

The One and Many: An Examination of John Zizioulas’ Ecclesiology

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Introduction

Concerned that the Eastern Church was influenced by the West, first by scholasticism after the fall of Byzantium in 1453, and later by secularism, John Zizioulas, following the footsteps of his teacher, Georges Florovsky, seeks to liberate Orthodox theology by returning to the Early Church Fathers through a patristic synthesis.¹ Ironically, it is the western theologians who first called for a return to the ancient patristic source as a way to revive and reform the church. Zizioulas acknowledges his debt to these theologians, especially Henri de Lubac, in his effort to revive Orthodoxy. This paper attempts to examine the influence of Henri de Lubac on Zizioulas’ thought regarding the relation between the Eucharist and the church. It also seeks to understand Zizioulas’ position on the relation between the universal and the local churches, which is also a key issue in the Roman Catholic Church as demonstrated in the debate between Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper. As we shall see, the metaphysical principle of the “one” and the “many” forms the basis of his theological investigation.

¹ Zizioulas agrees with Florovsky that the main problem in Orthodox scholasticism was the separation of theology from its liturgical roots: “*the lex orandi and the lex credendi no longer coincided.*” See Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 127 – 129.

Ontology

This metaphysical principle, “the one and many,” sums up Zizioulas’ approach in his studies of ecclesiology. First he points out that in the Last Supper, Jesus identifies the bread and wine with his body and blood. The Lord said to his disciples, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14: 24). According to him, these words of the Lord are linked to the “Servant of God,” a figure who takes upon himself the sins of the “multitude” (Is 40: 55), which means he identifies himself with the “many.” This idea by Zizioulas that the “one” represents the “many” has its origin in the Eucharistic tradition in Pauline’s writings: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16 – 17). In St. John’s Gospel, the “Son of Man” incorporates the “many:” “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6: 56).²

In view of the above scriptural evidence, Zizioulas highlights that the Synoptics, St. Paul’s and St. John’s writings share the same fundamental belief that in the Eucharist the “many” become “one” and the “one” incorporates the “many.” Further, it is wrong to interpret Johannine theology as a tendency towards individualism in the Eucharistic community as some scholars do. St John actually speaks of the communicant as an individual within the community. There is also a “curious philological phenomenon” here when Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (Jn 3: 11 – 13). In this quotation, Zizioulas points out the mixing of the first person singular with the first person plural – the “I” and the “We” – the “one” and the “many.”³

² John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 12 – 13.

³ Ibid., 14.

In *Catholicism*, Henri de Lubac mentions St. Peter Damian, a strong supporter of the papacy, who claims that “the whole Church forms, in some sort, but one single person. As she is the same in all, so in each one is she whole and entire; and just as man is called a microcosm, so each one of the faithful is, so to say, the Church in miniature.”⁴ Using this metaphysical principle, “the one and many,” Zizioulas attempts to understand and explain the nature of the church in terms of its universality and particularity.

Ecclesial Being

For Zizioulas, the church is “a way of being,” “a mode of existence.” The mystery of the church is closely tied to the being of man in the world and to the being of God himself. The church is here to serve the existential needs of humankind. As a member of the church, the human being is also “an image of God,” which means he exists as God himself exists, taking on God’s “way of being.” As such, the human being is able to relate to the world, to other people and to God in communion. This ability is not an achievement on the part of the individual person but is a gift from God, an “ecclesial fact.” The church, on its part, must strive to be an image of God by making sure that its structures and ministries conform to this way of existence. In other words, the church must possess the right faith and vision in accordance to God’s being. This is not a luxury for the Orthodox Church, according to Zizioulas, but “an existential necessity.”⁵

This theory of the “one and many” goes back to the Greeks whose philosophy is monistic in outlook. They believed that the being of the world and the being of God were one, forming an unbreakable unity. But the Church Fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus and Athanasius helped to break this ontological monism of Hellenistic philosophy. The Fathers “approached the being of God through the experience of the ecclesial community, of *ecclesial being*.” They found out that God’s being can only be known through personal relationships and love: “Being means life, and life means

⁴ Quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 315.

⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 15.

communion.”⁶ This breakthrough of the Fathers originated from the Eucharistic experience of the church that understands God as communion. Thus Zizioulas claims that there is no true being without communion; the person exists only through communion.

Furthermore, the human person in the church becomes the “image of God” due to the “*economy* of the Holy Trinity” which means the activities of Christ and the Holy Spirit in “history.” This economy is the foundation of ecclesiology: “The Church is built by the historical work of the divine economy but leads finally to the vision of God ‘as He is,’ to the vision of the Triune God in his eternal existence.”⁷ This eschatological aspect of the church is part of the Orthodox tradition that emphasizes liturgical worship, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Zizioulas insists that there is a need to bring the ecclesial being and the being of God closer by rediscovering the importance of the Eucharist in the primitive church. In the olden days, the Eucharist was not just one sacrament among others, merely as a means of grace as taught by the scholastics, administered by the church in the gathering of the people, it was above all, “an eschatological act” – a foretaste of the very life of the trinity. Zizioulas writes: “the eucharist was not the act of a pre-existing Church; it was an event *constitutive* of the being of the Church, enabling the Church to *be*. The eucharist *constituted* the Church’s being.”⁸ As such, the Eucharist serves to unite the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist, the “dialectical relationship” between God and the world is preserved.⁹ The Eucharist is not just a memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, it looks to the future, to the *eschata*, where we get a foretaste of life with God in heaven.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Ibid.

Ecclesial Identity

As the Eucharist is given such a prominent place in Zizioulas' theology, it is no surprise when he claims that the Orthodox Church has its roots in the divine Eucharist. The Catholic and the Protestant Churches, in his opinion, focus primarily on mission, namely preaching and proselytising. But when an Orthodox goes to church, he goes there not primarily to listen to the preaching of the Gospel, but to participate in the liturgy which includes the Eucharistic celebration. In other words, the Orthodox Christian goes to church to worship God.

Be that as it may, Zizioulas thinks that the emphasis on mission, preaching and individual piety by Western Churches is beginning to affect the Orthodox Church, especially its liturgy. He fears that Orthodox liturgy has deteriorated due to pugnacious Western influence. For Zizioulas, the Orthodox Church's main objective is not missionary enterprise; it does not seek to convert others as such because its liturgy does not attempt to explain the faith. At the centre of the Orthodox tradition is worship: the Eucharistic celebration and the recitation of the Creed. Such understanding of the church goes back to its early history where there was only divine worship and the celebration of the Eucharist. It is the liturgy that defines the Orthodox tradition.¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, Zizioulas worries that Orthodox liturgical tradition has been affected in a negative way by aggressive Latinization of the Western Church. Henri de Lubac, however, believes that the ecclesial sense of the Eucharist was diminished because of a change in mentality after the patristic age: "Just as they would no longer see the spiritual reflected in the sensible or the universal and particular as reciprocally symbolical, so the idea of the relationship between the physical body of Christ and his Mystical Body

¹⁰ John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Douglas Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 122. The other aspect of Orthodox tradition is monasticism which he seems to downplay. Perhaps Zizioulas fears that individualism found in ascetic practices may affect the communitarian aspect of the church.

came to be forgotten.”¹¹ Thus it is not a question of scholasticism or Latinization, but secularism which diminishes the sense of the spiritual. It affects both the Eastern and the Western Churches. We will now look at a specific aspect of the liturgy – the celebration of the divine Eucharist in the church.

The Eucharist makes the Church

According to Zizioulas, in the primitive church, the Eucharist is closely tied to the mystery of the church. In fact, the words *ekklesia* and Eucharist mean the same thing. A study of 1 Corinthians 11 shows that the “Lord’s Supper” or “coming together on the same place” and “church” signify the same reality. For St. Paul, the church is the concrete community that celebrates the Eucharist: “the local community becomes the very ‘Church of God’ when it gathers to celebrate the Eucharist.” This close identification of church and the Eucharist was developed further by St. Ignatius of Antioch who taught that the Eucharist makes the church catholic meaning “the full and integral body of Christ.”¹² For Ignatius, the church derives its catholicity from the celebration of the Eucharist, thus, every local church is “catholic.” When the local community gathers together with the bishop, priests, deacons and laity to worship, the “catholic Church” is present because the fullness of Christ is found in the Eucharist.¹³

Borrowing from Aristotelian language, the term ‘catholic’ refers originally to the concrete local churches. The catholicity of the church is also linked to the *parousia*, the eschatological reality, and at the same time, “its nature is revealed and realistically apprehended *here and now* in the Eucharist.” The Eucharist is understood as “an *act* and a *synaxis* of the local Church, a ‘*catholic*’ act of a ‘*catholic*’ Church.”¹⁴ Things changed when St Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), the great Western doctor, came to the scene.

¹¹ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 99.

¹² John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 100.

¹³ Ibid., 101.

¹⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 145 (emphasis in original).

Augustine emphasized that the universality of the Church against the particularism of the Donatists, and the term “catholic” now, for the first time, referred to the universal church. This new meaning of catholicity implies qualitative as well as geographical expansion.¹⁵ As Augustine was such a towering figure with tremendous influence, the Latin Church evolved into a single monolithic organization with the bishop of Rome as its head. Nonetheless, even up to the thirteenth century, the Eucharist continued to be the sacrament of the church that expressed its unity; the body of Christ and the body of the Church are identical. Henri de Lubac speaks of the Eucharist as the sacrament “which contains the whole mystery of our salvation;” it is also the “sacrament of unity.”¹⁶

After the thirteenth century, scholastic theologians made a distinction between the terms, the “body of Christ,” the “body of the church,” and the “body of the Eucharist.”¹⁷ In the Latin Church, sacramental theology became independent of Christology and ecclesiology. There is now a separation between Eucharist and ecclesiology; the Eucharist is seen as just one of the many sacraments; it is no longer identified with the church. As a result, in Western practice, we now have a private celebration of the Eucharist, something that is unheard of in the ancient church. Furthermore, the priest alone can celebrate a valid Eucharist without the bishops, deacons, and the people in the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eucharist became distinct domains. De Lubac speaks against such individualism creeping into the church:

True Eucharistic piety, therefore, is no devout individualism. It is “unmindful of nothing that concerns the good of the Church.” With one sweeping, all-embracing gesture, in one fervent intention it gathers together the whole world. It recalls the commentary that, according to St. John, Jesus himself gave ... the prayer of unity and the approach of the “supreme token of love.” It is on these things that

¹⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 101.

¹⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 89.

¹⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 102.

true Eucharistic piety bases thoughts and resolutions; it cannot conceive of the action of the breaking of bread without fraternal communion ... it will be noticed that in the ancient liturgies, and still nowadays in the East, the prayers for union form the culminating point of the Epiclesis.”¹⁸

The celebration of the Eucharist occupies a central position in the Orthodox Church. However, according to Zizioulas, “in spite of the continuous centrality of the Eucharist in Orthodox Church *life*, an ecclesiology developed in the academic level which regarded the Eucharist as *one* sacrament among many (usually seven), and which actually distinguishes very clearly between Church and Eucharist in its methodology.”¹⁹ Perhaps, this was due to the way universities and seminaries organized their curriculum.

What Zizioulas is emphasizing here is that there is a gap or dichotomy between academic ecclesiology and the liturgical practice in the Orthodox Church. Fortunately, in our own time, Zizioulas argues, the situation has changed for the better due to the revival of biblical, patristic and liturgical studies by Western scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century. One of the good things in this revival is the restoration of the ancient link between the Eucharist and the Church, which was forgotten in the Middle Ages. Zizioulas acknowledges that it is through the influence of these Western theologians and liturgists that Orthodox thinkers themselves began to appreciate “the patristic concept of the Eucharist as *leitourgia*, i.e. *a work of the people* and as gathering *epi to auto* to realize the ecclesial event *par excellence*.”²⁰ One of those who sought to revive this close connection between the Eucharist and the Church was Nicholas Afanasiev. The main principle of Afanasiev’s Eucharistic ecclesiology is “wherever there is the Eucharist there is the Church.” Zizioulas, however, is critical of such one sided theory, thus

¹⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 109 – 110.

¹⁹ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 103.

²⁰ Ibid. Regarding the work of Western scholars in liturgical revival, Zizioulas was referring to the writings of G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1945; O. Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*, 1999; W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, 2003.

accuses Afanasiev of promoting “*eucharistic* presupposition of ecclesiology and not so much of the ecclesiological presuppositions of the Eucharist.”²¹

The first problem in Afanasiev’s Eucharistic ecclesiology, according to Zizioulas, is that the local Church at present times does not comprise only of one parish as in the primitive church. In other words, in the past, all the members of the local Church assembled in one place in the presence of all the presbyters and the bishop at its head, thus overcoming social and cultural divisions, and fulfilling all the conditions of catholicity. Nowadays, however, the Eucharistic community does not meet all these conditions. In Zizioulas’ opinion, since there are more than one parish in the local Church these days, we cannot have all the faithful gathered together in one place when the Eucharist is celebrated. Therefore, the parish is not a “complete” and “catholic” Church.²² The idea that the parish by itself is not “catholic” contradicts Orthodox teaching.

It seems that Zizioulas’ understanding of catholicity is limited to geographical and spatial dimensions in the Augustinian sense. According to Orthodox understanding, the catholicity of the Church is not an empirical or a geographical reality but refers to its ontological nature. The Church is “catholic” or “sobornost” because of its wholeness and integrity.²³ Catholicity in the Orthodox tradition has nothing to do with physical expansion. At the same time, Zizioulas admits that where the Eucharist is celebrated, there is the church. The other problem has to do with the relationship between the local and the universal churches. Zizioulas thinks that the Eucharistic ecclesiology of Afanasiev suggests that each local church is independent of each other. Further, Afanasiev in giving priority to the local churches over the universal church runs the risk of “localism.” Zizioulas is looking for a solution that will maintain the right balance between “localization” and

²¹ Ibid., 104.

²² John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 24. For further studies on this issue see Eamon McManus, “Aspects of primacy according to two Orthodox theologians,” *One In Christ* 36, no. 3 (January 1, 2000), 234-250.

²³ Catholicity of the Church: “Sobornost” by Fr Milan Savich, http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/dogmatics/savich_catholicity.htm.

“universalization” of the Church. It is a solution that transcends both localism and universalism.²⁴

Zizioulas puts the issue in this way: “does the Eucharist make the Church or is the reverse true, namely that the Church constitutes the Eucharist.”²⁵ The scholastic theologians say it is the church that makes the Eucharist; Afanasiev and other Orthodox theologians say it is the Eucharist that makes the church. Zizioulas argues that the question is related to the relation between Christology and pneumatology. Thus when we say that the church precedes the Eucharist, we imply that Christology precedes pneumatology. This means that it is the institutional church that makes the celebration of the Eucharist possible. Zizioulas writes: “This position forms part of an ecclesiology which views the Church as the Body of Christ which is *first* instituted in itself as an historical entity and *then* produces the ‘mean of grace’ called sacraments, among them primarily the Eucharist.”²⁶ The order suggested by traditional dogmatic manual in the Latin Church is as follows: first comes Christ, second, the Holy Spirit, then the Church and lastly, the sacraments including the Eucharist. This line of thinking, of course, is unnatural to the Orthodox Church. Zizioulas is merely stating the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

As far as Zizioulas is concerned, there is no question of priority between the Church and the Eucharist. His position is this: “the Church constitutes the Eucharist while being constituted by it.”²⁷ In other words, Church and Eucharist coincide, they are identical as it were. As stated earlier, Afanasiev’s teaches that “wherever there is the Eucharist there is the Church.” He gives priority to the Eucharist over the Church and supports “*eucharistic* presupposition of ecclesiology.”²⁸ Zizioulas, however, avoids the pitfall of

²⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 25.

²⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 104.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 104.

giving priority either to the Church or to the Eucharist. He believes that they are inter-dependent.

Henri de Lubac argues that “the Eucharist makes the Church. It makes of it an inner reality. By its hidden power, the members of the body come to unite themselves by becoming more fully members of Christ, and their unity with one another is part and parcel of their unity with the one single Head.”²⁹ At the same time, de Lubac also admits that the Eucharist cannot explain everything in the church, for example its structure, which is needed for the church to spread itself physically. Thus for practical purposes, especially for missionary endeavours, to facilitate the administration of the sacraments, it is the church that makes the Eucharist. Hence, in *The Splendour of the Church*, de Lubac says “The Church makes the Eucharist. It was principally to that end that her priesthood was instituted. ‘Do this in memory of me.’”³⁰ Further, he argues that “the ministry of the twelve” was instituted for the purpose of celebrating the Eucharist. In this sense, it is the church that makes the Eucharist.

Paul McPartlan sums up the two principles in this way: “We see that, for de Lubac, the transition between the principles that the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church takes place via the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements.”³¹ As we can see, de Lubac has it both ways – the Eucharist makes the church and the church makes the Eucharist. This is quite similar to Zizioulas’ understanding that “the Church constitutes the Eucharist while being constituted by it.”³² The influence of de Lubac is clearly

²⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, translated by Gemma Simmonds CJ with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens, edited by Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2006), 88. Von Balthasar says “The Church’s sacrifice is, therefore, at once distinct from that of Christ and identical with his, since it consists in a (feminine) consenting to the sacrifice of Christ (and to all the consequences that flow from the Church). Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, translated with an introduction by Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 99.

³⁰ Quoted in Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 100.

³¹ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 104.

³² John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 105.

evident in Zizioulas' understanding of the Eucharist in the church. Obviously, Zizioulas favours a kind of Eucharistic ecclesiology that emphasizes the Church as a communion. The kind of ecclesiology he adopts has to do with the relationship between the universal and particular churches.

Universal and Local Churches

Western theology gives priority to *being*, making the particular less important than the universal. This means that the universal Church has priority over the particular churches. Thus the one Church stands over the rest of the local churches, and the pope over the rest of the bishops. This was expressed by the First Vatican Council's (1869-70) teaching on the infallibility of the pope. Critical of such position, Zizioulas argues that this is not merely "a judicial matter, but a consequence of placing essence before existence, the one before the many."³³ In his ecclesiology, Zizioulas avoids giving priority to either the universal or the particular church. Zizioulas teaches that local churches are related to one another, and what binds them together is the seven Ecumenical Councils, which express the teaching of the entire Church. But he acknowledges that the balance between the Councils and churches is not easy to maintain. "Conciliarism" is the term used in the West to express the supreme authority of the council. In the Orthodox Church, only the first seven general councils are accepted as genuinely ecumenical and thus binding on them. As a consequent, in the East, no ordinary church council is allowed to interfere with the affairs of the local churches. This was the principle articulated in the third century by St. Cyprian that states: "every bishop is to lead his own diocese, ordain whomever he wishes, and be responsible directly to God."³⁴

In Orthodox ecclesiology, there are patriarchates and autocephalous churches, which are seen as expressing the conciliarity of the church. Tradition accords the Bishop of Constantinople as first in honour among all

³³ John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Douglas Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 141. Although Vatican II has taught that each local church is the whole church in each place, it has not officially repudiated the teaching of Vatican I, and thus there seems to be a dilemma in Roman Catholic ecclesiology. This is revealed by two different view points regarding the primacy of the universal church.

³⁴ Ibid., 142.

the Eastern Orthodox bishops. It is not him personally but the Patriarchate of Constantinople that holds honour or primacy, and this is only honour of being seated as the first among the equals. It carries no administrative privileges or jurisdictional powers. The Church is considered “healthy” if there is consultation between him and the other churches, and *vice versa*. In other words, the Patriarch of Constantinople does not hold absolute power over the other churches. Zizioulas points out that this is very different from Roman Catholicism where the pope has the authority to intervene in any local church without consulting the local authority: the pope makes the final decisions alone. But in the Orthodox Church, there is no such “papal element” in its ecclesiology.³⁵

While Henri de Lubac acknowledges that the Orthodox belief in Eucharistic communion would provide a good platform for dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics, it would be a mistake to “deduce ‘a real priority of the local church over the universal.’”³⁶ In agreement with Yves Congar, de Lubac believes there is “mutual interiority” between the local and the universal churches. This mutual interiority means that a bishop is consecrated for the service of the local church as well as the universal church. As such, the local church cannot claim priority over the universal church. Although de Lubac appreciates the Orthodox position, he is not convinced by it. Neither is he convinced of the priority of the universal church over the local churches. It is an issue that de Lubac admits he cannot resolve.³⁷ This topic was the subject of a widely publicised debate between Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper. As we shall see, Walter Kasper’s position is more in accord with Zizioulas’ approach regarding the priority of the local churches over the universal church.

The Ratzinger-Kasper Debate

Joseph Ratzinger’s (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) strong assertion of the priority of the universal church led to a prolonged debate between him

³⁵ Ibid., 145.

³⁶ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 106.

³⁷ Ibid., 110.

and Cardinal Walter Kasper in 2001 before he was elected pontiff. In a series of exchanges, Kasper accuses Ratzinger of reversing the traditional order of priority. This is because “the local church is neither a province nor a department of the universal church; it is the church at a given place.”³⁸ Kasper says he has reached this position regarding the relationship between the universal church and particular local churches through his pastoral experience. He analyzes the question in terms of praxis and not doctrine. Kasper accuses Ratzinger of approaching the problem from a purely abstract and theoretical point of view, without taking into consideration the actual pastoral situations.

Walter Kasper is particularly against the assertion of Ratzinger that: “in its essential mystery, the universal church is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual church.”³⁹ He contends that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) identifies the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church with the universal church in a way that excludes the particular churches. Another serious problem with Ratzinger’s assertion of the ontological and temporal priority of the universal church is the unspoken assumption that “the Roman church is *de facto* identified with the pope and the curia.”⁴⁰

Unlike Ratzinger, Kasper believes that the problem of the relationship between the universal church and the local churches cannot be approached by theoretical deduction because the church is a concrete reality. Like Ratzinger, he starts off with scripture, but arrives at a different conclusion. Kasper also asserts that in the Gospel of Luke, the word *ecclesia* refers to a domestic and local community. The early church was developed from local communities, presided over by a bishop; “the one church was present in each and all, they were all in communion.” Kasper acknowledges that the See of Rome, “presiding in charity,” was the guiding and leading authority in determining

³⁸ Walter Kasper, “On the Church,” *America*, April 23, 2001, 184(14), 9. See also Kilian McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper debate: the universal church and local churches,” *Theological Studies*, June 1, 2002; 63(2), 227 – 250 and Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 357 – 382.

³⁹ Walter Kasper, “On the Church,” *America*, April 23, 2001, 184(14), 10.

⁴⁰ Kilian McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper debate: the universal church and local churches,” *Theological Studies*, June 1, 2002; 63(2), 231.

orthodoxy. For the Eastern Church, this authority of Rome did not include jurisdictional power.⁴¹ Thus Kasper concludes that the ecclesiology of the first millennium neither stressed the primacy of the universal church nor the local churches.

Conclusion

To sum up, Zizioulas thinks that the problem regarding the priority of churches is relevant to the extent the local church enjoys a “primary and constitutive role” in ecclesiology. If the local church has a primary constitutive role, diversity will take place. Zizioulas insists that diversity is necessary for the church because without it, the church ceases to exist. The church must be a local reality. Further, if we stress the importance of the Holy Spirit in ecclesiology, then the one Church will be understood as many “Churches incarnating.”⁴² He assures us that diversity will not destroy unity and *vice versa*.

To safeguard both unity and diversity, Zizioulas recommends a historical solution – synodality – an institution that ensures the right balance between the “one” and the “many.” Synods serve as “instruments of communion” of churches to safeguard unity and harmony. To do this, synods must not interfere with the internal affairs of the local church. Further, all matters relating to other local churches should be brought to the synod of the bishops concerned. In all synods, the head or primus must decide with the rest of the bishops who also cannot act without consulting him. All these rules and regulations ensure that the local church remains in communion with the other local churches without losing their independence. For Zizioulas, the universal church is not above the local churches but “a communion of full and ‘catholic’ Churches.”⁴³ For him, unity does not destroy diversity. This means that we should not have an authority that requires the “many” to be “one.” After all, unity is not to be confused with uniformity. The Roman Catholic Church could adopt this idea of synodality to promote better relationship between the

⁴¹ Walter Kasper, “On the Church,” *America*, April 23, 2001, 184(14), 11.

⁴² John D. Zizioulas, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church and the World today* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 339.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 340 – 341.

universal church and the local churches and better understanding of Orthodox tradition. This idea of synodality as recommended by Zizioulas could also be the basis for the two sister churches to be reunited again.

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