

“When You Gather as a Church:”
**The Eucharistic Ecclesiology of Nicholas Afanasiev and its
Ecumenical Significance**

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*Always everyone and always together
for one and the same thing.
Acts 2:44*

The goal of this paper is to re-introduce the work of the Russian Orthodox theologian and priest Fr. Nicholas Afanasiev. Although his name is known to the scholars of the Eucharistic ecclesiology – the term that he coined – the enduring ecumenical significance of his work is often overlooked or narrowed down to a number of specific issues.

Afanasiev starts with the realization that the Church of God whose life is based solely on the activity of the Holy Spirit has the unity that can never be broken as it is the unity of Christ himself. Regretfully, over the centuries the role of the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist in the empirical structures and organization of the Church became obscured. According to Afanasiev, the resulting dissolution of the Eucharistic assembly led to the dissolution of the historical Christianity into different churches. Looking at ecumenism in the light of the Eucharistic worship of the Church, Afanasiev concluded that the problems of the Eucharistic assembly and the problems of the divided Church are of the same nature and that they cannot be solved separately from each other. Therefore, all of Afanasiev’s work is aimed at the restoration of the experience of “gathering together as a Church” - beginning with the liturgical lives of the local assemblies and extending into the relationships between the churches.

To accomplish its goal this paper will address (1) the major factors that influenced Afanasiev’s thoughts; (2) Afanasiev’s main contributions to ecclesiology; (3) the relationship between Afanasiev’s vision and the documents of the Vatican Council II; and (4) Afanasiev’s application of principles of the Eucharistic ecclesiology to the practice of ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches.

1. The major factors of Afanasiev’s approach

To truly understand and appreciate the writings of Nicholas Afanasiev (1893-1966), one needs to consider the factors that played an important role in the development of Afanasiev’s basic ecclesiological assumption that the Church has an essentially eucharistic constitution. The three most important of these factors are:

- the influence of Slavophile¹ thought,
- Afanasiev’s in-depth knowledge of the Church’s history and canon law, and
- the circumstances of Afanasiev’s life.

In his views, Afanasiev was an heir to the Slavophiles who turned their attention to the nature of the Church and especially to the notion of “*sobornost*.” This word is derived from the Russian noun “*sobor*,” which can be translated either as “cathedral” or equivalent of “town hall meeting.” “*Sobornost*” can be roughly translated as “conciliarity” or even “ecclesiality.” It is equivalent to the word “catholicity” as used in the Nicene Creed. Aleksei Khomiakov (1804-1860), one of the founders of Slavophilism, added an epistemological dimension to the meaning

¹ Slavophilism was an intellectual movement in the 19th century Russian Empire. This movement is often identified by its opposition to the Western European influence and its insistence on Russia’s distinctive way of development based on values and institutions that existed in Russia’s early history.

of this word by stressing that “the true understanding is communal and possible only in organic fellowship – *sobornost*.”²

Since *sobornost* is born in the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church, it harmonizes in itself the inner freedom of the Church with its organic unity. Slavophiles bitterly criticized Western Christianity for losing *sobornost* either through suppression of the freedom of the Church (as in case of the Roman Catholicism), or through neglect of the unity of the Church in an attempt to restore its freedom (as in case of Protestantism). That criticism often resulted in a denial of the possibility of the faith experience by Catholics and Protestants.

The Slavophiles’ insight into mystical nature of the Church was further developed during the so called Russian religious renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century. The main insight of this period that “the search for truth can never be sustained apart from the active worship of the Church in vibrant synergy with her Lord” can be summed up by the remark of Fr. Pavel Florenski made in 1906: “Only he understands the Church who understands the liturgy.”³ Christian mystery cannot be known only through intellect, but needs to be experienced by the whole person in the sacramental worship of the Church.

In his work Afanasiev combined the insights of Russian religious thought of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. His Eucharistic ecclesiology balanced the Slavophiles’ emphasis on the essentially invisible mystical communion of the Church, brought into being by the Holy Spirit, by reconnecting it with the empirical life of the Church through its sacramental worship.

Afanasiev’s training also influenced his historical approach to theology. He had an extensive training in mathematics, canon law, ecclesial history, and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. His theological inquiry into the mystery of the Church was preceded by his serious study of the juridical mechanisms at work in the Church throughout its history.

Afanasiev tried to look at the realities of the early Christian Church without juxtaposing on them later phenomena and concepts because, in his words, “for primitive Christian consciousness the unity of the Church was not merely a dogmatic statement but a lived experience.”⁴ However, Afanasiev did not consider the early Church or any other period in the life of the Church as ideal. Neither did he flatly condemn later developments in the life of the Church, since he believed the Spirit never stopped acting in the life of the Church. Afanasiev’s approach is characterized by his urgent insistence on identifying the cultural and social factors at work in the spiritual life of the Church. In his study of the early Church, he searched for normative *patterns* of both teaching and liturgical practice of the Church in order to distinguish *patterns* from *concrete forms* of ecclesial practice, teaching, and governance which were often borrowed from the civil society.

One should not overlook the influence, on the development of his thought, of the circumstances of Afanasiev’s turbulent life as an émigré after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The control over the Orthodox Church by the Russian Imperial government that was replaced by the repression of religion by the Communist government led Afanasiev to question the juridical constitution of the Church.⁵ The Russian revolution also prompted a massive way of

2 Robert Slesinski, “Postmodernity and the Resources of the Christian East,” Essays in *Diakonia: Eastern Catholic Theological Reflections*, Peter Lang, New York, 1998, p. 40.

3 Slesinski, p. 45.

4 Nicolas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2007, p.4.

5 Ernest Skublics, “The Rebirth of Communion Ecclesiology within Orthodoxy: From Nineteenth Century Russians

emigration from Russia and the formation of a strong Russian Orthodox Diaspora in Western Europe. The resulting overlap of the jurisdictions of the national Orthodox Churches (which were manifested even more strongly with the establishment of the national Orthodox Churches in America) tested the limits of the “primitive Christian ideal of a single Eucharist and bishop in each local church.”⁶ Finally, the whole experience of his exile and ethnic uprooting certainly led Afanasiev to re-examine what elements of tradition were essential to the Christian faith and which elements were added in Church’s assimilation into culture in general and into state structures in particular.

All these factors contributed to Afanasiev’s search for pneumatological and sacramental, rather than juridical, foundations of the Church.

2. The Eucharistic Vision of the Church of N. Afanasiev and its Reception

Edmund Hussey observed that the dominant ecclesiology of Afanasiev’s time was more of “an attempt to develop theological justification of canonical power and [existing] ecclesial structure rather than a theology of the church.”⁷

Afanasiev’s ecclesiology is built from a radically different perspective. He starts from the foundation of the Church at the Last Supper and its actualization through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostles by the resurrected Christ at Pentecost. Afanasiev states that from that moment on, the Church is created and constantly maintained by the action of the Holy Spirit. The question under his investigation is “whether the Spirit was indeed the foundation of the Church’s entire life” during the first formative centuries of Christianity.⁸

Afanasiev starts his investigation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church in his main work “*The Church of the Holy Spirit*” by describing the creation of the royal priesthood of all in baptism. He shows that the life of the primitive church was based on the ministry of all baptized. This priestly ministry and charismatic giftedness of all members of the Church was expressed in the Eucharistic assembly, in which is the fullness of the Church of God is manifested. “The Church is where Christ is, but Christ is always present in the fullness of the union of his Body in Eucharistic assembly.”⁹

Afanasiev then describes how the oneness of the Eucharistic assembly maintained the unity of the diverse manifestations of the One Church through the multiplicity of local churches:

“Empirically the unity and fullness of the Church of God are expressed through the multiplicity of the local churches, each of which manifests not a part of, but the fullness of the Church of God. For this reason, the multiplicity of the local churches, in empirical reality, guards the unity and fullness of the Church, that is, its catholicity. The unity of the local church itself is manifest in its one Eucharistic assembly. The Church is one since it has one Eucharistic assembly in which God’s priestly people are gathered. Since Christ yesterday, today, and forever is one and the same ... in both space and time the Eucharistic assembly remains one and the same.”¹⁰

to Twenty-First Century Greeks,” *Logos*, Vol. 46 (2005), nos 1-2, p. 102.

6 Aidan Nichols, *Theology in the Russian Diaspora*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.55.

7 Edmund Hussey, “Nicholas Afanassiev’s Eucharistic Ecclesiology: A Roman Catholic Viewpoint,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 12, no. 2, Spring 1975, p. 243.

8 Nikolas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2007, p.2.

9 *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, p. 4.

10 *Ibid*, p. 4.

Finally, Afanasiev shows how the episcopate and presbyterate necessarily emerged from the royal priesthood of all baptized as required by the Eucharistic liturgy. This development, however, did not undermine the “baptismal and charismatic identity of all the members of the Eucharistic assembly, laity as well as clergy.”¹¹

Afanasiev finishes his book with a beautiful chapter on the power of Love – the only authentic power in the life of the Church.

Unfortunately, “The Church of the Holy Spirit” was published in Russian only posthumously in 1971 and translated into English in 2007. This work presents Afanasiev’s vision of the Church more fully than his earlier essay that was published in Russian “The Lords Supper,” (1950) and the better known in the West essays published in French and available in English, “The Church that Presides in Love” (1960) and “Una Sancta” (1963).

I propose that the order in which his works became available to the non-Russian speaking audience influenced the total perception of his work. Afanasiev’s critics tend to ignore the logic of Afanasiev’s presentation and criticize him on isolated issues without taking into account the totality of his vision.

For example, one of Afanasiev’s better known critics, John Zizioulas, in his “*Being as Communion*” states (without making even one reference to Afanasiev’s major work “The Church of the Holy Spirit”) that

Ever since Afanasiev...it is often too easily assumed that eucharistic ecclesiology leads to the priority of the local Church over the universal, to a kind of “congregationalism.” ...Afanasiev was wrong in drawing such conclusions, because the nature of the Eucharist points not in the direction of the priority of the local Church but in that of the simultaneity of both local and universal.¹²

However, Afanasiev never “drew a conclusion” about the priority of the local church over universal. Perhaps, his critics “drew this conclusion” from Afanasiev’s statement that the universal church has no priority over the local church. The whole question of placing local against universal is alien to Afanasiev. In “The Church of the Holy Spirit” Afanasiev says that “the Church resided, lived, and was revealed in all the fullness of its unity and in all the unity of its fullness in each local church.”¹³ This view not only does not contradict Zizioulas’ “the simultaneity of both local and universal,” but it presupposes it.

Afanasiev approached the study of the universal Church in relationship to local churches as Eucharistic communions in the basic framework of, what he was first to call, Eucharistic ecclesiology.¹⁴

In one of his earliest works, “Two Ideas of the Church Universal,” published in 1934, Afanasiev explored the historical development of the Church’s self-understanding of this relationship. He reviewed the writings of two Fathers of the early Church - St. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) and St. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35-110) as the starting points of two different ecclesiologies - universal ecclesiology and Eucharistic ecclesiology.

11 Michael Plekon, “Nicolas Afanasiev: Explorer of the Eucharist, the Church, and Life in Them,” *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2002, p. 159.

12 John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1985, p. 133.

13 *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, p. 255.

14 Paul McPartlan, “Eucharistic Ecclesiology,” *One in Christ*, 22 no 4, 1986, p. 326.

Universal ecclesiology, which eventually dominated in the Eastern and Western churches, is rooted in the vision of Cyprian. Afanasiev says that what Paul said about the members of the community in 1Cor 12, 13, 27 was juxtaposed by Cyprian onto the communities united in the Body of Christ. According to Cyprian, each local church is like a member of the Body of Christ, but the universal church is the aggregate of the local churches and the one Body of Christ. Only as parts of the universal Church do local churches possess the fullness of the Church. The unity of the Church is guaranteed by the single episcopacy. "Just as one church is diffused into many churches, so is the single episcopate into many bishops."¹⁵

The foundations of Eucharistic ecclesiology can be traced to the writings of Ignatius, who starts with the fact that where Christ is, there is fullness of the Church. Since Christ is present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, therefore, the fullness of the Church is present in the Eucharistic assembly. The episcopacy also played an important role for Ignatius, since where there is no bishop, no Eucharist can be celebrated.

Following Ignatius' thought and Paul's teaching about the Body of Christ, Afanasiev fully developed Eucharistic ecclesiology. According to Eucharistic ecclesiology, during the Eucharistic sacrifice, the local church experiences itself as a unified body, as a living Body of Christ. In the Eucharist, the Church achieves its mystical and empirical unity.

The key to understanding Afanasiev's Eucharistic ecclesiology is in his interpretation in the context of the Eucharistic celebration of the passages where Paul called both the Eucharistic bread in 1 Cor. 10:16 and the local church in 1 Cor. 12:27 the "Body of Christ." In both cases, Paul proclaims the real presence of Christ. Each local church is the Church of God in Christ because Christ is present in his body, the Eucharistic assembly. In the communion, all faithful become members of his body - of the whole body and not just a part of it. Similarly, each Eucharistic assembly is the whole Church and not just a part of it.

According to Afanasiev, "the fundamental difference between the universal ecclesiology and eucharistic ecclesiology consists ... in their understanding of the unity of the Church, and above all the principle on which this unity is based."¹⁶

In universal ecclesiology, the unity is based on the single episcopacy which is extrinsic to the local churches themselves. In Eucharistic ecclesiology, it is an intrinsic unity of Christ himself that is manifested in each Eucharistic assembly.¹⁷

Although few completely reject Afanasiev's basic approach to ecclesiology, he was criticized by such theologians as Kallistos Ware, John Meyendorff, John Zizioulas, etc., especially on the following points:

- the already-discussed perception that Afanasiev gives priority to the local church over universal,
- Afanasiev's purported exaggeration of Ignatian and Cyprianic ecclesiologies,
- narrowing of the Church to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist,
- neglect or lack of recognition of the role of the episcopacy in the unity of the Church and as a criterion of the authenticity of the Eucharistic celebration by the local church, and
- Afanasiev's purportedly exaggerated view of the self-sufficiency of the local Church.

15 Aidan Nichols, *Theology in the Russian Diaspora*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 85.

16 Nicholas Afanasiev, "Una sancta," *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003, p. 14.

17 Una sancta, p. 14.

I will try to address some of these points.

Afanasiev did not equate the Church with the liturgy. As Victor Aleksandrov observed, the object of his study was not the liturgy or even the Eucharist. Afanasiev first and foremost studied the Church, which he saw in light of the Eucharist. The Eucharist gives life to the Church but it does not constitute all the manifestations of the life of the Church. The Church with all its manifestations (and not just the liturgy) is called a Eucharistic assembly by Afanasiev. Therefore, one should speak not about “limiting” the Church to the Eucharistic assembly by Afanasiev, but of his “widening” of the Eucharistic assembly to the size of the Church.¹⁸

Neither did Afanasiev simply deny the ecclesiastical authority – bishops, canon law, etc. – but he recognized and emphasized the primacy of “the inner charismatic character of the Church’s authority and structure.”¹⁹ He sees the role of bishops within the communal nature of the Eucharist and the Church and the participation of the whole assembly in the Eucharistic liturgy. Afanasiev is very direct in stating that there can be no Eucharist without either presider (pastoral leadership) or concelebrants (assembly of the baptized). The difference in the “priestly act of worship” is a gift of God, but the presider and the concelebrants are not divided by these gifts. “It is the people of God, in all its fullness, that celebrates the sacraments of the Church.”²⁰

As to self-sufficiency of the local church, one must first of all distinguish between the local church led by a bishop and a parish church. Afanasiev called the development of parishes a deviation from the ancient practice. Nevertheless, according to Afanasiev, the local churches led by the bishop indeed were autonomous and independent because they contained in themselves everything necessary for their lives and they had no external authority over them. Despite that, the churches “could not live apart from the other churches” because their unity was based on the unity of the One Church.²¹ In order to live as the Church of God in Christ in conformity with the will of God, the local churches relied on each other’s mutual witness. In *Una Sancta* Afanasiev developed the idea of the unity of the local churches through their internal nature and reciprocal reception so “whatever happened in her [one church] happened in the union of all churches. The fullness and unity of the Church was felt and experienced by each local church.”²²

3. Afanasiev and Vatican Council II

Afanasiev’s thought found its reflection in the preparatory work of the Vatican Council II. After his emigration from Russia, Afanasiev studied in Belgrade and briefly worked in Macedonia. In 1930, he began teaching canon law and church history at St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris, which was a center of Orthodox theological thought and ecumenical work. As many of his co-workers, Afanasiev deliberately published his works in French in order to be able to contribute to the lively ecumenical discussions that took place in Catholic and Orthodox theological circles.

Notably, Afanasiev was the only Orthodox theologian whose specific work was

18 Victor Aleksandrov, Zametki o kritike “evharisticheskoy ekkleziologii” Nikolaja Afanasieva, (Notes on the critique of the “eucharistic ecclesiology” of Nicholas Afanasiev), *Vestnik RHD* (Paris), no. 192, 2007.

19 Plekon, p. 173.

20 Plekon, p. 164.

21 Nicolas Afanasiev, “The Church Which Presides in Love,” *The Primacy of Peter*, ed. John Meyendorff, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1992, p. 112.

22 *Una Sancta*, p. 16.

mentioned in the records of the proceedings of the Vatican Council II. His essay “The Church Which Presides in Love” was cited three times in the *nota praevia* to the draft “*De Ecclesia*” of the Council in connection with Eucharistic ecclesiology and the role of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. It is often stated by different authors that the influence of Afanasiev’s thought was particularly traceable in *Lumen Gentium 26*.

Lumen Gentium 26 reflects the re-instatement in Roman Catholic ecclesiology of the theology of the local church:

“[The] Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which in so far as they are united to their pastors are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament... [In] these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in diaspora, Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted.”

Compare this passage with Afanasiev’s succinct statement of Eucharistic ecclesiology:

Where there is a Eucharistic assembly, there Christ abides, and there is the Church of God in Christ.²³

A comparison shows that both passages follow similar logic in affirming the necessary bond between the Church and the Eucharist.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Vatican II endorsed only Eucharistic ecclesiology. *Lumen Gentium 23* makes a clear statement of universalistic ecclesiology: it states that the local churches “are built on the model of the universal Church,” as “parts” of the universal Church. Contrary to what *Lumen Gentium 26* suggests, the logical conclusion of *Lumen Gentium 23* is that local churches as “parts” can not be the local manifestations of the “catholic Church.”

The presence of both of these statements in *Lumen Gentium* may reflect Council’s intention to retain both ecclesiologies as valid ways of looking at the nature of the Church. This conclusion is supported by one of the comments recorded in the proceedings of the Council:

Under the leadership especially of Prof. Afanasiev many Orthodox theologians believe that there is an opposition between the universalistic ecclesiology (that is, an ecclesiology of a single and universal Church, organized juridically in a hierarchical mode – as in the Catholic Church) and a Eucharistic ecclesiology (that is, an ecclesiology of particular churches, nor subordinated to divine authoritative law – as in the Orthodox Church). Therefore it seems very useful to indicate both how the Catholic Church begins with the Eucharistic theology which is at the same time universalistic.²⁴

Some argue that mixing the elements of the Eucharistic ecclesiology with the ecclesial structures that support universalistic ecclesiology all but neutralizes the positive influence of the former. For example, a student of Afanasiev, Fr. John Meyendorff, while applauding Council’s intentions of critical self-examination of the Catholic Church, concludes that this self-examination did not go farther than “adapting an old and familiar ecclesiology, whose existing

23 Ibid.

24 Footnote 2, p. 87 of *Congregatio Generalis 31: 1, 4, 87*, in Latin

structures date from the Middle Ages, to the realities and exigencies of the modern world.”²⁵ Specifically, the introduction of episcopal collegiality by the Council – a product of the Eucharistic ecclesiology – loses its value in the absence of real interdependence between the pope and the bishops.²⁶

E. Hussey compared Eucharistic ecclesiology with the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*.²⁷ Predictably, he finds the biggest differences in the role of the bishops in the Church and in the manner in which this role is exercised.

Whereas Afanasiev locates bishops’ power within the ecclesial community and not above it, Vatican II views bishops first of all as members of the college of bishops by the virtue of their consecration. [See *Christus Dominus* 3.] The episcopate so conceived by the Council is then considered to be a guarantee of the unity of the local churches. The Roman Pontiff is called the “source and foundation” of unity while the Eucharist is seen as a sign of unity and means of fostering unity. Contrary to that, Afanasiev affirmed the strictly sacramental, Eucharistic rather than juridical basis for the unity of the Church.

From these crucial distinctions follows the difference in positions regarding the primacy or priority of some churches among others. Afanasiev maintains that priority does not belong to the bishop personally but to a local church first of all and to a bishop only insofar as he is a president of this church. Vatican II assigns that power to the bishop and reinforces this position by never referring to the Roman Pontiff as a bishop of the diocese of Rome in the Council’s documents.

Despite these differences, the Council adopted certain positions that echo the main themes of Afanasiev’s work: it affirmed the pneumatological foundation of the Church, it restored the liturgy as source and summit of the life of the Church, and it developed the theology of the universal priesthood of all baptized and Church as “People of God.” These positions were especially important for the development of the Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement.

4. Ecumenism in the work of N. Afanasiev

Afanasiev’s historical and theological inquiry into the mystery of the Church led him to develop an interest in the state of the relationship between contemporary Orthodoxy and Catholicism. In the years prior to the Vatican Council II, he produced several essays on the most problematic issue of this relationship - the issue of papal primacy.

Also, Afanasiev was invited by Patriarch Athenagoras as an observer to the last session of the Second Vatican Council, where he assisted “with much emotion” in the mutual lifting of the anathemas between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.”²⁸

Afanasiev dedicated his most profoundly and courageously ecumenical essay, *Una Sancta*, to the “memory of John XXIII, the Pope of Love.” In this essay Afanasiev explores the nature of the division and possibilities of re-union between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches based on his interpretation of the universal and Eucharistic ecclesiologies. In doing so

25 John Meyendorff, “Vatican II,” *Orthodoxy and Catholicity*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1966, p. 152.

26 Meyendorff, p. 163.

27 Edmund Hussey, “Nicholas Afanassiev’s Eucharistic Ecclesiology: A Roman Catholic Viewpoint,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 12 no 2, Spring 1975, pp. 235-252.

28 Skublics, p. 107.

he recovered the notion of the *ecclesial communion* as a way in which ancient churches related to each other.

In his study, Afanasiev discovers that in the early history between the Rome and the Eastern churches there were many serious disagreements, yet they have never ceased to be churches to each other.²⁹ Afanasiev then tried to apply this pattern to the current state of relationships in order to show “that the reestablishment of Eucharistic communion between East and West would be neither a denial of the schism nor a facile use of the Eucharist to attain ecclesial unity but rather an assertion of the authentic reality of the church as Eucharistic assembly.”³⁰

According to Afanasiev, there can be no talk of re-union of the Catholic and the Orthodox Church from the point of view of universal ecclesiology. If the ecclesial nature of the local churches is conditioned by their rooting in the universal Church, then no church can exist in separation from the universal Church and stay a church. So, either the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church can truly be called “the Church” but not both. Any talk of the “vestiges of truth” existing outside this One Church makes no sense since outside the organic structure of the Church as a mystical body of Christ everything becomes distorted and falsified.”³¹

Therefore, one cannot strive for the reunion of the Church with a “non-Church” without preliminary decision of which church of the two churches is the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”³² Since there is no objective way to verify the statements of faith of both churches, the ecumenical dialogue based on universal ecclesiology is doomed to a standstill.³³

However, for Eucharistic ecclesiology, which is based on “the unity of the church itself and not the unity of her manifestations in actual life” there can never be a complete break in the unity of the Church of God.³⁴ It is the unity of Christ himself and the Eucharistic communion in His one body that can never be broken even where there exist regrettable divisions - cessations of the fraternal communion between the local churches. If the current state of relationship between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches is described as a break of fraternal communion then one may propose a realistic goal of reestablishment of this communion. This goal allows for a positive change in the relationship between the two great Churches without the denial of the existing divisions.

The ecumenical vision of Afanasiev is often criticized in the Orthodox circles as, in the words of John Meyendorff, “Eucharistic extremism.”³⁵ The better received position concerning ecumenism was formulated by another brilliant student of Afanasiev, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. Schmemmann somewhat nuanced the position of the universal ecclesiology by presenting the re-union of churches as “reaffirmation of ‘orthodoxy’ and the authentic tradition of the church.”³⁶ In response to this position, Afanasiev asks a bold question of whether this need to move toward orthodoxy should apply to both the Catholic *and* the Orthodox Churches.³⁷

29 *Una Sancta*, p. 29.

30 Plekon, p. 176.

31 *Una Sancta*, p. 8.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

35 John Meyendorff, “Vatican II,” *Orthodoxy and Catholicity*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1966, p. 157.

36 *Una Sancta*, p. 5.

37 *Una Sancta*, p. 5.

The Orthodox criticism of Afanasiev's ecumenical vision also extends to the question of whether the Orthodox Church should even acknowledge the Catholic Church as a Church.

The Catholic Church during the Vatican Council II acknowledged the authenticity of the work of the Spirit not just among individual Christians outside the Roman Catholic Church, but in the "corporate groups," or churches. In light of the common baptism and the theology of the local church, the Council found it possible to admit that the separated communities are not devoid of the gifts of the Spirit and that "some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church" [*Unitatis Redintegratio*3]. J. Ratzinger noticed that, theologically speaking, it created a curious situation when valid churches exist outside *the* Church, aka Roman Catholic Church.³⁸

Due to their historic continuity, apostolic succession, valid sacraments, and doctrinal complementarities with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches were placed in a special position by the Council, which included even the possibility of *communication in sacris*.

However, after the Vatican Council II, the Orthodox Churches did not make any similar authoritative statements that would recognize either the membership of the Roman Catholic Church in the Church of Christ or the validity of its sacraments.

Robert Barringer finds the signs of the positive development in this area in his analyses of the 1982 Munich Statement. This document, titled "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" was produced by the joint Catholic – Orthodox Preparatory Commission. Interestingly, Aidan Nichols in his book "Rome and the Eastern Churches" mentions the importance of Afanasiev's thought on the work of this commission.³⁹ Barringer points to a fundamentally important statement made in section 1.5.d that highlights that "the communion in the Church through the Eucharist is the work of the Spirit:"

The Spirit puts into communion with the Body of Christ those who share the same bread and the same cup. Starting from there, the Church manifests what it is, the sacrament of the Trinitarian *koinonia*, the "dwelling of God with men. (cf. Rev 21.4).⁴⁰

This paragraph, so close to the spirit of Afanasiev's Eucharistic vision of the Church, creates a possible ground for future discussion about the membership in the Church between the Catholics and Orthodox.

Afanasiev's commentators often overlooked his ecumenically important insight into the historical existence of the Church.

Afanasiev rejected the validity of dividing the Church into invisible and visible churches, the church of saints in heaven and the church of the sinners of earth respectively.⁴¹ Instead, he spoke about the essence or nature of the Church in relations to its empirical manifestations. Through baptism, the Church is eschatologically embedded in the whole of our lives. The

38 Ratzinger, p. 72.

39 Aidan Nicols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1992, p.313.

40 Robert Barringer, "Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue: Present Position," *Rome and Constantinople: Essays in the Dialogue of Love*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brooklyn, 1984, p. 65.

41 *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, p. 260.

authors of the Gospel experienced it and declared that “the Kingdom of God is at hand!”

The historical aspect of the Church affected its empirical manifestations. The empirical manifestations were naturally infused with the ideas and structures borrowed from the civil society. During the long history of the Church the “empirical principles started to replace ecclesiological ones and...provoked distortions” in the life of the Church.⁴²

As Michael Plekon notes, Afanasiev recognized that one of the most serious distortions in the life of the Church was caused by “the separation of the structure and organization of the Church from the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist.”⁴³ In this separation Afanasiev sees the main reason for all the divisions and problems in the Church. It is precisely in the healing of this separation that Afanasiev sees the promise of the re-united Church.

Plekon also concludes that, besides helping to overcome the schism between the churches, Afanasiev’s “understanding of the ecclesial nature of the Eucharist and the Eucharistic essence of the Church” can also assist in diagnosing and healing of the problems common to all Christian churches in today’s secular culture.⁴⁴

In “The Lords Supper” Afanasiev chronicled “the slippage of the Eucharist from the central, defining action of the Church to merely one of many services performed (by no means the most popular) and documented the theological rationalization for this.”⁴⁵ Afanasiev showed how the dissolution of the Eucharistic assembly led to the dissolution of the Christianity, first through schism and later to contemporary dissolution of Christianity in the secular culture. Modern day Christians are afflicted by individualism because they do not *experience* the One Church in their worship:

“We profess faith in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church...but this faith goes completely unrealized in our actual life... We cannot even explain why we profess our faith in the Church. Each one remains a separate atom in relation to all the other whom we do not even know. Often, we do not know those with whom we approach the chalice. We enter the church building for ourselves alone, and not in order “to gather together as church.” The neurological center of individualism lies in the Eucharist. The foundational principle of “always all and always together” manifests itself most fully in the Eucharistic gathering, which is the gathering of all for one and the same thing. Everyone ministers to God in the Eucharist. Neither separate groups not separate members celebrate: it is the Church that celebrates.”⁴⁶

All of Afanasiev’s work is aimed at the restoration of the experience of “gathering together as a Church” - beginning with the liturgical lives of the local assemblies and extending into the relationships between the churches. To achieve that goal he carefully studied the practice of the early church and discovered that the Eucharistic nature of the Church was born entirely in the action of the Holy Spirit. He also attempted to document the accumulation of empirical factors that “has concealed the true life of the Church almost entirely.”⁴⁷ Despite the distortion and abuses in the life of the Church, the Holy Spirit was at work in the Church for the past two thousand years. Therefore, Afanasiev does not call us to re create the early Christianity in an

42 Ibid., p. 256.

43 Plekon, p. 162.

44 Ibid., p. 156.

45 Ibid., p. 157.

46 Quoted from Plekon, p. 171.

47 The Church of the Holy Spirit, p. 255-256.

attempt to renew the Church of today but he calls to re-discover the essence of the Church beneath its empirical manifestations.

Afanasiev saw ecumenism in the light of the Eucharistic worship of the Church. He discovered that the problems of the Eucharistic assembly and the problems of the divided Church are of the same nature and that they cannot be solved separately from each other. Although his insights in this area were written down in the first half of the last century, they are still acutely accurate and pastorally applicable. He teaches that we need to *experience* the oneness of the Church manifested in the Eucharistic assembly before we can restore it in the empirical life of the Church.

Despite the fact that both Eucharistic ecclesiology and ecumenism enjoy positive reception in theological circles, there is still a need for them to penetrate to the level of everyday life and practice of the local church – to the very place where we “gather together as a Church.”

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