founded by him. The

Son sends the Comforter from the Father to the Church, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, in order that he will always remain with it and lead it into all truth (Jn. 14:15–17). The Church therefore takes part in the truthfulness, faithfulness and infallibility of God. The Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ and that is why the Church, also enlightened by the Comforter, bears witness to its Lord and his teaching when it takes up the Apostolic Tradition and passes it on (Jn. 15:26–27). The Holy Spirit teaches it all things and reminds it of all that Christ has told it (Jn. 14:26; cf. 15:26).

Because Christ remains with his Church to the close of the age (Mt. 28:20), it keeps – in spite of all human weakness of its members – the revealed truth, the “treasure” entrusted to it (2 Tim. 1:14), pure and intact so that the powers of death will not prevail against it (Mt. 16:18). That is why the Church is called “house of God”, “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and is able to reliably impart to its members the faith handed to it, and to bear unadulterated witness to it before the world. The infallibility of the Church derives from the Lord and from the Holy Spirit. The Church is in Christ and he works in it through the Spirit who is sent into the hearts of the faithful (cf. Gal. 4:6). This infallibility is not invalidated in its essence by the sin and error of the members (cf. Rom. 3:3–4).

The Church is only infallible as a whole but not its individual members themselves, be they bishops, patriarchs, or popes, or be they clergy, people, or individual local Churches themselves. Because the Church is the fellowship of believers who are all taught by God (cf. Jn. 6:45), infallibility uniquely applies to the whole Church. Together ordained and lay persons form as members the Body of Christ and are “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). It is the believers as a whole who have the “unction of him who is holy”, who rightly know the truth (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20, 27) and live by it. These believers as a whole, then, do not commit an error when they profess a common faith in one accord from the bishops to the last believer of the people.

For that reason the highest organ of the Church in declaring belief infallibly is an ecumenical council. Local synods as well as bishops and all individual members of the Church are subject to the Ecumenical Council as the spokesman of the entire Church. This was already the case in the age of the Apostles when they gathered, together with the presbyters and the entire congregation, in Jerusalem to express the will of the entire Church with unanimity. This assembly exercised greater authority than any single apostle (cf. Acts 15). An ecumenical

council, making its decisions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, lays claim to infallibility on the basis of its accord with the entire catholic Church. Without this accord no assembly is an ecumenical council.

The necessity for the Church to reach dogmatic decisions arises when the sound doctrine of the Church is threatened or when there is need for specific explanation and testimony to ward off heresy and schism and in order to maintain the unity of the Church. It is clear that infallibility only applies to matters of salvation.

Fundamentally the Holy Spirit, who is the spirit of Christ, inspired the Holy Scripture which witnesses to the eternal Word of God made flesh. The guidance of the Church by the Holy Spirit is therefore to be understood as one which is in correspondence with Scripture as well as transmitted apostolic teaching and is never without reference to these two (cf. Jn. 16:13). The continuity of belief maintained in the Church based on this includes the necessity to hold firm to the fullness of the witness of the Church at all times.

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Infallibility (Unerring) of the Church” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Moscow, September 20, 1981

Signatures

III/6 The Synods of the Church

As the Body of Christ, the Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit in which all members are baptized into the one Body and so abide in the communion of the new life and together know the truth in the Holy Spirit.

The episcopal and synodical constitution of the ancient Church is an expression of the life of the Church as the fellowship of all its members living in the unity of the Body of Christ. Accordingly the bishops, as representatives of the Head of the Church – which is Christ – and presiding over the eucharistic and synodical assembly, are joined with the whole people of God as members of the one Body (cf. Ignatius of Antioch, Smyrn. 8.2 – PG 5.713).

In the diversity of new life that finds fulfillment in Christ through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:1 – 31), the synodical character shows itself

to be basic for Church order. That is why the Church as a people called by God, redeemed by Christ and enlightened by the Holy Spirit can be referred to as the great synod in which the trinitarian unity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is reflected.

This fundamental character of the Church is especially evident in the representative gatherings of the bishops of the local Churches, as they meet in synod to discuss and to decide questions of faith and order, which decisions are ultimately subject to adoption or refusal by the whole Church.

The highest expression of the synodical life of the church is found in the Ecumenical Council. It is convened in order that the bishops, as representatives of the community of all local Churches, may make decisions on questions of faith and order which concern the whole Church and which will be binding on it. The ecumenical councils serve as the highest organ of the Church when they deal with warding off false doctrines, formulating dogma, forming and consolidating the Church constitution and maintaining ecclesial unity based on the true faith.

We recognize these seven as such Ecumenical Councils: Nicaea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, Chalcedon 451, Constantinople 553 and 680 as well as Nicaea 787. In them the faith of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church found its expression, and the unity of all the local Churches in the one Holy Body of Christ was in evidence. That is why the ecumenical councils do not stand above the Church as a whole but in it. That is why the ecumenical character of a council and the validity of its decisions are not already given by its convocation. Rather it demonstrates its ecumenical character in the subsequent free reception by the Church as a whole (*plērōma*).

Through their participation in the whole life of the Church, the members – ordained and laity – realize their unity in the Body of Christ. In this unity and totality the infallibility of the Church finds its expression. Accordingly the ecumenical councils can also acknowledge the decisions of local synods as being made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand local synods have also prepared the substance of the decisions of ecumenical councils and supported the adoption of the decisions reached.

The decisions of councils are decisions of faith (*horoi*) or canons (concerning law and order). Of these, the decisions of faith have direct authority and are of binding character for the entire Church, for they concern dogma based on revelation. They therefore, in substance, can-

not be changed or revoked. The Church can, however, interpret them according to the needs of particular situations for a better understanding of, and witnessing to, the faith. The canons of ecumenical as well as local synods can, on principle, be replaced or supplemented by new canons of corresponding later synods as long as they do not affect questions of faith.

Generally the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches are also of the opinion that their synods have the right, when necessary, to establish new canons and to apply them in their own Churches.

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Synods of the Church” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Moscow, September 20, 1981

Signatures.

III/7 The Necessity of Apostolic Succession

1. Here apostolic succession is understood as the passing on of the grace of ordained ministry by the lawful laying on of hands, and in a broader sense, as apostolicity: the continuity and genuine preservation of faith handed down by the Apostles, as well as the continuous succession of the bishops from the Apostles onward. The former constitutes the basis, the latter is an essential characteristic of apostolic succession in that deviation from apostolic teaching destroys apostolic continuity and illicit ordination by unauthorized persons allows it to be broken.

The apostolic succession in this broader sense is essential and necessary for the life of the Church in order to continue the Lord’s work of salvation through faithful transmission of sanctifying and saving grace. As Jesus Christ was sent by the Father, so he also sent the Apostles in order to gather the people of God through them and to found and build up his Church.

2. In their capacity as eye-witnesses of the risen Christ and in their function at the foundation of the Church, the Apostles in fact do not and cannot have successors. They have successors, however, in the apostolic mission of gathering and building up the congregation time and again through the preaching of the Word of God and presiding

over the liturgical and sacramental life, especially at the celebration of Holy Eucharist.

Even though the New Testament speaks of many charisms and ministries among the faithful, it does not leave any doubt about the uniqueness, unrepeatability and fundamental significance of the ministry and mission of the Apostles (cf. Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14).

3. The Church has its life from Christ who is present in it and works through the Holy Spirit. Christ is the Lord of the Church and speaks to it, loves it and is the one to whom it listens. This relationship between Christ and the Church is not only an abstract thought but a concrete reality and experience which is transmitted through persons called by Christ. As this was the case in the age of the Apostles, so must it be in our time and at all times, for the structure of the Church in its fundamental character cannot be other than the one that Christ gave it.

The Church, which as a community cannot be without this structure, must also be in continuous temporal relationship with its origin and with the Church of previous and subsequent generations. The call of ordained ministers in apostolic succession, therefore, occurs not as something totally new without connection with the origin of the Church, but as the taking up and passing on of that which occurred in the Church from the beginning. The laying on of hands with prayer in the community of the whole Church is the only sacramental means of passing on of the grace of ordained ministry to which Scripture and tradition attest.¹

4. The necessity of maintaining apostolic succession both as the continuity of apostolic teaching and as the passing on of ordained ministry and its grace of mission by the lawful laying on of hands is the teaching of the Church Fathers in general.

5. The Orthodox Church of the East draws attention to the necessity of apostolic succession in the above sense from the beginning and especially now and raises it whenever the question of restoring Christian unity arises. The Old Catholic Church holds fast to this necessity as well.

¹ More regarding this matter in the texts concerning the sacraments with which the commission will deal later.

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Necessity of Apostolic Succession” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Moscow, September 20, 1981

Signatures

III/8 The Head of the Church

The Head of the Church is Christ, the First-born of all creation through whom and for whom all things were created and through whom God decided to reconcile all things to himself by making peace by the blood of his cross (cf. Col. 1:15–20). Out of the fullness of the life of the Head, Christ, the members of the Body have new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 6:11; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 2:9f). “And God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22f). Christ is in fact the “one Lord” (Eph. 4:5), the only Head of the Body, the Church, from whom “the entire body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col. 2:19; cf. Eph. 4:15). Therefore Christ cannot be thought of without the Church, the Head not without the Body and vice versa, because Christ and the Church are joined with one another and abide in absolute, inseparable and eternal union. The faithful, justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, are saved by him, have peace with God and boast of the hope of the glory of God. This hope cannot be destroyed because the love of God has been poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to them (cf. Rom. 5:1–5). So the Church as the Body of Christ is joined with its Head by the Holy Spirit and together with him is the whole Christ (cf. Eph. 1:22f). In him the members have new life and grow through the Holy Spirit towards perfection in divine grace in the firm hope that they shall be like him for they shall see him as he is (1 Jn. 3:2).

The focus of the new life is the Holy Eucharist in which the inner form of the bond between the Body and the Head shows itself. The bishop who celebrates the Eucharist presides in the place of Christ, and by bringing to God in this manner the sacrifice which has been wrought by Christ once and for all he represents Christ as the Head of the Church assembled around him in whose name he celebrates.

The bishops, as the successors of the Apostles who carry on the apostolic ministry, are faithful guarantors of the catholicity and apostolicity of the Church. According to divine law, the bishops among themselves are of the same rank because they all have received the same episcopal grace by the lawful sacramental laying on of hands and stand in the apostolic succession. They take part in the same way without quantitative or qualitative difference in one and the same episcopal authority. They are bishops among bishops, servants of Christ and the Church. They, too, are members of the Body, i.e. the Church, holding a special position in it.

Even though the bishops are equal to one another in episcopal authority, the life of the Church during the first three centuries evidenced a differentiation in the positions of honour granted to the various episcopal sees. The bishops of certain local Churches, who had gained greater authority for various reasons, held a special position of honour and exercised a greater influence in ecclesiastical matters. The position of honour of the bishops of these sees was unfolded in Ecumenical Synods since the 4th century to a presidency of honour (*presbeia timēs*) in the Church (3rd canon of the 2nd Ecumenical Synod – Mansi 3,560). The Bishop of Rome enjoyed such an honorary position because the see of Rome took the first place in the order of episcopal sees: Rome was the capital of the empire and its Church preserved the apostolic tradition – still without any innovations; it brought the Gospel of salvation to peoples and nations who had not yet heard of Christ and it was rich in Church life and works of love. So the Bishop of Rome possesses the presidency of honour in the Church. But with regard to episcopal authority, he does not differ whatsoever from his brother bishops. The same is valid for the other bishops who hold honorary rank in the Church.

According to the teaching of the Orthodox and the Old Catholic Church, all the decrees of later dates therefore, which ascribe a monocratic and absolute authority over the whole Church to the Bishop of Rome and which regard him as infallible when he defines doctrine in the exercise of his office “as shepherd and teacher of all Christians” (*ex cathedra*), are regarded as unacceptable. With their unwavering striving for unity, both Churches hope that the existing difficulties and divisions will be overcome by the Head and Lord of the Church, so that according to his word those who believe in him may all be one and thus the world may come to faith (cf. Jn. 17:20f).

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Head of the Church” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Chambésy/Geneva, October 7, 1983

Signatures