

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 102

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 2: The Structure of the Church (Holy Ordination) (*The Faith*, Chp.11)

“The Church is composed of the local bishop, presbyters, deacons, and laity, gathered around the Holy Table, reflecting here on earth the unity and harmony of the All-holy Trinity.”

1 Peter 2:5 “you also, as living stones, are **being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

The inner structure of the Church: not mere Roman Empirical administrative unity.

See quote by Archimandrite Vasileios:

“If the Lord had wanted a merely administrative unity, with no further implications in terms of life and mystery, He would have provided as an image of the Church’s unity the Roman Empire, saying, ‘Father, I desire that the faithful may be united as the Roman Empire is united’.” (*Hymn of Entry*, p. 47, quoted in *The Faith*, p. 166)

Instead, the **unity of the Church** is revealed in John 17:21-23 to be the unity experienced within the Holy Trinity by the Three Persons:

That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us; that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. And the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them; **that they may be one, even as We are one: I in them and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one;** and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.
(John 17:21-23).

Obviously, our Lord Jesus Christ had something much greater in mind than mere administrative unity. He offers us **THEOSIS—union with God.**

“The **Church is, therefore, an act of communion with God.**” (*The Faith*, p. 166) The Church is mankind’s **participation** (through and in Christ) in the eternal relationship of love among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) wrote that the Church “must herself be an image of the way in which God exists.” (*Being as Communion*, p. 15)

God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a communion (a *common union*) of love. Therefore, the Church, saved humanity, the Body of Christ, must reflect this heavenly example.

We—as the Body of Christ—are a communion of love.

We are always partaking of Holy Communion. We share the One Cup. We share the One Bread. We share the One Christ, and in so doing we are united by Christ and the Holy Spirit with God and with each other.

There is a “unity of the Faith” and the “communion of the Holy Spirit”. We pray for this at each Divine Liturgy, just prior to our partaking of the One Cup and the One Bread.

Ever since the days of the Apostles, the gathering of the Christians for the partaking of the Holy Eucharist (Holy Communion) was **central** to their **life in Christ**. It was a weekly event. Every Sunday was a little Resurrection, the “Lord’s Day”.

Acts 2:42 reports that the early Christians “continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of the Bread and the prayers.” The “breaking of the Bread” is the Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion. St. Paul bore witness to this fact when he wrote:

“The Cup of Blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the Blood of Christ? The Bread which we break, is it not the Communion of the **Body of Christ? For we, though many, are one Bread and one Body; for we all partake of that one Bread.**” (1st Corinthians 10:16-17)

The Eucharist was central, in the life of the early Church. It is still CENTRAL to the life of the Orthodox Catholic Church. The early Church was a Eucharist-centered community. It was an eucharistic community. It fed on the Body and Blood of Christ for its “daily bread”. It is in this oneness of the shared Eucharist that the unity of the Holy Trinity is most clearly seen.

From this point—of understanding the Church as an Eucharist community, gathering often around the Table of the Lord, to share in the Lord’s Body and Blood—one can see how the Church ever since its earliest days was structured.

At the Eucharistic gatherings, “**someone** had to **preside**; someone had to repeat the words of Christ, offer prayers for the community, and distribute the Gifts.” (p.167, *The Faith*)

At **first** the **Apostles** led the worship, but as the Church grew and spread, they could not be everywhere. So...to assist them, the Apostles appointed **bishops, presbyters, and deacons** to lead the local communities. The bishops were the Apostles’ successors.

From the First Century, the Church was **hierarchical**:

Bishop (“*episkopos*” in Greek)--means: “over-seer”. He is the presiding elder of a community. “Bishop” in English comes from the Greek “episkopos”.
See Acts 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 1 Peter 2:25

Presbyter (“*presbyter*” in Greek)—means: “elder”. One of a group, or council, of elders who assist and follow the lead of the presiding elder, the episkopos, the “over-seer”. “Priest” in English is the commonly used term when referring to the “presbyter”.
See Titus 1:5; Rev. 4:4

Deacon (“*diakono*” in Greek)—means: “servant, or helper”.

See Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13

Note: In a few places in the New Testament the terms “episkopos” and “presbyter” are used interchangeably. “This does not mean, however, that the specific offices themselves were interchangeable...” (p.167, *The Faith*)

See Acts 20:17 (presbyter)

See Acts 20:28 (bishop)

See Titus 1:5 (presbyter)

See Titus 1:7 (bishop)

This interplay of terminology is clarified when one remembers that all bishops (episkopos) are still priests (presbyters). The bishop is only the **presiding presbyter**.

[**Liturgical clothing trivia:** priests wear the stole around their neck as a symbol of their office. Bishops continue to wear the priestly stole—since they remain priests—over which they wear the bishop’s omophorion (the large scarf-like cloth symbolizing their role as “over-seer”).]

Writings from the Early Church witness to the fact that the Early Church had a structure of government utilizing a hierarchy of bishops, priests, deacons, and laity.

St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in the late **70’s A.D.** He wrote letters to various Churches, just as St. Paul had done.

Quote on page 169 of *The Faith*: **St. Ignatius to the Magnesians:**

“I advise you, be eager to act always in godly concord; with the bishop presiding as the counterpart of God, the presbyters as the counterpart of the council of the Apostles, and the deacons (most dear to me) who have been entrusted with a service under Jesus Christ, Who was with the Father before all ages and appeared at the end of time....Let there be nothing among you which will have power to divide you, but **be united** with the bishop and with those who preside, for an example and instruction in incorruptibility.”

St. Ignatius’ terminology became standard for the whole Church. “Thus, **the local Church is comprised of one bishop, who is the first and presiding presbyter, the college (or council) of presbyters, the deacons, and the laity—the People of God.**” (p.169-170, *The Faith*)

One bishop (the successor to the Apostles, and also the presiding presbyter)

Assisted by the council of presbyters (elders/priests)

Also, assisted by the deacons (“servants”)

Who together with the entire laity (“People of God”)

Gather together (assemble) as the “ecclesia” (the assembly)

Around their archpastor, the bishop,

Who presides and leads the Eucharist Prayers (Liturgy)

Standing in front of ONE altar table,

On which is the One Bread which is broken and shared to UNITE all the Believers (Laity) as the Body of Christ, who also drink from the One Cup of Blessing, the Blood of Christ.

The Church constantly lives the Apostolic experience of 1st Corinthians 10:16-17 --

“The Cup of Blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the Blood of Christ? The Bread which we break, is it not the Communion of the Body of Christ? **For we, though many, are one Bread and one Body; for we all partake of that one Bread.”**

Summary: In any given area, the Church of Christ was wholly present: One Eucharist, one Table, presided over by one presiding elder (the bishop), surrounded by and aided by his council of elders (the presbyters), and assisted by the deacons (the “servants”), with all the laity.

The **one** legitimate bishop [as successor of the Apostles themselves] presiding over the **one** Eucharistic gathering **provided the unity for the Church.**

To be part of the Church, one had to **hold** to the Apostle’s Faith, be a **member** of that gathering of the Faithful around the Eucharistic Table, and be **obedient** to the Apostle’s successor, the local bishop, the president of the assembly [the ecclesia].

Since the times of the Apostles, they established order within the Church. Nothing was to be done without the blessing of the Bishop, or his delegated representative. For example, the parish priest in any local town has been delegated and sent there by the bishop to represent him, and to lead the Liturgical worship, and to help shepherd the flock, in the bishop’s absence. But the bishop remains the ultimate leader and pastor of each parish within his area (his diocese).

Quote by St. Ignatius of Antioch:

“Let no one do anything that pertains to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is under the bishop or one whom he has delegated. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; just as wherever Christ Jesus may be, there is the catholic [*the whole*] Church.”

“Take great care to keep one Eucharist. For there is one Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one Cup to unite us by His Blood; one sanctuary, as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow-servants. Thus all your acts may be done according to God’s will.”

Growth of the Early Church:

As the local Church grew in the cities and towns in which the Apostles set up the Church, the natural growth of the membership of the church in a particular geographic area often required that the Bishop of a city would delegate—select and dispatch—one of his

ordained presbyters to represent him to a sub-area—a neighboring town—where the Church was just growing up. This presbyter would preside at the Eucharistic gathering in that town, as a representative of the local bishop.

As the Church in a local area continued to grow, more and more presbyters were dispatched—representing the bishop—in all these surrounding villages and towns.

Thus, parish life (with dispatched, delegated presbyter, deacon, and laity) came to be the norm. The bishop would preside at the Eucharist at the city cathedral, and would visit his surrounding village parishes as time permitted.

The Diocese represents that local Church, under one Bishop, with all the surrounding towns and villages (with delegated presbyters), all under the one Bishop.

The Bishops of a larger geographical area are grouped together as a “Synod”, in imitation of the Holy Apostles and their famous Council in Jerusalem, (see Acts 15). Ever since the early days of the Church, the bishops of each geographical area would meet together as a “Synod” at least two times a year to discuss matters common to their local churches. This gathering is called a “Holy Synod” of Bishops.

One bishop was always given the position of honor, at the head of the council table, as “first among equals.” He was, and is still called, the “Primate” of the Church in that local geographical area, and serves as the honorary figure head of that area’s Holy Synod of Bishops. He is not their “Pope”. When they vote on any matter, all the bishops of a Synod have an EQUAL vote.

For example, the Church with one of the smallest synods is the Orthodox Church of Cyprus: it has hundreds of parishes, about 5 bishops, with one archbishop as head of their Holy Synod, and Primate of their local Church.

However, the Church with the largest synod is the Orthodox Church of Russia: it has 38,649 parishes, about 314 diocesan bishops, and one patriarch as the head of the Holy Synod of their Church and their Primate.

There are 15 autocephalous (“self-ruling”) local Orthodox Churches in the world today. Together they make up the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Under normal circumstances they are in full communion with one another.

They together hold the one Faith of the Apostles.
They recognize each other and hold each other accountable to keep the Apostles' Holy Tradition unchanged.

The senior Patriarch (as “**first among equals**”) is the Ecumenical Patriarch—the Archbishop of Constantinople. He is in no way a global “Orthodox Pope”. His brother patriarchs always remind him of this. His is a position of honor only, **not** a position of absolute primacy or supremacy. He is only the archbishop of Constantinople, not of the whole world. In the first 1,000 years of Church history, the Bishop of Rome was honored as “first among equals”; but in AD 1054 Rome lost this honor when the Pope began to **exalt** himself to be “**first**” and **no longer** “**equal**”. The Roman Catholics initiated the Great Schism in 1054, breaking from the unity of the rest of the Eastern Patriarchs, by trying to do something **very UN-apostolic**: to **exalt** the Bishop of Rome **OVER** the rest of the Church. When the East refused to submit, the West excommunicated the East. The Eastern half of the Christian world would not tolerate such innovation, and wrote back to Bishop of Rome: “**You were always our sister church, when did you become our mother?**” And then they excommunicated the West in return, hoping that after time the West would come to its senses, humble itself, renounce its innovations, re-embrace its ancient collegial stance, and takes its place among the equality of Patriarchs. The East has been waiting another 1,000 years—to the present moment—for the West to “come home”...since it left the unity of the Faith in AD 1054.

Listed in order of rank are the Churches of:

Constantinople
 Alexandria and all Africa
 Antioch and all the East
 Jerusalem
 Russia
 Georgia
 Serbia
 Romania
 Bulgaria
 Cyprus
 Greece
 Albania
 Poland
 Czechoslovakia
 Orthodox Church in America
 (considered to be self-ruling by its Mother Church, Russia;
 however, from the perspective of the Church of Constantinople,

the O.C.A. is seen to be “still under Russia, its mother church”)

*Mt. Sinai—under Jerusalem

*Finland—under Constantinople

*Mt. Athos—under Constantinople

*Missionary dioceses in Far East, etc.—under Constantinople

*Japan—under the Church of Russia