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St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology  
**Conciliarity of the Church**

Nicholas Sagovsky

First published: 15 June 2023

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ConciliarityoftheChurch>

### **Citation**

Sagovsky, Nicholas. 2023. 'Conciliarity of the Church', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ConciliarityoftheChurch> Accessed: 4 June 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

# Conciliarity of the Church

*Nicholas Sagovsky*

Conciliarity is central to the identity of the Christian church. This article discusses the meaning of the word ‘conciliarity’ and its relation to ‘synodality’ through the lens of the church’s experience of councils (synods) at the local, regional, and universal levels. It offers ten scriptural ‘roots’ for the experience of councils and conciliarity in the church. It describes the church’s experience of councils and conciliarity in the pre-Nicene era, at the Council of Nicaea (325), and up to the rupture in communion between East and West (1054). There is a brief analysis, drawn from the church’s experience in the first millennium, of the conditions for the recognition of a council as ‘ecumenical’. The trajectory of the general councils of the Western church, convened by the Pope, is then followed through to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) highlighting debates around conciliarism and the contemporary Roman Catholic understanding of conciliarity. The article then turns to a discussion of councils and conciliarity as understood in Eastern Orthodoxy, the churches of the Reformation, and the Anglican Communion. A section on the World Council of Churches shows how ‘conciliar fellowship’ is central to its understanding of its own identity. A concluding section on ‘conciliarity, conversation and consensus’ returns to the model of the disciples on the road to Emmaus as central to an ecumenical understanding of the conciliarity of the church.

**Keywords:** Conciliarity, Synodality, Conciliarism, Concord, Consensus, Ecumenism, The Christian church, Church authority, Apostolic Succession, *Koinonia* (communion)

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# 1 Introduction: the meaning of ‘conciliarity’

The word ‘conciliarity’ can be used in two senses. It is used to describe the way the church functions and takes decisions, especially those decisions that address conflicts which arise in its life. Characteristically, the church resolves disputes through councils, local, regional, and worldwide, at which (or around which) issues are discussed and conflicts resolved by coming to a *consensus* on the right way forward. The word ‘conciliarity’ is also used to describe the church’s *capacity* for resolving conflicts and difficulties in this way – rather than through the imposition of solutions by those in authority. The church believes itself to be conciliar because it believes it has – through the Holy Spirit – the capacity to resolve divisive issues peacefully, through the members of the church taking counsel together and jointly discerning the will of God.

The words ‘council’ and ‘conciliarity’ are derived from the Latin term *concilium*, meaning a collection of people, an association, gathering, union, meeting, assembly and, particularly, ‘an assembly for consultation’. The components of *concilium* are *con-* (together) and *calo* (call): a council is ‘a calling together’. *Concilium* is the Latin equivalent for the Greek word *synodos*, which also means a meeting or assembly. The Greek word is derived from *sun* (together) and *hodos* (way). It is a ‘coming together’ of those who travel on a common way.

In English, no distinction is made between a ‘council’ as a formal meeting of an official body (as in ‘ecumenical council’) and a continuing consultative body (as in ‘World Council of Churches’). French, however, distinguishes between *concile* and *conseil*; German between *Konzil* and *Rat*; Italian between a *concilio* and a *consiglio* (Keshishian 1992: 1–2). The nearest English equivalent would be the distinction between a ‘council’ and a ‘consultation’. Both can be expressions of the church’s conciliarity.

The words ‘council’ and ‘synod’, ‘conciliarity’ and ‘synodality’, are in principle interchangeable. The word ‘council’ has, in the history of the Western church, often been used to designate a meeting of clergy, especially bishops, together with lay participants such as rulers and their representatives. The ‘synodality’ of the church is, in Eastern theology, more closely linked with the eucharistic identity of the church in which all the baptized participate, than the term ‘conciliarity’ in Western usage. In current Catholic canon law, a ‘council’ like Vatican II is a body which can take binding decisions on behalf of the whole church, whilst a ‘synod’ is a representative, advisory body. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), there have been regular synods of bishops to advise the Pope in various ways on the implementation of the teaching of the Council. In recent Catholic and ecumenical ecclesiology, the term ‘synodality’ has often been preferred over ‘conciliarity’ because it emphasizes the eucharistic identity of the church (‘The Eucharist makes the Church’), with full – but differentiated – participation of all the baptized.

In this article, it is suggested that there are two complementary understandings of ‘conciliarity’, which relate to the structures of the church. For the Orthodox churches, for Roman Catholics, and for churches which claim ‘apostolic succession’ through the episcopate, the conciliarity/synodality of the church is related to the tradition of councils as meetings of bishops. The role of the bishops both corporately and individually is closely linked to their presidency at the Eucharist when local churches or regional churches gather. The churches of the Reformation and Protestants in general are less likely to have bishops and, if they do, they do not claim ‘apostolic succession’ through bishops. When they speak of contemporary church councils, they are more likely to emphasize participation through the baptismal *koinonia* (communion) of all Christians, which is established by baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The conciliarity of the church, however understood, is integral to the way in which it understands its own authority. It is faithful to Christ because it resolves conflicts peacefully, by consultation rather than by any form of repression or violence. In so doing it acknowledges the immanence of the Holy Spirit within the whole church, leading the whole church into the whole truth. The aim of the exercise of conciliarity within the church is always to achieve consensus, concord, or unanimity (cf. Acts 4:32).

## **2 Scriptural roots of the church’s conciliarity**

The conciliarity of the church is not fully apparent in the New Testament (see The Church in the Christian Bible). Within the New Testament, authority lies in Jesus and then in the apostles who are endowed with the Spirit to guide the church in fidelity to him (cf. John 16:13). It is only in the second and subsequent generations of the church that the practice of conciliarity, based upon the apostolic witness contained in scripture, becomes formalized. This is when the first conciliar structures of the church emerge. As they developed, so did the church’s understanding of the scriptural roots of its own conciliarity.

The Hebrew scriptures foreground the significance of the assembly (*qahal*) called together by God. This may be summed up in the words of Psalm 133,

How very good and pleasant it is  
When kindred live together in unity. (Ps 133:1)

The vision of Jerusalem ‘as a city that is at unity with itself’ (cf. Ps 122:3) was also generative. Despite experience to the contrary, the church council was expected to encapsulate something of the peace of Jerusalem (Ps 122:6) in which earthly discords were resolved in eschatological harmony. This aspect of conciliarity was (and is) particularly important for cenobitic monastic life (monastic life shared in common) as an anticipation of the heavenly peace (*shalom*).

The following list discusses ten of the most important ‘scriptural roots’ of conciliarity found in the New Testament (although this list is not exhaustive and does not prioritize according to significance):

(1) ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Matt 18:20). This text can be applied to any gathering of Christians, especially when they come together for prayer or for worship, but it had a particular resonance when the bishops, in their apostolic role, gathered together in synod. Congar calls it ‘the great conciliar text’ (1983: 6). The presence of Jesus was often signalled by the Gospel Book placed in the midst of the assembly.

(2) ‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth’ (John 16:12–13). From the beginning, it was believed that Jesus had many new things to teach and that it was the Holy Spirit who would guide the church into a deeper and fuller understanding of the truths he wished to communicate.

(3) ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you’ (2 Cor 13:13). The relation between the Holy Spirit and the unity of the church is a major issue in the life of the church. Unity is seen as the gift of the Holy Spirit. The unanimity (concord) of Christ’s disciples is thus an important theme in the New Testament (cf. John 17). The Christians of Ephesus are exhorted to make every effort to maintain ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Eph 4:3) and Paul is at great pains to restore unity amongst the squabbling Christians of Corinth. The later synods of the church are expressions of the unity (*koinonia*) that is demonstrated and reaffirmed when the church meets to celebrate the Eucharist.

(4) The corollary of this spiritual unity is that those who provoke disunity by preaching in a divisive way are to be rigorously excluded from the church. As the author of the First Letter of John says:

If we say that we have fellowship (*koinonia*) with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6–7)

For the first Christians, it mattered greatly that their preaching and teaching bore faithful witness to the God-given truths that had been entrusted to them:

Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist! [...] Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. Do not receive into the

house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person. (2 John 7:11)

An important corollary of fidelity to the gospel, then, was a firm rejection of every form of unfaithfulness. The Christian churches had an obligation, with the help of the Spirit, to discern God's truth and to 'abide' in it (cf. John 15:4).

(5) John Zizioulas draws attention to the importance of the phrase 'all together' or 'in the same place' (*epi to auto*) for Paul's understanding of the church (2001: 48–49; cf. 1 Cor 11:20; 14:23). The term 'church' (*ekklesia*), he says, was used to describe an 'actual meeting', primarily for the Eucharist.

Thus, in the thought of Paul and the churches which read his Epistles, the terms 'coming together' or 'coming together in the same place' (*epi to auto*), 'the Lord's supper' (i.e. Divine Eucharist) and 'the Church' (*ekklesia*) or 'the Church of God' mean the same thing. (Zizioulas 2001: 48–49)

A council was later seen as a gathering *epi to auto* in precisely the same sense.

(6) The Day of Pentecost and the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:1–47; 4:32). The phrase '*epi to auto*' also appears at crucial points in Acts, such as Acts 2:1: 'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place (*epi to auto*)'. It was when the apostles were so gathered that the Holy Spirit came upon them. So, it was later believed that the bishops of the church, when they were similarly gathered 'in one place' as a 'synod' (council), could expect the Holy Spirit to come upon them and bring about unanimity. For Eusebius, the gathering at Nicaea of bishops from 'all the nations' of the world (he lists them in a deliberate echo of Acts 2:9ff) created 'a new Pentecost' (1999: 124). No such apostolic assembly had hitherto been possible for the scattered and persecuted church since its earliest days in Jerusalem. Just as the Christians of Jerusalem were 'of one heart and soul' (Acts 4:32), so should be the participants, brought together by the Spirit, in a Christian council.

(7) The 'Jerusalem consultation' (often seen as a proto-synod) is described in Acts 15. Luke's account is sketchy, schematized, and theologized. Nevertheless, it is formative for later synodical practice. First, there is a clear question, arising from mission, that threatens to divide the church: do male Gentile believers need to accept all the provisions of the Jewish law, including circumcision? It is a question about the preconditions for 'walking together' which arises because the gospel is being accepted in new cultural and religious contexts. What precisely are the demands of the gospel for these new Gentile believers? We are told that '[t]he apostles and the elders [in Jerusalem] met together to consider this matter' and that there was 'much debate'. Only after this deliberation does Peter give his testimony as to what God has taught him through his encounter with Cornelius.

Then Paul and Barnabas speak ‘of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles’ (Acts 15:12). And then James speaks, making reference in his judgement (or discernment) to scripture. The matter is settled by edict, based upon consultation. The ‘apostles and elders’ in Jerusalem decide ‘with the consent of the whole church’ – ‘unanimously’ (*homothumadon*) – to choose emissaries. They send them, in the company of Paul and Barnabas, to the Christians of Antioch and the surrounding area. The emissaries bear a letter giving details of their decision, which begins, ‘It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us [...]’ (Acts 15:28). We are told that ‘[w]hen they gathered the congregation together [in Antioch], they delivered the letter’, and, ‘[w]hen [the congregation’s members] read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation (*paraklēsei*)’ (Acts 15:30–31). In other words, the decision of the consultation at Jerusalem is received with joy by the local church of Antioch.

(8) Another scriptural root of conciliarity is concerned with the apostles and their proto-episcopal role. The councils of the church, both in the East and West, have been overwhelmingly councils of bishops. This is because bishops were seen to have inherited the place of the apostles within the church, not as eye-witnesses of the resurrection (cf. Acts 1:22), but as those who had responsibility for *oversight* of the church. This role meant faithfully communicating the rich deposit of faith which had been handed on to the local churches and their leaders (cf. 2 Tim 2:2; 1:14). Thus, in defending the authenticity of their faith, the early Christian sees were concerned to trace their episcopal lineage back to apostles such as Peter and Paul (Rome), Peter alone (Antioch), John (Ephesus), and Mark the Evangelist (Alexandria). When their bishops met in council, it was understood that they carried responsibility for the faithful transmission of the apostolic faith on which the church they represented had been founded (cf. Eph 2:20).

(9) The Petrine texts are also important. One major question with which the conciliarity of the church is concerned is the respective roles of the Bishop of Rome and of the bishops. The claims of the Pope to exercise a distinctive role in – and over – the church are based on Peter’s distinctive role in the New Testament. The central texts include:

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matt 16:18)

Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:32)

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend

my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'. (John 21:15–17)

Reflection on these three texts opens a window on the whole picture of Peter in the gospels, which embraces the weakness and failure of Peter (his failure of faith when walking on water [Matt 14:30]; his threefold denial of Jesus [Matt 26; 69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:17–27]). Peter plays a prominent role in Acts, especially in settling questions about the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles and the necessity for non-Jewish converts to be circumcised. Paul records how he had been told it was to 'Cephas' (Peter) that Jesus first appeared after the resurrection (1 Cor 15:3–5). He also recalls that, recognizing Peter's inconsistency, he 'opposed [him] to his face, because he stood self-condemned' (Gal 2:11). All of this raises questions about the nature and communicability of the ministry of Peter amongst the earliest leaders of the church and the distinctive ministry of later bishops of Rome (and, indeed, all church leaders).

(10) Finally, the road to Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35) is important in understanding the scriptural roots of conciliarity. The primary reference of 'synod' and 'synodality' in the New Testament is to the story of the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus on the evening of the day of Jesus' resurrection. We are told that they were 'talking about all these things which had happened' – trying to understand the meaning of the events surrounding the crucifixion, the reports of the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:14). 'While they were talking and discussing', Luke tells us, 'Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him' (24:14–16). Jesus engages them in conversation: 'Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them all the things about himself in all the scriptures' (24:27). As evening draws on, they prevail upon him to stay ('abide') with them. 'When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.' At this point, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' (24:30–32).

This is a story about Jesus becoming known to his disciples in the Eucharist, but for Christians faced with new and potentially divisive experiences, it can also be seen as a story about Jesus himself drawing near as they walk on the way, teaching them to interpret the scriptures in the light of the Risen Lord who now walks with them. From the perspective of the church over the centuries, this can be seen as a narrative account of the conciliarity of the church.

### **3 The conciliarity of the church seen in the emergence of councils**

### 3.1 Councils of the second and third centuries

From the beginning, a key question for the churches was that implied in 'syn-odality': 'with whom may we walk?' The question of 'walking together' was raised both by doctrinal issues (what teaching about Jesus Christ is admissible for the Church?) and by disciplinary issues ('Can Christians who disagree on the date of Easter share communion? On what terms can the Church readmit those who have compromised with the authorities in times of persecution?'). In his treatise *On Fasting*, written about 208, Tertullian writes that, '[t]hroughout the provinces of Greece there are held in definite localities those councils (*concilia*) gathered out of the universal churches, by whose means [...] all the deeper questions are handled for the common benefit' (*On Fasting*, 13; 1994). The precise nature of these *concilia* is not clear.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage from 248 to 258, is the first Christian writer to give focused attention to the nature of the church – and in so doing to bear witness to his experience of councils in North Africa and Rome. He powerfully affirmed the importance of local councils – by which he meant councils of bishops, at which presbyters and laity might be present – in achieving unanimity. Christian conciliar practice was modelled on the civic assemblies of Carthage with which Cyprian would have been very familiar from his earlier career in public service. At an early stage in his ministry, when he was in hiding, he wrote to the presbyters and deacons of Carthage, expressing his commitment to consultation with them and to the assent of the laity when difficult issues arose in the life of the church:

From the first commencement of my episcopacy, I made up my mind to do nothing on my own private opinion, without your advice and without the consent of the people. (*Epistle 5:4*; Cyprian of Carthage 1995)

During his seven years as bishop, Cyprian presided over seven councils – about one a year – attended by bishops, clergy, and lay people. At one of these councils the controversial policy over the readmission to the Eucharist of those who had denied their faith during the Decian persecution (250–251) was debated. Later, the issue was the necessity for those who had been baptized by heretics to be rebaptized before they could be admitted to communion in the Catholic Church.

In what sense then did Cyprian believe in the conciliarity of the church? For him the role of the bishop was crucial, but the bishop was nothing without the presbyters of his diocese and the lay people. He expected all three 'orders' to act in concert with one another, something that would be demonstrated by their shared participation in the Eucharist over which the bishop presided. It was the Eucharist, in which the participants demonstrated their unity in Christ, which showed the church to be the creation of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, both baptism and the Eucharist were empty and deceptive rituals. For

Cyprian, the answer to the question, 'with whom may we walk?' was clear: with those who are members of the Catholic Church. This is why it was so important for him to establish, in a conciliar manner, clear and trustworthy answers to the questions of whether and how those who had denied the faith could be readmitted to communion and whether those baptized by heretics needed 're-baptism' to ensure that they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Their salvation was at stake.

The councils over which Cyprian presided were essentially regional. They drew together the bishops who lived within reasonable travelling distance of Carthage, which was a thriving Roman administrative and trading centre. Communication by letter with the church of Rome was relatively easy. There are a number of letters from Cyprian to successive bishops of Rome: Cornelius, Lucius, and Stephen. Though he recognized the prestige of Rome, with its Petrine foundation, Cyprian was perfectly prepared to tell the Bishop of Rome what he should be doing and to disagree with him if he thought what he was doing was wrong. He was not going to ally himself with any group that challenged the authority of a bishop he believed to have been lawfully elected Bishop of Rome – but where there was a dispute (as between the conservative rigorist Novatian and Bishop Cornelius), he was determined to check where the right lay before he committed himself. His approach was conciliar in that he was concerned to maintain communion not just between two powerful bishops (the Bishop of Carthage and the Bishop of Rome) but between two of the most significant churches in the West. At the end of his life, he began to be in communication with some of the bishops of the East who supported him against Bishop Stephen when he (Cyprian) demanded the rebaptism of those who had been baptized by heretics before they could be admitted to the Catholic Church. What Cyprian was looking for was a wider agreement amongst the churches which would be brought about through common participation in the Holy Spirit. Not for another seventy years did the structures to undergird such a wider agreement come into being.

Cyprian, who died in the middle of the third century, knew little of the Eastern church and of the growth of synods there. Eusebius of Caesarea (d.339), the first historian of the church, writing early in the fourth century, shows that the synods which began to meet in Asia Minor, North Africa, Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome in the third century belonged to a growing 'synodical ecology' through which local and regional churches addressed various questions, some of which were deeply divisive. His *History of the Church* (see Eusebius 1965) stretches from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the early fourth century, when, with the ending of state persecution and the conversion of Constantine, the church experienced what he saw as a new Pentecost.

Eusebius describes how, towards the end of the second century, Christian believers 'repeatedly and in many parts of Asia' met to determine their response to Montanism, a rapidly growing apocalyptic movement. Montanism was condemned, its followers were

turned out of the church and excommunicated (*The History of the Church* 5.16; Eusebius 1965: 219). His first, and most lengthy, explicit mention of synods comes when he is discussing the ‘Quartodeciman’ controversy concerning the date of Easter, which came to a head towards the end of the second century – though it rumbled on for many years after that. The practice in Asia Minor, which was attributed to the Apostle John, Polycarp, and other Christian leaders, was to follow the Jewish calendar, celebrating Easter on the fourteenth day of the lunar month Nisan, when the Jews kept Passover. This might be on any day of the week. Churches in many other lands kept Easter on the Sunday after Passover. Eusebius describes how

[s]ynods and conferences of bishops were convened, and, without a dissentient voice, drew up a decree of the Church in the form of letters addressed to Christians everywhere, that never on any day other than the Lord’s Day should the mystery of the Lord’s resurrection from the dead be celebrated. (*The History of the Church* 5:23; 1965: 230)

Victor, as newly appointed Bishop of Rome, went so far as to excommunicate those who took the Quartodeciman position. Irenaeus (d.c.200), Bishop of Lyons, wrote rebuking him for what he saw as an overreaction. It was, he said, perfectly in order for different churches on a matter like this to follow the ‘unbroken tradition of their predecessors’ (5:24; 1965: 232). Eusebius makes no secret of his support for celebrating Easter on a Sunday. However, in reporting the eirenic intervention of Irenaeus, he raises – but does not pursue – the question of legitimate diversity in the church. What matters to him is that the church is unanimous in its apostolicity: where ‘apostolic’ practice diverges this suggests that it is possible without rupture in communion to allow divergence even on a matter as important as the date for celebrating Easter (Schatz 1996: 1–12).

When Eusebius describes the situation in the middle of the third century he frequently refers to local and regional synods. He quotes a letter from Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria about the rebaptism of those who have been baptized by heretics:

For it is a fact that resolutions about this question have been passed in the largest synods of bishops, if my information is correct, to the effect that those who come over from heresies are first instructed, then washed and cleansed afresh from the filth of the old unclean leaven. (*The History of the Church* 7.5; Eusebius 1965: 289)

Dionysius also speaks of rebaptism being adopted a long while back ‘in Church synods, at Iconium, Synnada, and many other places’ (7.7; 1965: 290).

A crucial example of synodal discipline was provided by the series of two or even three synods called at Antioch to pass judgment on the teaching of the bishop, Paul of Samosata, whose adoptionist Christology (the idea that Jesus was not born but ‘adopted’ as the Son of God) was eventually condemned in 268 (7.27–30; 1965: 313–

319). Eusebius describes how Dionysius of Alexandria was invited to attend the synod but excused himself because of age and infirmity, instead sending a letter giving his views. Eusebius is at pains to show how wide the regional representation was ('a very large number of bishops') and how careful the discussion was that led to the condemnation of the Bishop of Antioch. It is clear that he wishes to show that the condemnation of Paul was unanimous throughout the Catholic Church.

Eusebius sought to tell the story of the triumph of the Catholic faith. From the beginning, he endeavours to show the church's Spirit-led unanimity and its ability to repel heretical teaching. When he describes the Peace of the Church under Constantine, he speaks of 'convocations of bishops, gatherings of representatives from far distant lands, friendly intercourse between congregation and congregation, unification of the members of Christ's body conjoint in one harmony' (1965: 382). He speaks of the unity of the church: 'There was one power of the divine Spirit coursing through all the members, one soul in them all, the same enthusiasm for the faith, one hymn of praise on all their lips' (*The History of the Church* 10.3; Eusebius 1965: 383). This for Eusebius was the conciliar ideal. It had been present in the outpouring of the Spirit in the earliest days of the church, it was a living reality through the Spirit-led synodal experience of the church, and it was renewed afresh in the glorious reign of Emperor Constantine. Eusebius quotes a letter from Constantine to Miltiades, Bishop of Rome, in which he orders a synod to be held at Rome to promote the unity and concord of the churches. It ends with the words, 'I desire you to leave no schism or division of any kind anywhere'. Similarly, he quotes a letter of Constantine to Chrestus, Bishop of Syracuse, in which he says he has given orders for bishops to be summoned to Arles from Gaul and from Africa and for the Bishop of Rome to be present so that current disputes in the Church can be resolved and 'transformed, however belatedly, into genuine religious feeling, faith, and brotherly concord' (10.5; 1965: 405–406).

### **3.2 The Council of Nicaea as a paradigm case of the church's conciliarity**

Eusebius was a strong supporter of the Emperor Constantine. He believed the church had triumphed, through the sustaining action of the Holy Spirit, over two hundred and fifty years of adversity to emerge into the sunlight of Constantine's beneficent regime. In his *Life of Constantine*, he gives a heavily theologized account of the Council of Nicaea, clearly depicting it as a new Pentecost (*The History of the Church* 3.7; Eusebius 1999: 124). We have no records of the proceedings of the Council, so there are many questions about its conduct which we cannot answer, but we can see how it acted as a paradigm for later councils, being received as the first Ecumenical Council.

The convoking of the Council of Nicaea was a personal initiative of the Emperor. Eusebius presents a picture of Constantine's distress at the division in the church of Alexandria,

primarily because of the teaching of Arius that Jesus Christ was a 'creation' of the Father, so 'there was a time when he was not'. Constantine, having embraced Christianity as the privileged religion of the Empire, wanted a united church to support a united empire. In the face of the conflict in North Africa, especially Alexandria, he moved a synod that had been called to settle the current controversies from Ancyra to his palace at Nicaea so that he could keep a watchful eye on proceedings. Eusebius describes how the Emperor 'marshalled a legion of God, a *universal* council (*synodon oikoumenikēn*), with respectful letters summoning the bishops to hasten from every place' (*Life of Constantine* III.6; 1999: 123). To facilitate their attendance, he put at their disposal the imperial means of communication, including a generous supply of pack animals. Eusebius reports that more than 250 bishops (which later became 318 to reflect the number of the followers of Abraham cf. Gen 14:14), plus presbyters and deacons, gathered.

The primary document from the Council is, of course, the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten begotten from the Father, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (ὁμοούσιον) with the Father, through whom all things came to be, both those in heaven and those on earth; for us humans and for our salvation, he came down and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the holy Spirit.

And those who say, 'there once was when he was not', and 'before he was begotten he was not', and that he came to be from things that were not, or from another hypostasis or substance, affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration – these the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes. (Tanner 1990: 5 [vol. 1])

The question for the bishops assembled at Nicaea was: which existing credal formulation or formulations would they *together* receive as an adequate expression of the apostolic faith? When the Council communicated its statement of faith to the churches, the sheer number of bishops assembled in a representative capacity gave their creed a unique authority. 'The Nicene Faith' as expressed in the Nicene Creed became the touchstone of orthodoxy (Smith 2019). It became an *ecumenical* statement of faith. This is why it became so important for subsequent synods to proclaim at the outset their acceptance of 'the Nicene Faith' by recording their acceptance of the Nicene Creed. It was further expected that, since they were corporately committed to the Nicene Faith, their unanimous teaching would be received by the members of the churches who were committed to walking on the same way.

It is striking that this early conciliar creed uses the non-biblical word *homoousios* ('identical in being') to describe the relationship between the Son and the Father. Additional authority was given to the use of the term by the later claim that it was the suggestion of the

Emperor, affirmed by the Council. The Council's creed concludes with an anathema which is very obviously anti-Arian. It answers the question, 'with whom may we walk?' by excluding those who say, 'there once was when he was not', and, 'before being born he was not'. It is significant that the Council as an authoritative body was guiding the church in its reading of scripture – accepting one reading and excluding another. In this sense orthodox, credal teaching is the fruit of conciliarity.

The Council of Nicaea also promulgated twenty disciplinary canons, which addressed various questions about *how* the churches should walk together. The most important for the conciliarity of the church was Canon 4:

It is by all means desirable that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops of the province. But if this is difficult because of some pressing necessity or the length of the journey involved, let at least three come together and perform the ordination, but only after the absent bishops have taken part in the vote and given their written consent. But in each province the right of confirming the proceedings belongs to the metropolitan bishop. (Tanner 1990: 7 [vol. 1])

In this way, the overlapping authority of the bishops, in communion with one another, was to be maintained. Communion and conciliarity went together.

One question that must be raised is whether the Council of Nicaea was truly representative. The overwhelming majority of bishops who attended came from the East, but Bishop Osius of Cordova in Spain played a prominent part in the proceedings. The Bishop of Rome, Sylvester, did not attend because of his advanced age but sent as legates two priests who kept him informed about the Council. It was understood, through the legates, that he approved of what was done but there was no formal requirement for the Bishop of Rome to signal his assent.

In subsequent years, the Council of Nicaea was seen to be truly 'conciliar'. The Emperor himself, who at this stage was not even baptized, took an active part in the deliberations and in the promulgation of the Council's decisions. However, the bishops were far from united. Arius, together with two bishops who supported him, was banished after the Council, but he was soon reinstated by the Emperor, and Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, defender of Nicene orthodoxy throughout his long and combative life, was several times exiled. Not until the latter part of the fourth century was the anti-Arian teaching of Nicaea finally accepted throughout the Eastern church and affirmed by the Council of Constantinople (381).

### **3.3 The ecumenical councils of the undivided church**

Ramsay MacMullan has shown how frequent and widespread was the convoking of local and regional councils by the fourth century (for a list, see MacMullan 2006: 2–4,

'Three Centuries of Synods = Councils'). The reception of certain councils as ecumenical has tended to obscure this 'synodical ecology' and to give the impression of a clear trajectory of development in a succession of such councils. When these councils took place, the centre of gravity of the Empire and, to some extent of the church, was in the East. There was no denying the primacy of the church of Rome, established on the witness of Peter and Paul, but the other three ancient patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, together with the newly-founded Constantinople, were all in the East. The ecumenical councils were overwhelmingly gatherings of the Eastern church. Their relation to the Western church was somewhat fraught. It was clear that they would decree nothing against the expressed will of the Bishop of Rome, made known through his representatives. In some cases, such as the adoption of the Tome of Leo by the Council of Chalcedon, they were deeply indebted to the teaching of the Bishop of Rome, but major councils of the church were convened by the Emperor. The discernment of certain councils as 'ecumenical' was a matter both of their self-perception as a body which sufficiently represented the whole church to serve the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, by an authoritative ministry of discernment – and of the reception of their teaching throughout the church. Thus, the Council of Chalcedon (451), which in its Definition of the Faith (Tanner 1990: 83–87 [vol. 1]) referred to itself three times as 'ecumenical', affirmed the 'unerring' faith and the creed(s) of the fathers who met in Nicaea and Constantinople, and commended the teaching of the Council of Ephesus.

The conditions for a council being recognized as 'ecumenical' arose informally but by the fifth century they came to include:

- The existence of an issue or issues on which the church needed clear teaching to maintain unity. The underlying belief was that the Holy Spirit would guide the assembled body to discern the truth on disputed issues (cf. John 16:12–13).
- The council had to be convoked by the Emperor. It was believed that the Emperor had a God-given role to ensure the peace and harmony of the church for the good of the Empire.
- The assembled body, who were predominantly bishops, but at times included significant lay people, together with monks, priests and deacons, had to be seen to be truly representative of the 'ecumenical' church, that is of the church as a whole.
- The council met in the presence of Christ, often symbolized by an open Book of the Gospels.
- The council was not a majoritarian body. It was expected to achieve 'unanimity' or 'concord'.
- The decrees of the council had to have the (implicit or explicit) assent of the Bishop of Rome.
- The decrees of the council had also to have the assent of the Emperor, who would promulgate them widely.

- A council was not recognized as ecumenical until it was received as such.

One major issue remains unresolved: how many ecumenical councils were there? The Orthodox receive seven; Roman Catholics eight (together with thirteen more held after the era of the undivided church); Anglicans usually four or seven; the churches of the Reformation four (Lossky et al. 2002: 375). Those received by the Orthodox churches are:

- Nicaea (325). The full deity of Christ was acknowledged and Arianism was condemned.
- Constantinople I (381). The Creed of Nicaea was extended to include the recognition of the full deity of the Holy Spirit.
- Ephesus (431). 'Nestorianism' was refuted by recognition of Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God).
- Chalcedon (451). Following the teaching of Pope Leo, the 'two natures' of Christ were affirmed.
- Constantinople II (553). Certain writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrihus, and Ibas of Edessa were condemned for Nestorianism.
- Constantinople III (680–681). The presence of 'two wills' in Christ was affirmed.
- ('Quinisext' (692). The disciplinary canons of Constantinople II and III were collected and published, forming the basis of Orthodox canon law. For the Orthodox, this council is not to be counted separately from Constantinople II and III; its decrees were not received in the West as ecumenical teaching.)
- Nicaea II (787). The Iconoclastic Controversy was brought to an end by affirming that icons may be 'venerated' (but not worshipped).

Roman Catholics recognize a Fourth Council of Constantinople (869–870), which confirmed the deposition of Photius, Bishop of Constantinople. Several contemporary theologians, such as Norman Tanner, strongly recommend that the Roman Catholic Church rescinds its recognition of this council as ecumenical, as this judgment still gives offence to Orthodox Christians (Tanner 2001: 43).

Out of the confidence that there was, given the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a clear line of development (but not change) from the witness of the apostles recorded in scripture to the Nicene Faith acclaimed by the ecumenical councils, there grew the conviction that ecumenical councils themselves were 'infallible'. What was meant by 'infallible' and whether that was better expressed by 'indefectible' became a major issue at the Reformation. Where the language of infallibility is used, as by both Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, this is because of their conviction that the Christian faith remains one and the same: it is based on the self-revelation of God in Christ, to which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, scripture, apostolic tradition and the authoritative teaching of the church all bear witness.

It should be noted that the definitions of ecumenical councils, by giving clear answers to questions, such as 'with whom may we walk?', created not only inclusions but exclusions. Thus, the Assyrian Church of the East receives only two ecumenical councils (Lossky et al. 2002: 70); the Oriental Orthodox Churches (including the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and [Indian] Malankara Churches [Lossky et al. 2002: 857–859]) receive only three. Contemporary ecumenical dialogue has, however, uncovered much that these churches have in common with the churches that receive the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon. The exclusions created by ecumenical councils, which have often been expressed in violent language, are now being reassessed in a more eirenic and conciliar spirit.

Both the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church give special recognition to the first four ecumenical councils, which are also received as such by the Anglican Communion and the churches of the Reformation. Gregory the Great was saying nothing new when, in his synodical letter of 591, he wrote, 'I say that just as there are four holy gospels, so I receive and venerate four councils.' Congar, who quotes a number of similar statements by Gregory, comments, 'By the beginning of the seventh century the four first [ecumenical] councils are considered as [...] the essential and fundamental norm of orthodoxy' (Rousseau 1960: 80).

## **4 General councils of the Western church**

### **4.1 Pope and emperor; conciliarism and Pope**

The breach in communion between the Eastern and Western church, which brought to an end the era of ecumenical councils in which both participated, is usually dated to 1054. This breach catastrophically deepened in 1204 when the Western soldiers of the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople. Meanwhile, the power structures of the East had been reproduced in an increasingly distanced West when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans in St Peter's Basilica, Rome on Christmas Day 800. It was widely believed that Christ himself had instituted governance of the kingdoms of this world by 'two swords': one spiritual, that is the Pope, and one political, that is the Emperor.

There was, however, in this era a decisive shift in the relation between the Pope and the Western Emperor. The provincial synods of Rome, presided over by the Pope, developed into councils of the entire Western Church. Medieval popes, who crowned many (but not all) emperors, made increasingly strident claims to 'plenitude of power' – including power over kings and emperors. Pope Callistus II used the support of the First Lateran Council (1123) to cement a favourable settlement of the Investiture Controversy against the Emperor Henry IV. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) represented a high point for the Pope's claims to power in the political arena. Pope Innocent III used the support of the First Council of Lyons (1245) formally to depose the most dangerous enemy the

medieval papacy ever faced: Emperor Frederick II. In the end, though, the over-use of the Pope's spiritual weapons to support political interventions led to a strong political reaction, especially from France, when successive popes were contained at Avignon, under the watchful eye of the French king.

The 'captivity' of the papacy at Avignon (1309–1377) led to a period in which there were first two, and then three, claimants to the papacy. Faced with this disastrous situation, the Emperor Sigismund played a positive role, alongside Pope John XXII, in convening and steadying a council at Constance (1414–1418) where the matter could be addressed. All three 'popes' were persuaded or forced to resign in favour of Martin V, who was duly acclaimed by the Council, having confirmed two important decrees which affirmed the authority of an ecumenical council over an errant pope, together with the necessity of 'frequent' councils. As Brian Tierney showed in his classic *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, this expression of 'conciliarist' thinking was the product of extensive theological reflection by some of the best canon lawyers of the age on the conciliar nature of the church (Tierney 1955). The central tenet of *conciliarism* (which is not the same thing as 'conciliarity') was brought into focus by the urgent need to resolve the schism of the Western church. Conciliarist thinkers maintained that an ecumenical council has authority over a pope (or 'popes'), especially in matters of faith. A heretical or schismatic pope can be called to order, and Christian doctrine authoritatively expressed or re-expressed, by an ecumenical council. Normally, a pope exercises 'plenitude of power' unchallenged, but in situations of crisis or breakdown an ecumenical council can act as what Schatz calls 'a kind of highest constitutional court in the Church' (1996: 103).

The successor to Martin V was Eugenius IV. Despite the Pope dragging his feet, a council was convened at Basel (1431–1449), which was strongly conciliarist in its thinking. Eugenius was working in parallel with the Council to bring reconciliation between the Eastern and Western Church at a time when Constantinople was seriously threatened by the armies of the invading Ottoman Turks. The Pope outwitted those gathered at Basel by attracting the Greek Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople to a conciliar gathering at Ferrara (1438), which then moved to Florence (1439). The Council of Florence had the strongest claim to being an ecumenical council of any in the medieval era, as it was supported by a pope and an (Eastern) emperor, and it included representatives of the Eastern as well as the Western Church. Consequently, support for the Council at Basel and for conciliarism ebbed away. In the early days of the Basel Council, Nicholas of Cusa wrote perhaps the most significant treatise in support of conciliarism, (*The Catholic Concordance*, 1991), but then he, like many others, migrated to Florence.

Francis Oakley (2003) has shown the depth and extent of conciliar thinking in the Catholic Church over three hundred years and its embeddedness in a wider agenda for reform, at which successive popes balked. Conciliarism was at the root of the Gallicanism which

for three hundred years underlay French support for a decentralized church. The decisive rejection of conciliarism in favour of a form of papalist monarchy – as set out in the terms of reunion to which in 1438 the indigent Greeks agreed at Florence (Tanner 1990: 523–528 [vol. 1]) – meant that the Catholic Church was in no state to engage in any conciliar fashion with the reform agenda that was being pressed throughout the fifteenth century, especially from Germany.

Traditionally, the Roman Catholic Church has claimed that the medieval councils from Lateran I (1123) to Lateran V (1512–1517) were ‘ecumenical councils’ despite – with two exceptions – a lack of representation from the East. One of those exceptions was the Council of Florence (1431–1445), where a substantial Greek delegation, together with the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople, was present. The other was Lyons (1274) from which crude terms of reunion were conveyed by a Greek delegation to the emperor Michael Palaeologus who, in a position of considerable weakness, accepted them because of his need for military help. The people of Constantinople were outraged and refused to receive the offer made by the Council. Reflecting on this debacle seven hundred years later, Pope Paul VI described the Council at Lyons as a ‘general’ (not an ‘ecumenical’) council, which gave ‘no possibility to the Greek Church of expressing itself freely’. He recognized that ‘a unity achieved in this way could not be accommodated within the minds of the Eastern Christians’ (Pope Paul VI 1974). It was an important admission, not only about the nature of the Council of Lyons and similar medieval councils of the Western Church which are best regarded as general councils of the Western Church, but about the limited understanding of conciliarity with which those councils worked.

## **4.2 The slow recovery of conciliarity**

Hubert Jedin has shown the extent to which in the early sixteenth century the leaders of the Reformation in Germany pressed for a council which would respond to their criticisms of Rome (1957: 197–219). When successive popes ignored the rapidly deteriorating situation in central Europe, supporters of the Reformation looked to the Holy Roman Emperor to convoke ‘a free Christian council in Christian lands’. However, Charles V, who was a sincere Catholic, had no intention of acceding to such a dangerous demand. It is important to note that at this point belief in the conciliarity of the church *as a whole* was being turned by the followers of Luther, and later of Calvin, against the claims of the Roman authorities.

Such was the clamour for a council that would address the question of reform that Pope Paul III could resist it no longer. The bishops gathered at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) made it possible for a Protestant delegation briefly to be present and to argue their case before members of the Council – but this was too little too late. Fundamentally, the bishops saw no basis for including the emerging churches of the Reformation in an

inclusive, conciliar discussion about reform. Their ecclesiology was sharply defined: outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. They therefore went on to define yet more clearly the boundaries of the Catholic Church. The Council asserted its position on scripture and tradition, justification, and the sacraments, remaining steadfast against the Protestant critique. It taught that there are seven sacraments, all to be traced back to Christ. It provided for a reworked Vulgate translation of the Bible, and a new catechism. During the eighteen years in which it met intermittently, it conceded nothing to the demand for a reform of church funding through the sale of indulgences and similar practices, nor to a reform of the Curia and the papacy.

The First Vatican Council (1869–1870) was convened at a time when the Church had been traumatized by the French Revolution and the imperial reign of Napoleon, the revolutions of 1848, and decades of sustained anti-clericalism. Its response was to reaffirm the spiritual authority of the Pope by the declaration of ‘papal infallibility’. As an exercise of conciliar authority, it should be noted that this was preceded by acrimonious controversy within and beyond the Church and that the minority at the Council opposed to the definition left before the final vote, which then became in effect unanimous. It should also be noted that the circumstances of an ‘infallible’ decree by the Pope are extremely limited: it must be when the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra* (formally); when he speaks pastorally ‘as shepherd and teacher of all Christians’; it must be in the field of faith and morals (Tanner 1990: 816 [vol. 2]). If these conditions are met, the infallibility which the Pope possesses is that ‘which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals’. However, when such a definition is made, it is irreformable ‘*ex sese non autem ex consensu ecclesiae*’ (of itself, and not by the consent of the church; Tanner 1990: 816 [vol. 2]). It had been intended that the Council would go on to consider the conciliar responsibilities of bishops, but the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War prohibited this.

The current preoccupation of the Roman Catholic Church with the synodality/conciliarity of the church is a direct outcome of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), sets out an understanding of the church which differs greatly from that of the Council of Trent. The church is seen as far more than the visible institution with which Trent was primarily concerned: it is the mystical Body of Christ, as well as the People of God; it is a communion (*koinonia*) brought about by participation in the Holy Spirit. The Pope and the bishops form ‘one apostolic college’ within which the Pope has ‘full, supreme and universal power over the church’, exercised in communion with the college of bishops (Tanner 1990: 865 [vol. 2]). This collegiate mode of working is shown in ‘the councils that were convened, by which all the most important matters were settled in common, and a decision carefully arrived at through the counsel of many’ (Tanner 1990: 866 [vol. 2]). Baptism is fundamental to the full membership of the church enjoyed by both laity and

clergy. Lay people are no less fully members of the church than the clergy. The Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio* 1964) shows how constitutive 'elements' of the church may be present in non-Catholic forms of Christianity – something that is far from the thinking of Trent or Vatican I. In the light of the teaching of Vatican II, it makes sense, then, to think of the Catholic Church's 'conciliarity' as in some degree embracing not only all its own members, but other baptized Christians with whom the Church may come into dialogue about its own identity. This was made evident in the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995).

## **5 Conciliarity (or synodality) in Eastern Orthodoxy**

Orthodoxy is known to be the 'Church of the Seven Councils', as it looks to the ecumenical councils for authoritative teaching that guides the church even today. However, the understanding of 'conciliarity' in the Orthodox Church extends far beyond its expression in the councils of the church. For the Orthodox Church, what is constitutive of the Church's conciliarity are 'the relations of communion and unity in faith among the local churches' (Lossky et al. 2002: 871). The conciliarity of the Church embraces every member, laity as well as clergy, because the church is one Body: this is emphasized by the widespread use of the term 'synodality' (rather than 'conciliarity').

Following the fourth century 'Apostolic Canons' 34, the need for primacy at the various 'levels' of the Church is recognized, but so is the need to act with 'the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity'. The *protos* (first), the Ecumenical Patriarch, is *primus inter pares* (first among equals), a leader amongst the metropolitans of the various autocephalous (self-governing) churches without jurisdiction over any of them. There is a *taxis* (order) amongst the patriarchs dating back to the first millennium, but all the bishops share equally, as successors of the apostles, in their responsibility for the life of the church. It is the whole church at every level that is 'conciliar'. This 'synodality' of the church is evident in the liturgy, in which the *koinonia* of the clergy and of the people (led by the choir) undergirds all that takes place.

Schmemmann emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the church's conciliarity. He finds the root of this in the church's participation in the life of the Trinity: 'The perfect "council", the Blessed Trinity, is a hierarchy and not an impersonal equality of interchangeable "members"' (1979: 164). Zizioulas (2001: 195–227) notes the historical origins of this hierarchical conciliarity in the council of the bishop with the presbyters in the earliest local churches. When parishes were first created, the presbyters who were put in charge of them represented the experience and views of the laity to the bishop. The governance of the local church remained in the hands of the bishop, who presided at the corporate Eucharist, with his presbyters gathered around him. The governance of the regional and

ecumenical Church came to lie in the hands of the bishops as a body, under a *protos* who was '*primus inter pares*'. Thus, the whole body of the Church was, at every level, conciliar.

The 'conciliarity' of the church, which Schmemmann equates with *sobornost*, is fundamental for Eastern Orthodoxy (Schmemmann 1979: 160). *Sobornost* is a Russian word that is notoriously difficult to translate. It was used by key nineteenth-century Russian theologians like Khomyakov and Soloviev to describe the unique unity, solidarity and catholicity – the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 13:13) – that constitutes the Christian church (Lossky et al. 2002: 1042–1043).

The Orthodox Church now exists as a body of autocephalous and autonomous churches, a number of which have a national identity. This is not seen by the Orthodox as a 'fellowship' of churches, but as one united body, sharing in the *koinonia* of the Spirit. The churches teach the same faith and celebrate the same liturgy. In this sense, the Orthodox are profoundly traditional: they see themselves as bound to hand on faithfully what they have received. Doctrinal and liturgical change could only come about with the agreement of all. Hence the importance of conciliar gatherings in which issues which threaten the concord of the whole church can be debated and unanimity restored. There is no continuing *magisterium* as there is in Catholicism. The life of the church is conciliar in that each constituent church is responsible to all the other churches for its fidelity to the faith they have all received – but there is no higher body to which they can appeal for the resolution of disputes.

From the first millennium, many Orthodox churches have existed under non-Christian and often hostile regimes. With the Fall of Constantinople (1453), the patriarchate of Constantinople survived, much diminished and under constant pressure. The Russian Orthodox Church made the bold claim to be a 'third Rome' and so to have a distinctive leadership role within the body of Orthodox Churches. This was resisted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, still based in Istanbul. Severe tensions have arisen over the recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019 of an autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The Moscow Patriarchate has opposed this vehemently.

Following the schism with the West in 1054, which was confirmed by mutual anathemas (rescinded in 1965), and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, when the last of the Byzantine emperors died in the fighting, there could for the Orthodox churches be no more genuinely ecumenical councils. There have, however, been a number of synods to which most Orthodox churches give assent. The Holy and Great Synod held in Crete in 2016 spoke in its encyclical of

councils of universal authority, such as, for example, the Great Council (879-880) convened at the time of St. Photios the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople (see above), and also the Great Councils convened at the time of St. Gregory Palamas (1341, 1351, 1368), through

which the same truth of faith was confirmed, [...] the Holy and Great Councils convened in Constantinople, in 1484 to refute the unionist Council of Florence (1438-1439), in 1638, 1642, 1672, and 1691 to refute Protestant beliefs, and in 1872 to condemn ethno-phyletism (the identification of a local church with a particular race or nation) as an ecclesiological heresy. (Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church 2016: para. 3)

A highly significant 'local' council was the council held in Moscow in 1917–1918, just as the nation slid into Revolution and Civil War. Peter the Great's imposition in 1721 on the Russian Church of direct rule through a 'Holy Synod' (which was, in effect, a department of state) was overturned and the Patriarchate was restored. Destivelle has shown to what extent this was the product of fresh thinking in the Russian Church about conciliarity (*sobornost*) and how this conciliar thought pervaded all the decisions of the council (Destivelle 2018). Not only did the laity participate fully in the council; they were in a majority. Besides addressing questions of governance, the council gave guidance on the role of the laity, the ministry of women, and liturgical reform – all with a concern for a throughgoing 'conciliarity'. Unfortunately, the work of the council was swept away by the tragic events of the First World War and the Russian Revolution in the following years, but it was not forgotten, especially within the Russian Orthodox diaspora.

The Great and Holy Synod, held in Crete in 2016, was of unique, authoritative significance for contemporary Orthodoxy. It was presided over by the Ecumenical Patriarch, together with the leaders of the autocephalous churches. It had been sixty years in preparation. During that time, the statements which were finally agreed in Crete were carefully drafted and re-drafted. In the event, four autocephalous churches, including that of Russia, absented themselves. The authority of the Synod was seriously diminished by its non-reception in these churches, but that could yet be reversed.

In a striking parallel with the Catholic agenda of *aggiornamento* ('bringing up-to-date') at Vatican II, the first of the documents from the Synod at Crete addressed 'The Mission of Orthodoxy in Today's World'. Five further documents discussed 'The Question of the Diaspora', the autonomy of local (but not autocephalous) churches, fasting, marriage, and 'The Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World'. In a substantial encyclical, the Synod affirmed that 'the Church is in itself a council' (Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church 2016: 3). A final message affirmed that '[t]he Orthodox Church expresses her unity and catholicity "in Council". Conciliarity pervades her organization, the way decisions are taken and determines her path' (Destivelle 2018: 370).

The conciliarity of Orthodoxy as a whole has also been demonstrated in ecumenical documents which express a depth of shared understanding with Catholicism. These include: the Joint International Commission's 'Ravenna Statement' on 'Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority' (2007); their 'Chieti Statement' on 'Synodality and Primacy During the First Millennium' (2016); the Saint Irenaeus Group statement

on 'Rethinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality' (2018); as well as documents that address contemporary problems, particularly issues concerning the environment. Whilst the Orthodox churches take a strong line against eucharistic hospitality, their openness to the Spirit in the practice of conciliarity has led them, with some powerful exceptions, to be active participants in the ecumenical movement and in the World Council of Churches.

## **6 Conciliarity in the churches of the Reformation**

The Reformation was both a reaction to the failure of the conciliar movement of the fifteenth century and a continuation of that movement by other means (Avis 2006: 108). The commitment of the Reformers to conciliar forms of church governance led them to outright rejection of a monarchical papacy and the doctrinal and financial claims of Rome. For them, however, it was not councils in themselves which had ultimate authority in the church, but scripture. Councils were to be respected insofar as their doctrinal teaching was in accord with scripture. The Reformers wanted a church which rediscovered unity through reform conducted in the light of the teaching of scripture – though there were serious disagreements about how this should be done.

Luther accepted the doctrinal authority of the first four ecumenical councils but he was profoundly suspicious of the teaching of later purportedly 'ecumenical' councils with a less secure grounding in scripture. For him, no council of the church could be 'infallible'. However, to the extent that the teaching of the early ecumenical councils was in accord with scripture and was therefore recognized by the local churches, it was of unique authority. He accepted the historic role of bishops (*episkopoi*) in the church, in that he accepted that they had a shared role in guiding the church under the leading of the Spirit, but he did not accept that they represented a distinct order of ministry nor that they were successors to the apostles. He also recognized the role of the 'godly prince' as God's instrument for the maintenance of good order, which included the convening of councils. Though he would not have used the word 'conciliarity', he saw the theologians of the church, because of their knowledge of scripture, as an important resource for the development of the church's Confessions of Faith.

As early as 1518, Luther appealed to a general council against the teaching of Rome and, in 1521, he appealed to a council against his excommunication. When, in 1536, Pope Paul III finally called a council – which did not actually meet until 1545 – Luther set out, in the Smalcald Articles (1538), the reasons for his loss of hope that any council called by a pope would ever address the demands for radical reform of the church which he and Reformers like him were making. He set out what amounted to an agenda for a free council, concluding his introduction with the prayer, 'Dear Lord Jesus Christ, assemble a council of thine own' (Tappert 1959: 291). Luther's gloomy reading of conciliar history

and his positive conciliar ecclesiology was further developed in *On the Councils and the Church* (1539). He quoted Gregory of Nazianzus (who briefly and unhappily presided at the First Council of Constantinople): 'To tell the truth, one ought to flee all the councils of bishops, for I have never seen any good results from the councils, not even the abolition of evil, but only ambition, disputes over precedence, etc.' (quoted by Küng 1964: 30). 'In the councils', added Luther, 'the bishops are ambitious, proud, quarrelsome, and violent' (Luther [n.d.]: 174).

For the early magisterial Reformers, the conciliarity of the church as they understood it was implicit in the doctrinal teaching of confessions like that of Augsburg (1530), which was drafted by Philip Melancthon. When it was submitted to Emperor Charles V, it was signed by seven princes and the representatives of two free cities. In the introduction, they offered

in full obedience [...] to participate in such a general, free, and Christian council as the electors, princes and estates have with the highest and best motives requested in all the diets of the empire which have been held during Your Imperial Majesty's reign. (Tappert 1959: 26–27)

Charles, as a faithful Catholic, had utterly refused to take such a conciliar initiative against the wishes of the Pope. A late attempt to build bridges across the Catholic-Protestant divide by conciliar means was that of Martin Bucer and Philip Melancthon who came to an agreement on justification by faith with Cardinal Gasparo Contarini at the Colloquy of Ratisbon in 1541. When, however, they debated the church, sacraments, and transubstantiation, they were not able to bridge the divide between the Catholic and Protestant views of these things (Jedin 1957: 355–409). By the time the Council of Trent actually met, though Protestant delegates were invited and even briefly attended under safe-conduct, there was virtually no hope left for conciliar reconciliation.

Lutheranism developed as a movement with local and regional synods. Only in 1947 was a Lutheran World Federation formed as a consultative body with no authority over its individual members. In 1990, it proclaimed itself to be a worldwide 'communion' (*koinonia*) of Lutheran churches. In that communion, the implications of which are still being tested and explored, lies any Lutheran claim to conciliarity at the worldwide level.

The demands of communion in Christ were made plain by the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) which was adopted at the first synod of the Confessing Church in Germany. This made clear, on explicitly scriptural grounds, that there could be no compromise between the demands of Christian discipleship and the demands of an anti-Christian state. It was a 'conciliar' document in the sense that it was adopted at a synod of Christians who sought unanimity in obedience to scripture and the Holy Spirit when faced by the oppressive demands of the Nazi regime. Its authority lay not in the power or position of those who

drafted it (Karl Barth, a Reformed Christian, was a major influence), but in the willingness of those who heard in it the authentic call of Christ to receive its teaching for themselves and for their churches.

Calvin, as a second-generation Reformer, was able to build on the controversial positions taken by his predecessors. In his *Institutes*, he wrote:

We willingly embrace and reverence as holy the early councils, such as those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, Chalcedon, and the like, which were concerned with refuting errors – in so far as they relate to the teachings of faith. For they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture. (Calvin 1960: 1171)

Beginning from the New Testament affirmation that '[w]here two or three are gathered together in my [Jesus'] name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt 18:20), Calvin set out much more systematically than Luther his programme for the convening of councils in accord with positive scriptural precedent. Like Luther, he privileged the role of theologically proficient teachers (such as himself). He recognized the need for representative 'oversight', though not necessarily by bishops. The Zwinglian/Calvinist tradition developed into that of the churches known in continental Europe as Reformed and in Great Britain and Ireland as Presbyterian or Congregational (which differ over the relation of the local church to wider church bodies).

Reformed and Presbyterian church polity is served by presbyters (ministers) and (lay) deacons. Binding decisions are taken through a hierarchy of assemblies. Thus, the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), which was convened by the Dutch States-General, committed the Dutch Reformed Church to five key Calvinist positions: unconditional election; a limited atonement; the total depravity of man; the irresistibility of grace; the final perseverance of the saints. The Westminster Assembly (1643–1639) was the synod appointed by the English Parliament to reform the Church of England on Calvinist lines. It produced the Westminster Confession, which is still regarded today in the English-speaking world as the classic, conciliar statement of Presbyterian doctrine (1646). Presbyterian Churches round the world were linked through the World Presbyterian Alliance (1875), which since then has become the World Communion of Reformed Churches (2010).

Amongst the churches of the Reformation, Methodism is distinctive in its practice of conciliarity. It is governed by conferences in which ministers and laity play an equal part. Ministers are ordained at a conference by the laying on of hands. The President of the Conference is always a minister and the Vice-chair a lay person. Both positions are held for a strictly limited time. Some Methodist churches have bishops, but, as with the Lutherans, they do not represent a separate 'order'. There is no magisterium other than the Conference which may remit matters to local synods. As with the early church, Methodism is as much a movement as an institutional church. Methodists have often been

in the forefront of schemes of church union, such as the creation of the Church of South India (1947).

Overall, the conciliarity of Protestant churches, including Baptist and Pentecostal churches, has been rooted in an aversion to ‘top-down’ church authority. It has been based on a belief in the baptismal authority and the participation in the Holy Spirit of all believers. There has been a distinct role for scholarship, especially in the interpretation of scripture, and a willingness to recognize a similar commitment in other Protestant Christians. Members of Protestant (evangelical) churches were the driving force behind the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, which, after the terrible years of the First World War, led to the creation of conciliar institutions which eventually joined up to become the World Council of Churches (1948).

## **6.1 Conciliarity in Anglicanism**

With respect to ‘conciliarity’, Anglicanism has followed a distinctive path. When Pope Clement VII refused to annul the marriage of Henry VIII to Catherine of Aragon, Thomas Cranmer was one of the King’s envoys who consulted other possible sources of authority, especially teachers of Theology and Canon Law in the universities. The by-no-means unanimous response from these various sources strengthened Cranmer’s conviction that the Pope’s decision could and should be challenged. As Archbishop of Canterbury from 1533, he seriously doubted that the Pope would ever call a council which would freely address the need for reform in the Church. Alongside Thomas Cromwell, the King’s Chief Minister, Cranmer made Parliament, in which the bishops sat and the educated laity were widely represented, the instrument of that reform in England. Parliament was a national, conciliar body, but for Cranmer there was also an urgent need that the leaders of the Reformation across Europe should communicate with one another, to avoid new disagreements over doctrinal matters like the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Cranmer never lost his belief in the importance of general councils for the good of the church. MacCulloch writes:

Perhaps one might see this reverence for the authority of the General Council as the golden thread which runs through Cranmer’s theological progress: the one constant to which he always returned, even when in later years his appeal for a General Council was addressed to Wittenberg, Zürich and Geneva rather than to Rome, and was conceived as a defence against the Council of Trent. (MacCulloch 1996: 29)

The historic role of the monarchical state in disengagement from Rome, and the reform of the church in accord with scripture, tradition, and practical reason is part of the inheritance of what is now a worldwide Anglican Communion. Its magisterial exponent is Richard Hooker, whose ‘conciliar’ vision is based upon an account of the church as a body governed by laws, both divine and human. The conduct of church councils should be

in accord with such laws. In the making of ecclesiastical laws, Hooker looks for the participation of the laity as well as clergy. He holds it 'a thing most consonant with equity and reason, that no ecclesiastical law be made in a Christian commonwealth, without consent as well of the laity as of the clergy, but least of all without consent of the highest power' (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* VIII.vi.8; Hooker 1841). Hooker looks for a reasoned consensus, guided by scripture and tradition, in the affairs of the Church. All the formative Anglican theologians, such as John Jewel, Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes, would agree with the later summary of Jeremy Taylor that, '[t]he Church of England receives the four first Generals [General Councils] as of highest regard, not that they are infallible, but that they have determined wisely and holily' (More and Cross 1935: 162). Hooker's contemporary, Richard Field, however, notes that '[t]here are but Seven General Councils that the whole Church acknowledgeth called to determine faith and manners' (More and Cross 1935: 142–155). Some 'catholic' Anglicans, like Field, follow the consensus of the undivided church of the first millennium by recognizing seven ecumenical councils.

The Anglican Communion may, then, be seen as conciliar in inspiration. Anglicans claim to be 'part' of the one, holy, catholic church. The distinctive tenets of Anglicanism are set out in the (Thirty-Nine) Articles of Religion (final version, 1571), though not all have in practice today equal force. They affirm robustly that 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation' (VI) and on that basis maintain that '[a]s the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also on matters of Faith' (XIX). The Articles, in reaction to the claim of Trent to stand in the tradition of 'ecumenical' councils, prefers to speak only about 'general councils' of the church:

General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of Princes. And when they be gathered together (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God), they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared out of holy Scripture. (*Article XXI*; see 1662)

None of this precludes new insights into the consonance of past, present, or future church teaching with scripture. In practice, it has opened, rather than foreclosed, debates about the identity of Christianity.

Guided by the four points of the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' (1888), Anglicans recognize the authentic church life of other churches which acknowledge the authority of the same scriptures, celebrate the same dominical sacraments (baptism and Eucharist), recite the same creeds (Apostles' and Nicene-Constantinopolitan), and maintain the 'historic episcopate' with local adaptation. It sees in these four points a possible basis for the sharing of eucharistic communion. It is this quest for a wider unity amongst Christian

churches which has led Anglicans to play a prominent part in the conciliar assemblies and initiatives of the ecumenical movement, especially in ecumenical dialogues.

The 'open' identity of Anglicanism is sustained by a conviction that this is in accord with the conciliarity of the early church. It springs from a conviction that the Holy Spirit continues – through conciliar processes – to guide the church into all truth (John 16:13) and that the identity of the church rests in a communion which embraces genuine diversity. There is no ongoing international magisterium to prescribe the limits to diversity, so the unity of Anglicans at the international and regional (provincial), and, to some extent, local levels must be sustained by common liturgical norms, a shared recognition of the limits to diversity and the demands of mutual deference implicit in communion. When Christians live and worship in such different situations worldwide, questions raised by mission and the demands of fidelity to the gospel can appear in a very different light in different parts of the world. The maintenance of internal unity at every level of church life from the parish to the Communion as a whole is a continuing challenge.

Anglicans speak of four Instruments of Communion which between them have the task of sustaining unity through conciliar means. They are: (1) the Archbishop of Canterbury who has considerable powers of jurisdiction in England but amongst his fellow-primates (presiding bishops) is *primus inter pares* (first among equals); (2) the Lambeth Conference, which has been held approximately every ten years since 1867 – this is a consultative body to which all the bishops of the Anglican Communion are invited; (3) the Anglican Consultative Council, which meets about every three years – this has representation (bishops, priests, and lay people) from all the provinces of the Anglican Communion; (4) the Primates' Meeting, which from time to time brings together the primates of the provinces in the Anglican Communion. None of these instruments has powers of compulsion over the provinces of the Anglican Communion – other than that of exclusion from representative bodies.

Anglican practice of 'dispersed' authority relates closely to Anglican understanding of conciliarity. This is set out in *The Virginia Report* of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission (1997), which was welcomed at the 1998 Lambeth Conference with a call for a decade of study of the issues it raised. It is also developed in dialogue with Catholicism in the Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), *Walking Together on the Way* (2017).

It remains to be seen to what extent the currently divisive questions about the ordination of women as priests and bishops (now practised in much of the Anglican Communion) and about homosexuality (in particular, same-sex marriage) can be resolved in a conciliar manner, and to what extent current tensions will continue to threaten the unity of the whole Anglican Communion. Referring to tensions over the ordination of women, the Lambeth

Conference of 1998 spoke of an 'ongoing, open process of reception' (Resolutions III.2 and 4; 1998). In its attempt to face difficult contemporary issues in a conciliar manner, Anglicans are aware that other communions are wrestling with the same issues whilst often interpreting the demands of conciliar unity in very different ways.

## **7 The World Council of Churches and conciliarity**

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in 1948 as '[a] fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour' (Lossky et al. 2002: 1225, 1238). It was formed by bringing together two existing ecumenical movements, 'Life and Work', which was inaugurated with a major conference in Stockholm in 1925, and 'Faith and Order', which was inaugurated in Lausanne in 1927. The International Missionary Council, a product of the great Edinburgh Conference of 1910, was associated with the WCC in 1948, and then fully integrated in 1961. In that year also, the definition of the WCC was amended to its being '[a] fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (Lossky et al. 2002: 1239). From the beginning, a number of Orthodox Churches joined and, in 1965, shortly before the ending of the Second Vatican Council, a Joint Working Group of the Vatican and the WCC was set up. In 1968, the Roman Catholic Church became a full member of the Faith and Order Commission, but not of the WCC.

From the beginning, the World Council of Churches has served the goal of church unity in a conciliar manner. As a 'fellowship of churches', it promotes dialogue and exchange amongst its member churches, common action and shared witness, but there is no central authority with powers of compulsion over member churches. A major theme for the WCC has been reflection on the nature of 'conciliarity' and conciliar unity (Lossky et al. 2002: 235–236, 1170–1175). In response to concerns expressed by Orthodox members, decisions are taken as far as possible by achieving consensus.

The WCC Faith and Order Commission has fostered two remarkable multi-lateral studies which may themselves be seen as uniquely successful exercises in conciliarity. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), a 'convergence' document, was the fruit of prolonged study which in its turn produced a wide range of responses on these issues from churches round the world. Similarly important, and also using a 'convergence' method, was *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), to which there has been a similarly wide range of responses. The Faith and Order Commission has published four substantial volumes of documents from bilateral and multilateral dialogues entitled *Growth in Agreement* (1984; 2000; 2008; 2016–2017). These provide a unique resource for the study of ecumenical convergence. The assemblies of the WCC, which are its most authoritative gatherings, take place every seven or eight years. Through a lengthy process of discussion and

review, the WCC came to understand itself as a ‘conciliar fellowship’ of churches, working together in the service of visible unity. The conciliar unity of the Church was summed up at the Fifth General Assembly in Nairobi (1975) in this way:

The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith, and, therefore, recognizes the others as belonging to the same church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit. [...] Each church aims at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfilment of their common calling. (World Council of Churches 1975: 60)

Thus, ‘conciliar fellowship was conceived as manifesting both the “nature” and the “vision” of the unity that the churches are striving for’ (Keshishian 1992: 21). The reports of the WCC Assemblies, together with a growing list of over 200 Faith and Order Papers, are a major resource for conciliar reflection – most of which is available online through the WCC website ([www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org)).

The WCC is now well over seventy years old. It has 350 member churches from every part of the world, including Orthodox and Anglican churches, churches of the Reformation, and a wide range of Independent and Pentecostal churches. It represents a unique fellowship in which churches not only work and worship together but in which the explicit aim, as affirmed by the Harare Assembly (1998), continues to be: ‘to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ [...] and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe’. The diversity of its membership, together with the range of political and religious situations in which they are situated, has made the practice of conciliarity at times extremely difficult for the WCC. There is, however, no other umbrella organization of Christian churches of similar breadth and influence, and its continuing existence represents a sign of conciliar hope for all the churches.

## **8 Conclusion: conciliarity, conversation, and consensus**

The challenge of conciliarity for the church is that of maintaining in ever-changing situations the unity that its members already have through ‘the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit’. When conflicts over doctrine and ethics arise, the temptation for the church is to fall back on tried and tested solutions rather than embrace the possibility that the path of obedience to the gospel and to the Spirit may be the path of change. This was the issue that Newman addressed in his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (1845), where he famously wrote: ‘In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below to live is to change; and to be perfect is to have changed often’ (Newman 1974: 100). Newman used the word

'development' to explain the kind of change he had in mind: growth and renewal whilst remaining faithful to what must always remain the same, because it has been revealed by God. The 'conciliar' nature of this development was made clear by Newman when, in *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859), he talked about the *sensus* and the *consensus fidelium*: the intuition for the truth shared amongst the body of believers, both clergy and laity. He praised the widespread consultation of the laity regarding discussion of the definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, maintaining that:

Each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected. Though the laity be but the reflection or echo of the clergy in matters of faith, yet there is something in the '*pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*,' which is not in the pastors alone. (Newman 1859)

By affirming the consultation of the laity on a matter of doctrine, Newman showed not only the inalienable place of all of the baptized in the life of the Church, but the conciliar ideal of *consensus* amongst clergy and laity in discerning Christian truth. Such were the insights that led to Newman being called 'the Father of the Second Vatican Council'.

The earliest Christians believed that the unity of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the unity of those who participate in the life of the Holy Trinity through baptism and the Eucharist, has been revealed in Christ (cf. Eph 4:3–6). The unity of the church is thus a given – which on earth exists under constant threat. The response of the early church to that threat was the response of conciliarity: of overlapping communication of all sorts between local churches and Christians – through visits, through letters, through prayers for one another, especially at the Eucharist, through the 'solidarity' (Cyprian) of the bishops, through councils. The life of the church may be seen from the perspective of the 'higher world' as a continuing communion (*koinonia*) and from the perspective of life 'here below' as a continuing exercise in communication. Both are facets of conciliarity.

Clearly, the councils of the church at every level are exercises in communication, and they are much influenced by contemporary political practice – but in no society, whether democratic or not, are they exercises in representative democracy. Their nature is eucharistic, not parliamentary. When they meet, they draw on the ongoing worship and debates within the churches. This worship and debate is continued within the formal setting of the council as the participants together seek to 'listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches' (cf. Rev 1:7; 2:11 etc) and so to find unanimity (*consensus*). The outcome of conciliar deliberation is then offered to the churches in the hope that they will recognize in the conciliar proposal a clarifying development of some aspect of the faith they already hold (cf. Acts 15:31).

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, Hans Küng provocatively suggested that the word 'council', which expresses a 'calling together', is a way of speaking about the

identity of the church as *'ek-klēsia'*, called by God (Küng 1964: 9–15). Whilst it is an overstatement to see the church as a whole as a 'council' (councils are discrete gatherings of Christians), it makes sense to see the life of the church as a continual conversation (not least because of the link between the Latin root of 'conversation' and 'conversion'). In the 'conversation' that is the life of the church, its members together seek a deeper 'conversion' to the way of Christ. An understanding of the life of the church as a continuing, many-sided conversation accords with understandings of revelation which focus on dialogue: on the invitation by God which draws human beings into dialogue with their Creator. This dialogue is further developed in the ministry of Jesus ('Who do you say that I am? [...] You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' [Matt 16:15–16]) and in the conversation of the earliest Christians as they seek to walk in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Luke 24:14–15). This, the earliest Christians had to learn, is an open conversation into which 'disciples from all nations' (Matt 28:18) are to be drawn. In the Spirit-given ability of the church patiently to sustain this conversation until a consensus emerges lies the essence of the church's conciliarity.

## **Attributions**

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