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Apostolic succession in ecumenical perspective: an Orthodox contribution

Katerina Pekridou

1. Introduction

Most churches confess “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381).¹ According to the latest multilateral ecclesiological document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV),² the apostolicity of the church is rooted in the *missio Dei*: the Father sent the Son to establish the Church, and the Son, in turn, sent the apostles and prophets, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to serve as its foundation and oversee its mission. Fidelity in worship, witness and service is adherence to the apostolic origins of the church. “Apostolic succession in ministry, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is intended to serve the apostolicity of the Church.”³

While all churches see themselves in continuity with the apostolic church, they hold different and often conflicting views on how the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church relates to institutional structures or ministerial order. TCTCV illustrates the variety of perspectives on the matter:

Some see certain essential aspects of the Church’s order as willed and instituted by Christ himself for all time; therefore, in faithfulness to the Gospel, Christians would have no authority fundamentally to alter this divinely instituted structure. Some affirm that the ordering of the Church according to God’s calling can take more than one form while others affirm that no single institutional order can be attributed to the will of God. Some hold that faith-

¹ ‘Called to Be the One Church. The Porto Allegre Ecclesiology Text’, in: Jeffrey Gros et al. (eds), *Growth in Agreement III* (Faith and Order Paper 201; Geneva/Grand Rapids: WCC Publications/Eerdmans, 2007), 606–610: 607.

² *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper 214; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), hereafter cited as TCTCV.

³ TCTCV (as note 2), 14. Also, on p. 26: “Among the several means for maintaining the Church’s apostolicity, such as the scriptural canon, dogma and liturgical order, ordained ministry has played an important role. Succession in ministry is meant to serve the apostolic continuity of the Church.”

fulness to the Gospel may at times require a break in institutional continuity, while others insist that such faithfulness can be maintained by resolving difficulties without breaks which lead to separation.⁴

As Sullivan rightly observed, the main point of division among churches can be summarised in the question: “Is the historic episcopate the result of a purely human, historical development or is it of divine institution?”⁵ This relates to the significance that churches attribute to the historic episcopate and episcopal ordination in the apostolic succession. Again, TCTCV provides a summary of the existing views on the matter:

Churches remain divided, however, as to whether or not the “historic episcopate” (meaning bishops ordained in apostolic succession back to the earliest generations of the Church), or the apostolic succession of ordained ministry more generally, is something intended by Christ for his community. Some believe that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon is a sign of continuing faithfulness to the Gospel and is vital to the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole. In contrast, others do not view faithfulness to the Gospel as closely bound to succession in ministry, and some are wary of the historic episcopate because they see it as vulnerable to abuse and thus potentially harmful to the well-being of the community. Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, for its part, only affirmed that the threefold ministry “may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it.”⁶

The Orthodox Church, for example, inherited the threefold pattern of the ordained ministry and a hierarchical order of ministries that provides structure to the life of the church in which the bishop, as the presider of the eucharistic celebration, has a central role. Therefore, it did not question the necessity of the episcopal ordination in the apostolic succession. Episcopal succession has been so rudimentary to the life of the church that it did not require theological justification up until the Orthodox Churches engaged in the debate on apostolic succession in the context of ecumenical

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops. The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: The Newman Press, 2001), 1–16, esp. 4.

⁶ TCTCV (as note 2), 27.

dialogue.⁷ However, it is noteworthy that the decision concerning “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World” of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church convened in Crete in 2016, identifies apostolic succession as one of the questions that require “speedy and objective clarification” in the dialogue with Christian churches and confessions that are not in communion with the Orthodox Church.⁸

The present essay offers an overview of the Orthodox engagement with the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission on the question of apostolic succession. It explores apostolic succession in selected official Orthodox reactions to the Faith and Order statements BEM and TCTCV. Lastly, it discusses the two distinct understandings of apostolic succession developed in Zizioulas’ ecclesiology, and argues that consensus on apostolic succession can be facilitated by a renewed study of apostolicity as a mark of the church, and a re-examination of ministry and ministerial order from the perspective of *missio Dei*.

2. Apostolic succession in ministry and Orthodox reactions to BEM and TCTCV

Modern scholarship and the statements of bilateral and multilateral dialogue agree that the apostolic church did not hand on a fixed ministerial structure with a clearly defined threefold order of bishops, presbyters and deacons. Rather, there was gradual development from various forms of oversight into a pattern of one bishop in each local church who functioned at a local level. However, as noted above, one of the major underlining

⁷ The same is true for other aspects of ecclesiology. *The Inter-Orthodox Consultation for a Response to the Faith and Order Study. The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order paper 98; Geneva: WCC, 2005), Agia Napa/Paralimni, 2011 admitted that “It has been only since the 19th century that Orthodox theologians have begun to arrive at a systematic ‘ecclesiology,’ often in response to the challenge of the encounter with Christianity outside Orthodoxy. Orthodox involvement in the NMC text, both in the drafting as well as in the reception and reaction process, is helpful as we continue to be challenged to articulate our ecclesiological principles.”, § 5. See also Radu Bordeianu, ‘The Church: Towards a Common Vision. A Commentary in Light of the Inter-Orthodox Consultation at Agia Napa in Cyprus’, *Exchange* 44 (2015) 231–249: 236.

⁸ Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World, § 6, available on <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world> (accessed on 26.01.2022).

questions of the ecumenical debate is whether the episcopate and the threefold pattern of ordained ministry was the outcome of divine will. The responses of churches to this question relate to the significance that they attribute to episcopal ordination in the apostolic succession which for some, including the Orthodox, is considered necessary for valid ordained ministry in the church. For them, the character of episcopal succession as a guarantee and “effective sign” needs to be safeguarded as a condition for unity and recognition of ministry.⁹

In its attempt to reconcile the different views, the most widely distributed ecumenical document, BEM, placed episcopal succession in the context of apostolic ministry and the apostolic tradition of the church.¹⁰ This fresh approach at the time allowed for apostolic succession to be understood in terms of succession of the whole community expressed, but not exhausted, in the tactical succession of episcopal sees. In BEM, succession in the apostolic tradition signifies continuity in the permanent characteristics of the church of the apostles:

[W]itness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and the needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each (§ 34).¹¹

Apostolic succession, therefore, is found in the apostolic tradition as a whole and it constitutes an expression of the permanence and continuity of Christ’s mission. Ordained ministry has the task of preserving and actualising the apostolic faith within the church. Thus, the orderly transmission of the ordained is “a powerful expression of the continuity of the church throughout history; it also underlines the calling of the ordained

⁹ *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982–1990. Report on the Process and Responses* (Faith and Order Paper 149; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), 84.

¹⁰ For a history of the treatment of the concept of apostolic succession within the ecumenical movement from 1930 to the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982, see ‘Apostolic Succession in the Ecumenical Movement’, in: Carlos Alfredo Steger, *Apostolic Succession. In the Writings of Yves Congar and Oscar Cullmann* (Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 20; Berrien: Andrews University Press, 1995), 50–57.

¹¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper 111; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 28, hereafter cited as BEM.

minister as guardian of faith” (§ 35).¹² The succession of bishops is described as one of the ways in which the apostolic tradition of the church was expressed. In the early church this succession was understood as “preserving, symbolising and guarding the continuity of the apostolic faith and communion” (§ 36).¹³

BEM stressed that in churches that retained episcopal succession there is an increasing recognition that continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission has been maintained in churches that do not practice succession through the historic episcopate (§ 37). The text invited churches that have not retained the episcopate to appreciate episcopal succession “as a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the church” (§ 38). Earlier, it invited churches to ask themselves whether their ministerial structures are in need of reform, in situations where “the ordained ministry does not adequately serve the proclamation of the apostolic faith” (§ 5).¹⁴ Seventeen years later, a report reflecting on the study process initiated by BEM noted that the document allowed churches that retained the historic episcopate to reflect more critically on their theologies and practices of the ministry of oversight, whereas it challenged churches that did not retain the office of bishops to consider the value of episcopacy.¹⁵

The succession of bishops within the context of apostolic tradition was an aspect of BEM that received particular attention by the Orthodox Churches, although they did not provide a systematic treatment of the topic and, as Erickson later observed,¹⁶ reflected the influence of textbook scholasticism rather than the works of Afanasiev and Zizioulas that have

¹² Ibid., 29. Cf. *Together in Mission and Ministry. The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe. Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches* (London: Church House Publishing, 1993), § 40–41

¹³ BEM (as note 11), 29.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ‘Apostolicity, continuity and sign. Report of Group III’, in: Peter C. Bouteneff/Alan D. Falconer (eds), *Episkopé and Episcopacy and the Quest for Visible Unity. Two Consultations* (Faith and Order Paper 183; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 57–64: 62.

¹⁶ John H. Erickson, ‘Episkopé and episcopacy: Orthodox perspectives’, in: Peter C. Bouteneff/Alan D. Falconer (eds), *Episkopé and Episcopacy* (as note 15), 80–92: 84.

been decisive in the development of eucharistic ecclesiology.¹⁷ Apostolic succession in the Orthodox reactions is tied up to the person and ministry of the bishop, who is seen as the expression of the visible unity of the church. Such an interpretation of apostolic succession stems from a sacramental understanding of ministry that emanates from an ecclesiology that is centered around the eucharist.¹⁸

The main concern in the Orthodox responses was that BEM did not identify apostolic succession with episcopal succession.¹⁹ In this sense, the responses saw a misleading ambiguity in BEM and emphasised that “continuity in apostolic faith” and “apostolic succession” are two distinct things. To affirm that churches which possess apostolic succession (meaning those who retained the historic episcopate, such as the Orthodox), recognise continuity in apostolic faith, worship and missionary action to the churches that have not maintained “an episcopate of apostolic succession” (meaning the historic episcopate) indicates a “lessening of the importance of apostolic succession.”²⁰

In this regard, the Romanian Orthodox Church expressed the view that even though BEM seemed to affirm apostolic succession (Commentary 34), it called “for the recognition of apostolic succession of the churches that have not retained or have episcopal succession (§ 37), without stating precisely through what particular church structures apostolic succession could have been or could be preserved today.”²¹ The response discerned a kind of relativism in this recommendation, as also in the fact that the text insisted on the recognition of ordained ministry in § 53, but the sacramen-

¹⁷ Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), and John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church. The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the First Three Centuries* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), have been two of the most influential books in modern Orthodox ecclesiology.

¹⁸ Peter A. Baktis, ‘Ministry and Ecclesiology in the Orthodox responses to BEM’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33 (1996) 173–186: 180–181.

¹⁹ Lucian Turcescu, ‘Eastern Orthodox reactions to the ministry section of the Ministry Section of the Lima Document’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33 (1996) 330–343.

²⁰ Antonie Plamadeala, ‘The BEM Document in Romanian Orthodox Theology. The Present Stage of Discussions’, in: Gennadios Limouris/Nomikos Vaporis (eds), *Orthodox Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper 128; Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1985), 97–103: 102.

²¹ ‘Romanian Orthodox Church’, in: Max Thurian (ed.), *Churches respond to BEM, Vol. III* (Faith and Order paper 135; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 4–14: 11.

tal aspect of priesthood was unclear, as it did not refer to “the apostolic succession in faith and charisma – insured by sacramental episcopate – as a prerequisite of it.”²²

The sacramental character of ordained ministry was underlined in other responses as well. For instance, the response of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, rejected the language of symbol and sign that BEM used with regard to episcopal succession, as in the case of § 36, which spoke of the succession of bishops as symbolising and guarding the continuity of the apostolic faith and communion, and also § 38, which referred to churches that have not retained the episcopate, but have the willingness to accept episcopal succession as a sign of apostolicity. The response saw a serious obstacle to unity in the statement that the churches, which have not maintained episcopal succession, cannot accept that their ministry is invalid until they enter into an existing line of episcopal succession (§ 38).²³

The same response illustrated the hierarchical ministry in the church as continuation of the apostolic ministry. The apostles “had preserved and handed down in the church the charism of the priesthood through an uninterrupted succession of the apostolic ordination.”²⁴ This was possible “by passing to their successors the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the authority received from Christ himself,” and this is how “in the church the succession of the apostolic ministry has been preserved to this day.”²⁵ The response stressed that in BEM there is no interest in the apostolic succession in ordination, which was seen as the main condition for the validity of ministry as a sacrament. This was perceived as the reason why there was no mention of “an apostolic succession of God’s blessing by way of an unbroken chain of ordinations from apostolic times until this day,” but rather a new term was used, which carried a new meaning, that of “succession in the apostolic tradition.”²⁶

Further, reflecting on § 34 and the Commentary that follows, the same response observed that it would be correct to say that bishops were “conse-

²² Ibid.

²³ ‘Bulgarian Orthodox Church’, in: Max Thurian (ed.), *Churches respond to BEM, Vol. II* (Faith and Order paper 132; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 13–23: 21. Cf. ‘Ecumenical Patriarchate’, in: Max Thurian (ed.), *Churches respond to BEM, Vol. IV* (Faith and Order paper 137; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 1–6: 2, 4, and ‘Russian Orthodox Church’, in: Thurian, *Churches respond to BEM II*, 5–12: 9.

²⁴ ‘Bulgarian Orthodox Church’ (as note 23), 21.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

crated” by the apostles instead of “appointed.” The bishops are seen as guardians of the transmission of the apostolic tradition, as BEM affirmed, but this succession of the ministry is seen as “transmitted along the line of the ordination in the sacrament of the ministry.”²⁷ Apostolic tradition is inextricably linked to the apostolic ministry, and the distinction between the apostolic tradition of the whole church and the succession of the apostolic ministry, that the Commentary to § 34 is suggesting, is seen as unacceptable.

In a more nuanced response, the Orthodox Church in America, in agreement with BEM, noted that apostolic succession of the ministry, or rather, the orderly transmission of the ordained ministry, is a powerful expression of the continuity of the church throughout history, and “it must not be separated from other expressions of the church’s apostolic tradition,” such as episcopal succession.²⁸ The response stressed that the succession of the apostolic tradition is actualised through the laying-on of hands (in ordination) of the episcopate in apostolic succession. In this view, the development of the threefold ministry is not attributed to “fortuitous historical circumstances,” and the episcopate is treated in its “organic context of ecclesial communion” without “compromising its value as a sign of the continuity, identity, and unity of the church.”²⁹

This selection of responses demonstrates that for the Orthodox, it is the bishops who safeguard the unity of the church as they unite their local community not only with other local communities and the church throughout the world at present, but – through ordination in the episcopal succession – with the local communities that preceded and with the ones that will succeed in the future. Therefore, as Bouteneff eloquently explained in his response to the Porvoo Statement:

For the Orthodox Church, to speak of apostolic succession is to speak of the historic episcopal succession. (...) Historic succession is not seen as a guarantee in itself of fidelity, but the absence of the historic succession is the absence of an essential element of the being of the church. There can be historic episcopal succession without apostolic fidelity, but there can be no full apostolic fidelity without the historic episcopal succession. To the Orthodox the historic succession is more than a sign that “reinforces [the Church’s] determination

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ ‘Orthodox Church in America’, in: Max Thurian (ed.), *Churches respond to BEM III* (as note 23), 15–25: 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

to manifest the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles” (§50). The historic succession is in fact one of those permanent characteristics. It is on the level of *esse* and not *bene esse*.³⁰

More recent Orthodox responses to the ongoing ecclesiological reflection within the multilateral dialogue of the Faith and Order Commission have treated apostolic succession in its relation to the whole community that forms the church. The 2011 report of Agia Napa stressed the distinction between the ministry of all the faithful and of the ordained. While affirming that all faithful participate in the royal priesthood (following 1 Pet. 2), it maintained that “bishops and presbyters are called to administer the sacraments and have particular responsibilities for the proclamation of the gospel, teaching the apostolic faith and visibly expressing the unity” of the church. The text stressed an additional responsibility for the bishops, namely that of expressing the unity of the church through episcopal synods. Lastly, it emphasised that it is important “to maintain a balance between understanding priesthood as a hierarchical structure transmitted through apostolic succession, and the active participation of all the faithful in the entirety of Church life.”³¹

The *WCC Inter-Orthodox Consultation for a Response to the Faith and Order text The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, following the decisions of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church convened a few months earlier, affirmed “the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian churches and confessions that are not in communion” with the Orthodox Church and stressed that “relations with them should be based on an objective clarification of the whole ecclesiological question, particularly to the issues related to sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession.”³² While reflecting on Chapter III of TCTCV, “The Church: Growing in Communion”, the response underlined that a crucial point for

³⁰ Peter C. Bouteneff, ‘The Porvoo Common Statement. An Orthodox Response’, in: Tjørhom Ola (ed.), *Apostolicity and Unity. Essays on the Porvoo Common Statement* (Grand Rapids/Geneva: Eerdmans/WCC Publications, 2002), 231–244: 242–243.

³¹ Section on Authority, Ministry and Oversight, in the Report of the *Inter-Orthodox Consultation for a Response to the Faith and Order Study: The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order paper 198; Geneva: WCC, 2005), Agia Napa/Paralimni, 2011, § 28.

³² *WCC Inter-Orthodox Consultation for a Response to the Faith and Order text The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper No. 214; Geneva 2013), Paralimni, 2016, § 27.

the Orthodox is the historical identity of the Orthodox Church with the Church instituted by Christ, the Apostles, the Church of Ecumenical Councils, and “the validity of apostolic succession expressed in and safeguarded by the historic episcopate which ‘teaches correctly’ (cf. Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).”³³

Reflecting on the successors of the apostles in the ministry of oversight, who according to TCTCV, “exercised authority in the proclamation of the Gospel, in the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the eucharist, and in the pastoral guidance of believers,”³⁴ and on § 52 on the ministry of *episkopé*, that attempts to bridge the gap between churches that retained the historic episcopate and churches that have not retained it,³⁵ the response states: “We want to assert that there is no *episkopé* without the bishop. In the New Testament, the person of the bishop defines the function of *episkopé*.”³⁶ The same adamant view concerning the centrality of the bishop within the church is expressed in the international bilateral dialogues between the Orthodox Church and other episcopally ordered churches.³⁷ The

³³ Ibid. 5.

³⁴ TCTCV (as note 2), § 48.

³⁵ Ibid., § 52: “(...) The faithful exercise of the ministry of *episkopé* under the Gospel by persons chosen and set aside for such ministry is a requirement of fundamental importance for the Church’s life and mission. The specific development of structures of *episkopé* varied in different times and places; but all communities, whether episcopally ordered or not, continued to see the need for a ministry of *episkopé*. In every case *episkopé* in the service of maintaining continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life. In addition to preaching the Word and celebrating the Sacraments, a principle purpose of this ministry is faithfully to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the Gospel (...).”

³⁶ WCC *Inter-Orthodox Consultation* (as note 32), § 32, 6.

³⁷ See ‘Statements of the Old Catholic-Orthodox Conversations: Ecclesiology, Agreed Statement, Chambésy 1977, Bonn 1979 and Zagorsk 1981, III/1. The nature and Marks of the Church’, and ‘Ecclesiology 1981, The need for apostolic succession’, in: Harding Meyer/Lukas Vischer (eds), *Growth in Agreement I. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (Faith and Order Paper 108; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2nd edition, 2007), 401–404: 403–404, and 411–419: 417–418; ‘Sacramental Teaching, Amersfoort 1985, Kavala 1897’, in: Jeffrey Gros et al. (eds), *Growth in Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level 1982–1998* (Faith and Order Paper 187; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 254–263: 261–262. In the same volume, the Statements of the Eastern Orthodox-Roman Catholic Dialogue: ‘The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, Munich 1982, section II’, 652–659: 654–657, and ‘The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the

difficulty to arrive to a common understanding on apostolic succession is vividly depicted in the 2017 statement of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Theological Commission on “The Mystery of the Church: F. Ordained Ministry/Priesthood.”³⁸ Although “Common”, the statement articulates the different views that Lutherans and Orthodox hold on the topic. The section on apostolic succession affirms that the church is apostolic because: 1) it is instituted by Christ and the apostles are its foundation, 2) Christ sent it in the world to proclaim the gospel, and 3) it preserves the apostolic teaching and Tradition received from Christ (§ 40).³⁹

Moreover, for the Orthodox, the church is apostolic because its bishops have received their ordination in unbroken succession from the apostles (§ 42).⁴⁰ The insistence on the unbroken succession of ordination from the apostles (§ 43)⁴¹ is a major hindrance to unity between the Orthodox and churches that do not consider the historic succession of bishops essential for the apostolicity of the church. As the statement explains:

Orthodox believe it to be the normative teaching of the whole Church up to the time of the Reformation that every Bishop had to receive Ordination in unbroken Succession from Christ through the Apostles, and be in communion

Church, 671–679: 675–679. Also, the statement of Roman Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue: ‘Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority, Ravenna, 2007’, in: Thomas Best et al. (eds), *Growth in Agreement IV. Book 1, International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 2004–2014* (Faith and Order Paper 219; Geneva: WCC, 2017), 5–12: 6–9. In the same volume, the statement of Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue: ‘The Church of the Triune God, Cyprus, 2006’, 25–82: 52–60. Also, the Statement of the Roman Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue ‘Synodality and primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a common understanding in service to the unity of the Church, Chieti 2016’, esp. § 9, available on http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20160921_synodality-primacy_en.html (accessed on 20.04.2020).

³⁸ 17th Plenary Session of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Theological Commission, Helsinki, Finland, 7-14 November 2017, section VII. Apostolic Succession, § 39-45, available on https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2019/documents/helsinki_2017_common_statement_17th_plenary_session_of_the_lutheran-orthodox_dialogue_commission.pdf (accessed on 20.04.2020).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

with the other Bishops in Apostolic Succession. Any Bishop who does not have historic Apostolic Succession is in an irregular situation, which needs to be resolved before full communion is possible. (§ 44).⁴²

The statement underlines that historic apostolic succession is a church-dividing issue for Orthodox, not simply because of the different theologies around apostolic succession, “but primarily because of the historical fact that historic Apostolic Succession has been broken (...). This historic Apostolic Succession would need to be restored before communion could be possible” (§ 45).⁴³

How can mutual understanding be built of the different interpretations of apostolic succession among churches that understand historic episcopal succession as a sign of apostolicity, and churches that find historic apostolic succession of ordination as desirable but not essential? Is it possible for churches that preserved historic episcopal succession to discern apostolicity and a ministry of *episkopé* in churches that do not consider the succession of episcopal ordination necessary for the church? A helpful distinction and synthesis of different interpretations of apostolic succession and ways that they are “translated” in the structures and life of churches is found in the ecclesiological studies of Metropolitan Zizioulas of Pergamon, whose theology heavily influenced the modern bilateral and multilateral dialogues. His analysis provides a foundation for a better understanding of the different ecclesiological positions, and possibilities for ecumenical dialogue to move forward.

3. Approaches to apostolic succession in the ecclesiology of Zizioulas

When examining apostolic succession Zizioulas elaborates on two approaches which, when overemphasised, can lead to dichotomy: the “historical” approach, expressed in I Clement, relating to the dedication to tradition, is oriented to the past, whereas the “eschatological” approach, illustrated in the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch, relates to the centrality of worship and a “meta-historical view” of the church.⁴⁴ The former ap-

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cf. Erickson’s analysis on the main aspects of episcopal ministry in Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons and Cyprian of Carthage, and their association with Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant theologies in: Erickson, ‘Episkopé (as note 16), 80–90.

proach is based on the image of the apostles as persons “sent” and “dispersed” in the world “with a mission to fulfil.” The apostles, therefore, “represent a link between Christ and the church and form part of a historical process with a decisive and perhaps normative role to play.” According to Zizioulas, in this approach mission and historical process belong together and result in “a scheme of continuity in a linear movement: God sends Christ – Christ sends the apostles – the apostles transmit the message of Christ by establishing Churches and ministers.”⁴⁵ The latter approach focuses on the eschatological function of the apostles and conceives them as a college that surrounds Christ, or as “the foundations of the Church in a presence of the Kingdom of God here and now.”⁴⁶

For Zizioulas, the two approaches have implications for the understanding of the concept of continuity. The “historical” approach sets the foundation for a “retrospective continuity with the past” entailing “a transmission of certain powers,” whereas the “eschatological” approach is built on “a real presence of the *eschata* here and now”, implying that the apostolicity of the church comes from its final nature. Continuity in the latter approach is expressed in and through the convocation of the church in one place, namely through the eucharistic structure of the church.⁴⁷

In Zizioulas’ ecclesiological reflection, the two approaches are connected to Christology and Pneumatology respectively, both of which reflect on how church life is ordered and structured and reveal particular interpretations of apostolic continuity.⁴⁸ The “historical” approach emphasises the significance of the apostolic group because they are the witnesses to the life and sacrifice of Christ, whereas the “eschatological” approach underlines

⁴⁵ ‘Apostolic Continuity and Succession’, in: John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 171–173, hereafter cited as “Being as Communion”. The ideas in this study firstly appeared in John D. Zizioulas, ‘Apostolic Continuity and Orthodox Theology: Towards A Synthesis of Two Perspectives’, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 19 (1975) 75–108.

⁴⁶ Being as Communion (as note 45), 174–175.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 177–178, cf. ‘Episcopate, Episcopos and Primary’ and ‘Priesthood, Christ and the Church’ in ‘The Church of the Triune God’ (as note 37), 52–60.

⁴⁸ See Stavros Yangazoglou, ‘The synthesis of Christology and Pneumatology and its ecclesiological consequences in the work of Metropolitan of Pergamon John D. Zizioulas’, in: Kalaitzidis Pantelis/Asproulis Nikolaos (eds), *Person, Eucharist and Reign of God in Orthodox and ecumenical perspective, volume in honour of Metropolitan Zizioulas* (Volos: Demetrias Publications, Volos Academy for Theological Studies, 2016), 153–171 (in Greek).

the role of the apostles in pointing to “the reality and the content of the event of Christ.”⁴⁹ On the one hand, the apostles are perceived as “creators of history,” and on the other, as “judges of history.” Likewise, the Church is apostolic when it remains faithful to the apostolic teaching as well as lives out the teaching in a particular historical context, and “judges” this context based on the eschatological vision of the church.⁵⁰

After pointing out the extremes to which over-emphasising of the two approaches has led in East and West, Zizioulas proposes a theological synthesis of the two applying the biblical notion of “corporate personality” to Christ.⁵¹ In this synthesis, continuity is understood in terms of “inclusiveness” (members of the body are “in Christ”), and the constant invocation of and transformation by the Spirit, which, according to the author, constitutes the sacramental nature of the church.⁵² Concerning the episcopate, Zizioulas detects a synthesis of its images as early as in Hippolytus: In the *Apostolic Tradition*, the bishop is both the image of Christ and the image of the apostles; the presbyters form a college surrounding and accompanying the bishop in his ministry; all the functions of episcopacy presuppose the gathering of the entire community in one place, i.e. in the eucharist. He, therefore, concludes that “Apostolic succession through episcopacy is essentially a succession of Church structure,”⁵³ and he insists that adherence to episcopal succession does not mean isolation of episcopacy from the rest of the orders of the church, including lay people, but implies their absolute interdependence. Episcopal succession, there-

⁴⁹ Being as Communion (as note 45), 180.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 180–181.

⁵¹ Zizioulas applies the notion of corporate personality to the bishop as well. The bishop acts in *persona Christi* by virtue of his capacity to allow through his actions Christ to act. Particularly in the offering of the eucharist, the bishop acts so as to point beyond himself to the resurrected Christ and allows him to be present in and through his person and action. According to him, the bishop is not the type of Christ as an individual, but as a community. The eschatological Christ of which he is the type is One and yet at the same time Many. Thus, in his representing Christ, the bishop is inconceivable apart from his community. He is a “communal entity, a corporate personality.” See John. D. Zizioulas, ‘The bishop in the theological doctrine of the Church’, in: Richard Potz (ed.), *Kanon VII: Der Bischof und seine Eparchie* (Wien: Verlag des Verbandes der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs, 1985), 28–29.

⁵² Being as Communion (as note 45), 181–187.

⁵³ Ibid., 196–197.

fore, is seen as indispensable because through it, the entire community of the church embodies apostolic continuity.⁵⁴

The interdependence between bishops and their communities, and the connection between apostolic succession and episcopal succession has been highlighted by other Orthodox scholars. The Metropolitan of Diokleia Kallistos Ware emphasised that apostolicity inheres in the local church as a whole and not in the person of the bishop alone, and therefore, apostolic succession is the unbroken continuity of communities rather than persons. “There is no true succession of persons that is not mediated through the community.”⁵⁵ Discussing catholicity of the local church, through which the unity and continuity are expressed of the post-apostolic church with the apostolic generation, Clapsis observes that “apostolic succession must be understood in terms of a charismatic identity of the communities (through their heads) in time and space” and notes that this reality is preserved by the ministry of *episkopé* in the local church with the offering of the eucharist and administration of the local community.⁵⁶

However, several reasons have led to a weakened participation of lay persons in the life of the church or a sole passive attendance of church services. The role of the full local community in safeguarding apostolic continuity has been lost, and

Ecclesiastical bureaucracy that overemphasizes the role of the clergy – especially that of bishops – at the expense of conciliarity often interprets apostolicity solely as apostolic succession, that is, the unbroken chain of episcopal ordinations from the twelve apostles all the way down to the present day. But, beyond this, the church is apostolic insofar as it participates in God’s work in history. (...) mission means “to send out.” (...) the church is apostolic insofar as (and provided that) it is both sent and sending (...). The “sending” and “being sent” always have to be performed in Christ’s way: in self-emptying (kenosis).⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁵⁵ Kallistos Ware, ‘The Tension Between the “Already” and “Not Yet”’, in: Colin Davey (ed.), *Returning Pilgrims. Insights from British and Irish Participants in the Fifth World Faith and Order Conference, Santiago de Compostela, 3-14 August, 1993* (London: Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 1994), 29–33: 30.

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Clapsis, ‘The Sacramentality of Ordination and Apostolic Succession: An Orthodox-Ecumenical View’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30 (1985) 421–432: 427.

⁵⁷ Athanasios Papathanasiou, ‘Mission in Orthodox Theology’, in: Dale T. Irvin/ Peter C. Phan (eds), *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 37–54.

4. A renewed understanding of apostolicity in the Orthodox Church

In the last few decades, Orthodox missiologists following and developing the reflections of Archbishop of Albania Anastasios Yannoulatos,⁵⁸ have underlined the apostolic character of the church in terms of the church's mission in and for the world. Yannoulatos speaks of mission as “part of the Church's genetic material, a fixed element in its DNA.” For him, the transmittal of Christ's message to the world has both historical and eschatological dimensions: it was entrusted to the apostles, who in turn entrusted the continuation of their work to their successors and continues until the Second Coming. This mission is understood as a “gift of grace organically fused to the church, nourished as it is by the Eucharistic community; and the church is, in turn, constantly renewed by the apostolic calling. And this calling will be realized with the continual presence and energy of the Holy Spirit, until the end of time.”⁵⁹

Yannoulatos raised two significant points, whose ecclesiological consequences need to be reflected further by contemporary Orthodox theologians. First, he repeatedly stressed that the work of “apostleship” was entrusted to the Church as a whole:

[It] is necessary to stimulate our slumbering awareness that we belong to a Church that is “apostolic” (...) and that this apostolic vocation belongs to the entire Church. Each one of us personally, as a living cell of this organic whole, bears some part of the responsibility. Interest in apostleship, in mission, is not the specialty of particular groups or individuals. It is designated as the occupation of the Church. It is the *sine qua non* of its life.⁶⁰

The second point that Yannoulatos raised, which became a turning point for the retrieval of the missional identity of the Orthodox Church, is that apostolicity entails that “the disciples are obliged to go out and teach ‘all nations’ – without exception.”⁶¹ The universal character of the mission church and the duty to move out of one's comfort zone to share the news

⁵⁸ See his most popular writings in Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), and *Mission in Christ's Way. An Orthodox Understanding of Mission* (Brookline/Geneva: Holy Cross Orthodox Press/WCC Publications, 2010).

⁵⁹ Anastasios Yannoulatos, ‘Rediscovering our apostolic identity in the 21st century’, available on <https://missions.hchc.edu/missions/articles/articles/rediscovering-our-apostolic-identity-in-the-21st-century> (accessed on 21.04.2020).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of the resurrection implies a dynamism and an open-ended dialogue between the church and the world in which apostolicity is bound to cross-cultural encounter and the “translation” of the gospel in local forms.

In this perspective, theological reflection is needed on what “apostleship” actually means for each of the baptised members of the church and how it is lived out in the contemporary world. Continuity with the apostolic church and permanence of the same teaching, of the same faith, the same means of grace, and *koinonia* in prayer and mission⁶² is a reality broader than the handing-on of any single ministry within the community. Each of the ministries of the church, not only ordained ministries, are part of the plan that God intended for the world. Orthodox theology needs to articulate what role lay ministries play within the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and reinforce the theological reflection on conciliarity/synodality on all levels of the church that has started within the context of ecumenical dialogue.

Recent studies on ecclesiology in the context of World Christianity, discussing a missional understanding of apostolicity, pointed to how a deeper understanding of the missionary nature of the church can transform ecclesiological thinking and practice.⁶³ Orthodox theology needs to re-examine its theological reflection on the nature of the church starting from God’s own self-sending in Christ by the Holy Spirit into the world. In this light, it needs to reflect anew on the church as community of witness, called, equipped and sent into the world by God to participate in Christ’s salvific work, and consider the implications for ministerial order. A renewed missional understanding of apostolicity, can reinvigorate the ecumenical debate on the ministry of *episkopé*, broaden the understanding of ecclesiological questions relating to the historic succession of bishops, and foster consensus on apostolic succession among churches.

⁶² See Jean-Marie Tillard, ‘The Eucharist in Apostolic continuity’, *One in Christ* 24 (1988) 17.

⁶³ For instance, see John G. Flett, *Apostolicity. The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016). Particularly interesting for the debate on episcopal succession is Flett’s critique of ecclesiologies that perceive the church as a “culture” into which people need to be “encultured” in order to be fully and authentically Christian. Also, his critique on colonisation, which involves the imposition of a certain structure, as well as “power relationships, paternalism, building relationships of dependence, and finally, maintaining a state of Christian infancy”, p. 181.

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Zusammenfassung

Während sich alle Kirchen in Kontinuität mit der apostolischen Kirche verstehen, vertreten sie unterschiedliche und oft konfligierende Sichtweisen darüber, wie sich die Aktivität des Heiligen Geistes in der Kirche zu institutionellen Strukturen oder Amtsordnungen verhält. Dieser Beitrag verschafft einen Überblick darüber, wie sich das orthodoxe Engagement in der Kommission für Glauben und Verfassung des Weltkirchenrats im Hinblick auf die Frage der apostolischen Sukzession gestaltet. Es werden ausgewählte orthodoxe Reaktionen auf zwei Dokumente der Kommission für Glauben und Verfassung, das Lima-Dokument und «Die Kirche auf dem Weg zu einer gemeinsamen Vision», näher untersucht. Ausserdem setzt sich die Autorin mit zwei unterschiedlichen Auffassungen über apostolische Sukzession auseinander, wie Joannes Zizioulas sie in seiner Ekklesiologie entwickelt hat, und stellt die These auf, dass einem Konsens über apostolische Sukzession der Weg geebnet werden kann durch eine neuerliche Beschäftigung mit Apostolizität als Kennzeichen der Kirche sowie durch eine erneute Betrachtung von Amt und Amtsordnung unter dem Aspekt der *Missio Dei*.

Schlüsselwörter – Keywords

Apostolic succession – apostolicity – historic episcopate – episcopal succession – ministry of *episkopé* – ministerial order – missional identity