

Quest for primacy: consensus

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Hegumen Cyril (Hovorun) reviewing the concept of primacy which is associated with such categories as authority, order and service mission of the Church in its eternal and temporal dimensions. The presented text is a Russian translation of a lecture delivered by the author at the Augustinian university of Villanova (USA). The lecture was given on April, 3. The audience consisted of students, postgraduates and teachers of the Fine Arts Department, mostly Roman-Catholic by confession.

The issues which are mentioned in the title of this paper – order, authority, service – in application to the Church in her both eternal and temporal dimensions, have a multiplicity of meanings. In my presentation, however, I would like to dwell on the notion of primacy, which is connected with all the mentioned issues. Again, in the ecclesiological context, the idea of primacy applies to all the levels on which the Church exists. It applies to a primitive community as well as to the Universal Church. My intention here is to focus on the level of the Universal Church, though one should remember that the primacy in the Universal Church can be properly comprehended only when the primacy either in the primitive community, or monastic community, or diocese, or any other form of incarnation of the Church, is taken into consideration.

In exploring the issue of primacy in the Church, it is possible to follow two paths. One is to make a snapshot of the concept of primacy as it has been dogmatised in various theological traditions; I mean primarily western and eastern traditions. The other one is to try to look at this concept from the historical point of view. The latter path can provide us with a more spherical picture of what the primacy used to be and, more important, what it can be in the life of Church. The path of the historical exploration can eventually lead us to finding appropriate solutions to the current problems in exercising primacy. It can also help avoiding further misunderstandings and even splits between the Churches on the grounds of primacy.

My key question here is what primacy used to be from the eastern point of view? When we speak of the eastern point of view, we mean mostly a tradition which was formed mainly as a result of the process of emerging and further growing of the Church of Constantinople. Other eastern concepts of primacy are more or less reflections on this tradition and modifications of the Constantinopolitan primacy in application to other Churches. It should be noted here that the idea of primacy was not exactly in the focus of thought of the East. The East touched on this issue occasionally, in a few instances when the role of the Church of Constantinople in the hierarchy of the local Churches was discussed.

These discussions happened in the course of two ecumenical councils, Constantinople 381 and Chalcedon 451. In result of the discussions, two canons were adopted. Even though these canons deal with very particular historical issues, they constitute basic legislative documents on which the idea of primacy, from the eastern

point of view, was built. Although these councils are ecumenical, they were held in the East and in this particular question reflect more the eastern than the western point of view.

So, the canons say:

Let the Bishop of Constantinople, however, have the priorities of honour after the Bishop of Rome, because of its being New Rome (canon 3 of the Council in Constantinople 381).

Everywhere following the decrees of the Holy Fathers, and aware of the recently recognized Canon of the one hundred and fifty most God-beloved Bishops who convened during the reign of Theodosius the Great of pious memory, who became emperor in the imperial city of Constantinople otherwise known as New Rome; we too decree and vote the same things in regard to the privileges and priorities of the most holy Church of that same Constantinople and New Rome. And this is in keeping with the fact that the Fathers naturally enough granted the priorities to the throne of Old Rome on account of her being the imperial capital. And motivated by the same object and aim the one hundred and fifty most God-beloved Bishops have accorded the like priorities to the most holy throne of New Rome, with good reason deeming that the city which is the seat of an empire, and of a senate, and is equal to old imperial Rome in respect of other privileges and priorities, should be magnified also as she is in respect of ecclesiastical affairs, as coming next after her, or as being second to her. And it is arranged so that only the Metropolitans of the Pontic, Asian, and Thracian dioceses shall be ordained by the most holy throne of the most holy Church of Constantinople aforesaid, and likewise the Bishops of the aforesaid dioceses which are situated in barbarian lands; that is to say, that each Metropolitan of the aforesaid dioceses, together with the Bishops of the province, shall ordain the Bishops of the province, just as is prescribed by the divine Canons. But the Metropolitans of the aforesaid dioceses, as has been said, are to be ordained by the Archbishop of Constantinople, after the elections have first been conducted in accordance with custom, and have been reported to him (canon 28 of the Council in Chalcedon 451).

There is one more canon, adopted at the Quinisext Council in 692, which summarises the two above canons. It states:

Renewing the laws made by the one hundred and fifty Holy Fathers who assembled in this God-guarded imperial capital city, and by the six hundred and thirty of those who assembled in Chalcedon, we decree that the throne of Constantinople shall enjoy equal seniorities (or priorities) with the throne of older Rome, and in ecclesiastical matters shall be magnified like the latter, coming second after the latter; after which the throne of the great city of the Alexandrians shall come next, then that of Antioch, and after this the throne of the city of the Jerusalemites (canon 36).

The rationale of the primacy of Constantinople, as it was seen from the perspective of the East, has been made clear in the canon 28 of Chalcedon. It is clarified through

the following words, which I repeat:

The Fathers naturally enough granted the priorities to the throne of Old Rome on account of her being the imperial capital. And motivated by the same object and aim the one hundred and fifty most God-beloved Bishops have accorded the like priorities to the most holy throne of New Rome, with good reason deeming that the city which is the seat of an empire, and of a senate, and is equal to old imperial Rome in respect of other privileges and priorities, should be magnified also as she is in respect of ecclesiastical affairs.

So, the Fathers of the Chalcedon regarded primacy of the Churches of Rome and Constantinople as a result of the political importance of two cities, and not for any other historical or ecclesiastical reason. The Church of Rome has her privileges because Rome used to be an imperial capital. So is Constantinople, which has become a new Rome after the Emperor and the Senate moved there.

When we look at the decision of the council in a broader context, we will see that this explanation is not satisfactory. Indeed, the primacy of the Roman Church was seen by the fathers of the Church, including the eastern ones, not only through the prism of political importance of Rome. It was undoubtedly connected with Apostle Peter. I don't have time to explore this issue thoroughly. I will limit myself just to two witnesses of the eastern Patristic thought. One is a passage from St Ephraim the Syrian who makes Christ speaking of Peter in the following words:

Simon my follower, I have made you the foundation of My holy Church. I betimes called you Peter, because you will support all its buildings. You are the inspector of all who will build on earth a Church for Me. If they should wish to build what is false, you, the foundation, will condemn them. You are the head of the fountain from which My teaching flows, you are the chief of My disciples. Through you I will give drink to all peoples. Yours is the life-giving sweetness which I dispense. I have chosen you to be, as it were, the first-born in My institution, and so that, as the heir, you may be the executor of all My treasures. I have given you the keys of My Kingdom. Behold, I have given you authority over all My treasures! (Homilies)

Second witness is by another great figure of the eastern theology, St Maximus the Confessor:

The extremities of the earth, and everyone in every part of it who purely and rightly confesses the Lord, look directly towards the most holy Roman Church and her confession and faith, as to a sun of unfailing light, awaiting from her the brilliant radiance of the sacred dogmas of our Fathers, according to that which the inspired and holy Councils have stably and piously decreed. For, from the descent of the Incarnate Word among us, all the churches in every part of the world have held that greatest Church alone to be their base and foundation, seeing that according to the promise of Christ our Saviour, the gates of hell never prevail against her, that she has the keys of orthodox confession and right faith in Him, that she opens the true and exclusive religion to such men as approach with piety, and she shuts up and locks

every heretical mouth which speaks against the Most High. (*Opuscula theologica et polemica*)

At the same time, from the eastern point of view, not only the See of Rome, but also the See of Constantinople enjoyed apostolicity as a foundation of its primacy. Apostolicity of the Church of Byzantium, a town which was chosen by Constantine to establish a new capital of his Empire, is mentioned in the Syriac translation of the early Christian text, *Doctrina Apostolorum*. This document mentions Apostles Luke, John, and Andrew as those responsible for Christianization of the region. Tradition of apostolicity of the See of Constantinople was especially developed in the period of the Acacian schism (484-519). It also penetrated into the state legislation, with the Novella 24 by the Emperor Heraclius to call the See of Constantinople 'Apostolic.'

It is obvious from what has been said that even from the eastern point of view, not to say about the western position, the political explanation of primacy, as it was given by the Ecumenical councils held in the East, is not satisfactory. It is actually a reduction of what the Fathers thought of the primacy in the Church. Probably, because of this, the West for a very long time refused to include the canon 28 in its canonical Corpus. At the same time, the explanation given in the canon 28 was not a distortion of the idea of primacy, which at that time included a clear political element. Therefore, when we look at how the primacy of Rome was interpreted, we should not ignore this element. When the rationale of the Roman primacy was seen as only connected with Peter, while the political status of the city was ignored, this was also regarded and is still regarded by the East as a reduction of the idea of primacy.

Summarising what has been said, it is hardly possible to speak about any radical difference in the approaches of the West and of the East to the issue of primacy in the period of the common ecumenical councils. Yet, different tendencies in dealing with this issue, as for instance during the discussions over the canon 28, should not be overseen as well. These tendencies gradually developed into irreconcilable interpretations of the primacy which eventually led to split between the Churches of West and East.

West and East did not come into clash over the issue of primacy until the XIII century, when Constantinople was captured by the crusaders and Pope Innocent III installed a Latin Patriarch, Thomas Morosini, to Constantinople. At this time the issue of primacy came into focus of the eastern theological thought and was explored thoroughly.

It is noteworthy that even after the schism, capture of Constantinople by the crusaders, installation of Morosini, the eastern theologians did not deny the primacy of Rome, though they demanded that some conditions were to be met:

First, the Church which is on top of the hierarchy should not consider the other Churches as parts of herself, but as partners whose autonomy should be respected.

This reservation is clearly demonstrated by the Patriarch of Constantinople John Kamatiros, who was replaced by Latin Thomas Morosini:

We agree to venerate Peter as the first disciple of Christ, we agree that his veneration excel the veneration of others, so that he may be glorified for his primacy; we also count the Church of Rome as first in the rank and the honour... However, we do not see that the Scriptures oblige us to recognise her (= the Church of Rome) as either the Mother of the others or as embracing the other Churches. (Letter to Pope Innocent III)

So, Kamatiros clearly indicates two possible abuses of primacy. One is ignoring the hierarchy among the local Churches. The other is when one local Church dictates her will to another Church.

Second condition of primacy acceptable for the East, was that the Church which is the first in the rank must firmly stand in truth. It is adherence to true doctrine which makes the Church of Rome first among the others, and not vice versa. This position was stated, for example, by St Symeon of Thessalonica:

We should not speak against the Latins, when they say that the Bishop of Rome is the first – this sort of primacy is not harmful to the Church. Let them only show that he (= the Bishop of Rome) keeps the faith of Peter and his successors. In this case he may have all the privileges of Peter, be the first, the head, the head of all, and the highest archpriest... If he keeps the Orthodoxy of Sylvester and Agatho, Leo, Liberius, Martin, and Gregory, then we will call him apostolic man and the first among the archpriests. Then we will be under his authority not as if he were Peter, but the Saviour himself. (Dialogus contra haereses)

Thus, during the controversies with the West, a specifically eastern understanding of primacy was formulated, which applied not only to Rome, but to Constantinople as well. Nevertheless, even though such an understanding was dogmatised, still it to a great extent reflected the actual historical reality of that time, with the Church of Constantinople on the top of the system of Pentarchy and the other local Churches to be safeguarded in their full autonomy by the conciliar canons and the State legislation. Very soon, however, the historical conditions for the eastern Churches changed dramatically. This happened when the territories of Byzantium fell under the rule of Turks.

During the Ottoman period, the eastern concept of primacy underwent considerable modifications. In particular, the Patriarch of Constantinople was given rights to exercise not only ecclesiastical, but also civil authority. Moreover, this authority was extended not only to the people under canonical jurisdiction of the See of Constantinople, but over all the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire – Rum millet. This population jurisdictionally belonged also to the other eastern Churches. Thus, Orthodox people under the jurisdiction of the Churches other than Constantinople, had double authority over them, ecclesiastical authority by their own

Patriarchs and Archbishops, on the one hand, and the political authority by the Patriarch of Constantinople, on the other hand. As a result, under the Ottomans, a new paradigm of relationships between the Church of Constantinople and other eastern Churches was formed, when the political authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople as millet başı, extended far beyond his ecclesiastical authority. This inevitably led to the extension of his ecclesiastical authority as well. Although influence of the Patriarchs of Constantinople over the other eastern Churches was informal, it was real and effective. We should keep this nuance in our minds, if we want to understand properly what is going on with the issue of primacy today.

In our days, there is a revival of the interest to the issue of primacy. This revival has two reasons. One is a dialogue between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. The other reason is a discussion about the primacy between the Orthodox Churches. This discussion develops mostly around the issue of the Orthodox Diaspora. The two arguing sides in the discussion are primarily the Churches of Constantinople and Moscow, notwithstanding the other autocephalous Churches which take one or the other side.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to analyse the Roman-Orthodox dialogue. Remaining time allows me just to say a few words about the differences in approach to the issue of primacy by Constantinople and Moscow. The key formula which has been selected to interpret the modern understanding of the notion of primacy nowadays, is *primus inter pares* – first among equals. However, as it is known, the shorter and nicer is a theological formula, the more confusing it may be. So it is with this formula. All the Orthodox Churches favour this formula. However, sometimes they interpret it in different ways.

To speak roughly, some Churches, with Constantinople on the top, tend to emphasise the first part, *primus*, while the others, with Moscow as protagonist, stress the last part, *inter pares*.

The Church of Constantinople, it seems, lives more with the memories of the Ottoman period, than the Byzantine times. She continues thinking of herself as a 'Great Church in captivity', as once Steven Runciman called her. The paradox is that in the captivity, she had more political rights and exercised more influence over the other Churches, than when she was a state Church of the Eastern Roman Empire. In the period that followed the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the beginning of the XX century, the Church of Constantinople attempted to keep the *de facto* situation of her relative dominance over the other local Churches, now in application to the Diaspora. Even now, consciously or unconsciously, the Church of Constantinople sometimes applies the paradigm of the Ottoman period in her relations with the other Churches, especially Greek-speaking ones. And this is not always helpful for the relations between the Orthodox Churches. Nevertheless, this paradigm seems to be rather helpful in the dialogue with Rome. The Ottoman paradigm, let us call it like this, is closer to the Roman understanding of primacy and helps the two Churches to better understand each other.

Moscow opposes this tendency. However, it seems to me that sometimes it falls out of the historical tradition and neglects the importance of the hierarchy of the Churches and the first one among them. As it has been shown, even in the hardest times of invasion of the crusaders in Constantinople, the Greek theologians did not refuse the idea of primacy in the Church, something that some modern theologians do.

Concluding, as in the old days, when the Church was united, so is now, there is a variety of interpretations of the primacy in the Church. On the one hand, such a variety may work for the good of the Church, as far as it safeguards the Church from any abuse of primacy and authority. On the other hand, it does not mean that we should not seek for a consensus over the issue of primacy. This consensus is not a monopoly of one or another side, but rather a compromise, when truth is found somewhere between the existing interpretations. Truth actually is in between, as one can conclude from the historical retrospective expounded earlier. As we have seen, both East and West in the periods before and after the schism approved the hierarchical structure of the local Churches, with the Church of Rome on top of it. However, the East did not accept the policy of Rome to dictate her will to other Churches. At the same time, West justly opposed the eastern tendencies to desecralise the hierarchy of the local Churches and reduce it to the political reasons only. As at those times a compromise was much in need, so it is now. The issue of primacy is a dangerous one. If we do not handle it carefully avoiding one-side interpretations, we are in risk to face further splits and never find a healing for the existing divisions.

[Geschichte der Alten Kirche](#), [Geschichte der autokephalen und autonomen Kirchen](#), [Geschichte der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche](#), [Geschichte der westlichen Glaubensbekenntnisse](#)

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