



THE TRIADOCENTRIC DIMENSION (PROPERTY/QUALITY) OF THE ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Conjugating the Godhead person communion life ensemble, the Church is an icon of Trinitarian relations, continuing the salvation opera of Its founder, Jesus Christ, essence and finality of personal relation between God and man. Christian life is anchored in Christ and the Holy Spirit, for only in Christ and through the Holy Spirit we can meet and know our Father. Therefore, life in Christ or the spiritual life is nothing but a direct participation at Trinitarian life. The door to this life is opened only by Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity and we cannot partake of its fullness but through the grace of saints marking their presence in the Church.

Keywords: *Holy Trinity; communion; Holy Church; ecclesiology; pneumatology;*

INTRODUCTION

The first basic principle and premise of Eastern dogmatic theology is its triadocentric quality (centered upon the Holy Trinity). No branch of Orthodox dogmatics can be understood without being related to the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Thus, in its ensemble, Orthodox theology is a special sort of *feast*, which evokes the veridic nature of the texts of the Holy Scripture, related to the real incarnation of Christ the Lord in history. Christian thinking, the pulse of ecclesial life, conjugates the nature of divinity on all its levels (Biblical-exegetical, patristical, liturgical, spiritual-moral, and historical): the perfect, eternal love between I, You, Him or that *Us*, that simultaneously encompasses the Unborn, the Born and the Proceeding. We worship the Father as a factor of the person-unitary life of God, as a Reason for the Birth of the Son and the Origin of the proceeding of the Holy Spirit; as the supreme Self-reflecting Subject, and also as Subject that reflects upon other Subjects, a Subject of Subjects, equal to Him in infinity and boundlessness. As Eternal Love, which hypostasizes His existence, His *to be* in the Trinity of Persons.

The Son as a Whole of Wholes, as an utterance of the Father, as a saying of His thought. And the Holy Spirit as the One who ineffably comes from the Father; as an expression of the power and wisdom of God. The same in Its nature, always, but not separate from the Father and the Son. This celebration shows that the Trinity is the motion of One who does not remain shut into loneliness, that it is the love-filled movement of the Father to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is the movement of three Persons who are not separate from one another, One from the Existence of Another, but converge in the Oneness of Their perfect nature. Concretely, we are part of a *feast* that opens the mystery of our existence to our profound intuition, as well as its ultimate Meaning. We are referring to an eternal event, the *leap* from singular to plural, from *I* to *Us*. Due to perichoresis, in the ontic *geography* of the Trinity, one cannot speak of the priority of one person over the others, not



even the Father. At this level, the Trinity is a communion of equals without a hierarchy, because the unity of the Trinity is not realized through the monarchy of the Father, as a *matrix* of Godly ontogenesis, neither through the bond of personal unity in the Holy Spirit (in a *Filioque* manner), but through the perichoresis of eternal love. „The pure nature of the Divine Subjects implies a full inter-subjectivity, a term that highlights the positive communion that takes place between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. This is why we speak of One God, and three Egos. The three Subjects do not separate from each other, One from the Conscience of Another, to show Godhood subsisting separately. Through this, the subjectivity of neither divine Ego is narrowed, but broadened, encompassing the Others in some way or another. Each one lives through the manners in which The Others live the divine being, but not as His, but as Theirs”¹, as Saint Gregory the Theologian emphasized.

1. „THE CHURCH IS FILLED WITH THE TRINITY” – ORIGEN

For the Holy Fathers, there is no Church without the Holy Trinity, whether it is narrowly or widely involved. In fact, the very Divine revelation which is the source of redeeming dogmas is the *ad extra* movement of the Godly Hypostases, through the mediation of their works, which are manifested, in creation and history, from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Father is the initiator of our redemption, as well as the founder of the creation plan of *all things visible and invisible*. Through His Son and hypostatic Word, all godly actions in the world are accomplished, and the Holy Spirit, through the outpour of His uncreated energy, *covers* us and fortifies us to the state of being in which we were elevated, so that we may be forevermore *incorporated* in the blissful proximity of the Holy Trinity².

As an *icon* of The Holy Trinity, the Church does not come across as a reality that is parallel or independent from God, but as a direct reflection of intra-trinity brightness, as guaranteed by the perichoretic love of the three equals³. Therefore, Christian living in the Church is a life *grafted* in Christ and the Holy Spirit, for it is only in Christ and through the Holy Spirit that one encounters and knows The Father.⁴ At the same time, life in Christ, or spiritual life – in the Spirit – denotes a direct participation in the *life* of the Trinity. One enters this life through the Baptism performed in the name of the Holy Trinity, and we can only partake of its fullness through the sanctifying Grace that is present within the mysteries of the Church. In conjugating the ensemble of the communion life of the persons in the Godhood, the Church is an *icon* of trinitarian relationships, and at the same time, it continues the redeeming work of its Founder, Christ Jesus, as the essence and finality of the personal relationship between God and man.

„But the Church, as an icon of the Holy Trinity, is not built as an icon that is parallel or independent to the Holy Trinity, but as participation in trinitarian life and as the shining (reflection) of said participation in the world. In fact, when someone becomes a Christian or a

¹ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1978, p. 207.

² See Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Sfânta Treime, creatorea, mântuitoarea și ținta veșnică a tuturor credincioșilor (The Holy Trinity, the Creator, Redeemer and Eternal Target of All the Faithful)*, in *Ortodoxia*, no. 2/1986, p. 36.

³ See Archimandrite VASILIOS, *Intrarea în Împărăție. Inițiere în taina liturgică a unității Ortodoxiei (Entering the Kingdom. An initiation into the liturgical mystery of the unity of Orthodoxy)*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1996, p. 42.

⁴ According to *John* 14, 6-10 and *Romans*, 8, 15.



member of the Church, this is done through Baptism in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, becoming a Christian means reestablishing or beginning communion with the Holy Trinity”⁵.

The trinitarian aspect is not only about the origin and certainty of the Church, but mostly about its ontology, which means its theandric constitution. The trinitarian element becomes fundamental for understanding the Mystery of the Church, because the Trinity of God is the *emblem* of transcendence, of overcoming a solitary insufficiency, of communion in love and of perfect freedom. Thus, ecclesiology is founded upon theology, as a revealed teaching about God-the Holy Trinity, which means that, every time, one must affirm its transcendence and openness to the world. The ontology of the Church is the ontology of *boundless* love, etched upon the *score* of communions.

This is why ontology must not be understood through a circular forming, enclosing the Church within the *cell* of the created eon. The Church does not rotate around its own axis, nor is it reduced to a space that is circumscribed to the limits of matter, but is founded upon the movement of love, communion and freedom which God inserts into His perennial relationship with human beings, a process which took the ultimate shape through the incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ. Through its very being, the Church is found upon this continuous trajectory between God and the world. The Church of Jesus descends into the world because God-Love *impregnates* the entire cosmos through His uncreated and eternal energies, making Himself accessible to creation. The Church interiorizes a world risen *to the power* of the age *to come*, for God cannot be locked inside the immanence and relativism of history. The entire plan of salvation attests the movement of *He Who Is* in His creation, a movement which involves the *Paschal* form of moving from death to life, from a state of spiritual *invalidity*, acquired through sin, to a state of *permanent* godliness, given by He who is *ancient of days* through his immeasurable love.

For centuries on end, Western theologians have insisted upon a Christ-centered theological *pattern*, although the Fathers of the Church unanimously saw it as a trinitarian *construct*, instated after a *kata-basic* movement of the sort: Father-Christ-Spirit, and constructed upon an *ana-basic* scheme: Holy Spirit-Christ-The Father. It is only in the light of the Holy Trinity that the Church reveals itself in its true meaning. In the Church, the fullness of communion in love is affirmed, according to the image of divine intersubjectivity, for a unity of will and feeling takes place between its members, leading to a union in Grace with the Triune God. But as a communion of human beings with God, the new Ark of Noah – the Church – is driven to the *deep* by the incarnation of The Word, being, therefore, an extension of the Incarnation into humanity, and objectively founded by Christ through His death upon the cross and His Resurrection from the dead.

As a visible community between God and human beings, the Church debuts in history at the celebration of the *Fire Easter*, through the protective descent of the Paraclete Spirit. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is „the life and soul of the Church. Through Him, Christ extends into human beings, incorporating them into Himself as members of His body. The Church enters history as a real community from the Pentecost, which means at the same time

⁵ Dan Ilie CIOBOTEĂ, *Dorul după Biserica nedespărțită sau Apelul tainic și irezistibil al iubirii Treimice (Longing for an Undivided Church or The Mysterious and Irresistible Call of Trinitarian Love)*, in *Ortodoxia*, no. 4/1982, p. 592.



as the descent of the Holy Spirit over the apostles who were together, but in a distinct manner over each of them, thus instating sacramental of special priesthood in the Church”⁶.

On another note, through the redeeming work of Christ, the communion life of the three Persons descends into humanity, giving birth to the Church, and the Church, due to its Head, Christ, perfects itself by reaching for the Holy Trinity, through the Holy Spirit”⁷. The constitution of the Church is focused upon a theandric synergy, keeping those it unites, mankind and God, as distinct persons, just as the *hypostatic* community keeps the Divine Persons distinct. Ecclesial pneumatology becomes dangerous when it relies on the Holy Spirit remaining with us, as a substitute of Christ. If the Holy Spirit is seen announcing Himself, without indicating the crucified, Resurrected and Glory-ascended Christ, then one believes that they are dealing with a theology influenced by the addition of *Filioque*, not the teaching revealed to the Church, which is, quintessentially, built upon the *trinitarian pattern*. The Holy Apostles found the unity of the Church upon the unity of the Body of Christ, upon the „unity of spirit”⁸ and the unity of God, „Father of all, who is above all and in all”⁹. And through the fact that the Church is incorporated in Christ and structuralized in a triune manner, it differs from every other human creation. Thus, the Church is the new Creature of God, in which the differences that exist in the world disappear¹⁰.

Strongly related to the ecclesial¹¹ Christological school of thought, countless eminent theologians began to consider the tendency of the Church’s pneumatology, in the attempt to expand its ecclesiological bases. Based upon the following allegation: „The Church has existed before the creation of the world in the eternal Godly paradigms, and the depths of its being originate from the Holy Trinity”¹², Eastern theology states that the sacred Body of the Lord was born from the overflowing of love from God-the-Holy-Trinity over a mankind under the condemnation of sin. Its purpose is that of giving mankind a Godly nature. Thus, the following corollary results: „The Church is one in the multitude of its members and whole in each of them”¹³. Referring to the more and more pronounced

⁶ Dumitru RADU, *Hotărârile dogmatice ale celui de-al doilea Sinod ecumenic (The Dogmatic Decisions of the Second Ecumenical Synod)*, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 7-8/1981, p. 819.

⁷ „Even in New Testament writings, one encounters the idea that the Holy Spirit is given through Christ, especially the Resurrected Christ, ascending to Heaven (for the Spirit had not been given yet, as Christ had not been glorified yet – *John* 7, 39), as well as the idea that He is not Christ, so to speak, until the Spirit works, not just as a forerunner who announces His arrival, but as the One who makes up His true identity as the Christ, both at His baptism (Mark), and at the moment of His biological conception (Luke and John). Both perspectives can fortunately coexist, as it is obviously revealed by a study of Luke (the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles), of the Gospel of John etc” (according to Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Ființa eclezială – The Ecclesial Being* –, translated by Vasile Gavrilă, Bizantina Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, p. 132).

⁸ *Ephesians* 4, 3.

⁹ *Ephesians* 4, 6.

¹⁰ Constantin VOICU, *Studii de teologie patristică (Studies of Patristic Theology)*, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 290.

¹¹ The theandric constitution of the Church is given by Christ Himself, who, according to His Godly nature, is united to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and according to His human nature, is united to all human beings, and to each and every one of them. Encompassed in the incarnate hypostasis of the Son, the Church is Christ extended in humanity. Christ and humanity are so united in the Church, that neither Christ, nor humanity, can be seen or conceived one without the other (according to Ioan TULCAN, *Misterul mântuirii în Hristos și în Biserică – The Mystery of Salvation in Christ and in the Church* –, Aurel Vlaicu University Publishing House, Arad, 2007, p. 105).

¹² Nicolae CHIȚESCU, *Sobornicitatea Bisericii (The Universality of the Church)* in *Studii Teologice*, no. 3-4/1955, pp.151-152.

¹³ Nicolae CHIȚESCU, *Sobornicitatea Bisericii*..., pp.152-153.



differences between Eastern ecclesiology and Western ecclesiology, the *foremost figure* of Romanian theology emphasized: „The time has come to be able to proceed with establishing an exact formula of balance, the middle ground between and to the other denomination, which should give them that which is due to them, but also consider the branch that they differently contradictorily left, to help them grow closer, both to one another and to the branch that they left, finding themselves in a Christological and pneumatological ecclesiology”¹⁴.

The triadological approach of ecclesiology is not new in Eastern Christian conception and writing, and not only that. The Holy Fathers have always unequivocally affirmed the *polymorphous* (triadological and Christological) basis of the *ecclesial construct*. Thus „triune ecclesiology was largely developed in the Patristic age. The first thing that was understood when mentioning this was unity in multiplicity, which characterizes both the Church and the Holy Trinity. Then, it was the identity of life outpoured by the Holy Trinity over believers, through its gifts and Grace – communion of a life of faith and supernatural love”¹⁵. In this context, one must mention the intervention of the great Christian apologist Origen, who, in a well-known passage of his work, says: „The Church is filled with the Trinity”¹⁶. Within the same semasiological framework, the famous Latin-language apologetic Tertullian stated that „where there are three, meaning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, there is the Church, for the Church is the Body of the Three”¹⁷. The same approach is shared by Saint Maximus the Confessor, when he states that „the role of believers and saints is that of expressing the unity of the Holy Trinity itself”¹⁸. This aspect must be understood in the following manner: the Church is an indivisible structure, distinct, in its essence, from any form of outside legal compulsion. However, the following question arises: in the context of the need to establish, based upon the fundament of Trinity, how it is possible to avoid a confusion which stems from the cancellation of personal distinctions (because of the addition of the *Filioque*), as shown in the Roman Catholic teaching on the Trinity and the Church), and to elude a disaggregation of the authority and unity of the Church, due to the exaggerated quantum of liberty given to individuals in the Protestant faith environment? Holy Father Dumitru Stăniloae proposes the most propitious *constitution* of a unitary ecclesial environment, as an answer to the challenge from Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky: „The problem of how the Church is one in Christ, and human beings nevertheless merge within Him is one that Lossky tried to solve. According to him, believers are united in Christ through their nature, but their personhood is preserved and developed in the Holy Spirit...But the central position of Christ as a person among persons is shown by the fact that He is in the midst of those gathered in His name”¹⁹.

The distinction between the role of Christ and that of the *Comforter* Spirit does not reside in a difference between works, „for all that the Son does, the Spirit does in like manner”²⁰, but in the fact that the Son does it all for us through His power, and the Spirit

¹⁴ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Noțiunea dogmei (The Notion of Dogma)*, in *Studii Teologice*, no. 9-10/1964, p. 563.

¹⁵ Nicolae CHIȚESCU, *quoted study*, pp. 151-152.

¹⁶ ORIGEN, *Selecta in Psalmos*, 23, 1, Migne, PG 12, 1265.

¹⁷ TERTULLIAN, *De baptismo*, 6, 10, Migne, PL 2, 1162.

¹⁸ Saint MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Ambigua*, Migne, PG 91, 119 B.

¹⁹ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Noțiunea dogmei (The Notion of Dogma)* in *Studii Teologice*, no. 9-10/1964, p. 567.

²⁰ According to John 5, 19.



brings it up to date. In other words, in the Son, we have the potency of our own personal unity, while the Holy Spirit does not only share its various gifts with us, but also unites us.

Every Western denomination, with the exception of old Catholics, presents this erroneous perspective on triune relationships, which is the filioquist one. Furthermore, Western theologians have attempted to offer a wide *range* of explanations regarding this phenomenon, considered the *matrix* of all doctrinal errors in the Western theological environment. Thus, Anglican theologian T. F. Torrance considered that most Western theologians did not maintain the old patristic *conviction* about the Holy Spirit as an ambient through which we perceive Christ, but tried to render Him approximately the same way as their conceptions of the other two Persons of the Trinity. By dispossessing the Spirit of Truth of His fundamental capacity of revealing Christ, the Paraclete becomes a *vaporous* reality, where He is either mistaken for the Church (in Catholicism, *Filioque* is actually replaced by the syntagm *Ecclesioque*), or for the individualist spirit of Protestantism, where the same *Filioque* is rendered by *Hominoque*²¹.

In opposition to the doctrine of Torrance, who wants to credit the idea that it is not the teaching on *Filioque* that is wrong, but its manner of application, one finds the explanatory position of Father Stăniloae: „But it is surprising that it is the West, where the filioquist doctrine has been continuously affirmed, where both the Catholic doctrine and the Protestant doctrine have fallen into this error. The explanation can only be that *Filioque* itself is the cause of this mistaking the Holy Spirit for human subjectivity; and in Protestantism, for individuals to be given the capacity to find Truth in the Scripture, for it is because of *Filioque* that the Father and the Son are thought of, for He is no longer seen as staying, resting in the Father and the Son, but as coming forth Himself from the Father (and the Son) for an existence like theirs”²². The teaching on double proceeding implies a clear subordination of the Spirit to the Son (historically, the *germs* of the *Filioque* addition) are found in the classic pneumatomachic subordinationism, proffered from the second half of the *golden age* and vehemently countered at the 2nd Ecumenical Synod. The aforementioned heresy considered the Holy Spirit as a creature of the Son, thus refusing His nature as True God, of the same being as the Father and the Son). As we know, this wrong teaching was spread out across the entire Christian West, with numerous and unfavorable consequences. For example, the life of the Church, medium and long-term, ended up being considered this endless dispute between the individual and *πλήρωμα*, between the subjective and the objective, between the particular and the general. Consequently, the Church, both in matters of faith, and on a liturgical level, shall either emphasize objective ensembles being offered instead of that which is interior and typical, or subjective elements which cancel all that is common”²³.

Orthodox Patristic triadology places filioquism in opposition to the thesis of reciprocity in regard to the relationship between the Incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit, elevating the person and work of the Holy Spirit from the status of ontological subordination to that of consubstantiality with the Father *Original Godhood* and the Son *Only-Begotten*. The statement of French Protestant theologian and sociologist Roger Adolphe Mehl (1912-1997) is hardly surprising. He said the following: „We are sorry that the Orthodox Church refuses to acknowledge papal primacy, which stems from an original conception about the

²¹ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii (Triunic Relationships and the Life of the Church)*, in *Ortodoxia*, no. 4/1964, p. 523.

²² Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii ...*, p. 524.

²³ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii ...*, p. 524.



relationships between ecclesiology and pneumatology. The churches of the Reform have not given enough consideration to pneumatological problems”²⁴.

The visible reciprocity between the Son and the Holy Spirit manifests concretely, on one hand, through the descent and remaining of the Holy Spirit over the Son, and through the Father and the Son sending the Spirit into the world, on the other.²⁵ These two distinct, but equipollent aspects of the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit allow Orthodox ecclesiology to do away with the exaggerations and deformities that are typical of Western Churches. The descent of the Holy Spirit over the Son of God, threefold-*submerged* in the waters of the Jordan, becomes the reasoning of the sacramental epiclesis regarding the transubstantiation of the matter of the Holy Mysteries. This descent of the Spirit of *Elohim* can be considered the moment of the *ordainment* of Christ as Savior of the world, upon the basis of which grace-filled, sacramental priesthood functions in His church. Reiterating a text from the Book of Isaiah, the Son of Man says: „The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted...”²⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

In consequence, communal (triadological) ecclesiology is a *coat of arms* that defines the theological discourse of the Church. Accounting for an organic part of the bimillennial Christian Tradition, ecclesiological dogma spreads out the uninterrupted *pulsation* of the Spirit in the church and its members, who are called to utter holiness²⁷, to a union with Christ, He who gives us sight and knowledge of „The Master of all Creation, Holy among holy ones” (δέσποτα πάσης κτίσεως, ἅγιε ἐν ἁγίοις)²⁸. Therefore, it is clear that only an approach that considers the perspective of trinitarian relationships, especially that between the Father and the Holy Spirit can offer a satisfying answer to the ecclesiological problem, as it is nowadays posed within ecumenical theology.

²⁴ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILAOE, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii ...* , p. 525.

²⁵ John 14, 26 and 15, 26.

²⁶ Luke 4, 18.

²⁷ I Peter 1, 15.

²⁸ III Maccabees 2, 2 .



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