

# Priority of the Universal Church Over the Particular Church? A Ratzinger-Kasper Debate

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to examine Pope Benedict XVI or Joseph Ratzinger’s writings on the church, focusing on the Ratzinger-Kasper debate, to highlight an essential feature of Ratzinger’s ecclesiology – the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church – and its significance. Ratzinger’s understanding of the Church can be described as “ecclesiology from above” as opposed to “ecclesiology from below.”<sup>1</sup> Ratzinger’s communion ecclesiology emphasizes the following features of a Catholic Church: a valid ministerial order, papal approval for bishops’ consecrations, a valid Eucharist, and above all, communion with Rome.

The final segment of this paper discusses the implications of the Ratzinger-Kasper debate on the Church in China regarding two contentious issues: the appointment of bishops and papal authority. Upholding the primacy of the Petrine Office, Ratzinger was anxious to safeguard the unity of the Chinese Church. Kasper's ecclesiology, which emphasizes the importance of local churches, may perhaps be more acceptable to the Chinese Church

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1 Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol.1 (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 18-25, 56-66.

leaders. The Ratzinger-Kasper debate reveals the complexities that exist in the relationship between the universal and local churches, which is being played out vividly in Sino-Vatican relations.

[摘要] 本文試圖檢視教宗本篤十六或賴辛格的教會學著作，焦點在於賴辛格——卡斯柏的辯論，當中突出賴辛格教會學的一個基本特徵——普世教會在本質上和時間上（比地方教會）的優先性——及其意義。賴辛格對教會的理解可以描述為「由上而下的教會觀」，而不是「由下而上的教會觀」。賴辛格的共融教會學強調天主教會的以下特點：有效的職務等級、教宗批准的主教祝聖、有效的聖體聖事，以及最重要的是與羅馬教會的共融。

本文的最後一部分討論了賴辛格——卡斯柏辯論對中國教會的影響，當中涉及兩個富爭議的問題：主教的任命和教宗的權威。強調羅馬教會主教的首席地位，賴辛格會熱切維護中國教會的團結。卡斯柏的教會觀則強調地方教會的重要性，也許被中國教會的領導者更容易接受。賴辛格——卡斯柏的辯論揭示了普世教會與地方教會之間的關係存在的複雜性，這在中梵關係中正具體地展現出來。

## Introduction

The point of departure for Joseph Ratzinger's theology has always been ecclesiology. Most of his writings deal with ecclesiology in one way or another. In his doctoral dissertation, he started off with an ecclesiological topic exploring the themes of the people and household of God in the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo. Ratzinger's understanding of Christian anthropology, the relationship between nature and grace and his Bavarian background, with a strong sense of the church being at the heart of the community, shaped his understanding of ecclesiology. Vatican II's understanding of the Church also affected Ratzinger's own ecclesiology both in the formative and reactive sense. Thus not only did Ratzinger have a significant impact on the Council's understanding of the Church, he was also deeply influenced by it and continued to reflect and write on ecclesiological issues.<sup>2</sup>

This article attempts to examine Ratzinger's writings on the Church, focusing on the Ratzinger-Kasper debate, to highlight an essential feature of Ratzinger's ecclesiology – the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church – and its significance. Ratzinger's understanding of the Church can be described as “ecclesiology from above” as opposed

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2 Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey* (New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 81-82. Some material in this article appears in Ambrose Mong, *Are Non-Christian Saved?: Joseph Ratzinger's Thought on Religious Pluralism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), pp. 67-91.

to “ecclesiology from below.”<sup>3</sup> The final segment of this paper discusses the implications of the Ratzinger-Kasper debate on the Church in China regarding two contentious issues: the appointment of bishops and papal authority. Upholding the primacy of the Petrine Office, Ratzinger was anxious to safeguard the unity of the Chinese Church. Kasper's ecclesiology, which emphasizes the importance of local churches, may perhaps be more acceptable to the Chinese church leaders. The Ratzinger-Kasper debate reveals the complexities that exist in the relationship between the universal and local churches, which is being played out vividly in Sino-Vatican relations.

A number of documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, as prefect, show an attempt to declare as normative, his particular ecclesiological vision. Motivated by his perception of how the Church should respond to the social, cultural and intellectual challenges posed by contemporary society, his writings on ecclesiology reveal an apologetic stance. Believing that the Church is not a human construction, but is a gift from God, Ratzinger takes a negative view of pluralism and is bent on correcting theologians who present any different ecclesiology he thinks is a threat to the faith of ordinary believers. He takes a centrist approach to ecclesiology and believes that “All roads lead to Rome.”

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3 Roger D. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol.1: *Historical Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 18-25, 56-66.

In spite of criticism, the ecclesiology of Ratzinger has also been supported by many, including Maximilian Heinrich Heim, who has done an important and detailed study on this subject in his book *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology*. There are many educated Catholics who find great encouragement from Ratzinger’s efforts to restore the Church to its original mission, in this turbulent time – “a restoration of theological faithfulness and a vision for a renewed Christendom.” Ratzinger’s vision of the Church is seen as a renewal through both the mind and heart, as well as through various church movements.<sup>4</sup> He rightly believes that the Church is in constant need of reform.

### ***Ecclesia Semper Reformanda***

Joseph Ratzinger has frequently discussed his preference for a smaller and purer Church, but critics claim that Ratzinger “represents a backward-looking and intransigent form of ecclesiology that is exclusivistic and life-denying.”<sup>5</sup> This is not exactly a fair judgment because Ratzinger, like Augustine and Martin Luther before him, maintains that the church needs constant renewal – *Ecclesia semper reformanda* – a sentiment also expressed by the Second Vatican Council. However, Ratzinger has his own view of renewal and some would call it restoration.

Real reform, according to Ratzinger, is not about making structural changes to the Church. It is about personal

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4 Boeve and Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader*, p. 114.

5 Ibid., p. 85.

admission of sins and shortcomings. He reminds us that the Church is not ours but Christ's. Hence, reform and renewal cannot be just efforts to erect new structures. Real reform means to reform ourselves as individuals. Ratzinger tells us that saints reformed the Church in depth, not by grand plans, but by reforming themselves. What the Church needs, he insists, is not management but holiness.<sup>6</sup>

Thus for Ratzinger, renewal for the Church means a new orientation to Christ who is its origin. Renewal is “never a glorification or a new edition of the past in the sense of *restoration*.”<sup>7</sup> In his interview with Vittorio Messori, however, Ratzinger considered restoration desirable, “if by *restoration* we understand the search for a new balance after all the exaggerations of an indiscriminate opening to the world, after the overly positive interpretations of an agnostic and atheistic world.”<sup>8</sup> Here Ratzinger is critical of the erroneous interpretation of Vatican II which resulted in the indiscriminate opening to the values of the world.

## **Ecclesiology of Communion**

Joseph Ratzinger teaches that the concept of *communion* lies “at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding.” This

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6 Joseph Ratzinger, and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), p. 53.

7 Maximilian Heinrich Heim, Michael J. Miller, and Joseph Ratzinger, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 197.

8 Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 37.

implies the union of each person with the Trinity and with the rest of humanity. Rooted in faith and begun as a reality in the church on earth, it is “directed towards its eschatological fulfillment in the heavenly Church.”<sup>9</sup> This concept of communion must be understood in the biblical sense and in the biblical context, communion has theological, Christological, soteriological and ecclesiological characteristics.<sup>10</sup>

There is also this sacramental dimension as acknowledged by St Paul: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body ...” (1 Cor 10:16-17). Thus, the ecclesiology of communion forms the basis for Eucharistic ecclesiology. Ratzinger writes:

The Eucharist celebrated in different places is universal at the same time, because there is only one Christ and only a single body of Christ. The Eucharist comprehends the priestly service of “*repraesentatio Christi*” as well as that network of service, the synthesis of unity and multiplicity which is expressed in the term “*communio*.”<sup>11</sup>

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9 Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion,” [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_28051992\\_communionis-notio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html).

10 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy), <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfeccv2.htm>.

11 Ibid.

Communion has two dimensions: the vertical that is communion with God and the horizontal that is communion with one another. Christians must understand that communion is a gift from God given to us through the paschal mystery. Ecclesial communion is both invisible and visible. The invisible reality refers to our communion with the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The visible reality is our communion with one another, as sharers in the divine nature, in the passion of Christ and in the same faith. In the church on earth, there is this close relationship between the invisible and visible aspects of communion. The link between these two dimensions of communion, invisible and visible, “constitutes the Church as the *Sacrament* of salvation”. From this sacramentality, Ratzinger argues, the church is open to missionary and ecumenical work. It is sent out to the world to realize the mystery of communion which is essential to its nature: “to gather together all people and all things into Christ; so as to be for all an *‘inseparable sacrament of unity.’*”<sup>12</sup>

Another important point that Ratzinger makes is the idea that the church is a communion of saints. This communion fosters unity among the members of the church when they are members of one body. The invisible element means that communion exists not only among those still living, but also between those who have died in Christ, in the hope of rising again. Ratzinger writes:

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12 Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church,” nos. 3-4.

... that there is a *mutual relationship* between the pilgrim Church on earth and the heavenly Church in the historical-redemptive mission. Hence the ecclesiological importance not only of Christ's intercession on behalf of his members, but also of that of the saints and, in an eminent fashion, of the Blessed Virgin Mary's.<sup>13</sup>

Ratzinger's understanding of communion became the official ecclesiology when he was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Meanwhile, the word "communion" was interpreted differently by different people. Ratzinger says that like the expression "People of God," the word "communion" became a "slogan," its meaning distorted and devalued when people only emphasized the horizontal aspect and abandoned the vertical dimension. In this case the ecclesiology of communion was reduced to a concern with relations between the local churches and the universal Church. The egalitarian emphasis on equality in communion was gaining popularity. In "Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity," Ratzinger expressed his concern clearly:

It was unavoidable that this great fundamental word of the New Testament, isolated and employed as a slogan, would also suffer diminishment, indeed, might even be trivialized. Those who speak today of an "ecclesiology of communion" generally tend to mean two things: (1) they support a "pluralist" ecclesiology, almost a "federative" sense of union, opposing what they see as

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13 Ibid., no. 6.

a centralist conception of the Church; (2) they want to stress, in the exchanges of giving and receiving among local Churches, their culturally pluralistic forms of worship in the liturgy, in discipline and in doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

In this erroneous understanding, according to Ratzinger, communion is seen as “emerging from a network of multiple communities.” He is opposed to the horizontal idea of communion, with its emphasis on the idea of “self-determination within a vast community of churches,” that dominates the thinking of the Church.<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger admits the need to correct the imbalance and excessiveness of Roman centralization, but he also reminds us that questions of this sort should not distract us from the main task of proclaiming Christ to the world. He rightly asserts that the Church should not be proclaiming itself but God.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Ratzinger insists that communion is related to the universal Church, with its ecclesial hierarchy and papal primacy. Thus, there are criteria to be met by Christian communities in order to be qualified as a “valid Church.” These criteria centre on the requirements of “valid ministerial orders, including a valid episcopate, and the

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14 Lecture by H.E. Cardinal Ratzinger at the Bishops’ Conference of the Region of Campania in Benevento (Italy) on the topic: “Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity,” [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020602\\_ratzinger-eucharistic-congress\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020602_ratzinger-eucharistic-congress_en.html).

15 Ibid.

16 Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II.”

celebration of a valid Eucharist.” Above all, for Ratzinger, communion with Rome is an important prerequisite.<sup>17</sup> It is no surprise that he insists on the ontological priority of the universal Church.

Joseph Ratzinger was highly criticized for his assertion concerning the priority of the universal Church: “The universal Church in her essential mystery is a reality that ontologically and temporally is prior to every particular Church.” He replies to the criticism by saying that “the ontological priority of the universal Church — the unique Church, the unique Body, the unique Bride — vis-à-vis the empirical, concrete manifestations of various, particular Churches is so obvious to me that I find it difficult to understand the objections raised against it.”<sup>18</sup> Those objections are possible only if we look at the Church with its shortcomings and not as something willed by God. For Ratzinger, these oppositions are “theological ravings” by people who see the Church only as a human institution. He sarcastically remarks that nowadays, any theologian concerned about his reputation feels the need to criticize all documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Thus, “in this case one has abandoned not only the ecclesiology of the Fathers, but the ecclesiology of the New Testament and the understanding of Israel in the Old Testament as well. It is not just the later deutero-Pauline letters and the Apocalypse that affirm the ontological priority

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17 Boeve and Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader*, p. 83.

18 Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II.”

of the universal Church to the particular Churches.”<sup>19</sup> We will now examine in greater detail this contentious issue which involves Ratzinger’s highly publicized debate with Cardinal Walter Kasper.

### **Priority of the Universal Church**

When the ecclesiological concept of communion is applied analogously to the relationship between the universal Church and particular churches, Ratzinger strongly asserts the priority of the universal Church. He dismisses the idea that the particular church is a subject complete in itself. According to Ratzinger:

In order to grasp the true meaning of the analogical application of the term *communion* to the particular Churches taken as a whole, one must bear in mind above all that the particular Churches, insofar as they are “*part of the one Church of Christ,*” have a special relationship of “*mutual interiority*” with the whole, that is, with the universal Church, because in every particular Church “*the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active.*”<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, Ratzinger insists that the universal Church is not merely the sum of all the particular churches or a federation of churches. It is also not the result of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church,” no. 9.

the communion of all the churches, but “it is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior to every *individual* particular Church.” The universal Church is the mother and not the offspring of the particular churches.<sup>21</sup>

In its original and first manifestation, the Church is universal. The local churches that have arisen in different places are particular expressions of the one unique Church of Jesus Christ. “Arising *within* and *out of* the universal Church, they have their ecclesiality in it and from it.”<sup>22</sup> Ratzinger argues that the relationship between the universal Church and the particular churches is a mystery and cannot be compared to any human organization. We become members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church through faith and baptism. However we “do not belong to the universal Church in a *mediate way, through* belonging to a particular church.” Instead, we belong to the universal Church in an “*immediate way*” although we enter it through a particular church. Ratzinger says “from the point of view of the Church understood as communion, this means therefore that the universal *communion of the faithful* and the *communion of the Churches* are not consequences of one another, but constitute the same reality seen from different viewpoints.”<sup>23</sup> This means that when one becomes a Catholic through a particular church, one automatically belongs to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., no. 10.

## The Ratzinger-Kasper Debate

Joseph Ratzinger's strong assertion of the priority of the universal Church led to a prolonged debate between him and Cardinal Walter Kasper. In a series of exchanges, Kasper accuses Ratzinger of reversing the traditional order of priority. This is because "the local church is neither a province nor a department of the universal Church; it is the Church at a given place."<sup>24</sup> Kasper says he has reached this position regarding the relationship between the universal Church and particular local churches through his pastoral experience. He analyzes the question in terms of praxis and not doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Kasper accuses Ratzinger of approaching the problem from a purely abstract and theoretical point of view, without taking into consideration the actual pastoral situations.

Walter Kasper is particularly against the assertion of Ratzinger that: "in its essential mystery, the universal Church is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual church."<sup>26</sup> He contends that the CDF identifies the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church with the universal Church in a way that excludes the particular churches. Another serious problem with Ratzinger's assertion of the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church is

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24 Walter Kasper, "On the Church," *America*, 184 (April 23, 2001): 9.

25 Kilian McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper debate: the universal church and local churches," *Theological Studies*, 63, 2 (2002): 231.

26 Kasper, "On the Church," p. 10.

the unspoken assumption that “the Roman Church is *de facto* identified with the Pope and the Curia.”<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Ratzinger, Kasper believes that the problem of the relationship between the universal Church and the local churches cannot be approached by theoretical deduction because the Church is a concrete reality. Like Ratzinger, he starts off with scripture, but arrives at a different conclusion. Kasper writes:

In the letters of Paul, the local church is clearly and firmly at the center. When in his principal letters Paul uses the word “church” (*ecclesia*) in the singular, he refers to a particular church or to a given community. When he speaks of “churches” in the plural, he refers to several local assemblies. For Paul, the one church of God comes to life in each local church.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, Kasper also asserts that in the Gospel of Luke, the word *ecclesia* refers to a domestic and local community. The early Church was developed from local communities, presided over by a bishop; “the one church was present in each and all, they were all in communion.” Kasper acknowledges that the See of Rome, “presiding in charity,” was the guiding and leading authority in determining orthodoxy. For the Eastern Church, this authority of Rome

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27 McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper debate,” p. 231.

28 Kasper, “On the Church,” pp. 10-11.

did not include jurisdictional power.<sup>29</sup> Thus Kasper concludes that the ecclesiology of the first millennium neither stressed the primacy of the universal Church nor the local churches.

Kasper argues that the CDF document, “On Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, “went beyond the limits of the council’s doctrine, which is that the universal Church exists ‘in and from’ the local churches. The CDF asserted that the local churches exist ‘in and from’ the universal Church.”<sup>30</sup> Kasper thinks that Ratzinger’s doctrine of the primacy of the universal Church is based on a highly questionable understanding of the Pentecostal event in the Acts of the Apostles. This is because the Pentecostal event does not refer to the universal Church, but to the gathering of the Jewish people living outside Israel, which will eventually become a Church of all nations, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

Ratzinger finds support for his understanding of the ontological primacy of the universal church in a theory about the pre-existence of the Church in the words of Paul who speaks about the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22 ff). Kasper admits that this was a widespread opinion held by the early fathers and evident in the Jewish Torah as well as in Platonic philosophy. Although the pre-existence of the Church is an important theological doctrine for a correct understanding

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29 Ibid., p. 11.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 13.

of ecclesiology, Kasper insists that it is not an argument to support the ontological primacy of the universal Church.<sup>32</sup>

Kasper claims that the Pauline texts about the pre-existence of the Church do not support the idea of the primacy of the universal Church, but they do support his argument and that of many others as well, of the simultaneous pre-existence of the universal Church and the particular churches. This is because the pre-existent Church exists in and from the particular churches. Quoting Henri de Lubac, Kasper says that the universal Church cannot have a separate existence, or even exist, outside the particular churches: “God does not love empty abstractions. He loves concrete human beings of flesh and blood. God’s eternal saving will intended the incarnation of the Logos in view of the concrete church composed of people of flesh and blood.”<sup>33</sup>

Kasper also admits that this debate about the primacy of the churches is not a contest over Catholic doctrine, but it is a conflict between theological opinions and underlying philosophical assumptions. Influenced by Bonaventure, Ratzinger proceeds from Plato’s teaching on the primacy of ideas as a universal concept. Kasper, more of a Thomist, follows Aristotle’s approach and looks upon the universal as existing in a particular concrete reality.<sup>34</sup> Both the Platonic and Aristotelian schools were accepted as part of the

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32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

Catholic tradition. Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas were respected as doctors of the church and venerated as saints. If such pluralism and diversity were accepted in the Middle Ages, Kasper argues, Ratzinger should be more flexible in accepting differences of opinion.<sup>35</sup>

The motive behind Kasper's objection to the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church, Ratzinger believes, is related to Roman centralism and the role of bishops. He insists that the CDF never dreamt of identifying the universal Church with the Pope and the Roman Curia. Thus, the fear of Roman centralism is unfounded. In response to this "attack," Ratzinger writes:

The church of Rome is a local church and not the universal church — a local church with a peculiar, universal responsibility, but still a local church. And the assertion of the inner precedence of God's idea of the one church, the one bride, over all its empirical realizations in particular churches has nothing whatsoever to do with the problem of centralism.<sup>36</sup>

This means, according to Ratzinger, that the identification of the ontological priority of the universal Church with the Pope and the Curia makes no sense because ontological priority is only an expression of the "inner priority of unity" of the Church. It has nothing to do with Roman centralism.

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35 Ibid., p. 14.

36 Joseph Ratzinger, "The local church and the universal Church : a response to Walter Kasper," *America* 185,16 (November 19, 2001): 10.

Kasper admits that the transformation of Ratzinger's thesis of the ontological priority of the universal Church into "the priority of inner unity" can be accommodated in both Platonic and Aristotelian paradigms. Kasper writes: "The fact that unity as a transcendental determination of being makes variety and multiplicity possible to begin with is a fundamental insight of both Platonic and Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, which thereby stand in opposition to the postmodern principle of absolute pluralism."<sup>37</sup>

Both theologians agree that the one Church of Jesus Christ exists "in and from" the local church and the local churches exist "in and from" the universal Church.<sup>38</sup> Kasper is concerned that Ratzinger's universal Church is just an abstraction without any historical foundation. Ratzinger thinks that Kasper's ecclesiology reduces the Church to a sociological entity, a Church without depth. Ratzinger insists on a sequence: the universal Church comes first, then the local church. But Kasper argues that one does not step out of the local church into the universal Church (or *vice versa*): "Because of simultaneity and perichoresis, one is already in the universal Church when one is in local church."<sup>39</sup> Thus Kasper denies the ontological priority of the universal Church.

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37 Walter Kasper, "From the President of the Council for Promoting Christian Unity," *America* 185,17 (November 26, 2001): 29.

38 Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church."

39 McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper debate," p. 248.

The debate took place when Walter Kasper was secretary and later president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. During this period, Joseph Ratzinger was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Their theological positions can be understood as reflecting their ecclesial functions: Kasper is concerned with ecumenism and Ratzinger is concerned with the doctrine of the faith. Nonetheless, the debate between these two distinguished German theologians highlights ecclesiological complexities and tensions. It is clear that Ratzinger's theological approach is to strengthen the unity or universality of the Church, which he thinks is threatened by pluralism. As Prefect of the CDF, his preferred ecclesiological model became normative and binding on all Catholics, including theologians.

Ratzinger has the tendency to label theological positions which differ from his as ideologies or slogans. He unfairly associates Kasper with the “sociological reductionism” and “ecclesiological relativism” of Leonardo Boff's theology.<sup>40</sup> Many question the propriety of Ratzinger comparing Kasper's ecclesiology with Boff's understanding of the Church. Boff and Kasper inhabit different ecclesiological planets.<sup>41</sup> Kasper's ecclesiology goes beyond sociological-empirical reductionism. A criticism like that coming from Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect of the CDF is not only inappropriate, but reveals his reluctance to accept ideas from

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40 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Notification to Father Leonardo Boff,” March 11, 1985.

41 McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper debate,” p. 249.

a different theological framework, not even if they come from no less a theologian than Cardinal Walter Kasper.

### **Simultaneity of the Universal and Local Churches**

The debate over the relationship between the universal and local churches may seem abstract and esoteric, but as Kasper notes, it has profound implications for ecumenical efforts to coalesce Christian churches into a visible unity. If the Catholic Church insists on Roman centralism while stressing the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church, Protestant and Orthodox Churches would not be willing to engage in dialogue for fear of being absorbed by an overly centralized Catholicism. Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, a well-known ecclesialogist in the French-speaking world, offers a more open and accommodative ecclesiological model for ecumenism.

Tillard rejects the question of priority as a misleading notion. He argues that the universal Church is a communion and not a confederation of local Churches, “a communion of communions.” He agrees that each local church exists only in communion with the universal Church and the universal Church does not exist apart from the communion of local churches. Against priority, Tillard argues that the universal and local churches are “simultaneous.” This means that the question of the priority of the universal Church, as advocated by Ratzinger, betrays a misunderstanding of unity and diversity.<sup>42</sup>

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42 Christopher Ruddy, *The Local Church: Tillard and the Future of Catholic Ecclesiology* (Herder & Herder, 2006), p. 100.

While Tillard agrees with Ratzinger on the idea of mutual interiority of the universal and local churches and on the mutual ordering of primacy and collegiality-synodality, he rejects, on four points, the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church in favour of “simultaneity.”<sup>43</sup> The first point is trinitarian communion: the Church of Christ is modelled on the image of the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Spirit. This trinitarian root cannot be separated from its reality as a “hierarchical institution.” The unity and diversity of the Church is the “‘refraction of the divine life’ as revealed in the Johannine vision of divine mutual indwelling.”<sup>44</sup>

Second, this trinitarian vision demonstrates that diversity is an inherent element of divine and ecclesial unity. Hence, the simple notion of the universal versus the particular is ruled out.<sup>45</sup> Tillard’s theology of catholicity and the local church emphasizes the “mutual inherence and simultaneity of locality and universality.” It claims that “the Church is catholic precisely because it is local, and vice versa.”<sup>46</sup>

Third, the Pentecostal church of Jerusalem is simultaneously local and universal. The universality of the Pentecostal Church is seen in its “speaking all tongues.” It means that the Church embraces all nations and cultures.

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43 Ibid., p. 102.

44 Ruddy, *The Local Church*, p. 103.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 104.

This universality is at the same time manifested only in specific places. Jerusalem “bears the marks of a distinctive culture and salvation history.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore Tillard argues that the Jerusalem Church is both local and universal. “Its ecclesiality depends upon their simultaneity.”<sup>48</sup>

Fourth, Tillard maintains that the universal Church “*is* the communion of local churches,” not a separate Church, above or prior to the local churches. Since the universal and local churches exist in mutual interiority and simultaneity, “every local church is the Church of God.”<sup>49</sup> This means that if there were only one local church left, the Church of God would still exist in its entirety there – the whole Church being in the local church.

Tillard’s support for the simultaneity of the universal and local churches is more convincing and more open than Ratzinger’s insistence on universal priority, which tends to lessen the importance of the particular or local churches. Joseph Komonchak classifies Ratzinger’s position as “merely theological” ecclesiology that neglects the human and cultural dimensions of the Church and its catholicity. Thus the “church appears to float in mid-air, constituted solely by the theological, divine, supernatural elements, while socio-cultural locality represents at best the natural and human

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47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., p. 105.

49 Ibid.

variety within catholicity....”<sup>50</sup> Ratzinger’s position seems to suggest the incompleteness of the local churches, while Tillard’s support of simultaneity seems more acceptable. Another criticism of Ratzinger’s ecclesiology is his dualistic outlook, regarding the church in relation to the world which Eamon Duffy characterizes as “Manichean.”

### **Manichean Influence**

Critics are concerned that the Church has become increasingly reactionary in recent years and that Ratzinger’s ecclesiological outlook “fosters an exclusivistic mentality” in the Church. It is an ecclesiology that perceives the Church as a separate entity vis-à-vis the world. It is a Church that has to fight against the corrupting influences of the present time.<sup>51</sup> In this regard, Eamon Duffy describes Ratzinger’s view of the church-world relationship as Manichean in outlook, “the lurid and simplistic world of easy dualisms.” Ratzinger sees, in the atheistic culture of Western contemporary society “signs of the return of dark forces” in the form of the “liberal-radical ideology.”<sup>52</sup> Since the 1960s, there has existed a “scandalous optimism,” an “uncritical openness to the world,” which Ratzinger believes must be abandoned.<sup>53</sup> Duffy asserts that this kind of worldview ignores the experience of the Pauline communities and all Christian

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50 Ibid., p. 107.

51 Boeve and Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader*, p. 87.

52 Eamon Duffy, “Urbi, but not Orbi,” *New Blackfriars* 66, 780 (1985): 273.

53 Ibid., p. 274.

communities, who understand the Church as a place where “sin, error and sheer human cussedness co-exist alongside grace and truth.”<sup>54</sup>

Duffy insists that there cannot be the “sort of simple church/world dualism” that Ratzinger perceives because the “Church *is* the world.” All the Church’s thinking and its institutions are conditioned by the secular world and are thereby “implicated in the relativism and imperfection of the created order.” The authoritarian and hierarchical model of the Church is shaped by social, cultural and political forces, derived from the Roman imperial government. These influences are still prevalent in the Church. Duffy claims that “even the most unequivocally spiritual concerns and activities of the Church are rooted in worldly paradigms.”<sup>55</sup> Duffy also argues that Ratzinger’s rejection of liberal modernity in Catholicism “is not the rejection of the ‘world’ by the Church, but the repudiation of one form of ‘worldliness’ in favor of another. Ascetic, aristocratic, authoritarian, corporatist, over against liberal, democratic, bourgeois, individualistic.” Duffy cautions us against accepting Ratzinger’s deification of one polarity and demonizing of the other.<sup>56</sup> The authoritarian and hierarchical model of the Church fits well with what Roger Haight describes as “ecclesiology from above” in contrast to “ecclesiology from below.”

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54 Ibid., p. 273.

55 Ibid., p. 277.

56 Ibid., p. 278.

## Ecclesiology from Above

Roger Haight's analysis of "ecclesiology from above" offers an accurate description of Ratzinger's understanding of the nature of the Church. This ecclesiological, ideal type, is characterized by the attempt to define "the essential nature and structure of the Church that transcends any given context." It is an "a-historical" view of the Church in which its essence "is determined by those constitutive elements that transcend its particular instantiations, and these can be grasped precisely by abstracting from those individualizing particulars which characterize the Church wherever it is, but are precisely not of its defining substance." This method tends towards exclusivism because in defining the Church, it sets forth "the limits or frontiers beyond which is non-church or a defective embodiment of it."<sup>57</sup>

An ecclesiology from above is one that looks upon the authority of the magisterium, tradition and scripture as absolute. Haight argues that such ecclesiology "presupposes the intelligibility of the doctrinal language about the Church, and it appeals to its normative character."<sup>58</sup> This kind of ecclesiological vision tends to see the Church standing against the world. Haight says: "in contrast to the world in its secularity, the Church defines the sphere of the sacred.... Implicitly, the Church represented a social reality that was in some measure set apart from the world, usually in some sense 'above' it."<sup>59</sup>

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57 Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1, p. 19.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

In ecclesiology from above, the development of the Church is based on a doctrinal account of history which is different from critical history: “God’s providence in history led to the Church; God more or less ‘directly’ founds the Church in the work of Jesus Christ; and God as Spirit animates and directs the development of the church from its beginning at Pentecost.”<sup>60</sup> Haight’s account of ecclesiology from above is clearly reflected in Joseph Ratzinger’s writings on the church.

Another feature of ecclesiology from above is its “christocentrism.” In Haight’s view, “this means that the Church, even when it is not considered constitutive of the salvation of all, is the summit of all religious forms, and the single, normative religion that is superior to all others because the Church is constituted by Christ as its center. In short, in an ecclesiology from above, christocentrism has a tendency to become ecclesiocentrism.”<sup>61</sup> The final aspect of Haight’s description of ecclesiology from above is the hierarchical structuring and ordering of the Church itself: “the levels of power and authority have their foundation in God, and they descend.”<sup>62</sup>

Ecclesiology from above is similar to what Nicholas Healy calls “blueprint ecclesiologies.” Healy says, “Ecclesiology is not about the business of finding the single right way to think about the Church, of developing a

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60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., p. 23.

62 Ibid.

blueprint suitable for all times and places. Rather, I propose that its function is to aid the concrete church in performing its task of witness and pastoral care within what I will call its ‘ecclesiological context.’”<sup>63</sup> Ratzinger, however, believes there is a blueprint that is universal and timeless for the church to build on. Unfortunately, he writes: “... the Church of the post-conciliar period is a huge construction site ... where the blueprint had been lost and everyone continues to build according to his taste. The result is evident.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Ecclesiology from Below**

Ecclesiology from below refers to a method in which one examines the Church from its “concrete, existential and historical” perspectives.<sup>65</sup> It takes a “genetic approach” in the sense that it is attentive to the Church’s origin as an historical organization. By applying the tools of social and historical analysis to examine the nature of the Church, it acknowledges that the Church is an organization susceptible to social forces from within and without. To understand the full reality of the Church it is, therefore, crucial to understand the social and historical situations.<sup>66</sup> Despite the use of social-historical analysis, Haight insists that ecclesiology from below is still a theological discipline and therefore, “it cannot

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63 Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 38.

64 Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 30.

65 Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1, p. 4.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

be reduced to conclusions that can be generated by history or sociology alone.” At the same time, it is also important to understand how the historical and social aspects of the Church relate to its theological dimensions. Haight claims that “this Church is experienced religiously or theologically, because in it and through it people recognize the presence and activity of God.” Likewise, “when symbols pointing and referring to God are used to illumine the full reality of what is going on in the existence of Church, a theological imagination and judgment are at work.” Thus, theological judgments include the fact that God, as Spirit, is active and at work in the Church, and Christ is present in the preaching of the Word and in the sacraments.<sup>67</sup>

As this ecclesiology from below emphasizes the concrete realities of culture, the conditions of the poor and interreligious dialogue, it is more suited for meeting the challenges of postmodern society. Characterized by its historical consciousness, an awareness of globalization and appreciation of pluralism, such an understanding of the Church embraces the reality and value of other churches and religions. It is more attentive to human suffering, the plight of women, secularization and individualism, all of which result in a decreased participation in the life of the Church.<sup>68</sup> Wary of “theological reductionism,” ecclesiology from below avoids “the exclusive use of Biblical and doctrinal language in the interpretation of the Church” but emphasizes

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67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., pp. 27-35.

the Church as an interdependent “empirical, human, and historical community.”<sup>69</sup>

Haight also believes that “a pneumatocentric Church adhering to Jesus Christ as its norm opens up to a good deal of pluralism.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, a Spirit-centered ecclesiology allows recognition of legitimate pluralism in church teaching and structures. In addition, as the Spirit “blows where it wills” (John 3:8), free from all constraints, it is present and active throughout human history. We contend, with such a delineation, that an ecclesiology from below suits the Asian churches better than the top-down approach that we discussed earlier.

## **Ecclesiological Revolution**

Moving away from the speculative debate on the nature of the Church, Aloysius Pieris calls for an ecclesiological revolution. He says: “there is no church that is not local.” However, this does not mean that “all local churches *in* Asia are necessarily local churches *of* Asia!”<sup>71</sup> What Pieris means is that our local churches are actually institutions, imported from another continent, struggling for centuries, without much success, to adapt themselves to the local culture. They are actually Asian branches of local churches from Rome, Canterbury, etc.

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69 Ibid., p. 38.

70 Ibid., p. 63.

71 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 36.

To evangelize Asia, Pieris insists that local churches *in* Asia must become local churches *of* Asia. He has observed that a local church *in* Asia is usually a wealthy church working *for* the poor. But to become a local church *of* Asia, the church could only be a poor church working *with* the poor. In order to become local, the Church must first be evangelized to become good news to Asians. This also means that the local churches *of* Asia must work with other great religions, not as competitors but as collaborators.<sup>72</sup>

Pieris argues that the “local church’s mission to the poor of Asia is total identification ... with the monks and peasants,” who have kept for us “in their *religious socialism*, the seeds of liberation that *religion* and *poverty* have combined to produce.” The local church must “remove the cross from the steeples where it has stood for four centuries and plant it once more on Calvary.”<sup>73</sup> This means that the Church must come down from its pedestal and be planted in the midst of the suffering people. Pieris also asserts that “the local church *in* Asia needs yet to be ‘initiated’ into the pre-Christian traditions under the tutelage of our ancient gurus, or it will continue to be an ecclesiastical complex full of ‘power’ but lacking in ‘authority.’”<sup>74</sup> Thus, the Church should listen and learn from other ancient religions and also, from the poor of Asia.

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72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., p. 45.

74 Ibid., p. 47.

## Not a One-Way Street

The communion ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger, with its “top down” approach, has greatly influenced Catholic teaching and policy.<sup>75</sup> This kind of ecclesiology is a reaction against liberalism, various forms of pluralism and relativism, which Ratzinger perceives as threats to the Church. Quoting Christopher Duraisingh, Gerard Mannion states: “Forms of pluralism are seen as dangerous to the very identity and integrity of the church; therefore, greater and centralized teaching authority and clearer and uniform formulations of truth are seen by some as urgent for the very survival of the church.”<sup>76</sup> However, a rigid, official, ecclesiological model is not adequate enough for the Church to respond to the challenges of the postmodern world.<sup>77</sup> Without altogether discarding this curial ecclesiology, the Church would be better served by taking into consideration an ecclesiology from below. As we have seen, such an ecclesiology is more responsive to the challenges posed by pluralism and globalization.

## Implications of the Debate for the Church in China

The debate between Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper regarding the priority of the universal Church has significant implications for the Church in China, especially

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75 Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Question for the Church in Our Time* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 2007), p. 44.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

on the legitimacy of episcopal appointments and the role of the pontiff. Since 1958, the Chinese Catholic Church has consecrated almost 190 bishops without the Vatican's approval. Needless to say, the official Catholic Church, controlled by the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), does not accept papal authority, at least in matters of politics and economics. If we adhere to Ratzinger's ecclesiology, this refusal to accept the authority of the Pope could be tantamount to creating a schismatic church. Yet the Vatican has never declared that the Chinese Church sponsored by the CPA is schismatic.

Another dimension of Ratzinger's ecclesiology is his understanding of the Church as communion, with its vertical dimension, with God, and its horizontal dimension with one another: the intersection of these two dimensions constitutes the Church as the sacrament of salvation. Ratzinger laments that the word "communion" has been transformed into a slogan in recent theological discourse - there are theologians who favor a pluralist ecclesiology, applying a political and sociological understanding of the Church as an institution. This secular understanding implies that local churches can adopt their own forms of liturgy, discipline and doctrine - this is precisely what the Chinese Church attempts to do regarding episcopal election and papal power. Ratzinger objects to self-determination or autonomy in the local churches, although he concedes that there is equally a need to reduce excessive Roman centralism.

In Ratzinger's view, a Catholic church must have the following pre-requisites: a valid ministerial order, papal approval for bishops' consecrations, a valid Eucharist, and above all, communion with Rome. It is thus logical that Ratzinger insists that the universal Church has priority over the local church. Above all, he advocates that the Church is a mystery willed by God, and thus, we cannot, and must not, look upon the Church merely as a human institution and examine it from a purely secular point of view.

The Chinese government, however, considers the Church only as a legacy of colonialism, hence, it is potentially a political threat that needs to be controlled and contained early on, as one does with coronaviruses. In many ways, the Communist Party in China mirrors the Catholic Church in its emphasis on authority and the loyalty of its members. For the Chinese authorities, the attempt to establish an independent Catholic Church was purely a political move, without any theological implications.

As such, Ratzinger's ecclesiology can be accommodated within the Chinese context through dialogue and compromise, as he has attempted to do. On the other hand, Kasper's ecclesiology, with its emphasis on the role of local churches, may strike a more consonant chord within the Chinese ecclesial reality.

Just as the Holy See never declared that the Chinese Catholic Church is schismatic, the Chinese ecclesiastical hierarchy has also never openly rejected papal authority. But

it did challenge the idea of papal primacy by insisting that the Pontiff is merely the Bishop of Rome. This in turn means that the Chinese Church has equal status with the other local churches and does not have to submit to Roman authority. This comes close to Kasper's insistence that the local church is not a province of the universal Church. Chinese leaders also insist that their local leaders have the right to appoint bishops when the need arises, which actually has historical precedent when the local communities elected their own bishops in the early days of the church.

In spite of his centralist view of the Church, Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI attempted to seek reconciliation with the Church in China. In his letter of 2007, he adopted a conciliatory tone towards the official Church while at the same time, emphasizing the importance of communion with the Holy See and the Petrine Office. Aware of widespread persecution of Christians in China, Benedict understood the pain and plight of Chinese Catholics. In fact, he expressed deep admiration and love for the Chinese faithful as shining examples of Christian suffering and forbearance. As pontiff, this is a deliberate act to confirm the faith of Chinese Catholics and safeguard their unity.

Benedict assured the Chinese authorities that he was not seeking any privilege but keen to establish a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. The Church is not to be identified with any political system. Both the Church and the State are called to serve the people in different ways,

and they should cooperate and work for the common good, Benedict wrote.

The debate between Ratzinger and Kasper reveals the tensions and complexities in the relationship between the universal and local churches. We have witnessed these conflicts in China since 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party came into power. The strain in Sino-Vatican relations is a rupture in the bond between the local church and the universal Church.

Ratzinger is anxious to maintain the unity and universality of the Church in China. Refuting Ratzinger's assertion regarding the ontological priority of the universal Church, Kasper maintains that the universal Church finds its existence in and from the local churches. His understanding of the Church is based on praxis. His pastoral experience reveals the concrete reality of the local churches. The reality of the Chinese Church is a suffering and divided community. Kasper's ecclesiology expresses more realistically the lives of Christians in China, a church struggling not only with Communist control, but also divided by different views of Roman primacy.