

Chapter 2

Nicholas Afanasiev

The eucharistic ecclesiology of Orthodox theologian Nicholas Afanasiev, with its emphasis on the unity of faith, on communion, and on the relationship between the local and universal churches, exerted great influence on Roman Catholic theology prior to Vatican II. Afanasiev attended the Council as an official observer and was also present when the anathemas from the eleventh century were lifted by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I. In his essay 'Una sancta', written 'to the memory of John XXIII, the Pope of Love', Afanasiev expressed great hope for the reunification of the Christian churches when Vatican II was convoked. Concerned about the sinful division of Christianity, Afanasiev saw the Eucharist as the source of unity. He applied his understanding of the eucharistic assembly to exploring the nature of division and the possibilities of reunion between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.

While Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was still prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, his preference in ecumenical endeavours was for a slow, realistic, and theologically attentive approach. As a result, he was very critical of shortcuts to unity. Critical of the various approaches to ecumenism that relied on sociological or political models, Ratzinger believed it was unlikely that full Christian unity would happen in the near future. However, as Pope Benedict XVI, he confirmed his commitment to Christian unity as a priority in his pontificate. Not only did Ratzinger seek to correct a wrong interpretation of the Council's ecclesiological vision, he also wanted to stress Vatican II's conception of the local churches. In his ecclesiology, Ratzinger moved from an emphasis on the church as the mystical body of Christ to the church as the sacrament of salvation. This led to his understanding of the importance of the Eucharist as the foundation of the church.

This chapter seeks to examine the eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicholas Afanasiev and Joseph Ratzinger. It attempts to demonstrate that in spite of their differences, they share a belief that the impasse in the dialogue between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches can be overcome by 'a purification of memory' in 'a spirit of love' that is also rooted in the Eucharist. It is this purification of memory through the effort of love that will enable the process of healing to take place in their ecumenical efforts to achieve unity. Afanasiev categorized his understanding of the church into two fundamental types: universal and eucharistic.

Universal Ecclesiology

Universal ecclesiology based on the principles laid down by Cyprian of Carthage gradually replaced eucharistic ecclesiology. Universal ecclesiology teaches that only the universal church possesses fullness, which means that the local churches do not possess fullness. The principle of unity of the universal church consists of 'a multiplicity united in peace' of the bishops. For Cyprian, 'the principle of the unity of the episcopate is the principle of the unity of the universal church. The unity of the Church demands the unity of the bishops, and the unity of the bishops protects the unity of the Church.'¹ Furthermore, 'The bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop, and if anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the Church.'²

To Cyprian and the early Church Fathers, the church is one because Christ is one. Cyprian, with his Roman background, was precise in juridical formulae and thus, for him, the essential unity of the church is found in the one Christ. At the same time, the actual unity of the many local churches 'is preserved in the one episcopate which all bishops share, the one throne of Peter which all bishops occupy'.³

1. Nicholas Afanasiev, 'Una sancta', in Michael Plekon (ed.) (2003), *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time/ Readings from the Eastern Church*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. For a detailed biography of Afanasiev, see Aidan Nichols OP (1989), *Theology in the Russian Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Some material in this chapter appeared as an article: Ambrose Ih-Mong (2012), 'Purification of memory in the spirit of love: An examination of the ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and Joseph Ratzinger'. *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 3 March, 129–57.
2. Afanasiev, 'Una sancta', p. 13.
3. M. Edmund Hussey (1975), 'Nicholas Afanasiev's Eucharistic ecclesiology: a Roman Catholic viewpoint', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12, no. 2 (March), 236.

Universal ecclesiology implies that outside the episcopate there is no church. As such, Afanasiev believed that the schism existing between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches has been perpetuated by uncritical acceptance of Cyprian's formula. He wrote: '[T]his doctrine [universal ecclesiology], and above all the doctrine on the unity of the Church and on the principle of this unity, has greatly supported the division.'¹ Thus there can be no hope of reunion between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches from the perspective of universal ecclesiology, which teaches that local churches are rooted in the universal church, for this means that no local churches separated from the universal church can remain as part of the church. Regarding the status of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, universal ecclesiology would convince each of them that there can only be one true church, not two. Hence, an ecumenical dialogue based on universal ecclesiology is doomed to fail.

In sum, universal ecclesiology based on the principles formulated by Cyprian of Carthage is not the primitive structure of the church, but a development caused by external factors in the Christian community during the time of Constantine. A universal ecclesiology implies the idea of primacy, but Afanasiev's preference was for priority given to the local church. He believed that a return to the eucharistic ecclesiology of the early church would have the potential to heal the rift between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches and to recover the unity that was there from the very beginning.

Eucharistic Ecclesiology

According to Afanasiev, 'in the apostolic age, and throughout the second and third centuries, every local church was autonomous and independent – autonomous, for it contained in itself everything necessary to its life; and independent, because it did not depend on any other local church or any bishop whatever outside itself.'²

Furthermore:

[T]he local church is autonomous and independent, because the Church of God in Christ indwells it in perfect fullness. It is independent, because any power, of any kind, exercised over it would be exercised over Christ and His Body. It is

1. Afanasiev, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

2. Afanasiev, 'The Church which Presides in Love' (1992) in John Meyendorff (ed.), *The Primacy of Peter: Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 107.

autonomous, because fullness of being belongs to the Church of God in Christ, and outside it nothing is, for nothing can have being outside Christ.¹

Christ is fully present in the Eucharist and each local church together with its bishop during eucharistic celebrations manifests the full body of Christ. Afanasiev taught that ‘Where the Eucharist is, there is the Church of God, and where the Church of God is, there is the Eucharist. It follows that the eucharistic assembly is the distinctive empirical sign of the Church.’² As such, the limit of the church is determined by the limit of the eucharistic assembly.

The bishop is not excluded because he is ‘the distinctive empirical sign of the local church.’ In fact the bishop is ‘included in the very concept of the Eucharist’.³

However, Afanasiev was critical of universal ecclesiology that maintains the principle of unity in the episcopate which lies above eucharistic assembly. For him, the role of the bishop is important for the church, but it is not the full manifestation of the church. Although nothing can stand above the local eucharistic assembly, Afanasiev also argued that the *una sancta* (the church) is not subordinate to the local church and thus maintained a proper balance between the universal and local aspects of the church. He wrote:

Each local church would unite in herself just the local churches, for she possessed all the fullness of the Church of God and all the local churches together were united because the same Church of God dwelt in them all. . . . It is the union of the Church of God with herself, through diverse representations. Within eucharistic ecclesiology the principle of the union of the local churches is that of the unity of the Church of God, which is found in the local church herself.⁴

Therefore what was celebrated in one church was also celebrated in others as they all possess the fullness of the church of God. The local churches are not provincial in nature, but possess a universal nature.⁵ Hence separated churches are also in some ways in communion with the church.

1. Ibid., p. 109.

2. Afanasiev, ‘Una sancta’, p. 14.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 15.

5. Quoted in Radu Bordeianu (2009), ‘Orthodox–Catholic dialogue: retrieving Eucharistic ecclesiology,’ *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 2 (March), 242–3.

According to Afanasiev, both the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church celebrate the same Eucharist, and as a result, he contended, the two communities are united in spite of dogmatic differences. Cyprian, however, argued that separated churches are not in communion with the church (*una sancta*) and as such their sacraments are not valid. Unfortunately, both the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church adopted Cyprian's position. Each considered itself the true church and thereby dismissed the other as having a 'diminished existence of the Church'.¹ But Afanasiev considered such a position to be untenable because 'the nature of the Church presupposes that either she exists in her fullness or she does not exist at all, but there can be no partial existence nor can there be vestiges existing here and there. The Church is one in all the fullness of her nature and she is the only true Church, and it is not possible to have the Church where there is error.'²

According to the Nicene Creed, the church is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic,' and thus Afanasiev insisted that the church would always be one in spite of differences. He wrote: '[I]f one recognized the quality of church in the other part of the divided church, one would be minimizing the importance of dogmatic differences, leaving them integral as they are. If one or the other parts are both the church, then this means the sacraments are celebrated and salvation is possible in both, for this is the purpose of the church.'³ In his ecclesiology, Afanasiev stressed fewer doctrinal differences, but emphasized that:

For eucharistic ecclesiology, the orthodox church and the catholic church are both Churches, or to be more exact, each local church of both groups remains a Church – as it was before so it is after the 'separation.' I put 'separation' in quotation marks for it did not take place and there is no separation. The Church of God is forever and remains one and unique. The break in communion was not able to produce the division of the Church which, by her very nature, cannot be divided into parts.⁴

1. Ibid., 243.

2. Afanasiev, 'Una sancta', p. 8. Bordeianu argues that ironically Afanasiev did not accept different degrees of belonging to the church and thus he implicitly followed Cyprian's position that there is no church outside the universal Church. Bordeianu, *op. cit.*, 243.

3. Afanasiev, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.

4. Ibid., p. 22.

Afanasiev believed that the East–West schism did not affect union at the deeper level. Thus the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are still united in essence, even though they still lack eucharistic communion, because the separation is based on canonical principles:

[O]ur separation, even if provoked by dogmatic differences, nevertheless has a canonical character. The separation always remains but on the surface of ecclesial life and never extends to its depths. Our canonical division (provoked by dogmatic differences), a division that in turn has given rise to even more profound dogmatic differences, has despite all of this never entirely broken our eucharistic unity. Although this unity does not find concrete expression for reasons of canonical order, we are not able to transform in reality our ecclesiological *koinonia*, our fellowship.¹

Eucharistic unity remains intact in spite of doctrinal differences. While acknowledging that exclusion from the Eucharist happens when there is a schism, Afanasiev argued that:

The nature of the break in communion indicated that the local church deprived of communion with the other churches ceased to exist for the latter, for there were no longer links by which this communion could be realized. But such a church did not cease to remain in itself the Church of God despite its isolated situation. If we think that such a local church is no longer the Church, we reject the only distinctive sign by which we can judge the existence of a Church: where there is the eucharistic assembly, there is Christ, and there is the Church of God in Christ.²

Thus in the ecclesiology of Afanasiev, the churches scattered throughout the world remain one with the rest as manifested in the eucharistic celebration. In other words, the unity of the churches depends primarily on the same Eucharist being celebrated in different local churches. They are not dependent on local communities, doctrinal uniformity, episcopal union or even the bond of love. Afanasiev lamented that both the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church have forgotten these eucharistic principles and instead have focused on their doctrinal differences. He called for a return to the eucharistic ecclesiology of the early church, believing this would

1. Ibid., p. 49.

2. Ibid., p. 18.

eventually lead to unity when believers from the two churches receive the Eucharist. This means that as long as there is a valid Eucharist in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, the unity has never completely been broken – the link is the Eucharist.¹

Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology has been criticized for its one-sidedness manifested in congregationism, and he has also been accused of favouring the local church over the universal church.² Nonetheless, his understanding of eucharistic ecclesiology has an ecumenical significance in explaining the idea that the problems of a divided church cannot be separated from the issue of the Eucharist. Influential in the Roman Catholic Church, Afanasiev was the only Orthodox theologian whose work was mentioned in the documents of Vatican II. In *Lumen Gentium*, we see that the Eucharist is important in the life of the church because it signifies and effects unity in the church:

Really partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. 'Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread.' In this way all of us are made members of His Body, 'but severally members one of another.'³

The fundamental idea in eucharistic ecclesiology is that the local church contains the fullness of the church. *Lumen Gentium* also expresses this perspective:

In any community of the altar, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, there is exhibited a symbol of that charity and 'unity of the mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation.' In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. For 'the partaking of the body and blood of Christ does nothing other than make us be transformed into that which we consume.'⁴

1. Bordeianu, *op. cit.*, 245.

2. Anastacia Wooden (2010), 'Eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and its ecumenical significance: a new perspective'. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 4 (September), 544.

3. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church – *Lumen Gentium*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, no. 7.

4. *Ibid.*, no. 26.

As we can see, Vatican II affirms that the one church is fully present in the local church. However, it also emphasizes the principle that local churches are part of the universal church – they are not autonomous and independent, as taught by Afanasiev. *Lumen Gentium* affirms that:

The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful. The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model of the universal Church, in and from which churches come into being the one and only Catholic Church.¹

The above statement means that the local church is just a portion of the universal church. Afanasiev saw the Eucharist as the source of unity. In contrast, Vatican II sees the pope as the ‘principle and foundation of unity’, and the Eucharist as a sign and means of fostering that unity.

Spirit of Love

Putting aside all dogmatic differences, Afanasiev urged both churches to work towards strengthening their common bond in the Eucharist in a spirit of love:

By an effort of Love, the orthodox church *could* reestablish communion with the catholic church, the dogmatic divergences notwithstanding and without demanding that the catholic church renounce the doctrines that distinguish her from the orthodox church. . . . Certainly, to attain this the effort in Love is necessary, a great sacrifice, an element of self-renunciation. To restrict the doctrine of the power of the pope within the limits of the catholic church would be, for the church of Rome, the result of a great sacrificial spirit toward the goal of reestablishing the union-of-the-churches-joined-in-Love.²

In view of the above, Afanasiev called for the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches to act in the spirit of love to renew their communion in spite of disagreements over many aspects of church

1. Ibid., no. 23.

2. Afanasiev, ‘Una sancta’, pp. 25–6.

life and teaching. Not minimizing the importance of dogmatic formulations nor advocating doctrinal relativism or indifferentism, Afanasiev believed that differences can be resolved through the power of charity. He claimed that Christians ‘have forgotten that “our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect” (1 Corinthians 13:9). When Love is raised higher than knowledge, then knowledge itself will be perfected. Knowledge is not opposed to Love and Love does not exclude knowledge.’¹ Thus Orthodox and Roman Catholics need to strengthen the bond of love in order to re-establish eucharistic communion.

When Afanasiev wrote about ‘the agreement in Love of the local churches’, he was not referring to love as an emotion or general friendliness.² Love for him was a commitment, an effective binding force:

If the power founded upon love is insufficient in actual life, which has lost the principle of love, it is on the contrary completely sufficient in the Church, where love is the first and the last principle. Juridical power is a substitute for love in actual social life, a substitute as perfect as possible in a very imperfect life. In the Church, perfect love dwells, there is no need for such a substitute.³

In sum, Afanasiev contended that the main difference between universal ecclesiology and eucharistic ecclesiology is in the principle of unity of the local churches. Universal ecclesiology stresses the fullness and unity of the church in the multitude of local churches and is guaranteed by the episcopacy. Eucharistic ecclesiology, however, stresses the fullness of the one church manifested in each local church. Afanasiev was convinced that eucharistic ecclesiology existed in the early church and he saw it as a primordial way of being church. Universal ecclesiology borrowed ideas and structures from the civil society and gradually replaced eucharistic ecclesiology. This ‘slippage of the Eucharist from the central, defining action of the Church to merely one of many services performed’ caused the meaning of the Eucharist to be obscured.⁴ Afanasiev understood that one of the most serious problems in the life of the church was due to ‘the separation of the structures and organization of the Church

1. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

3. Quoted in Wooden, *op. cit.*, 554.

4. *Ibid.*, 555.

from the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist'.¹ In the same way, Ratzinger has claimed that the separation of the doctrine of the Eucharist from ecclesiology represents a distortion in theology.

The Ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger

Pope Emeritus Joseph Ratzinger believes that:

the separation of the doctrine of the Eucharist and ecclesiology, which can be noted from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, represents one of the most unfortunate pages of medieval theology . . . because both thereby lost their centre. A doctrine of the Eucharist that is not related to the community of the Church misses its essence as does an ecclesiology that is not conceived with the Eucharist as its centre.²

The institution of the Eucharist is the making of a covenant and thus it is the concrete foundation of the new people. This means that the people come into being through the covenant relationship with God. Jesus brings his disciples into his communion with God and also into his mission to draw all people at all times and places to himself. These disciples become a 'people' through communion in the Eucharist.³

The Old Testament theme of covenant is appropriated by Jesus and receives a new centre: communion with Christ's body. Thus the church, the people of the new covenant, takes its origin from the Eucharist; the church is regarded as the people of God only through its communion with Christ. It is only this relationship with Christ that allows men and women to gain access to God. In *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (1996), Ratzinger writes:

[T]he Eucharist, seen as the permanent origin and centre of the Church, joins all the 'many,' who are now made a people, to the one Lord and to his one and only Body. The fact already implies that the Church and her unity are but one. It is true that the many celebrations in which the one Eucharist will be realized also

1. Ibid.

2. Joseph Ratzinger (1965), 'The pastoral implications of episcopal collegiality'. *Concilium* 1, 28.

3. Ratzinger (1996), *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, p. 28.

point ahead to the multiformity of the one Body. Nevertheless, it is clear that these many celebrations cannot stand side by side as autonomous, mutually independent entities but are always simply the presence of one and the same mystery.¹

Influenced by Henri de Lubac, Ratzinger asserts that the church as the mystical body of Christ refers to the Eucharist. St Paul and the Early Fathers also connected the idea of the church with the Eucharist. Eucharistic ecclesiology implies that Jesus' Last Supper is the event that founded the church:

[T]he Eucharist joins human beings together, not only with one another, but also with Christ, and . . . in this way it makes people into the Church. At the same time this already determines the fundamental constitution of the Church: Church lives in eucharistic communities. Her worship service is her constitution, for by her very nature she is service of God and therefore service of men, the service that transforms the world.²

The mass is the church's form, through which it develops the new relationship of multiplicity and unity. This means that the ecclesiology of local churches has its origin in the formulation of the eucharistic ecclesiology.³ Thus we also see Ratzinger's ecclesiology seeking to clarify the role of the local churches through an understanding of the church as a sacrament of salvation and the Eucharist as the foundation of the church. In *Rome and the Eastern Churches* (2010), Aidan Nichols sums up the significance of eucharistic ecclesiology when he writes:

The value of a eucharistic ecclesiology is that it derives the ministerial, and therefore governmental, structure of the Church from the pattern of her eucharistic life and in so doing

1. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

2. Ratzinger (2008), *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp. 17–18. Claude Geffré is more radical when he writes: 'the visible belonging to the church guaranteed by the confession of the same creed and the communion in the eucharistic body of Christ can be a sacrament of an invisible belonging to Christ, who transcends the borders of the visible church and who may coincide with belonging to the other great non-Christian traditions.' Claude Geffré (2002), 'Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion', in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions?* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, p. 104.

3. Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

suggests how we should understand the relation of the local church, which celebrates the Eucharist in a particular place, to the universal Church, the *Catholica*. The Eucharist is always celebrated by a particular group, yet that which is so celebrated is, in fact, the Eucharist of the whole Church. The local church, therefore, manifests the plenitude of the Church – yet only in the measure of its communion with all the other churches.¹

Ratzinger emphasizes that the church is not a human construction. We can only receive the church from where it is really present: ‘from the sacramental communion of his Body as it makes its way through history.’² This leads to his preference for an ecclesiology of *communio*.

Ecclesiology of Communion

Joseph Ratzinger teaches that the concept of communion lies “‘at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding” insofar as it is the mystery of the personal union of each human being with the divine Trinity and with the rest of mankind, initiated with the faith, and, having begun as a reality in the Church on earth, is directed towards its eschatological fulfilment in the heavenly Church’.³ This concept of communion must be understood in the biblical sense, and in the biblical context, communion has theological, Christological, soteriological, and ecclesiological characteristics.⁴

There is also a sacramental dimension as acknowledged by St Paul: ‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body’ (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). Thus the ecclesiology of communion forms the basis for Eucharistic ecclesiology. Ratzinger writes:

1. Aidan Nichols OP (2010), *Rome and the Eastern Churches*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp. 359–60.
2. Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
3. Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1992), ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion’, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html.
4. Ratzinger, ‘The Ecclesiology of Vatican II’, Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy), <http://www.wtn.com/library/curia/cdfecv2.htm>.

In the Eucharist, Christ, present in the bread and wine and giving Himself anew, builds the Church as His Body and through His Risen Body He unites us to the one and triune God and to each other. The Eucharist celebrated in different places is universal at the same time, because there is only one Christ and only a single body of Christ. The Eucharist comprehends the priestly service of ‘repraesentatio Christi’ as well as that network of service, the synthesis of unity and multiplicity which is expressed in the term ‘communio’.¹

Communion has two dimensions: the vertical that is communion with God and the horizontal that is communion with one another. Christians must understand that communion is a gift from God given to us through the paschal mystery. Ecclesial communion is both invisible and visible. The invisible reality refers to our communion with the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The visible reality is our communion with one another as sharers in the divine nature, in the passion of Christ, and in the same faith. In the church on earth, there is this close relationship between the invisible and visible aspects of communion. The link between these two dimensions of communion, invisible and visible, constitutes the church as the sacrament of salvation. From this sacramentality, Ratzinger argues, the church is open to missionary and ecumenical work. It is sent out to the world to spread the mystery of communion which is essential to its nature: ‘to gather together all people and all things into Christ; so as to be for all an “*inseparable sacrament of unity*”’.²

Another important point that Ratzinger makes is the idea that the church is a communion of saints. This communion brings spiritual solidarity among the members of the church when they are members of one body. The invisible element means that communion exists not only among those still living, but also between those who have died in Christ in the hope of rising again. Ratzinger writes:

[T]here is a *mutual relationship* between the pilgrim Church on earth and the heavenly Church in the historical-redemptive mission. Hence the ecclesiological importance not only of Christ’s intercession on behalf of his members, but also of that of the saints and, in an eminent fashion, of the Blessed

1. Ibid.

2. Ratzinger, ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church’, no. 4.

Virgin Mary's. *Devotion to the saints*, which is such a strong feature of the piety of the Christian people, can thus be seen to correspond in its very essence to the profound reality of the Church as a mystery of communion.¹

Ratzinger's understanding of communion became the official ecclesiology while he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Meanwhile, the word 'communion' was interpreted differently by different people. But Ratzinger regards these different interpretations as 'handy slogans'. He says that, like the expression 'People of God', the word 'communion' becomes a slogan, its meaning distorted and devalued, when people emphasize the horizontal aspect only and abandon the vertical dimension. In this case the ecclesiology of communion was reduced to a concern with relations between the local churches and the universal church. The egalitarian emphasis on equality in communion was gaining popularity. In 'Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity', Ratzinger expresses his concern clearly:

It was unavoidable that this great fundamental word of the New Testament, isolated and employed as a slogan, would also suffer diminishment, indeed, might even be trivialized. Those who speak today of an 'ecclesiology of communion' generally tend to mean two things: (1) they support a 'pluralist' ecclesiology, almost a 'federative' sense of union, opposing what they see as a centralist conception of the Church; (2) they want to stress, in the exchanges of giving and receiving among local Churches, their culturally pluralistic forms of worship in the liturgy, in discipline and in doctrine.²

In this erroneous understanding, according to Ratzinger, communion is seen as 'emerging from a network of multiple communities'. He is opposed to the horizontal idea of communion with its emphasis on the idea of 'self-determination within a vast community of churches' that dominates the thinking of the church.³ Ratzinger admits the need to correct the imbalance and excessiveness of Roman centralization. But he reminds us that questions of this

1. Ibid., no. 6.

2. Ratzinger (2002), 'Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity', lecture at the Bishops' Conference of the Region of Campania in Benevento (Italy), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020602_ratzinger-eucharistic-congress_en.html.

3. Ibid.

sort should not distract us from the main task of proclaiming Christ to the world. He rightly asserts that the church should be proclaiming not itself but God.¹

At the same time, Ratzinger insists that communion is related to the universal church, understanding the importance of ecclesial hierarchy and papal primacy. Thus there are criteria to be met for Christian communities to be qualified as a 'valid church'. These criteria centre on the requirements of valid ministerial orders and the celebration of a valid Eucharist. Above all, for Ratzinger, communion with Rome is an important prerequisite.²

Ratzinger has been criticized for his assertion concerning the priority of the universal church: 'The universal Church in her essential mystery is a reality that ontologically and temporally is prior to every particular Church.'³ He responded to the criticism by saying, '[T]he ontological priority of the universal Church – the unique Church, the unique Body, the unique Bride – vis-à-vis the empirical, concrete manifestations of various, particular Churches is so obvious to me that I find it difficult to understand the objections raised against it.'³ Those objections are possible only if we look at the church with its shortcomings and not as something willed by God. For Ratzinger, these oppositions are 'theological ravings' by people who see the church only as a human institution. Thus 'in this case one has abandoned not only the ecclesiology of the fathers, but the ecclesiology of the New Testament and the understanding of Israel in the Old Testament as well. It is not just the later deutero-Pauline letters and the Apocalypse that affirm the ontological priority of the universal Church to the particular Churches.'⁴

Priority of the Universal Church

When the ecclesiological concept of communion is applied analogously to the relationship between the universal church and particular churches, Ratzinger vociferously asserts the priority of the universal church. He dismisses the idea that the particular church is a subject complete in itself. According to Ratzinger:

1. Ratzinger, 'The Ecclesiology of Vatican II'.
2. Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion (eds) (2010), *The Ratzinger Reader*. London: T & T Clark, p. 83.
3. Ratzinger, *op. cit.*
4. *Ibid.*

In order to grasp the true meaning of the analogical application of the term *communion* to the particular Churches taken as a whole, one must bear in mind above all that the particular Churches, insofar as they are ‘*part of the one Church of Christ*’, have a special relationship of ‘*mutual interiority*’ with the whole, that is, with the universal Church, because in every particular Church ‘*the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active*.’¹

Consequently, Ratzinger insists, the universal church is not merely the sum of all the particular churches or a federation of churches. It is also not the result of the communion of all the churches, but ‘it is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior to every *individual* particular Church.’² The universal church is the mother and not the offspring of the particular churches.

In its original and first manifestation, the church is universal. The local churches that have arisen in different places are particular expressions of the one unique Church of Jesus Christ. ‘Arising *within* and *out of* the universal Church, they have their ecclesiality in it and from it.’³ Ratzinger argues that the relationship between the universal church and the particular churches is a mystery, and cannot be compared to any human organization. We become members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church through faith and baptism. However we do not belong to the universal church in a *mediate* way, through belonging to a particular church. Instead we belong to the universal church in an *immediate* way, although we enter it through a particular church. Ratzinger says, ‘from the point of view of the Church understood as communion, this means therefore that the universal *communion of the faithful* and the *communion of the Churches* are not consequences of one another, but constitute the same reality seen from different viewpoints.’⁴ This means that when one becomes a Roman Catholic through a particular church, one automatically belongs to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Ratzinger’s ecclesiology is different from and even contrary to the ecclesial vision of Afanasiev, who favoured the local churches over the universal church. As an Orthodox theologian, Afanasiev was naturally wary of the principle of primacy in ecclesiology. Ratzinger, on the other hand, stresses the ontological priority of the universal

1. Ratzinger, ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church’, no. 9.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., no. 10.

church and the necessity of communion with Rome. Be that as it may, below is discussion of a letter written by Ratzinger that reveals his true feelings regarding the relationship between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Here we see Ratzinger concurring with Afanasiev on many points regarding efforts to forge greater unity between the two churches.

Purification of Memory

In his letter to the Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland on 20 February 2001, Joseph Ratzinger expressed his cognisance that the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church belong to one another. Therefore none of their doctrinal disputes are insurmountable. Ratzinger thinks that the obstacle that stands between the two churches is not so much a question of doctrine as the memory of old hurts that alienates the two communities: '[T]he power of the confused tangles of history seems to be stronger than the light of faith that ought to be transforming them into forgiveness.'¹ This means that both churches need a purification of memory to begin the process of healing that will eventually lead to unity.

Many people believe that the main obstacle to the full restoration of unity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church lies in the pope's primacy of jurisdiction. Ratzinger thinks that this is a problem of language. The pope's jurisdiction over the whole church is based on honour, not in the worldly sense, but in the sense of service and obedience to Christ. The pope presides over the church in charity. This *agape*, expressed fully in the Eucharist, is connected to the theology of the cross, which is the deepest expression of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.²

Joseph Ratzinger also claims that without the primacy of the pope's jurisdiction over the whole church, the Roman Catholic Church would long ago have split into various national churches or various different rites. This would make it impossible to have a general view of the ecumenical situation. The primacy of the pope makes possible the steps of reconciliation towards unity. Ratzinger believes that the problem of autocephalous churches ('self-headed' Eastern Orthodox churches whose primates do not report to higher

1. Ratzinger (2005), *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, p. 232.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

authorities) shows ‘the necessity for an instrument of unity’ that must also be ‘correctly balanced with the independent responsibility of the local Churches’.¹

Orthodox believers were offended when Ratzinger asserted that it is not appropriate to refer to the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church as two ‘sister churches’. He explained that the term ‘sister churches’ refers to particular churches only. It is a matter of setting the plural ‘churches’ and the singular ‘the church’ in the right relationship to one another.² In the Credo we confess that there is only one church of Christ, which of course exists concretely in many particular churches. At the same time, these particular churches form part of the one church. Therefore, according to Ratzinger, to speak of the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church as sister churches would be ‘setting up a plural above and beyond which no singular is apparent. A dualism would remain at the ultimate level of the concept of “Church”, and the one Church would thus become a phantom, a utopia, whereas bodily existence is the very thing that is essential to her.’³

Ratzinger laments that the term ‘universal church’ is very often misinterpreted when he insists on the ontological and temporal precedence of the universal church over the particular churches. To interpret this understanding as favouring Roman centralism is ‘complete nonsense’, according to Ratzinger. He argues that the local Church of Rome is a local church that is entrusted with a special responsibility for the whole church, ‘but she is not herself the universal church’.⁴

1. Ibid., p. 235.

2. Ibid., p. 236.

3. Ibid., p. 237.

4. Ibid., p. 239. Ratzinger is following the teaching of Vatican II, which attempted to depict the one Church of Christ as united in *koinonia*. Before the Council, the Catholic Church identified itself with the one true church, implying that other Christians are living outside the church. The Council fathers applying the theology of *koinonia* used the term ‘subsist in’ rather than ‘is’ to depict the relationship of the Church of Christ to the Catholic Church. This means that instead of saying the Church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church, Vatican II teaches that the Church of Christ *subsists in* the Catholic Church. The aim of this new understanding of the church is to avoid sociological identification of the church with the present structure of the Roman Catholic institutions. It also avoids implying that the Eastern Churches that are not in communion with Rome are not real churches. The Decree on Ecumenism also states that other Christian communities contain elements of the true Church. Thus members of these ecclesial

Maintaining the ontological and temporal priority of the universal church over the particular churches is ‘not a declaration that the local Church of Rome should seek to acquire as many privileges as possible’, Ratzinger insists.¹ It is not a question of the distribution of power, but is about the mystery of the church. In *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (2005), he writes:

[T]his is strictly a matter of theology, not of juridical questions or of Church politics: the fact that God’s idea of the Son’s one bride, eschatologically oriented toward the eternal wedding feast, is the first and the one essential idea of God that is at stake in matters to do with the Church, while the concrete realization of the Church in local Churches constitutes a second plane that is subsequent to the first and always remains subordinated to it.²

For the Orthodox Church to be in communion with Rome, Ratzinger suggests, the only condition is that they accept the teachings of the primacy of the pope during the first millennium:

Rome must not require more from the East with respect to the doctrine of primacy than had been formulated and was lived in the first millennium. . . . Rome need not ask for more. Reunion could take place in this context if, on the one hand, the East would cease to oppose as heretical the developments that took place in the West in the second millennium and would accept the Catholic Church as legitimate and orthodox in the form she had acquired in the course of that development, while, on the other hand, the West would recognize the Church of the East as orthodox and legitimate in the form she has always had.³

communities are saved ‘through the mediation of their communities, and not in spite of them’. This change in language from *est* to *subsistit* allows the possibility of expressing the reality of the church as transcendent and not merely a sociological structure. Other Christian communities are also recognized as having elements of the church, its spiritual and mystical reality. See *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html; and Jeffrey Gros FSC, Eamon McManus and Ann Riggs (1998), *Introduction to Ecumenism*. New York: Paulist Press, pp. 68–9.

1. Ratzinger, *op. cit.*
2. *Ibid.*
3. Ratzinger (1987), *Principles of Catholic Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, p. 199.

Ratzinger also stresses the importance of apostolic succession in preserving the unity of the church. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church have accepted that the church came into existence from the scripture. The bishops by virtue of their sacramental consecration and ecclesial tradition personify this unity of the church. This church unity, Ratzinger claims, is based on the concept of *successio apostolica*, intrinsically part of the structure of the church, as expressed since the second century.¹ He writes:

The Apostolic succession is not a purely formal power; it is part of the mission for the gospel. That is why the concepts of succession and tradition were not separated in the early Church and why Vatican Council II is justified in linking the two closely together. The *successio*-structure is the expression both of the link with tradition and of the concept of tradition in the Catholic Church. On this question, there is, so far as I can see, no essential difference between the Catholic Churches of East and West.²

The structural unity between the two churches has not been destroyed. Afanasiev would be delighted to hear this. Perhaps this is the reason Ratzinger says that Rome should not demand from the East that it accepts any doctrine of papal jurisdiction other than the one formulated during the first millennium.

Ratzinger understands the Orthodox Church's aversion to papal primacy, but he thinks that they developed an incorrect interpretation of the Petrine office. According to the Orthodox point of view, the development of *monarchia papae* (papal monarchy) destroyed the ecclesial structure and, as a result, the primitive church was replaced by something different. This means that the Western Church is no longer under the bishops in their collegial unity. Instead the church has become a 'centrally organized monolith' and the idea of a perfect society has replaced the idea of succession. According to Ratzinger, the Orthodox Church has developed the mistaken idea that, in the Roman Catholic Church, the faith that is handed down no longer serves as a normative rule. It is no longer a rule that can be interpreted with the consensus of all the local churches. The Eastern Church has thus held that in the Roman Catholic Church, the will of the supreme pontiff creates a new authority.³

1. Ibid., p. 194.

2. Ibid., p. 245.

3. Ibid., p. 194.

This understanding by the Orthodox Church was reinforced in 1870 by the Roman Catholic teaching on the primacy of jurisdiction exercised by the bishop of Rome. On the one hand, only tradition serves as a valid source of the law.¹ On the other hand, the source of the law appears to be the will of the sovereign, who creates new laws that are binding for all. The Orthodox Church thus believes that the sacramental structure of the church has been replaced by a new concept of law; the papacy, which is not a sacrament but only a juridical institution, has set itself above the sacramental order.² Thus the Eastern Church must reject papal authority.

The Orthodox Church also contends that the Roman Catholic understanding of papal primacy, with its insistence on the universal jurisdiction of the papacy, goes against the eucharistic foundations of the church.³ Since the eucharistic communities are wholly the body of Christ under their bishops, they are ‘fundamentally equal and may not be subordinated to one another’. The Orthodox Church admits that historically Rome played a prominent role among the five ancient patriarchates: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. However, it challenges traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the role of the patriarch in Rome.⁴

The Orthodox Church is opposed to the Roman Catholic tradition of papal primacy, with its strong emphasis on the universal jurisdiction of the pontiff. It believes that the authority of the patriarch was ‘an expression of synodality’ and bound to the communion of the churches.⁵ It has rejected the notion of Roman primacy that assumes a ‘supra-episcopal authority’, as well as ‘any primacy understood as a power *over* other local bishops and their Churches’. Instead, for the Orthodox Church, the essential form of primacy lies in the synod of bishops.⁶ Simply put, primacy lies in the episcopacy it belongs to.

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 195.

3. Ibid., p. 292.

4. Richard Gaillardetz (1997), *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, p. 47. Russian Orthodox theologians stress the notion of *sobornost*, the organic unity of the whole Church. This unity applies particularly to the relationship between bishops and the whole Church. The bishop is the presider over the local eucharistic community in relation to the Church he serves. This authority is always ‘exercised *within* rather than *above* the Church’. Ibid., p. 33.

5. Ibid., p. 47.

6. Ibid., p. 48.

According to Joseph Ratzinger, the removal of the anathema of 1054 reflects a holy and historic responsibility that goes beyond mere courtesy.¹ It is an important historical action involving the dialogue of love and the theological dialogue. Quoting the Metropolitan Meliton's words in his *Principles of Catholic Theology* (1987), Ratzinger states that the act of reconciliation brings 'no modification whatever in the status of dogma, in the existing canonical order, in the liturgy or in the life of the Church. . . . It does not mean a restoration of the sacramental community.'² The fundamental aim of the event was the restoration of ecclesial love – a community of love between bishopric and bishopric, between church and church. Ratzinger claims that this ecclesial love 'is not yet a sacramental community but possesses in itself the necessary dynamism to become such. It is to be regarded as an actual ecclesial union that binds churches as churches.'³

This restoration of love means that, as St Paul says in Philippians 3:13, we must forget the past. Memory has the dangerous power of causing the poison of yesterday to become the poison of today. Thus Ratzinger believes that reparation of the past can take place through a 'purification of memory'. This would mean amending our past mistakes through forgetting, resulting in a purification of memory that will serve to heal the wounds. In practical terms, both churches would erase from memory the excommunication that took place in the past. Forgetting is forgiving.⁴

This purification of memory taught by Joseph Ratzinger is what Nicholas Afanasiev was urging those who work for the reconciliation between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches to consider. For Afanasiev, dogmatic divergence was of secondary importance, because reconciliation is about forging the bond of love that is already there in those who are baptized in Christ.

In the next chapter, we will discuss the ecclesiology of John Zizioulas, including his critique of Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology. In relation to this subject, the chapter will also present Walter Kasper's response to Ratzinger's understanding of the

1. This refers to the mutual lifting of excommunications in a joint Catholic–Orthodox declaration, approved by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople, and read simultaneously on 7 December 1965 at a public meeting of the Ecumenical Council in Rome and at a special ceremony in Istanbul.
2. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 209.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

priority of the universal church over the local churches. As we shall see, divergent theological views exist in both the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church and thus, there is always room for debate and mutual learning. Dialogue between churches is, after all, a process of discovering the 'other' in all its complexities and changes.

SAMPLE