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**Time of Crisis:
The Example of the
Synods of Antioch in the Third and Fourth Centuries**

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Introduction

We all carry with us our own experiences that show that community life in religious communities and churches inevitably create tensions, due to the fact of our different personalities, convictions and behaviour. To my knowledge there is neither a community nor a church nor a religion which has never experienced, during its history, periods of deep crisis and division, excommunications and condemnations. Conflicts are indeed the fruits of human behaviour or conviction, and, if not resolved in time, they spread slowly like a contagious illness, thus appealing for means and procedure to find common solutions. If lacking so, conflicts threaten the very existence of any community. No community can exist while ignoring the fact that there are necessary boundaries which form the identity of a group and which have to be respected by its members. Moreover, conflicts highlight where these boundaries are and whether somebody is still inside or is already outside the community.

Nevertheless, one conflict is not similar to another conflict. Some of them can easily be solved rapidly without special institutions, whereas others need a set-up of official procedures.

Solutions can be found in a positive way, if some conditions are respected:

- The readiness of the two opposed parties to meet with one another and to discuss the problem together.
- Institutions, places, times adapted to deal with conflicts.
- This means finally agreements on a common position or recognition of diverse positions, without provoking neither separation nor division, exclusion or excommunication. Everybody has to commit himself to respect the resolutions taken.

Part 1: Conflicts in the Early Church arose in different ways concerning various subjects.

The early Christian communities, the oldest local churches were not sheltered from division, conflicts or internal struggles. We find already signs of deep divisions inside the Apostolic Church in the letters of Saint Paul or the Acts of the Apostles. Therefore it is simply a matter of fact: From the very beginning onward, the church or the churches had to face serious problems inside their communities and had to find solutions.

One may wonder what the concrete reasons for these conflicts in the church community were. There was just not one isolated reason, but there were many, depending on the various situations. Looking at the beginning of the Church, we face a whole set of problems belonging to various areas of daily life in the church.

One of the central discussions in the Early Church arose about doctrinal problems in the profession of faith. This means in simple words: What makes a Christian a Christian? What has he to believe and how has he to behave? What is the basic definition of Christian faith, and what is required to belong to a Christian community or to be excluded from it? What are the boundaries for belonging to or being excluded from the church?

Hence we encounter in the second, third and fourth centuries a fierce struggle inside the church concerning the definition of Christian faith. J. Stevenson has entitled his well-known book *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, which contains a collection of documents illustrating the history of the Church between the years 337 and 461 A.D.¹ It is not only the alliteration of the three “C’s” which points out sharply what the church had to deal with during that period. These three expressions show us more in depth a constellation that forms the base of church-life:

¹ STEVENSON, J, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies. Documents illustrative of the Church AD 337-461*, London 2000 (6).

1) Creeds highlight: “What do I believe and how do I formulate it?”

Belonging to a church needs a common profession of faith. This constitutes a necessary condition for membership. But a common faith needn't be expressed everywhere in exactly the same formulas. One faith yes – but how to express it?

2) Controversies remind us: “What were the fundamental discussions in the church about?”

Belonging to the same church community doesn't suppress different opinions, convictions or traditions. There has to be a certain diversity of expression of the same faith and a sound discussion about it. But this can create divisions when the borderline has been trespassed.

3) Councils had the task to answer: “How can controversies be solved and how can faith be clarified for the future generations?”

If conflicts arise, they require special places and special times where one could define boundaries, which cannot be transgressed without breaking off from the community.

The early Christian community had to face all kinds of questions, because faith encompasses all dimensions of Christian life. Let us just make a list of some of the most essential questions in the Early Church.

1. Liturgical problems (time schedule of celebrating feasts i.e. Easter). The question comes up: What to do when, for example, two Christian communities celebrate at a different time the feast of Easter. Can such a difference be tolerated or have they to agree on a common date? In such a discussion the church discovers the importance of tradition going back to the apostolic times. A tradition linked to the origins of the faith. If there are two different traditions but both are linked to the apostolic origin, they may coexist peacefully.
2. Fixing the canon of the Holy Scriptures in confrontation with Markion and his selective way of defining the scripture-canon. Still in the second century it was not clear which ones were the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament and where were the limits.
3. Problems of church-structure: How can the community be structured and who leads the community? What about leaders who show themselves unworthy of their responsibility? What about interference from outside into a given church?
4. Problems of personal strife – ambition of leadership. How to deal with somebody who has conquered a leading position in a church to somebody else's detriment?

5. Problems of apostasy and purity of faith in the time of the “lapsi” during the Roman persecutions. Is there forgiveness for those who return to the church after having committed the act of apostasy or any other heavy sin?
6. General questions of human relations and moral life of the faithful.

There wasn't simply one problem, but a whole range of problems, which were dealt with in the early synods. Different synods focussed on one or another problem, according to the actual needs.

Part 2: Synods (a word of Greek origin) or councils (a word of Latin origin), show a successful way of dealing with conflicts inside the church.

Conflicts urgently ask for a solution, but not every single problem in the church needed the convocation of an official council, which was indeed the most important meeting between local churches. Synods and councils are at the end of a long chain of different procedures in the effort of resolving conflicts peacefully. Therefore, the Early Church developed different lines of action working in a gradual, progressive way, to foster solutions inside the church-communities in case of conflict. Eusebius of Caesarea, the first Christian church historian and one of the most important sources of the oldest synods, hands down to us a detailed description of the procedure during the conflict with the anti-Montanist movement, which originated in the middle of the second century.² The Montanist sect was somehow a spiritual and prophetic movement in the Early Church, which threatened the faith and the hierarchical structure of the church.

We find in the church history of Eusebius a list of gradual procedures while dealing with a special problem.

1. At the beginning of a quarrel, the small local Christian communities had to face division. Two groups inside the same community claim to possess exclusively the right faith while accusing the others of being wrong. The dispute still remains on the level of oral confrontation. Theological discussions between different groups inside a local church community rose, with the bishop being the final instance of taking a decision in his church.³
2. When a peaceful solution in a single local church can not be found, we reach the next degree of confrontation. The conflict overflows and reaches other churches. At that point we notice that theologians, who were very often bishops, start dealing with the conflict in special apologetical writings, defending the Orthodox position. The

² EUSEBIUS, *Church-history* V, 18,1-12.

³ EUSEBIUS, *C.H.* V, 16,4. und 16,10.

spreading of problems beyond the pale puts the unity of a local church as well as the unity between different churches at risk. Nevertheless, a written exposition of the faith was not always sufficient for the dispute to be resolved.⁴

3. It is at that very point that councils and synods came into existence. They are meetings of different local churches in order to deal with important problems, which couldn't be solved in a simple way. Synods or councils are indeed the highest platform in the ancient church for dealing with conflict.⁵

The nature of synods finds itself well expressed in the linguistical meaning of the word *synhodos*. It means "to find a way together," "to go side by side." Synods were initially meetings, gatherings, places of exchange and discussion, convoked by a bishop in the presence of the whole local Christian community. Neighbouring communities and their responsible leaders (bishops) were also invited to participate in such common meetings.

We always find two dimensions in a synod: a local and a universal one. Synods took place in a local church, but the participants came as well from other local churches. Therefore a synod was never a purely local event. The decisions taken were sent by letters to all major churches. "Ecumenical councils" began with Nicaea I (325). But the expression, as we know it today, symbolizing "the gathering of the whole church from one end of the earth to the other" only became a point of reference in the fifth century.

Part 3: Antioch as an example of a rich tradition of synodal structure

First and foremost I want to underline that the church of Antioch, founded by the apostles themselves, in the same way as Rome, Alexandria and Jerusalem, was one of the most important ancient churches from the first until the sixth century.

We remember the presence of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Antioch at different times. It was here that the followers of Jesus Christ received for the first time the name of "Christians." The open and tolerant atmosphere of Antioch was favourable for a flourishing Christian community. Moreover, Antioch occupied in the East (Syria-Palestine) of the Roman Empire a dominant and strategic position.

Due to its function as a crossing-point of trade-roads, Antioch was an outstanding place of political and military administration as well as a centre for trade and commerce. At a certain time, it became even the residence for the Byzantine Emperor in the East. Under many regards, the city can be seen as a cosmopolitan place and a melting pot of different cultures.

⁴ EUSEBIUS, *C.H.* V, 16,1.

⁵ EUSEBIUS, *C.H.* V, 19,1-4.

There East and West, Hellenistic and Semitic life came together. We find there different religions and languages coexisting. This milieu has certainly influenced the growing church. During its historical evolution this church became one of the most fertile places of Christian thinking. Theology and philosophy were flourishing. This means also that conflicts couldn't be avoided and very often could lead to popular uproar and even to civil war. The population of Antioch was well known for being a hot-minded people with a dangerous inclination to political uproar. This didn't change with the growing Christian presence there.

If we look at the other major centres of Christianity at that time, we notice that Rome didn't yet have important Christian theologians. Alexandria, on the other hand, was differently structured and dominated by one mainstream theology of Clement and Origen. Moreover, Alexandria had a very autocratic church structure and the bishop of Alexandria governed the whole church of Egypt with a strong hand in good pharaonic tradition.

Such a flourishing and sparkling surrounding sometimes created inside the Christian communities in Antioch an overflow of enthusiasm. The church was permanently challenged to find solutions to problems in order to keep its identity. Therefore, in a period of about one hundred and eighty years, we find more than twenty church synods, which took place in this city. The first known synod may have taken place around the year 200. But besides some specialists in church history, hardly anyone today could enumerate one or two of these synods. Even in more qualified books on the history of the church, hardly more than five synods will be mentioned for Antioch. The question may rise if these Antiochian synods were without significance and therefore disappeared from the historical memory? We will deal with this question at later on.

Practically speaking, a meeting of a synod in Antioch meant that the bishops from Antioch and its surroundings were gathering for some weeks or even longer to deal with very precise questions concerning church life and unity between the churches. Some of these synods were very small, gathering only some ten participants, but others could be attended by more than one hundred and fifty bishops. Moreover, we can suppose, that, besides the bishops, lower clergy and even ordinary Christians were present at these meetings. The bishops themselves took the final decisions, but the people assisted sometimes actively in finding the solution to problems.

In general, and this is not particular to Antioch, we notice a growing clericalization of synods. Whereas in the second and third centuries lay people participated quite naturally in synods, from the fourth century onward synods became more and more exclusive gatherings of bishops. In the third century, we do still find that an important place was allotted to lay-

theologians in some of the synods (Origen took part as a layman in some Synods in Bostra in Arabia). But we notice as well that all their places are taken later on by the bishops.

As the church became an official institution of the Byzantine Empire, the bishops in their turn slowly took up the role of official administrators of the religious services. The meeting of bishops in a synod was considered more and more as the meeting of the political leaders of the churches, trying not only to preserve the unity in the church but also to foster peace inside the Roman State. We may find in the state-administration a senate, municipal or regional councils; in the same way we find in the church: local, regional or general synods, copied on the existing administrative structure of the Roman Empire.

The number of participants indicates very often the importance of a meeting. The bigger the number of participants in a synod, the more important it became. Therefore we have to be cautious about the sources of the church fathers. They sometimes stressed the importance of one or the other synod by attributing to it a largely exaggerated number of participants. Even today, numbers have a magic importance and may easily suggest that the more the better. Nevertheless, most of the Antiochian synods show a remarkable participation of bishops, underlining once more the important role of this church.

Part 4: Influence and power – Constantine the Great (303-325-337) and the church: who is who in a council?

To understand in depth the history of the Ancient Church, we should never forget the important, even revolutionary change, which took place in the Roman Empire and in the church when Constantine the Great became emperor. Being the first Christian emperor of Rome, Constantine allotted to the church a totally new status in the Empire. With only one exception (Julian Apostata in the middle of the fourth century), his successors will continue on the new way Constantine has opened.

Still at the beginning of the fourth century, only a few years before Constantine became emperor, the Christian Church was a community permanently threatened by public persecution and harassment being considered to be the public enemy of the Roman Empire and of its religious traditions. We remember different periods of persecutions, some being more, some less severe. Some persecutions were locally confined; others touched the whole extent of the Roman Empire. As a matter of fact, at that time it was incompatible to be a faithful Christian believer while occupying an official political position in the Roman State. Either one was a Christian or a government official.

At best, Christian worship could be held in private sometimes even tolerated, but sometimes also cruelly persecuted by the public authorities⁶. To be a bishop meant in this context to be the most exposed person of the Christian community in case of persecution and to be subjected to harassment. The quality of a bishop appeared in his capacity to confess adamantly his faith even at risk of persecution and martyrdom. To become a bishop was certainly not a career somebody would easily strive for out of idle motivations. Bishops were in general outstanding persons of faith, strength and perseverance but they were no official political figures.

With Constantine's coming to power, a real revolution broke its way. From now on, the emperor considered himself to be the first bishop of all Christian bishops, the true "Pontifex Maximus." Eusebius glorifies Constantine with the most eulogistic speeches, awarding him the title of "episkopos tôn ekτος" that means, "Bishop for those who were not yet in the church" – or "Bishop of all the affairs outside the church." Constantine even received the title of an "iso-apostolos," which means "the one being equal to the apostles." It is in his burial-celebration of his successor Constantius I that we grasp the totally new significance, which an emperor attributed to himself as a Christian emperor. The emperor was buried in a church he himself had ordered to be constructed in Constantinople. His mausoleum, which is the funeral-church dedicated to the twelve apostles, opened a large round space inside to shelter twelve fake-coffins of the apostles. They encompassed the central coffin of the emperor.

For a long time, every Roman emperor was by his dignity considered to be the "Pontifex Maximus" of the traditional Roman religion. Now the emperor considers himself as the "Pontifex Maximus" of the Christian religion. Only later, when the Roman Empire was again divided into East and West, in absence of an emperor in the West, this title was given to the bishop of Rome, who, in a certain way, replaced the Christian emperor in the western part of the *Imperium Romanum*. What did this tremendous change mean in fact for the church-councils?

The Holy Council of Nicaea (325), later called the first ecumenical council, only came to existence because the emperor himself convoked the bishops of the empire. This was a new reality. There was a gathering of more than three hundred bishops (three hundred and eighteen according to tradition), who came to the council of Nicaea profiting from the services of the imperial public transports. The bishops were welcomed and hosted like state officials. Constantine participated in the council and occupied a place of honour. In early documents he is shown as the one being surrounded by the bishops of whom he turns out to be the centre.

⁶ See the persecutions in the time of Cyprian of Carthage in North-Africa (351-356).

Let us still remember that in the time, which preceded Constantine's reign, councils were still a pure church event. Never an official representative of the state would have taken part in it. The church was free to convoke synods according to its own needs and to make decisions in function of its pastoral work and dogmatic questions.

With Constantine's coming to power, suddenly the emperor finds his place among the bishops. But originally, the councils were not created for this participation. How to deal with such a powerful presence of the state inside a pure church institution? Nobody can have any doubt that such a presence changed deeply the significance of a synod. This presence of the emperor played a crucial role in nearly all the Antiochian synods in the fourth century. Either he participated, or he influenced their procedure. And let us not forget: The decisions taken in an important synod do not only have an impact on the church, but also on the state! Thus every emperor had a big interest in having the church united and behind him so as to promote peace and unity inside the Roman Empire. The church has become an officially-recognized institution of the state with many advantages and privileges; very soon the church laws coming from synods would become official state law of the Empire (*Codex Justinianus* and *Codex Theodosianus*). From now on, the state would protect the church and promote its work. On the other hand, the church and its institutions had to serve the interests of the state.

We still need to mention that Constantine the Great had once again unified the empire under his reign, but later on, already under his successors, the empire will again be divided into a western and an eastern part. The eastern part was politically and religiously speaking by far the most important one. The most influential emperors resided in the East, in the recently build capital of Constantinople, considered to be the Christian Rome. Outstanding theological schools can be found in the eastern churches, in Alexandria, Antioch and Caesarea. At that time, Antioch becomes one of the central places for the eastern churches and a principal place for synods. The emperors Constantius I and his successors took a great interest in these synods. The latter turn out to be the place where the Eastern churches define themselves and their own identity. Unluckily, this happens in confrontation with the Church of Rome and of Alexandria, reined by Athanasius the Great and linked very closely to Rome and to the Western Roman Empire. With Antioch on the one side and Rome and Alexandria on the other, we find the two opposed blocks of churches in the fourth century. They reflect the political antagonism between the Roman Empire in the West and in the East.

Such an opposition couldn't be found in the third century when the church had to face very different problems. Unity of the church in Antioch means also unity of the Byzantine Empire in the East. The synods of Antioch should accomplish this task; they manifest a self-conscious church, capable of taking far-reaching decisions while trying to protect itself against interferences from outside, especially from Rome and from Alexandria.

Part 5: Historical writing – historical truth: a difficult relation

In the case of the Antiochian synods as well as of other contemporary synods we are confronted with a major problem in church history. We cannot simply take the written sources of the church fathers, which have come down to us, without critically analyzing them. Otherwise we hardly reach a trustworthy presentation of the synods of Antioch. One of the principal questions which are to be answered is how synods have been described and dealt with in the hands of the church fathers and what are the motives for the writers to do so.

+ In fact, the result of our research helps us to confirm:

The synods of Antioch count among the most interesting ones during the third and fourth centuries. Whereas in Alexandria the synods in the fourth century are mostly dominated by Athanasius who showed a dominant position in that church and its synods, we notice a large variety of synods in Antioch. There was not one bishop who dominated that church during a long time. Antioch had rather to struggle with a rapid change of bishops and different divisions in the church hierarchy.

Some synods, for example the “Enkenian Synod” of 341, were even held in the presence of the Byzantine emperor himself, and his presence bestowed a special importance on the event. The most important of Antiochian synods could bring more than one hundred and fifty bishops together.⁷

All aspects of life in the church were dealt with, sometimes canon laws were elaborated, another time bishops were condemned for heresy and replaced. It still needs questioning whether these condemnations were really justified or whether they were pure political strategies of some opponents.

A central point in synodal discussion in the fourth century remains the question of defining the Christian faith with formulas that explained and developed the profession of faith of Nicaea.

Therein, the Antiochian synods show an open-minded attitude to elaborate different formulas of faith by expressing the Orthodox faith in a new, creative way. Antioch was not simply repeating what was always said before. The expression of the faith is variable and flexible and can change according to circumstances. Formulas of faith have to respond to new demands and new theological findings. These are basic convictions of the Antiochian synods.

⁷ See the synod of 379 with about 160 participants.

Nevertheless, there was always a risk to be too flexible and too open in formulating the faith, as well as lacking stability and clarity in the expression. Such flexibility could easily lead to abuse by heretical tendencies. Nevertheless, the faith-formulas of Antioch represent in general the mainstream Orthodox tradition in the Eastern Church.

As time goes on we encounter a new risk. It is the risk of an astonishing multiplication of synods, splitting into smaller and smaller synods. The Antiochian synods risked to lose their capacity of unifying the different groups in the church. A tendency cropped up that some bishops tried to use the synods for their own political purpose. If a synod and its decision didn't please, why not convoke another one condemning the decisions of the first synod? By doing so, nobody could be sure whether he hadn't become the ostracised victim of a synod of his enemies. Neither could anybody know with certainty which synod he had to follow nor which one he had to reject. The criteria of validity of a synod went missing.

We also notice the danger that some synods may have been organized solely to bless the official policy of the emperor. The most important thing in the eyes of the emperor was to establish peace in the church, even if this should be done at the detriment of real Orthodoxy. Becoming more and more church of the state, synods assume the function of establishing unity and peace for the empire.

The synods of Antioch had a difficult stand because they were nearly always in opposition to Athanasius of Alexandria, less because of the question of faith than because of the question of leadership, influence and power. Athanasius had been condemned officially at an eastern synod of Tyrus (335) still under Constantine the Great, and the synods in Antioch followed this example. We regret deeply that only a small number of these Antiochian synods survived in the documents of the church fathers and the earliest historians of the church.

+ In fact, we read in the texts of the church fathers:

The documents we hold in our hands today, come nearly all from Orthodox Nicaean sources, namely those ones convinced of the fact, that the Nicaean Creed, as it was formulated during the "Holy Council of Nicaea" (325) is the only possible formulation of an Orthodox Christian faith. As a consequence, all other formulas were accused of striving for Arianism and heresy. One of the main sources is the theological writings of Saint Athanase who had in general a despising regard on the Antiochian synods. Athanasius himself contributed with all his strength to establish the Nicaean Creed as the unique profession of Orthodox faith and to denigrate all the other formulas of faith.

Other sources of the synods of Antioch may have existed. There were for sure written synodal. They are even mentioned by some church historians, but either they disappeared or they were consciously eliminated by the mainstream party of the Nicæan faith, of which Athanasius became little by little the champion. If, however, documents survived, they found themselves most often incorporated in the writings of the most severe critics, like Athanasius of Alexandria, or they are to be found out of their historical context at places nobody would expect them to be.

Therefore the Antiochian synods find themselves in a disadvantaged position. They were judged severely, because they didn't follow the mainstream theology of Rome and Alexandria. Moreover, they were regularly in open conflict with Athanasius of Alexandria and Rome. The bishop of Alexandria, out of his personal history, didn't have any interest in putting the synods of Antioch in a positive light. He always presents them as threatening the true Nicæan faith and thus disqualifies all the Antiochian synods and their documents without entering into details. This could have harmed him. Athanasius himself defines the quality of a synod in an absolute and inflexible way: Only Nicæa can be considered to be good and trustworthy. In addition, Athanasius links to his arguments the accusation of strong abuse of the Antiochian synods by the eastern emperors, who were considered to be critical of Nicæa and personal enemies of Athanasius. But as we see it in history, those who accuse the Antiochian synods as symbols of political corruption, they themselves tried to use the political influence of the western emperors for the sake of their own synods in Rome or Alexandria. It is not fair to accuse others of the sins oneself commits.

+ In fact, we notice the following procedures in the work of the church fathers:

Already in the earliest years, which followed the Antiochian synods, we discover an intentional transformation of historical facts. Many Antiochian synods have been coincidentally or unconsciously eliminated from historical memory. One doesn't even mention them nor speak about them. This looks like a clear procedure of elimination of certain synods to the advantage of others.

Only by chance and with a scientific approach we still find some hints of their existence in the writings of some church fathers. Some synodal documents as there are canon laws, synodal letters or formulas of profession of faith went astray and were later attributed to other synods. This makes us aware of the fact that the historical view of the Early Church historians is defined from the victorious position of the council of Nicæa and its strongest supporter: Athanasius. In the case of the Antioch synods we find some astonishing procedures when disclosing some historical events. Besides the writings of Athanasius, nearly all the other sources have disappeared. The church fathers constantly reduce the significance of the

Antiochian synods to one theme only: “The Nicaean Orthodoxy.” Along these criteria, the Antiochian synods have to be condemned. To stress this, the church fathers use methods of negative presentation: Earthquakes and invasions of enemies accompanied the Antiochian synods or they simply caused a civil war. We can qualify this changing of historical facts as an embellishment of the Nicaean position which is seen as the victory of the true faith over a dangerous enemy – but was this enemy really the enemy described in later writings?

Conclusion:

Synodal life was very developed in Antioch in the third and fourth centuries. But the ever-growing radiance of the first council of Nicaea made the other synods nearly disappear in the historical writings. Because of these procedures we also lost the richness of the synodal life in the first centuries of the church. Synods were indeed a very performing means for solving conflicts in the church. With all their shortcomings they show us that the local churches succeeded very well in resolving their problems in a synodal structure. No single bishop was yet dominating the other churches, but in synods all the churches were equally treated. Nevertheless, under the Byzantine Empire there was a growing risk of the abuse of councils for political purposes.