

Why Ecclesial Structures at the Regional Level Matter: Communion as Mutual Inclusion

Theological Studies

2014, Vol. 75(2) 308–330

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DOI: 10.1177/0040563914529899

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Abstract

In the one communion of all local churches, regional structures of authority are essential if the church is to live out its mission in each sociopolitical context. The article explores how structures of regional and universal authority interact in Catholic and Orthodox contexts, looking at the ministry of unity exercised in the late 1970s by Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador and at Orthodoxy's ongoing efforts to bring multiple ethnic jurisdictions into administrative unity in North America.

Keywords

Catholic–Orthodox relations, church unity, communion, ecclesial authority, ecclesiology, episcopal assembly, local church, mutual inclusion, Orthodoxy, Oscar Romero, primacy, regional church

Ecclisial authority at the regional level has often been relegated to the category of the merely human and the historically contingent. But the church, as a divine-human organism, called not so much to transcend history as to transfigure it, must have an intact and unified structure of authority in every region, beyond the local level of the diocese and within the one communion of the church universal. The theological case for regional structures that I make in this article is meant in part

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to persuade doubtful Catholics—that is, Catholics who doubt that ecclesiology is authentically three-tiered (local, regional, universal) rather than two-tiered (local and universal). With the recovery of a triadic ecclesiology in the West, the possibilities for further ecumenical progress with Orthodoxy become much greater than without it. At the same time, I hope to give further impetus to the movement within North American Orthodoxy, still administratively divided into more than a dozen jurisdictions, to become one administratively (and not just sacramentally) unified regional communion of churches here and now. This aim corresponds to that of a number of recently convened forums and symposia and published presentations, including a paper on Orthodox jurisdictional overlap to be considered in some detail below.¹ Since 2010, there have been four meetings of the newly constituted Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America, whose mandate is to work for “the swift healing of every canonical anomaly”²—especially related to the existence in a single locality of multiple bishops representing parallel Orthodox jurisdictions—and to undertake “the preparation of a plan to organize the Orthodox of the Region on a canonical basis.”³ As these developments centering on the need for updated regional structures of ecclesial unity continue to unfold in the Orthodox world, related but distinct questions about national episcopal conferences have been raised anew at the highest levels of the Catholic Church. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis observes that

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1. Josiah Trenham, “Orthodox Reunion: Overcoming the Curse of Jurisdictionalism in America,” originally the keynote address at the Diocesan Parish Life Conference in El Paso, Texas, June 15, 2006, of the Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America; subsequently printed in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006) 277–303. My own article is a revised and expanded version of a paper originally presented at the symposium “Pan-Orthodoxy in North America: Towards a Local Church,” held March 16–17, 2012, in Los Angeles, sponsored by the Huffington Ecumenical Institute. In that symposium’s title, the word “local” refers not to the most local level, that of the diocese, as it otherwise often does—and as it generally does in this article, since the ecclesialogists I cite use it that way; rather, it refers to a grouping or communion of churches at the regional level. It is the goal of moving toward such a *regional* communion of churches that the symposium intended with its title, “North American Orthodoxy: Towards a Local Church.”
 2. This was the language adopted by the Synaxis of the Heads of all the Orthodox Churches gathered at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul (Constantinople) in 2008. For a timeline of events that led to the establishment of twelve Assemblies of Bishops in regions around the world often described as the “Orthodox Diaspora” because they fall outside the canonical territory of the ancient patriarchates as well as of the newer, but still long-standing, patriarchal and autocephalous churches of Eastern Europe; see <http://assemblyofbishops.org/about/assembly-timeline>. All URLs cited herein were accessed February 2, 2014.
 3. Article 5 of the Decision of the Fourth Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference held at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, Switzerland, June 6–12, 2009, “Rules of Operation of Episcopal Assemblies in the Orthodox Diaspora,” <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/documents/chambesy/rules>.

the Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit.” Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated.⁴

These remarks come in the same paragraph in which Francis speaks critically of “excessive centralization” and hopefully of “a conversion of the papacy.” With Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew meeting this spring in Jerusalem, 50 years after the encounter between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras, considerations of the place of regional structures in the life of the church are sure to be significant in shaping their respective visions of the path ahead toward Orthodox–Catholic unity.

An insight of German Catholic theologian Hermann Pottmeyer encapsulates the basic thesis underlying the present study: “The local church,” he writes, using the term “local church” to refer to the basic ecclesial unit, the diocese, “cannot effectively be a local church without the support of the regional communion of local churches.”⁵ “Communion among the Churches,” he adds, “can only succeed if it is regionally organized.”⁶ How to distinguish between a kind of communion among local churches that succeeds and a kind that does not succeed obviously involves looking at more than just whether or not they are in communion sacramentally. The notion of communion as “mutual inclusion” can help elucidate what the interrelationship ought to be between or among local churches if it is to be authentic and fruitful.⁷

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4. *Evangelii gaudium* no. 32, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents. Follow-up remarks by Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), indicate how limited and uncertain the status of regional structures of ecclesial unity continue to be in Catholic ecclesiology. In Müller’s words, while the papacy and the local bishop are, “by divine right, instituted by Christ,” the bishops’ conferences “both historically and today, belong only to the ecclesiastical law . . . a human creation.” Further: “‘National’ churches do not exist. . . . The presidents of the episcopal conferences, while important, are coordinators, nothing more. . . . Each bishop has a direct and immediate relationship with the Pope,” <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/archbishop-mller-affirms-doctrine-based-pastoral-care-for-divorced-remarried>. How adequate such a position can be for an ecclesiology of communion among local churches is an essential area of inquiry of my article.
 5. Hermann Pottmeyer, “Response to Angel Antón,” *Jurist* 52 (1992) 577–82, at 581.
 6. *Ibid.* Pottmeyer offered his reflections as part of a special colloquium on “The Local Church and Catholicity” held in April 1991 at the Universidad Pontificia in Salamanca, Spain. This was a second colloquium that grew out of one held there in 1988 and devoted to the highly controverted question of episcopal conferences. Both colloquia’s proceedings are published in the *Jurist* 48 (1988) and 52 (1992).
 7. This term was used on an important occasion by Pope John Paul II and has been explored subsequently by several Catholic theologians, including Joseph Komonchak and Hervé Legrand. See Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic,” *Jurist* 52 (1992) 416–47; John Paul II, address to the Roman Curia, December 21, 1984, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 7 (1985) 503–14, quoted

The first part of my discussion will consider mutual inclusion and attempt to demonstrate that it provides a helpful grammar for an ecclesiology of communion. What will emerge as most essential about the idea of communion as mutual inclusion is that it fosters an understanding of how communion is a process that happens through time. Here I seek to show how regional structures of authority are intrinsic to the logic of communion as mutual inclusion. One of the basic ideas is that a temporal, incarnational church requires that local churches relate to one another in each region through a single locus of authority.

I then attempt to flesh out this idea by looking at two concrete instances in ecclesial life when regional communion of local churches in a certain place and time has hung in the balance. One is the circumstance of the Catholic Church in El Salvador in the late 1970s. The other is that of contemporary North American Orthodoxy. These are very different contexts, but each in its way supports the basic point put forward by Pottmeyer that communion among local (diocesan) churches can effectively occur only when it is facilitated at the regional level.

In the discussion of these two variations on the theme of regional communion, one of the issues explored is the relationship between communion and conflict. The outbreak of conflict within a regional grouping of churches does not necessarily mean that their communion as mutual inclusion has broken down. When strongly-held conflicting views about how to respond in the spirit of the gospel within a given sociopolitical context are aired, even very publicly, this may be a fruitful part of the process of communion among the local churches of the region. Much depends on whether a single, sturdy regional structure exists that all disagreements must, as it were, pass through. The effectiveness of the communion among local churches in a given region is less apt to be threatened by heated internal disagreement than by a kind of estrangement that stems from mutual isolation.

When communion among a regional grouping of local churches is ineffective, the mission of the church is impaired. Indeed, regional authority in the church is ultimately much less about matters of ecclesial structure and governance for their own sake—matters of what are often called *ad intra* ecclesiology—than they are about the *ad extra* matter of the churches' mission in the world. Mission here pertains of course not just to the care of individual souls but to what Pottmeyer calls the church's "political *diakonia*," which he says has its scope within "one or several nations." The world that Christians are called not to escape from but to live in with integrity by the light of the gospel, takes on its characteristics of language, culture, and law at the level of the region. According to Pottmeyer,

many of the ethical questions that are posed to the faithful today transcend the individual local church. But even Rome cannot answer these questions if they have a regionally specific

in Komonchak, "The Local Church and the Church Catholic" 440–41; and Hervé Legrand, "Le dialogue catholique–orthodoxe: Quelques enjeux ecclésiologiques de la crise actuelle autour des Églises unies," *Centro pro unione bulletin* 43 (1993) 3–16; published in abridged English translation as "Uniatism and Catholic–Orthodox Dialogue," *Theology Digest* 42 (1995) 127–33.

character. Only the regional church as, for example, a bishops' conference, can organize the needed competency. The same thing is true for many social tasks.⁸

For Pottmeyer, the threat to the regional organization is a threat especially "from above," from the universal level. He contends that where the regional organization is weakened in the Catholic context, the local (diocesan) churches "lose their constitutive role and become mere administrative agencies of a centralized management."⁹ Indeed something of this can be seen in the case of El Salvador in the 1970s and early 1980s when the robust ministry of unity that was being exercised at the regional level by Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador was at a certain point almost undone by John Paul II, as we shall see. However, in complex and paradoxical ways, Romero's ministry of unity at the regional level was both undermined and strengthened by the ministry of unity exercised at the church's universal level.

In Orthodoxy today, to be sure, there is not the same danger of local churches being reduced to "branch offices" of a single highly centralized universal church structure as there is in Catholicism.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in Europe and North America, the lack of a stable and single regional organization capable of bringing together all the local Orthodox churches in one web of mutual exchange and common action is striking. By considering the observations of one Orthodox writer, Josiah Trenham, on Orthodox jurisdictional disunity in America, we are given another angle from which to see the truth of Pottmeyer's dictum that communion among churches cannot succeed unless it is regionally organized. Especially interesting to explore here is the source of Orthodoxy's ecclesial disorganization at the regional level. Trenham himself attributes jurisdictional disunity to certain pretensions to universal primacy on the part of the patriarchate of Constantinople. I argue instead that Orthodox jurisdictional disunity in North America is a function of the absence of a locus of universal authority commonly acknowledged by all the Orthodox.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, the argument for sturdy regional structures of ecclesial unity, which bring and hold together the local churches in an effective communion that serves the temporal mission of the church in every cultural and political context, is also an argument for a sturdy universal structure of ecclesial unity. Without a structurally solid ministry of universal primacy, the canonical order at the regional level is not secured; and without the latter, internal ecclesial conflict about the church's mission in that place does not have the same chance to bear fruit as it does within the single regional communion of churches.

8. Pottmeyer, "Response to Angel Antón" 581.

9. *Ibid.*

10. The uncomfortable sense of being constrained by the wishes and rules of a distant center of authority is, in fact, common enough within North American Orthodox jurisdictions, whose mother churches in far-off lands are often accused of being out of touch with the American situation. The difference is that in Orthodoxy there is a multiplicity of such distant ecclesial centers, which are all regional in principle, yet global in how they reach into the "diaspora."

Regional Structures and Mutual Inclusion

The term “mutual inclusion” is most often used in recent Catholic ecclesiology to speak of the relationship between the local and the universal church. Against an idea put forward in the 1990s by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the priority of the universal church over the local, a host of Catholic theologians responded by insisting on the simultaneity of the two.¹¹ A key text for the discussion is Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium* no. 23, which says of diocesan local churches that “in and from these particular churches [*in quibus et ex quibus*] there exists the one unique catholic Church.”¹² As Ton Van Eijk has written, “The *in quibus* and the *ex quibus* have to be carefully kept together,” allowing us to “speak of the relationship between the universal and the local church as ‘a mutual interiority.’”¹³ Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his public response to Ratzinger, similarly wrote that “according to the teaching of Vatican II, the local churches and the universal church exist in one another.”¹⁴

Even in these formulations of Van Eijk and Kasper, it might be possible to construe the universal church as a reality somehow distinct from local churches. Komonchak urges us to avoid this understanding of the universal church as something distinct, and to see it instead as all the local churches in communion. In his carefully reasoned essay on the subject, Komonchak draws attention to remarks of John Paul II that envision communion between each local church and all the others as mutual inclusion.¹⁵ In what the pope has to say about mutual inclusion, the entities that “include” one another are spoken of not as the local church and the universal church, but as each local church and all the others. It may be noted as well that the backdrop of his discussion is the mission (or missions) of the churches: he refers to “the ‘special’ Christian experiences which the particular churches are having in the socio-cultural context in which each is called to live.” Having laid initial emphasis on ecclesial diversity, John Paul goes on to point out that these special experiences of particular churches

must not be lived in isolation or independently of . . . the lives of the churches in other parts of the world. To constitute authentic experiences of the Church, they must in themselves be synthesized with the experiences which other Christians, in touch with different cultural

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11. In addition to authors to be cited here (Antón, Van Eijk, Komonchak, and Legrand), see also Winfried Aymans, “Die *communio Ecclesiarum* als Gestaltgesetz der einer Kirche,” *Archiv für katholisches Kirchenrecht* 139 (1970) 136–46; and Walter Kasper, “Zur Theologie und Praxis des bishöflichen Amtes,” in *Auf neue Art Kirche Sein: Wirklichkeiten—Herausforderungen—Wandlungen* (Munich: Bernward bei Don Bosco, 1999) 32–48.
 12. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.
 13. Ton Van Eijk, “The Structure of the Church: Dyadic or Triadic,” in *Of All Times and Of All Places: Protestants and Catholics on the Church Local and Universal*, ed. Leo J. Koffeman and Henk Witte (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Meinema, 2001) 147–69, at 153.
 14. Walter Kasper, “On the Church,” *America* (April 23, 2001), http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=1569.
 15. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic” 441.

contexts, feel called to live in order to be faithful to the demands that flow from the single and identical mystery of Christ. In fact among the individual particular churches there is an ontological relationship of mutual inclusion: every particular church, as a realization of the one Church of Christ, is in some way present in all the particular churches “in which and out of which the one and unique catholic Church has its existence.” This ontological relation must be translated on the dynamic level of concrete life, if the Christian community does not wish to be in contradiction with itself: the basic ecclesial choices of believers in one community must be able to be harmonized with those of the faithful in the other communities, in order to allow that communion of minds and hearts for which Christ prayed at the last supper.¹⁶

In the understanding of mutual inclusion put forward here, John Paul II describes local churches as being present to and in *one another*. He regards this not as something that is realized only mystically apart from the lived experiences of these churches but also precisely “on the dynamic level of [their] concrete life,” such that “the basic ecclesial choices of believers in one community” may be “harmonized with those of the faithful in the other communities.” For this notion of mutual inclusion as mutual presence to be fully realized, we need regional structures of unity. Because neighboring dioceses typically share a similar sociocultural context, the process of harmonization that John Paul alludes to cannot be one that occurs instantly and simultaneously between each diocese and all others throughout the world. Each is not related to all in the same way; or perhaps better said, not at the same rate. Neighboring dioceses within the same cultural and political milieu will normally become present to one another sooner than will dioceses that happen to be geographically and culturally distant. The cogency of Pottmeyer’s framing statement quoted earlier, “communion among the Churches can succeed only if it is regionally organized,” becomes clearer when viewed in terms of the concept of communion as mutual inclusion.

Legrande uses the same language of mutual inclusion to challenge what he calls “the juridical conception of collegiality in which the universal church is an immediate reality.”¹⁷ “To adopt an ecclesiology of communion,” he writes, “is to affirm and put into practice a mutual inclusion among local churches.” Legrand indicates that this requires local diocesan churches to be grouped regionally by suggesting that episcopal collegiality must be conceived “as a coming together of bishops, each presiding over the communion of his local church, and thereby presiding (as a group) over the communion of the churches of their area. . . . One thus encounters the grouping of regional churches as the unquestionable framework of activity for bishops.”¹⁸

The points made thus far suggest a need to extend and enrich the widely held notion of mutual inclusion of local and universal church. Specifically, they suggest that the mutual inclusion of each local church and all the others will normally be realized

16. John Paul II, address to the Roman Curia, December 21, 1984; quoted in Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic” 440–41.

17. Legrand, “Le dialogue catholique-orthodoxe” 8 (my translation).

18. *Ibid.*

within each one's regional grouping first, and only then can mutual inclusion of local and universal suitably occur. In its 1992 letter "On Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion" (*Communio notio*), the CDF affirms that "for each particular Church to be fully Church . . . there must be present in it, as a proper element, the supreme authority of the Church: the Episcopal college 'together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him.'"¹⁹ Might this important statement about the mutual presence, or mutual inclusion, of local church and universal church be filled out further by enfolded into its dyadic vision of the church the further, intermediate level—that of ecclesial region? If, as Legrand says, "the unquestionable framework of activity for bishops" is the "grouping of regional churches," then it would follow that there must be present in the particular church not only the *supreme* authority, the episcopal college "together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff," as *Communio notio* rightly insists, but also the authority of the intermediate sphere, that binds together in diversified unity the *regional* grouping of churches. This would be the provincial or patriarchal synod together with their head, the metropolitan archbishop or the patriarch.

An advantage of this approach is that it takes more fully into account the temporal dimension of communion as mutual inclusion, seeing it as a process that finds its fulfillment on the "dynamic level of concrete life." Only on this level is it possible to understand that the universal church is formed in and out of the particular churches, not just as so many free-floating interchangeable portions—what Pavel Florensky aptly described as "the chaotic confusion of all with all"²⁰—but as they exist in their integrated context as members of one another in a closer relation to some than to others, as in any real organism. Communion among local churches is unlikely to be effectively sustained without a regional primate.

Regional Structures and Mission

Myriam Wijlens, in her article "The Intermediate Level in the Roman Catholic Church," speaks of the origin of episcopal conferences from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries in Europe.

They are in a way the result of the development of national states, the rise of social movements and the need felt by the bishops to discuss the new situation with all the bishops of their nation, because they saw that the issues they had to address would require that they had to present themselves as one partner in dialogue with the government and that they could not enter into such discussions effectively as individual bishops.²¹

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19. CDF, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion" no. 13 (May 28, 1992), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents. In documents of the Catholic magisterium after Vatican II, the term most regularly used for the local, diocesan church is "particular church."
 20. Pavel A. Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, trans. Boris Jakim, intro. Richard F. Gustafson (Princeton: Princeton University, 1997) 572 n. 812.
 21. Myriam Wijlens, "The Intermediate Level in the Roman Catholic Church: An Organizational or Ecclesiological Category?," in *Of All Times and of All Places: Protestants and Catholics*

The 2007 Ravenna Statement of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between Roman Catholics and Orthodox likewise draws the connection between the regional sphere and mission:

Since the Church reveals itself to be catholic in the *synaxis* of the local Church, this catholicity must truly manifest itself in communion with the other Churches which confess the same apostolic faith and share the same basic ecclesial structure, beginning with those close at hand in virtue of their common responsibility for mission in that region which is theirs.²²

The idea that communion among local churches manifests itself in a process “beginning with those [churches] close at hand” rather than all at once speaks again to the temporal quality of communion. It reminds us that the regional grouping of local churches is an essential element of the church as a historical reality. In Komonchak’s reflections on the ecclesiology of communion articulated in the passage of John Paul II quoted above, the point is stressed that all Christian experience is historically grounded. Komonchak writes that when John Paul spoke of the mutual inclusion of each local church with all the others, and mentioned the “‘special’ Christian experiences” that churches undergo as they carry out their mission each in their own context, “the comparison is not between ‘special’ Christian experiences and some unitary ‘universal’ experience, but between the ‘special’ experiences of one church and those of the others, all of them attempts [*sic*] to be faithful, locally, to ‘the demands that flow from the single and universal mystery of Christ.’”²³ The universal Christian truth is recognizable only in the particular experiences of the local churches. Just as an aspiring writer, wishing to learn the craft of narrative fiction, does well to bear in mind that a story has universal appeal the more particular it is, the more rooted in its time and place, so too do the realities of particularity and universality coincide in the life of the church: there is no way for a church to embody the one, universal truth of the gospel except by entering fully into the particular historical situation that gives shape to its mission. Komonchak calls this mission the “historical self-project” of each local church in its context. And to underscore that no two self-projects are entirely the same, he refers to “the missions”—plural—“in which the local churches realize themselves.”²⁴

It is indeed possible to . . . speak of a single mission of the Church. . . . But the one mission is undertaken only within the specific missions of the particular churches. . . . The realization

on the Church Local and Universal, ed. Leo J. Koffeman and Henk Witte (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Meinema, 2001) 95–130, at 113–14.

22. Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, “Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity, and Authority” no. 22 (Ravenna, October 13, 2007), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs.

23. Komonchak, “Contemporary Theological Problematic” 442.

24. *Ibid.* 444.

of the specific mission in and to different historical circumstances, always involves a new, original, and unrepeatable experience precisely because [it] is the encounter, not between gospel or charism and mankind in general, but between gospel or charism and the concrete, particular, pre-existing subjectivity of these men and women, here and now.²⁵

The human circumstances in which the local church lives out its calling are never just the same as those of other times and places. Yet this does not mean that each local church finds its way in inaccessible remoteness from others, as though no two could understand each other. The idea is for every church to realize itself, not in isolation or opposition to others also realizing themselves, but in communion with them, a communion that requires continual and intentional exchange and mediation.

The Regional Communion of Catholic Churches in El Salvador

As a minister of unity in a regional context, an archbishop ideally serves to mediate between and among local churches, not so much to help them surmount mutual antagonism—though this can be necessary—but to overcome mutual isolation. The office of archbishop will normally make possible exchanges of information that enable neighboring dioceses simply to know, in the first place, what is happening in one another's midst, something especially important in difficult political circumstances, when the flow of information is essential. To the extent that overlapping experiences are discovered, it becomes much more possible than it would otherwise be to forge a common response to issues jointly faced by neighboring dioceses.

In the figure of Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador from 1977 until his assassination in 1980, we can see an illustration of this kind of ecclesial function at the regional level, which I regard as essential for the life of the church. At the time he was archbishop, the archdiocese he oversaw contained, beyond the jurisdiction of San Salvador itself, the suffragan dioceses of Santa Ana, San Miguel, San Vicente, and Santiago de María.²⁶ This single Metropolitan Archdiocese of San Salvador encompassed the entire country of El Salvador (slightly smaller in area than the state of Massachusetts). Thus Romero was effectively the nation's primate.

During his archiepiscopacy, numerous examples indicate how this office of church unity that lies between the strictly local (diocesan) level and the universal level of the church played an indispensable role in the mission of the church in El Salvador:

25. *Ibid.*

26. In the jurisdiction of San Salvador, Marco René Revelo had been assigned as auxiliary bishop under Romero; in the diocese of Santa Ana, the auxiliary bishop was Benjamin Arrera y Reyes; in San Miguel, José Eduardo Alvarez Ramírez was the bishop ordinary; in San Vicente, Pedro Arnoldo Aparicio y Quintanilla was the bishop ordinary; and in Santiago de María, the bishop ordinary was Arturo Rivera Damas, who upon Romero's death in 1980 became apostolic administrator of San Salvador and in 1983 archbishop. I include the names of these Salvadoran bishops here because I refer to some of them later.

Romero's national radio broadcasts that did much to knit the faithful of El Salvador together in a common awareness of the nation's problems and how these problems might be viewed in a Christian perspective; his four pastoral letters written between April 1977 and August 1979; and his archiepiscopal visits and the striking symbolism of his refusal to attend the inauguration of General Carlos Humberto Romero (no relation), whose election in February 1977 had been fraudulent. But perhaps nothing Romero did in his ministry of regional unity was more dramatic in its impact than the single mass he called the entire archdiocese to attend at the Cathedral in San Salvador on the Sunday after news had spread throughout the country of the killing of a well-known priest and critic of government policy, Father Rutilio Grande, along with a young boy and an old man. Romero ordered all other masses throughout the archdiocese canceled; the result was a mass concelebrated by 150 priests with upward of 100,000 people in attendance. In his book *A Gathering of Memories: Family, Nation, and Church in a Forgetful World*, Charles Pinches notes that Archbishop Romero issued the order of the single mass "in the face of the expressed opposition of the *nuncio*, the papal representative of the archdiocese."²⁷ This point bears importance for my theme, as it suggests that had there been only the universal primacy of Rome with its immediate delegate to El Salvador—and no regional primacy of the archiepiscopal office—there would not have been the kind of witness to the truth of the gospel that the event of the single mass turned out to bear. Pinches describes the event and its repercussions:

We typically think of "church" as both local and universal, on either side of the middle space generally occupied in our modern times by "nation." In ordering the single mass, Romero stepped into this space, to the discomfort of both the papal representative and the national government. The effect of the move was to elevate the deaths of Fr. Grande, the young boy, and old man, to the level of representation. The remembrance of their lives and murderous deaths was a way to tell and remember the people's sufferings, which had been going on for years throughout the country under the repressive governance and economic oppression of the privileged few. . . . In this dramatic move, Romero signaled to his people that he would not let that part of the story remain untold.²⁸

Romero understood that without telling "that part of the story" of his country's recent past and present, it would not have been possible for the story of the gospel itself to be told truly in his place and time. The "special experience," to recall John Paul II's term, of the church in El Salvador was one that Romero knew as the papal *nuncio* could not. To live out the one and unchanging mission of the church within the context of this "special experience" had to involve doing something "new, original, and unrepeatable," because the mission's realization was occurring in the framework of "the encounter, not between gospel or charism and mankind in general, but between gospel or charism and the concrete, particular, preexisting subjectivity of these men and women,

27. Charles R. Pinches, *A Gathering of Memories: Family, Nation, and Church in a Forgetful World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006) 112.

28. *Ibid.*

here and now”²⁹—that is, the people of El Salvador caught up in the events of the late 1970s as these were actually unfolding.

What is then perhaps especially confounding from an ecclesiological point of view is that in addition to being opposed by the papal nuncio and the national government, the single mass that Romero ordered as archbishop was opposed by four of the six bishops then serving with him in El Salvador. Orthodox ecclesiology, when it admits (as good Orthodox ecclesiology does) of the need for primacy at each level of the church, is fond of insisting on primacy’s need always to be embedded in conciliarity if it is to function properly. Unfailingly invoked in this connection is Apostolic Canon 34, which states, “The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent. . . . But neither let him (who is head) do anything without the consent of all.”³⁰ But in this case, out of El Salvador’s six bishops, Romero had the support of only one (Damas); the other four (Revelo, Arrera, Alvarez, Aparicio) opposed him. Indeed they disparaged Romero in letters to Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio, the Vatican Prefect for the Congregation of Bishops, and publicly in newspaper articles in El Salvador. Had Romero’s exercise of his regional primacy been curbed by a more robust conciliarity—by, say, something more like a majority vote of the bishops—the church in El Salvador would have weakly accommodated itself to worldly injustice and been muffled in its prophetic task.³¹

This observation underscores what is all too evident but is still occasionally forgotten in discussions of ecclesiology, namely, that being close to events on the ground by no means guarantees being able to tell the local story truly, that is, in a manner that reflects the gospel by rightly naming good and evil within the particulars of what is unfolding. The dangers of parochialism and nationalism are indeed a matter of having an overly local perspective, lacking a certain distance. Of course geographical distance is not what is primarily needed to guard against such dangers but the distance or perspective that the light of faith provides. Romero and the four bishops who opposed him witnessed the same events close at hand but interpreted them differently.

29. Komonchak, “Contemporary Theological Problematic” 444, quoted above.

30. The text of the canon can be found in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 14 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 596.

31. It is interesting to note that, among other things, “the Archdiocese was accused of interfering in the other dioceses” (Archbishop Oscar Romero, *A Shepherd’s Diary*, trans. Irene Hodgson [Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, 1986] entry of April 3, 1978, quoted by Damien Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Disciple Who Revealed the Glory of God* [Scranton, PA: University of Scranton, 2010] 38). The other bishops clearly wanted a less robust exercise of regional primatial authority from Romero, but the line is fine indeed between the noninterference they desired and a kind of diocesan autonomy—or, what may amount to virtually the same, each diocesan bishop’s “direct and immediate relationship with the Pope” (see above, n. 4)—that would keep communion as mutual inclusion from actually occurring on the lived level in the region.

Romero's episcopal motto, *Sentir con la Iglesia* (To feel with the church) is perhaps relevant to the twofold dynamic of his drawing near, on the one hand, to the political and social problems that those within the local churches of his archdiocese were encountering and, on the other hand, his ongoing effort to perceive these problems in the light of a faith that transcended El Salvador. Romero's faith was shaped through his reading not only of Scripture but also of the documents of Vatican II, the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) at Medellín (1968), Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in terris*, and Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*. In his role as primate of the regional communion of churches, Romero felt with both the local churches and the church universal. But he had the vocation and the official responsibility to speak into a space that was neither local nor immediately universal. It was into this intermediate, regional sphere that he was obliged to speak and act because the evil to which the church in El Salvador had to respond was happening on a national scale, and because his office corresponded to the nation's boundaries.

Romero and Rome

I have argued that had there been no specifically regional locus of primatial authority in the El Salvador of Romero's time but only the two levels of the local (diocesan) and universal (papal) structures of ecclesial authority, the mission of the diocesan churches in El Salvador would have been impaired. This example supports Pottmeyer's thesis quoted at the outset that "the local church cannot effectively be a local church without the support of the regional communion of local churches." It is important to recognize, however, that the endorsement of ecclesial authority at the regional level does not entail a derogation of ecclesial authority at other levels—for example, at the universal level. Romero himself did not see his exercise of regional authority as being in opposition or resistance to Rome's exercise of authority at the universal level. Indeed, his unwillingness to let his archiepiscopal office and responsibility be simply subsumed into that of the papal nuncio when the two were in disagreement should not be seen as evidence of disrespect toward the papacy, though the Salvadoran bishops who opposed him sought to portray it that way.³² Romero's relations with the Vatican became fraught due to the one-sided criticisms of him communicated to Cardinal Baggio and other Vatican officials by the opposing Salvadoran bishops, but his attitude toward Rome was, according to his diaries, never antagonistic, even privately. While on a trip to Rome in April 1979, Romero reflected on the trouble he was having securing appointments with Baggio and John Paul II to apprise them of circumstances in his archdiocese. This was only four months after he had been informed by Gerada, the nuncio, that Baggio was assigning a bishop from another country³³ as apostolic visitor to San Salvador, a sign of the Vatican's weakening confidence in Romero's pastoral leadership. "I have put it in God's hands," Romero wrote of his thus-far unsuccessful attempts to meet with Baggio or the pope.

32. See Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* 37–38.

33. This was Bishop Antonio Quarracino of Avellaneda, Argentina.

I told him [God] that I have done everything in my power and that, in spite of everything, I believe in and love the Holy Church, and with his grace, I will always be faithful to the Holy See, to the teaching of the Pope; and that I understand the human, limited, defective part of his Holy Church, which is the instrument of the salvation of humankind and which I want to serve without any reservations.³⁴

In the end Romero was granted an audience with John Paul II, but their meeting proved to be more of a disappointment to him than an encouragement. This was in contrast to the audience that Romero had been granted with Paul VI a little more than two years earlier. Taken together, Romero's two papal visits, in 1977 with Paul VI and in 1979 with John Paul II, shed further light on the place of regional authority in the life of the church especially as it relates to universal authority—and they show that there are paradoxical aspects to the relationship.

In the earlier visit, Romero's primatial authority at the regional level was strengthened by the authority of the universal primate, Paul VI, who, after receiving reassurance from Romero of his fidelity to him as successor of Peter and to the magisterium, took Romero's hands in his and said, "Courage. You are the one in charge!"³⁵ The language is significant: the one in charge of the church at the universal level makes a point of insisting on Romero's being the one in charge at the regional level. Paul VI at this point trusts Romero to know better how to carry out the mission of the grouping of local churches in El Salvador than Paul VI himself could know. He may also have understood that the authority of a decision made at Romero's level, that is, from within the situation, would be in some sense *greater* than if a decision (even the identical decision) were made from afar by Rome. John Paul II, on the other hand, in Romero's 1979 visit recommended that Romero not be left as the one in charge of the regional communion of churches in El Salvador. Instead, John Paul was moving to have an apostolic administrator for the archdiocese appointed *sede plena*,³⁶ a step taken rarely and normally only when the occupant of the office is incapacitated by illness. Upon Romero's return to his country, the Vatican sent Archbishop Lajos Kada, previously papal nuncio in Costa Rica and a man not at all in sympathy with Romero's methods, to familiarize himself with circumstances in Romero's archdiocese in order to begin to serve there as its apostolic administrator. Had Romero not been assassinated two weeks later, oversight of the communion of churches in El Salvador would soon have ceased to be his anyway.

Most observers today would agree that John Paul II, the man whose poignant observations about "special" Christian experiences and communion as mutual inclusion I

34. Romero, *A Shepherd's Diary*, entry of May 4, 1979, quoted by Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* 39.

35. *Ibid.*, entry of June 21, 1978.

36. *Ibid.*, entry of May 7, 1979, quoted by Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* 40. The role of an apostolic administrator is to be distinguished from that of an apostolic visitor. An apostolic visitor is present as an observer and perhaps a consultant but does not actually take charge of an archdiocese; an apostolic administrator does take charge of it, replacing the authority of the sitting archbishop.

have highlighted, misjudged the ecclesial choices made by Romero. Why John Paul did not recognize Romero's choices as expressions of the truth of the gospel must have had partly to do with the pope's being misinformed by the opposing Salvadoran bishops. It may also have been a function of John Paul's own particular ("special") experiences in Eastern Europe—where the church, in distancing itself from the Scylla of Communism, did not run the same risks as it did in Latin America of being sucked into the Charybdis of collusion with oppressive capitalist oligarchs. The story in El Salvador was different enough from the story in Poland that the one, universal story of the gospel could not be told in just the same terms in the two places. "Nations," writes Pinches,

can neither control nor exclusively negotiate the stories that rise up within them. Indeed, they are required in many cases to ride along on the backs of these stories. What they ride on is nothing more nor less than a kind of memory, one relating to the things we have been speaking of throughout: land, birth and death, spilt blood, sacrifice.³⁷

The story of a nation, transfigured by those within it whose lives conform to the gospel, is always particular and new; therefore it is always a story that can only *first* be known *from within*. Of course stories overlap, and people move in and out of regions, and there are all kinds of cross-pollinating; nations themselves rise and fall. Yet amid the flux there remains enough continuity of place such that its stories cannot be abstracted from it. Communion as mutual inclusion, then, becomes a matter of the mutual encounter of these stories, as they expand outward in concentric circles between regional groupings of churches, in order that the ecclesial choices of each may be tested by and harmonized with those of the other. And of course this cannot realistically occur without a certain lag time, a process of reception.

It is important to acknowledge that in the ordinary course of events Christians will often enough get things wrong; getting things wrong on the way to getting them right is part of the process of reception. One now universally recognized fourth-century saint of the church, Cyril of Alexandria, long considered another saint, John Chrysostom, a heretic and an imposter.³⁸ John Paul II was on the verge of deposing Romero. No amount of getting the structural balance right between or among the local, regional, and universal levels will bring about a guarantee of perfect discernment all at once. Because of the human potential for getting things wrong, it is tempting to be wary of structures of authority, especially of those at the highest level, since at that level above all there is the greatest danger of mistaking one's own "special" experience for a *unitary* "universal" experience of the Christian mystery, as John Paul II seemed to do with the circumstances surrounding Romero.³⁹

37. Pinches, *A Gathering of Memories* 111.

38. See, inter alia, John Anthony McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2004) 5–7.

39. When Romero met with John Paul II, he noted that in offering certain observations and admonitions, the pope recalled his time in Poland (Romero, *A Shepherd's Diary*, entry of May 7, 1979, quoted by Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* 40).

If, however, Romero's legitimate exercise of regional primacy was threatened near the end of his life by what may have seemed an overreaching or overconfident universal primacy, it must not be forgotten that his regional primacy was threatened just as much "from below" by the local primacies of diocesan bishops who considered him to be the overreaching one. Romero's regional primacy was indeed secured against this threat "from below" precisely by the universal primacy as Paul VI exercised it "from above." It is interesting, too, that when John Paul criticized Romero, it was chiefly for Romero's failure to secure episcopal unity in his archdiocese⁴⁰—in other words, for his failure to adequately promote and preserve conciliarity. Thus Romero's case is riddled with paradoxes and breaks down every ecclesiological ideology. It demonstrates perils of conciliarism and papalism, of localism and universalism. Ultimately, however, and apart from the individual personalities and approaches of respective popes, it should be seen that *without* the universal primacy—the very authority in the church that nearly sabotaged Romero's witness to the gospel—the regional communion of churches within which Romero's authority was exercised would have lacked the indisputable canonical unity that made his archiepiscopal activity possible in the first place. This point is so easily overlooked that it bears accentuating. Without a singular ministry of unity at the universal level of the church, there is no indisputable canonical unity at the regional level. A more obvious and related point is that without such canonical unity, the mission of the regional grouping of local churches is severely hindered.

Canonical Disunity at the Regional Level in North American Orthodoxy

Not all Orthodox Christians are agreed that a singular ministry of unity is needed at the church's universal level in order for there to be canonical unity at the regional level. But most do readily admit that without canonical unity at the regional level, the mission of the local churches of the region in question is compromised. The shape of the mission of the regional communion of churches emerges only in terms of what Pinches has described as the stories that rise up from within nations in ways that cannot be predicted or controlled. If this is so, then unity within the regional communion of churches is obviously of paramount importance for getting the nation's story into focus. This story is in fact made up of many individual stories that emerge in all the crush and clamor of daily life and are delineated in the light of the gospel. Without a regional center of unity, the churches of a given place will be seriously limited in their capacity to discern what is actually taking place, where and how the gospel is being betrayed or lived out, in order to be able to encourage, correct, and support one another. In "Orthodox Reunion: Overcoming the Curse of Jurisdictionalism in America," Josiah Trenham writes of such a diminished capacity in Orthodox Christianity in North America resulting from the lack of any single administrative center.

40. *Ibid.*, entry of May 7, 1979, quoted by Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* 40.

Most American Orthodox Christians, when they speak of their “church,” sadly, most often mean their *jurisdiction* in America, not the corporate American Orthodox Church. Jurisdiction has replaced *Church* in our distorted phronema and divided state of existence. As a result we really have no idea what is going on in American Orthodoxy. . . . We simply do not know because we are isolated in our jurisdictions.⁴¹

The applicability of Pottmeyer’s dictum, “communion among the [local, diocesan] churches can succeed only if it is regionally organized,” may be seen yet again, only now with the added specification that would otherwise go unmentioned, namely that within any given region the local churches must be joined together in one organization or jurisdiction rather than existing in multiple parallel organizations or jurisdictions. For North American Orthodoxy, prior regional primacies (Greek, Russian, Romanian, Serbian, Albanian, etc.) have meant multiple jurisdictional primacies in the single region of the “diaspora.” The absence of a unified regional organization in this North American context has major consequences on the level of concrete Christian life. As Trenham further describes it,

in this deformed type of spiritual life we are not able to fully live as members of the Body of Christ. How are we to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice, when the joys and sorrows of the majority of our Orthodox brothers and sisters in our nation [who themselves share also the joys and sorrows of non-Orthodox neighbors, friends and loved ones], and even in our own cities and towns, remain beyond our knowledge since we are insulated and isolated from the true corporate body by our jurisdictional lines of communication?⁴²

Without adequate ecclesial means at all levels—including the regional level, as Pottmeyer insists—for entering into one another’s stories, the communion of churches that I have been describing as mutual inclusion cannot properly occur; the special experiences of each church will not be able to be harmonized with those of others. Not only are the structures and mechanisms lacking for finding out what one another’s stories are, but the structures and mechanisms are lacking for the no-less-essential task of sorting out these stories, and for evaluating in a truly corporate way at the regional level how the local churches within that regional context are living out the gospel in terms of their particular stories. This is an evaluation in which all participate and to which, when it reaches its stage of ripeness, all must submit. Where canonical unity is lacking, such evaluation may and surely will take place in individual minds, in the published reflections of theologians, and even on a quasi-canonical basis within one or another jurisdiction, but all these elements of the process of evaluation will never be taken up into a single whole. Instead, where canonical unity is lacking at the level of the region, each jurisdiction can go on doing things its own way, without the requirement to square its practice with how others do things. In this regard, Trenham gives the

41. Trenham, “Orthodox Reunion” 291.

42. *Ibid.*

example of divergent practices among Orthodox jurisdictions in how they receive converts from Catholic and certain Protestant communions into the Orthodox church: “some . . . by baptism and chrismation, some by chrismation alone, and some merely by confession of faith.”⁴³ But other examples could also be adduced to show that the separately-grouped local Orthodox churches of North America are at liberty, in their separate groupings within one and the same region, to go on making ecclesial choices that contradict each other. That such contradictions muddle the mission of the church is evident.

The objection may be raised: Did not Romero’s ecclesial choices contradict the publicly stated preferences of the four opposing Salvadoran bishops? How is that any less problematic than the jurisdictional confusion of North American Orthodoxy? Did not the disunity among the hierarchy in Romero’s archdiocese cloud and confuse the message of the regional communion of churches in El Salvador? Such, as we have seen, was the concern of John Paul II: he was troubled most of all by Romero’s inability to unite the bishops of his region. It is of course a valid concern, as far as it goes. Romero’s response to it is simple and profound. “Again, I clarified, telling him that this [keeping the bishops unified] is also something that I want very much, but that I was aware that unity cannot be pretended. Rather, it must be based on the Gospel and the truth.”⁴⁴ Romero’s insight is that communion is better served by moments of real conflict than by false agreement. Conflict must indeed be said to be consistent with communion, a legitimate living out of communion as a process of discerning in a corporate way what truly reflects the gospel and what does not.

Thus the difference between the disunity Romero was willing, however unhappily, to let stand as a temporal reality in the process of living out the regional communion of local churches in El Salvador, and the jurisdictional disunity that North American Orthodoxy finds itself in today, may be summed up in the following observation: the administratively separate Orthodox jurisdictions in North America, though at any moment they may well come together to see if they can harmonize their ecclesial choices, are also free at any given moment to walk away from one another, with differences unresolved, and without any further canonical consequences. Within the single Catholic archdiocese of El Salvador, on the other hand, there is not the same freedom to walk away from one another without canonical consequences. Instead, the single Catholic archdiocese of El Salvador was constrained by an imperative to resolve the situation.

Another objection might be raised: Did not the imperative to resolve the situation lead, in the case of the administratively-unified regional communion of churches in El Salvador, precisely to its being resolved—in the wrong way? An apostolic administrator was sent by the Vatican to divest Romero of his regional authority as primate. It is interesting, perhaps, to speculate whether the true message of the gospel would ever have emerged from the archdiocesan communion of churches in El Salvador had this

43. Ibid. 288–89.

44. Romero, *A Shepherd’s Diary*, entry of May 7, 1979, quoted by Zynda, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* 40.

papal act of nullifying Romero's authority not been preempted and eclipsed by the overwhelmingly kerygmatic event of Romero's martyrdom—a nationally defining moment played out almost immediately upon the Vatican appointee's arrival on the scene, rendering the latter immaterial. If Romero had been only demoted rather than martyred, how much more muddled might the mission of the churches in El Salvador have become?

The answer to this question might simply be that this is not what occurred, and the workings of Providence can never be discounted. True as that certainly is, one can have confidence that the process of communion as mutual inclusion eventually will bring to light whatever has been hidden of the truth of the gospel in the particular context of a given church's historical self-project. John Paul II may have misread Romero's story, but such misreadings are not catastrophic in the life of the church so long as they are tested and corrected within a context that is itself structurally unified as things go forward. Romero's own canonization, should it proceed as it seems now poised to do under Pope Francis, reflects the capacity of the church as a whole to discern the witness Romero bore to the gospel, even though this discernment took considerable time. The far greater danger arises when differing interpretations of what is done within particular churches are allowed to persist indefinitely without a process of evaluation that is corporate and therefore binding. Only within such a binding corporate process of evaluation is it possible for whatever conflict may erupt along the way to be fruitful.

Orthodoxy in North America needs to be a unified church body—that is, a single regional grouping of all the particular churches—in order for us to be in communion on the level of concrete life, and thereby to carry out our ecclesial mission. The fact that, across their jurisdictional lines, the Orthodox churches in North America have remained in full sacramental communion has not been enough as yet to overcome—and may even have served partly to obscure—the fact that “we are not able to fully live as members of the Body of Christ,” as Trenham laments. The local churches' life of communion as a process, one that must sometimes involve conflict of an ultimately fruitful kind, is short-circuited insofar as the ecclesial choices of the individual jurisdictions need not be harmonized.

Concluding Remarks

In September 2013, the Episcopal Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Hierarchs in North and Central America convened for its fourth annual meeting. Still in its very early stages of formation, the Assembly does not currently function as the structure for an actual communion of regional churches with its own regional primate, but it may be seen as a prototype of such a structure.⁴⁵ It differs from the organization it

45. The Assembly has a chairman, a position always filled by the primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA); this reflects the canonical order within world Orthodoxy, whereby the mother church of the GOA, the ecumenical patriarchate, located in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), is the first See. The most remarkable feature of the emergence of the twelve Episcopal Assemblies may be that the other Orthodox churches

effectively replaces, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA, founded in 1960). SCOBA was comprised only of the primates of the various jurisdictions whereas the Assembly includes diocesan bishops as well as metropolitans and archbishops—more than 50 hierarchs—and has been given a much more formal and delineated charge by an international synod at which all the Orthodox churches were represented. Since its inception, the Assembly has formed committees on pastoral, liturgical, ecumenical, and social issues, in order that hitherto parallel initiatives of the separate Orthodox jurisdictions might be increasingly undertaken as common tasks of an administratively unified communion of Orthodox churches in the United States.

Should the goal of the Episcopal Assembly be achieved in the coming years—the goal of administrative unity—the question that will inevitably arise in much sharper relief than it does today is how the single, emergent Orthodox jurisdiction relates to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the dioceses those bishops represent. According to Trenham, “the Roman Catholics in the United States,” much more than the Orthodox, “have been able to care for the pastoral needs of its multiple ethnicities in this country, while on the whole maintaining episcopal and synodal unity.”⁴⁶ The unity of which Trenham speaks is really not the kind of unity that excludes disagreement even on fundamental issues that bear upon the gospel; it is instead the kind of unity that requires working through disagreement. It is less a moral than a structural kind of unity. In the long run, however, the latter is conducive to the former, and probably indispensable for its realization.

Trenham does not draw any connection between Catholicism’s maintenance of unity at the regional level and the papal ministry of unity exercised at the universal level. Orthodoxy in general, in this early part of the twenty-first century, is seeking to resolve its ecclesiological anomalies on the regional level without recourse to a ministry of universal primacy. The ecumenical patriarchate must exercise something of such a ministry, as the first of the Orthodox sees, if the regional anomalies are even to begin to be addressed, but this always entails its incurring the criticism of comporting itself as if it were an Eastern papacy. Trenham himself, in fact, blames the ecumenical patriarchate for the jurisdictional morass in which Orthodoxy finds itself in North America. It is all due, so Trenham avers, to the action taken by Patriarch Meletios IV of Constantinople back in the 1920s, namely,

his appointment of his auxiliary Bishop Alexander of Rodostolou as the first Bishop of the Greeks in America and . . . the establishment on May 17, 1922, of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, without any reference to or agreement with the

agreed in 2009 that the chairmanship of each of the twelve (most of them are in Western Europe) would be occupied by the regional primate with canonical ties to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, rather than the regional primate or exarch connected to any other major see such as the Patriarchate of Moscow, the Patriarchate of Romania, or the Patriarchate of Antioch.

46. Trenham, “Orthodox Reunion” 283.

Synod of Russia, which had for many years exercised sole pastoral authority in America or with this synod's ruling bishop in America, Archbishop Alexander (Nemolovsky).⁴⁷

Trenham does not take up the larger question of the lack of synodal agreement on the universal level to authorize the Russian Orthodox mission to America to begin with. The point naturally is not that there was anything wrong with the mission to evangelize, but that it was undertaken, already in the eighteenth century, by one Orthodox church in isolation from others with which it was sacramentally but not administratively in communion.

Orthodoxy embraces regional structures of ecclesial authority but still largely rejects the universal structure of authority that alone can enable and strengthen them, especially in places where the church was not already established prior to the Great Schism and the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire. Roman Catholicism, meanwhile, has and affirms the universal structure that makes unified regional structures possible in such places; but Roman Catholicism itself seems still hesitant about assigning these regional centers of authority too much decision-making power, for fear that their authority would undermine the Church's universal authority. There are historical reasons for such anxieties. But neither the specter of Gallicanism nor of Orthodox nationalism must be allowed to frighten contemporary Catholic ecclesiology away from facing up to the gross inadequacy of any notion of communion among particular churches that is severed from regional structures of ecclesiality that would be secured by the existence of a regional primate. Ultimately, an ecclesiology without such regional structures of authority is an atemporal ecclesiology, tending toward Docetism. The Ravenna Statement offers rich reflection on the point that a truly incarnational church must have regional organization:

In fact, regional synodality, whatever its contours and canonical regulation, demonstrates that the Church of God is not a communion of persons or local Churches cut off from their human roots. Because it is the community of salvation and because this salvation is "the restoration of creation" (cf. St Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 1, 36, 1), it embraces the human person in everything which binds him or her to human reality as created by God. The Church is not just a collection of individuals; it is made up of communities with different cultures, histories and social structures.⁴⁸

The regional level of the church continually brings us back around to its temporality, and temporality is messy. The messiness of the ecclesiastical apparatus in the middle is striking: provinces, patriarchates, autocephalous churches, episcopal conferences and assemblies, all variously shaped bodies coming into being at some historical point

47. *Ibid.* 293 n. 11.

48. Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *The Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church—Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority*, no. 30 (October 13, 2007), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni.

and at another point losing their relevance to actual sociopolitical reality as this takes new form. No doubt the very human messiness of this level and the comparative conceptual cleanness that is possible in discussing both the undifferentiated many dioceses and the one communion that is the universal church are what have led canonists to prefer a dyadic, two-tiered ecclesiological structure in their understanding of the divine constitution of the church. But the constant and ubiquitous *filling in* of the intermediate sphere in the life of the church throughout history should tell us that it is no mere accident of history. Regional structures of communion allow the church to be what it is called to promote and be: the transfiguration of the world—of the always-particular worlds we inhabit—by the light of the gospel.

To secure the canonical structure at the regional level, and thus the effectiveness of the communion of local churches there, universal primacy is essential. The specters of papal imperialism and over-centralization must not scare away contemporary Orthodox ecclesiology from facing up to the reality that a vibrant and fruitful communion at the regional level, in North America and other places where Orthodoxy has spread after the Byzantine period, is impossible without a universal locus of authority acknowledged by all.⁴⁹

Although the regional and universal must go together—with, of course, the local, which neither tradition questions—both traditions continue to be tempted to opt for either the regional or the universal, one over against the other. Orthodox and Catholic liturgical commemorations of bishops illustrate the point. In most Orthodox parishes, the local (diocesan) bishop and the metropolitan bishop are commemorated in the liturgy. There is no mention of a universal primate. The canonical norm, which is not always followed but which in any case entails the same absence of a recognition of primacy at the universal level, is this: the priest commemorates only the bishop under whose omophorion he directly serves; the bishop, wherever he serves the liturgy, commemorates the metropolitan; the metropolitan commemorates the patriarch; and the patriarch commemorates—and this is the aspect of most interest for us—every other Orthodox patriarch or head of an autocephalous church.⁵⁰ At each level except the last,

49. This point is brought home eloquently by a comment of Metropolitan Savas of Pittsburgh (GOA) at a public forum outside Cleveland, Ohio, October 27, 2013, about the ongoing work of the North and Central American Assembly of Bishops. A clergyman asked whether the administrative unity that the keynote speaker, Protodeacon Peter Danilchik, had described as being “under construction” could be completed without a single leader to oversee the work. Metropolitan Savas replied, “The way I hear that, and the way I would answer that, and this is from my heart’s conviction, is that that’s the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch, to be the organizing principle. And that role is not universally accepted; it’s in fact aggressively contested. And so we really are at loggerheads. It’s very hard to move forward if you don’t know who’s the leader. If the assumption [of some] is that the baton of leadership has passed [e.g., to the Moscow Patriarchate], and that we should all realize that—we don’t all realize that” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjLQMSgVTM0>, at the 14:22 mark).

50. See Metropolitan Panteleimon Rodopoulos, “Commemoration of the Name of the Bishop during the Divine Liturgy,” <http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&id=290&tla=en>.

it is the one primate who is commemorated; the pattern then changes so that the commemoration is strictly conciliar at the universal level. But if conciliarity and primacy are mutually interpenetrating as recent ecclesiology has insisted,⁵¹ there should be no less reason for a patriarch to commemorate the single figure of the universal *protos* than for a metropolitan to commemorate the single figure of the patriarchal *protos*. Universal primacy's absence in Orthodox canonical norms for commemoration of bishops represents a lacuna in Orthodox ecclesiology of the second millennium. Conversely, in Roman Catholic parishes the bishops named in the celebration of the Eucharist are the local ordinary and the pope—reflecting the two-tiered ecclesiology of the Latin West of the second millennium. For both traditions, then, naming the bishops at all three levels in liturgical commemorations, rather than only at two, would be an ecumenically and ecclesiologically positive step that better reflects the organic life of each parish within the communion of churches at the local, regional, and universal levels—the life of communion as mutual inclusion.

Author biography

Will Cohen received his PhD in systematic and historical theology from the Catholic University of America. He is now associate professor of theology at the University of Scranton. Specializing in ecclesiology and ecumenism, he has recently published “Augustine and John Zizioulas” in the *T. & T. Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. C. C. Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (2013); “The Thing of It: An Orthodox Response to Hunsinger’s Not-So-High Sacramental Theology,” *Pro Ecclesia* (2010); and “The Concept of ‘Sister Churches’ in Orthodox–Catholic Relations in the 12th and 21st Centuries,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* (2009). In process is a monograph entitled *Truth and Time*, which explores how the church as the pillar and ground of the truth arrives at answers to the newly framed questions of every age.

51. See *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences* no. 43.