

# PETRINE MINISTRY, COLLEGIALITY AND SYNODALITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

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## **Abstract**

The Second Vatican Council reestablished the ecclesiology of communion and today it has become the official ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. In accordance with this ecclesiology the Catholic Church is a communion of particular Churches (dioceses or eparchies) and individual Churches (like patriarchal or major archiepiscopal Churches). The ecclesiology of communion has its repercussions on collegiality, synodality and primacy. Through episcopal consecration, a bishop becomes the head of a diocese or eparchy, the bishop of an individual Church and of the universal Church, as he is a member of the episcopal college. He thus exercises the office of bishop at three levels of the ecclesial communion: the particular Church, the individual Church and the universal Church. The Bishop of Rome, successor of St Peter, exercises the Petrine ministry in the universal Church as a service to the communion.

**Keywords:** Particular Church, Individual Church, Universal Church, Communion Ecclesiology, Petrine Ministry.

## **Introduction**

The First Vatican Council promulgated the doctrine of the universal primacy of the Roman Pontiff as a dogma of the Catholic Church that must be believed by all Catholics. In the context of the juridical and monarchical ecclesiology of the second millennium, which regarded

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the Church as a perfect society and the dioceses as administrative departments of the universal Church, the ultramontane advocates of absolute papal supremacy misinterpreted the dogma of primacy as the universal and supreme jurisdiction of the Roman Pontiff and reduced the bishops to the status of his delegates or officials.<sup>1</sup> The Second Vatican Council of course retained the unalterable dogma of papal primacy, but balanced it out by restoring the sacramentality of the episcopate and the collegiality of the bishops.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Council reestablished the ecclesiology of communion, which was the essential key to understanding the nature of the Church in the first millennium. This article is an attempt to evaluate primacy, collegiality and synodality in the light of the ecclesiology of communion.

### 1. The Second Vatican Council and the Reestablishment of Communion Ecclesiology

The Second Vatican Council was characterized by the confrontation between two ecclesiologies: the juridical universal ecclesiology and the ecclesiology of communion, which is profoundly shaped by the biblical, patristic and liturgical tradition. The Second Vatican Council witnessed the conflict between these two ecclesiologies in its discussions, but in the end the ecclesiology of communion prevailed over the other. However, the two ecclesiologies are not properly coordinated or integrated.<sup>3</sup>

In the period after the Council, an increasing growth in ecclesial consciousness and awareness of being Church as a communion of Churches can be observed. Even the collegiality and synodality of bishops are explained within the broad theological framework of communion, whereby the Church is understood as a mystery of communion and as a communion of Churches. In his address at the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Pallath, "Consolidation of Roman Primacy and the Decline of Synodality in the Second Millennium until the Second Vatican Council," in *Iustitia* 14, no. 2 (December 2023) 57-105.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. Pallath, "Primacy of the Pope and Collegiality of Bishops according to the Second Vatican Council," in *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 28, no. 1 (March 2024) 36-75.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion: A. Acerbi, *Due ecclesiologie: ecclesiologia giuridica e ecclesiologia di comunione nella "Lumen gentium,"* Bologna 1976, 13-553; J.-M. R. Tillard, "The Church of God is a Communion: The Ecclesiological Perspective of Vatican II," in *One in Christ* 17 (1981) 117-118; E. J. Kilmartin, *Particular Liturgy of the Individual Church*, Bangalore 1987, 51-68; A. Anton, "Post Conciliar Ecclesiology: Expectations, Results, and Prospects for the Future," in R. Latourelle, *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, New York 1988, 421-424.

opening of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1969, Pope Paul VI emphasized that collegiality is nothing other than the communion of bishops; it is a particular expression of the communion of the Church.<sup>4</sup> The Roman Synod of Bishops in 1985 categorically affirmed this in its final report:

The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents. *Koinonia*/communion, which is based on Holy Scripture, is highly honoured in the ancient Church and in the Eastern Churches until today. Since the Second Vatican Council much effort has been made, so that the Church as communion might be more clearly understood and concretely integrated into life.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the relationship between communion and collegiality, the final report points out that the ecclesiology of communion provides the sacramental basis for collegiality.<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger considered that the said Synod made a renewed effort to synthesize the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and the "synthesis involved one basic concept: the ecclesiology of communion," which can "serve as a synthesis of the essential elements of the Council's ecclesiology."<sup>7</sup>

On 28 May 1992, the then Congregation (now Dicastery) for the Doctrine of the Faith published a letter entitled *Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church. This letter begins with a statement on the importance of the ecclesiology of communion:

The concept of communion (*koinonia*), which appears with a certain prominence in the texts of the Second Vatican Council, is very suitable for expressing the core of the Mystery of the Church, and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paul VI, Homily on 11 October 1969, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 61 (1969) 717-718.

<sup>5</sup> "Ecclesiologia communionis idea centralis ac fundamentalis in documentis concilii est. *Koinonia*/ *communio*, in S. Scriptura fundata, in *Ecclesia antiqua et in Ecclesiis Orientalibus usque ad nostros dies magno honore habentur. Inde a Concilio Vaticano II multum factum est ut Ecclesia tamquam *communio* clarius intellegeretur ac magis concrete traduceretur in vitam.*" Roman Synod of Bishops 1985, *Relatio finalis*, II, C, 1, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 December 1985, 7.

<sup>6</sup> "Ecclesiologia communionis offert fundamentum sacramentale collegialitatis." Roman Synod of Bishops 1985, *Relatio finalis*, II C, 4, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 December 1985, 7.

<sup>7</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II," in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly English edition), no. 4, 23 January 2002, 7.

A deeper appreciation of the fact that the Church is a Communion is, indeed, a task of special importance, which provides ample latitude for theological reflection on the mystery of the Church [...].<sup>8</sup>

In 2003, Pope John Paul II confirmed that the ecclesiology of communion is the central idea of the Council's ecclesiology. The Pope quoted the aforementioned final report of the Roman Synod of Bishops of 1985: "The Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1985 saw in the concept of an 'ecclesiology of communion' the central and fundamental idea of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The Church is called during her earthly pilgrimage to maintain and promote communion with the Triune God and communion among the faithful."<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, the International Theological Commission published the document: *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, "after receiving a favourable response from Pope Francis." In this document, the Commission emphasises the relationship between the ecclesiology of communion and synodality as follows:

The dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* offers the essential principles for a correct understanding of synodality in the perspective of the ecclesiology of communion. The order of its first chapters expresses an important step forward in the way the Church understands herself. The sequence - the Mystery of the Church (chapter 1), the People of God (chapter 2), the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church (chapter 3) - stresses that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is at the service of the People of God in order that the Church may carry out her mission in conformity with God's plan of salvation, in the logic of the priority of the whole over its parts and of the end over the means.<sup>10</sup>

All these statements indicate that the ecclesiology of communion has become the key concept for understanding the essence and nature of the Church. Among the proponents of the ecclesiology of communion itself, however, two tendencies can be recognised, both

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<sup>8</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* (28 May 1992), Vatican City 1992, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (encyclical letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church), Vatican City 2003, no. 34.

<sup>10</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican City 2008, no. 54.

of which are based on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. There are many ecclesiologists of the Latin Church who see the universal Church as a communion of particular Churches or dioceses directly dependent on the Pope. Although they sometimes use expressions such as local or individual Churches instead of particular Churches, they basically only mean dioceses. The official Roman ecclesiology only admits a two-tiered model of the Church: the dioceses (*Ecclesia particularis*) and, without any intermediate structure, the universal Church (*Ecclesia universalis*).<sup>11</sup>

The second group, consisting mainly of Eastern theologians, holds that the universal Church is a communion of individual Churches such as patriarchates and their equivalents, which in turn are the communion of particular Churches or dioceses.<sup>12</sup> Both ecclesiological models are briefly discussed with the aim of presenting primacy and collegiality in the context of the Catholic Church as communion of Churches.

### 1.1. Church as the Communion of Particular Churches or Dioceses

The basis of the ecclesiology of the Church as communion is the central event in the life of the visible Church, namely the Eucharistic celebration of the local Church, presided over by the bishop himself, surrounded by his presbyters, deacons and the Christian faithful. In the Eucharist, the communion comes to the full realisation of itself.<sup>13</sup> Thus the local Church can be described as the assembly of Christian believers called by the Holy Spirit, which under the leadership of the bishop, priests and other ministers, proclaims the word, celebrates

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. G. Nedungatt, "Autonomy, Autocephaly and the Problem of Jurisdiction Today," in *Kanon* 5 (1981) 23; A. Anton, *Le conferenze episcopali: istanze intermedie? Lo stato teologico della questione*, Cinisello Balsamo 1992, 256-260; G. Ghirlanda, "Universal Church, Particular Church, and Local Church at the Second Vatican Council and in the New Code of Canon Law," in R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, vol. 2, New York 1989, 240-245.

<sup>12</sup> For example: J. Powathil, *Church as the Mystery of Communion: A Tribute to the Ecclesial Vision of Father Placid J. Podipara*, Bangalore 2014, 91-109; J. Kallarangatt, "Communion Ecclesiology in the Light of the Second Vatican Council," in X. Koodapuzha (ed.), *Communion of Churches*, Kottayam 1993, 80-91; *Windows to Heaven*, Kottayam 2018, 139-160; M. Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches, Biblico-Theological Perspectives on the Communion Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, Mumbai 2009, 145-167; X. Koodapuzha, "Communion of Churches: Its Ecumenical Relevance in the Indian Context," in *Communion of Churches*, Kottayam 1993, 58-61.

<sup>13</sup> J.-M. R. Tillard, "The Church of God is a Communion," 118; Cf. E. J. Kilmartin, *Toward Reunion: The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches*, New York 1979, 47.

the Eucharist and other sacraments and makes the saving action of Christ present in the world.<sup>14</sup>

The fundamental unit of the Church with all the necessary ecclesial elements are dioceses or eparchies and not parishes. Although the family and the parish are called “Church” in the Second Vatican Council,<sup>15</sup> they are not considered “particular Churches” in relation to the universal Church. Only the diocese is referred to as a particular Church and is regarded as the fundamental ecclesial unit. According to the ancient tradition of the Church, the episcopal ministry is necessary for a perfect unit of the Church, and the parish as such lacks the immediate presence of the episcopal ministry and consequently the fullness of the sacramental ministry.<sup>16</sup> The importance of the episcopal ministry for a perfect unit of the Church is clear in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: “In any community of the altar, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, there is made manifest the symbol of that charity and unity of the mystical body without which there can be no salvation.”<sup>17</sup> According to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the liturgical celebration presided over by the bishop, surrounded by the college of his priests and ministers and the Christian faithful is the most important manifestation of the Church.<sup>18</sup> This also emerges from the definition of the particular Church in *Christus Dominus*:

A diocese is a section of the people of God whose pastoral care is entrusted to a bishop in cooperation with his priests. Thus, in conjunction with their pastor and gathered by him into one flock in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, they constitute a particular Church. In this Church the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and at work.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> P. Granfield, “The Church Local and Universal: Realization of Communion,” in *The Jurist* 49 (1989) 455.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 11 and *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. Nedungatt, “Ecclesia universalis, particularis, singularis,” in *Nuntia* 2 (1976) 79; E. Lanne, “L’Eglise locale et l’Eglise universelle,” in *Irénikon* 43 (1970) 490-491; cf. also K. Rahner – J. Ratzinger, *Episkopat und Primat*, Freiburg 1961, 28; English translation, *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, New York 1962, 28-29 [This book contains three parts, of which the first and third are written by K. Rahner and the second by J. Ratzinger].

<sup>17</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41; cf. also *Lumen gentium*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, 11; Cf. CCEO c. 177 § 1; CIC c. 368. Besides this, *Lumen gentium*, 27; *Christus Dominus*, 3 and 36 speak of the relationship between bishop and particular Church.

Only a diocese forms a particular Church in which the Catholic Church is truly present. Other communities, such as the family and the parish, are not complete in themselves; they are linked to the diocese in the strict sense and are in communion with it.

According to Orthodox ecclesiology, too, the eparchy is the basic unit of the Church. The fundamental ecclesiological principle of the local Church in the Orthodox tradition is the identification of the Church with the Eucharistic community. Orthodox ecclesiology is based on the idea that wherever there is the Eucharist, there is also the Church in its fullness as the Body of Christ. The Eucharistic assembly presided over by the bishop is the Church in its fullness and possesses all the *notae ecclesiae*.<sup>20</sup> Although the parish is also a Eucharistic community, the Orthodox Churches generally hold that the reality of the local Church is guaranteed by the bishop and not by the presbyter; the local Church as an entity with full ecclesiological status is the episcopal diocese and not the parish. Parishes, families or other Christian groups are not Church in the "full" and Catholic sense. The full ecclesiological status of a local Church requires the presence of a bishop, and therefore only a diocese is properly called a Church.<sup>21</sup>

Since a diocese is considered as the fundamental ecclesial unit, most ecclesiologists of the Latin Church who favour the communion ecclesiology regard the universal Church as a communion of

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in the Personhood and the Church*, London 1985, 247; A. Schmemmann, "La notion de primauté dans l'ecclésiologie orthodoxe," in *La primauté de Pierre dans l'Église orthodoxe*, Neuchâtel 1960, 129; N. Afanassieff, "L'Église qui préside dans l'amour," in *La primauté de Pierre dans l'Église orthodoxe*, Neuchâtel 1960, 25-31; J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, New York 1974, 208-210; J. H. Erickson, "Common Comprehension of Christians concerning Autonomy and Central Power in the Church in View of Orthodox Theology," in *Kanon* 4 (1980) 100-101; G. Tsetsis, *Orthodox Thought: Reports of Orthodox Consultations Organized by WCC 1975-1982*, Geneva 1983, 23-27. For a critical evaluation of orthodox ecclesiology: J. J. Holtzman, "Eucharistic Ecclesiology of Orthodox Theologians," in *Diakonia* 8 (1973) 67-88; B. Schultze, "Ecclesiologia universale o eucaristica," in *Unitas* (gennaio-marzo 1965) 14-33; "Der Primat Petri und seiner Nachfolger nach den Grundsätzen der universelle und der eucharistische Ekklesiologie," in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 31 (1965) 24-52.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 24-25 and 247-253; G. Tsetsis, *Orthodox Thought*, 24; A. Schmemmann, "La notion de primauté" 128-130; "Ecclesiological Notes," in *St. Vladimir Theological Quarterly* 1 (1967) 38; J. H. Erickson, "Common Comprehension of Christians concerning Autonomy," 101-102; N. Afanassieff, "Statio orbis," in *Irénikon* 35 (1961) 67.

dioceses. The basis of this communion is the essential interior identity of all the particular Churches; it is a special relationship of “mutual interiority.” Therefore, the universal Church cannot be understood as the sum of the particular Churches or as a confederation of particular Churches. According to *Lumen gentium* the universal Church grows out of the particular Churches:

The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, formed in the likeness of the universal Church; in and from these particular Churches there exists the one unique catholic Church. For this reason, individual bishops represent their own Church, while all of them together with the pope represent the whole Church in the bond of peace, love and unity.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that the particular Churches are “formed in the likeness of the universal Church” cannot be interpreted platonically as if the particular Church were merely a reproduction of an “ideal Church.” It can be said that the universal Church is fully manifested in the local Church in the sense that all the essential elements of the Church are also present in each particular Church. But a prior universal Church or a Church that supposedly exists in itself, independent of all particular Churches, seems to be a creation of the mind.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph Ratzinger holds that the Church is primarily and immediately realized in the individual local Churches, which are not separate parts of a large administrative organisation, but rather embody the totality of reality that is the Church. He explains:

[...] for the early Christians the word *ecclesia* meant first of all and most conspicuously the local Church. In other words, the Church is realized immediately and primarily in the individual local Churches which are not separate parts of a large administrative organization but rather embody the totality of the reality which is the “Church.” The local Churches are not administrative units of a huge apparatus but living cells, each of which contains the whole living mystery of the one body of the Church: each one may rightly be called *ecclesia*. We may then conclude that the one Church of God

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<sup>22</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. H. De Lubac, *Les Eglises particulières dans l'Eglise universelle*, Paris 1971, 53-54.



consists of the individual Churches, each of which represents the whole Church.<sup>24</sup>

When analysing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the Church as a communion, Walter Kasper affirms that the "Catholic Church exists in local Churches and consists of local Churches." According to him, the revival of the early Church's concept of the communion ecclesiology represents a turning point of the first order in the history of the theology of the Church. "For a return to the *communio* ecclesiology of the first ten centuries means departing from the one-sided 'unity' ecclesiology of the second millennium of the church, which was, and still is, one of the essential reasons for the separation of the Eastern churches from the Latin church of the West. The interpretation of Church's unity as a unity in communion again leaves room for a legitimate variety of local churches within the greater unity in the one faith, the same sacraments and the same ministries."<sup>25</sup> Based on the teaching of the Council on particular Churches and individual Churches Walter Kasper again affirms:

[...] although the universal church certainly does not come into being through any subsequent union, addition and confederation of individual churches, yet the individual churches are, with equal certainty, never merely a subsequent administrative partition of the universal church into individual provinces and departments. The universal church and the individual church are mutually inclusive. They dwell within one another mutually. That is why it is part of the essential structure of the church to have two focusses, like the two focusses of an ellipse: *iure divino*, it is both papal and episcopal. Neither of the two poles can be traced back to the other. This unity in tension is the foundation of the union in communion. The communion which is both episcopal and papal is the essential organic expression of the essential structure of the church, its unity in catholicity, and its catholicity in unity<sup>26</sup>

Each particular Church is the Church of Christ present in one place and endowed with all the means of salvation, and each is fully Church because it possesses all the ecclesial elements such as the profession of the apostolic faith, the sacraments, the preaching of the

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<sup>24</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," in *Concilium*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1965) 22; cf. *Il nuovo popolo di Dio (Biblioteca di Teologia Contemporanea 7)*, Brescia 1992, 225-226.

<sup>25</sup> W. Kasper, *Theology and Church*, London 1989, 157.

<sup>26</sup> W. Kasper, *Theology and Church*, 160.

Word and the presence of the Holy Trinity. There is no universal Church except in and through the self-realisation of the particular Churches. The universal Church appears and exists as particular Churches or the particular Church is the universal Church in a determined place. In each particular Church, the universal Church manifests or incarnates itself in all its reality. The particular Church is nothing other than the Catholic Church in a particular time and place.<sup>27</sup>

The main difference between a particular Church and the universal Church is that the particular Church is fully Church, but it is not the whole Church. On the basis of Eucharistic ecclesiology, Karl Rahner argues that the "local Church is not an agency of the universal Church, subsequently founded [...], but is the event itself of the universal Church." The local Church does not come into being through an "atomizing division of the world-territory of the universal Church, but by the concertation of the Church into its own nature as event."<sup>28</sup> The International Theological Commission confirms: "The Church, insofar as she is Catholic, makes the universal local and the local universal. The particularity of the Church in one place is fulfilled at the heart of the universal Church and the universal Church is manifested and made real in the local

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. E. Lanne, "L'Eglise locale et l'Eglise universelle," 482- 511; J. Pinard, "L'Eglise locale come lieu de divinisation," in *Esprit et vie* 81 (1971) 385-394; J. J. Von Allmen, "L'Eglise locale parmi les autres Eglises locales," in *Irénikon* 43 (1970) 512-537; J. Komonchak, "The Church Universal as Communion of Local Churches," in *Concilium* 6 (1981) 32; P. Granfield, "The Church Local and Universal," 452-456; E. R. Hambye, "The Second Vatican Council and the Local Churches," in *Jeevadhara* 1 (1971) 301-304; R. Kress, "The Church as *Communio*: Trinity and Incarnation as the Foundation of Ecclesiology," in *The Jurist* 36 (1976) 144-151 and 156-157; J.-M. R. Tillard, "The Church of God is a Communion," 124-127; H. Legrand, "La réalisation de l'Eglise en un lieu," in B. Lauret & F. Refoulé (ed.), *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, vol. 3, Paris 1986, 151-171; "Nature de l'Eglise particulière et rôle de évêque dans l'Eglise," in *La charge pastorale des évêques (Unam Sanctam 71)*, Paris 1969, 104-112; H. De Lubac, *Les Eglises particulières dans l'Eglise universelle*, 49-51. K. Rahner, "Quelques réflexions sur les principes constitutionnels de l'Eglise," in *L'Episcopat et l'Eglise universelle (Unam Sanctam 39)*, Paris 1962, 552-557; K. Rahner – J. Ratzinger, *Episkopat und Primat*, 24-28; *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, 25-30; G. B. Mondin, *La Chiesa primizia del regno: trattato di ecclesiologia, corso di teologia sistematica*, vol 7, Bologna 1990, 406-416.

<sup>28</sup> K. Rahner – J. Ratzinger, *Episkopat und Primat*, 28-30; *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, 26-27.

Churches, and in their communion with each other and with the Church of Rome."<sup>29</sup>

Even the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concedes, albeit with caution: "The universal Church is therefore the *Body of the Churches*. Hence it is possible to apply the concept of communion *in analogous fashion* to the union existing among particular Churches, and to see the universal Church as a *Communion of Churches*."<sup>30</sup> In short, according to Western ecclesiology, the universal Church can be considered as a communion of particular Churches or dioceses.

## 1.2. Universal Church as the Communion of Individual Churches like Patriarchates

A close examination of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, in particular *Lumen gentium*, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and *Unitatis redintegratio* which define the nature, structure and constitution of the Church, demonstrates the recognition of intermediate structures such as patriarchates, especially in relation to the Eastern Churches.<sup>31</sup> *Lumen gentium* seems to recognize the intermediary communions as part of the constitution of the Church. While treating the catholicity of the Church *Lumen gentium* states: "Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions, without prejudice to the chair of Peter

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<sup>29</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 59.

<sup>30</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, no. 8.

<sup>31</sup> In the documents of Vatican II, the expression 'particular Church' is used to refer both to dioceses (cf. *LG* 13, 23a, 27, 45; *CD* 11, 23, 28; *AG* 6, etc.) and to the intermediate level of ecclesial communions like the patriarchal Churches (cf. *LG* 23; *OE* 2-4, 16, 17, 19; *UR* 14). In order to avoid confusion, during the process of codification of the Codes of Canon Law the *Coetus mixtus de lege ecclesiae fundamentalis*, composed of the members of the pontifical commissions of the Latin and Eastern codes, decided to apply 'particular Church' exclusively to dioceses, and to adopt the expression 'ritual Church *sui iuris*' to denote the Eastern Churches [cf. *Communicationes* 8 (1976) 81-82; 9 (1977) 274 & 297-299; *Nuntia* 22 (1986) 23]. In accord with this decision in both Codes of canon law the designation 'particular Church' is reserved exclusively to dioceses or eparchies (see CIC c. 368 and CCEO c. 177). In the Latin Code 'ritual Church *sui iuris*' is used for intermediate communions like the patriarchal and major archiepiscopal Churches (see CIC cc. 111 & 112). The pontifical commission for the Eastern Code, however, dropped the word 'ritual', and retained only 'Church *sui iuris*', because the word 'ritual' was considered superfluous and counterproductive in referring to Churches *sui iuris*, especially since there are different Churches *sui iuris* belonging fundamentally to the same basic ritual tradition.

which presides over the whole assembly of charity, and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute to it."<sup>32</sup> Again it explicitly affirms:

It has come out through divine providence that, in course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, whilst safeguarding the unity of the faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony. Some of these, notably the ancient patriarchal Churches, as mothers in faith, gave birth to their daughter-Churches, as it were, and down to our own days they are linked with these by bonds of a more intimate charity in what pertains to the sacramental life and in a mutual respect for rights and obligations.<sup>33</sup>

The organically united groups of Churches with their own liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony of which the Council speaks, are not dioceses, but the intermediary structures such as the ancient patriarchal Churches.<sup>34</sup> The Council also recognizes that these institutions developed according to divine providence. The Western or Latin Church, despite the existence of semi-intermediate structures such as episcopal conferences, is seen as equivalent to a single patriarchal or individual Church, extending throughout the world and possessing its own liturgical, theological,

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<sup>32</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 23. This translation is taken from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, A. Flannery (ed.), Bombay 1975, 402. Although the Latin original uses the expression: "*particolres ecclesias seu ritus constituunt*," Tanner translated it as: "make up various churches or rites." See *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, N. P. Tanner (ed.), vol. 2, London 1990, 902. The Vatican English translation reads: "form separate Churches or Rites." [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), *Testi fondamentali*.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. B. P. Prusak, *The Canonical Concept of Particular Church before and after Vatican II*, Rome 1967, 97-99; J. D. Faris, *The Communion of Catholic Churches: Terminology and Ecclesiology*, Brooklyn-New York 1985, 34-38; G. Philips, *L'Eglise et son mystère au IIe concile du Vatican*, vol. 1, Paris 1967, 313-314; A. Anton, "The Theological Status of Episcopal Conferences," in *The Jurist* 48 (1988) 194-199; K. Mörsdorf, "L'autonomia della Chiesa locale," in *Atti del congresso internazionale di diritto canonico: La Chiesa dopo il concilio*, Roma 1970, 183-184; W. De Vries, "Die Patriarchate des Ostens: Bestimmende Faktoren bei ihrer Entstehung," in *I Patriarcati orientali nell primo millennio (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 181)*, Roma 1968, 33; M. Brogi, "Strutture delle Chiese orientali sui iuris secondo il C.C.E.O.," in *Apollinaris* 65 (1992) 301-302; "Le Chiese sui iuris nel Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium," in *Revista Española de Derecho Canónico* 48 (1991) 518-519.

spiritual and disciplinary heritage, contextualized by the different cultures and historical circumstances in each nation. However, in a commentary on the quoted statement from *Lumen gentium* about the origin of the patriarchal Churches by divine providence, Karl Rahner explains: "the first sentence of the section involves an important principle, since the historical findings are regarded as marking a special divine providence. It affects particularly the Latin or Western branch of the Catholic Church because this has in fact been practically identified with the Church as a whole. Major Churches with their own discipline, their own liturgy, and their own spiritual and theological heritage could also be formed in the future, 'by divine providence', say in Africa, Asia or South America."<sup>35</sup>

The existence of intermediate structures is more evident in the *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches*, which states: "The holy Catholic Church, which is the mystical body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government. They combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy and so form particular Churches or rites [...]"<sup>36</sup> Obviously the Council uses the expression "particular Churches" here to refer to the patriarchal Churches and their equivalents which are also called "rites" at that time. The text, in which the statement of *Lumen gentium* resonates, testifies to the theologically founded structure of the Church as a communion of individual Churches.

From the same Decree it is clear that individual or particular Church is a common term applicable to both Latin and Eastern Churches:

These individual Churches (original: *particulares ecclesiae*), whether of the East or the West, although they differ somewhat among themselves in rite (to use the current phrase), that is, in liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline, and spiritual heritage, are, nevertheless, each as much as the others (original: *aequali tamen modo*), entrusted to the pastoral government (*pastorali gubernio*) of the Roman Pontiff, the divinely appointed successor of St. Peter in primacy over the universal Church. They are consequently of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite and they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations, also in respect

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<sup>35</sup> K Rahner, "The Hierarchical Structure of the Church, with Special Reference to Episcopate," in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1, New York 1967, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 2.

of preaching the Gospel to the whole world (cf. *Mark* 16, 15) under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff."<sup>37</sup>

The text, affirms the fundamental equality of the individual Churches, both of the West and of the East in dignity, rights and obligations "also in respect of preaching the Gospel to the whole world." The formulation that the Roman Pontiff is equally entrusted with pastoral government is to be understood in the light of the common tradition of the first millennium, in which the Bishop of Rome exercised only primatial power in the Eastern patriarchates, while in his own Western patriarchate he exercised both patriarchal and primatial power.<sup>38</sup> At that time there was no need for the Pope to exercise patriarchal power in the East, since powerful Eastern patriarchs accomplished patriarchal function in their territories. In this context, the statement by Johannes Maria Hoeck is significant:

This equality naturally applies also in relation to the Pope as such. However, according to Eastern ecclesiology it is questionable whether one should call this competence of the Pope in relation to the individual Churches *gubernium* for, according to the concept prevalent in the universal Church, that is, in the Church before the Schism, the Pope as Pope is not *gubernium*, but defender and guarantor of unity and of the bonum commune of the Church, its *summus iudex* and arbiter, who intervenes only where, and to the extent that, the unity and purity of the faith make it appear to be necessary. His competence as Patriarch of the Latin Church is, of course, far more extensive. This concept of the primacy has, to be sure, largely been lost in the West, and it is well known that this is the main obstacle to a reunion of the Churches.<sup>39</sup>

Under the supreme authority of the Church, each individual Church of the Catholic communion has the power to govern itself, with legislative, judicial, electoral and administrative functions. Having spoken of the heritage of the Eastern Churches as part of the

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<sup>37</sup> Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 3. For an analysis: M. Brogi, "Le Chiese sui iuris," 519-522; "Strutture delle Chiese orientali," 302-304; G. Nedungatt, "Ecclesia universalis, particularis, singularis," 76; J. D. Faris, *The Communion of Catholic Churches*, 38-50.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. P. Pallath, "Primacy and Synodality according to the Common Tradition of the Church in the First Millennium," in *Iustitia*, vol. 14, no. 1 (June 2023) 23-44.

<sup>39</sup> J. M. Hoeck, "Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches," in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1, New York 1967, 315.

patrimony of the universal Church, the Second Vatican Council declares:

Therefore, the Churches of the East like those of the West have the right and duty to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines. For these are guaranteed by ancient tradition and seem to be better suited to the customs of their faithful and to the good of their souls.<sup>40</sup>

The Council then solemnly affirms the principle of the disciplinary autonomy of the patriarchal Churches. In fact, each individual Church is governed by its own highest authority:

The patriarchs with their synods are the highest authority for all business of the patriarchate, not exceeding the right of setting up new eparchies and appointing bishops of their rite within the patriarchal territory, without prejudice to the inalienable right of the Roman Pontiff to intervene in any particular case.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, a patriarchal Church is not dependent on any other church for its hierarchical constitution, its order and its discipline, regardless of its size or historical origin. Each Church can decide its own destiny under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff.<sup>42</sup> However, he has the "inalienable right" to intervene and can intervene whenever it serves the good of the Church, in particular to safeguard faith and morals as well as proper liturgical order and canonical discipline.

The *Decree on Ecumenism* even recognizes the non-Catholic Eastern Churches as particular Churches and considers them as intermediate ecclesial communions: "The Council gladly reminds every one of the highly significant facts among others: in the East there flourish many particular local Churches; among them the patriarchal Churches hold first place, and of them many glories in taking their origins from the apostles themselves."<sup>43</sup>

When we synthesize the formulations of *Lumen Gentium*, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* it becomes clear that the

<sup>40</sup> Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 5; cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. N. Edelby, "L'authentique tradition orientale de le décret Vatican II sur les Eglises orientales catholiques," in *Kanon 1* (1973) 65-66; G. D. Gallaro, "Orientalium Ecclesiarum Deserves More Attention," in *Nicolaus 2* (1986) 299.

<sup>43</sup> Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio*, 14; for an explanation about the statement of Vatican II: J. Feiner, "Decree on Ecumenism," in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. II, New York 1968, 129-132.

intermediate communions such as the patriarchal Churches and their juridical equivalents are included in the constitution of the Church. There are thus three levels of communion: the diocesan Church (*Ecclesia particularis*), the individual Church (*Ecclesia individualis or sui iuris*) and the universal Church (*Ecclesia universalis*). The diocese is the communion of parishes, the individual Church or intermediate communions such as the patriarchates and their equivalents are the communion of dioceses or eparchies, and the universal Church is the communion of both.

Although official Roman ecclesiology is reluctant to recognise the theological basis of bishops' conferences and in particular their intermediary status, there are theologians who acknowledge the intermediary character of conferences in the Latin Church as well. Karl Rahner, who distinguishes between purely human ecclesiastical law and divine law concretised in history, affirms the possibility of intermediary structures in the Latin Church:

Rightly understood, one can say without any scruples that the real, fundamental-theological essence of the patriarchate belongs to the *ius divinum*<sup>44</sup> in the Church, because the collegiality of the bishops gives rise to the conclusion that they must realize a concrete and particular unity with one another at that time and in that place where a large part-Church embracing several dioceses grows up in the spheres of history, ecclesiastical tradition, sociology, and so on, or where such a unity already precedes the division into dioceses. Whether such a greater Church is called a patriarchate, a metropolitan union, or anything else, is a question of secondary importance. This is especially so because the dividing line between the duties and rights of a 'patriarch' on the one hand and those of the individual local bishops on the other have been fluid and can vary according to time and place. Where energetic and effective national conferences of bishops exist or are in process of formation, a 'patriarchate' is already materially there, provided that there also corresponds to the national (or continental) unity of such a union of bishops a greater Church, which has historically, liturgically (or para-liturgically), theologically and so on, its own proper character

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<sup>44</sup> Although we realize at the same time that this *ius divinum* must become concrete in determinate historical forms and will therefore rightly become concrete *differently* in different times and places (footnote as in the original).



which enables it to fulfil a function proper to it within the whole Church [...].<sup>45</sup>

James H. Provost is of the opinion that "episcopal conferences have become practically equivalent to patriarchs with their synods in church law since the council," although the conferences are more restricted in their powers. "Moreover, many elements which characterize a particular church are now characteristic within these conferences or groups of conferences. Discipline is being adapted even to the extent of juridical procedures. Liturgical usage is now modified to the language and customs of the people. Certain theological and spiritual insights characteristic of various cultures can now be discerned. In short, those elements which characterize a particular church are now discernible in the ambience of episcopal conferences."<sup>46</sup>

## 2. Episcopal Collegiality as an Expression of the Catholic Church as Communion of Churches

Many theologians who favour the communion ecclesiology also explain episcopal collegiality in accordance with the undivided common tradition of the Church as an expression of the communion of particular Churches. The bishops participate in a synod as heads of particular Churches and represent them.<sup>47</sup> While speaking about the ministry and representation, Jean-Marie Roger Tillard affirms: "Between the bishop and the local Church there exists a dynamism of mutual inclusion which means that in the voice of the bishops is heard that of the entire local Church."<sup>48</sup> According to Cardinal Yves Congar, the headship of a particular Church and membership in the

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<sup>45</sup> K. Rahner, "The Episcopal Office," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, Baltimore 1961, 355-356.

<sup>46</sup> J. H. Provost, "Structuring the Church as *Communio*," in *The Jurist* 36 (1976) 237; for the same idea about the bishop's conference as an intermediary structure: B. P. Prusak, *The Canonical Concept of Particular Church before and after Vatican II*, 110; A. Anton, *Le conferenze episcopali: istanze intermedie? Lo stato teologico della questione*, 249-267; "The Theological Status of Episcopal Conferences," in *The Jurist* 48 (1988) 79-87; G. Philips, *l'Eglise et son mystère au IIe concile du Vatican*, vol. 1, 315-316.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. H. Legrand, "Nature de l'Eglise particulière et rôle de évêque dans l'Eglise," 114; "La réalisation de l'Eglise en un lieu," 306-309; G. Alberigo, *L'ecclesiologia del Vaticano II: dinamisimi e prospettive*, Bologna 1981, 250-251; D. Valentini, "An Overview of Theologians' Positions: A Review of Major Writings (on Collegiality) and the State of the Question Today," in *Concilium* 4 (1990) 33-35.

<sup>48</sup> J.-M. R. Tillard, *Eglise d'Eglises: l'ecclésiologie de communion*, Paris 1987, 245; *Church of Churches: the Ecclesiology of Communion*, Minnesota 1992, 192.

college are the two simultaneous effects of the same episcopal consecration which are not distinct but distinguishable. By the very act of episcopal consecration for a particular Church a bishop becomes a member of the college and bishop of the universal Church, since the particular Church is a manifestation of the whole Church and it is the Church of God in a determined place.<sup>49</sup> The communion of bishops, which is expressed at a council, has its basis in the communion of the Churches and their faithful. The bishops are representatives of their Churches at the council, not in the manner of delegates, but in the ancient sense of the representation or personification of a body by its head.<sup>50</sup>

All bishops are in communion with other bishops: for a bishop is a bishop only if he is in communion with other bishops, without which he cannot exercise his episcopal office.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, collegiality is an aspect of the juridical structure of the Church that results from the communion of the particular or individual Churches and the harmonious plurality of the bishops representing them.<sup>52</sup> Joseph Ratzinger affirms:

[...] collegiality of the bishops fulfills its meaning only if the individual bishop really and faithfully represents his individual Church and thus through him, a part of the Church's plenitude is inserted into the totality of the Church's unity. Thus it will be an important obligation to ensure that the increased importance of the episcopal office does not result in making individual bishops little popes, as it were, by increasing and strengthening their monarchical powers; rather they must be placed more clearly in the

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed discussion: Y. Congar, *Ministères et communion ecclésiale*, Paris 1971, 123-140; cf. also D. Valentini, "An Overview of Theologians Positions," 36-38.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Y. Congar, "The Conciliar Structure or Regime of the Church," in *Concilium* 7 (1983) 4-5; "De la communion des Eglises à une ecclésiologie de l'Eglise universelle," in *L'Episcopat et l'Eglise universelle (Unam Sanctam 39)* Paris 1962, 230-233; *Ministères et communion ecclésiale*, 98-99; cf. also H. Legrand, "Lo sviluppo di Chiese-sogetto: un'istanza del Vaticano II," in G. Alberigo (ed.), *L'ecclésiologia del Vaticano II: dinamicismi e prospettive*, Bologna 1981, 146; J.-M. R. Tillard, *Eglise d'Eglises: l'ecclésiologie de communion*, 243-251; *Church of Churches: the Ecclesiology of Communion*, 190-197.

<sup>51</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," 22-23; *Il nuovo popolo di Dio*, 227.

<sup>52</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," 23-24; *Il nuovo popolo di Dio*, 226-227.

multiple relationship with their brethren with whom they govern the Church of God.<sup>53</sup>

The individual Church is indeed a "closed totality that embraces the full essence of the Church of God, but it is at that same time open in all directions through the bond of communion."<sup>54</sup> Recently, Pope Francis has confirmed with regard to the Roman Synod that the bishops represent their own Churches: "The Bishops assembled in Synod represent in the first place their own Churches, but they are also attentive to the contributions of the Episcopal Conferences which selected them and whose views about questions under discussion they then communicate. They thus express the recommendation of the entire hierarchical body of the Church and finally, in a certain sense, the whole Christian people, whose pastors they are."<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, bishops participate in synods and councils not as private individuals but as heads of particular Churches, bringing the faith and aspirations of their Christian community to the synod. In this sense, a patriarchal synod turns out to be a crystallization of the faith and ecclesial heritage of an individual Church and an ecumenical council becomes a concentration of the entire Church and its faith. In fact, the college of bishops is the concentrated form of the *communio fidelium* and the official magisterium is an authentic expression of the faith of the *communio fidelium*.<sup>56</sup>

The idea of the collegiality of the bishops as an expression of the communion of local particular Churches is consistent with the genuine Eastern and Orthodox traditions. In fact, the Eastern tradition arrives at the notion of a college of bishops, based on the ecclesiology of communion among local particular Churches. The reciprocal relationship between the bishop and his Church is evident in the early tradition.<sup>57</sup> The bishop and the Church are even identified by Fathers like Cyprian who said: "the bishop is in the Church and

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<sup>53</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," 27; *Il nuovo popolo di Dio*, 236.

<sup>54</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," 23; *Il nuovo popolo di Dio*, 226.

<sup>55</sup> Francis, *Episcopalis communio* (apostolic constitution), Vatican City 2018, no. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. J. C. Groot, "Aspetti orizzontali della collegialità," in G. Barauna (ed.), *La Chiesa del Vaticano II*, Firenze 1965, 779-784.

<sup>57</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* II, 26, 1-8; English translation by R. H. Connolly, Oxford 1929, 85-86.

the Church is in the bishop."<sup>58</sup> A bishop is ordained for a particular Church or eparchy in order to exercise his sacramental, teaching and pastoral functions. The bishop is not a member of a council or synod in himself but as the head of a community.<sup>59</sup> Since the Church is a communion of local Churches, the bishops also form a college. As the bishop is identified with the eparchy or diocese over which he presides, he represents his Church in a synod, which is the manifestation of the communion of different local Churches. In his contribution on the synodal structure of the Eastern Churches, Cardinal Duprey emphasises:

As a bishop, his role is to keep his Church open to the Catholic communion, and the Catholic communion open to his Church. He is to be a member of the college for his Church and from within his Church. He is to live the reality which is signified in his being ordained by several bishops. The bishops form a college because the Church is a communion. Everyone represents his Church and brings it into the communion just as each one represents the Catholic communion and brings it into his Church.<sup>60</sup>

In brief, although a bishop is not elected by the people and is not a representative of the people in the political sense, he does not take part in synods and councils as a private person to spearhead his personal views and ideological positions, but as the head of the people of God in a particular Church in order to bring the lived faith and ecclesial experience of his community to the individual and universal Churches for mutual enrichment and strengthening. According to the ecclesiology of communion, the Catholic Church is a communion of particular or individual Churches and therefore the bishops who preside over these Churches also form a college or synod.

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<sup>58</sup> Epistle, 66, *ad Papiam* 8; *PL*, 4, col. 406, p. 418: "Unde scire debes episcopum in Ecclesia esse et Ecclesia in episcopo, et si quis cum episcopo non sit, in Ecclesia non esse [...]."

<sup>59</sup> Cf. J. Meyendorff, *Orthodoxie et catholicité*, Paris 1965, 147; N. Afanassieff, "Réflexions d'un orthodoxe sur la collégialité des évêques," in *Le Messager Orthodoxe* 29-30 (1965) 7-15; J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 241; H. Marot, "Notes et documents," in *Irénikon* 38 (1965) 246. Therefore, according to Orthodox tradition only the diocesan bishops are allowed to vote in a synod.

<sup>60</sup> P. Duprey, "The Synodical Structure of the Church in Eastern Theology," in *One in Christ* 7 (1971) 173.

### 3. Primacy of the Bishop of Rome as the Guarantee of Communion and Unity of Faith in the Catholic Church

Since the Second Vatican Council restored the ecclesiology of the communion of Churches as in the patristic period and in general throughout the first millennium, the primacy of the Pope can also be seen as the supreme ministry for ensuring the unity of the Churches and their faith, as the first bishop among the other bishops. The function of the Bishop of Rome in the patristic age and in the first millennium, when the Church was considered essentially as a communion, was to be the touchstone and the ultimate criterion for the universal or Catholic communion of the Church. With reference to that period, Ludwig Hertling affirms:

The basic function of the pope was not the performance of given official actions, but simply being present as the fundamental point of orientation and unity in the network of communion between the several Churches [...]. His essential office is bishop of Rome, the primate diocese of the Catholic world. As bishop of Rome, the pope is in the episcopal college holding the first place among all the bishops.<sup>61</sup>

Cardinal Yves Congar highlights that the role of the Pope in the network of communions is to be the indispensable guarantor of ecclesial communion and the unity of faith. Referring to the role of the Bishop of Rome in the first millennium, he affirms:

The Bishop of Rome was first among the bishops; his role in a public law of communion was to authoritatively protect unity by judging cases that challenged it, according to tradition and the canons that governed the life of the Churches. In this sense, one could speak of a "power in" the Church, as opposed to a "power over" the Church.<sup>62</sup>

Since the Second Vatican Council re-established the ecclesiology of communion, the role of the Bishop of Rome has also been

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<sup>61</sup> L. Hertling, *Communio: Church and Papacy in Early Christianity*, Chicago 1972, 10-11.

<sup>62</sup> "L'évêque de Rome était le premier des évêques ; son rôle, dans un droit public de communion, était de garder supérieurement l'unité, en jugeant des cas qui la mettaient en cause, selon la tradition et les canons qui régelaient la vie des Églises. On pourrait, en ce sens, parler de <<pouvoir dans>> l'Église, par distinction d'avec un <<pouvoir sur>> l'Église." Y. Congar, "De la communion des Eglises à une ecclésiologie de l'Église universelle," 234-235. Cf. *Ministères et communion ecclésiale*, 98-99; "La Chiesa è apostolica," in J. Feiner e M. Löhrer (edd.), *Mysterium salutis VII*, Brescia 1972, 706.

reinterpreted as a ministry of unity and communion as the first bishop among other bishops. Cardinal Congar affirms:

The central power, the Roman See, without being the source that it claimed to be, has the mission, and therefore the charism and the power to moderate the communion of the Churches, ensuring the preservation of Tradition and the Confession of Faith, organizing the ecumenical life of the Churches, judging disputes, promoting the spread of the mission, etc.<sup>63</sup>

This view is also shared by many other authors who see the Bishop of Rome as the guardian of Christian tradition par excellence, the supreme judge of the faith and the link of the unity and communion of the Churches.<sup>64</sup>

According to Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, the papacy is based on no other sacrament than the episcopal consecration of the one who, by virtue of his election as Bishop of Rome, is entrusted with a special episcopal responsibility within the college of his brother bishops. It is a special way of exercising the common sacrament of the episcopate:

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<sup>63</sup> "Le pouvoir central, celui du Siècle Romain, sans être la source qu'il a prétendu être, a la mission, et donc le charisme et le pouvoir, de modérer la communion des Eglises, en veillant au maintien de la Tradition et à la Confession de Foi, en organisant la vie œcuménique des églises, en jugeant les cas conflictuels, en favorisant l'exercice de la mission, etc." Y. Congar, "Autonomie et pouvoir central dans l'Eglise vus par la théologie catholique," in *Kanon* 4 (1980) 137.

<sup>64</sup> P. P. Joannou, "Pape, concile et patriarches dans la tradition canonique de l'église orientale jusque' au IXe s.," in *Les canons des synodes particuliers*, Grottaferrata 1962, 526 and 520-540; E. Lanne, "L'Eglise locale et l'Eglise universelle," 498; "Il Servizio di comunione tra le Chiese cattoliche romane," in *Concilium* 8 (1975) 128-129; G. Greshake, "Die Stellung des Protos in der sicht der Römischkatholischen dogmatischen Theologie," in *Kanon* 9 (1989) 25; G. Alberigo, "Per un papato rinnovato a servizio della Chiesa," *Concilium* 8 (1975) 24 & 28-38; W. Kasper, "Ciò che permane e ciò che muta nel ministero petrino," *Concilium* 8 (1975) 57-58; J. J. Von Allmen, "Ministero papale ministero di unità," in *Concilium* 8 (1975) 138; P. Batiffol, *Cathedra Petri: études d'histoire ancienne de l'Eglise*, Paris 1938, 28; G. Dejaive, "Peut-on concilier le collège épiscopal et primauté?," in *La Collégialité Episcopale (Unam Sanctam 52)*, Paris 1965, 295-300; V. Peri, "La synergie entre le pape et le concile œcuménique, note d'histoire su l'ecclésiologie traditionnelle de l'Eglise indivise," in *Irénikon* 56 (1983) 180-181; G. Thils, "Papauté et épiscopat, harmonie et complémentarité," in R. Bäumer & H. Dolch (ed.), *Volk Gottes*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1967, 55-63; J.-M. R. Tillard, *Eglise d'Eglises: l'ecclésiologie de communion*, 324 et 328; *L'évêque de Rome*, Paris 1982, 203-235; "Presence of Peter in the Ministry of the Bishop of Rome," *One in Christ* 2 (1991) 101-105.

The function of the Bishop of Rome is none other than a very special form of this *sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum* given with the episcopal grace, hence a particular form of exercising the common sacrament of the episcopate. It is a service within the all-encompassing mission of the episcopal college, the function of the 'servant of the servants of God',<sup>65</sup> according to the ideal which Gregory the Great put forth and which is expressed in the title of every conciliar document of Vatican II.<sup>66</sup> It does not support this mode of a sacramental hierarchy which would make him a 'super-bishop'.<sup>67</sup>

The primatial function of the Bishop of Rome is a service in the global mission of the episcopal college, the function of "servant of the servants of God." The primatial see is not a see that extends territorially over the whole world, so that the territory of other sees is considered only as its subdivisions. It is the see of one local Church among others. But because of the double apostolicity and the double martyrdom of Peter and Paul, Rome has the privilege of being an outstanding witness to the apostolic faith and tradition and therefore of acting as the arbiter and centre of communion. Therefore, the local Church of Rome renders the Church a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity, both of faith and of communion.<sup>68</sup> Joseph Ratzinger explains the real significance of the primacy of the Pope in the light of the ecclesiology of communion as follows:

The primacy cannot be patterned on the model of an absolute monarchy as if the pope were the unrestricted monarch of a centrally constituted, supernatural state called Church; but it means that within the network of the Churches communicating and thus forming the Church of God there is one official point, the *Sedes Romana*, by which the unity of faith and communion must be oriented. [...] the primacy of the bishop of Rome in its original meaning is not opposed to the collegial character of the Church but

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<sup>65</sup> On the formula, see H. Leclercq, *DACL* 15, 1950, 1360-1363 (footnote as in the original text).

<sup>66</sup> "Paul, bishop, servant of the servants of God, in union with the Fathers of the Holy Council, so that the memory may be maintained forever" (footnote as in the original text).

<sup>67</sup> J.-M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: the Ecclesiology of Communion*, 260.

<sup>68</sup> J.-M.R. Tillard, "The Church of God is a Communion," 127; *Eglise d'Eglises: l'ecclésiologie de communion*, 324 & 328; *L'évêque de Rome*, 203-235; "The Presence of Peter," 101-105. For the same idea H. Legrand, "Ministero romano e ministero universale del papa: il problema della sua elezione," in *Concilium* 8 (1975) 65-74; J. J. Von Allmen, "Ministero papale ministero di unità," 134-135; C. Vogel, "Unité de l'Eglise et pluralité des formes historiques d'organisation ecclésiastique du IIIe au Ve siècle," in *L'Episcopat et l'Eglise universelle (Unam Sanctam 39)*, Paris 1962, 624.

is a primacy of communion in the midst of the Church living as community and understanding itself as such. It means, we repeat, the faculty and the right to decide authoritatively, within the network of communication, where the word of the Lord is witnessed correctly, and consequently, where there is true communion. It presupposes the *communio ecclesiarum* and can be understood correctly only in reference to it.<sup>69</sup>

The Bishop of Rome, as the guarantor of faith and unity, has the right and duty to intervene in the internal life of other Churches and the universal Church in order to protect the integrity of the faith and the unity of the Catholic Communion.<sup>70</sup> Church history attests that even in the first millennium the Bishop of Rome intervened in the affairs of other Churches when appeals were made to him and in cases of serious canonical and liturgical disorders in order to restore peace, unity and harmony in the Church.<sup>71</sup> In short, the Pope is the defender and guarantor of faith and unity as well as the *bonum commune* of the Church, its *summus iudex* and arbiter, the indispensable prerequisite for the ecumenicity of the councils and the authenticity of their doctrinal decisions. As guarantor of the true faith and of Catholic communion, the Bishop of Rome intervenes in the affairs of other Churches, especially in the Eastern patriarchates only when this is necessary to protect the true faith and morals or to restore peace and harmony in the case of grave canonical or liturgical disorders and indiscipline, or to make his decision when an appeal is made to Rome.

The position of several theologians during and after the Second Vatican Council concerning the office of the Bishop of Rome as a ministry of communion and unity is finally confirmed by Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis. Already in the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* on the reform of the Roman Curia, which was promulgated on 28 June 1988, Pope John Paul II emphasized that in the Church, the people of God, the task of its shepherds or pastors is indeed to be that service "which is called very expressively in Sacred

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<sup>69</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," 25; cf. also *Il nuovo popolo di Dio*, 231-233.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Y. Congar, "De la communion des Eglises à une ecdésiologie de l'Eglise universelle," 234; "Le pape come patriarcho d'occidente: approche d'une réalité trop négligée," in *Istina* 28:4 (1983) 379; V. Parlato, *L'ufficio patriarcale nelle Chiese orientali dal IV al X secolo*, Padova 1969, 44-51; J.-M. R. Tillard, *L'évêque de Rome*, 207-235.

<sup>71</sup> For details and documentation: P. Pallath, "Primacy and Synodality according to the Common Tradition of the Church in the First Millennium," 40-42.



Scripture a *diaconia* or ministry". "The main thrust of this service or *diaconia* is for *more and more communion or fellowship to be generated* in the whole body of the Church, and for this communion to thrive and produce good results."<sup>72</sup> Then, regarding his own power and that of bishops the Pope affirms:

The power and authority of the bishops bears the mark of *diaconia* or *stewardship*, fitting the example of Jesus Christ himself who "came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (*Mk* 10: 45). Therefore, the power that is found in the Church is to be understood as the power of being a servant and is to be exercised in that way; before anything else it is the authority of a shepherd.

This applies to each and every bishop in his own particular Church; but all the more does it apply to the bishop of Rome, whose Petrine ministry works for the good and benefit of the universal Church. The Roman Church has charge over the "whole body of charity" and so it is the servant of love. It is largely from this principle that those great words of old have come — "The servant of the servants of God" —, by which Peter's successor is known and defined.<sup>73</sup>

In the Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* Pope John Paul II presents the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, who is the Bishop of the Church that preserves the mark of the martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul, as that of *servus servorum Dei* to ensure the unity of the faith and the communion of Churches.<sup>74</sup> He insists that the Petrine service of unity is that of a bishop among other bishops and within the college of bishops:

This service of unity, rooted in the action of divine mercy, is entrusted within the College of Bishops to one among those who have received from the Spirit the task, not of exercising power over the people — as the rulers of the Gentiles and their great men do (cf. *Mt* 20:25; *Mk* 10:42) — but of leading them towards peaceful pastures [...]. The mission of the Bishop of Rome within the College of all the Pastors consists precisely in "keeping watch" (*episkopein*), like a sentinel, so that, through the efforts of the Pastors, the true voice of Christ the Shepherd may be heard in all the particular Churches. In this way, in each of the particular Churches entrusted

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<sup>72</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pastor Bonus* (apostolic constitution), Vatican City 1988, no. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pastor Bonus*, no. 2.

<sup>74</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, 25 May 1995, Vatican City 1995, no. 88-90.

to those Pastors, the *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica Ecclesia* is made present. All the Churches are in full and visible communion, because all the Pastors are in communion with Peter and therefore united in Christ.<sup>75</sup>

For the unity of all the Churches and ecclesial communities he also expressed his willingness “to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” and to seek “the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned.”<sup>76</sup>

Pope Francis humbly recognises that he is one of the baptised and “a bishop among bishops.” In his address on 17 October 2015 (Saturday), on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Roman Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis affirmed:

I am persuaded that in a synodal Church, greater light can be shed on the exercise of the Petrine primacy. The Pope is not, by himself, above the Church; but within it as one of the baptized, and within the College of Bishops as a Bishop among Bishops, called at the same time – as Successor of Peter – to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches.<sup>77</sup>

On 15 September 2018, Pope Francis promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (*Episcopal Communion*), with which he made some modifications to channel the Roman synod even better for the evangelisation of today’s world and to strengthen communion and cooperation between the Pope, the bishops and the entire people of God. In this constitution, the Pope quotes his own declaration mentioned above and emphasises his own ministry in relation to the other bishops:

Another fruit of the Synod of Bishops is that it highlights more and more the profound communion that exists in Christ’s Church both between the Pastors and the faithful (every ordained minister being a baptized person among other baptized persons, established by God to feed his flock), and also between the Bishops and the Roman

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<sup>75</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, no. 94.

<sup>76</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, no. 95.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Romanos*, Proemium: PG 5, 686 (original footnote). Francis, Discourse on the occasion of the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015) 1144.

Pontiff, the Pope being a "Bishop among Bishops, called at the same time – as Successor of Peter – to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches."<sup>78</sup> This prevents any one subject from existing independently of the other.<sup>79</sup>

In accordance with his teaching, Pope Francis has chosen the Bishop of Rome from the various historical papal titles, the oldest, most authentic and ecumenically acceptable title, in order to emphasize the true meaning of the Petrine ministry as a service of unity and communion.<sup>80</sup>

When the Bishop of Rome exercises his primatial authority as bishop among other bishops and successor of St Peter, he takes into account the reality of the Catholic Church as a communion of particular Churches and individual Churches. The Bishop of Rome has three types of powers: episcopal, patriarchal and primatial.<sup>81</sup> However, officially no distinction has been made between the powers of the Bishop of Rome as Patriarch of the West or as head of the Latin Church (if one wishes to avoid the term patriarch) and as Primate or head of the universal Catholic Church.

It is obvious, however, that the Bishop of Rome exercises ordinary episcopal power in the diocese of Rome, patriarchal power in the Western Patriarchate or Latin Church, and primatial power as successor of St Peter in the whole Catholic Church, which is a communion of Churches. When the Pope exercises primatial power in Eastern patriarchal and major archiepiscopal Churches he will take into consideration the fact that in these Churches the patriarchs or major archbishops "with their synods are the highest authority for

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<sup>78</sup> Address of Pope Francis on Saturday, 17 October 2015 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops (footnote as in the original).

<sup>79</sup> Francis, *Episcopalis communio* (apostolic constitution), Vatican City 2018, no. 10, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 110 (2018) 1367.

<sup>80</sup> From 2020, the official title in the *Annuario Pontificio* is given as Francis, Bishop of Rome. All other titles, which originated mainly in the second millennium, are printed on the next page, after the brief biographical profile, in small type with the note that these are only historical titles. For example: *Annuario Pontificio* 2020, 33\*-24\*.

<sup>81</sup> The Bishop of Rome was recognized as Patriarch of the West at the ecumenical councils of the first millennium (for details and documentation: P. Pallath, "Primacy and Synodality according to the Common Tradition of the Church in the First Millennium," 23-35). During the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013), the title Patriarch of the West was removed from the list of papal titles (cf. *Annuario Pontificio* 2006, 107\*). However, Pope Francis reinstated the title Patriarch of the West in 2024 (cf. *Annuario Pontificio* 2024, 24).

all business.” In the Latin Church itself the bishops’ conferences, which have gained much importance and competence in recent years, especially in legislative and liturgical matters will not be ignored.

### **Conclusion**

The ecclesiology of communion, which was reestablished by the Second Vatican Council, is today the official ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. In accordance with this ecclesiology the Catholic Church is a communion of particular Churches (dioceses or eparchies) and individual Churches (like patriarchal or major archiepiscopal Churches). The ecclesiology of communion has its repercussions on collegiality, synodality and primacy. Through episcopal consecration, a bishop becomes the head of a diocese or eparchy, the bishop of an individual Church and of the universal Church, as he is a member of the episcopal college. He thus exercises the office of bishop at three levels of the ecclesial communion: the particular Church, the individual Church and the universal Church, even if his role at the three levels is different and is determined by authentic tradition and canon law. Although a bishop is primarily responsible for the community of his diocese or eparchy, as a member of the episcopal college he goes beyond parochialism and provincialism and also works for the common good of his own individual or national Church and the universal Catholic Church. A bishop participates in councils, synods or bishops’ conferences not as a private individual to satisfy his own desires, but as the head of a particular Church and represents it, albeit not in a political and democratic sense.

The Bishop of Rome, successor of St Peter, exercises the Petrine ministry in the universal Church as a service to the communion. He strengthens his brother bishops so that they can exercise their ministry fruitfully, guarantees the unity of the episcopate, safeguards the true Catholic faith and morals, protects liturgical order and canonical discipline, and ensures harmony and consensus among the various Churches of the Catholic communion.