



## THE HOLY MYSTERIES EVENTS OF THE CHURCH AS THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

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### ABSTRACT

*The Church is a mystery that is difficult for human reason to fathom because of the mystical element that defines it as the Mystical Body of Christ. The presence of the mystical element entails a profound reality which reveals much more than what human reason can visibly, historically or socially perceive. In its organizational nature, the Church manifests only the human dimension, the outward, visible presence, while its most important aspect cannot be disregarded: the inner, the spiritual, the supernatural, the divine. The two forms of the Church - seen and unseen - in their profound unity, turn the Church into a great sacrament: The Body of Christ. This is why we can say that the Church has an essentially theandric nature similar to the mode of existence of Christ as a person and His relation to creation, but distinct from Christ as a being. Life within and with Christ is what the members of the Church receive through the Holy Sacraments. It begins with Baptism, which represents joining the community of the mystical Body of the Church. This Body grows through the Eucharist and then through all the other Sacraments. All the Sacraments are valid only in the Church on the basis of the unity of faith between the local Church and the universal Church. The Church's existence and life represent the object of faith; it is known by faith, "believing in one, holy, solemn and apostolic Church". Therefore, a Holy Sacrament is always an event of the Church, with the Church and through the Church.*

**Keywords:** Church, Sacrament, humanity, Christ, unity, faith;

### INTRODUCTION

In theological language, the notion of "Church" has two very different meanings. The first and most important meaning is the dogmatic-liturgical one: the "Church" (written with a capital C) as the "Mystical Body of Christ", liturgical assembly - hierarchy and people who confess and believe in Christ, baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity confessing the same faith - gathered together to celebrate the Divine Liturgy or the Holy Sacraments.

The second meaning is "church" (written with a lower-case c) as a sacred place, a place of worship. These two uses of "church" are present throughout the Orthodox tradition<sup>1</sup>. When we speak of these two meanings, we must never forget the mystical dimension of the Church. The Church is a reality that is experienced rather than an object to be studied and analyzed. Sergei Bulgakov said: "Come and see: The Church can only be grasped by participating in its life"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet, *Biserica, Trupul lui Hristos. Natura și structura Bisericii* [The Church, the Body of Christ. The Nature and Structure of the Church], vol.I, (Bucharest: Sofia, 2013), p. 24

<sup>2</sup> Serghei Bulgakov, *Ortodoxia* [Orthodoxy], (Bucharest: Paideia, 1997), 9.



Christianity demands a common life, a communion among the members of the community who must regard one another as "brothers", and, closely bound to one another, they become a unity, not only from a human point of view, but especially from a mystical perspective because Christ is the Head of this unity. "The Church," says St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "is a human communitarian I in Christ as YOU, but at the same time the I of the Church is Christ"<sup>3</sup>. This unity is achieved and manifested through the confession of the same faith, through participation in the Holy Sacraments, common obedience to the Word of God, union in prayer, participation in the dialogue of chant during the Liturgy and in a more intimate way through Eucharistic communion.

This community<sup>4</sup>, that in Orthodoxy is called a synaxis, is not a confluence of the perfect, but it brings together a people with all its limitations and frailties, but this does not mean that if its members are limited and sinful, the assembly is sinful. The liturgical synaxis can never be considered sinful because Christ is its head, the Righteous and Holy par excellence. The Holy Fathers likened the Church to the Bethesda Water Shepherd (John 5:2) whose waters healed the sick and always remained clean. Similarly, the Church welcomes all sinners but does not contaminate itself with sin.

Only when the assembly recognizes Christ as its Head and Lord can it be considered a Christian assembly<sup>5</sup>. The liturgical assembly is not just any meeting, or a group of spectators as in a theatre or a cinema or a society meeting, here there are no spectators, but only actors whose participation is at the same time active and conscious, pious and interiorized. And this unity is achieved in and with the Church through the Holy Sacraments as means, visible acts by which God's life is conveyed, revealed in our human condition in Christ.

By establishing the Church, the God-Man, Jesus Christ is the Great Sacrament of the world: "He appeared in the flesh and was justified in the Spirit" (1 Tim 3:16); (Col 1:19; 2:19). This body, elevated by divine power to a spiritual-supernatural mode of existence, becomes in turn a mystery in the Holy Eucharist.

With the Incarnation, the death on the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ, the Church also becomes a Great Sacrament, an actualization, an extension of life blossoming within the Holy Spirit of the original Sacrament which is Christ<sup>6</sup>. Through Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the mysteries/sacraments are at the core of the Church's life and an indispensable condition for the growth of the mystical Body of the Church<sup>7</sup>.

The Church is more than a human community, because Christ Himself belongs to His community: Christ is not above or outside the Church, the assembly of believers who have been incorporated into Him and live within and with Him. It is essential from this point of view to see the Christian community-assembly as a consecrated or sacramental assembly-community whose means for realizing its unity are the Eucharist and the other sacrament.

<sup>3</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Dogmatic Orthodox Theology]*, vol. II, Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române [The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church], 2003, 214.

<sup>4</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Sinteza Ecceziologică" ["Ecclesiological Synthesis"], *Studii Teologice [Theological Studies]*, 5-6 (1955), 274.

<sup>5</sup> J-C Larchet, *Biserica, Trupul lui Hristos. Natura și structura Bisericii [The Church, the Body of Christ. The Nature and Structure of the Church]*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Otto Semmelroth, "La Chiesa come sacramento di salvezza", in *Mysterium salutis*, VII: *L'evento salvifico nella comunità di Gesù Cristo*, a cura di J. Feiner – M. Löhrer, (Brescia: Queriniana, 1972), 394-396.

<sup>7</sup> Dumitru Radu, "Caracterul ecceziologic al Sfințelor Taine și problema comuniunii" ["The ecclesiological character of the Holy Sacraments and the issue of communion"], *Ortodoxia [Orthodoxy]*, 1-2 (1978), 18.



## 1. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL AND PNEUMATOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE HOLY SACRAMENTS

All the Sacraments refer to and are permanently nourished by the Sacrifice on the Cross of the Incarnate Logos who offered Himself for us as a sacrifice atoning for our sins<sup>8</sup>. The whole abundance of divine grace, withdrawn from the human race through the breaking of the covenant with God as a consequence of disobedience and then promised by the prophecies of the Old Testament, is progressively actualized in the Incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, and in the Coming of the Holy Spirit.

The permanent collaboration between the two distinct missions - the Sacrifice and the Sanctification of the World - ensures that the relationship between God's love and His creation, a relationship that has temporarily gone unnoticed by man, is energized. The focalization of the spiritual powers of the believer, who experiences during the Mass and throughout all the Sacraments of the Church both his own remoteness and, above all, his being accepted by God again, represents the effort of his integration into the spiritual order, present in the divine plan even before the creation of man. In the Divine Liturgy, the ecclesial community prays like the "prodigal son" who has returned home and recognizes the Father's house, but is also aware of its inability to understand God's love and its own superficiality.

In the Holy Sacraments, more than recalling the past dialogue between God and man, the Christian experiences the bond re-established due to the Savior's sacrifice on the Cross. From this perspective as well, the Sacraments are the "joints" and "bonds" that unite the Body of Christ<sup>9</sup>. Through the Sacraments, Christ unites all Christians as one man with one heart and one soul (Eph 4:32). Only the Sacraments can accomplish this unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:6-26). This is because the sacraments are means, visible acts by which divine life is communicated to us. The God-Man, Jesus Christ, is the greatest sacrament of the Church: *originalis sacramentum*<sup>10</sup>. The sacrament of Christ covers the whole historical and physical reality of creation<sup>11</sup>: "Truly great is the sacrament of the right faith: God was revealed in the flesh, was manifested in the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations... He was exalted in glory" (1 Tim 3:16). And this Body elevated by divine power has a spiritual-supernatural mode of existence, which in its turn becomes a sacrament in the Sacrament of the Eucharist<sup>12</sup>. Connected to the Incarnation and then to the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, the Church is also through the Eucharist a great sacrament, a sacramental mystery, as a means of ramification and extension in time of the sacrament of Christ<sup>13</sup>. Due to Christ who instituted them, the Holy Sacraments are the core of ecclesial life and an indispensable condition for the growth of the body of the Church<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Ființa Tainelor în cele trei confesiuni" ["The Being of the Sacraments in the Three Confessions"], *Ortodoxia [Orthodoxy]*, 8 (1956), 4.

<sup>9</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Sinteza Ecleziologică" ["Ecclesiological Synthesis"], 263.

<sup>10</sup> Otto Semmelroth, "La Chiesa come sacramento di salvezza", 389.

<sup>11</sup> Gheorghe Sava, "Le baptême - participation à la mort et à la resurrection du Christ", *Teologie și educație la Dunărea de Jos [Theology and education in the Lower Danube]*, vol. II, (Galați: Editura Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, 2003), 159.

<sup>12</sup> Ioannis Zizioulas, *Ființa eclezială [The ecclesial being]*, (București: Editura Bizantină, 2007), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Battista Mondin, *La Chiesa primizia del regno. Trattato di ecclesiologia*, (Corso di teologia sistematica 7), (Bologna: Dehoniane 1986), 303-304.

<sup>14</sup> D. Radu, "Caracterul ecleziologic al Sfintelor Taine ... " ["The ecclesiological character of the Holy Sacraments..."], 18.



In the Holy Sacraments, man encounters the divine and the divine encounters the human, and this is above all a sacramental encounter<sup>15</sup>. This encounter is first accomplished in the sacrament of Baptism, then in the other sacraments, through which man becomes a member of the Church and the subject of dialogue with God. The human encounter within Christ is the sacrament of encountering God and religious life as an essential theological relation with God<sup>16</sup>. And the first step towards this encounter is not made by man, but by God, first of all, with the Incarnation of His Son. Man alone could not have risen to this communion with God if He had not manifested Himself before accepting us: "Thus the love of God toward us was made manifest in this, that God sent His only Son, the Only-Begotten, into the world, that through Him we might have life. This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as the sacrifice to atone for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

Before Christ, God spoke to men through men chosen by Him "many times" and "in various ways", but when the time came, God spoke to man through His Son, so that the whole icon of God's great works is focused and reaches its absolute climax in the Incarnation of the Son. Christ sums up in Himself all things, and all men - through His humanity elevated to a level above the flesh - can personally encounter God in a visible way: "No one has ever seen God; the Only-Begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made Him known" (John 1:18). All that God has perfected in Jesus Christ and that which Christ has transmitted to the Church in sacramental form, beginning with the Incarnation and ending with His Resurrection and Ascension, He has perfected as God<sup>17</sup>. Divine life entered the world through Jesus Christ. And this is described by the witnesses, the apostles who saw and heard what Christ did. The Savior's life of sacrifice is objectively transmitted to us through the sacraments.

In the Holy Sacraments we could say we have the DNA of our identity as God's children<sup>18</sup>. We become God's children not by natural birth, but by union with Christ, through faith and the Holy Sacraments: "You see what kind of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called God's children, and we are. Therefore, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are God's children, and what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We know that if He shall be revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:1-3). And from this perspective, Christ is the fundamental Sacrament of encountering the invisible God in a visible humanity.

Among all the divine Sacraments, the Sacrament of Christ is the greatest. God-Man is the hypostatic, personal union of divinity with humanity, while remaining true God and true Man. The phrase: the Sacrament of Christ thus encompasses the person of God-Man and his work for the salvation of the Church, which in this way partakes of the Sacrament. Therefore, to translate the Greek word as sacrament or secret does nothing but conceal the divine or liturgical action. All the more so, since for mystics, to whom the sacrament has been revealed, there is no secret. Revelation is truly an essential element of the Sacrament, and for it to be a sacrament it must be unveiled, revealed.

Christ, the Sacrament of Man and of the Church, begins with the Incarnation. The Sacrament of the Incarnation of God's Word encompasses in itself the power and meaning of

<sup>15</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *I sacramenti punti d'incontro con Dio*, translated by Eliseo Ruffili, (Brescia: Queriniana, 1965), 30.

<sup>16</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *I sacramenti* ..., 31.

<sup>17</sup> Carlo Rocchetta, *I sacramenti della fede*, vol. I, (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1998), 186.

<sup>18</sup> Leontin Popescu, *Il sacramento della Confessione dei peccati nella Chiesa ortodossa e in particolare quella rumena*, (Galați: Editura Zigotto, 2007), 166.





all the Christian Sacraments, all the symbols of Scripture, and the whole range of visible and intelligible creatures. The Passions, the Cross, the Sepulcher and the Resurrection are but the continuation of the Incarnation<sup>19</sup>. The New Testament depicts the humanity of Christ as the visible image of the invisible God, the sacramental epiphany of the Son of God. Christ is not only the will of God's Word to us, human beings, but He is the personal presence of God who became Man, and at the same time the perfect reality of God's presence in the Holy Sacraments: "He who sees me sees the Father" (John 14:9). In fact, the Holy Sacraments are nothing other than communion with Jesus Christ, the God-Man, elevated in all His glory which He has had throughout eternity, before the creation of the world. From the moment the Ascension becomes the prerequisite for the Second Coming, our encounter with God takes place in the spiritual form of faith, through the Holy Sacraments<sup>20</sup>.

The Savior Jesus Christ is the sacrament of the theandric par excellence, the source and power of life, the theandric act of the Church and of the Christian. In the Sacrament of Christ, the original Sacrament, the Church is also included, His Body which remains in history as the concrete form of the personal encounter and communion of people with God through the grace of the Holy Spirit<sup>21</sup>. All this communion is accomplished since Pentecost through the Holy Sacraments, which are celebrated by the Church alone<sup>22</sup>. Certainly, Christ descends through the Holy Sacraments of the Church to the level of each believer in order to climb with Him on the ladder of perfection, just as a mother descends to the level of her son in order to raise him to the higher level on which she herself is. Thus, for example, in the Sacrament of Baptism, Christ is born with us to new life; in the Sacrament of Confirmation, He collaborates with us so that we may experience filial love for the Father in heaven. Our true communion with Christ is undoubtedly achieved in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, through which Christ imprints Himself on us to the point of flesh and blood. Thus, just as for Christ as Man the Passion and Resurrection are new degrees in the elevation of our assumed humanity to the rank of sacrifice and glory, so too, for Christians who share Christ in the Eucharistic Sacrament, the life of sacrifice is a higher degree of the spiritual ascent to communion with Christ and with others. Through His Sacrifice and Resurrection, Christ has made it possible for Himself to convey to us the objective salvation which the faithful person acquires through the Sacraments, which are also linked to the Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ. In fact, in each Sacrament, the believer dies and rises with Christ to new life. Each sacrament is preceded by an epiclesis in which the whole Holy Trinity participates in the divinization of man, the ultimate goal of religious life<sup>23</sup>.

Through the Holy Sacraments, we are enabled to communicate with the whole Holy Trinity, "One people gathered in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"<sup>24</sup>. In the humanity of Christ, we encounter the whole Holy Trinity both in the doxological dimension,

<sup>19</sup> D. Radu, *Caracterul ecleziologic...* [*The ecclesiological character...*], 29.

<sup>20</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *I sacramenti...*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> I. Ziziulas, *Ființa eclezială* [*The ecclesial being*], 117.

<sup>22</sup> D. Radu, *Caracterul ecleziologic...* [*The ecclesiological character...*], 29.

<sup>23</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Din aspectul sacramental al Bisericii" ["On the sacramental aspect of the Church"], *Studii Teologice* [*Theological Studies*], 9-10 (1966), 543.

<sup>24</sup> S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani, "De Dominica Orazione," 24, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. III, Pars. I, (Vindobonae/ Vienna: Apud C. Geroldi Filium Bibliopolam Academiae, 1868), 285: "Sacrificium Deo maius est pax nostra et fratema concordia et de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti i plebs adunata" ("A greater sacrifice for God is our brotherly peace and concord and one people united in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit").



but also in the celebration of individual festive acts, including the Holy Sacraments<sup>25</sup>. In Baptism we become sons of God the Father, in Holy Communion we are given the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in the Eucharist we are in communion with the Son of God Himself. This is why, in Orthodoxy, these three sacraments are celebrated together in a single rite in order to have the participation in the spiritual communion in life. Therefore, all the sacraments are celebrated in the name of the Holy Trinity. Christ, the central Sacrament of our salvation, reveals to us the Sacrament of the Holy Trinity which extends through the Sacraments of the Church to the whole world<sup>26</sup>. Only with Christ, the incarnate Son of God, can we have access to the Holy Trinity's life of communion. For from the risen and ascended Christ the love of God the Father continually spreads forth through the Holy Spirit through the Holy Sacraments in the Church. Here we see the necessity of the sacramental extension of Christ's presence in the Church, His Body, which makes the love of the Father possible and visible to us. Related to the Incarnation and to the whole work of salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Church, His Body, also becomes a great sacrament. The Church is the extension of Christ's presence in the world, it is the love of the Holy Trinity extended into the world. St. Gregory of Nyssa says in this regard:

"For the One whom no one has ever seen, as John says (1 John 4:12), nor could see, as Paul testifies (1 Tim 6:16), He has made the Church His body, and, by adding to it those who are being saved, is building it up within love, until we all reach the level of perfect man, that of complete fulfilment within Christ (Eph 4:13). If, then, the Church is the body of Christ, and the head of the body is Christ, Who with His seal is set before the Church, the friends of the Bridegroom, beholding it, have been filled with love, because they see the invisible One in it more clearly. Just as those who cannot see the circle of the sun itself look at it through the shining water, so those who look as through a pure mirror through the face of the Church see the Sun of Righteousness, known by what is visible"<sup>27</sup>.

The essence of the Church, in its totality, consists in being the sacramental or liturgical extension<sup>28</sup> in time and space of the presence of Christ and, through Christ, the extension of the love of the Holy Trinity into the world. "Therefore, that heavenly teaching was spread throughout the world, peoples were gathered together, churches were established, a single body was made to extend throughout the whole world, a body whose head, Christ, was raised up to heaven, so that necessarily the members would follow the head"<sup>29</sup>.

Starting from Pentecost, every intervention of God is a sacramental intervention through the invocation of the Church. Contact with the Church for every sacramental celebration becomes an ecclesial celebration. The ecclesial community is thus a sacramental

<sup>25</sup> Cipriano Vagaggini, *Il senso teologico della liturgia*, (Rome: Edizione Paoline, 1965), 209-242.

<sup>26</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Ființa Tainelor ... " ["The Being of the Sacraments ..."], 7.

<sup>27</sup> Sanctus Gregorius Nyssenus, "In Cantica Canticorum, Homilia VIII", *PG*, 44, col. 950B: "Deus enim, quem nemo vidit unquam, ut dicit Joannes, nec potest aliquis videre, sicut testatur Paulus, corpus suum fecit Ecclesiam, et per accessionem eorum qui salvi sunt, ipsam aedificat in claritate, donec occurramus omnes in virum perfectum, in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi. Si ergo Ecclesia est corpus Christi, Christus autem est caput corporis, suo caractere formans faciem Ecclesia, forte per hoc ad ea accipientes amici sponsi, corde donati sunt: quoniam per ipsam clarius aspiciunt sponsum qui non cadit sub aspectum. Et quomodo ii qui ipsum orbem solis non possunt videre, per aequae splendorem ipsum vident: ita illi quoque in mundo speculo, nempe facie Ecclesiae, vident solem justitiae, qui per id quod apparet, mente comprehenditur".

<sup>28</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Sinteza Ecleziologică" ["Ecclesiological Synthesis"], 262-263.

<sup>29</sup> Manlius Severinus Boetius, "Brevis Fidei Christianae Complexio", *PL*, 64, col. 1337C-1338A: "Diffunditur ergo per mundum coelestis illa doctrina, adunatur populi, instituuntur Ecclesiae, sit unum corpus quod mundi latitudinem occuparet; cuius caput Christus ascendit in coelos, ut necessario caput suum membra sequerentur".



community springing from the extension of Christ's presence into the world. From this perspective as well, the Holy Sacraments are concrete and expressive acts in which Christ's action in the Church is accomplished, and at the same time, they express in their own way the dimension of the ecclesial community<sup>30</sup>. Once the Church is established, it becomes the bearer of the Holy Sacraments, which in turn become inseparable from the Church.

The sacramental character of the Church is expressed par excellence in the Holy Sacraments which are a manifestation of the very life of the Church<sup>31</sup>. Thus, by its mystical, sacramental character, the Church makes it possible for every believer to live the grace of sonship given to each believer through Baptism. If Christ is the original Sacrament, the Protothe Sacrament or the Proto Sacrament, then the Church can be defined, according to the Catholic theologian K. Rahner, as the first sacrament or *Ursakrament*<sup>32</sup>. Which means that the Church has a sacramental structure dependent on Christ, and only insofar as it continues to make Christ's presence visible can it be defined as "*Mysteria carnis Christi*"<sup>33</sup>. For the Holy Fathers, even from the apostolic period, this is well understood: there is no Church without Christ, just as there is no Church without the Holy Spirit<sup>34</sup>. Seen from the Christ's perspective, the Church is the permanent manifestation of the presence of divine grace into the world, but seen from the perspective of the Holy Sacraments, it is the first Sacrament<sup>35</sup> of Christianity, the Holy Spirit being the divine principle of unity of the body of Christ - the Church<sup>36</sup>, like the image of unity of the Holy Trinity.

Consequently, if the Church is the sacrament by which God's communion with all the faithful, the members of the Church, is accomplished, then the Holy Sacraments as acts are the means by which the covenant which constitutes the being and unity of the Church is continually extended and maintained<sup>37</sup>. In a nutshell, the Sacraments are acts of the Church alone, and this means that, as long as the Church is the bearer of the power of sanctification, so do the Sacraments have an ecclesiological character because they are only celebrated in the Church and through the mediation of the Church. The twofold quality of the Church, on the one hand the condition, and on the other hand the goal and result of the Holy Sacraments, is expressed in Orthodox theology by the spiritual or mystical character of the Church. The Church, on the one hand, has the Holy Spirit, but on the other hand, it continually invokes Him<sup>38</sup>. Invoking Him from God, before the Eucharistic Preface, the Church prays in the troparion of the Second Vespers: "For this, O Good Lord, do not take Him from us, but renew Him within us"<sup>39</sup>. The Sacrament of the Eucharist is at once an act of the Holy Spirit in which the synaxis of the Church participates.

<sup>30</sup> C. Rocchetta, *I sacramenti della fede*, I, 190-191.

<sup>31</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Sinteza Ecleziologică" ["Ecclesiological Synthesis"], 279.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Rahner, *Chiesa e sacramenti*, (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1966), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Carlo Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria Fondamentale. Dal Mysterion al Sacramentum*, (Bologna: EDB, 1989), 401.

<sup>34</sup> Francesco Lambiasi, *Corso di Teologia sistematica: Lo Spirito Santo: mistero e presenza*, (Bologna: EDB, 1987), 96.

<sup>35</sup> K. Rahner, *Chiesa e sacramenti*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Sanctus Ignatius Martyr, "Epistola ad Magnesios", 13, 2, *PG*, col. 674: "Subjecti estote episcopo et vobis mutuo, ut Jesus Christus Patri in humana sua natura, et apostoli Christo et Patri et Spiritui, ut unio sit et carnalis et spiritualis"; ("Obey the bishop and one another, as Jesus Christ obeys the Father in His human form, and the apostles obey Christ and the Father and the Spirit, so that there may be a union in both body and spirit").

<sup>37</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Ființa Tainelor ..." ["The Being of the Sacraments ..."], 7-9.

<sup>38</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Din aspectul sacramental...* [On the sacramental aspect...], 533.

<sup>39</sup> *LITURGHIER*, (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române [The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church], 2000), 163.



The Church meets all the objective conditions to be considered a sacrament, source of the other sacraments<sup>40</sup> or as Holy Father Dumitru Stăniloae says, "the Church is the Third Sacrament", in the sense that "the notions of Church and Sacrament coincide"<sup>41</sup>. In this sense, the subjective conditions depend on those who receive the Sacraments of the Church. This tells us that every sacramental action of sanctification is at the same time an ecclesial action. The idea is that the Sacraments are actualizations of what the Church is essentially in itself. This implies two things: on the one hand, it means that the fundamental structure of the seven sacraments was established by Christ at the founding of the Church. On the other hand, the seven sacraments are fundamentally visible acts of the Church through the mission of the hierarchy, or acts of both Christ and the Church. The validity or authenticity of the seven sacraments depends, in this case, on whether or not a sacrament is also an action of the Church<sup>42</sup>.

The Church is a communion which is constituted by the Holy Sacraments, is sustained by them, is bound by them, and it alone accomplishes them<sup>43</sup>. The Holy Sacraments belong to the Church as its own acts or, rather, as acts of its Head who is Christ. The Head is not on His own, but is united with His Body which is the Church, and everything that Christ accomplishes is accomplished in dialogical relationship with His Body. The Church is fundamentally sacramental and the Body of Christ<sup>44</sup>. It is both a worshipping and a sanctifying community, and in this sacramental denomination expression of its holiness, the Church also manifests itself as sanctifying<sup>45</sup>. In every Sacrament, the Christian partakes in the deepest communion of the ecclesial community and the Sacrament of the Body of Christ. The Sacrament of Christian worship is not only the Sacrament of the worship of adoration offered to Christ in and through the Church, but it is also the Sacrament of the liturgical ecclesial worship<sup>46</sup> through which the Church accomplishes its own essence. And we can say that it is precisely through the Sacraments in which religious communion with Christ is realized, that divine grace spreads out into the world from an eschatological perspective.

All the Sacraments depend on the Church, belong to the Church, develop and strengthen the Church<sup>47</sup>. From this statement it is clear that the Holy Sacraments have an ecclesiological character and an ecclesial effect. All the Sacraments taken either together or separately are conditioned by the Church on the one hand, and on the other hand, the Church is conditioned and circumscribed by its Sacraments, in the sense that through them the Church manifests itself as sacramental unity, that is, it unites its members in the Body of Christ.

The ecclesiological character of the Sacraments and their effects indicate not only a static number of the sacraments, but also the presence of a constant religious environment and spiritual space, a connection of the community with the divine. These (religious environment and religious space) are none other than the liturgical-ecclesial worship that the theologian R. Taft equates with the Divine Liturgy<sup>48</sup>. The ecclesiological character of the Sacraments indicates the dynamism of the faith confessed and received through the

<sup>40</sup> C. Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria Fondamentale*..., 403.

<sup>41</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Dogmatic Orthodox Theology]*, II, <sup>3</sup>2003, 13.

<sup>42</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *I sacramenti*..., p. 46-47.

<sup>43</sup> C. Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria Fondamentale*..., 423.

<sup>44</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Dogmatic Orthodox Theology]*, II, <sup>3</sup>2003, 14.

<sup>45</sup> C. Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria Fondamentale*..., 379.

<sup>46</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *I sacramenti*..., 60.

<sup>47</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Dogmatic Orthodox Theology]*, II, <sup>3</sup>2003, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Taft, *Oltre l'Oriente e l'Occidente*, (Rome: Edizione Lipa, 1999), 276.





Sacraments. The Holy Sacraments not only imply individual faith, but they are the manifestation of the faith of the Church and cannot be divided, separated from the Church's teaching of faith. Without confessing the faith, the Holy Sacraments cannot constitute a sufficient criterion for unity of communion. The Holy Eucharist and all the other sacraments do not constitute a unit distinct from the Church's teaching of faith. The Sacraments are dependent on the faith of the Church and at the same time on the faith of the individual, because only faith can lift the veil, and the Holy Sacraments can really have an effect on those who receive them<sup>49</sup>. The imparting of a Holy Sacrament in the Church is at the same time a personal act of the one who receives it, but also an ecclesial act of the Church's faith. The sacramental faith of the Church is the faith which bears witness to the abiding presence of Christ Resurrected in the Mysteries of the Church. That is why in each Sacrament the recipient is called by name and makes a confession of faith (at Baptism, Eucharist, Penance, Ordination), or of commitment (Marriage, Penance, Ordination)<sup>50</sup>.

Not only for the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also for the other sacraments, for example, for Baptism, confessing faith is not only an individual, personal act, but also a communal-liturgical act of the people of God who participate in the sanctification of the one who receives the sacrament.

"In a more particular sense, the Sacraments are the invisible works of Christ accomplished by visible acts, by which the Church is constituted, and which are accomplished in the Church. Christ and the Holy Trinity are not made known except through the Church in their efficacy, but, on the other hand, they are made known as the Sacraments because they are made known in the sensible reality of the Church. In the most special sense, the character and name of Sacraments is given to certain visible works of the Church, instituted by Christ, by which Christ binds to Himself, and therefore to the Church, the individual persons who believe in Him, and by which He develops this union with them. For the Son of God, in taking human form, reconciled and reunited it with the Father, and sanctified it by obedience, crucifixion, and resurrection, so that, by binding us to this lever of ours, we might become like Him and constitute the Church, and maintain and improve ourselves in unity with Him, represented by the Church"<sup>51</sup>.

This can very clearly be seen both in the Divine Liturgy and in the other sacraments where the people are united in liturgical prayer with the one receiving the sacrament. In Orthodoxy no sacrament can be separated from the Church and from Christ Who is the Head of the Church. This cannot be said of other Christian confessions. For example, in the Catholic world, the custom of celebrating the Messa (Mass) without the presence of the community reveals the tendency to divide the Eucharist from the ecclesial community. In this option, the priest separates himself alongside Christ in a relationship that is above community. The Second Vatican Council did, however, make an effort to overcome this separation by deciding not to celebrate the Mass without the presence of the faithful, but nevertheless, the Council stuck to the same conception of separation. The problem that remains is the Sacrament of Ordination which no longer requires, as in Orthodoxy, the participation or approval of the ecclesial synaxis. As in the other case, the episcopate is in a relationship with Christ that is above the community. This situation of superiority of the episcopate has given the pope the possibility of placing himself in a relationship with Christ

<sup>49</sup> R. Taft, *Oltre l'Oriente ...*, 276.

<sup>50</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Dogmatic Orthodox Theology]*, II, <sup>3</sup>2003, 26.

<sup>51</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Dogmatic Orthodox Theology]*, II, <sup>3</sup>2003, 14.



which is above the community and the whole episcopate, thus creating the premise of infallibility<sup>52</sup>.

In Orthodoxy there is no such division of power. The infallibility is always of the whole Church: the hierarchy together with the people, the ecclesial community, make up the Body of Christ. Christ alone is infallible and this infallibility He has passed on to the Church as His Body: hierarchy and the faithful. For this reason, in Orthodoxy, Christ is the image of God, the Church is the Body and image of Christ, and the Sacraments are acts of Christ's work of salvation, still present among us<sup>53</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In the Orthodox understanding, teaching about the Sacraments means teaching about the original Sacrament which is Christ. The reference to Christ as the Protosacrament (or Proto Mystery) emphasizes the personal nature of the sacraments which is manifested in the sacrament of the encounter between the Tripersonal God and man, and of man and God.

Related to the idea of the Proto-Sacrament - Christ as the original Sacrament - there is also the fact that Christ is the Body and Head of the Church, which means that the Church, in its turn, is also a Sacrament, being no more than the extension of the original Sacrament, Christ. Thus, the Church's sanctifying power has its origin in Christ's sanctifying power through the Holy Sacraments<sup>54</sup>.

The Sacraments have a Christological character, that is, Christ is the starting point of every Sacrament: Christ's Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and all of Christ's redemptive acts for the world are accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit within the Holy Mysteries.

The Holy Sacraments have an ecclesiological character because they are acts of the Church through Christ within the Holy Spirit; and secondly, they are only celebrated in, with and through the Church where faith is confessed by the ecclesial community.

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<sup>52</sup> St. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Din aspectul sacramental... [On the sacramental aspect...]*, 547.

<sup>53</sup> R. Taft, *Oltre l'Oriente ...*, 271.

<sup>54</sup> C. Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria Fondamentale...*, 239.



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