

The Role and Authority of the Papacy in the Church of Christ: Some Questions and Answers

by Father Steven Tsichlis

Dear Eric,

Thank you for your recent letter. I will try to answer your questions as clearly and briefly as possible. Thank you for dividing them up along the lines of biblical, historical, theological and practical concerns. This gives me a clear structure to follow.

Biblical and Historical Concerns

Question: *Based upon Biblical evidence, Peter seems to have been given a fairly central if not primary place among the apostles. I am sure you know the relevant passages, but it does seem a bit difficult to surmount Matthew 16:13-19. The arguments that I've heard from Protestants and Orthodox that the Rock is Peter's confession, but not also Peter himself seems specious because, in the Hebrew mind, it would be unintelligible to separate St. Peter's word and confession from who Peter is. It appears to be quite eisegetical to say that there is no association with Peter's confession as the rock and St. Peter as the Rock. But going beyond the Bible, there is the universal regard in the early church for the status of Rome as the see of St. Peter, to which preferred honor should be given before other churches, and that for many – if not all – the church fathers, the church at Rome presided over all the other churches. As St. Gregory the Theologian noted, Rome is the "president of all the churches."*

Answer: Orthodox Christians have no difficulty in agreeing with Roman Catholics that the Apostle Peter “has been given a fairly central if not primary place among the apostles.” To my knowledge, this has never been a matter for dispute either historically or at the present time. And the Eastern Church has always recognized the *authority* of the Roman see, but has never understood this in terms of absolute *power*, especially as this is currently understood in Roman Catholicism, with the dogma of papal infallibility and the practice of immediate ordinary jurisdiction.

Matthew 16:16b-19 has indeed become **the** text cited by the Roman Catholic Church as the Scriptural basis for the present authority of the papacy and this text, in Latin, adorns the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. However, in the exegesis of the Church Fathers and even medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas, surprisingly little attention was focused on this text for establishing the authority of the Roman see. And no serious exegete today, even among Roman Catholics, would assert that, in these verses, Peter is given the *potestas* to govern the other apostles.

Again, I can agree with you that the play on words is clear whether in Aramaic (probably the original language in which those words were spoken), the Greek of the New Testament or the Latin of the Vulgate. I do not believe that Orthodox Christians have historically *separated* Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ from the person of Peter himself. However, I do *not* believe it is inappropriate to *distinguish* the two and this has often been done by a great number of saints and Christian writers of the early centuries as well as during the medieval/Byzantine period. This is not at all "specious." For most patristic commentators on this text, it is Peter's faith, his *orthodoxy* if you will, that makes him the rock on which the Church can be established. This is the understanding of Origen in the 3rd century; and saints such as the Cappadocians, Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine in the 4th century. It is also the view of later writers in the East such as Symeon and Nilus Cabasilas, both of whom served as Archbishops of Thessaloniki, and Theophylact of Ochrid.

With regards to the interpretation of this or any other passage of the Scriptures, we would say that it is important to read the rest of the text. Do not forget that Peter goes from being "the rock" to "Satan" in only 5 verses because he refuses to accept a crucified Christ (Matthew 16:21-23). In fact, in a further play on words, Peter in this context is described by the Lord as a *skandalon*, a stumbling block, a rock that one trips over and falls. This is the ancient Greek word from which we get the modern English word *scandal* and, for most Protestants, is most famously used by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23, where he says that his preaching of "Christ crucified is a *skandalon* to the Jews." As a former Baptist pastor, you know that Christ crucified is at the heart of orthodoxy. When Peter's lack of understanding of Christ is at odds with the admittedly harsh reality of orthodoxy, he is "not on the side of God, but of men."

Years later, the apostle Paul, writing in Galatians, speaks *not* of a *single* "pillar" of the Church in Jerusalem, but of *three* pillars: James, Cephas and John (Galatians 2:9). Nor does Paul hesitate to oppose Peter "to his face" in Antioch, when the latter capitulates before the demand of Jewish Christians that he stop eating meals with Gentile Christians. According to Paul, Peter "acted insincerely" and "stood condemned" because he was "not walking a straight path in accordance with the truth of the Gospel" (Galatians 2:11-14). In this instance, the "orthodoxy" of Paul was necessary to correct the "lapse in orthodoxy" of Peter. Interestingly enough, the word I have translated as "walking a straight path" is in Greek "orthopothousin," the root of which is the same as "orthodoxy." In the Scriptures, orthodoxy is not merely "straight thinking" and "true worship," it is also living one's life faithfully, walking the straight path of the truth of the Gospel.

This brings up another important point. Historically, in our eyes, the prestige of the Roman see was not due only to the "Petrine" character of this Church. It is significant that the first lists of the bishops of Rome date from 160-185AD and that they make Peter and Paul conjointly the founders of the Roman Church as they were both martyred there. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the 3rd century, says of the Roman Church that it is "the great church, the best known of all the churches, founded and constituted by the two glorious apostles Peter and Paul." This is also confirmed at the beginning of the 4th

century by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*. The joint liturgical commemoration of the apostles Peter and Paul is attested to at Rome from the second half of the third century and is soon found in the East on June 29th where these “chorus leaders” and “princes” of the apostles were celebrated without opening the least rift between them and the college of the apostles as a whole, for June 30th was consecrated as the *synaxis* or “gathering” to celebrate the college of the Twelve. This remains how we do things to this day and we believe this is based on the Scriptural record. The Gospel does emphasize the place of Peter as first, but as first among the Twelve. The primacy of Peter does not exist in a vacuum but in a *collegium*, in the context of - and in communion with - the other apostles. “Simon and his companions” (Mark 1:36) we read; and “Peter stood up with the Eleven” or “Peter and the other apostles” (Acts 2:14, 37). Peter is indeed the first, or *protos*, but the *protos* does not stand alone. The word *protos* means the first in a series and is not the same as *arche*, the first cause or source, for that can only be Christ.

Finally, the primacy of the Roman see was never thought of – in the rest of the Christian world – as simply a matter of apostolic foundations. In the East, unlike the West where only Rome could claim apostolic roots, apostolic sees were so numerous that no particular authority could be established solely on the basis of tracing one’s see back to apostolic foundations. Logically, if having apostolic roots is the sole reason behind any kind of primacy, then primacy should belong first and foremost to Jerusalem. However, in addition to the principle of “apostolicity,” there was also what the late Roman Catholic scholar and priest Francis Dvornik has called “the principle of accommodation” to the governmental structures of the Roman Empire. It is a matter of historical fact that the Church, from the very first days of its existence, had conformed itself for the organization of its ecclesiastical administration to the political divisions of the Empire. This organizational principle was not contested by anyone and this form of ecclesiastical administration was sanctioned by the 4th and 6th canons of the 1st Ecumenical Council in 325AD. Rome’s primacy among the churches was based not merely on its apostolic foundations but also on its status as the capitol of the Roman Empire. When the throne of the emperor moves to Constantinople and Constantine’s city on the Bosphorus becomes the *de facto* capitol of the Empire, the status of the bishop of Constantinople begins to rise accordingly and is codified in the 3rd canon of the 2nd Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381 and later, not without controversy, in the 28th canon of the 4th Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451. By the 6th century, St. John the Faster adopted the title “ecumenical” patriarch and Justinian himself, in one of his edicts, refers to Constantinople –without qualification – as “head of all the churches.” This was, of course, protested by St. Gregory the Great in Rome as the height of arrogance, for no bishop, in his opinion, could claim authority over the entire *oikoumene*. He took instead the title “the servant of the servants of God,” which is still one of the titles borne by the pope to this day. And whatever their conflict with each other over titles, both Gregory the Great and John the Faster are remembered as saints today in *both* churches.

Unfortunately, this understanding of the ministry of the papacy held by Gregory the Great is a far cry from that held by his namesake, Gregory VII, only a few hundred years later. The *Dictatus Papae* assert that the Pope “alone is rightly to be called universal,” that he alone “can depose and reinstate bishops, depose emperors” and “may be judged by no one.” For Orthodox Christians, this is quite a leap, and a theologically and historically untenable one, at that.

There is obviously much more that can be said historically and although I hope I have answered at least some of your questions, not all of the issues dividing East and West over the role of the papacy in the Church have been touched upon by me here. For example, we have not talked about the Gregorian reforms, the forged *Donation of Constantine*, Innocent III, the Crusades and the sack of Constantinople in 1204AD, or the 1st Vatican Council. Innumerable volumes have been written about these questions. If you are interested in pursuing any more reading, you may wish to consult *Byzantium and the Roman Primacy* by Francis Dvornik; *The Primacy of Peter in the Orthodox Church* edited by John Meyendorff; *The Christian East and the Rise of the Papacy* by Aristedes Papadakis and John Meyendorff; and most recently, *You are Peter: an Orthodox Theologian’s Reflection on the Exercise of Papal Primacy* by Olivier Clement.

Question: *Is not the presiding nature of the Roman see evident in that the bishop of Rome continued the practice of holding church councils, while the Orthodox abandoned it after the schism? As an added note in relation to this, there are many instances where we find historic defections from the East to the West, thus creating a sizable number of Eastern Catholics of every nationality. The same cannot be said of the West toward the Eastern Orthodox.*

Answer: An Orthodox Christian can only be amazed by your assertion that “the presiding nature of this see is evident in that the bishop of Rome continued the practice of holding church councils, while the Orthodox abandoned it after the schism.” The fact that in the West the Roman see continued to hold councils that it deemed “ecumenical” long after the schism is, for us, all too typical of Roman Catholic amnesia, forgetting the other ancient patriarchates and the fact that the Roman see was initially just a *part* of what constituted the Christian *oikoumene*. Eventually, Rome came to identify itself as *Christianitas* in its entirety. We, at least, did not forget the West, and although conciliar activity has indeed continued in the East, no such councils have been called ecumenical precisely because, in my opinion, the Church of the West and the Roman see were not involved. Orthodox Christians were very heartened by the remark of the late Pope Paul VI in 1974, on the occasion of the 7th centenary of the failed union Council of Lyons, that a clear distinction could be made between the seven ecumenical councils held in common by East and West during the first millennium and the “general councils” convoked after the separation and which are “valid” only for the West. Of course, what these remarks might mean for the dogma of papal infallibility that was pronounced at the 1st Vatican Council is not clear nor, to my knowledge, has it ever been discussed at any official level.

You also mention “the many instances where we find historic defections from the East to the West” and state that “the same cannot be said” of defections from the West to the East. Without going into a long dissertation on the subject of the *Unia* and its origins in various countries over the centuries, the fact remains that there have occasionally been “defections” (not an appropriate term in my opinion) from the West to the East. For instance, at the turn of the last century, after Father Alexis Toth, a widowed Eastern-rite Catholic priest, was rejected by the Latin-rite Archbishop of Minneapolis, John Ireland, he led a movement that culminated in 100,000 Uniate Carpatho-Russians returning to the Orthodox Church by 1917. Fortunately, the very idea of uniatism has been renounced by the Roman Catholic Church. With the signing of the Balamand agreement in 1993, the Roman Catholic Church has renounced uniatism as a failed method of reuniting our two Churches.

Theological Concerns

Question: *Surprisingly, I have come across notable Orthodox authors who have said that the issue of papal primacy cannot be resolved historically (in part because of the incongruent historical data), but must be decided on theological grounds.*

Answer: I do not know who these “notable Orthodox authors” are, who have told you that “the issue of papal primacy cannot be resolved historically....but must be decided on theological grounds,” but I would disagree with them. This question must be looked at both historically and theologically. We worship an incarnate Lord and the Church is the ongoing reflection of that incarnation in human history. Theology and history are thus intertwined and I hope that what I’ve written above is both historically and theologically sound.

Question: *The Orthodox Churches historically lack a visible structural unity. However, Bishop John Zizioulas, through his appeal to early patristic literature, has made an interesting point about unity in relation to the Eucharist, where each individual bishop guarantees the unity of the church through the administration of the Lord's Supper. Following Christ's high priestly prayer, that the church should be one as the Triune God is one, Bishop John has noted that the church has always argued for the unity of the Godhead based upon the hypostasis of God the Father. Hence, each person of the Trinity proceeds from the Father and receives their hypostatic identity from Him. But the beginning, the (arche, aitia) of that unity is God the Father. I go into this extended discussion of Bishop John's patristic theology because I find in it one of the strongest arguments for Roman Catholicism. It would make sense that just as in the Being of God there is unity secured by the one Father, so also in the being of the church there is unity secured by one father – in this case, the Pope. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope does not hold all authority unto himself, but shares it with all the bishops. The authority most surely begins with the Pope, just as it does in God the Father; and as in the Godhead so also the Pope authorizes his own bishops and priests to share in his authority without divesting himself of his own primacy of honor. So the church of God, as in God Himself, is one in authority.*

Thank you for going into detail concerning your understanding of Metropolitan John Zizioulas' theology. Fortunately, I am familiar with his theology and with him. Unfortunately, I can assure you that you have misread him and that he would be, to say the least, quite surprised to learn that anyone would use his theology of communion to justify the current structures of the papacy within Roman Catholicism. Metropolitan Zizioulas states in *Being and Communion*: "That Orthodoxy does not have a Pope is in fact true" and that the dichotomy often drawn between the local and the universal in the Church's life "is transcended in the eucharist" in a synthesis of Christology and Pneumatology, history and eschatology. No Orthodox Christian – and certainly not Metropolitan John Zizioulas – would ever state that the Pope is the *arche* or *source* of the entire episcopacy in the Church just as the Father is the *arche* of the Son and the Spirit as you do. The source of the Church's life and structure is Christ and the Holy Spirit – not the papacy. In fact, Metropolitan Zizioulas has stated quite clearly that he sees no other structure of grace in the Church than the episcopacy and further, all bishops as ontologically equal. The rest – the various primacies – are the products of history, which is why for us primacy should always be defined theologically in accordance with the 34th canon of the apostles as a *primus inter pares* or a primacy among equals. This rules out, among other things, immediate ordinary jurisdiction.

My sense in all this is that you are desperate to have not so much a "primacy" within the Church but an intellectual "authority" of some kind, some kind of infallible guide to Christianity that will never fail to provide you with *the* answer you feel you need at any given moment. This comes through clearly in all your questions and particularly in your last section. To an Orthodox Christian this seems to be *the* Western question. Since the Reformation in the 16th century, Roman Catholics and Protestant Christians of various kinds have been torn between competing authorities: on the one hand, an infallible pope and magisterium; and on the other, an infallible Bible ("in the original autographs," some would add). Clearly, neither has worked historically. The simple fact is that the authority of the pope could not prevent the Western Schism and Babylonian Captivity of the papacy in Avignon; nor could it stem the tide of the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the dissolution of so much of Christianity in Western Europe. And an infallible Bible, left to be interpreted by anyone and everyone, has produced rampant denominationalism and ecclesiastical chaos within Protestantism.

Because you do want an external authority to provide you with the answers you're seeking, you will probably never be very happy with how Orthodox Christians understand such "authority." In his essay "On the Western Confessions of Faith," the 19th century Russian theologian Alexis Khomiakov wrote, "The Church is an authority, said Guizot in one of his remarkable works, while one of his adversaries, attacking him, simply repeated these words. Speaking in this way, neither one suspected how much untruth and blasphemy lay in the statement....No – the Church is not an authority and Christ is not an authority since authority is something external to us."

Nor will you probably be happy with the teaching of one of my fathers in the faith, but I believe he accurately describes how we as Orthodox Christians view the nature of

theology and the need for external criteria. The late Father John Meyendorff, writing in *Byzantine Theology*, says: “Knowledge of God is not merely an intellectual process, but also a spiritual purification (*katharsis*) which discards all forms of identifying God with that which is not God – i.e., all idolatry. Byzantium never knew any conflict, not even a polarization, between theology and what the West calls mysticism. Theology, therefore, may and should be based on Scripture, the doctrinal decisions of the councils and the witness of the saints. But to be a true theology, it must reach beyond the letter of Scripture, beyond the formulae used in definitions, beyond the language employed by the saints to communicate their experience. For only then will it be able to discern the unity of Revelation, a unity which is not simply an intellectual coherence and consistency, but a living reality experienced in the continuity of the one Church throughout the ages. *The Holy Spirit is the only guarantor and guardian of this continuity. No external criterion which would be required for man’s created perception or intellection would be sufficient.* Because the concept of *theologia* in Byzantium, as with the Cappadocian fathers, was inseparable from *theoria* (contemplation), theology could not be – as it was in the West – a rational deduction from “revealed” premises i.e., from statements of Scripture or from the statements of an ecclesiastical *magisterium*; rather, it was a vision experienced by the saints. The true theologian was the one who saw and experienced the content of his theology; and this experience was considered to belong not to the intellect alone but to the “eyes of the Spirit” which place the whole person – intellect, emotions and even senses – in contact with the divine existence.”

The Holy Spirit is the only guarantor of the Truth who is Christ. It is as simple and as frightening as that. The late Father Alexander Schmemmann wrote, “The proper role of the Holy Spirit is to connect and unite, not by a form of “objective” link, but by revealing and manifesting the *interiority* of all that exists, by restoring and transforming the “object” into the “subject” (the *it* into a *thou*, in the terms of Martin Buber). And He does it not from the outside as a “sanction” or a “guarantee,” not as “authority,” but from the “inside” for He Himself is the “interiority” of all that exists, the life of life, the gift of Being.”

Practical Concerns

Question: *In such vital matters as the proper administration of the sacraments, tradition and relating to other church entities, different episcopacies within the Orthodox churches have different economies in how they administer the sacraments to different groups. One bishop may recognize the Armenians, receive their clergy without Chrismation and give them the Lord's Supper if they attend an Orthodox Church. Another bishop may feel that the Catholics are no longer excommunicated and may seek fellowship with them, while another may receive Catholic priests through vesting and not chrismation. Still another bishop may reject all of this, while authorizing a Latin rite, to which the others take grave exception. I do not know by what authority any of this is permissible. There is clearly not a united front in such vital matters. The Catholic Church is definitive on all of this.*

Answer: I agree with you that “there is not a united front” concerning Orthodox pastoral practice on a variety of different issues concerning the administration of the sacraments, ranging from “authorizing a Latin rite” (to which I do indeed take “grave exception”) to the reception of other Christians into the life of the Church. But this is part and parcel of the Church’s “give and take” throughout history as the imperfect and sinful human beings within her struggle to live “in Christ,” as the apostle Paul says.

However, I do not believe the Roman Catholic Church has been as "definitive" on its pastoral practice through the centuries as you seem to think. Haven't pastoral questions been answered in different ways at different times in the Roman Catholic Church as well? For example, Orthodox Christians were "rather frequently" re-baptized by Roman Catholics during the Middle Ages, according to an agreed statement on baptism put out by the North American Orthodox/Catholic Theological Consultation in 1999. The document goes on to say that it was Pope Alexander VI who "affirmed the validity of Orthodox baptism just after the turn of the 16th century." Although the re-baptism of Orthodox Christians continued even afterwards, in Catholic Poland and the Balkans – "contrary" to Vatican policy – this has certainly ceased since Vatican II. Another example of a change in moral theology and pastoral practice through the centuries is the question of usury, the charging of interest on loans: during the Middle Ages, this was a grievous sin. This is no longer the case today and hasn't been the case for centuries. Or, on a more practical level, and in the recent memory of many people: the elimination of fasting on Friday for Roman Catholics following Vatican II, something that caused much confusion and even dismay at the pastoral level during the 60's and 70's.

Sunday, September 12th

How happy I was to have lunch with you today! Talking face-to-face is always best! It is far better, far more personal than the anonymity of e-mail. It is in our relationships with one another that we discover the face of God!

Let me see if I can continue to answer your questions listed under Practical Concerns.

Question: *Some Orthodox think there is a big “T” Tradition, which is something different than the little “t” tradition. Other Orthodox Christians reject this distinction completely. Which is it? The Roman Catholic Church has made a distinction between what is essential and what is not for centuries. It is not left open to every layperson's interpretation.*

Answer: I believe we discussed this a little bit this past Sunday. Perhaps a better way to put this distinction would be to speak of *the* Tradition of the Church and those things that are merely customs, whether cultural and/or historical accretions. On Sunday, I used the example of the conical hat that Orthodox clergy in Greece wear. This is certainly an accretion, based on the Turkish *fez*, and historically, the result of Muslim conquest and

occupation following the fall of Constantinople in 1453. St. Nektarios of Pentapolis, who died in 1920, wore one; St. John Chrysostom, living more than 200 years before the birth of Islam, did not. Is the wearing of the *kalymafki* by the clergy of Greece to be considered a part of *the* Tradition of the Church, that Tradition which the late Vladimir Lossky defined as “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church”? Is the wearing of the *kalymafki* to be understood as a formal criterion of Orthodoxy? Is it on a par with the Scriptures, the decrees of the 7 ecumenical councils and the icons? Is St. Nektarios more *Orthodox* than St. John Chrysostom because he wore a *kalymafki*? Of course, the answer to all of these questions is an unqualified “No!”

Question: *The position of other "Christians" who are not Orthodox is unclear. Some say that there are Christians who are not Orthodox; others say there are not. Some Orthodox Christians say that ecumenism is a heresy; others say that it is a blessing. The Roman Catholic Church speaks regularly about ecumenical matters. The Orthodox Church seems to have no definitive answer, but the Catholics do.*

Answer: I do not know of any Orthodox Patriarchate or local Church that has said that “ecumenism is a heresy” or that there are no other Christians. To my knowledge, the only group claiming to be Orthodox that has said such a thing is ROCOR, the so-called Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, a tiny group that at this point in their history is simply in schism from the Church. Created as a result of the confusion in Church life following the Bolshevik Revolution and persecution of the Church in Russia, ROCOR continues to declare itself to be the “real” Russian Orthodox Church more than a decade after the fall of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and now justifies its existence by its “resistance to the pan-heresy of ecumenism” as I once read on one of their websites. It is hoped that the bishops and people of ROCOR will repent, come to their senses and return to the communion of the Church. In fact, at the present time, there is grave division within ROCOR over precisely this issue, but progress is being made and some positive steps have been taken by ROCOR to return to the Moscow Patriarchate. And – it must be noted – the Moscow Patriarchate is a member of the World Council of Churches and regularly participates in ecumenical conferences and meetings with other Christians. However, to look to ROCOR as it is currently constituted, or any other such schismatic group, as a standard of what the Orthodox Church teaches, would be similar to looking at the post-Vatican II schism of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St. Pius X that he established as the standard of what Roman Catholicism teaches.

In the meantime, doing ecumenical work, with its many painful difficulties, allows Orthodox Christians to seek the unity of the Church of Christ on earth as the Lord commands in John’s Gospel and enables us to follow His example of engaging in dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well: a person who, according to Jewish tradition, was both a heretic and foreigner. And, as Father Thomas Hopko has pointed out, it also affords us “magnificent opportunities to witness to the truth, love our enemies, articulate our faith, turn the other cheek, pray and do good to those who misunderstand and even hate us, practice a ruthless and compassionate honesty both with ourselves and others, and to give good things to others without asking anything in return for ourselves or our Church.” And whatever doubts or temptations we may face in ecumenical settings,

all the Orthodox Churches continue to participate in ecumenical activity in one form or another.

As for the Roman Catholic Church having a “definitive answer” about “ecumenical matters,” please remember that it was *not* the policy of the Roman Catholic Church to engage other Christians in ecumenical dialogue at an official level *at all* until *after* Vatican II, which was truly a watershed event in Roman Catholic history. To give only one example: in the first half of the last century, the Roman Catholic Church, although invited, did not participate in the formation of the World Council of Churches, intended to be an international forum for dialogue among different Christians. On the other hand, as difficult as it has sometimes been, the Orthodox Church has long been a member of the WCC; the Roman Catholic Church is still not officially a member.

Question: *Some Orthodox Christians feel that because no council has decided the status of those Scriptures written in the Hebrew language, it is commendable to read the Old Testament in Hebrew. Others think that tradition has decided this point sufficiently and so reject the Hebrew Bible in favor of the Septuagint exclusively. Which is it? The Roman Catholic Church has spoken to this in council.*

Answer: With regards to the language of the Old Testament Scriptures, as I believe I’ve mentioned to you before, we agree that “it is commendable to read the Old Testament in Hebrew” and there is no canon or teaching of the Church that forbids this. How could this be forbidden when we have the example of St. Jerome in 4th century Bethlehem? Indeed, knowledge of Hebrew can often provide added insight to the study of a particular text and its meaning. Nevertheless, where the medieval Masoretic text differs significantly from the Septuagint (and here the most famous example is the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 cited at Matthew 1:23), for an Orthodox Christian, the weight of the Tradition falls on the side of preferring the Septuagint text, the text used by and large by the authors of the New Testament and the Church of the early centuries.

You keep saying, “The Catholic Church is definitive on all this” or “The Catholic Church has spoken to this in council,” as if all major questions within Catholicism have been settled once and for all. I do not believe that everything has been settled once and for all, even in Roman Catholicism and I know of few Roman Catholics who believe this to be so. On the other hand, there is a definite sense in which the Roman Catholic Church has pronounced on this or that topic in ways that we as Orthodox Christians have never had to do. We have had a very different history. To give the most obvious example: we have not experienced a Reformation. Therefore, we had no need for a Council of Trent. Furthermore, we have a more *apophatic* approach to the doing of theology than is found in any western confession, including Roman Catholicism. And, truth to be told, while we Orthodox Christians perhaps do not speak clearly or often enough about some issues, we often think that the Roman Catholic hierarchy has spoken and defined *too much*. In our opinion, the Christian world would all be much better off if Pope Pius IX had never “infallibly” defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Apart from whether it is right or wrong (and we Orthodox certainly think it is wrong), it was simply *unnecessary*.

Question: *Jesus prayed for the unity of the Church! Looking from the outside, it does not appear that the Orthodox really care about the unity of the Church! I thought it was bad enough with 9 overlapping jurisdictions in America! How can I know that the Father truly sent His Son to form the Orthodox Church if the unity He prayed for does not exist?*

Answer: Even as one looking at things from the inside, I can wholeheartedly agree. We are terribly divided along ethnic lines, with each ancient patriarchate wanting a piece of the American pie, something that has led to jurisdictional chaos on this continent and others. Here, we Orthodox Christians must be ruthlessly critical of both ourselves and our leaders. Our divisions in America along jurisdictional lines are sinful, stupid and wrong. In that sense, we are like the ancient Church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). We are the New Testament Church of Christ on earth, but it's the faith that's true – not us. We are full of sin and our sinfulness tears at the Body of Christ.

But let me ask you: have there not been in the past and are there not now sins of disunity within the Roman Catholic world? What about the 39 anti-popes throughout the first 1500 years of papal history, at least one of whom - the early 3rd century martyr Hippolytus - is remembered as a saint in both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches? What about the Western Schism (1378-1417), during which there were as many as three popes at the same time? What about the Reformation itself? What about the 19th century schism of the Old Catholics, who rejected the dogma of papal infallibility after Vatican I; and the schism of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St. Pius X, who have rejected the teachings of Vatican II? After all, even the most beloved saints of history, like the apostles Peter and Paul, were not entirely perfect. The Church is like a hospital and we come to it sick with sin. The more we receive the faith and practice it, the more we are changed. We are never perfect, but at least we're better than we would be without it. Of course, it's an unfortunate fact that not everyone in the hospital takes his medicine.

Question: *How would I (or even you) know that the answers which you provide are authoritatively Orthodox? Even if I like your answers, how would I know it is truly pleasing to God and bespeaks the voice of the whole Church? I would hate to be on the wrong end of history (or eternity).*

Answer: I know that my answers are authoritatively Orthodox! The question for you is *not* whether you “like” my answers or not but whether they resonate with the Truth. And to discern this, you must allow the Holy Spirit the necessary room in your mind and heart. It is only in the Holy Spirit that you are betrothed to Christ. The Holy Spirit is *not* an abstraction! After all, if I were a Roman Catholic priest, how would you know if my answers “bespeak the voice of the whole Church”? If, for example, you had lived at the time of the apostles, would you have chosen the side of Peter or Paul in their conflict over whether or not Gentiles entering Christianity must keep the Law of Moses? In the 6th century, during the Monothelite controversy, would you have chosen the side of the lowly monk, Maximos the Confessor, who is now remembered as a saint in both the

Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches? Or would you have chosen the side of the posthumously excommunicated bishops, Pope Honorius of Rome and Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople? These are difficult questions and none of us can evade our personal responsibility for the decisions we make. However, having said all that, it is quite possible to be outside the canonical boundaries of the Church taken as an organization, “work out your own salvation in fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12) and still be a saint. Perhaps the most famous example of this in the Orthodox tradition is St. Isaac of Ninevah, almost certainly a hermit in the Nestorian or Assyrian Church of the East in the 7th century. Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo taught doctrines that have not found acceptance in either the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Churches, yet they are remembered as saints in both. It is possible to be on the “wrong end” of *some* things and still make it into the Kingdom.

This is enough for me to say in writing. I believe that any further dialogue after this needs to take place face to face. I am happy to meet with you and your wife again and discuss any questions you may have. You need only call the parish office and set up an appointment for us to do so.

God keep you!

Father Steve

A Post Script: The thought has occurred to me that, with regards to the role and function of the papacy in the Christian Church, I should mention not only what Orthodox Christians cannot accept – the dogma of papal infallibility, immediate ordinary jurisdiction and the like – but should, more positively, tell you what we would accept as a foundation for a reunited Church. This is nowhere stated more clearly and succinctly than in Bishop Kallistos Ware’s *The Orthodox Church*: "Orthodoxy recognizes that, in the early centuries of the Church, Rome was pre-eminent in its steadfast witness to the true faith; but we do not believe that, in his teaching ministry, the pope possesses a special charisma or gift of grace that is not granted to his fellow bishops. We recognize him as first – but only as first among equals. He is the elder brother, not the supreme ruler. So, let us ask, in positive terms, what the nature of papal primacy is from an Orthodox viewpoint. Surely we Orthodox should be willing to assign to the pope, in a reunited Christendom, not just an honorary seniority but an all-embracing apostolic care. We should be willing to assign him the right, not only to accept appeals from the whole Christian world, but even to take initiative in seeking ways of healing when crisis and conflict arise anywhere among Christians. We envisage that on such occasions the pope would act, not in isolation, but in close cooperation with his brother bishops. We would wish to see his ministry spelt out in pastoral rather than juridical terms. He would encourage rather than compel; consult rather than coerce."