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Benedict practices 'communion ecclesiology'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2006 All Things Catholic

On June 29, the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Benedict XVI imposed the pallium, the symbol of a metropolitan archbishop's office, on 27 archbishops appointed during the last year.

The pallium, which also symbolizes the link between the metropolitan and the See of Peter, is a circular band about two inches wide, with two pendants hanging down front and back. It's ornamented with six dark crosses of silk, and is worn over liturgical vestments. The pallium is given to metropolitan archbishops appointed during the last year, and can be worn only within their ecclesiastical province.

Like last year, Benedict XVI led the ceremony inside St. Peter's Basilica, rather than in the square as was customary under John Paul II. From Benedict's point of view, the basilica, especially the central altar directly above the tomb of St. Peter, better captures the meaning of the event.

It's customary for the Patriarch of Constantinople to send a delegation to the Vatican for the event, just as the pope sends a delegation to the Phanar for the Feast of St. Andrew on Nov. 30. (This year, Benedict will go himself.) The Orthodox delegation was led by Metropolitan John Zizioulas, who is to some extent an Orthodox analog of Joseph Ratzinger -- one of the most accomplished theologians of his generation, who has been called into church governance.

As Benedict XVI processed into the basilica, he made a special point of spotting Zizioulas and smiling at him. Later, the two men exchanged the Sign of Peace. At the end of the Mass, Benedict and Zizioulas went down the stairs under the main altar together and prayed before what are believed to be the bones of St. Peter. The two prelates stood shoulder-to-shoulder, with no distinction in "rank."

Zizioulas pioneered the concept of "communion ecclesiology," the idea that the church is constituted by the celebration of the Eucharist around the bishop, which has had great influence also in Roman Catholicism in the period after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In his own theological work, Joseph Ratzinger has written that the "ecclesiology of communion" is a useful point of departure, though he's warned that it must not exalt the

local church at the expense of the universal. For his part, Zizioulas has argued that Orthodoxy can accept the universal primacy of the pope, if it is "fundamentally qualified," meaning that it respects the autonomy of local churches and acts through a synodal structure.

In his homily, Benedict ended with a strong ecumenical appeal.

"We share the ardent desire expressed in the past by Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI: to drink together from the same chalice, and to eat together the bread that is the Lord himself," the pope said. "We newly implore, on this occasion, that this gift will be conceded to us soon."

In an audience for the Orthodox delegation, Benedict recalled that Peter is recalled in Byzantine hagiography as the *protocoryphaeus*, literally the "first in the choir," which Benedict defined as "the task of maintaining the harmony of the voices, for the glory of God and the service of his people."

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