The problem of unity of the Church

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Among the major ecclesiological problems on the modern agenda I would stress the criteria of unity of the Church. We believe that the Church is one here and now. But what makes the Church one? What keeps different communities with diverse cultural, geographical, ethnical backgrounds together? There are some self-evident answers which however do not easily stand a closer investigation. When we start a historical inquiry into the problem we may discover that the criteria of the unity of the Church varied depending on historical circumstances.

Looking back into the history we can see that there was no a single standardised, unchangeable, and accepted by everyone criterion of the unity. Rather, there was a fluctuating variety of the criteria. Those criteria were not necessarily contradictory to each other. From time to time, some criteria became more important and other – less important.

Some of the criteria were articulated in the Nicean creed: 'I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.' Here, apostolicity and catholicity secure the unity and the holiness of the Church. The Nicean creed reflects the situation of the first quarter of the 4th century and summarises the ecclesiological self-consciousness of the Christian communities of the pre-Constantine era. Interestingly, the creed does not enlist the unity of faith as a criterion of the unity of the Church. This criterion would become crucial in the context of the posterior theological controversies. It is possible to assume that for the Christians of the first three centuries, apostolicity and catholicity were the most important features that kept the Church one.

Initially, the apostolicity served as a magisterial criterion of unity. The reasons were obvious: various Christian communities were in communion with each other through the Apostles who directly or by their disciples had established them. It was not only apostolicity of faith and doctrinal traditions that mattered, but also and may be primarily, apostolicity of origins. With passage of time, however, apostolicity of origins

gradually turned into apostolicity of faith. I think we find this shift happening in the time of Irenaeus of Lyon. Apostolicity of origins also took shape of the apostolicity of epicsopal succession. Although this change was a reduction of the original notion of apostolicity, it turned into an important practical instrument of securing unity of the Church: those bishops who did not have proper apostolic succession in their heirotonies, were excluded from the ecclesial communion, together with their communities. This incurred another important shift, with apostolicity being concentrated in the person of bishop, and the unity of the Church being preserved through the unity of bishops, and not directly by the communities sharing the same apostolic faith. In our days, apostolic succession has become especially important in the ecumenical relations. It turned into a criterion of the degree of possible reapproachment between the Churches that confess different doctrines, as well as a criterion of receiving from other confessions. Thus, the idea of apostolicity went through dramatic developments.

As for the catholicity, we can assume that in the apostolic era it had a simple meaning that the communities which belonged to one Church were not sects. Catholic in that time was synonymous to 'non-sectarian' and indicated those communities that considered important to keep together with other Christian communities. This criterion became vital with outburst of various sectarian movements that did not consider fragmentation of the Christian *oecumene* as any big problem. The notion of apostolicity also developed through the centuries. In its historical development, it passed through the idea of geographical spread, numerical majority, uniformity of the ecclesial structure, and even synodality or conciliarity. In the western Christianity, catholicity has become the most important marker of the one Church. It meant, and still means many things, first of all, the unity of the ecclesial structure with one visible centre – the Roman Pontiff. In the East, catholicity recently was identified with consiliarity. A major contribution to this development was made in the 19th century by the Russian lay theologian Alexei Khomiakov whose concept of 'sobornost' found many followers among the Orthodox theologians. In both western and eastern concepts of catholicity, we find how far they stand from the original idea.

In the 4th century, catholicity adopted a geographical meaning. With legalisation of Christianity and its political promotion as state religion of the Roman empire, catholic

would sound to many as imperial. The state took a great deal of care about the unity of the Church. When the Church appeared to be challenged by various doctrinal disputes, it was the state, at least in the eastern part of the Empire that took responsibility for preserving the unity of the Church despite theological differences. Unity of the Church became an important political agenda for many Byzantine emperors. To protect unity, they sometimes compromised faith. This started happening as early as in the era of Constantine and continued through the period of the Christological disputes. The emperors persecuted Athanasius of Alexandria as a troublemaker, attempted to reconcile the adherents and adversaries of Chalcedon by banning theological discussions (*Henotikon* of Zeno), promoted eclectic doctrines (Monenergism and Monothelitism of Heraklion) *etc*. All this was done to protect or restore unity of the people in the Empire, and was accepted by the majority of the Church. Only single figures resisted the attempts to sacrifice the doctrine to the unity. Thus, unity of the Empire and of the Church were among the priorities of both secular and ecclesial leaders of Byzantium, who sometimes pushed the issue of Orthodoxy to the back.

On the contrary, in the West in the same period Orthodoxy of faith was something that the Church leaders were fighting for without taking much into consideration any political expediency. Unity of the Church did not much count for them without full agreement on the controversial issues of the doctrine. This might led them to breaking communion with the Church of East, when the latter went too far in compromising faith. The most illustrative example of such kind of approach was the Acacian schism (484-519). Apparently, this situation was possible because the state in the East was strong, or had to be strong, while in the West it was weak.

When statehood in the East became weaker, and in the West a new, Frankish, statehood emerged, the situation with the criteria of the unity of the Church changed to opposite as well. East became more rigid about the issues of faith, while West allowed a more doctrinal variety, as it appears in the case of Filioque. As it is known, Filioque was locally introduced as an interpretation of the Trinitarian dogma much before it became an apple of discord between East and West. Charlemagne started promoting this interpretation as a feature of the western Orthodoxy. Quite contrary to other epochs, when the westerners often demonstrated rigor to the eastern ‘flexibilities’ in the issues of faith, this time it was their turn to be flexible about the

doctrinal initiatives of their emperor, while the easterners did not miss a chance to show their uncompromised adherence to Orthodoxy. May be in other epoch they would grant the westerners their collaborationism, in the spirit of their own flexibility that sometimes in the past turned in servilism. But they did not. In the 9th century, they applied the western-style rigorism and made out of Filioque a Church-dividing issue. I do not want to say that Filioque was not a Church-dividing issue. I just want to say that the two sides exchanged the roles. Apart of the theological reasons, one of the explanations why they appeared to be so akribic, could be absence of political expediency, given that the eastern imperial authorities were seriously challenged by the pretensions of Charlemagne.

With the polemics against Filioque and later on, the so-called 'hesychastic' controversy, the East more and more identified itself with Orthodoxy of faith. The doctrinal purity became very dear to the easterners and turned for them into a pivotal identity and an important criterion of the unity of the Church. An elevated attention to Orthodoxy can be seen in the renaissance of theology in the late Byzantine epoch. The new era of Orthodoxy was marked with the appearance and popularity of the '*Synodika* of Orthodoxy,' the catalogues of heresies. Orthodoxy played the role of a key criterion of the Church unity until the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Under the rule of the Ottomans, the East did not pay the same attention to Orthodoxy anymore. Indeed, theological outcome of the Greek East in the Ottoman period is strikingly poor. It cannot be compared with the theological achievements of late Byzantium. Moreover, it often appears to be heretical, if judged against the criteria of the *Synodika*. This theological downturn cannot be explained only by general degradation of learning in the Greek-speaking East. I believe it means that strict Orthodoxy of faith ceased to be the key criterion of the unity of the Church. Other factors of unity emerged.

I think that under the Ottoman rule, it was the fact of belonging to one *millet* that somehow substituted Orthodoxy as the main criterion of the Church unity. Again, it does not mean that Orthodoxy as criterion of unity disappeared altogether, but that it stopped playing the same important role as it did before the fall of Constantinople. *Millet* is a quasi-ethnical community of people confessing the same faith. The

Orthodox population of the Ottoman empire regardless of their ethnical backgrounds, constituted a single *millet*, with one head on top of it, *millet başi*, the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Thus Orthodoxy as criterion of unity of the Church was shadowed by a sort of ethnical unity. It was not about nation in the modern sense, since *millet* comprised people of many nationalities. A further transformation happened after the French revolution when the unity of *millet* evolved into the unity of nation, as a criterion of belonging to one Church. This change of criteria, I think, gives an explanation to the fervent struggles of the newly-emerged national Balkan states for their own independent Churches. They believed that one nation had to have one Church. The nation, this time, was not regarded in a sense of *millet*, but in the sense shaped by the French Enlightenment. Thus ethnical identity became an important feature of self-understanding of the Orthodox people, up to the point of blending the two identities.

This situation caused many implications which are still valid nowadays. For instance, a popular belief that belonging to a certain Orthodox nation implied being Orthodox, and *vice versa*. It also led to the restructuring the entire system of the Orthodox Churches, which turned into a confederation of ethnical ecclesial bodies, fully independent from each other in a sense of independence of national states. The Church unity within the same local Church became much more valuable then the unity between the local Churches. Hence is a series of schisms that accompanied the emancipation of the ethnic Churches from their kyriarchal centres. The shift of the criterion of ecclesial unity to the ethnic unity also resulted in a phenomenon, when one can be considered Orthodox only by the fact of belonging to an Orthodox nation, regardless of what he or she believes or practices. One can be completely ignorant about basic Christian beliefs, and yet considers oneself Orthodox, and furthermore, considered as Orthodox by the Church. For instance, the Church could allow one to be buried by the Orthodox rite just by taking into account one's ethnic identity.

The fall of the Russian empire in 1917 led to a mass migration of the Orthodox population to the West. People found themselves in the heterodox environment which put them face to face with the problem of preserving their Orthodox identity. What would make them now feeling that they belong to one Church of Christ? The Orthodox

empire that made them feeling secure about their belonging to one Church did not exist anymore. In result, they had two ways to follow. One way was to connect their religious identity with the national one. This way had been followed by other national diasporas mainly from Balkans and Asia Minor: Greeks, Serbians, Bulgarians, and others. This was a well trodden path which was chosen by a part of the Russian emigration. However, blending the religious and national identities was not satisfactory for everyone in the Russian diaspora. In result, an alternative way of religious self-identification.

Instead of the ethnic identity, an alternative factor of the Church unity was suggested, the Eucharist. Sharing the same Chalice was promoted as a key criterion of belonging to one Church, thus giving birth to the Eucharistic ecclesiology. Eucharistic ecclesiology dominated the entire 20th century and is still popular as a theoretical framework that provides explanation to many aspects of the Church life. Eucharist is believed to be a starting point that gave a new sense to the communal life, as well as to the role of bishops, priests, and laity. Even the structure of the local Churches was attempted to be explained in terms of the Eucharistic ecclesiology.

Recently, however, some theologians started doubting the sufficiency of the Eucharistic criterion. Instead or in parallel, they develop alternative ecclesiologies which feature Baptism or hierarchical ministry as major criteria of the Church unity, no less significant than the Eucharist. Strict following the canons is also in several cases promoted as a criterion of belonging to one Church, so that a notion of 'canonical' Churches emerged in recent years. In result, the local Churches which are believed to be part of the one Church of Christ are sometimes called 'canonical'.

I think that no one of these criteria, taken separately, appears to be fully explanatory for the Church unity. Indeed, if we take Eucharist, is it a precondition or a result of the unity of the Church? In other words, do people belong to one Church because they partake of the one Chalice, or they partake of the one Chalice because they belong to one Church? If we consider as one Church those communities that share one Eucharist, how then should we treat the instances when some Churches have communion with a certain group of canonical Churches, and with other canonical Churches, they do not? This was the case, for instance, with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia

(ROCOR). Before its reunion with the Moscow Patriarchate, this Church had Eucharistic communion with the Churches of Serbia and Jerusalem, and did not have any communion with the rest of the local Orthodox Churches, primarily the Russian Orthodox Church which it anathematised. This situation is a good example of violation of the classical criterion of the Church unity: κοινονῶν ἀκοινονήτῳ ἀκοινόνητος – the one who has communion with someone out of communion, sets himself out of communion as well. The criterion of strict following the canons does not seem to work either, as there are no 'canonical' Churches which would act in full conformity with the canons of the Church.

Recently, there was an attempt to set up a new criterion of unity, based on the communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch. It was attempted in a document adopted by the Joint International Commission for the theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church at its meeting in Ravenna in October 2007 (Ravenna document): The councils 'gathered together the bishops of local Churches in communion with the See of Rome or, although understood in a different way, with the See of Constantinople, respectively' (article 39). The idea behind this statement is that those local Churches are a part of the one Church which have communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This idea was obviously imported from the Roman ecclesiology and was challenged by the Russian Church.

All what has been said above draws us to an unfortunate conclusion that it is not an easy task to identify the criteria of the unity of the Church. We accept as granted the phenomenological unity of the 'canonical' Churches, but theoretical principles of this unity seem to be evasive. This problem is another side of the problem of ecumenism. To clarify the criteria of the unity of the Church is as difficult as to draw the borders of the one Church, and to answer the question whether there is Church beyond the 'canonical' Churches. We will be hardly able to answer this question without making clear what is the theological basis of the unity of the one Church. I think no one of the criteria discussed above can constitute a sufficient basis for the Church unity. As no one criterion excludes each other. They should be considered in complex. It seems that we have to research the multiplicity of the criteria of unity. In the history, certain criteria became more or less important. They could have been transformed or modified, but never vanished altogether.