

## The Term Autocephalous Church



Metropolitan **Hierotheos** of Nafpaktos and St Vlassios

At the end of an earlier article I said that in a future article I would deal with the term *Autocephalous Church*, which is misinterpreted. I am undertaking this task with this present study, in which I expand on the views that I have expressed briefly in the past.

When we refer to local Churches we call them Autocephalous, and the *Tomos*, the synodical document by which metropolises are emancipated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and they are granted self-administration, refers to an Autocephalous Church.

I consider that the meaning of the term *Autocephalous Church* ought to be clarified ecclesiologically. This is important because the problem that has arisen with Ukraine is a symptom, but the cause of the illness lies in how the so-called Autocephalous Church is regarded today by some local Churches. This will become clear in what follows.

### 1. Christ the Head of the Church

First of all, it must be stressed that the head of the Church, and I mean the Orthodox Church, is Christ. The Apostle Paul writes in a categorical way: “And He

put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him Who fills all in all" (Eph.1:22-23).

Further on he writes: "But, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all things into Him Who is the head, Christ, from Whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:15-16).

These apostolic passages are absolutely clear. The head of the Church is Christ. He joins together and unites the whole body of the Church, and every member of the Church, according to the charisma he possesses, contributes to the growth of the body and its edification in love.

Elsewhere in the same Epistle, St Paul writes that "Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body" (Eph. 5:23). This means that Christ is the Saviour of the Church, and no member of the body saves the Church, but he stays within the Church in order to be saved.

Insofar as Christ and no one else is the head of the Church, what is meant by the fact that a Local Church is autocephalous (literally: self-headed)? The Apostle Paul asks bluntly: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor. 1:13).

The local Orthodox Churches should not therefore be understood as being independent autocephalies. They should be understood as local Churches in a Eucharistic sense.

In the Divine Eucharist there is one Lamb on the holy paten. Christ is one, and He is apportioned without being divided. This is why the president of the Eucharistic assembly says: "Apportioned and distributed is the Lamb of God, being apportioned and yet not divided." Everyone partakes of the whole Christ, not a part of Him.

Fr John Romanides used to say that this Eucharistic phrase is "the key to the mystery of Pentecost." In the Old Testament the grace of God "is indivisibly divided among divided beings", but on the day of Pentecost this happens within the Church with the Body of Christ. "What is important is that from Pentecost onwards, when Christ's human nature shares in the energy of God, which is indivisibly divided among divided beings, the whole Christ dwells in every believer, but only if Christ has been 'formed' in him."

Since Pentecost, the Body of Christ is a source of God's uncreated grace, by virtue

of the union of the divine and human natures in the hypostasis of the Word. Thus the Body too “is indivisibly divided among divided beings.”

Christ is the head of the Church. The local Primates are regarded as heads in the type and place of Christ, and not as His representatives and vicars.

## 2. The Metropolitan Regarded as Head of the Provincial Synod in the Type of Christ

I have tried to find sacred Canons containing the word *autocephalous*. In spite of my searches, I did not encounter this term in the sacred Canons, although I did find other terms, such as *uninfluenced*, *without constraint*, and so on.

The Fathers of the Church at the Ecumenical Councils gave a certain freedom to various local Churches to ordain their bishops and to administer their provinces, without other Churches intervening in their internal affairs.

The basis for the operation of local provinces is Apostolic Canon 34, which declares:

“The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first [the *protos*] among them and **account him as their head**, and do nothing out of the ordinary without his consent; but each may do those things only which concern his own diocese, and the places which belong to it. But neither let him (the *protos*) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

There is a wonderful equilibrium in this Apostolic Canon, so that unity may prevail in the Church. It concerns all levels of the synodical system of the Church.

According to John Zonaras (1074-1130), who interprets this Canon, just as bodies without a functioning head move incorrectly or are completely useless, so the body of the Church, “if the one leading it and **filling the position of the head** is not fittingly honoured, **it will act in a disorderly and irregular way.**” It should be noted here that the *protos* fills the position of the head.

He goes on to comment that the present Canon orders that the chief bishops of every province, namely, the metropolitans, “ought to be regarded as their head by the other bishops of the same province”, so that “they do nothing without him” with regard to the general state of the Church, in other words, with regard to “dogmatic discussions, matters of economy concerning common faults, the appointment of bishops, and other similar matters.” The *Protos*, of course, is not allowed to abuse the honour by intervening in the internal affairs of the bishops

without their consent.”

Theodore Balsamon (1140-1199), commenting on this Canon, writes that “order keeps all heavenly things together, but also earthly things.” By “heavenly things” he means the angels and saints. Thus, this Canon determines “that those who ordain should be honoured by those who have been ordained, for they are their ***protoi*** and ***heads***.” He continues by explaining “It has been determined by common consent that what goes beyond the administration of the affairs of each diocese and concerns the state of the Church, and is considered out of the ordinary, should not be done without the consent of the *protoi*.” However, even the *Protos* “was not allowed to do anything of this sort without the consent of his bishops.”

St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, interpreting this Apostolic Canon, writes:

“This Canon lays down the following. All the bishops of each province ought to acknowledge the one who is **protos** among them, namely, the metropolitan; and **to consider him as their head**, and not to do anything in out of the ordinary without his consent: in other words, anything that does not concern their sees, but goes beyond them, and is aimed at the common state of the whole province, such as, for example, matters to do with dogmas, economies and corrections of common faults, appointments and ordinations of the bishops, and other similar things. Rather, they must hold a meeting with the metropolitan, and take counsel with him with regard to such common concerns, and decide together on what seems best. Each bishop should only do on his own, without the consent of his metropolitan, those things that belong within the boundaries of his see, and to the places subject to his see. However, just as the bishops ought not to do anything of common concern without the consent of the metropolitan, so, likewise, the metropolitan ought not to do any such thing of common concern alone and on his own behalf, without the consent of all his bishops. Because in this manner there will be concord and love among bishops, metropolitans and clergy, and among laypeople. As a result of this concord and love, our God and Father will be glorified through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who made known to human beings the name of His Father and gave us the law of love, saying: ‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:35). And He will be glorified in His Holy Spirit, Who united us in a spiritual union through His grace. This means that by this concord the Holy Trinity will be glorified, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, according to the words of the Gospel: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

It is clear from this Apostolic Canon and the commentaries on it that, in the metropolitan system of administration, the metropolitan of the principal city of the province is **Protos**. As **head** he should be held in honour by the bishops. Nothing out of the ordinary should be done without his consent, but neither should he do anything without the consent of all the bishops. This shows the synodical administrative system of the Church, but at the same time the hierarchical system.

Whatever relationship the bishop has to his metropolitan, the metropolitan the same relationship to the patriarch to whom he is subject. And since the system of the Orthodox Church is synodical and hierarchical, there should be a similar sort of relationship between each Primate and the first-throne Patriarch, the Archbishop of New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, although they are of equal standing. No one can assert that the synodical system stops at each Primate of a Church, and that

ultimately the Primates of the Churches will remain without a head, and the Autocephalous Churches will function as independent, many-headed Churches.

This will be analysed in what follows.

### 3. **The Autocephalous Archbishop**

As we have seen, in the metropolitan administrative system the metropolitan is regarded by the bishops in his province as head, that is to say, as *Protos*, without, of course, replacing Christ, Who is the head of the Church. He is an administrative head according to the order and type of Christ, Who is the head of the whole Church, and he expresses the mystery of Christ's perceptible presence, lest the theological truth that the Church is the Body of Christ and is One be lost.

With the passage of time, the term *Autocephalous Archbishop* appeared in the Church, in the sense that he was not subject to the metropolitan, the head of the province, but was autocephalous (self-headed) with regard to the metropolitan of the region, and came directly under the Ecumenical Patriarch, **whom he commemorated**, so as to ensure the unity of the Church and its synodical and hierarchical system or regime. The term *autocephalous archbishop* also characterised someone who was outside the canonical territories of other metropolises, like Methodius in Moravia, for instance. The autocephalous archbishop, therefore, was not independent, but was subject to the Patriarch of New Rome – Constantinople.

According to Professor John Tarnanidis, who also makes use of existing literature on this subject, "autocephaly" does not refer "to a specific form of ecclesiastical independence that is fixed for all time", but "in contemporary research it is often used incorrectly."

He goes on to note:

"In ecclesiastical tradition the term *autocephalous* appeared and was mainly used as an addition to the title of an archbishop, to give him additional prestige. The basic privilege of the 'autocephalous archbishop' was his freedom from the regional metropolitan and his direct subjection to the Patriarch of Constantinople. The 'autocephalous archbishop' was ordained by the Patriarch, whom he was obliged to commemorate, thus showing his dependence on him. Consequently, at the first stage, the independence of the 'autocephalous archbishop' was limited and applied only to his relations with the metropolitan of the region."

The term *autocephalous archbishop* is completely clear. It certainly does not mean

that he was independent, as he was subject to the Patriarch of Constantinople, whom he commemorated.

As Professor John Tarnanidis notes again, the prestige of the archbishop who was subject to the Patriarch, and hence the significance of autocephaly, “began to rise mainly from the ninth century onwards, when the subject of ecclesiastical independence formed part of the more general political aspirations of the Slav leaders, particularly the Bulgarians Boris and Symeon.” Boris exploited the antagonism between the Eastern and Western Church, and attempted to force Constantinople to grant him ecclesiastical autonomy. “From this two-pronged ecclesiastical and political pressure, a new form of ‘autocephalous archbishop’ emerged, who, by passing over the metropolitan, placed himself immediately after the Patriarch.”

However, even after this upgrading, the ‘autocephalous archbishop’ did not receive full independence. The Patriarch of Constantinople had the right to ordain the ‘autocephalous archbishop’, and he in turn was obliged to commemorate him.

John Tarnanidis concludes: “For this reason, we regard as mistaken the view of some researchers, who identify the concept of ‘autocephaly’ unvaryingly in every era with the concept of ‘independence’. This, to be sure, came about at later stages.”

#### **4. The ‘Autocephalous Churches’ and ‘Autocephalism’**

According to the Canons, the *Protos* of each province is regarded as the head, in the type of the only true head, Christ, and later on the term *autocephalous archbishop* was introduced, vis-à-vis the metropolitan but not vis-à-vis the patriarch. Nevertheless, I have not found the term *Autocephalous Church* anywhere in the Canons. The fact that the *Protos* is to be regarded as head, in the type and place of Christ, is something quite different from the term *Autocephalous Church*. The ‘autocephalous archbishop’, who is dependent on the Patriarch of Constantinople, is not the same as the ‘Autocephalous Church’, which is allegedly completely independent.

There are many terms that express the self-administration of a Church. The term *autocephaly* applied to Churches, however, is a reference to the commentaries of Balsamon.

For example, Canon 2 of the Second Ecumenical Council determines the boundaries within which the local Churches will function, so that they will not intervene in other Churches and confuse “the rights of the Churches”. This Canon

lays down that there must not be confusion between the Churches, and bishops must not interfere “outside their dioceses for ordination or any other ecclesiastical functions.”

Theodore Balsamon, in his commentary on this Canon, writes about the metropolitans, who were ‘autocephalous’: “Take note from the present Canon that formerly all **the metropolitans of provinces were autocephalous**, and were ordained by their own synods.” The metropolitan, therefore, who was the *Protos* of the other bishops of the province and was regarded as their head, is characterised by Balsamon as “autocephalous”.

Because the Archbishop of Antioch was performing ordinations in Cyprus, Canon 8 of the Third Ecumenical Council (431), following the earlier custom, lays down “The rulers of the holy Churches in Cyprus shall enjoy, **uninfluenced** and **without constraint**, according to the Canons of the blessed Fathers and ancient custom, the right of performing for themselves the ordination of their most pious bishops.” And it adds: “The same rule shall be observed in the other dioceses and provinces everywhere, so that none of the bishops beloved of God shall assume control of any province which has not always, from the very beginning, been under his own hand or that of his predecessors.”

This Canon does not refer to an autocephalous Church, but says that the Churches of Cyprus should be “uninfluenced and without constraint” in ordinations of bishops.

On the other hand, in Theodore Balsamon’s interpretation of Canon 39 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council (692), which dealt with an issue concerning the Church of Cyprus, refers back to Canon 8 of the Third Ecumenical Council, which gave self-administration to the Church of Cyprus, and describes it as an Autocephalous Church. He writes: “It is shown by the third Canon of the Third Ecumenical Council that, at the petition of a certain bishop from Cyprus called Reginus, it was determined that the Church of Cyprus should be **autocephalous**, and the Archbishop of Antioch was prevented from performing ordinations there.”

It is clear that being “uninfluenced and without constraint” with regard to ordinations and administration, which the Canon of the Third Ecumenical Council decrees, is interpreted by Balsamon in the twelfth century as being an “autocephalous Church”, and St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain follows him.

Later on, the registers of the thrones refer to “the order of precedence of the most holy patriarchs”, “precedence of metropolitans, of the autocephalous, and of bishops, under the apostolic throne of this divinely preserved capital city.” This



shows that the autocephalous bishops were not subject to the metropolitan of the province, but to the patriarch, whom they commemorated, as we have emphasised already.

Subsequently, the *tomoi* of emancipation of the local Churches characterised these Churches as “Autocephalous Churches”, and the registers of the thrones define them as Autocephalous Churches “of Russia, Cyprus, Austria and Greece”.

Initially, therefore, mention is made of Churches being “uninfluenced and without constraint”, and later there is reference to the “autocephalous” bishop. The term *Autocephalous Churches* is much more recent. Reference is made to a non-canonical text of the sixth century, but it comes mainly from the commentator on the sacred Canons, Theodore Balsamon (twelfth century), who defines in this way the self-administration of the Churches, the election and ordination of their bishops, and the fact that they have a *Protos* and head with particular ministries and responsibilities.

According to Professor John Karmiris, the One Catholic and Apostolic Church is the Body of Christ and is made up of all the local Orthodox Churches. Every local Church under its bishop, who celebrates the Divine Eucharist, “possesses the fullness of the Church, realised as the Body of Christ in the Divine Eucharist, as the ‘Church of God that is in Corinth, in Rome’ and so on.” To be precise, therefore, we cannot say the Church of Greece, the Church of Russia, and the like, but the Church in Greece, in Russia, and so on. John Karmiris continues:

“However, in the unity and equality and identity of grace, of faith, and of the structure of the local Orthodox Churches, the one Orthodox Catholic Church is to be found, and the expression of her unity is the Pan-Orthodox or Ecumenical Council.”

It is clear here that the expression of the Church and its synodical system does not stop at the local ‘Autocephalous Churches’, such that each ‘Autocephalous Church’ is absolutely free, but it goes on to be expressed by the Pan-Orthodox Council, which constitutes an expression of the One Orthodox Catholic Church.

Overemphasising autocephaly and bypassing the Pan-Orthodox Council is, therefore, an ecclesiological problem. Professor John Karmiris points out:

“As this is how things stand, it is necessary for Orthodox theologians to take care to avoid the one-sided emphasis on autocephaly to such a degree that some theologians speak about **‘absolute autocephalism’, which is ‘essentially unknown and alien to Orthodoxy.’** Because there can be no doubt that autocephaly in the absolute sense originates from ethnophyletism, which was

condemned by the Local Council of Constantinople in 1872, and which constitutes a heresy against the Church, the Body of Christ, inasmuch as it splits her unity and overturns the synodical and collective administrative system of the Orthodox Catholic Church, which was handed down by the Apostles and the saints, and her traditional 'structural fabric'."

Here too it is clear that the regime of the Church is synodical and hierarchical, and for this reason overemphasis on the Autocephalous Church should be avoided, as it constitutes an ecclesiological deviation. Professor John Karmiris concludes as follows:

"It follows that '**absolute autocephalism**' is contrary to the Orthodox dogmatic teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ, which is not divided or split up, and contrary to the synodical regime, in accordance with the sacred Canons, of Orthodoxy, the unity of which the Orthodox have kept, and must always keep, as the apple of their eye, respecting the longstanding canonical ecclesiastical order, and particularly the Pentarchy of the Patriarchs, which took shape during the period of the seven Ecumenical Councils and was completed later on."

The unity of the Orthodox Church, therefore, is obviously manifested in the ancient Pentarchy and in the contemporary Pan-Orthodox Council or Synaxis of all the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, and this must be preserved "as the apple of our eye". The unity of the Primates should not be split for paltry nationalistic reasons. A so-called 'Autocephalous Church' cannot stop the commemoration of another Church for reasons of secondary importance, particularly the commemoration of the Ecumenical Patriarch. Such a state of affairs constitutes 'ecclesiological heresy'.

Whereas the system of the Pentarchy or the Pan-Orthodox Council always prevailed in the East, in the West, on the contrary, the monarchical system of administration dominated. Professor John Karmiris writes:

"Whereas in the East the Pentarchy of the patriarchs, and through it the bishop-centred, democratic and decentralised system of administration prevailed canonically, in the West the bishops of Rome gradually imposed the papal, monarchical, absolute and centralised system of administration, thus overturning the ecclesiastical regime that had been in force from the beginning. In this way a difference in the regime of the two sections of the Church, the Eastern and the Western, gradually came about, little by little."

After this, when one considers the term *Autocephalous Church*, as it is repeated

today in practice, one realises that it is problematic from the ecclesiological point of view.

What does *Autocephalous Church* mean? Does every local Church have her own head, who is independent of the other heads? And what does it mean that in the system of the Orthodox Church there are, up until now, fourteen or fifteen 'Autocephalous Churches'? Is the Orthodox Church many-headed, and are the local Churches completely independent of each other? And how do the 'Autocephalous Churches' operate without having a head, a *Protos*, who will preside over their assemblies? And what does it mean that the Orthodox Church has one head, when all the Churches are autocephalous? The metropolitan system is headed by the metropolitan; the patriarchal system is headed by the patriarch. Do the Primates of the local 'Autocephalous' Churches have no head and no *Protos*?

For this reason, taking the term *Autocephalous Churches* to mean that they are completely independent, without having a *Protos* in accordance with canonical law, goes against the synodical and hierarchical regime of the Church. It is reminiscent of a federation of Churches as found in Protestantism or at the World Council of Churches. Some people, therefore, although they reject the World Council of Churches, nevertheless in practice accept its manner of operation in the Orthodox Church. This is unacceptable!!

## 5. The Pope as “Supreme High Priest” and the “Brother Patriarchs”

Because in this article I am speaking about the *Protos*, and I do not want it to be supposed that I am speaking about Primacy, as it functions in Roman Catholicism, I shall refer to the difference between the *Protos* and Papal Primacy.

At one point in the discussions at the Council of Ferrara-Florence the Latins requested the Orthodox to accept the Pope as “supreme High Priest”. According to Syropulum, the document that the Latins sent for the Orthodox to sign, in order for the union of the 'Churches' to come about, contained, among other things, the following as its first item: “That the apostolic throne, the **vicar** of our Lord Jesus Christ, **the supreme High Priest**, namely, the most blessed pope, has these privileges. And it is lawful for him to add what has been added to the sacred creed [the *filioque*], and it is his right as **supreme High Priest**.”

In other words, the Latins proposed that the Orthodox should accept the addition of the *filioque* to the creed, because it was added by the Pope, who is “supreme High Priest” and the vicar or representative of Christ on earth. This is the basis of Papal Primacy, which is unacceptable to the Orthodox Church.

At that time the Orthodox replied with regard to this subject that, if it was necessary for something more to be added to the creed, this could not be done by the Pope alone, without his brother patriarchs. The Orthodox denied that the pope is “the vicar of Christ” in the Church and the “supreme High Priest”. They replied as follows:

“How can we say that the church of Rome has power to add or take away **without its brother patriarchs**? Because, even if the addition is pious, he who has dared to do this without a synodical decision will not escape punishment.”

According to Orthodox ecclesiastical tradition, the Pope is not “supreme High Priest” and he does not have primacy in the Church in the dogmatic sense as “the vicar of Christ”, as though Christ were in heaven and were not the head of the Church, and were to give His powers to His vicar, who is “supreme High Priest”!! It is characteristic that each Pope, expressing this primacy, does not regard himself as the successor of the previous Pope, but as the direct successor of the Apostle Peter, and, of course, as the vicar of Christ.

This, however, is unacceptable and does not exist in the Orthodox Church. The Ecumenical Patriarch has never said that he is the “supreme high priest” and “vicar of Christ” on earth. On the contrary, he has often stressed that we do not have a Pope in the Orthodox Church. At the Council of Crete he said emphatically: “In Orthodoxy we do not have a Pope.” He is, however, the exponent of the unity of the Church and its minister. He is the President of the Eucharistic assembly, and, by extension, the President in the administrative structure of the local Churches. The system of the Orthodox Church is neither papal nor Protestant; it is “synodically hierarchical” and “hierarchically synodical”.

The Ecumenical Patriarch, as first-throne patriarch, has certain duties, which in practice all the Orthodox Churches have recognised as his. Among these is that he presided at the Second Ecumenical Council and the following Ecumenical Councils, and granted not only the *tomoi* of autocephaly, but also patriarchal dignity and honour, to all the newer Churches, from the Church of Russia until today. Who has denied him these special privileges and duties? Anyone who denies them belatedly, should, to be consistent, reject all the Autocephalous Churches and the

patriarchates that he has granted in recent years.

When there are some theologians who overstep the limits, and elevate this privilege of the Ecumenical Patriarch to what they regard as the “primacy of the Father” vis-à-vis the Son and the Holy Spirit, this is blasphemous. The Church is the Body of Christ and not of the Father, and there is, of course, a huge difference between uncreated and created, and between theology and the divine dispensation, and they must not be confused with one another.

The mystery of the innermost recesses of the Holy Trinity is completely inaccessible to human beings, and we can only approach them apophatically. There are no analogies between the Triune God and human affairs. However, I have analysed this in other articles.

## 6. “Church is the Name of a System and a Synod”

After all this, the question arises: What is meant by the term *Autocephalous Church*, and particularly by fourteen or fifteen Autocephalous Churches?

This term is obviously problematic, and I think it should be understood as denoting only self-administering Churches, which are not independent of each other. These local Churches administer their own affairs, have the canonical “right to elect” bishops and metropolitans and their *protos*, and the “right to judge” them, without the other local Churches interfering in their internal affairs.

The term *Autocephalous Churches*, however, ought never to be understood as meaning they are independent of the other Churches. Since they have a relationship with the other Churches, there is a visible administrative and Eucharistic centre.

Earlier on I analysed the significance of the fact that Christ is the head of the Church, and yet there are many local Churches, who have a *Protos* as head, according to the Eucharistic manner in which the Church functions, in keeping with the words “Apportioned and distributed is the Lamb of God, being apportioned and yet not divided.” I should therefore make an analysis centred once again on the mystery of the Divine Eucharist and the administrative self-administration of the local Churches, which are not ecclesiologically independent of each other.

When the Divine Eucharist is performed, the one who takes the lead, the *Protos*, is in “the position of Christ” and the others are concelebrants with him. The *Protos* is the one who celebrates and says the words of the Lord.

St Symeon of Thessaloniki, who is renowned for his sensitivity in liturgical matters, writes that the bishop at the Divine Liturgy is acclaimed “as he bears His [Christ’s] grace.” During the Divine Liturgy the bishop represents Christ. “And he typifies Christ Himself slain and alive, and invisibly lying there sacrificed, and unceasingly being offered as a sacred offering, and on the high throne of God to the east, signifying Christ’s sitting on the right hand of the Father in heaven.”

Subsequently he writes that the *Protos* of the bishops or priests pronounces peace to the people: “However, the peace is not through himself, but through the first bishop or priest under him, because at that time they are in the position of apostles, whereas the bishop who is *protos* is in the position of Christ.” Thus, the first celebrating bishop is in the order of Christ. “Because he pronounces peace at the Gospel, having the type of Christ, whereas they [the concelebrants] at the Epistle, as being in the type of apostles.” But even they do not pronounce peace to the people on their own, but after receiving the blessing from the *protos*. “Neither do they do this of themselves, but they pronounce peace when they have received a blessing.”

Consequently, it is Christ Who performs the Divine Liturgy. The president at the Divine Liturgy has the place of Christ, because according to St John Chrysostom, “We occupy the place of servants”, the priest “simply lends his tongue and provides his hand.” In any case, during the prayer of the cherubic hymn the president prays “You are the Offerer and the Offered, the Receiver and the Received, Christ our God.”

Just as the one who presides at the Divine Liturgy has “the place of Christ” and the “type of Christ”, and typifies Christ, the same happens throughout the life of the Church, which is a continuation of the Divine Eucharist.

Consequently, when there is a Pan-Orthodox Divine Liturgy and all the Primates are present, the Patriarch of New Rome “typifies Christ” and has “the place of Christ”, and the others are his concelebrants. This continues in Pan-Orthodox Councils and Synaxes, as the whole of the Church’s life is an extension of the Divine Liturgy. The Ecumenical Patriarch is the *Protos* who keeps together the unity of the Church, according to the type of Christ, without being the “supreme High Priest” or the “vicar of Christ”. In this way the synodical and hierarchical regime of the Church, which differs from the papal and Protestant systems, is preserved.

Fr John Romanides observes:

“The Church as the Body of Christ is the dwelling place of the uncreated glory of

God. We cannot separate Christ from the Church nor the Church from Christ. In the Papal and Protestant traditions, a clear distinction is made between the Body of Christ and the Church. One can participate in the Body of Christ without being a member of the Papal Church. For the Orthodox this is impossible.”

“In the ancient Church, whenever they talked about the Body of Christ, or about Christ as the Head of the Church, they did not mean that Christ was spread over the whole world bodily, having, as it were, His head in Rome, His one hand in the East and the other in the West. They believed, rather, that the entire Christ exists in each local Church with all her members, namely, the saints and the faithful of the whole inhabited world. Thus, according to the Fathers, when we celebrate the Divine Eucharist, not only Christ Himself, but all the saints and all the Christians of the entire world are present in Christ. When we partake of a small piece of Holy Bread, we receive inside us the whole Christ. When the Christians gather together in one place, the whole Church gathers with them and not only a part of it. It is for this reason that, in the patristic tradition, the church of the monastery is called the *katholikon*, the place of the whole Church.”

This shows, as I have repeatedly stressed, because I regard it as highly significant, that Christ “is indivisibly divided among divided beings”; that the mystery of Christ is expressed in the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist and of the Church; and that the system of the Orthodox Church is synodical (in contrast with Roman Catholicism) and hierarchical (in contrast with Protestantism).

St Dionysius the Areopagite develops this subject in his treatises *On the Celestial Hierarchy* and *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The Hierarchy is a sacred way of life. It is presented as a “sacred citadel” organised thearchically and hierarchically, and its king is the Thearchy (God) Himself, Who is the beginning or principle of deification. St Dionysius writes:

“If one talks then of hierarchy, one means a certain general arrangement, an image of thearchial splendour which works out the mysteries of its own enlightenment in the orders and levels of understanding of the hierarchy, and is assimilated, as much as is permitted, to its own beginning.”

Elsewhere St Dionysius the Areopagite says that divine love (*eros*) is ecstatic, in the sense that it does not allow those who love it to remain in themselves, but in those whom they love. This is clear from the fact that those who are higher provide for those who are lower, those who are of the same order keep united among themselves, and those who are lower return to those who are higher.

“Divine love (*eros*) is ecstatic, because it does not allow lovers to belong to themselves, but to those they love. This is shown by the fact that the higher devote themselves to providing for those who are lower; by the bonds that unite those of equal status; and by the divine return of those below to those who are first.” ( *On the Divine Names* 4,13)

Apart from Christ’s relationship with the saints and theirs with Him, this passage also shows how the Church’s regime should function, in a synodical and hierarchical manner. All come out of themselves and are offered to the others. Those who are higher descend to those who are lower, those of the same rank keep united with those of the same order, and those who are lower turn towards those who are higher.

Then neither Roman Catholicism nor Protestantism applies, but the self-emptying role of the Orthodox synodical and hierarchical system applies. We should all aim towards this, and not seek to disrupt this unity decreed by God.

The fact that the Church is synodical is clear from many passages in the holy Fathers. St John Chrysostom, interpreting the words from the Psalms “His praise in the assembly [*ekklēsia* ‘church’] of His holy ones”, says: “This shows that we must send up hymns of praise to Him all together and of one accord. **Because Church is the name of an orderly whole and a synod.**” The word *Church* is the name of a synod, an assembly, not of self-independence.

Elsewhere, speaking about the assemblies in church which are the basis of the whole of ecclesiastical life, he says, “For it was made a Church, not that we who come together might be divided, but that they who are divided might be joined together: **and the assembly (synod) shows this.**” The Church is connected with the synod, and this is manifested in the Divine Eucharist.

Insofar as the word *ekklēsia* ‘church’ denotes a synod or assembly, the synodical system applies and functions at every level. It is not possible for the synodical regime to operate in parishes, monasteries, metropolises, patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches, and to stop with the Primates!

In this case, to whom do the Primates of the Church report? Should they not report to the Synaxis or Council of the Primates, with the Ecumenical Patriarch as *Protos*? Otherwise, perhaps autocephaly is being interpreted as ‘autocephalarchy’ (independent self-rule)? And does the Synaxis or Council of the Primates have no head or *Protos*? Is the Orthodox Church headless, in the Protestant manner?



I think that it is very significant that, when each Primate celebrates the Liturgy, he commemorates the Diptychs, with the Ecumenical Patriarch first, followed by the other Patriarchs and Primates of the Orthodox Churches. This commemoration of the Diptychs further interprets what I have said already, rather than the commemoration of “all the Orthodox Episcopate”, which can be taken as a “Protestant principle”.

I have always wondered what the words “all the Orthodox Episcopate” mean. What is each Primate of a local Church commemorating with the words “all the Orthodox Episcopate”, without commemorating a *Protos* with the Council of the Primates? This commemoration is better suited to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as a self-emptying expression of his first-throne ministry.

To be sure, this commemoration by the Primates of “all the Orthodox Episcopate” can be found, as far as I know, from at least the fourteenth century. It is used in parallel with the more ancient commemoration of the Diptychs, and is interpreted by it. But it is impossible for the Primates of the Orthodox Churches not to report to a Synod or Synaxis with a *Protos*.

Therefore one realises that, when a local Church stops commemorating the *Protos* in the Diptychs, **it is already in a state of schism, and is creating an independent head.** It is breaking up the concept of being “indivisibly divided among divided beings.” This is an ecclesiological heresy with dogmatic consequences, precisely because the Church is the Body of Christ and has Christ as its head. It “is indivisibly divided among divided beings” and functions synodically at all levels, since, according to St John Chrysostom, “Church is the name of an orderly whole and a synod.”

It follows that autocephaly and the patriarchal honour and dignity are never interpreted as denoting independent Churches without a *Protos*, as what John Karmiris calls ‘autocephalism’, what Olivier Clément calls ‘cephalarchy’, or what Panagiotis Trembelas calls a ‘fiefdom’. Such a mentality is the destruction of the synodical and hierarchical regime of the Church. It is a schismatic state and an ecclesiological heresy.

## 7. Potential and Actual Schism

Schisms are not created only at the lowest level by priests who want first place, but also at the highest level, when a Primate, together with his Synod, cuts himself off from the *Protos* and severs Eucharistic communion with him.

It goes without saying that the *Protos*, too, must respect the theology of the Church and her synodical system. There have been circumstances in which the *Protos* fell into theological errors and suffered the consequences (Nestorius, Honorius).

In any case, departure from the synodical system is due to many causes. St John Chrysostom, interpreting the apostolic words, “Be of the same mind toward one another”, notes: “For there is nothing that makes such schisms in the Churches as arrogance does.” And elsewhere he teaches that someone who has cut himself off from “this assembly (synod)” and has departed from the teaching of the Fathers and left the doctor’s surgery, “although he may seem to be healthy, will quickly fall sick.”

St Basil the Great, interpreting the passage from the Prophet Isaiah, “From the feet all the way to the head, there is no soundness in him, only wounds and bruises and festering sores”, writes: “For the schisms in the Church are wounds; perfidious hearts are bruises; and the festering sore is pride of soul due to a swelling of irrational conceit, which has therefore exalted itself against the knowledge of Christ.” Thus, schisms are wounds in the Church, treacherous hearts are bruises, and pride of soul due to unreasonable conceit is an inflammation.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Christ is the ONLY head of the Church, and for this reason the Church is one. Local Orthodox Churches do not split her unity, according to the apportionment of the Eucharistic Bread without division. The local Churches are administered in the way in which the Divine Eucharist is performed: they have a President and concelebrants.

The regime of the Church is synodical and hierarchical. This begins from the local Churches and metropolises, and reaches as far as the Council of Primates. It is not possible for the synodical and hierarchical administrative system to apply up to the Primates, and for the Papal or Protestant system to apply at that level.

The *Protoi* of the Churches are regarded as the head of the Churches “in the place and type” of the head, of Christ. The ‘autocephalous archbishop’ was described in this way in relation to the metropolitan and not in relation to the Ecumenical Patriarch, from whom he received ordination and whom he commemorated in the Divine Liturgy. The term *Autocephalous Church*, which was introduced much later, ought to be interpreted in an Orthodox manner, and certainly not as a fragmentation of the synodical system, as “wrong-headed” and “many-headed”. Every autocephalous Church must relate to the Ecumenical Throne.

Every fragmentation of the synodical and hierarchical system of the Church, and

the cessation of the commemoration of the *Protos* in the Divine Eucharist is a schism, and it comes about as a result of love of power and arrogance, unless the *Protos* has fallen into heresy, and this has been verified synodically. Since “order keeps all heavenly things together, but also earthly things”, this order cannot be infringed at the Council or Synaxis of the Primates. In that case, another institution is being introduced, which is not from the holy Fathers but anti-Orthodox and secularised, a quasi-World Council of Orthodox Churches!!