

# The Canonical Structure, Ecclesial Practice and Ecclesiological Interpretation of Synodality in the Russian Orthodox Church

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## ‘Multi-synodality’ in the Russian Orthodox Church

In the brief time that I have available to speak about the conciliar structure of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is unique in contemporary Orthodoxy for being the Local Church with, by far and away, the largest episcopacy in terms of the sheer number of Bishops (by a recent count, somewhere in the vicinity of 368 or so<sup>1</sup>) — meaning that a clear conciliar apparatus is critical in terms of our own self-organisation and administration — I wish to draw special attention to one of the elements of our internal, conciliar life that I feel is a distinguishing feature and is somewhat unique amongst the Local Churches: namely, our system of what we might call *multi-synodality*, or the coexistence and interaction of multiple synods. This is the result of the structural organisation of the Russian Orthodox Church as a single Patriarchate comprising a multiplicity of Autonomous Churches (namely, the Chinese and Japanese Orthodox Churches) as well as Self-Governing Churches (more on these in a moment). This is a characteristic shared in a widespread way perhaps only with the Ecumenical Patriarchate; though so far as I am aware the Ecumenical Patriarchate does not have a formal distinction between Autonomous (автономные) and Self-Governing (самоуправляемые) Churches within its fold<sup>2</sup>. Within this organisational framework, our Church includes one distinction of structure that is particularly noteworthy: that between the Patriarchate of Moscow *sui generis*, and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). As this year marks the tenth anniversary of the signing of the ‘Act of Canonical Communion’, which brought to an end nearly a century of internal fracture occasioned by the Bolshevik revolution, it seems especially pertinent to note it today. The signing of the Act, which we consider to be the working of God’s mercy and beneficence, has restored full fraternal unity within the Russian Orthodox Church; and it also further manifests the multi-synodal conciliarity of the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole.

## Historical Development

The historical development of conciliarity in the structure of Russian Orthodoxy is simply too vast a subject to treat at all well in the time we have available today, if indeed we are to direct adequate attention to aspects of its ‘lived practice’ that are more pertinent to our immediate interests in this conference. Perhaps it suffices to say that, as is the case with

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<sup>1</sup> This is an informal count; the actual number changes regularly with the routine consecration of new hierarchs.

<sup>2</sup> Such as is articulated in the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church (2013), 10, 11. More on this document is found in what follows.

most of the Local Orthodox Churches, the conciliar administration and governance of the Russian Orthodox Church developed as a lived expression of the order standardised in the ecumenical and local councils of the first millennium. While there are of course developments of praxis that date into the second, and now even third millennia since Christ's incarnation, it cannot be said that any of these significantly modifies standards that were set in the first.

Therefore the essential ecclesial and conciliar structures spelled out in canons that are well known to all, continue to provide the basis of, and serve as the chief documents for, the fundamental organisation of ecclesial life in the Russian Orthodox Church. The basic 'unit' of that life as the parish, at which the Diocesan Bishop presides in full communion and administrative concert with all other Bishops of his territory, remains the essential building block even today. So, too, the ancient practices of defining a local Bishop's operative territory<sup>3</sup>; as well as those establishing the layered administrative organisation of regional dioceses, and the regular, as well as exceptional, conciliar gatherings of Bishops within them.<sup>4</sup> It is clear, in these Canons, that such regional councils are meant to maintain doctrinal unity as well as administrative clarity, and to address the overcoming of interpersonal as well as inter-regional issues in a pastoral and fraternal manner.

The same Canons articulate the famous principle of what has come to be known loosely as *primus inter pares*, or the 'first among equals' (though this is of course a later phrase, not enshrined in the Canons themselves), referring to an administrative hierarchy within regional — and, by extension, national and global — gatherings of Hierarchs. Thus we have the famous 34th Canon of the Holy Apostles, setting out that 'the Bishops of every nation [should] know the one among them who is the premier or chief, and recognise him as their head, and refrain from doing anything superfluous without his advice and approval'; as well as Canons such as the sixth of Nicaea I and the third of Constantinople I (amongst others<sup>5</sup>), which clearly set out a pattern of administrative primacy on regional grounds, connected to such things as the antiquity of sees and their accepted hierarchy within the ecclesiastical and political/Imperial sphere. These are maintained in the Russian Orthodox Church today, though with the constant proviso that such primacy is an exclusively administrative-pastoral institution of 'good order', and includes neither any element of doctrinal primacy or an autonomy of ecclesial oversight, self-possessed by any rank of the diptychs — including the first. This is maintained both internally (in that no Bishop, including the Patriarch, is perceived as self-possessing an autonomy of canonical authority) and externally (in the constant rejection of any claims of inter-Orthodox primacy including a dimension of one patriarchate possessing a mandate for 'maintaining the unity of the entire Orthodox Church'; but seeing it as a clear administrative primacy between primates themselves, and not between whole hierarchies).

## Implementation

This canonical history is formalised, in practical terms, in two documents that are constitutive of the actual governance of the Patriarchate of Moscow and of the ROCOR: the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Apostolic Canon 14; Canon 2 of the 2nd Ecumenical Council; Canons 10 and 17-19 of Antioch; Canon 3 of Sardica.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Apostolic Canon 37; Canon 19 of the 4th Ecumenical Council; Canon 6 of the 7th Ecumenical Council; Canons 9, 19 and 20 of Antioch; Canon 5 of Sardica; Canon 13 of Constantinopolitanum 861; Canon 23 of Carthage.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Canon 8 of the 3rd Ecumenical Council; Canon 28 of the 4th; Canon 36 of the 6th; etc.

**‘Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church’** (MP), adopted first in 1988 after the collapse of the atheistic, communist regime in Russia, and then modified in 1990, 1994, 2000, 2008, 2011, and most recently in 2013; and the **‘Regulations of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia’**, adopted in 1956 and confirmed in 1964 (and slightly modified in 2008 after the Act of Reconciliation)<sup>6</sup> — this Regulation being an expansion on the 1950 Charter of the ROCOR, which was itself a statutory clarification of the implications of Decree 362 of Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow (1920), which had initially provided the basis for the existence of the Church Abroad.

What is immediately notable from the mention of all these dates is the frequency of refinement of the Church’s statutory structures. Though grounded in ancient Canons and millennia-old practices and norms, the functional conciliar structure of the Russian Orthodox Church is always understood as a necessarily adaptive reality. It lives in history, and responds to the vicissitudes and needs of historical circumstance. Thus the patriarchal decree of St Tikhon established the formation abroad of ‘a higher instance of ecclesiastical authority’ for dioceses in conditions of being forcibly cut off from patriarchal oversight from Moscow<sup>7</sup>; thus the MP Statute of 1988 responded to the collapse of communism and the need for swift reestablishment of proper ecclesial order in lands where it had been oppressed for seven decades; and thus, too, did the Act of Reconciliation itself mandate a modification both to the MP Statute and the ROCOR Regulations as a result of the restoration of full canonical communion and administrative cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, abiding within these documents which can be and are modified as needs arise, an ancient structure is preserved. Both the Statute and the Regulations codify the fundamental hierarchy of organisation laid out in the Holy Canons, providing clear frameworks for its implementation in contemporary circumstance. Both envisage and demand the intrinsically conciliar nature of Church organisation: that the highest authority in the Church is the Council (envisaged in the ROCOR context as the universal Sobor, since its territories have historically been global and not tied to a specific geography; and in the MP as the Local Council, given its historical grounding in a clearly-defined territory with its dependencies abroad — two structures that now coexist in unity); that within this conciliar body there is both a personal primacy of pastoral and administrative care (in the the persons of the Patriarch of Moscow and the First Hierarch of the ROCOR), as well as a smaller ‘executive body’ of hierarchs able to carry out administrative and pastoral works in the periods between convocations of the whole Sobor (both the Statute and the Regulations stipulate the workings of a Holy Synod).

The equality between Bishops, in terms of the essential canonical definition of their Apostolic ministry and authority, is preserved precisely through the Church’s conciliar structure. The Bishop serves as head, chief celebrant and pastor of his flock, while at the same time remains inextricably bound to the brotherhood of all Bishops and the unity of the Church

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<sup>6</sup> Hereafter these two important documents, in their most recent forms, will be cited simply as ‘Statute’ and ‘Regulation’.

<sup>7</sup> Decree No. 362 of Patriarch St Tikhon, the Holy Synod and the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (20 / 7 November 1920), §2.

<sup>8</sup> See the ‘Addendum’ to the Act of Canonical Communion (2007), §1.

as a whole — as well as the integration of the Bishops themselves into structures that ensure their co-fraternity and prevent isolationism and schism, whether it be formal or informal.

While these systems are ‘personified’, as it were, in the offices of their First Hierarchs (and above all in the office of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia), those offices themselves exist explicitly for the purpose of ensuring the unity of the synodal system — and this, in light of our discussions here, seems of paramount importance to stress. It is the First Hierarch of the ROCOR that ‘convokes Sobors of Bishops and sessions of the Synods of Bishops,’<sup>9</sup> presides over the same,<sup>10</sup> and has in his charge ‘the general care for the well-being of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, both internally and externally’<sup>11</sup>; just as His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow, according to the Statute, ‘shall concern himself with the internal and external welfare of the Russian Orthodox Church and shall govern it together with the Holy Synod as its Chairman.’<sup>12</sup> In both cases, such governance is envisaged chiefly as being that of ensuring the properly synodal life of the Church, to which the First Hierarchs are themselves always accountable (the First Hierarch of the ROCOR, like the First Hierarch of the Church of Ukraine, being responsible for his self-governing flock, while the Patriarch of Moscow is responsible for his own flock within the Patriarchate, as well as also for the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole, in all her plenitude). ‘The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia shall have primacy in honour among the episcopate of the Russian Orthodox Church and shall be accountable to the Local and Bishops Councils’.<sup>13</sup> In this way the patriarchal office, in the establishment of its ‘primacy’, strives ‘to uphold the unity of the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church’<sup>14</sup> throughout all its territories and structures, his office and the authority of the Synod which he chairs being inextricably interconnected, both equally necessarily, but the latter of unequivocally higher canonical authority.<sup>15</sup>

Ensuring the proper operation of the Church’s highest administrative bodies — namely, the conciliar assemblies<sup>16</sup> — therefore constitutes the primate’s chief canonical responsibility. It remains the Local Council (comprised of the entire episcopacy, together with representatives of the clergy, monastics and laypeople<sup>17</sup>) that governs the Church in the highest instance and serves ‘as this expression of the doctrinal and canonical unity of the Russian Orthodox Church and has as its primary task to preserve it’<sup>18</sup>; and this conciliar identity is episcopally manifested in the more frequent session of the Bishops’ Council (comprised of all Hierarchs, and constituting the highest authority in doctrinal and canonical

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<sup>9</sup> Charter of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, 5(g).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 5(a).

<sup>11</sup> Regulation, 37(a).

<sup>12</sup> Statute, 4.4.

<sup>13</sup> Statute, 4.2.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 4.7(c).

<sup>15</sup> So, for example, the Local Council has in its power the election of the Patriarch (Statute 2.5[c]) as well as take decisions on granting autocephaly or autonomy (*ibid.*, 2.5[b]), which the Patriarch may not do in his own right. It also has the right of canonical censure of the Patriarch, or to determine his retirement, etc. (4.12, 13).

<sup>16</sup> So the Regulation of the ROCOR lists as the First Hierarch’s first responsibility, ‘being the Chairman of the Council and Synod’ (Regulation, 37; cf. 37[b, d]); and it is precisely in serving as the Chairman of the Holy Synod that the Statute of the MP describes the means by which the Patriarch ‘governs’ the Church (see again Statute 4.4; cf. 4.6, 7).

<sup>17</sup> Statute 2.3.

<sup>18</sup> Statute 2.5(a).

matters<sup>19</sup>), and more frequently still in executive operation as a collection of Holy Synods<sup>20</sup>. While in each of these 'tiers' there is an encapsulation of administrative and pastoral oversight in a smaller body (including in the person of the Patriarch, who serves in a sense as the personal executive of the Synod, as the Synod itself serves in a sense as the executive of the Sobor), such bodies (or individuals) are always beholden to and accountable to the Council as the chief voice of the Church. This structure effectively permits the possibility of much more regular synodal activity than relying exclusively on full councils would ever practically allow: while a full Local Council is called only on occasions of doctrinal or pastoral need, the Bishops' Council meets no less than once in four years (and in actual practice, nearly every other year<sup>21</sup>), while the Holy Synods generally meet multiple times throughout the year (oftentimes monthly), and the institution of an 'inter-council presence' (межсоборное присутствие) maintains the activities and works of the larger councils in the years between their formal meetings.<sup>22</sup>

One of the uniquenesses of the Russian Orthodox Church in our day is the manner in which this conciliar design permits the co-existence of fraternal equality and autonomy at a multi-synodal level, within a singular structure under the spiritual headship of the Patriarch of Moscow. The 2007 Act of Canonical Communion between the MP and the ROCOR, for example, established that 'The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia is independent in pastoral, educational, administrative, management, property and civil matters, existing at the same time in canonical unity with the Fulness of the Russian Orthodox Church'<sup>23</sup>; affirming 'the supreme ecclesiastical, legislative, administrative, judicial and controlling authority in the ROCOR' as 'her Council of Bishops, convened by her First Hierarch',<sup>24</sup> while establishing that the Bishops of the ROCOR are full members of the Local Council and Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole,<sup>25</sup> and that these are the highest organs of canonical authority for the singular, unified Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>26</sup> The updated Statute of the Patriarchate (2013) identifies the ROCOR as a Self-Governing part of the Russian Orthodox Church,<sup>27</sup> similar thus to the canonical Church of the Ukraine,<sup>28</sup> confirming the prerogatives of its own Holy Synod and Council (i.e. Sobor of Bishops of the ROCOR) and its own statutes,<sup>29</sup> while uniting the work of these autonomous entities to the unifying labours of the Patriarch of Moscow and the Synod of the Patriarchate, for the greater unity of the Church.<sup>30</sup> This includes liturgical unity, such that, for example the ROCOR and other Self-Governing Churches

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<sup>19</sup> See Statute 3.1.

<sup>20</sup> That of the MP consists of its Chairman, the Patriarch, together with nine permanent members and five rotating members (see Statute 5.3-5); that of the ROCOR is comprised of its Chairman, the First Hierarch, together with his two deputies and four regular members (see Regulation III.16).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Statute 2.1, 2; 3.3.

<sup>22</sup> See Statute, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Act, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Act, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Act, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Act, 9. Cf. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Statute, 11.17.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 11.18.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 11.3, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 11.4-9.

within the Russian Orthodox Church receive their holy chrism from the Patriarch, rather than fashion it themselves.<sup>31</sup>

## Relationship of conciliar structures to Church life

While it may seem to be the case that this multi-layered system of conciliar hierarchy is complex or confusing, in fact it allows for a remarkably flexible and pastoral response to the needs of the Church in the world and in history. Rather than impose a fully centralised system of magisterial rule upon the Church in all places, the Russian Orthodox Church's conciliar structure as a Patriarchate in which the Local Council embodies in its Patriarch the institutions of Bishops' Synod, Patriarchal Holy Synod, Autonomous Churches,<sup>32</sup> Self-Governing Churches (such as the ROCOR and Ukrainian Church) with their synods, and even Exarchates and broad Metropolitan Regions,<sup>33</sup> effectively permits the Russian Orthodox Church to fulfil her identity as 'a multinational Local Autocephalous Church in doctrinal unity and devotional and canonical communion with other Local Orthodox Churches,'<sup>34</sup> existing not only in the ancient territory of the Patriarchate but 'also [among] Orthodox Christians living in other countries'<sup>35</sup> who fall under her heritage and omofor (a scope that is not, as it is sometimes unfortunately characterised, grounded in ethnic identity, but in the heritage of spiritual formation that is the result of more than a millennium of mission by the Russian Orthodox Church throughout the world, as well as the changes in borders and nationalities over the span of the centuries, that have left the Church with a genuinely multi-national and multi-ethnic [as well as multi-linguistic] assembly of spiritual offspring, in the homeland as well as in her autonomous territories and throughout the diaspora).

As if in tacit acknowledgement that a fully-centralised administration that universally governs all places, and all situations, in fact *goes against* the ancient principle of locality that has always been central to the canonical identity of a Bishop with his city (i.e. with a specific place, a people, a culture), the Russian Orthodox Church's multi-layered synodality permits concrete unity while at the same time giving more than mere lip service to the diversity of needs of a Church that exists both in the homeland and in the diaspora. The self-governance of the ROCOR, like that of the Ukraine (and also Latvia, Moldova and Estonia), permits the history of life in disparate regions to be properly, fully and canonically met by structures tailored to (and arising out of) those places and their needs; without multiplying division but instead creating a unity through common conciliar vision and patriarchal commemoration.

This manifests itself in conciliar activities that are able to respond directly to the concrete needs of the locales in which they operate. While there are universal issues that demand response from and for the whole Church (and thus these are ratified by the Councils; or spoken by the Patriarch for the whole plenitude of the Russian Orthodox Church), there are also a multitude of pastoral and practical situations that arise that are far more culture-specific. The social concerns facing post-Communist Russia are rather different than many of those facing Australia; and the socio-political issues facing North America are in turn rather

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 11.15.

<sup>32</sup> Namely, the Chinese Orthodox Church and the Japanese Orthodox Church, which are fully Autonomous Churches under the ROC as Mother Church; see. Statute (2013), 10.15.

<sup>33</sup> See Statute, 12, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Statute, 1.1.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 1.3.

different from those facing Ukraine or Moldova. The localisation of synods within these self-governing and autonomous bodies permits local and regional concerns to be addressed properly, avoiding an enforced ethnic superimposition ‘from afar’; while at the same time permitting all to be done in unity, the diaspora never cut off from the Mother Church, and all parts of this body informing, shaping and assisting all others.

We might draw, as a few examples, the fact that over the past years the ROCOR Holy Synod was able to issue statements and support its faithful in response to the United States Supreme Court’s decision on so-called ‘same sex marriages’, while the DECR of the Moscow Patriarchate was able powerfully to stand before the Moscow Duma to speak with regard to Russia’s stance on terrorism in Syria. These situations are intently localised, both geographically and politically; and it would be hard to envisage any singular body that could effectively address such a huge diversity of needs *in an authentically localised and representative way*, without imposing onto such concerns an overarching ethnic, political or social dogma. The inter-conciliarity of the Russian Orthodox Church, however, permits precisely this; and to my mind is one of the greatest strengths of conciliarity as exercised *within* the Russian Orthodox Church in our present day.

## Theological implications

Allow me to make a few brief comments about the theological implications of synodality that arise out of Russian Orthodox praxis.

Firstly, the axiom that synodality and primacy must necessarily exist hand-in-hand is clearly witnessed, but —importantly — without succumbing to the temptation of perceiving primacy in terms that can in any way be divided from synodal authority or deemed to exist in the unique charism of specific Bishops. Despite a few recent attempts to assert that this vision of primacy as constituted by conciliar office is in some sense ‘depersonalising’<sup>36</sup> and that the source of primacy can in fact exist ‘in the very person’ of a specific Hierarchy,<sup>37</sup> the Russian Orthodox Church maintains that the primacy that exists in First Hierarchs (or in any context of primatial relationships, at whatever level) is exclusively of a conciliar character.

Secondly, we might note that, in all this, synodality exists in the assumption of a eucharistic unity, not as a theological extension of it. It is a protective force for a unity of life and mission that serves to preserve and defend the presence of the Eucharistic Mystery in the world; but commonplace attempts to define synodality and primacy in chiefly Eucharistic terms (the efforts of what is sometimes called ‘Eucharistic ecclesiology’) is to conflate the distinctiveness of the sacraments themselves. Ecclesiology is built on a theology of the Mystery of Ordination, rightly perceived; and while this is of course always tied to the right celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery, it possesses its own unique sacramental identity and theological-pastoral attributes. Neither the MP Statute nor the ROCOR Regulation — and indeed, neither the Canons nor broader tradition — express the synodal structure of the Church as ecclesiological elements having their foundation in Eucharistic celebration. This is the pastoral work *of the individual Bishop*, in which *his personal vocation* will always find its

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<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Metropolitan Elpidophoros of Bursa, ‘First Without Equals: A Response to the Text on Primacy of the Moscow Patriarchate’ (2013); and Archimandrite Panteleimon (Manoussakis), ‘Primacy and Ecclesiology: The State of the Question’ (in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, 2013), 229-239.

<sup>37</sup> Metropolitan Elpidophoros, 2.(ii).para.3.

grounding and identity; the synodal structures of the Church are grounded in in the charismatic work of the people of God to ensure that this personal episcopal identity is never challenged or defeated.

## **Conclusion**

I might summarise, then, by stating that within the Russian Orthodox Church we find synodality enshrined in a unique, multi-faceted way. Within the patriarchal structure the ancient Canons are given voice in a manner more elaborate than they themselves articulate; but through this elaboration they protect the fundamental principles of canonical synodality in a robust way. Though His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia cannot possibly be geographically close to every city housing a church that commemorates him as ‘Our great lord and father’, the synodal structure of the Russian Orthodox Church permits him to remain the ‘first’ among a Hierarchy that is localised throughout the world in a way that permits universal unity as well as immediate, local identity — precisely as the Canons and ancient traditions of the Church stipulate.