“Structures” in the Churches of Eastern Tradition

The Eastern and Oriental Churches, whichever tradition they might follow, are deeply aware that they are Apostolic Churches. They feel that they are bound by this inheritance and they preserve it with greatest consciousness. The Second Vatican Council has referred to it with emphasis in its Decree on Ecumenism. Also Pope John Paul II in many documents during his pontificate has stressed the faithfulness to this inheritance of Apostolicity and presented it as exemplary for the western Church.

Therefore it is no wonder that the Eastern theology does not speak about “Structures”, but again and again goes back to the apostolic inheritance; for by that today’s Church remains true to Christ, its Lord, to the Apostles whom He appointed as his representatives and to their successors. Thus we can legitimately speak about the Epistles of St. Ignatius (+110), the Theophoros (God-Bearer), the second bishop of Antioch in Syria, the Church founded by St. Peter, as the Magna Charta of ecclesiastical life and Church affairs.

What are the signs of the true Church that is instrumental for the salvation of the faithful in the concrete local Churches? She is the Church “of God the Father and of the Beloved Son”. She possesses the means of Grace, she is filled with Faith and Love, she does not lack any means of Grace, and she is the “beloved of God and the bearer of the Saints”. St. Ignatius exhorts his addressees:

“You must all follow the lead of the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed that of the Father; follow the presbytery as you would the Apostles;
reverence the deacons as you would God’s commandment. Let no one do anything touching the Church, apart from the bishop. Let that celebration of the Eucharist be considered valid which is held under the bishop or anyone to whom he has committed it. Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not permitted without authorization from the bishop either to baptize or to hold an agape; but whatever he approves is also pleasing to God. Thus everything you do will be proof against danger and valid… it is well to revere God and the bishop. He who honours the bishop is honoured by God”\(^1\)

What is referred to the local Church, *ecclesia localis* (diocese, eparchy) here, has won the validity during the course of the ecclesial development on the relationship between each and every local church and the metropoles and the patriarchate, and the patriarchates among themselves. It is referring to an organic development that does not at all exclude differences in the traditions. In general it can be said that the bishops of the local churches within the Roman Empire, after 292, through tacit agreement handed over a part of their right to the chief leaders who resided in the metropoles and after that received the title Metropolitans. That does not mean that the Metropolitans (Patriarchs) were made the possessors of absolute authority. The
canons of the early Church already made it clear that a characteristic of the exercise of Eastern Church authority lies in synodality; i.e., in the collegiality of the bishops of a certain Church, a Church *sui iuris* as we say today.

During the Synod of Bishops (4th October, 2001), the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III of Antioch pointed out emphatically that it would be a mistake to call in one breath the Patriarchal synod equivalent to the Bishops’ Conference in the western Church. While the latter is an advisory body of a hierarchy of a country or area, the Patriarchal Synod, together with the Patriarch, is the *highest authority* of a Church of eastern Tradition. It can enact laws, elect bishops and patriarchs and excommunicate delinquents.³

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² See J. Madey, Quellen und Grundzüge (fn. 1) 86-94.

The Hierarchical Structures

According to the *Annuario Pontificio* 2002¹, there are 22 *sui iuris* Churches, which follow five Oriental traditions: the Alexandrian, Syro-Antiochene, Armenian, Chaldean or Syro-Oriental, and Byzantine. Out of these six are Patriarchal Churches, two Major Archiepiscopal Churches, four Metropolitan Churches. The other ten *sui iuris* Churches, all following the Byzantine tradition, have only one single eparchy or are taken care of by the Apostolic See as Apostolic Exarchates or Apostolic Administrations². The only exception is the *Italo-Albanian* Church in South Italy and Sicily. It has two eparchies and one territorial monastery.

It is striking that in the patriarchal Churches, the rights and the duties of the office of the metropolitan are surrendered to the patriarchs. The title Metropolitan or Archbishop is today an honorary title for specific sees or persons³. The Ukrainian Major Archiepiscopal *sui iuris* Church has a few metropolies outside its territory. Their metropolitans and the suffragans are similarly only aggregates (*aggregati*) of the Synod⁴. Against it, there are four metropolies in the sense of ecclesiastical provinces in the Indian Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church. Therefore, the Canons of CCEO about the Metropolitans within the Patriarchal Church (cc.133-139) are applicable to them also. Logically the Metropolies of Philadelphia (USA) and Winnipeg (Canada) of the Ukrainian Church must also be considered in the same way. They are not Metropolitan Churches *sui iuris*.

The Structures at the Eparchial level

It is difficult to say something on this point, which is valid for all. There are several reasons for that. As mentioned in the beginning, each *sui iuris* Church dates back to different traditions. Further, on the various historically conditioned grounds the number and the extension of the eparchies also vary. Some have no difference on the basis of the number of the faithful, parish structures and
extension from the western Church. The others have possibly only a handful of parishes or are as large as one single Dekanat (deanery) in Germany¹. Therefore, the decisions of CCEO regarding the advisory body of the bishop in the guidance of the eparchy and also on the presbytery assembly and the eparchial consultant body (cc. 235-278) are in practice only conditional.

As shown above in the Epistles of St. Ignatius of Antioch, the whole activity of a local Church is centred on the bishop; he, as successor of the Apostles, guides the folk of God in Christ’s name. He entrusted him to pasture it in collaboration with the presbyterium: “Adhering to its pastor and gathered by him in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes a particular Church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative”(c.177 § 1; cf. CIC c. 369).

The Eparchial Assembly

In order to get helpful support in the ecclesiastical matters, especially for his requirements and needs of the eparchy, the legislator makes provisions that the eparchial bishop establishes an eparchial assembly² (c. 235). The eparchial bishop should convene it after the consultation with the presbytery council (c. 236). Those whom the bishop invites to the eparchial assembly have the obligation to participate (c. 238). The following must be present for it, if they exist in the eparchy:

1. the coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishops;
2. the protosyncellus, the syncelli, the judicial vicar and eparchial finance officer;
3. the eparchial consulters;
4. the rector of the eparchial major seminary;
5. the protopresbyters;
6. at least one pastor from each district, to be elected by all of those who actually have the care of souls, the protopresbyter presiding over the election; another presbyter is to be elected as an alternate to fill in for him if he is impeded;
7. the members of the presbyteral council and some delegates of the pastoral council, if it exists, elected by the same council in the manner and number established by particular law;
8. some deacons elected according to the norms of particular law;
9. superiors of monasteries *sui iuris* and some superiors of other institutes of consecrated life which have houses in the eparchy, to be elected in the manner and number established by particular law;
10. lay people elected by the pastoral council, if it exists, or designated in some other manner determined by the eparchial bishop so that the number of lay people does not exceed one-third of the members of the eparchial assembly.

In spite of the considerable representation of the people of God, the eparchial bishop *alone* remains as the legislator: He “is the only participant in the eparchial assembly with a decisive voice; all the other participants have only a consultative vote”, says c. 241 (cf. c. 466) very clearly:

“The eparchial bishop is the sole legislator in the eparchial assembly, the votes of others being only consultative. He is the only one who signs the decisions which have been made in the eparchial assembly which, if they are promulgated in the same assembly, begin to oblige immediately unless expressly provided otherwise.”(c. 241).¹

It lies on the eparchial bishop to decide whether decisions should have an immediate effect or a *vacatio legis* be given, so that within a span of time the new legislation may be promulgated throughout the entire eparchy.²

² Cf. c. 1489 § 2: „Laws given by other legislators [than the Apostolic See] are promulgated in the manner determined by these legislators and begin to oblige from the date prescribed by them.”
The Eparchial Curia

Under this name should be understood the eparchial administration, which the bishop should have for his assistance. According to the canonical norms, the eparchial curia consists of the protosyncellus, the syncelli, the judicial vicar, the eparchial finance officer with the council for economic affairs, the chancellor, the eparchial judges, the promoter of justice and the defender of the bond, notaries and other persons assigned by the eparchial bishop for properly fulfilling the offices of the eparchial curia (c. 243 § 2).

But this regulation cannot be put into practice everywhere in the same way; especially in the Churches of the Near East some matters are arranged differently or lie within the competence and responsibility of the Holy Synods of the Patriarchal Churches. The Melkite Church in its Synod in September 2001 had adopted something similar in the new election of the representatives of the various synodal commissions and committees:

1. Commission for theological and ecumenical questions;
2. Commission for the questions connected with Church laws;
3. Commission for the preparation of the patriarchal assemblies;
4. Commission for the common treasury;
5. Commission for the supervision of St. Anne’s major seminary;
6. The Permanent synod;
7. Election of the president of the patriarchal tribunal of second instance;
8. Election of the secretary general of the synod;
9. Election of the moderator general of the administration of justice;
10. Election of the representative of the synodal tribunal (see above no. 7);
11. Election of the representatives for the “Synod of Bishops in Rome”.

www.malankaralibrary.com
The Council of Hierarchs of the Indian *Syro-Malankara Church*, which is a Metropolitan Church *sui iuris*, has similarly constituted a few Commissions for definite questions, which are equally valid for all the eparchies:

1. Commission for the priestly formation;
2. Commission for the clergy, the religious communities and societies of apostolic life;
3. Commission for ecumenical dialogue;
4. Commission for inter-religious dialogue
5. Commission for sacramental and liturgical questions;
6. Commission for the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement;
7. Commission for the Malankara Catholic Association, the laity and the family
8. Commission for education;
9. Commission for catechetical instruction and the mass media;
10. Various *ad hoc* Commissions with time-limited mandate.

The St. Mary’s Malankara Major Seminary, the Malankara Catholic Association and the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement are inter-eparchial institutions. We are presenting here, in a survey, a comparison showing the way in which the eparchial curias are formed. The metropolitan eparchy of Trivandrum and the eparchy of Tiruvalla are the mother eparchies of the two others, which still have the character of mission eparchies
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For a comparison is here the presentation of the structures of the *Ukrainian Catholic Church in Poland*, which after an oppression of several decades appeared again on the

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2 *Directory* (see fn. 18), 12-22, 89-97, 137-144, 166-169.
scene after the political *change* in the eastern parts of Europe\(^1\). It consists of the Metropoly of Przemysl-Warsaw and (since 1996) the Eparchy of Breslau-Danzig (Wroclaw-Gdansk)\(^2\). The Ukrainian Church in Poland is not a Church *sui iuris*, but is a Metropoly outside the territory of the Major Archiepiscopal Church of Lemberg/L’viv (Ukraine).

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\(^3\) The cathedral chapter of Przemysl has its origin in the time, when this town was under Austrian rule. It consists of the provost, four ordinary and four honorary canons.

\(^4\) In the Ukrainian Church this is the reunion of the presbyterium under the chairmanship of the eparch or exarch.
CCEO. With the Exarch Kyr Petro (Kryk), there is the protosyncellus, the chancellor (who is a deacon) and the finance officer. In addition to that, there is a finance council, the eparchial council and the presbyteral council. For the pastoral leadership in Scandinavia, another syncellus must be appointed; also a protopresbyter for Berlin and the new German states (former GDR). The other parishes and pastoral centres belong to the northern protopresbyterate with its headquarters in Hamburg, to the southern with its headquarters in Munich and to the western with its (actual) headquarters in Bamberg. In addition to this, the bishop appointed one episcopal vicar for the religious, one spiritual animator and the presidents for the catechetical commission (a deacon), the commission for the youth ministry and for the Caritas.¹

Protopresbyter and Protopresbyterate

Since the time that the Church grew over the city in which the bishop resided and with his presbyterium directly exercised his office, there emerged the necessity for a kind of intermediary office between the bishop and the pastors. Therefore new offices were set up: For the village pastoral work, there emerged the office of Corepiscopa, who was in the beginning an ordained bishop, subordinated to the bishop of the city. A similar office in relation to the city clergy was exercised by the Archpriest. Next to him, there was the Periodeutes who as representative of the city bishop conducted the visitation of the parishes of the eparchy. The institution of the protopresbyterate grew from these offices. In some Oriental Churches these titles are still now only honorific; on the other hand, as stipulated in the CCEO cc. 276-278², the office of the protopresbyter is of real significance (e.g. Ukrainian Church, Syro-Malabar Church, Syro-Malankara Church etc.).
The CCEO presupposes that the protopresbyter is a presbyter who is placed over a district consisting of several parishes (c. 276); other institutions such as schools, hospitals and pilgrim centres do not come under him.

An eparchy without parishes

The Melkite Greek Catholic eparchy of Aleppo in Syria whose history dates back to the fourth century, and which has the rank of a Metropoly is of a special category. Its territory encompasses Aleppo and surroundings. It is headed by a metropolitan with his curia (protoposyncellus, finance officer general, and secretary). There exists in the eparchy an *eparchial council* which is identical with the *presbyteral council*, in which all the incardinated priests are members and also the *small eparchial council* which consists of the protosyncellus, the finance officer, the senior-most ordained priest and two other elected priests. There are four commissions or committees: the commission for the temporal goods, the committee for social work, the Committee for social development and the committee for the cemetery.

The eparchial tribunal is *inter-ecclesial*, i.e., the tribunal of first instance for *all the Catholics* of Aleppo (Melkites, Maronites, Armenians, Chaldeans, “Latins”).

There are no canonical parishes. All the 16 priests of the Metropolitan eparchy have equal jurisdiction throughout the eparchial territory, irrespective of the nine churches they are appointed.¹

² Cf. *CIC* cc. 553-555.
Parishes

With the exception of the above-mentioned “eparchy without parishes”, the principle for the division into parishes is generally the same in all the Eastern Churches.¹

The provisions of the CCEO concerning the parishes and the parish priests are the same in content as those of the CIC. It is worth mentioning that before the Second Vatican Council, theology and canon law understood a parish to be an administrative institution or a territorial sub-unit of the eparchy at the service of the spiritual needs of the faithful (CIC [1917] c. 216; Cleri sanctitati c. 160 § 1). However, nowadays, both the CCEO and the CIC emphasize more the communio character. The parish is a community of faithful where the Eucharistic mystery is celebrated and concretely lived. And therefore the parish cannot be considered as a temporal get together of the faithful, which just exists when the Eucharist is celebrated. On the contrary, it is an established community, headed by a particular pastor and the other members.

The eastern ecclesiastical parishes are as a rule both territorial and personal. They encompass all the members of the respective Church sui iuris in a particular area. Only if a faithful of an Eastern Catholic Church is outside the border of the parish of his church sui iuris, and has no pastor to take care of him, generally the priest of the local Latin parish looks after him.¹

¹ This is valid even for those Chaldean eparchies in Iraq that, because of the Kurdish wars during the latest decades, have now only a few faithful: Amadiya (2452 faithful, 2 parishes), Aqra (192 faithful, 1 parish), Sulaimaniya (403 faithful, 1 parish).
The CCEO also briefly refers to Vatican II’s Decree on the Lay Apostolate *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no 26, dealing with the issue of consultative organs: “In the parish there are to be¹ appropriate councils dealing with pastoral and economic matters, according to the norms of the particular law” (c. 295). It is the wish of the legislator that the parish priests receive from the part of the lay people an active support in pastoral and economic matters. While the CIC proceeds from the pastoral council (CIC c. 536)² and the economic council, the CCEO simply speaks of “appropriate councils dealing with pastoral and economic matters, according to the norms of the particular law of its own Church *sui iuris*”. The CCEO hereby considers the differences of the legal structures of the different Churches of eastern tradition as well as their growth over different countries and continents.³ Therefore the CCEO that can give only the outline, leaves the details to the competence of the particular law. This includes also the question whether, as in the Roman Catholic Church, there should be a pastoral council and an economic council, in a Church *sui iuris* of Oriental tradition on the parish level. Anyway it is being tried to ward off a growing tendency coming from the Roman Catholic Church to form these councils according to the model put forward by the local political parliaments, through which the authority of the bishop and that of the parish priest are being affected in essential things connected with their office and quarrels programmed in advance.

¹ The English edition of the CCEO is more accurate in translating “habeantur” with “there are to be”, while the German translation of the CCEO, Paderborn 2000, has “there must be = muss es geben).
² The so-called *Pfarrgemeinderat* in German parishes is not identical with the pastoral council described in the CIC.
³ The collaboration of lay people in Church life is very ancient in the Churches of Oriental tradition. In this context it should be reminded of the order of the *palli yogams* (Church assemblies) with the Thomas Christians of India, abolished by Roman Catholic prelates during the period of colonialism. Its restoration continues to be an actual *desideratum*. See J. KOLLAPARAMPIL, *The Archdeacon of All-India [= The Syrian Churches Series, 5]*, Kottayam 1972, 200 and 215; TH. KOONAMMAKAL, “Syro-Malabar Maladies or Ecumenical Scandal?” in: *Christian Orient* 22 (2001), 171.
Conclusion

As a consequence of the above-mentioned matters, it becomes clear that we are not able to compare the structures of the Roman Catholic Church with the structures of the Catholic Churches of eastern tradition. The different historical backgrounds, the developments and the difficulties of the various periods are so different that one can consider always either a single Church \textit{sui iuris} at a time or several Churches which have a similar tradition and evolutionary background. By this alone it is possible for us to do justice to the Churches of eastern tradition “which are equally entrusted to the pastoral guidance of the Roman Pontiff who by God’s appointment is successor to Blessed Peter in primacy over the Universal Church”. They all possess the same dignity and are of equal rank, so that “none of them is superior to the others because of its rite”\footnote{\textsc{Vaticanum II}, \textit{Orientalium Ecclesiarum} no. 3.}

\footnotetext{\textsc{Vaticanum II}, \textit{Orientalium Ecclesiarum} no. 3.}