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NECESSITY AND SIGNS OF  
COMMUNIO BETWEEN THE LOCAL CHURCHES.  
(Metropolitan Paul Gregories)

The idea that "local Churches" should have communio among themselves seems to be based on a particular conception of the "local Church" and its relation to the "universal Church". I wish to submit that both these notions - i.e. that of something called the 'local Church' and of something called the 'universal Church' - can sometimes be theologically defective, and that any thinking based on these defective notions and their inter-relationship is likely to prove unsatisfactory in the long run.

There has been a tradition in the West which conceives the universal Church as composed of local Churches. This view regards the local Church as a part of the whole, something incomplete in itself, dependent upon the universal Church for its life and ministry. In this perspective, the authority of the bishop is never complete even in his relation to the diocese (or the local Church) which he shepherds. He functions only by authorization from and in dependence upon the central authority of the universal Church.

This pattern is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church. In the patriarchal system as it developed in the East too, this tendency was visible. But in the East the pattern was rooted less in any theological conception than in an imitation of Roman or Byzantine civil authority, with which ecclesiastical authority was often seen as parallel, especially in the post-Nicene development.

The one exception in the beginning seems to have been Egypt. There certainly the bishop of Alexandria had jurisdiction over the whole of Egypt from very early times, and Nicea (325 A.D.) in fact recognizes an ancient pattern in its Canon 6. In fact it is particularly noteworthy that it is the Egyptian pattern which is used by Nicea as a model for all the Patriarchates. The sixth Canon of Nicea defines the authority and jurisdiction of Rome as similar to that of Alexandria over Egypt,

Canon II of Constantinople (381) takes into account the reconstitution of the civil jurisdictions in the Byzantine Empire introduced by the Government. But here too it is interesting to note that the single bishop of Alexandria administers the affairs of the whole of Egypt, whereas in the diocese of orient it is bishops in the plural who are given the administration of the affairs of the East, with only prothala or rank given to the bishop of Antioch. In Asia, Pontus and Thrace too the bishops as a collective are given administrative authority over the region of the civil diocese which was usually composed of several prothala provinces. It is again interesting to note that the second Canon of Constantinople does not mention the authority of Rome at all. It would appear that the Council of Constantinople was taking special care not to interfere in the affairs of Rome.

There is this difference between the Patriarchal pattern and the Papal pattern as it developed later. In the Patriarchal pattern no bishop was given universal authority. His jurisdiction was always limited to one geographical region, usually a diocese of the Eastern Roman Empire. Even the so-called Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople was never given authority over the whole oikoumenē. He had prothala or rank after the bishop of Rome, according to the 3rd Canon of Constantinople, but no universal jurisdiction.

In other words, in the Patriarchal pattern, the concept of locality was extended beyond the civil province, so that a bishop (as in the case of Alexandria) or one group of bishops (Synod) had jurisdiction over the affairs of five or six provinces, but no bishop or group of bishops was given universal jurisdiction by the great ecumenical councils.

The Papal pattern first developed in Egypt, but there it never claimed universal scope.

One could say that in the classical conciliar period, the idea of a "universal Church" with a universal central authority, was not really in the minds of the fathers, even when they could have thought of the Ecumenical Council itself as such a universal authority.

How does one account for this reluctance of the Eastern Tradition to speak about a universal authority for the universal Church, such as was later conceived in the

Western tradition? I submit that the East had and still has a different understanding of the status of the 'local Church' in relation to the Church Catholic.

Let us first clarify the three terms - local Church, universal Church and Church Catholic. By local Church we mean the community of Christians in communion with and shepherded by the diocesan bishop; By universal Church people usually mean the world-wide Christian community as constituted in a single unit in communion with and shepherded by the Bishop of Rome as Universal Pastor, and by Church Catholic we mean the Body of Christ spreading throughout space and time. The distinction between Church Universal and Church Catholic is of crucial and decisive importance.

Now the question is - what is the relation of the local Church to the Church Catholic on the one hand and the Church Universal Church on the other? Is the local Church a constitutive part of both? A part in such a way that in itself it does not constitute the Church, but only in relation to the universal Church?

It would appear that the second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on The Church - Immense Constantia - takes this position. For in this view even if all the local pastors or bishops are gathered together in Council, they would have no authority, except when they are in communion with the Roman bishop.

"But the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is understood together with the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter as its head"<sup>1</sup>.

For the Fathers in both East and West, the Church was one. Deus unus, et Christus unus et ecclesia una was how Cyprian put it<sup>2</sup>. But when they the Eastern Fathers spoke about the via atheniensis they were not thinking about the universal Church, but rather about the Church Catholic of

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1. Eng. Tr. from The Documents of Vatican II, Bombay 1966.
  2. Epist 43, V.2.

all ages and places. The Church, as the Body of Christ, cannot be more than one. But it is not the Universal Church which is the Body of Christ, but rather the one, holy Catholic and apostolic Church of all ages and all places.

Cyprian himself tended to waver between the Universal Church and the Catholic Church. When for example he speaks of una ecclesia per totum mundum in multa membra divisa"3, he still seems to think that the Universal Church is the body of Christ, with the various provincial Churches as members of that body. The provincial Church is not the body of Christ, it is only part of the body of Christ, for Cyprian.

Ignatius of Antioch clearly taught that the local Church was the Catholic Church. He wrote no theological treatise, but he writes: "to the Church that presides in rank in the land of the Romans"4, or to "Church of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, which is at Philadelphia in Asia"5. The Church for Ignatius is organized around the bishop, the presbyters and the diaconate, and not around any universal authority.

Tertullian, however, stands in between He says, in de Praescriptionibus Haereticorum that

(The Apostles) established Churches in every city, from which the other Churches borrowed the shoot of faith and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day borrowing them so as to become Churches. It is because of this that these Churches are reckoned as Apostolic, as being the offspring of the Apostolic Churches. Every kind of thing must needs be classed with its origin. And so the Churches, many and great as they are, are identical with that one primitive Church issuing from the Apostles, for thence they are all derived. So all are primitive and all apostolic, while all are one. And their unity is proved by the peace they share, by the title of brethren, by the mutual bond of hospitality - privileges which have no other ground than the one tradition of the same revelation.

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3. Epist. 55:XXIV:2

4. Ep To the Romans, preamble

5. ad Philad.

..... We are in communion with the apostolic Churches because there is no difference of doctrine. This is our guarantee of truth....."6.

Tertullian does not say that the local Church is part of the universal Church, but he says simply that all are one. Each local Church has the same standing as an apostolic Church. And as for signs of communion, Tertullian proposes (a) common tradition, (b) love, peace, brotherhood and mutual hospitality. He says nothing about the Episcopate or the Eucharist or the Papacy. His is a practical lawyer's mind and his theology is accordingly quite down to earth.

Irenaeus also places major emphasis on the common apostolic teaching as the main sign of communion between the local Churches

"Since the Church has received this preaching and this faith, as we have said, although she is scattered through the whole world, she preserves it carefully, as one household: and the whole Church alike believes in these things, as having one soul and heart, and in unison preaching these beliefs, and teaches and hands them on as having one mouth. For though there are many different languages in the world, still the meaning of the tradition is one and the same. And there are no different beliefs or traditions in the Churches established in Germany, or in Spain, or among the Celts, or in the East, or in Egypt, or in Libya, or those established in the centre of the earth"7.

If sharing in the common tradition is the sign of communion for Irenaeus, for Cyprian the sign is the one episcopate in which all bishops share, and which episcopate is fully present in every bishop. There is no trace of the Vatican II idea that the episcopate of each becomes effective only in communion with the Roman Pontiff.

"The episcopate is one; the individual members have each a part, and the parts make up a solid whole.

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6. de Praes. Haer. 21, 32, 36. Eng. Tr. from H. Bettenson, ed. tr. The Early Christian Fathers, Oxford, 1969, p. 130.
7. Adversum Haereticos I. X : 12. E.T. The Early Christian Fathers. p. 92.

The Church is one; yet by her fruitful increase she is extended far and wide to form a plurality"8.

So speaks the undisputed common text of Cyprian's *de Unitate*. The part-whole way of thinking is there, mixed with the other way of thinking that the episcopate as a single reality is plurally manifested.

But what is the sign of communion for Cyprian? He uses pictures to answer the question: the sun and its rays - the seamless robe of Christ. The only indication of a theological principle are the references to the episcopate as one, and the reference to the Church as "cemented by heavenly mysteries"9. The two principles of Orthodox Theology of unity - episcopate and the eucharist - are there, though only in an embryonic form.

It is quite legitimate to see a third principle also in Cyprian again in embryonic form - that of Petrine Primacy. Let us make it clear that Roman Primacy does not follow self-evidently from Petrine Primacy. Cyprian develops a Doctrine of Roman primacy from Petrine primacy, but we need not discuss it here.

That Peter represents the Church as a whole Cyprian does affirm"10. But from Peter the transition is not to the Roman Pontiff, but clearly to the bishop as bishop. He develops the Ignatian line much more resolutely:

"The Church is made up of the people united to their priest (meaning bishop), the flock cleaving to its shepherd. Hence you should know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop, and that if anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the Church"11.

Even the words to Peter "Thou art Peter", etc. are interpreted by Cyprian to mean the establishment of the universal episcopate, rather than the Roman Papacy"12. As Professor Afanasiëff puts it:

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8. de Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate 5
  9. *ibid*:7
  10. Epist XXXIII:I; Ep /XVI:7
  11. Ep /XVI:7,8 - scire debes episcopum in ecclesia esse et ecclesiam in episcopo et si qui cum episcopo non sit in ecclesia non esse.
  12. Ep XXXIII:I Ep XLIII:V:2

according to Cyprian, "Every bishop presides separately over his own local Church, but all bishops have possession of Peter's throne together and so form a 'multiplicity in concord' (consensus multiplicatus)"<sup>13</sup>. The unity of the Church is expressed in the unity and concord of bishops, according to Cyprian.

Afanassiëff summarises Cyprian's view of the Universal Church as a pyramidal one - the people - diffused - at the base, the episcopate - in harmony and unity - at the apex.

Where then is the Consensus multiplicatus expressed? Cyprian's answer is incomplete. He has both forms of expression - conciliarity and papacy; but he does not develop either one as the essential. Afanassiëff offers us the interesting thought that two ecclesiologies are in embryonic form in Cyprian's writings - the 'universal' type and the 'Eucharistic' type. If the universal type is followed, then there has to be one bishop who is the principle of communion between the local Churches; if the eucharistic type is followed, the consequences are that the unity of the Church is expressed in the unity of the episcopate, in the context of each local bishop being united in the Eucharist, in the tradition, and in love, to other bishops and their peoples.

The Orthodox Church follows the Eucharistic ecclesiology as basic, but often adopts customs and practices which have some relation to the Universal ecclesiology. The clearest example of the latter is the creation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate which our tradition has rejected as unlawful. Universal tendencies are also clearly seen in the attempts of the Syrian Patriarch to interfere in the administration of the Indian Church, and in the affirmation of some dissident groups in India who claim that Antioch is the throne of Peter, that the Syrian Patriarch is seated on that throne, and that a Church not subject to the authority of the Syrian Patriarch is apostate.

### Conclusions.

As for the necessity of communio between the local Churches, the tradition of the Church, which the Orthodox follow, leaves us in no doubt. No local Church exists except in communion with the one Body of Christ with which other local Churches are also in communion,

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13. J. Meyendorff et al. The Primacy of Peter.  
Faith Press, Second Ed. 1973. p. 62.

On how that communion is to be expressed, we can make a few observations:

- a) No pattern existing at present is adequately expressing the communion between local Churches because of division in the Church.
- b) The Eucharist is the primary expression of the communion between local Churches. We not only remember each other in the Eucharist, but in our Communion in the Body of Christ, we have Communion with all local Churches.
- c) The bishop being the essential element in the local Church, The communion of the bishops, wherever it is expressed, is an expression of communion between local Churches. In the case of an autocephalous Church, this communion is more intimate and actual, and is expressed in the life of the Synod of that autocephalous Church. The concord of the bishops in the Episcopal Synod is a sign of communion between local Churches which are organized together as an autocephalous Church. This sign is less essential and indispensable than the Eucharist.
- d) As for a universal Council expressing the communion of all local Churches, this has never been achieved, nor is to be regarded as essential. Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus as well as the later councils were basically Councils of the Roman Empire rather than of the world - more Imperial than Universal. The Christians of Georgia, Armenia, Parthia, India, Nubia and Ethiopia as well as other countries outside the Empire do not appear to have participated. The universal Councils are useful and sometimes beneficial is not to be denied. But it does not appear that they are necessary or essential as a sign of communion between local Churches. Too many generations have passed away without participating in a universal council. Like the gift of tongues, they belonged to a ~~particular~~ particular period of the Church's history. They may still prove useful. But they are certainly not an essential sign of communion between local Churches.
- e) What is really essential as a sign and even as a basis for communion between local Churches is agreement in the Tradition of the Church. It is this agreement which then makes it possible for the bishops to be in concord. When there is disagreement in the Tradition, the concord of bishops is ~~has~~ broken, and the signs of communion disappear. Love, peace and concord are all disrupted when there is disagreement with the One Tradition of the Apostolic and Catholic Church.