

The Realization of the Church in the Age of Dematerialized Reality

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity for us to realize that nowadays we're really living in a "global village": any information or product, even a distant event or disease, can directly affect our lives, by abolishing borders and distances. This is facilitated by the rapidly and dynamically developing technology, which not only alters the concept of space and the sense of time, but at the same time it changes our relationship with materiality and physicality, thus creating an intangible or digital, and sometimes virtual, reality¹. In this context, there are –and perhaps for some people they are becoming established– new ways of expressing their religiosity, thanks to technology: e.g. churchgoing without physical presence in a church, preaching or catechesis via the internet, confession or spiritual direction via videoconferencing, etc.

Despite its extraordinary or sometimes necessary and beneficial character, this way of practicing religion raises fundamental ecclesiological questions: what does it mean to be a Christian in this new reality? If being a Christian automatically means being a member of the Church, how this Church of which I am a member is being defined? If the Church

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1. For these reflections, see indicatively Alexandros Katsiaras's informative *Εἰσοδικόν*, «“Επικοινωνία” διαμεσολαβημένη: Τὸ σῶμα εἶναι περιττό;» *Ἐφημέριος/Εφημεριος* 72, 5 (2023), pp. 3-6. For the challenges that the Christian anthropology is facing due to technology and especially Artificial Intelligence, see the interesting issue of the journal *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 111, 4 (2023).

is also by definition a community, how the latter is being substantiated? Can I belong to it in a general and abstract way or in an intangible, immaterial way? To put it shortly, how the Church is being realized within the new and changing “spaces” of a very different reality in which the contemporary man lives?

To answer these questions, we need to look at how we understand the Church, i.e. ecclesiology, a field of the science of Theology that has been developed during the late 19th and, especially, in the 20th century. The dominant ecclesiological model during this period, both in the Orthodox and partly in the Roman Catholic world, has been Eucharistic ecclesiology². Considering that it expresses the primitive ecclesiastical practice and patristic teaching, Eucharistic ecclesiology, through the ecclesiological significance of the celebration of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, emphasized the Church’s manifestation in a certain *locus*, spreading the term *local Church*. If eucharistic ecclesiology continues to be the way of understanding the Church, should we revise it in view of the new concept of space or place? In other words, should ecclesiology –Eucharistic or not– revise the criterion of locality in its manifestation or the principle of canonical territoriality in its administrative organization?

2. Fr. Nicholas Afanassieff is considered to be its originator in Orthodox theology; its main successor and representative is Ioannis Zizioulas Metropolitan of Pergamon. See, for example, N. Afanassieff, «L’Église qui préside dans l’amour», in: N. Afanassieff, N. Koulomzine (et autres), *La primauté de Pierre dans l’Église orthodoxe*, Delachaux & Niestlé, Neuchâtel 1960, pp. 9-64; «L’eucharistie, principal lien entre les Catholiques et les Orthodoxes», *Irénikon* 38 (1965), pp. 337-339 and Io. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon. «Η εὐχαριστιακὴ ἐκκλησιολογία στὴν ὀρθόδοξη παράδοση», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 80, 4 (2009), pp. 5-25. For a brief but comprehensive presentation of the Eucharistic ecclesiology in Greek, see Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan of Diokleia, *Εἰς νῆψιν ψυχῆς*, En Plo Publications, Athens 2023, pp. 143-158. For the place of the Orthodox theology in history, see Kal. Ware, “Sobornost and Eucharistic Ecclesiology: Aleksei Khomiakov and his Successors”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, 2-3 (2011), pp. 216-235 and more generally J.-M. Van Cangh (ed.), *L’ecclésiologie eucharistique*, Académie internationale des Sciences Religieuses, Cerf, Paris 2009. For the place of the Eucharistic ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic world and in the orthodox-catholic dialogue, see indicatively P. McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1995, and especially H. Legrand, «L’ecclésiologie eucharistique dans le dialogue actuel entre l’Église catholique et l’Église orthodoxe. Convergences et progrès encore souhaitables», *Istina* 51, 4 (2006), pp. 354-374.

These are the issues that the present proposal will attempt to roughly touch upon. For a start, by broadening the reflection, we will examine other factors, apart from technology, that call into question the localism as the beginning of the Church's realization. This will lead us to discern the criteria that ensure the realization of the ecclesiastical event in the context of the intangible/immaterial reality. In particular, after briefly referring to two fundamental concepts or characteristics of the Church, *communion* and *unity*, we will examine the principle of territoriality or locality and the concept of the local Church, before drawing some conclusions about the challenges that technology poses to ecclesiology today.

Challenges to the Church's Local Materialization

If “the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist”³, then the Church is realized thanks to a particular community which performs the Eucharist in a particular place. Already in the New Testament, the reference to a particular place, usually a city, is constant: the Church was born in Jerusalem; then, the Apostles and their successors were establishing communities which are «ἡ Ἐκκλησία τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡ οὖσα ἐν Κορίνθῳ»⁴ the Churches of Asia⁵ or the Church “dwelling” in Rome⁶; the New Testament and post-apostolic examples are indeed numerous⁷. The local Churches were thus born; at least from

3. The phrase “The Eucharist makes (constitutes) the Church” belong to the great Roman Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac, who is considered to be the main rapporteur of the Eucharistic ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic theology. For this idea and Ioannis Zizioulas's relevant theology, see P. McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church, Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1993.

4. Cf. *1 Cor.* 1, 2; *2 Cor.* 1, 1.

5. *1 Cor.* 16, 19.

6. See for example *Ἐπιστολὴ Κλήμεντος* (Sources Chrétiennes, v. 167, p. 98) or *Μαρτύριον Πολυκάρπου* (Sources Chrétiennes, v. 10bis, p. 210).

7. A good list of passages (with analysis and bibliography) can be found, for example, in the book by J.-M. Tillard, *L'Église locale, ecclésiologie de communion et catholicité*, Cerf, Paris 1995, pp. 37-48. Let us note for this book that it is a voluminous work of reference on the subject of the “local church”.

the time of St. Ignatius of Antioch and a little later of St. Cyprian of Carthage, are clearly linked to the now separate *service* of the bishop⁸, until we've reaching, about a century later, to the 8th canon of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325), which formulated the principle "one city, one bishop" («μία πόλη, εἷς ἐπίσκοπος»)⁹.

We can safely assume that, at least as far as the Orthodox Church is concerned, this rule, despite some exceptions¹⁰, was generally observed until the 19th century¹¹. Since then, the movement of Orthodox populations to Western Europe and America has raised the issue of diaspora, i.e. the parallel existence of Orthodox communities of different national origins

8. As it is well known, in the letters of St. Ignatius the Theophoros, we have the first testimony regarding the priesthood's three distinct degrees, among which the degree of bishop is distinct from that of elder and is unique in a community. The origin and emergence of the one bishop (mono-épiscopat), or the transition from a first elder to a quasi "monarchical bishop", as it has been wrongly described, has been the subject of much research by historians and theologians. Two recent studies, especially the second: A. Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origins of Episcopacy*, T&T Clark, New York 2007 and A. C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2014 (see esp. pp. 237-298) convincingly attempt a revision of the question of its appearance before/and in St. Ignatius of Antioch. The key point for us here is that, at the end of the day, these studies do not dispute the fact that this model (with three absolutely distinct degrees or ministries of the priesthood, the sole and central one being that of the bishop) was universally extended in the pre-Nicaean era (i.e., before the so-called imperial model of Church administration).

9. «ἵνα μὴ ἐν τῇ πόλει δύο ἐπίσκοποι ὦσιν»: Κανὼν 8, in: Archim. Gregorios Papatomas, *Τὸ Corpus Canonum τῆς Ἐκκλησίας (1ος-9ος αἰῶνας). Τὸ κείμενο τῶν ἐκκλησιακῶν Ἱερῶν Κανόνων*, Epektasi Publications, Canonical Library 30, Katerini 2015, pp. 302-304.

10. For this canon, see its thorough analysis by P. L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1996, pp. 57-62. Archbishop Pierre L'Huillier mentions that, regarding this rule, there have been some exceptions, as in Ireland where bishops were sometimes nomadic, or in medieval Serbia, where bishops were based in monasteries. However, we must emphasize that these exceptions, as well as any others, do not in any way diminish the authority of this rule; on the contrary, they confirm its universal prevalence and validity in the Christian world.

11. According to Professor Gregorios Papatomas, according to Western Christianity, the problem of "co-territoriality", i.e. the existence of two local Churches on the same territory, began in 1099 with the establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem by the Crusaders, and continued during the 16th century with the Reformation and the co-territorial Protestant communities. See Archim. Gregorios Papatomas, *Κανονικά Ἐμμορφα (Δοκίμια Κανονικῆς Οἰκονομίας II)*, Epektasi Publications, Canonical Library 29, Katerini 2015, pp. 404-405.

in the same city. To use the words of the Holy and Great Synod of Crete, the organization of bishoprics on the basis of ethnic and racial criteria and not on territorial ones is generally considered a deviation from the “orthodox ecclesiology and the canonical tradition and practice of the Orthodox Church”¹². Relatively recently, however, a well-known Orthodox theologian of the diaspora, Fr. Cyril Hovorun, argued –contrary to the prevailing view– that the principle of territoriality is not apostolic and an essential element; it represents a Roman influence corresponding to the political philosophy of the Empire. According to him, the solution to the problem of nationalism is not territorialism but “the strengthening of the role of the community in the life of the Church”¹³.

This brief article requires critical reflection not only because of the revolutionary idea it propagates, but also because of the author’s prestige. His basic thesis is that: “It was only after Constantine the Great that each individual Church became local”¹⁴ is justified by the observation that the first communities were “many times” networks linked to apostles or charismatic prelates (such as Paul, John, Ignatius of Antioch, Dionysius of Corinth), networks that sometimes covered the same territories. The First Ecumenical Council established and formalized the replacement of the community networks by the territorial structures that copied the imperial administrative organization.

The arguments of Fr. Cyril Hovorun, apart from being extremely synoptic, they are not convincing; they seem one-sided. In the context of this parenthesis of our text here, we certainly cannot present the data that weaken this briefly outlined argumentation. We only mention by way of illustration the following. To begin with, Fr. Hovorun has suppressed the undisputed New Testament evidence and its self-evident reference to a place. As for the two prelates he mentions, Ignatius and Dionysius, the

12. Ἁγία καὶ Μεγάλη Σύνοδος τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας, Ἡ ὀρθόδοξος διασπορά, § 1, Crete, June 2016. As it is well known, ethno-racialism was condemned by the Holy and Great Synod of Constantinople in 1872. For this subject, see, among others: «Le phylétisme ou nationalisme ecclésial. Un défi pour la conscience orthodoxe», *Contacts* 249, 67 (2015).

13. Cyril Hovorun, «Ἡ ἐκκλησιαστικὴ διασπορὰ μεταξύ ἐδαφικότητας καὶ ἐθνικότητας», *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 154 (2020), pp. 44-48, here p. 48.

14. *Op.cit.*, p. 47.

Ukrainian theologian does not pay attention to the fact that their names are accompanied by a specific local designation – Antioch and Corinth respectively. When Ignatius addresses communities in his letters, he identifies them by the city and not by a certain figure, while the reference to the bishop of the community is not unrelated to the city.

Apart from that, his main argument is based on the history of networks – a relatively recent field of research¹⁵, which nevertheless does not exclude but presupposes the reference to a certain place. As one expert, Marie-Françoise Baslez¹⁶, has shown, the Christians used the existing networks and their means (hospitality relations, money transfers, epistolary communication), transforming them into episcopal networks through which the ecumenical Church (its unity, we would say) began to organize itself, a process that would be intensified and systematized with the dynamics of the Empire. By collectively and indiscriminately considering dioceses, metropolises, and patriarchates as “supra-communal structures”, Fr. Hovorun speaks of “communities”, which are the hypostases of the Church, but he does not tell us more about how he defines community. If the community corresponds to the parish, then it is sufficient to have the Church. Anyway, the problem is not that the proposed model of the coexistence of communities rejects territoriality¹⁷, and perhaps that it is unabashedly Protestant (in its autonomous and disconnected relationship to one another), but that, as will be shown below, it does not provide the necessary elements that transform a community to a Church.

15. He cites the book written by C. W. Concannon, *Assembling Early Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, who is using the notion of Christian networks in order to explain the rich variety of the early Christianity and reject the argument about its “monolithic” nature.

16. See her article «La diffusion du christianisme aux Ier-IIIe siècles. L’Église des réseaux», *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 101, 4 (2013), pp. 549-576 and her book *Comment les chrétiens sont devenus catholiques Ier-Ve siècle*, Tallandier, Paris 2019, pp. 39-64.

17. The author mentions examples (different from those we’ve mentioned earlier in footnote no. 10) of, let’s say, nomadic communities, which travelled with their bishop, e.g. in Arabia or in some Germanic tribes. What the author does not say is that even these cases were rather rare and special exceptions that confirm the general rule, which is to have a community with a bishop in a certain geographical area.

A similar proposal for the rejection of the territorial criterion, in this case, in relation with the regional level, has been made a few years ago by a distinguished French Roman Catholic theologian, the late Fr. Bernard Sesboüé¹⁸. Faced with the problem of the great Christian schism, and based on the principle that unity does not equate with homogeneity, Sesboüé has made a proposal (a bit utopian, as he himself admits) the evolution of confessional groups of ecclesial communities into “Personal Churches”¹⁹, following the model of the ancient Patriarchates. Rome would exercise its role as the point of unity, and in communion with it the institution of the Patriarchate or “Great Churches” can be reconstituted in the West; thus, for example, the federations of Reformed Churches could become Patriarchates, the Anglican Communion an Anglican Patriarchate, and so on, in the context of a united Christendom²⁰. While Sesboüé rejects the criterion of nationality for this institution, the territorial one is not considered a *conditio sine qua non*. Although this proposal of the Jesuit theologian has a positive starting point, the concern for Christian unity with the restoration of the ancient institution of the Patriarchate and with a non-authoritarian Roman primacy, it has many problematic elements, which we cannot discuss here²¹. They can be summarized, though, in a more general problem, which is not only Roman Catholic, and it is the following.

18. B. Sesboüé, «Pour une articulation nouvelle entre primats et primauté», in: S. Selaru, P. Vlaicu (eds.), *La primauté et les primats, Enjeux ecclésiologiques*, Cerf, Paris 2015, pp. 13-25. This idea is based on an older proposal made by J. Ratzinger (who was later elected as Pope Benedict XVI) for the establishment of Patriarchates in the West (see «Primauté et Épiscopat» in his book: *Le nouveau peuple de Dieu*, Aubier, Paris 1971, pp. 56-57 and 68-69) that it has also been supported by other Roman Catholic theologians.

19. Regarding this characterization in relation with territoriality, see P. Erdő, P. Szabo (eds.), *Territoriality and Personality in Canon Law and Ecclesiastical Law: Canon Law faces the third millenium, Proceedings of the 11th International Congress of Canon Law and of the 15th International Congress of the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches, 2-7 September 2001*, Pázmány Péter Catholic University 2002, Szent István Társulat, Budapest 2002.

20. For relevant proposals, see Alph. Borras, «Considérations corrélatives sur l'exercice de la primauté romaine», in: P. Tihon (éd.), *Changer la papauté?*, Cerf, Paris 2000, pp. 118-119.

21. A critical examination is presented in our book: *Collégialité et Synodalité, vers une compréhension commune entre catholiques et orthodoxes*, Préface du métropolitain Jean Zizioulas, Postface P. Joseph Faméréé, collection «Unam sanctam, nouvelle série» 7, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2019, pp. 588-594.

We are indebted to the professor, now Reverend Metropolitan of Peristerion, Gregorios Papatomas, who, through his many studies²² has unearthed the problem common to the Christian Churches of “ecclesiastical globalism”²³, as he calls it, i.e. a Universalistic ecclesiology²⁴ that allows for co-territoriality, i.e. the parallel existence of Churches in the same place. In the Orthodox Church, this is the case with the national jurisdictions in the diaspora, in the Roman Catholics, on the basis of the criterion of liturgical rhythm (Unitarian Churches), and, finally, in the Protestants, according to the confessional criterion, on the basis of which the various

22. See, for example, Archim. Gregorios Papatomas, *Κανονικά Έμμορφα (Δοκίμια Κανονικής Οικονομίας II)*, *op.cit.*, pp. 230-236; Gr. Papatomas, «Au temps de la Post-Ecclésiologie. La naissance de la modernité post-ecclésiologique: de l'Église une aux nombreuses Églises, de la dispersion de l'Église à l'anéantissement du Corps du Christ», *Istina* 51, 1 (2006), pp. 64-84; «La dialectique entre “nation étatique” et “autocéphalie ecclésiastique”», *L'Année canonique* 43 (2001), pp. 75-92; «La relation d'opposition entre Église établie localement et “Diaspora” ecclésiastique. L'unité ecclésiologique face à la “co-territorialité” et la multijuridiction», *L'Année canonique* 46 (2004), pp. 77-99 [*Contacts*, 57, 210 (2005), pp. 96-132]; «*Culturalisme ecclésiastique*: l'aliénation de la Culture et l'anéantissement de l'Église. La dérive culturaliste dans le domaine ecclésiastique: Le monisme de l'Église nationale», *L'Année canonique* 51 (2009), pp. 61-67; «Du *culturalisme ecclésiologique* du 2e millénaire, vers une autre aberration ecclésiologique: l'*universalisme ecclésiastique*», *Kanon* 21 (2010), pp. 236-256; “Ethno-Phyletism and the [So-called] Ecclesial Diaspora”, *St Vladimir's Theological Review* 57, 3-4 (2013), pp. 431-450.

23. Archim. Gregorios Papatomas, *Κανονικά Έμμορφα (Δοκίμια Κανονικής Οικονομίας II)*, *op.cit.*, p. 231.

24. *Universalistic ecclesiology*, is an ecclesiology that has at its epicenter the universal, which has priority over the local Churches, which are considered parts of a whole which is the universal Church and not complete Catholic Churches. Let us remind here that, for Orthodox ecclesiology (of course, this view was generally adopted by the Second Vatican Council in its Decree, *On the Church*), the whole Church (the term *universal* is inaccurate and disorienting) is not the sum of the local Churches but their communion. Each local Church is identified with all the others and with the whole Church. The whole (ecumenical) Church cannot exist except through each local Church. Thus, *local Churches* and the *whole Church* are simultaneous and interdependent and no one is prior to the other. For an orthodox view of this question, as expressed in the theological controversy of the important Roman Catholic theologians Ratzinger and Kasper, see our article, «Οί τοπικές Έκκλησίες και ή “παγκόσμια” Έκκλησία. Μία όρθόδοξη αντίγνωση της θεολογικής αντίπαράθεσης Ratzinger-Kasper», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 85, 1 (2014), pp. 159-190. For the Universalistic Ecclesiology, see our article, “Collegiality or Episcopal Synodality? Challenging Universalistic Ecclesiology”, *Louvain Studies* 46, 2 (2023), pp. 168-190.

communities are organized in parallel. All the above, combined with a new social, political or philosophical approach on territory or the end of borders²⁵ and with the challenges that technology offers –that we’ve already mentioned above–, should indeed lead to a revision of the territoriality principle?

Criteria for the Church’s Realization

The question is not simply related to the Church’s administrative status; it touches on its whole being. What are the criteria that transform a community into a Church? The question is a thorny one and goes beyond the scope of this paper²⁶. However, in the context of our argumentation, we believe that we must take into account the following three basic elements (which, of course, are not the only ones) of the realization of the Church, which are also derived from the Eucharistic approach to it.

Communion

During the last decades, the concept of communion has become a central element at the inter-Christian level; the so-called “ecclesiology of communion” is considered to be commonplace²⁷. The doctrinal foundation

25. From the point of view of the political science, see, for example, M. Keating, “Rescaling Europe, rebounding territory: A political approach”, *Regional and Federal Studies* 31, 1 (2021), pp. 31-50 and B. Badie’s classical study, *La fin de territoires*, Fayard, Paris 1995. For a theological discussion of this issue, see in: H. Destivelle, «Le territoire: une question œcuménique», in: *Conduis-la vers l’unité parfaite. Œcuménisme et synodalité*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2018, pp. 217-256.

26. Among others, see J. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic”, *The Jurist* 52 (1992), pp. 416-447 and H. Legrand, «La réalisation de l’Église en un lieu», in: B. Lauret et F. Refoulé (eds.), *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, v. III: Dogmatique 2, Cerf, Paris 1983, pp. 156-171.

27. See, e.g., J. Rigal, *L’œcclésiologie de communion. Son évolution historique et ses fondements*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1997; D. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology, Vision and Versions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N. York 2000. W. Kasper (*L’Église catholique: Son être, sa réalisation, sa mission*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2014, p. 47), after stressing that it is a common good, he points out the danger of using the concept too broadly – i.e., the concept of communion to be used by all (Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Protestants) but meaning different things to each and every one of them. For the concept of communion, we can

of this concept is, before anything else, the communion of the Holy Trinity persons which, according to the Lord's own words in the sacramental prayer²⁸, is called to be the model for relations between Christians, "the communion of the believers"²⁹. Thus, the concept of communion is not the fruit of a sociological or moral experience, but of faith itself: We are called to be into communion because the Trinitarian God's to whom we believe is *communion*³⁰ in His very *being*.

The main challenge posed by technology is for communication to replace communion, in the theological sense of the term. If the concept of communion simply expresses a general and abstract spirit of collectivity, brotherhood, acceptance of the other, and love, then communication is useful and perhaps sufficient. But is this truly the case?

In one of his writings, the blessed Metropolitan of Pergamon, following an original line of reasoning, reaches to an extremely interesting, and, at least according to him, fundamental equation: "society and community are identical"³¹. John Zizioulas argues that: «The concrete structures of

find interesting relevant literature in: G. Routhier, «La synodalité de l'Église locale», *Studia canonica* 26, 1 (1992), pp. 111-113, note 1. In order to full appreciate the importance of the Roman Catholics' transition to such an ecclesiology, we should read Yves Congar's classic contribution, «De la communion des Églises à une ecclésiologie de l'Église universelle», in: *L'Épiscopat et l'Église universelle*, Unam Sanctam 39, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1964, pp. 227-260. See also A. Nisus, «La genèse d'une ecclésiologie de communion dans l'œuvre de Yves Congar», *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 94, 2 (2010), pp. 309-334. 28. *John* 17, 21.

29. As the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Synod of Crete stresses: "The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is a theanthropic communion in the image of the Holy Trinity, the foretaste and experience of the Last Days and the revelation of the glory of those who are to come, and as a perpetual Pentecost, an enduring voice in the world, the presence and witness of «τῆς Βασιλείας τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐληλυθυίας ἐν δυνάμει» (*Mark* 9, 1)». See Io. Karmiris, *Ὁρθόδοξος Ἐκκλησιολογία* (Δογματικῆς Τμημα Ε'), Athens 1973, pp. 121-128.

30. Io. Zizioulas, «L'Église comme communion», in his book: *L'Église et ses institutions*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2011, p. 106 ff.

31. "I said earlier that in the Orthodox tradition, going back to the biblical way of thinking, truth is identical with love; it does not precede it [...]. But what is love? Here we must be very careful, for love is not a state of existence that can be created and sustained in the heart of an individual or of a group of individuals. It is neither a psychological nor an ethical-activistic phenomenon. It is an event that stems from the

the community are not forms of the expression of love –of a love or communion that is somehow conceivable in itself– but they are this love and this communion”³². The conclusion is that there can be no society without community, i.e. without a real context within which the relations between loved persons are manifested.

According to the Eucharistic ecclesiology, the Church realizes the concept of communion through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, which constitutes it as a Eucharistic community with a specific structure. It is surely unnecessary to further elaborate that through Holy Communion in the one Body and Blood of Christ the communion of believers with one another is being felt. If, however, this twofold (with Christ and with other believers) communion is always realized within the context of a community, a problem arises. The existence of many communities does not seem to lead, on a second level (i.e. in the relationship of the particular communities to each other), to parallel societies, to a state of split? Here society needs to be supplemented by the interrelated concept of unity, both within each community, as well as in the relationship between these communities.

Unity

The confession that “the Church is one”, the first of the four attributes of the Church in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, means both the Church’s uniqueness and internal unity: it is undivided and unanimous³³. Although these are clear and accepted, when the time comes for them to be applied, things seem more complicated, especially at the level we’ve

life of a community; in fact, it is a community. Here we arrive at the very fundamental equation: Communion and community are identical”, J. D. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, “Comment on Communal Spirit and Conciliarity”, in: *The One and the Many*, Sebastian Press, Alhambra, California 2010, p. 217.

32. *Op.cit.*, p. 218. The full text: “Communion is expressed only in terms of historical existence (this is the biblical mentality). The concrete structures of the community are not forms of the expression of love –of a love or communion that is somehow conceivable in itself– but they *are* this love and this communion. You love only by being a member of a concrete structured community”.

33. See, for example, Io. Karmiris, *Ὁρθόδοξος Ἐκκλησιολογία*, *op.cit.*, pp. 235-272 and W. Kasper, *L’Église catholique*, *op.cit.*, p. 225 ff.

already mentioned, that of the relationship between communities. Just like communion, so unity is a quality which must characterize not only the ecclesiastical community internally, but also externally in its relationship with other communities, each one of which, and all of them together, are in the same way “the Church of God”.

In an older article of his, which, in our opinion, is very important, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has stressed that the essence of the Church is expressed by a single word: unity. As he has reminded us, according to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, the word «Ἐκκλησία» means the gathering of all into forming a unity³⁴. We often perceive this unity as an abstract concept (perhaps even unattainable to a perfect degree); on the contrary, always according to Schmemmann, it is something very practical – it is the very content of the ecclesiastical life. The means for the realization of unity in Christ and the building up of His Body³⁵ is love, and its supreme and final embodiment is the Divine Liturgy. And Fr. Schmemmann continues: “This unity, which is the doctrinal essence of the Church, is also the model (the norm) of her organization”³⁶. Stressing that the Church is not only an object of thought but an empirical reality, he explains why Christ established a supernatural communion alongside the physical reality.

This is the reason why the historical forms of church organization, although varying according to external historical conditions, act likewise only to embody in these new conditions the eternal nature of the Church, and above all its unity. This is the reason why behind the variety and differences of all these forms, we always find the same essential core, a constant principle, which we cannot change or violate without altering the Church’s very nature. This is the local (or geographical) principle of the organization of the Church³⁷.

This great theologian seems to be adamant in his view; this forces us to ask why the unity of the Church is so deeply connected with localism or territoriality. This inquiry is of great interest for our subject: for a

34. A. Schmemmann, «Église et organisation ecclésiale», *Le Messager orthodoxe* 146, 1 (2008), p. 43. This very important article was first published in Russian in 1949 in the journal *Messager ecclésiastique*.

35. *Ephes.* 4, 12-13.

36. *Op.cit.*, p. 45. Schmemmann quotes from the Russian theologian V. Troïtski.

37. *Ibid.*

religiousness that is, thanks to technology, an intangible or disembodied, unity may well be reduced to the acceptance of doctrinal truths or to the ideological identification of opinions.

Territoriality

The principle of territoriality, which is defined by many canons of Ecumenical and local Councils, with the 8th canon of the First Ecumenical one in Nicaea in 325³⁸, as the most essential, means that in a given geographical space/place there can only be one Church, one ecclesiastical organization expressed by its hierarchy³⁹, according to the patristic principle of the identification between the bishop and local Church⁴⁰. The existence of a second bishop in the same place automatically implies the existence of another Church, i.e. a schism. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains again:

The uniqueness of the Church in each place is precisely the first realization of unity, which, as we have seen, constitutes the essence of the Church and its life, the unity of those who have been restored to the new life in Christ and have one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism (*Ephes. 4, 5*). For this reason, there could be no other criterion for the organization of the Church than the local or territorial principle; the adoption of any other principle would mean the replacement of the supernatural unity founded on the Grace of Christ by some other criterion:

38. See also the Canons 12th of the Fourth Ecumenical Synod, and the 39th of the Quinisext. For many more, see Archim. Greg. Papatomas, *Κανονικά Έμμορφα, op.cit.*, p. 225.

39. Cf. «L'expérience ecclésiologique du premier millénaire était que, dans un lieu donné, l'unique critère *canonique* permettant la fondation et l'existence d'une Église 'locale' ou 'établie localement' était la *territorialité exclusive* et la *mono-juridiction ecclésiologique*»: Gr. Papatomas, «Au temps de la Post-Ecclésiologie. La naissance de la modernité post-ecclésiologique: de l'Église une aux nombreuses Églises, de la dispersion de l'Église à l'anéantissement du Corps du Christ», *Istina* 51 (2006), p. 68. The phrase «établie localement», refers to the peripheral Churches, while «Église 'locale'» corresponds to the bishopric. We should note here that the notion of jurisdiction is always connected with a specific geographical area. Cf. Vl. Phidas, «Le primat papal et la pentarchie patriarcale dans la tradition orthodoxe», in: W. Kasper (ed.), *Il ministero petrino, cattolici e ortodossi in dialogo*, Città Nuova, Roma 2004, p. 88.

40. See St. Cyprian of Cartage, *Ep.* 66, 8, 3 (CCSL 3B) “*episcopum in ecclesia esse et ecclesiam in episcopo et si qui cum episcopo non sit in ecclesia non esse*”. This principle is self-evident for the post-apostolic Fathers, like St. Ignatius of Antioch or St. Irenaeus of Lyon.

national, racial, ideological. To the secular physical divisions, the Church juxtaposes the supernatural unity in God, which it embodies with its organization⁴¹.

As a Eucharistic community, the Church cannot become a reality in an abstract context but always in a concrete place⁴². According to L. Villemin: “By saying that the Church realizes itself in a place, we do not mean that geography is its constitutive principle. It means that territoriality seems to be an organizing principle that allows the socio-cultural principle to contribute to Church formation without becoming an obstacle to it”⁴³. As Professor H. Legrand notes, “territoriality is both an indication and a guarantee of universality”⁴⁴, since a local Church does not succumb to the temptation of Babel, that is, to the reproduction of human divisions (political, social, cultural) within itself. On the contrary, as an assembly, as a church, it gathers a people consisted of all races, languages, and nations⁴⁵. In other words, the territorial principle allows unity in diversity, that is, it ensures universality, since no one is excluded for any reason from the ecclesiastical event, provided he or she is in the same place⁴⁶. As Metropolitan Gregorios Papatomas puts it: “the space is indeed the most comprehensive category of everyday life”⁴⁷.

In our age, as we have described it, territoriality seems obsolete and is indeed often de facto violated. Although the 20th canon of the Quinisext Council forbids public teaching by a bishop in a foreign diocese, in the same spirit as it strictly forbids the ordination or involvement in the internal

41. A. Schmemmann, «Église et organisation ecclésiale», op.cit., p. 46.

42. On this subject, see the important study by H. Legrand, «La réalisation de l'Église en un lieu», op.cit., pp. 143-345.

43. L. Villemin, «Les provinces ecclésiastiques et la théologie de l'Église», in: G. Routhier – L. Villemin (eds.), *Nouveau apprentissages pour l'Église. Mélanges en l'honneur de Hervé Legrand*, o.p., Cerf, Paris 2006, p. 82.

44. H. Legrand, «La réalisation de l'Église en un lieu», op.cit., p. 174.

45. Op.cit., p. 173. For an analysis of the importance that the connection between a place and its Church possesses, see pp. 156-180. On this subject we could quote the exact same opinions of many other important theologians, both Orthodox and Roman Catholic, such as Io. Zizioulas, E. Lanne, J. M. Tillard *et al.*

46. As H. Legrand stresses in his article, «Inverser Babel: mission de l'Église», *Spiritus* 43 (1970), p. 337: «only the territorial principle eliminates from the outset any exclusivity».

47. Gr. Papatomas, «Au temps de la post-Ecclésialité», op.cit., p. 76.

affairs of a province by another bishop⁴⁸, it is rather impossible to forbid a Christian not to listen to the teaching of another bishop or clergyman on radio, television or the Internet. In keeping with our pluralistic consumer society, the believers can choose the preacher who suits to their beliefs or temperament. Thus, the notion of belonging to a particular Church seems liquid and subjective.

As it can be surmised from the above, what is really at stake is what the local Church means, what its components are. The issue has been of great concern to ecclesiology⁴⁹. What seems self-evident but it is perhaps easily forgotten is that, apart from the objective “divine elements” that constitute the Church –faith, the Word of God, the sacraments, the priesthood–, there is always the human element, i.e., the concrete human subjects, the people, the men and women (and children) who make up the community, which accepts these gifts of God at a certain place and time⁵⁰. The human element is therefore an equal part of the Church. This cannot be done remotely or digitally. What is needed is the assembly, the personal participation in the community. The latter must be able to include everyone, with their differences, so as to express in a Eucharistic way the transcendence of any physical or social difference within the body of the Church⁵¹. For this reason, we believe that, in the absence of any other principle that ensures universality, i.e. the unity within diversity, the place –*locus*– remains the only theologically sufficient principle for the organization of the Church.

48. See the 35th Apostolic canon, the 13th and 22nd from the Antiochian Council, the 8th Canon from the Third Ecumenical Synod, the 3rd, 11th and 12th canons from the Council of Serdica, etc.

49. For a very good discussion of the subject (although a bit older one), accompanied by good bibliography, see the article by J. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic”, *op.cit.*

50. J. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic”, *op.cit.*, p. 447.

51. See the highlighting, with reference to St. Maximus the Confessor, of the distinction between difference and division: J. Zizioulas, “Primacy and nationalism”, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 57, 3-4 (2013), p. 455.

What does Local Church Mean?

The rejection of the principle of territoriality invalidates the concept of the local Church and, regarding the problem of the unity of the Church, it inevitably leads to two solutions. For the unity to be expressed, we will either have the coexistence of autonomous communities, elastically linked by a common faith, as it is roughly happening in the Protestant world, or we will have the affiliation to a Universalistic ecclesiology, such as that it is presented (even today) by the image of the Roman Catholic Church: a universal organization, with the Pope acting as a quasi-universal bishop of a universal Church⁵². The problem with the latter is that it cannot, of course, be constituted through the Holy Eucharist, since it is practically impossible to have a universal Eucharist. But is the Eucharist ultimately the *conditio sine qua non* for having a Church?

The word «Ἐκκλησία» is used to express many realities and various organizational structures. However, according to the biblical, patristic and canonical tradition, the term «Ἐκκλησία» is used exclusively for the bishopric/diocese –a community which lies in a certain place and is headed by a bishop–, that brings together all the other charismas (priests, deacons, laity) and manifests the Church of God, i.e. the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and thus being a complete, catholic Church, naturally without being the whole Church⁵³. As the Orthodox canonist Archbishop

52. Although the pope is not officially considered to be a universal bishop, it is no coincidence that what appears to be a universal Church is confirmed by the idea of the priority of the universal Church over local bishops or by the conclusion of a Roman Catholic canonist (G. Bier, *Die Rechtsstellung des Diözesanbischofs. Nach dem Codex Iuris Canonici von 1983*, Echter, Würzburg 2001, p. 376, who is quoted by H. Legrand, «L'ecclesiologie eucharistique dans le dialogue actuel», p. 369), that according to the Code of Canon Law of the Latin Church (1983), the local bishop is legally described as being an employee of the pope! It should be emphasized that a universalistic ecclesiology can also be found in the Orthodox Church when the central administration of an Autocephalous Church/Patriarchate takes the role of Rome. For a more detailed presentation of this danger, which has been called autocephalism (a corruption of autocephaly), See A. Miltos, *Collégialité et Synodalité, op.cit.*, pp. 565-579.

53. See J. Zizioulas «L'Église locale dans une perspective eucharistique», in: *L'être ecclésial*, Labor et Fides, Genève 1981, p. 192: «Dans une perspective eucharistique de l'Église, cela signifie que l'église locale, telle qu'elle a été définie plus haut, est la seule forme d'existence ecclésiale qu'on puisse proprement appeler Église».

L'Huillier has pointed out, it is very characteristic that in the sacred canonical documents of the first millennium the ecclesiastical entity that is called Church is the diocese⁵⁴, in perfect accordance with the Eucharistic ecclesiology. Thus, today, both an Autocephalous Church, such as the Church of Greece, and the whole, ecumenical Church, are somehow improperly called Churches, since in essence they are communities of local Churches (i.e. bishoprics). It is also, according to the canonical tradition, incorrect to use the term *local Church* for an Autocephalous Church⁵⁵, not only because this creates a verbal confusion between it and the episcopate, but above all because it upends the universality of the episcopate under a bishop who has ipso jure its responsibility (or, to use the Latin terminology, by *Jus divinum*) and not by authority or virtue of a Synod or a prelate⁵⁶.

54. "It is extremely important to point out that this is the manner of expression of all Orthodox canonical documents during the first nine centuries. Thus, for example, the Fathers of the Third Ecumenical Council do not speak of the episcopate of the Church of Cyprus but of 'the heads of the holy churches of Cyprus'. During the Middle Ages this precise terminology did not last, and we see a canonist like Balsamon speak of the 'Church of Iberia'. He uses a similar expression for Bulgaria and Cyprus. It would be very exaggerated to see in this semantic shift proof of a profound alteration of ecclesiology. It means, nevertheless, a certain tendency to regard the autocephalous entity as the essential structure of the universal Church, and the dioceses as simple administrative subdivisions. What is certain, in any case, is that the study of problems relating to autocephaly cannot be made independently without considering the idea of the local church. This structure is in fact the only one which has had and will have an unshaken existence, because it is linked to the episcopal nature of ecclesiastical organization. It is in terms of the local church and its structure that a great number of canonical stipulations reflecting the principles of Orthodox ecclesiology are laid down and understood. The ancient canonical documents which deal with means of coordination in the universal Church attack this question in strict connection with the question of the local church"; P. L'Huillier, "Problems concerning autocephaly", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 24 2-3 (1979), p. 169.

55. The most precise term is «κατὰ τόπον Ἐκκλησία». In the international bibliography, the phrase *Local Church* always means the bishopric.

56. According to Io. Zizioulas, this identification is one of the Autocephaly's problems: «Una tale incomprendione dell'autocefalia equivarrebbe all'errore, già commesso da molti, secondo il quale la Chiesa autocefala è la stessa cosa della "Chiesa locale" nel suo significato ecclesologico, e cioè il nucleo della struttura ecclesiale. Sarebbe questa una grava distorsione dell'ecclesiologia ortodossa. Come abbiamo notato sopra, questo nucleo va ricercato nella comunità attorno al vescovo, la cui responsabilità nella Chiesa deriva

If it is the Holy Eucharist that turns communities into Churches, then one could say that the parish, as long as it gathers the faithful in a Eucharistic assembly, could then be called a local Church. This question lies at the heart of the Eucharistic ecclesiology; on this point, Ioannis Zizioulas corrected or improved the views of their orthodox proponent, Fr. Nikolay Nikolayevich Afanasiev⁵⁷. In developing the Eucharistic view, Afanasiev focused on the position that “where the Eucharist is, there is the Church”; Zizioulas complemented it by strongly emphasizing the episcopal degree for the unity of the Church, which in retrospect led to the (perhaps justified) criticism that his views were bishopric-monistic, downplaying the priests and the synodality in the local Church. In addition to that, Ignatius’s normative model, i.e. the one Eucharist under the bishop, on which Zizioulas’s position is based, was considered to be a historical idealization; the transition from the one Eucharist (with the bishop as the presider) to the many parishes does not consist an alteration of the Eucharistic ecclesiology. In the context of this paper, we certainly cannot discuss this issue⁵⁸. The celebration of the Eucharist in the parish is unquestionably the first, the most “tangible” and empirical expression of participation in the Eucharistic community. Still, the parish community cannot find its place in ecclesiology at the expense of the diocese. It is problematic to speak of “parish ecclesiology”, or of communities outside the context of a local Church⁵⁹. The parish might be called (perhaps somewhat abusively) a Eucharistic community, but in no way a local Church. The parish is part of a local Church and the absence

dal fatto di essere il capo della comunità eucaristica e quindi l’immagine di Cristo. In tale veste ogni vescovo ha voce in capitolo sulle cose della Chiesa ipso jure e non in virtù o attraverso qualche autorità superiore, che sia il capo della Chiesa autocefala o un sinodo, ecc.»; J. Zizioulas, «Ortodossia», *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, v. 5, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma 1980, p. 4.

57. See Io. Zizioulas’s Prologue in his book: *Tò εἶναι ὡς κοινωνία*, Greek translation Z. Komninos, Indiktos Publications, Athens 2023 and K. Ware, *Εἰς νῆψιν ψυχῆς*, *op.cit.*, pp. 155-156.

58. For the presentation and discussion of these criticisms, we refer the reader to our book: *Collégialité et Synodalité*, *op.cit.*, pp. 513-521.

59. See Fr. Cyril Hovorun’s article cited above. Communities do not exist without a local Church.

of a bishop –before anything else– deprives it of catholicity both in terms of the community itself and in terms of its relationship with other local Churches⁶⁰.

Epilogue

An ancient Christian Latin saying says: “*unus christianus, nulus christianus*”. To summarize the above, we would say that I am not a Christian in general and abstract terms, but only as a member of a particular local Church. As we’ve already stressed, the Church is realized in a place as *a local Church*, i.e. as a diocese headed by a bishop in the likeness of Christ, who ensures unity both internally in a certain diocese and externally in the latter’s relationship with others. On a more practical level, of course, to be a Christian means that I participate in the life of the parish, which, however, it refers to a canonical bishop, whom –at least– I must know. Thus, I’m experiencing that I belong not only to my parish community but also to the wider Eucharistic community of the diocese, and, through it, to the one and catholic Church.

What does the notion of belonging means in an era of intangible, dematerialized reality and liquidity brought by technological means? The Church is called to respond to the new challenges of technology, not dismissively or fearfully, but based on the prophetic function of its theology. In this perspective, we have tried to highlight three criteria which must accompany the Church’s realization: the communion of persons, the unity ad intra and ad extra of the local Church, and the principle of territoriality. The first two elements, communion and unity, belong to the essence of the Church and must be preserved from the temptation of technology. The expression of these elements is also guaranteed by the geographical and territorial principle in the organization and constitution of the Church: Without it, the Church loses its catholicity and the quality

60. Among many other studies by the blessed professor Metropolitan Io. Zizioulas that we could refer to, see «Ὁ ἐπίσκοπος στὴν θεολογικὴ διδασκαλία τῆς Ὁρθόδοξης Ἐκκλησίας», in: *Ἔργα Α΄: Ἐκκλησιολογικὰ Μελετήματα*, Domos Publications, Athens 2016, pp. 589-595.

that distinguishes it from any other form of collectivity – the fact that it unites each and everyone in the name of Christ.

The connecting link of these elements is the Eucharistic community, as it was highlighted and defined by the Eucharistic ecclesiology in its most perfect version, that of Ioannis Zizioulas. Despite its individual criticisms, we fully share the judgment of Kallistos Ware, the late Metropolitan of Diokleia, who was also known for his prudent and moderate views, that the Eucharistic ecclesiology (of Afanasiev, and, especially, that of Zizioulas) remains the fully legitimate and dominant “model” of Orthodox ecclesiology⁶¹. In the face of the challenges posed by technology, and by securing above all the Holy Eucharist in all its ecclesiological dimensions, the Church safeguards its essence and identity and its realization – a legacy that has been left to us by that blessed sage, the Metropolitan of Pergamon:

Looking back to the past, with an eye now turned to the future that our century brings with it, I remain unrepentant about one thing in my theological journey: the Eucharistic approach to theology. This approach remains for me the only way forward for Orthodox theology, as it comes face to face with the challenges of our century. By choosing this approach, Orthodoxy can not only survive but also creatively interact with the social, even natural, sciences of our century, severely criticize the elements of our culture that are negative for man and God’s creation, and contribute - as far as the historical limitations and contradictions allow it - to the creation of a more human civilization. The Eucharistic approach is not a one-way street. Nothing is more “universal” than the Eucharist. Everything ends and finds its fulfilment in it: Baptism, Penance (=exercise), art and everything else that is involved in the existence and life of man as well as of all of creation. As theologians, the only thing we have to do is to open our eyes, and, having freed ourselves from prejudices and personal controversies, to stare at the depth and breadth of this *Magnum Mysterium*. There we shall find all our theology, not merely in our minds and intellects, but in our experience, an experience that it will not be an individual affair (as it is the case with other empirical theologies), but a communion of souls and bodies, a participation of God and all of creation⁶².

61. K. Ware, “*Sobornost* and eucharistic ecclesiology”, op.cit., p. 232.

62. Metrop. of Pergamon Io. Zizioulas, «Ἡ Ὁρθόδοξη Θεολογία καὶ οἱ προκλήσεις τοῦ 21ου αἰῶνα», in: *Πρόσωπο, Εὐχαριστία καὶ Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ σὲ ὀρθόδοξη καὶ οἰκουμενικὴ προοπτικὴ, Σύναξις Εὐχαριστίας πρὸς τιμὴν τοῦ Μητρ. Περγάμου Ἰω. Δ. Ζηζιούλα*, Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Ekdotiki Dimitriadou, Volos 2016, p. 336.