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The Local Churches and the Universal Church: Reflections on the Kasper/Ratzinger Debate

Adam Koester

The debate between Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger concerning the universal church's relationship to the local churches has been called by many the most important ecclesiological issue of this generation. Their debate has spanned almost a decade and has been continued by theologians seeking to understand the issue as well as advance one opinion over the other. Joseph Ratzinger argues that in understanding the relationship between these two aspects of church, the local and universal, the universal church must be emphasized over the local churches in order to preserve unity. Kasper disagrees, believing this emphasis will lead to the abstraction of the primary element of the church – if it be universal – and believes both aspects should be valued equally. The purpose of this paper is to seek to understand their debate in a step-by-step manor, while illuminating important points and advancements in the theology. Following this, I will show the opinions of two specific papers, which seek to illuminate the issues of the debate by adding views stemming from other subsets of theology. Finally, it will briefly discuss the implications three trinitarian theologians' ideas of perichoresis, trinitarian life, and inner unity have on the ecclesiological debate. It is the opinion of this author that placing priority on the universal church removes historical significance from the church as a whole. As Kasper argues, it is the people in a concrete existence, not the abstract church, that are primary to understanding the church along with seeking to maintain inner unity. The three trinitarian theologians chosen for this discussion highlight this point.

One preliminary distinguishing difficulty surrounding this debate is the lack of definition on the part of some theologians of the term 'universal church.' This has increased the difficulty of an already nuanced debate. However, following the work of Joseph Ratzinger's and Walter Kasper's placement of priority, some have attempted to flesh out the nuances of the term universal Church as used in *Lumen Gentium*, in "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," and in each of the responses by Kasper and Ratzinger in the debate. Paul McPart-

lan offers two uses of this term in his essay. The first refers to the church as 'essential mystery,' which is the Church as "the final heavenly eschatological Church of all ages, the assembly of all the just 'from Abel...to the last of the elect' (LG 2)."¹ The second, which McPartlan says is used more regularly by *Lumen Gentium*, is the universal Church as 'worldwide community.' This aspect, he states, is, "the present worldwide Church of today (e.g. LG 25)."² This distinction is often blurred by theologians in the debate, and was never clarified in *Lumen Gentium*. However, the distinction is necessary for discussion of the issue, as will be discussed later in McPartlan's article concerning eschatology. It is also necessary to establish the weight with which one is using the term 'universal Church.' The heart of the debate relies heavily on how this term is defined. These tensions will be drawn out briefly in the summary and the greater discussion of the issue that will follow.

The Ratzinger-Kasper debate was sparked by statements made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) in a clarifying letter, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion." The statement in question for Kasper states in paragraph 9, "It is not the result of the communion of the Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior to every *individual* particular Church."³ Ratzinger, who was head of the CDF at this time, had used this construction before, as shown by Killian McDonnell, in "books published in 1989 and 1991, well before the CDF's 1992 letter. Obviously, this is Ratzinger's formulation."⁴ This

¹ Paul McPartlan, "The Local Church and the Universal Church: Zizioulas and the Ratzinger-Kasper Debate," (*International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* Vol. 4, No. 1, March 2004), 22.

² Ibid.

³ "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, accessed 21 May, 2009.

⁴ Killian McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches," (*Theological Studies* 63), 228.

mention of ontological and temporal precedence is supported by reference to the Fathers, saying, “*ontologically*, the Church-mystery, the Church that is one and unique, precedes creation (42), and gives birth to the particular Churches as her daughters. She [the Church] expresses herself in them; she is the mother and not the product of the particular Churches.”⁵

Kasper reacts to this particular statement fearing that the statement is a reversal of the theology found in *Lumen Gentium*. The particular theology Kasper feels is in danger is found in paragraph 23, stating, “Individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches, which are modeled on the universal church; it is in and from these that the one and unique catholic church exists.”⁶ According to McDonnell, Kasper’s criticism focuses on “the response of the CDF to the ecclesiological threats, namely the declaration that the universal Church is ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular church. Kasper contends that CDF identifies *una, sancta, catholica, et apostolica ecclesia* with the universal Church in a way that excludes the particular churches.”⁷ Kasper’s argument focuses on the possibility that the universal church could become an abstraction; the local churches, which represent the historical reality of the church, could be neglected for the sake of something which has no real bearing on life. McDonnell continues, “The ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church becomes completely problematic when by some secret unspoken assumption (*unter der Hand*) the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia.”⁸ This primarily pastorally based fear of a return to a unity emphasized at the expense of the individual, particular churches in their diversity, as admitted by Kasper later in the debate,⁹ is the context with which he ultimately responds to Ratzinger and the CDF’s claims.

Ratzinger’s next response is found in a German publication, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Here Ratzinger responds to Kasper’s concern of centralization on Rome by describing the context with

which he is arguing. This is found in the misuse, (and, as Ratzinger contends: overuse) of the formula of churches as communion. He believes that the theology of Church must amount to more than a sociological interpretation of its structures. He contends that this tendency must be reverted to the Church’s primary task. McDonnell presents his argument, “But the discussion becomes skewed when the proper task of the Church is not kept in mind. The task of the Church is not primarily to speak of itself, but of God.”¹⁰ Thus, the possibility to revert ecclesiology into a totally horizontal exercise must be avoided. Ratzinger returns to the follow-up point made in the original letter, that of patristic sources, in order to defend the temporal and ontological priority of the universal church. He also references the day of Pentecost in Acts as the first episode of the universal Church. McDonnell states, “The narrative is a ‘theological declaration’ (*theologische Aussage*) in the basis of which the CDF notes that the Church begins with the gathering around Mary and the 120, together with the renewed community of the Twelve, who are not members of a local church, but are the apostles who will carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.”¹¹ He also draws attention to Kasper’s objection presented earlier about the possibility of an unspoken assumption that allows the idea that “the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia.” Ratzinger dismisses this as a hypothetical situation upon which Kasper then bases his argument. Yet, the issue is not completely unrelated. Ratzinger addresses these concerns by moving the conversation into the universal aspects of sacraments.

In analyzing Kasper’s rebuttal, a good place to start is with his treatment of the places of agreement between Ratzinger and himself. Kasper points to three areas where he and Ratzinger agree: (1) the “one-ness” of the church. Here he states, “This ‘one-ness’ is not in a future ideal that we strive to reach through the ecumenical movement: the one church exists in the present. It is not, however, a sum of the ‘fragments of the one church’ – as if at present each church were a mere fragment of the one church.”¹² (2) The relationship between the universal and local churches as stated in *Lumen Gentium* 23. He states, “The one church of Jesus Christ exists ‘in and from’ the local churches. It exists, therefore, in each local

⁵ “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” cf. Also footnote 5, McDonnell, 229.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 23: Austin Flannery, O.P. trans., *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, (Costello Publishing Company: Northport, 1996), 31.

⁷ McDonnell, 231.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ cf. Walter Kasper, “On the Church,” (*America* Vol. 184, No. 14, 23-30 April, 2001), 8.

¹⁰ McDonnell, 234.

¹¹ Ibid., 236.

¹² Kasper, 12.

church; it is present there especially in the celebration of the Eucharist... As the universal church consists 'in and from' local churches, so each local church exists 'in and from' the one church of Jesus Christ."¹³ Here he emphasizes the mutual relationship between universal and local even if they disagree on the placement of priority (3). The relationship between the universal and local are "intimately united. They share the same existence; they live within each other."¹⁴ This reality is based in trinitarian theology as unity is not reducible to uniformity, but itself depends on the diversity of its portions.

Kasper's acknowledgment of these similarities form a solid ground for further discussion. He first returns to the problem that sparked his first response, that is, to ensure that Ratzinger is not arguing for the return to a Roman-centered church. He bases this necessity on the theology of the local bishop found in *Lumen Gentium*. He argues, "The local church is neither a province nor a department of the universal church; it is the church at a given place. The local bishop is not the delegate of the pope but is one sent by Jesus Christ. He is given personal responsibility by Christ."¹⁵ Here, I believe, Kasper responds to Ratzinger's emphasis on Kasper's seeming use of a hypothetical situation ("if the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia") to base an argument by emphasizing that despite the best efforts of theologians, centralization has occurred. Kasper states, "This understanding of the bishop's office should have led to decentralization in the church's government. The opposite happened: the trend toward centralization returned after the council."¹⁶ He continues, after speculating on the reasons for this return, "Whatever happened, by now such 'unifying' activities and processes have gone too far. The right balance between the universal church and the particular churches has been destroyed."¹⁷ These observances come not only from Kasper's pastoral experience but from bishops all over the world.

Moving now to his critique of Ratzinger's tendency to return to a priority of the universal aspect of church, Kasper finds difficulty with this argument in an historical analysis of church development. Here he objects to Ratzinger's interpreta-

tion of the Lukan account of Pentecost, drawing on historical critical interpretations of the narrative. He states that historically, "The early church developed from local communities. Each was presided over by a bishop; the one church of God was present in each. Because the one church was present in each and all, they were in communion."¹⁸ This is contrary to Ratzinger's interpretation of the Lukan account which sees the event as the placement of the universal church first, gathered around the apostles and not local churches. Kasper disputes this interpretation directly when he states, "Many exegetes are convinced that the 'Pentecostal event' in the Acts of the Apostles is a construction by Luke. Similar 'Pentecostal events' also occurred, probably from the beginning, in the communities of Galilee."¹⁹ This, Kasper says, is why Ratzinger feels he must root his argument not in historical evidence, but in the Fathers of the Church and their statements of the pre-existence of the church. This pre-existence, as Kasper presents it, was developed in a manner similar to that of the pre-existence of the Torah – as "a heavenly reality before the creation of the world."²⁰ He says that by this doctrine of the church, St. Paul means to place the church not as an accidental reality but anchored in God and the mystery of God. This, Kasper says, cannot be left out when understanding ecclesiology but does not necessitate the ontological primacy of the universal church.

Finally, what I believe to be at the heart of the conversation and disagreement, is the question, "Does a priority on the universal church run the risk of abstraction?" While the problem of return to a Roman centralism is something to take note of, the possibility of an abstract foundation for the theology of church is much more daunting. If the church were to be conceived primarily on the basis of abstract notions there would be no need for it to include relevance to any social situation. While the socialization of theology cannot be the route to understanding the church, neither can the church be understood without the social aspect that is inherent to its people. It is important to note here that Ratzinger is not advocating for this specifically. This problem is based on the dangers Kasper sees in Ratzinger's position on the issue. Quoting a common ground for both theologians, Kasper appeals to Henri de Lubac in driving home this point. He states,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid.

No less a scholar than Henri de Lubac stated, 'A universal church which would have a separate existence, or which someone imagined as existing outside the particular churches, is a mere abstraction.' He explained further: '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.'²¹

McDonnell comments on this point and agrees with Kasper that Ratzinger's position is one that leads to an interpretation that is not concerned about historical events by saying,

The objection is not to the priority of God's eternal will to save humanity through a community of salvation, the Church, but to Ratzinger's assumption that this mystery of the pre-existent Church in God's eternal will is only the universal church, and not the actual church which exists 'in and from' the local churches. If one insists with Ratzinger that the pre-existent Church is only the universal Church apart from the local churches, then one has opted for an ecclesiological abstraction.²²

This issue is at the heart of the debate.

What makes this issue more difficult, as stated earlier in the paper, is the dual definitions of universal church being used to combat each other. It seems to me that Kasper argues consistently from a 'worldwide community' while Ratzinger argues from the definition of universal church as 'essential mystery'. Neither of these theologians takes the other conception of universal church out of their definition but they, in some cases are not speaking about the same things. In attempting to solve this issue without a clarification of which definition either is talking about at a given point, the conversation is much more difficult to engage.

On the other hand, the conversation benefits from the placement of the term 'universal church' as the central focus as opposed to the 'universal church as worldwide community' or the 'universal church as essential mystery'. If these terms were being discussed individually the temptation could be to argue that the 'worldwide church' aspect

is given to perichoretic relationship of equal priority with the local churches and the 'essential mystery' aspect is to be given priority over the local churches. The universal church *per se* cannot have two separate relationships to the local church. This would contribute to a dualism within an understanding of church which itself should not even be conceived without the local churches. What makes the church of Christ *subsist* in the Catholic Church is the fact the the eschatological church is present *now* and not just at some future event. Thus, it is the eschatological 'essential mystery' that is present in the 'worldwide community' that makes it relevant. The interlocution and perichoresis of these two elements makes them indistinguishable except to talk about *aspects* of the universal church *per se* and not about two separate entities.

While it is clear that Kasper disagrees with the movement towards abstraction that Ratzinger seems to be taking, he does offer a final way of mutually understanding the underlying premises of both theological starting points. Kasper states, "The conflict is between theological opinions and underlying philosophical assumptions. One side [Ratzinger] proceeds by Plato's method; its starting point is the primacy of an idea that is a universal concept. The other side [Kasper] follows Aristotle's approach and sees the universal as existing in a concrete reality."²³ Here, Kasper attempts to make acceptable both ways of approaching the issue – Platonic and Aristotelian – in the Catholic tradition as it has been accepted by the Fathers throughout the church's development. Again, this attempt, I do not think, is saying that the placement of priority is open to either side of the debate but the fundamental philosophical underpinnings are both acceptable.

In Ratzinger's final response in this debate, he begins with the topic which he has been attacking in Kasper's position – the hypothetical "if the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia..." statement. Ratzinger states that he addressed the relationship between the universal church and local churches in a speech where he explained that, "the letter from the congregation never dreamt of identifying the reality of the universal church with the pope and Curia, and hence that the fears voiced by Kasper were groundless."²⁴ He says

²³ Kasper, 13.

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, "A Response to Walter Kasper: The Local Church and The Universal Church," (*America* Vol. 185, No. 16, 19 November 2001), 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² McDonnell, 241.

that in response to this, Kasper dropped this notion and shifted the argument to the level of Ratzinger's personal philosophical views away from the CDF. Then, Ratzinger continues to defend his personal viewpoint that the universal church should have priority in ecclesiological understandings.

Ratzinger's primary argument for the priority of the universal in this rebuttal is the idea that in baptism, one is baptized into the universal, and not the local church community. Ratzinger points to a specific statement that Kasper had made about Kasper's own baptism. Ratzinger states, "yet in baptism he had not been socialized into this particular community, but born into the one church. As far as I am concerned, this statement clears up the controversy – for that is at issue here."²⁵ For Ratzinger, Kasper's assertion that a baptism is a baptism into a universal community shows that the sacramental nature of the church places its priority first into the universal church.

Kasper's final response reasserts his primary argument, as McDonnell states,

the agreement with the formula that 'local churches and the universal Church are incorporated into and interpenetrate one another, so that one can speak of their being simultaneous.' This principle is absolutely central to Kasper's position from which he does not depart. Ratzinger, says Kasper, now grants this perichoretic relationship 'holds true for the Church as it has existed throughout history' which means that the local church and universal Church are simultaneous in all concrete historical manifestations.

This perichoresis of the universal church and local churches, as Kasper sees it, cannot exist when one is ontologically and temporally prior. For this reason, in his final response he notes Ratzinger's reformulation of his thesis into a focus on "[t]he inner priority of unity, of the one bride to her essential variety, seems to be plainly evident."²⁶ This, along with Ratzinger's acceptance of the perichoretic nature of the universal church and local churches, Kasper sees as beneficial, "avoiding as it does 'the confusing language about the precedence of the universal Church.'"²⁷ This formulation allows Kasper to agree

with the thesis in general, though I suspect that Ratzinger would still contend for the ontological and temporally priority of the universal church.

Kasper, responds to this persistent claim as Ratzinger presented it in terms of the sacrament of baptism. McDonnell presents Kasper's statement, "Both agree that one becomes a member of the Catholic Church through baptism. 'But one becomes so – as the temporal-spatial event of baptism makes clear – in a specific (episcopally structured) local church. The principle of simultaneity holds true precisely of the sacramental event.' Kasper holds his ground."²⁸ Kasper continuously refutes Ratzinger's claims that the universal church holds ontological and temporal priority, contending that the church necessarily exists in a historical context. In this way, Kasper retains that the church can never become an abstraction.

The original claims for priority of the universal church are based on the patristic notion that the church itself is pre-existent. Kasper enthusiastically affirms the pre-existence of the church, stating the necessity of this doctrine for the correct understanding of ecclesiology. Yet, even the presence of the idea of pre-existence does not argue for the priority of the universal church. There are two reasons for this difference. First, Kasper argues for the pre-existence of the whole church, local and universal, and not just one aspect and "therefore denies the ontological priority of the universal Church."²⁹ It would seem difficult to argue that the concrete and historical church is pre-existent. However, Kasper is able to do this based on his clarification of the term 'pre-existent' in his first article in *America*. He does this by saying that by pre-existence, St. Paul's meant that "the church is not the product of accidental historical circumstance, developments and decisions but is grounded in the eternal saving will of God. Its origins lie in the eternal mystery of God who saves. This is precisely what Paul is stressing when in his letters he speaks of the eternal saving mystery of God that was hidden in earlier times but is manifest now in the church and through the church (Eph. 1:3-14; 3:3-12; Col. 1-26 ff.)."³⁰ It is in this way that pre-existence "cannot be contested"³¹ not in a way that places the church outside of historical and

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁷ McDonnell, 245. cf. Kasper, "From the President of the Council for Promoting Christian Unity," 29.

²⁸ Ibid., 246.

²⁹ Ibid., 247.

³⁰ Kasper, 13.

³¹ Ibid.

concrete existence as literally placing it outside of time accomplishes.

Second, Ratzinger wants to maintain the depth of the church, as he would see too much emphasis on the local churches contributing to the socialization of theology; theology without any vertical dimension. Conversely, Kasper fears that the abstraction of the church will reach a point at which it is no longer relevant or connected to the historical life of the church. He also addresses Ratzinger's fear of socialization of ecclesiology. McDonnell's assessment of this situation states, "Kasper denies such identification and the evacuation of theological depth, but asserts that one does not step out of the local church into the universal Church (or vice versa). The local church is the Church in a given place. Because of simultaneity and perichoresis, one is already in the universal Church when one is in local church. Simultaneity and perichoresis has everything to do with the pre-existence of the Church, and with the denial of the ontological priority."³² Ratzinger agrees with the interpenetration of the local churches and universal church as it exists in history, but maintains that the pre-existent church is primary. Thus, as McDonnell shows, "Even when Ratzinger grants simultaneity, he still insists on sequence: first the universal Church, then the local."³³

With these differences in opinion and philosophical underpinnings we will move on to discuss how two theologians have attempted to clarify the issue by introducing different theological aspects into the conversation. First, the perichoresis and interpenetration of the church and churches. This theme obtained from trinitarian theology is integral to understanding the relationship of the universal church to the local historical instances of church. Thus, it is integral to understanding the church's (churches') relationship to the world and the relationship to God. Second, the idea to come out of Ratzinger's reformulation of his position – that being – 'the inner priority of unity.' In this statement Kasper is able to agree with Ratzinger that this idea is essential, yet does so without claiming the universal church to be above in importance to the local church.

The first opinion, sequentially in our discussion as well as the history of the debate, is the introduction of eschatological understanding of John Zizioulas by Paul McPartlan. McPartlan contends

that Zizioulas's perspective, being from the differing mindset of the east, can shed a new light on this controversy and help shift perspective of the debate. After making the distinction between the universal church as 'worldwide community' and 'essential mystery' presented earlier in this paper, McPartlan shows how the eschatological understanding of church is largely unemployed by the west insofar as a 'larger' eschatology would see it. He describes this eschatology, "the local church, especially in its Eucharist, is actually constituted after the model of the eschatological Church and is, indeed, the icon of the final gathering."³⁴ He then distinguishes between these two types of eschatology as Zizioulas presents them. The first is eschatology as orientation, which sees the eschatological event as the culmination of historical process. The second, which Zizioulas employs, sees the eschaton as a present reality that "presupposes the end of mission."³⁵ McPartlan then points to Henri de Lubac, whom both Kasper and Ratzinger engage to argue their points, as a great proponent of eschatology as orientation. Kasper and Ratzinger, McPartlan states, "are both disciples of this outstanding Western master, and the debate between them is an intra-Western debate which could, I respectfully suggest, benefit from a more eschatological Eastern perspective."³⁶ With this, McPartlan begins his analysis of the debate.

McPartlan's article reviews the debate between Ratzinger and Kasper. Since we have already canvassed this progression it will serve our purpose to review McPartlan's main points and their influence on these main issues. The view of the eschatological church, presented in the previous paragraph, serves to prevent over accenting the historical reality of church by the continual injection of the Eucharist into the local church. In Zizioulas's view, it is "precisely the Eucharist that renders all self-sufficiency on the part of the particular Churches impossible', and the CDF's warning against eucharistic ecclesiology fostering a 'one-sided emphasis' on the local church directly corresponds to Zizioulas's own criticism of the 'localism' of eucharistic ecclesiology's pioneer, Nicholas Afanassieff."³⁷ In other words, the nature of the Eucharist as embodying the 'essential mystery' of the church outside history, but

³² McDonnell, 248.

³³ Ibid., 247-248.

³⁴ McPartlan, 23.

³⁵ Ibid. cf. Also John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 174.

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Ibid., 27.

continuously influencing it, stops the local church from claiming the presence of the universal church within itself if it is separate *from the other local churches*. McPartlan sides with Ratzinger here in terms of the priority of the universal church saying, “A universal primacy would have its place within that eschatological framework. In other words, for Zizioulas, the mutual interiority of the local and worldwide Church [distinguished from the ‘essential mystery’] is based on the mutual interiority of the local and the eschatological Church, as a result of which all local churches ‘coincide’ with one another.”³⁸

McPartlan points to the end of the debate to sum up its primary controversy,

This way of envisaging the Church-mystery may well seem rather strange and somewhat at odds with scriptural images of the Church-mystery as one single community (e.g. Heb 12:22-25; Rev. 7:9; 21:2), but how can that oneness be embraced without legitimating the priority of the worldwide Church, as a single community, over the local churches? That is the conundrum at the heart of this debate. Ratzinger translates the oneness into priority as a matter of course. Kasper wants to avoid priority, but seems then to need a rather difficult hypothesis. So we must ask: Is there another way? The answer will require a shift from the strongly historical framework within which both Ratzinger and Kasper work into a more eschatological one.³⁹

With this framing and a brief summary of his article, McPartlan makes his final argument for introducing Zizioulas’s eschatology into the debate, especially in terms of defining the pre-existence of the church. He says that the term itself invites a rather historical interpretation of the issue. However, “Zizioulas would urge that the Church is pre-existent only in the sense that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, its reality, which is truly *eschatological*,...was already mysteriously operative from the beginning of time.” This allows the distinction between universal church as ‘worldwide communion’ and as ‘essential mystery’ to remain concrete.

While McPartlan’s analysis of the debate is helpful in understanding the different issues of each theologian, and his insertion of Zizioulas’s

eschatological framework makes the distinction between ‘worldwide community’ and ‘essential mystery’ which in turn helps resolve the problem of Roman centralism, he does not offer anything to solve the debate as it stands. First, the problem of Roman centralism itself, by the end of the debate, had been put to the side insofar as Ratzinger had acknowledged that, indeed, if the council had been trying to support a return to Roman centralism, this would have been a problem. Kasper moved his argument from saying that the CDF’s formulation was promoting this return to saying that it does not fix the problem of already present Roman centralism. Second, Kasper’s argument by the end of the debate had moved to include the problem of placing the priority of the church onto an *abstraction*. McPartlan does little to address this issue as his presentation of Zizioulas’s eschatological understanding of the universal church, though it be present in the Eucharist, is a future reality.

The second position to consider regarding the debate is that of James Massa. He builds his argument around a primarily sacramental understanding of the church, arguing for the primacy of the universal church, and building on McPartlan’s presentation of Zizioulas’s eschatological understanding of church. Massa’s argument begins with establishing that Ratzinger has used the sacramental understanding of church in earlier works and that this is where his argument for universal priority comes from. He draws out the tension of holding both the church as body of Christ as well as a sinful society that compromises the people of God. Commenting on Ratzinger’s work, he states, “Only sacrament allows for a way of holding in tension the inner and outer dimensions as well as the permanent structures and historical contingencies of the ecclesial subject.”⁴⁰ He moves to show how individual sacraments are incorporated into the universal church. Then he articulates how, up until this point, there is no visible contradiction with Kasper’s position. “Yet,” he states, “for the pope the structure of the church-sacrament also requires that a certain priority be given to the one over the many.” The reasoning for this becomes clear in his next paragraph.

Massa’s primary argument is that the church must be understood primarily as its universal aspect because of its relationship with God. He states:

³⁸ Ibid., 27-28.
³⁹ Ibid., 30.
⁴⁰ James Massa, “The Priority of Unity in the Mystery of the Church,” (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Fall 2007, Vol. 42, Issue 4), Section 3.

The church is not first something visible and institutional, even though in the present age it is most definitely both--and never so much so as when encountered in local churches gathered around their pastors for worship. But, it is for Ratzinger--and here he follows Augustine--fundamentally a communion of grace or a "sharing of gifts" [com-munera] that originates in the invisible realm, outside of history, and with no connection to geography. This communion begins in the exchange of love among the three divine Persons of the Trinity and grows, as it were, "outwardly" toward human beings who live in time and space. Through the mission of Christ, the divine sharing of gifts takes the form of structured worship, sacred texts and sacred ministry, as well as the other charismatic forms that arise spontaneously in the local communities. This communion of grace cannot reach human beings except through one of the multiple congregations that exist in time and in one place. But, its origin and final effect lie in the single, spatially and temporally undifferentiated community that exists outside the historically contingent existence of human beings (see Heb. 12:22-24). The church begins in the unity of divine communion and ends in our assimilation to that unity. During our earthly pilgrimage, our assimilation entails membership and worship in local churches, but they remain always the door, through which the one Christ and his one church come to take hold of us so that we can begin journeying back to the Father's house.⁴¹

This line of thought places the communion of the church in God, pre-existent to the history of the church, generating from the communion of the Trinity and flowing forth into the world. My critique of this placement will begin in the same place as my critique of McPartlan's, that being the negligence of addressing Kasper's argument of placing emphasis on abstraction over visible. This is shown by Kasper in his first response in *America*, which I have quoted earlier in this paper.⁴² The placement of the church in the communion of the Trinity is absolutely es-

sential to understanding the church. However, the communion of the Trinity *cannot be confused* with the church. Placing the church in the Trinity *only*, reduces it to the notion, the idea, the *form* of communion and of unity. The church must be placed in relationship with God and must be modeled on our understanding that is the unity of the trinitarian *hypostases*, but placing the church there without any reference to its relationship with human history negates its importance *in* human history. The mystery of the church is that the unity of the divine persons is in relation to the presence of the church in history. My contention is that the communion that Massa is referencing does not become the church until the people respond.

The relationship of the trinitarian sense of unity to the local churches and universal church is often referenced in discussions of ecclesiology. However, the reference to perichoresis and interpenetration is not often related directly to the multitude of understandings of this concept in trinitarian theology itself. In the final section of this paper, I will briefly relate the conversation of universal church and local churches to three diverse opinions in trinitarian theology which reflect the possibility of the simultaneity of universal church and local churches. These diverse opinions incorporate perichoresis in their theology and are diverse in their locations as well as their theologies.

The first theologian I will present is the North American, Catherine LaCugna. For LaCugna's primary thesis of the practicality of the Trinity is supported in her desire to unite the conceptions of Divine life and the divine's relationship with creation, in her terms: the unity of *oikonomia* and *theologia*. Thus, the unity of the Trinity's 'inner life' and 'economic life' LaCugna defines perichoresis as, "being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. No person exists by him/herself or is referred to him/herself; this would produce the number and therefore division within God."⁴³ LaCugna's reflection on the perichoresis of the *hypostases* continues, "Father, Son, and Spirit are coequal because they *are* the same thing, namely, God. No person is prior to another person, no person is the reason for another's existence, and each person is equally interdependent on every other person. The divine persons are united by love, the perfect expression of which is the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See ft. 20 above.

⁴³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, (Harper San Francisco: San Francisco, 1991), 271.

Holy Spirit who is bond of love between Father and Son.”⁴⁴

The surface level implications for ecclesiology alone allow for codependency, neither aspect prior to the other in importance or time, in the debate of the universal church and local churches. In LaCugna’s interpretation of perichoresis the necessary motion, after affirming its presence, is to say that one cannot exist without the other. In her discussions concerning the unity of *oikonomia* and *theologia* this necessary unity of universal church and local churches is even more clear. *Oikonomia* can only exist with reference to *theologia* because it is the expression of *theologia*. *Theologia* can only be seen with reference to *oikonomia* because *oikonomia* is the very expression of *theologia*. LaCugna states, “*Theologia* is what is given in *oikonomia* and *oikonomia* expresses *theologia*. Since our only point of access to *theologia* is through *oikonomia*, then an ‘immanent trinitarian theology of God is nothing more than a theology of the economy of salvation.’”⁴⁵ Likewise, if we are going to affirm in ecclesiology that the universal church exists not only as ‘worldwide community’ but as ‘essential mystery’, then our only point of access to it is its movement in and with the local churches, established in a given place and time in human history. The separation of these terms in LaCugna’s theology means misunderstanding the reality of God. They can only be talked about as distinct from each other insofar as they are recognized to be dependent on each other.

Secondly, Jürgen Moltmann, a European theologian whose work primarily shows how God cannot be a static bystander outside of human history. As he asks, “Even if we relate ‘experience’ to the experiencing subject, concentrating it solely on the experience of the self *in* experience, it will still be permissible to ask, not only: *how do I experience God?* What does God mean for me? How am I determined by him? We must also ask the reverse questions: *how does God experience me?* What do I mean for God? How is he determined by me?”⁴⁶ Because Moltmann begins his trinitarian theology with reference to the three *hypostases* in order to prevent God from being conceived as static, he must establish unity as coming from the distinction that is the Trinity.

Moltmann establishes the unity of the divine persons as an eschatological reality. Their work

together in history moves them toward the eschatological moment. Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen states of Moltmann’s description the unity in the Trinity, “Being a dynamic concept, it is also ‘*communicable* unity and ... an *open, inviting unity, capable of interaction*’ over against the traditional exclusive way that builds on the ideas of the oneness of the substance or the sameness of the absolute subject.”⁴⁷ Moltmann reminds us of the danger in having a reality that exists outside of creation; that is: being perceived as static and immovable. Moltmann’s primary contribution to trinitarian theology is that he denies the difficult trend that God has no real investment in creation. In Moltmann’s theology, God is affected by historical events, primarily Christ’s crucifixion. If ecclesiology is to be rooted in this type of trinitarian theology, it must be cautious of designating the universal church as a static entity without regard to its historical manifestation. In Moltmann’s theology it is through the movement back and forth between creation and God that the Trinity exists. The universal church and local churches must interact with each other in order to realize themselves fully.

The final theologian I will look at is the Brazilian sister and eco-feminist theologian, Ivone Gebara. Gebara’s trinitarian reflection, though strictly speaking is more of a Philosophy of Religion than it is of a theology of the Trinity, offers a great insight into how to understand the Trinity. She begins by rooting her reflection in the “wonder of the human person,” which is essentially the recognition of unity in diversity. The wonder of the human person compromises the fact that no person is an individual *per se*. She points to science and culture as the source of this reflection. Science shows us that though we are people and individuals, we are always in relationship to our surroundings. Culturally speaking, our ideas, customs and rituals stand in relationship to the billions of years of the universe’s history, which in turn form us. From this, Gebara develops her reflection on trinitarian theology from this, which is the recognition that the universe is mysteriously and profoundly connected in all its diversity. She states, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are symbolic expressions; as such they are a language that bespeaks experience. They refer to the profound intuition that all of us participate, along with everything that exists, in the same Breath of Life”⁴⁸ and “The experience of the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 3.

⁴⁷ Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 111.

⁴⁸ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Lib-*

Trinity brings multiplicity and the desire for unity into a single and unique movement, as if they were phases of the same breath.”⁴⁹

Gebara’s reflection may not be something that is immediately received by everyone who reads it because its primary purpose is to shift the way we think about God to something that we may have never considered otherwise. Yet, her theology is compatible with many trinitarian theologians today. Concerning ecclesiology, Gebara’s reflection would not accept that the universal church could be something that could be possible without reference to history as she would see it as essentialism left behind by the platonic patriarchal dualism that is so readily found in Christianity. However, her insight that the Trinity reveals our desire to see the unity in the diversity of our lives, as well as the insight that we are already profoundly shown to be formed and related to the rest of the world and society relates directly to the conversation on how the universal church is connected to the local churches. In applying Gebara’s reflection, it would seem that there can be no separation between the ‘worldwide church’ to the local churches. The church is necessarily the profound mystery that it is one while existing in multiple places with very different people all at once.

These three trinitarian theologies all present the divine perichoresis as an integral point in the Trinity and thus their thoughts have direct implica-

tions on how the church sees itself. The inner unity of the church is essential to affirm in this discussion. Yet, unity cannot be taken as synonymous with the universal church, especially if this means that the only way to ensure unity is to sacrifice the diversity and concrete experience in history that exists in the church. Ratzinger, in no way suggests this blatantly but his position does hold that an abstract notion of church should be held in primacy over these historically concrete communities. The universal church, both as ‘worldwide community’ and as ‘essential mystery’ do not have any real meaning apart from their existence in time and space. The church, if it is to relate to God, must be integrally tied to the local churches. Each local communities’ manifestation of the universal church gives historical presence to the universal church, just as the universal church’s presence in the local churches gives them meaning and validation as church. This is why the notion of perichoresis between local churches themselves – for the sake of inner unity, and perichoresis between the universal church and local churches is so effective. They cannot exist and are meaningless without each other. The diversity that is creation must also be affirmed with unity, not under it. Kasper’s position incorporates both aspects of church successfully. This is true especially after reviewing these trinitarian theologians’ methods of asserting the unity that is present in God while fully emphasizing the diversity that is the Trinity.

eration, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1999), 154.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

