

*The Ministry of Oversight:
The Office of Bishop and President in the Church*

**Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia
(2000-2007)**

Notes by Doru Costache

Revd Dr Doru Costache
Senior Lecturer in Patristic Studies
St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College
(Sydney College of Divinity)
242 Cleveland St, Redfern NSW 2016 Australia
<http://sagotc.academia.edu/DoruCostache>
<http://www.sagotc.edu.au>

I am honoured and grateful for the opportunity to express my views on the document under consideration. I read it with great care and enthusiasm, being humbled by the tremendous work behind it. I found the document to be balanced and most illuminating in regards to the historical, doctrinal and practical aspects it addresses. Among the many virtues of this document, I particularly salute the conclusion reached at point 115 stating what the two parts have to learn from each other, namely, the bishop as a factor of ecclesial unity by the Lutherans and synodical practices by the Catholics. The outcomes of the dialogue as presented by this document – for which the contributors should be warmly congratulated – can be of inspiration to all Christian Churches.

Given the limited time at my disposal, I shall not refer to the many points of agreement between the views expressed in this document and the respective Orthodox understandings, focusing instead on a number of aspects which appear as problematic when assessed through the lens of my own ecclesial tradition. That said, apart from drawing on my ecclesial background, the following notes should be considered as personal and not as representing the official viewpoint of the Orthodox Church.

Regarding apostolic succession and the validity of episcopal ordination, discussed at points 84-89, I believe that their representation in “purely juridical terms” (points 84, 87) is not consistent with the experience of early Church, invoked by both parts. Owing to later historical developments, the juridical appraisal of apostolic succession seems to obscure its broader ecclesial significance, even when the juridical aspect is perceived as subsequent to the spiritual and theological dimensions of succession (point 85). It is an historical fact that the juridical approach both currently and in the past, allowed for the interpretation of the episcopal ministry as an exercise of power. In the Orthodox Churches of Byzantine tradition, the validity of episcopal ordination does not stem exclusively from apostolic succession and bears no juridical connotations. A valid episcopal ordination is construed as a synergetic act in which the ‘horizontal’ dimension, i.e. the ordaining canonical bishops and the agreement of the Christian congregation,¹ operate in conjunction with the ‘vertical’ dimension, i.e. the graceful ‘ordination’ effected from above by the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit.² The Orthodox sacrament of ordination illustrates perfectly these two dimensions, showing that episcopal validity cannot be assessed exclusively in terms of the ‘horizontal’ succession

¹ This agreement is liturgically expressed by the acclamation *ἄξιός ἐστι / dignus est* / “he is worthy.”

² The ‘vertical’ dimension is affirmed by the prayer of invocation, recited by the ordaining bishops – literally – upon the head of the candidate, by which God the Father is asked to bestow the grace upon the person to be ordained, through Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

of canonical bishops. Moreover, in the Byzantine tradition there is a dynamic understanding of validity, manifested as an ongoing renewal of episcopal authority within the Eucharistic liturgy. More precisely, clergy and laity prayerfully endorse their bishop, again by acclaiming his worthiness, on the grounds of his personal commitment to the apostolic faith.³ This complex, dynamic and bi-dimensional understanding draws on the *theandric* or divinehuman aspect of the Church, to which I shall return. Before moving any further, it could be useful to draw attention to the Byzantine discussions stirred by St Symeon the New Theologian, at the threshold of the first two millennia. St Symeon reiterated the early Christian sense of ordination as a spiritual charism working in conjunction with one's personal worthiness, and also made room for charismatic authority, seen as genuinely apostolic and as complementing ordained ministry. This recourse to the 'vertical' dimension invites further refinements of the notion of validity. If adopted by the members of this dialogue, it could strengthen the points acknowledging the validity of ordination in the Lutheran Church, as it could also contribute to better articulating episcopal authority and synodality, which is a possible implication of point 115.

With reference to the argument at points 60-68 on the episcopal institution as either *de jure divino* or *de jure humano*, both the remark that the Catholic side feels uncomfortable with this terminology (point 62) and the notes at point 67 on the various connotations ascribed to these phrases by the two parties, are useful. Nevertheless, I believe that the conclusion of point 68 undertakes to solve the above dilemma in a unilateral manner, by defining episcopal ministry as a divine institution, a gift from God to the Church. From an Orthodox perspective, both this conclusion and the antithetical expressions referring to institution beg further nuances. The institution of episcopal ministry in particular and ordination in general cannot be considered outside a comprehensive ecclesiological framework. Ordination cannot be defined as either divine or human, simply because the Church is a divinehuman reality. The aspect of *theandricity* entails both eternal and historical aspects, to the extent that within the ecclesial experience nothing occurs and likewise nothing is assessable according to the logic of either/or. Episcopal institution is a *theandric* reality within the Church and therefore it cannot be discussed in disjunctive terms. From another angle, precisely given the divinehuman nature of the ecclesial body, which implies the presence of the Head in the Church, no one can operate "in the person of Christ," that is in his stead, and no one but the Holy Spirit can make Christ present in the Church (cf. points 48-49, 54). In the Church, Christ is the one who works through and with the bishop.

Now, although I applaud the agreement on the ministry of bishop/president expressed at point 131, I would suggest that the proclamation of the gospel – pertaining to this ministry – be presented not only as an episcopal prerogative but also as a service to and with Christ. Again, it is a matter of avoiding the definition of episcopal ministry as exercised in Christ's stead, a clarification that could prevent its reinterpretation as an exercise of power. I believe that returning to such an interpretation would jeopardise the agreement reached through the document under consideration. The examples of such humble hierarchs, like St John Chrysostom, who in the past heroically resisted to the misinterpretation of episcopal ministry as power, are worth contemplating. Avoiding the definition of episcopal ministry in terms of power could further strengthen the acknowledgment of its usefulness by the Lutheran part (point 134), beyond the historical circumstances that stirred reticence towards it.

All the above lead to a related matter, which refers to the common affirmations at points 79-82, and the definition therein of the ministry of oversight in terms of teaching and presidency of worship gatherings. I would suggest that alongside these aspects further thought be given to the early Christian paradigm, which presupposed the role of the bishop/president as mainly

³ The celebrating clergy exclaim with one voice, "Above all, remember, Lord, our (Arch)bishop (Name): Grant that he may serve Your holy churches in peace. Keep him safe, honorable, and healthy for many years, rightly teaching the word of Your truth." The congregation answers, "Lord, have mercy."

a spiritual guide for the congregation, a role signified by the term “father.” For instance, in the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch (mentioned at 18) and in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of the Byzantine author known as St Dionysius the Areopagite, the bishop is represented first of all as a spiritual guide, leading the congregation to spiritual perfection by the example of his life and wisdom. If taken into consideration, this nuance might contribute to strengthen the link between episcopate and congregation implied at point 115 and again at point 69, where the Church is defined as serving the unification of all people under the one head, Christ. As a spiritual guide or father, the bishop/president fulfils this sacred task better than by exercising power.

To better articulate episcopal ministry and the rest of God’s people, more precisely to bridge aspects like governance, guidance, conciliarity and fellowship within the Body of Christ, it could be useful for the members of this dialogue and all other Christian Churches alike, to contemplate implementing more complex structures. Such structures would include the triple pattern of the one, the few and the many – corresponding to the principles of hierarchy, synodality and communion – as normative throughout the ecclesial body.⁴

I would conclude by pointing out the importance of point 132, which affirms the recognition of the apostolic ministry of oversight beyond “variations in structure.” Indeed, the aptitude to perceive the truth beyond its circumstantial polymorphisms is the way to go for the entire ecumenical dialogue. I apologise for any improper remark; if anything like this occurred in my analysis, it is only due to my limited understanding of the two traditions involved in this dialogue.

⁴ Cf. Ioan I. Ică Jr., ‘Comparative Views on Church Reforms in Twentieth Century Europe’ *Inter: Romanian Review for Theological and Religious Studies* 1:1-2 (2007): 59-87, in Romanian.