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Cyprian's Communal Model of Episcopal Ministry and Governance

St Cyprian of Carthage (c 210-258 AD) delivers a testimony that the Church of his time was unequivocally organized on a basis of monoepiscopal ministry and governance, and that each local gathering of the faithful was presided over by a bishop (*episcopos*) who safeguarded and coordinated various ecclesiastical activities. There is no ground for doubt that according to Cyprian's understanding and experience bishops were successors of the apostolic ministry in the Church. Therefore, he didn't hesitate to describe the apostles as bishops¹ and the bishops as direct successors of the apostles.² The older notion about the ancient apostolic centers, i.e. about the local churches originally founded by the apostles, which was so important in the theologies of St Irenaeus and Tertullian and functioned as a paradigm and the source of the authentic apostolic tradition and teaching, was not so prominent in Cyprian's thought. This was the case most probably because this idea didn't need perpetual emphasis and argumentation anymore as the influence of Gnostic theologies decreased significantly. Additionally, partially at least, it was the case because the schisms and disorders in Cyprian's time didn't spring out of problems connected primarily with doctrinal issues. Likewise, he intensely insisted on his insight about utter mutual equality of all apostolic successors, i.e. of all the bishops throughout the Christian *oikoumene* as well as on the necessity of maintaining the unity of all of the faithful with their bishops (overseers) on a local level.

As stated by Cyprian, every bishop (*episcopos*) participates in fullness in one episcopacy of the Church, and he is doing that in such a way that his own ministry could never be thought of

¹ „Meminisse autem diaconi debent quoniam Apostolos, id est episcopos et praepositos, Dominus elegit, diaconos autem, post ascensum Domini in coelos, Apostoli sibi constituerunt episcopatus sui et Ecclesiae ministros“, *Ep.* 65.3, CSEL 3.2.471; „Quod postea secundum diuina magisteria obseruatur in Actis Apostolorum, quando de ordinando in locum Iudae episcopo Petrus ad plebem loquitur... Nec hoc in episcoporum tantum et sacerdotum, sed et in diaconorum ordinationibus obseruasse apostolos animaduertimus...“, *Ep.* 67.4. CSEL 3.2.738.

² „... cum te iudicem Dei constituas et Christi, qui dicit ad apostolos ac per hoc ad omnes praepositos qui apostolis uicaria ordinatione succedunt...“, *Ep.* 66.4, *Ad Florentum Pupianum*, CSEL 3.2.729.

or exercised as it were his own private property or personal achievement. Participation in the sacramental fullness of the communion of the local churches is open for all only on condition of unbroken unity with the validly ordained local bishops who share in one ministry of the one and undivided episcopacy of the Church.³ According to Cyprian's testimony, the episcopal ministry was at the beginning bestowed upon Peter (Mt 16:18-19) and right after upon all the apostles (Jn 20:20-23), as the one homogeneous ministry which is equally shared by all.⁴ In the perspective of the historical inheritance of the apostolic ministry of overseeing in the Church, the key factor is the inclusion of concrete recipients (bishops) in this ministry, but, equally important, a continuation of this ministry and the preservation of its unity.⁵ Every concrete bishop participates in the episcopacy only on a condition of being in peace, concord and sacramental unity with all other ministers upon which the same episcopacy was bestowed, with whom he is fully equal in the matters of dignity and empowerment in his work inside the community he is responsible for. This certainly does not entail that in practice one couldn't discern a distinction in the authority which marked out certain bishops. What especially influenced the *dignitas*, *gravitas* and *auctoritas* of an individual bishop, besides his own personal abilities and competencies, was also his maturity, age and time spent in the ministry, and also size, gravity, and importance of the community he presided upon.⁶

However, one should certainly pay attention to Cyprian's communal perspective and insistence on his belief that the Church is founded on episcopal ministry, but also on clergy and on "those who remain firm [in faith] ", i.e. on the people of God.⁷ In this context, it becomes

³ All bishops share one and the same charisma of episcopacy in such a way that each bishop possesses a part of its entirety, but at the same time he possesses the very entirety of episcopacy *in solido*. In his share or portion of episcopacy the totality of episcopal ministry is present. Cf.: „Episcopatus unus est, cuius a singulis in solidum pars tenetur *Liber de Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate* 5, CSEL 3.1.214.

⁴ *Ibid.* 4, 212-213.

⁵ In line with Cyprian's opinion, any bishop separated from the episcopal *sacerdotum collegio* could not possess nor exercise the episcopal power which naturally belongs to this ministry (in spite of his valid ordination): „episcopi nec potestatem potest habere nec honorem qui episcopatus nec unitatem uoluit tenere nec pacem" (Ep. 55.24, CSEL 3.2.643). See: M. Bevenot, „‘Sacerdos’ as Understood by *Ουτρουζη*, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 30/2 (1979), 413-429.

⁶ For example, see G. D. Dunn, „Cyprian and his *collegae*: Patronage and the Episcopal Synod of 252“, *The Journal of Religious History* 27/1 (2003), 1-13.

⁷ „Cum hoc ita diuina lege fundatum sit, miror quosdam audaci temeritate sic mihi scribere uoluisse ut ecclesiae nomine litteras facerent, quando ecclesia in episcopo et clero et in omnibus stantibus sit constituta", Ep 33.1, CSEL 3.2.566. The cooperation and interconnectedness of the bishops with the other hierarchical structures in the local Christian communities are likewise visible in Cyprian's description of the reception of previously excommunicated members into the Eucharistic community. Namely, a readmittance was performed by communal laying on of hands by the bishop and clergy, as a clear symbol of achieved peace and concord: „Nam, cum in minoribus delictis quae

clear that Cyprian, similarly to St Ignatius of Antioch, does not separate the episcopal ministry from the living ecclesial organism to whom this ministry was oriented in the first place. This refers to the entirety of the community of the local church, along with all other different types of ministry which function inside it.⁸ Moreover, similarly to the argumentation from the *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*⁹, Cyprian emphasized the necessity of the participation of the entire community (*sub omnium oculis*)¹⁰ in the procedure of election of new bishops (including clergy and laity of the local community and the bishops from neighboring communities).¹¹ In peaceful and untroubled times the election of a new bishop on an empty episcopal see were accomplished in the following way, according to the testimony of Cyprian.

non in Deum committuntur poenitentia, agatur justo tempore, et exomologesis fiat inspecta vita ejus qui agit poenitentiam, nec ad communicationem venire quis possit nisi prius illi ab episcopo et clero manus fuerit imposita, quanto magis in his gravissimis et extremis delictis caute omnia et moderate, secundum disciplinam Domini, observari oportet?“, *Ep.u.z. Ad plebem*, PL 4.257.

⁸ A significant feature of the ecclesiology of Ignatius of Antioch is his emphasis on a collegial character of a ministry and on a consonance and coordination of activity of different ministries. It was in this context that he brought about his metaphor about the lyre (“For your presbytery, which is both worthy of the name and worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop as strings to the lyre [ὡς χορδαὶ κιθάρα]. Therefore Jesus Christ is sung in your harmony and symphonic love”, Eph 4:1). Such a harmonic activity is a key to attaining and strengthening of the unity of the Church. A collegial understanding of ministry is also manifest in Ignatius appeal that Christians should “be unified with the bishop and with those who preside” (ἐνώθητε τῷ ἐπισκοπῶ καὶ τοῖς προκαθημένοις – Mgn. 6:2). A conclusion that one could indirectly reach is that a transformation into a monoepiscopal model of the ecclesiastical organization did not entail an adoption of an authoritarian organization analogous to the political despotism, for example. A primacy of the episcopal ministry didn’t require a deprivation of dignity and sacramental authority of presbyters and deacons in the community (cf. Trl. 2:2-3). Likewise, the role of the laity had an enormous significance being an inseparable constitutive element in Ignatius’ ecclesiology. Cf. *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I, (Loeb Classical Library 24, B. D. Ehrman, ed. & transl.), Harvard University Press, London 2003.

⁹ A very important detail for a more complete understanding of Clement’s view of ministerial appointments is his emphasis on a practice that “the entire church giving its approval” (συνευδοκησάσης τῆς ἐκκλησίας πάσης – 44:3). The role of the entire community is obvious also in 54:2 where the author accredited to the “congregation” (πλήθος) the power of commandment and making of very important decisions like the deposition of unworthy presbyters. It is clear that for Clement a notion of ecclesiastical ministry or office does not refer to an individual property of some kind but springs out from the consensus of the entire community of Christians. Cf. *The Apostolic Fathers*, Ibid.

¹⁰ „Quod et ipsum uidemus de diuina auctoritate descendere, ut sacerdos plebe praesente sub omnium oculis deligatur et dignus adque idoneus publico iudicio ac testimonio conprobetur...“, *Ep.* 67.4. CSEL 3.2.738. In that sense, the very election and consecration of an episcopal candidate, besides the presence of all the neighboring bishops of a given region, presuppose the presence of the laity as well for whom the future overseer is consecrated. The presence of the laity, i.e. the People of God is necessary and reasonable because the laity of a given diocese is best acquainted with the abilities and charisma of a candidate for episcopal ministry. The needs and requirements as a primary recipient of the episcopal ministry are fundamentally important for St Cyprian: „... ut ad ordinationes rite celebrandas ad eam plebem cui praepositus ordinatur episcopi eiusdem provinciae proximi quique conveniant, et episcopus deligatur plebe praesente, quae singulorum uitam plenissime nouit et uniuscuiusque actum de eius conuersatione perspexit“, *Ep.* 68.5, *Ad clerum et plebes in Hispania consistentes*, CSEL 3.2.739.

¹¹ „Quod et apud uos factum uidemus in Sabini collegae nostri ordinatione, ut de uniuersae fraternitatis suffragio et de episcoporum qui in praesentia conuenerant quique de eo ad uos litteras fecerant iudicio episcopatus ei deferratur et manus ei in locum Basilidis inponeretur“, *Ep.* 67.5, CSEL 3.2.739; Cf. „publicum iudicium ac testimonium“, *Ep.* 67, 4, CSEL 3.2.738); omnium suffragium et iudicium, Ibid.

First of all, the community suffering a loss of its bishop gathered together (clergy and laity) with neighboring bishops present as well. The election of a new bishop implies an active participation of all faithful gathered together in the electoral procedure and, having this procedure in mind, Cyprian talks about notions such as – *universae fraternitatis suffragium*,¹² *publicum iudicium ac testimonium*,¹³ and *omnium suffragium et iudicium*.¹⁴ The final and the most significant element of the electoral system is *Dei iudicium*¹⁵ or *divinum iudicium*¹⁶ which actually represented a manifestation of the divine confirmation and a blessing of choice that has been previously made by the entire community of the local church.¹⁷

The purpose of such an electoral procedure in Cyprians Latin Africa was twofold. On the one hand, it represents a manifestation of the charismatic competencies of the entire community to discern about things of fundamental importance for their own life in Christ. On the other hand, it simultaneously provides the context in which, for the sake of the community, the best possible candidate will be chosen, whose virtues and abilities for governing and teaching will be confirmed by all.¹⁸ Therefore, one could speak about aggregation of discernment of some kind accumulated as a result of active participation of each segment of the structure of a given local community. It is also important that, besides the fundamental condition of new bishop's unity in faith with the entire episcopal collegium (*collegis omnibus fideliter junctus*), Cyprian emphasized the importance not only of the participation of all the people of a given Christian community (*quando populi universi suffragio*) in electoral process, but of their confirmation of

¹² *Ep.* 67.5, CSEL 3.2.739.

¹³ *Ep.* 67.4 CSEL 3.2.738.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ep.* 55.8, CSEL 3.2.629; *Ep.* 68.2, CSEL 3.2.745.

¹⁶ *Ep.* 59.5, CSEL 3.2.672.

¹⁷ For a technical discussion, see P. Granfield, „Episcopal Elections in Cyprian: Clerical and Lay Participation“, *Theological Studies* 37 (1976), 41-52; J. Patout Burns, „On Rebaptism: Social Organization in the Third Century Church“ *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 1/ 4 (1993), 367-403.

¹⁸ Cf. V. A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering. Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2010,265; S. Wessel, *Leo the Great and the Spiritual Rebuilding of a Universal Rome*, Brill, Leiden 2008,163.

bishop's ministry in a future period as well (*plebi suae in episcopatu ... probatus*).¹⁹ A similarity with the viewpoint of the ecclesiology of the *First Clement* is more than obvious.²⁰

In the context of the central significance of the episcopal ministry for the maintenance and strengthening of the unity and identity of the Church, the expressions like *ordinatio iusta et legitima* (ordination just and legitimate)²¹ indicate that for Cyprian the mentioned normative and rule of communal participation and discernment in connection with the election and evaluation of episcopal ministry had an utmost importance. It is exactly in this context of rightful approach in the ordination procedure Cyprian insists on the necessity of adherence to the Tradition and the apostolic rule as a guarantee of a valid consecration.²² Rightful ordination entails, according to Cyprian's theology, a synergy of three different factors which are operative in its implementation. The neighboring bishops who participate in the rite of consecration lay their hands on a newly elected candidate but also brings their judgment about him (*indicium*), clergy gives its testimony (*testimonium*), and the people give their vote (*suffragium*).²³ When the procedure for the election of the new bishop is conducted rightfully and in accordance with the Tradition it only then becomes an event in which the will of God is manifested. Consequently, in the event of communal election and ordination of a new bishop two different dimensions intertwine inseparably – the institutional and the charismatic (human, as well as divine), and this event becomes the manifestation of God's providential presence in the community of the Church.

The central Cyprian's idea is that in the event of ordination, when and if it is performed according to the rules and the Tradition of the Catholic Church, it is the God Himself who actually choose and appoint the bishop.²⁴ It is God who inspires and bless the activity of the

¹⁹ „... quando episcopus in locum defuncti substituitur, quando populi universi suffragio in pace deligitur, quando Dei auxilio in persecutione protegatur, collegis omnibus fideliter junctus, plebi suae in episcopatu quadriennio jam probatus, in quiete serviens discipline, in tempestate proscriptus applicito et adjuncto episcopatus sui nomine...”, *Ep.* 12.6, *Ad Cornelium Papam*, PL 3. 804.

²⁰ Author of the *First Clement* states that the entire community, in a long time, had the competence to observe and evaluate its overseers' ministry (μεμαρτυρημένους τε ποῖλόις χρόνοις υπό πάντων – 44:3)· whole community of the Church takes part in the election and reception of the ministers, but also have an obligation and competence to judge the dedication and quality of those who were elected to position of overseeing by community's own will and participation.

²¹ *Ep.* 6y.4-, CSEL 3.2.738.

²² „Quod diligenter de traditione diuina et apostolica obseruatione seruandum est... ut ad ordinationes rite celebrandas ...”, 67.5, CSEL 3.2.739.

²³ More extensively in A. Thier, „Procedure and Hierarchy – Models of Episcopal Election in Late Antique Conciliar and Papal Rule Making” y: (J. Leemans et. al., πριπ.), *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2011, 541-553.

²⁴ „Dominus elegit“, *Ep.* 3.3 CSEL 3.2.471

congregation in an event which implies a free participation and discernment of each member of the community. Cyprian is so assured that in the ordination of a bishop the activity of God is manifested that for him the notions of *iudicium episcopi* and *iudicium omnium* function virtually as analogous to the notion of *iudicium Dei*.²⁵ To discern rightfully about a candidate for an episcopal position and to reach a decision unanimously, with the participation of the entire local church and of the neighboring bishops actually mean to be in consonance with the will of God about the Church, and to manifest His presence in its midst. In this context, the laying on of hands (*impositio*) on a chosen candidate for the episcopal ministry, preceded by acclamation of all the community members present at a liturgical gathering (*suffragium omnium*), represented a visible sign that the electoral procedure was completed, that a candidate was chosen willfully and with the discernment of all, and therefore that the will of God was directly manifested and the new bishop was given to the local church.²⁶

Undoubtedly, a very important detail in the electoral procedure is that, although suggestions for a candidate and final choice belongs to the local ecclesiastical community, the very performance of laying on of hands is performed by the bishops from other (often neighboring) communities. Foundation for such a practice could be found, according to Cyprian, in the fact that the episcopal collegium was founded by the Christ Himself who established the council of the twelve apostles and conferred to them the governance of His Church. This first council of the apostles expanded continually due to the success of the apostles' missionary efforts. In other words, the mission implies the inclusion of the overseers of newly founded churches, appointed by the apostles, into the apostolic council. This process continued to develop after the disappearing of the original apostles from the historical scene as they were replaced by the successors of their ministry, namely the bishops. The succession of the apostolic ministry by the bishops implied both the capacity for governing of the local Christian communities but simultaneously also a responsibility for the entire Universal Church, together with all the other bishops sharing the same apostolic ministry. The manifestation of this universal responsibility of the apostolic successors was visible in the very act of consecrating of new bishops, and in the

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see P. J. Fitzgerald, „A Model for Dialogue: Cyprian of Carthage on Ecclesial Discernment", *Theological Studies* 59 (1998), 236-253.

²⁶ Compare, for example, Norton's conclusion: „Thus, in Cyprian's view, God sanctions an election which has been properly conducted", y: P. Norton, *Episcopal Elections 250-600 – Hierarchy and Popular Will in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2007, 12; also: V. A. Alkin, *The Earliest History*, 263.

participation at the regional episcopal councils and regular mutual consultations and correspondence as well.²⁷ In this context, Cyprian underlies the importance of the gathering of bishops in instances of serious crises threatening the life and the unity of the Church (as it was the case, for example, with the problem of the *lapsi*).²⁸

Cyprian states that episcopal councils could achieve a well-balanced analysis of the situation, but also says that insight and perception of presbyters and deacons could significantly contribute an effort to reach an adequate solution of problems.²⁹ Such a viewpoint is especially significant if one has in mind his teaching about the dignity and the prestige of the episcopacy. Cyprian's understanding of the episcopacy is, besides its strong connection with the apostolic ministry, far from any form of institutionalism and far from ascribing any autonomous or inherent qualities to the episcopal ministry independently of its source and foundation – the community of the Church. Cyprian's understanding of the episcopal ministry as completely rooted in the ecclesial community and oriented towards its life and growth was memorably made manifest in his assertion that for a bishop it is proper not only to teach others but to learn from others as well. Namely, in his interpretation of a line from the *Second Epistle to Timothy* Cyprian says that one who continually learn from others progress and become more capable to teach people (to become a διδασκτικός, 2 Tm 2:24) and consequently makes a stronger contribution to the building of the Church.³⁰

²⁷ Cf. J. Patout Burns, „Cyprian of Carthage“, *The Expository Times* 120/10 (2009), 469-477; A. Brent, *A Political History of Early Christianity*, T&T Clark, London 2009, 271.

²⁸ „... cumque semel placuerit tam nobis quam confessoribus et clericis urbicis, item universis episcopis vel in nostra provincia vel trans mare constitutis ut nihil innovetur circa lapsorum causam...“, *Ep.* 40.3, *Ad Plebem*, PL 4.334-335. УП: *Ep.* 38.2, *Ad Caldonium, Herculanium et Caeteros*, PL 4,329-330.

²⁹ „Plane caeterorum causas, quamvis libello a martyribus accepto, diffFerri mandavi et in nostram praesentiam reservari, ut, cum, pace a Domino nobis data, plures praepositi convenire in unum coeperimus, communicato etiam vobiscum consilio, disponere singula et reformare possimus“, *Ep.* 24.3, *Ad presbyteros et diaconos Rome consistentes*, PL 4.264. This is confirmed by the words of presbyters Moses and Maximus, and deacons Nicostratus and Rufinus and other confessors who, in the letter to Cyprian, confirm his opinion about the necessity of inclusion of all ministries in process of resolving of the disputed issues (such as admittance of the unworthies into a sacramental communion without the bishops approval): „... cum grande delictum, et per totum pene orbem incredibili vastatione grassatum, non oporteat nisi, ut ipse scribis, caute moderateque tractari, consultis omnibus episcopis, presbyteris, diaconibus, confessoribus, et ipsis stantibus laicis, ut in tuis litteris et ipse testaris“, *Ep.* 26.6. PL 4.295, just like in the letter of the Roman clergy sent to Cyprian in which it is stated that regarnig the issue of the *lapsi* the decision should be pursued at a council of bishops, presbyters, deacons, confessors and laics who stand firm in the faith: „... quamquam nobis in tam ingenti negotio placeat quod et tu ipse tractasti, prius Ecclesiae pacem sustinendam, deinde, sic collatione consiliorum cum episcopis, presbyteris, diaconis, confessoribus pariter ac stantibus laicis facta, lapsorum tractare rationem“.

³⁰ „Cui rei prospiciens beatus apostolus Paulus ad Timotheum scribit et monet episcopum non litigiosum nec contentiosum, sed mitem et docibilem esse debere. Docibilis autem ille est qui est ad discendi patientiam lenis et

* * *

Each form of ministry (διακονία) in the early Church, apostolic ministry included, was perceived as a continuation of Christ's own ministry. Its fundamental aspects such as kerygma of the authentic Word of God and safeguarding of peace and unity in the Church was understood as activities for which the entire community is held responsible for, and not just some of the specially appointed individual ministers. Such an understanding of the ministry was not lost even in the process of development of ecclesiastical self-understanding and institutional solidification and uniformity of hierarchical structures, due to complex historical challenges and circumstances.

The ecclesial context of an authentic apostolic succession was very strongly emphasized in the theology of Cyprian of Carthage. This was made manifest in his connecting of the episcopal succession of the apostolic ministry with the liturgical life of the Christian community in its entirety. According to Cyprian, the episcopal ministry emerges primarily on a local level as a ministry oriented towards the needs of a concrete community. He also rejected the idea of an automatism or mechanical *modus operandi* with regard to the notion of the succession of the episcopal ministry. A bishop ceases to be worthy of his ministry, i.e. he ceases to be a bishop if his conduct departs from the norm of the Christian ethos, and especially if he separates himself from the community of the Church and leads the community he is responsible for in schism.³¹ According to Cyprian, just as a firm faith of a bishop represents a paradigm one should look upon and follow, similarly a bishop's fall (into heresy or schism) threatens to lead astray those who are in sacramental communion with him.³²

However, the precondition for an authentic episcopal ministry was not based upon the valid consecration or ordination of a bishop only. An additional prerequisite is also an

mitis. Oportet enim episcopus non tantum docere, sed et discere, quia et ille melius docet qui cotidie crescit et proficit discendo meliora“, *Ep.* 74.10, *Ad Pompeium*, CSEL 3.2.807.

³¹ Cyprian expresses his opinion about the removal from office of unworthy bishops when reflects upon the deposition of Basilides: „Nec rescindere ordinationem iure perfectam potest quod Basilides post crimina sua detecta et conscientiae etiam propriae confessione nudata Romam pergens Stephanum collegam nostrum longe positum et gestae rei ac ueritatis ignarum fefellit, ut exambiret reponi se iniuste in episcopatum de quo fuerat iure depositus“, *Ep.* 68.5, *Ad clericum et plebes in Hispania consistentes*, CSEL 3.2.738.

³² „Nam quantum pernicioosa res est ad sequentium lapsum ruina praepositi, in tantum contra utile est et salutare cum se episcopus per firmamentum fidei fratribus praebet imitandum“, *Epistola* 3.1, PL 4.229.

understanding of a episcopal ministry as a constitutive part of the episcopacy conceived as a collegial body, analogously to the body of the original apostolic collegium. Nonetheless, such an understanding must have a practical implementation, i.e. maintenance of a continual and unbreakable Eucharistic community of each local bishop with all other overseers throughout the world. Another, equally important and necessary condition for an authentic episcopal ministry was also its rootedness in the liturgical community of the entire congregation. This rootedness is made manifest primarily in the electoral procedure of a candidate for episcopal ministry which necessarily included a discernment of the entire local church, but also in the continual evaluation of bishops ministry by its own community of faithful.