

An Orthodox Response to  
"Towards an Exercise of Primacy in the 21st Century"

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The final chapter of the document, "Towards an Exercise of Primacy in the 21st Century" (pp. 117–134), outlines key proposals from responses to *Ut Unum Sint* and various ecumenical dialogues. **From the perspective of your communion, which of these proposals do you find particularly promising for advancing ecumenical dialogue on the Bishop of Rome's ministry of unity?**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the proposal from the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (DPCU) on [the nature of the Church and the exercise of primacy in the 21st century](#). There are many areas of discussion that are particularly promising for ecumenical dialogue between Rome and the Christian East. My aim is to engage with discussions summarized in the final chapter in a spirit of ecumenical openness, while also clarifying where ecclesiological models diverge with Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches.

I begin by acknowledging the constructive gestures made by His Holiness Pope Francis, for whose health we all continue to pray. The emphasis of Pope Francis on wanting to be known as "Bishop of Rome" in his earliest public statements resonates closely with the first-millennium understanding of the Bishop of Rome's role as "first among equals." The Orthodox churches have never contested the primacy of honor of the Roman See, which Patriarch Athenagoras acknowledged in 1967 as "first in honor and order in the living body."<sup>1</sup> By adopting this title, Pope Francis demonstrates a pastoral and regional identity that opens a pathway for deeper mutual understanding. It is a highly promising step toward fostering mutual understanding with Eastern and Oriental Orthodox.

At the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis also expressed his desire for "an entirely synodal Church."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the universal claims of the papacy as introduced during Vatican I and integrated and completed by Vatican II remain. The Pope still enjoys ordinary, immediate and universal jurisdiction; supreme authority and power—and in certain circumstances could infallibly proclaim the faith of the Church. These roles, concentrated in a single individual, remain fundamentally foreign to the ecclesiology of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches.

Despite these differences, recent bilateral dialogues—such as the statements from Ravenna (2009), Chieti (2017), and Alexandria (2023)—highlight promising areas of convergence. Especially encouraging for future dialogue is the discussion on the essential interdependence between synodality and primacy. Paragraph 6 of the final chapter notes that any theological dialogue on primacy should begin with a reflection on synodality. This reflection involves the ecclesial contexts of the 'all,' the 'some,' and the 'one.' The Church is the gathering of **all** the baptized—the royal priesthood. Among the baptized, **some** are called to a unique clerical ministry, and among these, **one** is called to preside.

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 97, Page 70.

<sup>2</sup> Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015, in Alexandria statement, 2023, Paragraph 4.10

Orthodox ecclesiology is in agreement with Roman Catholic ecclesiology on the essential principle that synodality and primacy are not only mutually interdependent, but also that they are operative at all levels: local, regional, and universal. Yet their approaches differ.

Paragraph 22 states:

One should, however, bear in mind that Orthodox synods generally have a deliberative character, while Catholic synodal structures are mostly consultative.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction deserves greater emphasis. In the Orthodox Church, synods hold binding decision-making authority on matters of doctrine, discipline, and pastoral care, following the model of shared governance seen in the first millennium. A recent example is the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in Crete in 2016, which involved representatives from several autocephalous Orthodox Churches. Decisions on issues like marriage, fasting regulations, and the Church's relationship with other Christian groups were binding on the participating churches. Each church's voice was considered equally, and decisions required consensus.

In contrast, synods in Roman Catholicism are generally consultative, meaning that bishops serve in an advisory capacity to the Pope, who retains final authority.<sup>4</sup> In short, in the Roman Catholic Church, synods advise; in the Orthodox Church, synods decide.

Acts 15 provides a compelling biblical model of deliberative synodality. Faced with the question of whether Gentile converts should follow Jewish laws, the apostles and elders gathered to discern the matter. The decision did not rest on St. Peter alone but emerged from collective deliberation. Ultimately, Saint James, the Bishop of Jerusalem, speaks in the role of a moderator and attributes the decision to the whole assembly: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

Paragraph 99 of the last chapter of the study document also refers helpfully to Apostolic Canon 34, which of course belongs to the common canonical tradition of the Roman see and the sees of the Christian East. This canon explicitly requires the "first bishop" - the *protos* - to act only with the consent of his fellow bishops—and likewise, the others must seek his agreement. It affirms a model of mutual accountability, where decisions arise through shared deliberation rather than unilateral authority.

Metropolitan John Zizioulas, who served as assistant secretary of the commission on Faith and Order, and also, head of the Joint International Commission for Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue explicitly describes how the synodal structures of the Church match that of the asymmetry of the divine Trinity.<sup>5</sup> Metropolitan John emphasizes that while the one constitutes the many in the Church, as the Father in the Holy Trinity, the many also constitute the one. The Church is not constituted without the

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<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 22, page 130. In 1965, Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops as a 'permanent Council of bishops for the universal Church', representative of 'the whole Catholic episcopate', which would assist the pope in an advisory and consultative capacity (Apostolic Letter, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*). See Alexandria 2023, 4.7.

<sup>4</sup> An Example might be the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region held in Rome in October 2019 and the subsequent Querida Amazonia papal exhortation.

<sup>5</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 133f. Extended discussion in Chapter Three. "The Church as Communion."

episcopacy, and yet the charism of the *protos* – the first—in the midst of the community of equals—is seen as the guard against division that is a natural result of diversity.

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew elaborated this very point in his address on “Councils and Conciliarity” at a conference in Istanbul organized by the UNESCO Chair on Religious Pluralism and Peace in 2010:

It is on the teaching about the Holy Trinity, and not on any worldly concept of authority and power, that the entire conciliar and hierarchical structure of the Orthodox Church rests. For the Orthodox Church does not have a centralized authority or leadership, instead comprising a constellation of independent and equal sister churches, among which the Ecumenical Patriarchate possesses historically and traditionally the first rank.

In this regard, the Ecumenical Patriarchate bears a primacy of honor and service within Orthodox Christianity throughout the world. Its authority does not lie in administration, but rather in coordination. This is not a sign of weakness, but precisely of conciliarity.<sup>6</sup>

At an earlier address to Swiss bishops in Geneva, he further noted that there is an “apparent inconvenience of the Orthodox Church—that, not having a central administration, she lacks power—[but] proves in the end to be an advantage, as the Orthodox Church does not rely on secular power, which has no reality, but rather on the power of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Moving forward with ecumenical dialogue, therefore, would benefit from continuing to focus on the shared tradition of conciliarity and mutual consent from the first millennium. Additionally, as the final chapter states, a renewed exercise of primacy must ultimately be modeled on service, and the “kenotic example of Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, we affirm Pope Francis's pastoral sensitivity and his willingness to adopt language that resonates with the shared tradition of East and West, particularly in pursuing greater synodality and understanding primacy as a ministry of service. His recognition of himself as Bishop of Rome represents a hopeful step toward communion, by affirming the significance of regional primacies and demonstrating sensitivity to the historical and theological concerns of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches. Such gestures foster mutual respect and create valuable opportunities for deeper dialogue on primacy, synodality, and Church governance. As we continue these conversations, we do so trusting that the Holy Spirit is at work in our midst, illuminating the way forward—so that we too may proclaim: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”

Thank you for the opportunity to engage in this important conversation.

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<sup>6</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew address on “Councils and Conciliarity” UNESCO Conference on Religious Pluralism and Peace, Istanbul. October 1, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew address to Swiss Bishops’ Conference of the Roman Catholic Church. Zurich, Switzerland, December 14, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 28, page 133.