

OR̄T̄ XC̄ NĪ KĀ HODOXY

IN A NUTSHELL: Christ the Sole Head of the Church

The two largest Christian confessions in the world are Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Often it is said that one of the two main reasons for the Great Schism of 1054 is the “the place of the Pope.” But this is misleading, for from the Orthodox point of view the issue was the recognition of Christ as the sole Head of the Church, which affects the relation of every member of the Body to its Head, as well as affecting the Apostolic Office of Bishop to Christ as sole Head, and also the relation of Bishops to one another under the One Head Jesus Christ. It is important, therefore, for us as Orthodox Christians to understand why there can only be one Head of the Church, and why that is Christ. In the service for the reception



into the Orthodox Church of a person who is coming from a non-Orthodox confession, the Great Euchologion (Trebnik) has the following affirmation to be said by the one being received into the Church: “Do you believe and confess that the Foundation, Head, Great High Priest and Chief Shepherd of the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church is our Lord Jesus Christ; and that Bishops, Pastors, and Teachers are appointed by Him to lead the Church; and that the Guide and Pilot of this Church is the Holy Spirit” Answer: “I believe and confess that this Church is the Bride of Christ, and that herein is true salvation, which was in the Ark of Noah at the flood.” One must affirm that the sole Head of the Church is Christ. No one shares this with Him. But those in communion with the Church of Rome (both Latin and Eastern rite) are bound to believe that there are two heads, one “visible” and one “invisible.”

We must identify which one is correct, since this affects not only our relationship to Christ, but also the relationship of the Church on earth to the Church in heaven, and the relationship of Bishops as the appointed local Shepherds of Christ to one another. Only one can be correct—either there is One universal Head of the Church in heaven an earth, as the Orthodox say, or there are two heads--one who is head on

earth as a vicar of the other head in heaven--as Roman theology says. What does the universal witness of Scripture and the undivided Church of the first millennium have to say on this matter?

It is very clear in Scripture that the Church has only one Head: **“Christ is the Head of the Church”** (Eph. 5.23). There is no other person that is said to be head, but only **“He is the Head of the Body, the Church,** who is the Beginning, the firstborn of the dead, that in all things He might have pre-eminence” (Col. 1.18). **“And He Himself** gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ...that we should no longer be children, tossed to and from and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men...but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into **Him who is the Head—Christ—from whom the whole Body,** joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the Body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4.11-16). To misunderstand this principle by adding another “visible head” is to completely miss the point and abandon the principles of Christianity established by Christ and the Apostles. The term vicar implies a person’s absence, but, as the Pan-Orthodox council of 1848 states, Christ needs no vicar where He Himself is present.

Christ has not left the Church and therefore needs no vicar, for it was He Himself who said “lo I am with you always” and “wherever two or three are gathered there I am in their midst.” We are not to doubt, nor to look for any other Head, for “He [God the Father] put all things under His [Christ’s] feet, and gave **Him to be Head over all things to the Church”** (Ephesians 1.22). Indeed, we are to flee those who lead us astray by “not holding fast to **the Head,** from whom all the Body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase from God” (Col. 2.19). We also look to the other Scriptures that make it clear that Christ is the Head of the Church: Matt. 21.42; Mk 12.10 Lk 20.17; Acts 4.11; 1 Pet. 2.7 (“the head of the corner” or “chief cornerstone”).

In Scripture we actually find the condemnation of looking to another Head, even among the Apostles, “I am of Paul, or Peter, or Apollos” for “is Christ divided?” No, He is the sole Head of the Church in its entirety. He shares this with no other. The Bishops are appointed as heads of the local Churches throughout the world, but on the universal scale are bound together, including the eldest brother in the Episcopacy, under one Head--Christ. We see this in the Icon of Pentecost, where Christ is enthroned in the center (usually either

invisibly, or in form of Gospel or throne/altar with Chalice), with Sts. Peter and Paul in the most prominent positions as leaders among the Apostles, with the whole of the Apostolic College flanking them.

It is clear from Scripture, then, that there is only one Head of the Body. There is no “visible head of the visible body” and another “invisible head of the invisible body” as later claimed by Rome, but rather the visible and invisible head of the one Body, whether it be visible or invisible. There is only one Head of the Church, and that is Christ, so that “as in super-heavenly, spiritual and visible things the Word



of God is supreme, **so also in things visible and corporeal, He might possess the supremacy and, taking to Himself the pre-eminence, as well as constituting Himself Head of the Church; He shall draw all things to Himself at the proper time...**” (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 180AD; SC 34.292). There is no doubt that not only the New Testament, but also the entirety of the early Church saw only one Head of the Church, *whether things visible or invisible. Christ is the sole visible and invisible head of the Church.*

The Seventh Ecumenical Council made clear that Christ is the sole Head of the Church: “After this may be there be no further schism and separation in the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, **of which Christ our true God is the Head.**” (7th Ecumenical Council, Acts Session 1). This is affirmed also by the Council of Carthage: “Inasmuch as there is but one Body of the Most Holy Church, and **the Head of all its members is but One**, as it happened by God’s will...we persons have come to join this Church with the incentive of love and brotherhood” (Carthage Canon 94). Very clearly here we have one affirmation of the Church of the West and East in unison that there is only One head of all the Church’s members, in heaven and on earth, and

not one head here and another there. As St. Leo the Great (5th c.) once said of the Lord: “He has delegated to **shepherds** [bishops] the care of His sheep, **yet He has not abandoned the guardianship of the Flock.** And with His prevailing and eternal protection we have also received the support of the Apostles' aid, whose assistance does not cease from its operation; and the foundation’s strength, on which the entire superstructure is reared, is not disturbed by the weight of the temple that rests upon it” (*Elevation Anniversary Sermon*)

An ancient Christian document written about 138AD confirms that the early Church upheld this same principle: "Polycarp... rejoices with the Apostles and all the just to glorify God the Father Almighty and to bless our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls and Helmsman of our bodies and **Shepherd of the whole (katholikos) Church throughout the world**" (*Epistle on the Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 19.2). Notice that this speaks of Christ as the head not only of the invisible, but of the **VISIBLE Church**, the Church “throughout the world,” not vicariously through another as one absent, but as one who is Himself continuously present. Christ is the Great and only Shepherd of His One Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church who rules the Church throughout the cosmos at all times, with all things working together in Him.

As the 17th century Patriarch of Jerusalem Dositheus states: “Of which [Orthodox] Catholic Church, **Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is Head, since a mortal man cannot universally and perpetually be head**, and He is at the helm in the governing of the Church through the Holy Fathers, Himself being the one who holds the rudder” (*Orthodox Confession*: Dec. 10). No one rules in His stead, but, rather, with Him, at His side as His right and left hand. Of course, Scripture itself, as we have shown, declares this plainly.

The Lord Himself rules throughout the whole Body, in heaven and earth. The Parish Priest shepherds the local community of each parish, and the Bishop Shepherds the Church locally in each Diocese, but there is only one Chief Shepherd of the Universal Church, with the Bishops collegially having “the mind of Christ” in Synod, confirmed by the whole Church. “And Christ gave to the Apostles, and the Apostles to the people.”



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