

The Role of the Bishop in the Unity of the Early Church (With a Special Look at the Eucharist)

The partaking of the Body and Blood of our Lord unites the faithful not only to God but also to each other: *The sacrament of the body and the blood is a realization of the unity of our nature both with Christ and, at the same time, with all the members of the Church.*¹ Therefore, the Eucharist is of utmost importance as a unifying factor for the Church. Who has the authority to preside over a Eucharistic meal? This is an important question because if “just anyone” can pronounce bread and wine to be the Body and Blood of the Savior, there is no unity, just anarchy and division. Yet Our Lord clearly intends for His people to live in unity, as He prayed for the Church before His death on the cross: *And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one, I in them and You in Me.*² It is not His desire that Christians be divided and estranged from one another but that they be as closely united with each other as the Savior is with His Father. The Lord has given His Church a structure that will enable and ensure this unity: an ecclesiastic hierarchy consisting of bishops, priests and deacons.

The offices of “bishop,” “presbyter,” “deacon,” “teacher,” “prophet” and “pastor” can be difficult to distinguish in the New Testament writings. As one church historian has typically written, *The precise forms of the Christian community in the first century or so of its existence have been and remain a topic of debate.*³ The term “bishop” evolved from the Greek *episkopos*, literally, “overseer,” from *epi* + *skopein*, “to look.”⁴ It is mentioned as a church office in Saint Paul’s epistle to Timothy where the Apostle writes: *This [is] a true saying, If a man desires the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.*⁵ In the same epistle, the Apostle lists the requirements of a bishop, that he be blameless, sober-minded, gentle, and so forth.⁶

In some of Saint Paul’s writings the roles of the bishop and the presbyter (*presbyteros*, “elder” or “priest”) seem synonymous. Saint Clement wrote of “bishops and deacons” and of “presbyters”⁷ but does not speak of “bishops and presbyters,” allowing one to speculate that they may have been one and the same.⁸ It is probable that one man, the bishop, oversaw a community of Christians in a particular city or town but as the number of believers increased, it became necessary to delegate some of his sacramental responsibilities to the elders (“priests”) in charge of smaller, outlying communities and thereby establishing the familiar bishop/priest/deacon hierarchical order. In other words, in the early church it appears that for each city there was one community of Christians ruled by a bishop. The letters to the churches of the book of Revelation and St. Ignatius’ epistles to the bishops of various cities strongly indicate that this was the case. As Christianity expanded and the bishop was not physically able to preside over every Eucharist and baptism, presbyters (priests) were delegated to carry out

¹ . (V. Lossky, page 180)

² John 18: 22 NKJV

³ (Latourette page 115)

⁴ Bishop entry in “It’s Academic” Dictionary

⁵ I Timothy 3:1 KJV

⁶ 1Ti 3:2-7 NKJV

⁷ Clement 44:4

⁸ (Clem 42:4)

these functions under his authority and the role of bishop and priest became more precisely defined.

While it is evident in the New Testament that all bishops were priests, it became apparent that by Saint Ignatius' time that not all priests were bishops. In fact, *By the time St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote his letter... the hierarchical order had developed further, and clergy were divided into grades: the bishop, the council of the presbyters, and the deacons.*⁹ In his letter to Saint Polycarp he writes clearly of a bishop (singular), presbyters (plural) and deacons (also plural.)¹⁰

What was the function of the bishop in the early Church? It was much the same as today: preaching, teaching, correcting error, ordaining priests and the administration of the sacraments. All of these functions served as unifying factors in the Church, then as now. Some early examples of these functions include St. James' correction of the error of the Judaizers as he presided over the Council of Jerusalem as bishop¹¹ and Bishop Polycarp's encouragement of sound doctrine in his letter to the Philippians: *I exhort you all therefore to be obedient unto the word of righteousness.*¹² However, it is the sacrament of the Eucharist that contributed the most towards Christian unity because it united the believer with God and with his fellow Christian.

When one reads about the Eucharist in the New Testament one encounters a meal called the agape feast, or love feast¹³ which seems to be something quite different from the Eucharist we know today. We read in the second chapter of Acts of the Christians eating their food with gladness and breaking bread together.¹⁴ In his epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul references this meal and rebukes the believers for over-eating and becoming intoxicated while others went home hungry.¹⁵ The meal, which was intended to form the bond of Christian unity, had become a cause of divisions in the church: *When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you...*¹⁶ The Apostle then explains the true meaning of the Eucharist, that *whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.*¹⁷ An agape meal is also mentioned by Saint Ignatius in his letter to the Smyrnaeans where he writes that *It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast...*¹⁸ It would seem that the early Christians were attempting to recreate the Last Supper, which was a Jewish meal that concluded with the Lord's institution of the Eucharist.

Eventually, the agape meal and the Eucharist were separated, probably because of the abuses described by Saint Paul and Saint Peter, who reported that false teachers were *carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you.*¹⁹ Another possible reason the agape meal was discontinued was the large number of Gentile converts entering the Church did not fully grasp the significance of Jewish customs which were reflected by

⁹ (Paul Johnson, p. 56)

¹⁰ Ignat to Polycarp 6:1

¹¹ Acts 15:6-33

¹² Polycarp to Phil 9:1

¹³ Jude 12 nkjv

¹⁴ Acts 2:46

¹⁵ I Cor 11:21

¹⁶ I Cor 11:18

¹⁷ I Cor 11:27

¹⁸ Ignatius to Smyr 8:3

¹⁹ 2 Peter 2:13 NKJV

the agape meal. The agape meal may possibly survive today in the form of the potluck meal that is enjoyed in many parishes after the Divine Liturgy.

It is very clear that the early Church believed that the bread and wine of the Eucharist were truly the Body and Blood of the Lord. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.²⁰

Saint Ignatius wrote to the Church at Rome, as he was being transported there for his execution, that *I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ who was of the seed of David; and for a draught I desire His blood, which is love incorruptible.*²¹

The importance of Eucharist is seen in the taking of fragments of bread to shut-ins and the barring of unrepentant sinners from partaking.²² The author of the Didache wrote that no one could participate in the Eucharist unless they had been baptized.²³

These two themes- the importance of the bishop and the importance of the Eucharist- come together in the letters of Saint Ignatius. He writes in letter after letter that the bishop (or his delegate) must preside over the Eucharist if it is to be valid.²⁴ If there's no bishop there's no Eucharist. Nothing was to be done without the bishop,²⁵ who presides after the likeness of God.²⁶ The bishop was to be treated with reverence²⁷ and obeyed without dissimulation.²⁸ The Saint's thoughts on unity, the episcopacy and the Eucharist are summed up in his letter to Polycarp:

[But] shun divisions, as the beginning of evils. Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the presbytery as the Apostles; and to the deacons pay respect as to God's commandment. Let no man do aught of things pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid Eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal Church.²⁹

One might ask if Saint Ignatius had the mind of the Church- that is to say, the mind of Christ- when he emphasized the importance of the bishop. In *The Rise of Christianity* ecclesiastical historian W.H.C. Frend gives his opinion that Saint Ignatius wrote with such confidence that he must represent a longstanding tradition.³⁰ Jaroslav

²⁰ I Cor 10:16,17

²¹ Ignatius to Romans 7:3

²² Chadwick page 32

²³ Didache 9:10

²⁴ Ignat to Smyr 8:1

²⁵ Ignat Romans 2:2

²⁶ Ignat Magnesians 6:1

²⁷ Ignat mag 3:1

²⁸ Ignat mag 3:2

²⁹ Ignat to Polycarp 8:1,2

³⁰ Frend page 139

Pelikan noted that the unity of the church in its bishop was an *overriding preoccupation* in all of the Saint's letters and concludes that *the most important aspect of the church for the apostolic fathers is unity*.³¹

How does this all fit together? Our Savior chose twelve disciples to whom he imparted special giftings, powers and responsibilities, including the authority to bind and loose things in heaven and on earth.³² He gave them the Holy Spirit in a very unique way.³³ This group of men (which came to include the Apostle Paul) had "Apostolic authority," that is, they had God's own truth, preached to them by Jesus Christ and brought to remembrance by the Holy Spirit. The Apostles ordained bishops, priests and deacons as they travelled on their missionary journeys, exhorting them not to deviate from the truths they were given. These bishops were to be present at the Eucharist and if they weren't there, it wasn't a valid Eucharist, probably with the meaning the bread and wine did not become the Body and Blood of the Lord. Only the bishops (and their delegates) had the authority to dispense what Saint Ignatius called the *medicine of immortality*.³⁴ The Eucharist united the believer to Christ, who is the head of the Church and to each other as well. Since all the bishops succeeded from the Apostles and received their authority from them, the bishops were in unity with each other as well as their congregations, no matter how great the distance or cultural diversity, all are one in Christ.

Since the rightly-ordained bishop presiding over the Eucharist preserves the unity of the faith, what happens if one chooses to rebel against the authority of one's bishop? Will the unity of the faith be upheld or will division result? What will become of the Eucharist without the bishop? We need look no further than the Protestant Reformation to see the results of casting these precious things away. Setting aside, for the sake of the discussion, the fact that Martin Luther rebelled against the Roman Church, not the Orthodox Church, Luther nevertheless broke with his bishop and began developing his own theology. Luther himself still believed that the bread and wine became, in some way, the Body and Blood of the Savior³⁵ but there was no longer a bishop to oversee the Eucharist, which diminished its importance in reformers' eyes and of course, severed the unity with God that the participation in a genuine Eucharist provides. Soon enough, a Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, a former parish priest, concluded that the bread and wine were not really the Body and Blood of the Lord and that communion was nothing more than a commemoration of the Last Supper,³⁶ thereby destroying union not only with God but with each other. It is not surprising that within the next decades the churches that derive from the Reformation began to divide again and again into the thousands of Protestant denominations that exist today. It is interesting to note that among those Protestant denominations that still hold on to the notion of the Real Presence, there are fewer divisions. The Anglicans and Lutherans remain relatively intact which suggests that even a remnant of a belief in the genuine Eucharist has some unifying qualities. The groups that most enthusiastically embrace Zwinglianism are the most fractured,

³¹ Pelikan vol 1 page 159.

³² Matt 16:19

³³ John 20:22

³⁴ Ignatius, medicine of immortality- FIND

³⁵ <http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php> Article X "Of the Lord's Supper"

³⁶ <http://www.theologywebsite.com/history/zwingli.shtml>

suggesting that a total denial of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist results in anarchy and division and an attitude of “every man for himself.”

Likewise, those groups that still embrace an hierarchical form of church government- that is to say, they have bishops in some form of historical succession- are historically less fractured than those groups that have no form of episcopal government. We can see that even a non-Orthodox bishop presiding over the bread and wine, even if it’s just a shadow, has some unifying benefit. It is interesting to note that Zwingli was one of the first of the reformers to embrace the idea that all ecclesial authority resided with the local congregation and its own interpretation of the Scriptures. Zwingli’s teachings- no Eucharist and no bishop- have resulted in thousands of denominations, the opposite of the unity Christ wanted for His followers.

Any group or individual who disdains the teaching role of a rightly-ordained bishop will also fall into disunity very quickly. Holy Tradition insures that only correct doctrines are passed down from generation to generation as the bishops accurately transmit Apostolic truth. However, groups that believe in *sola Scriptura* (Bible alone) and its corollary doctrine *soul competency* puts every man in the position of deciding for himself what is correct doctrine, oftentimes with bizarre results.

When an Orthodox Christian partakes of Holy Communion in his parish church he knows with certainty that what he is imbibing is truly the Body and Blood of the Lord. He know this because his priest is under the authority of his bishop who is in a 2,000 year old line of succession which stretches back to the Apostles, who received their authority from the Lord Himself. The Orthodox Christian is not only united with the Lord as he takes Communion but is also united with the faithful Orthodox of every age.

The Lord gave the Church her bishops, priests and deacons *for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*³⁷

³⁷ Eph 4:12, 13