

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382  
82 (1), pp. 135-149, 2020

# The Ecumenical Vocation of Orthodoxy - Challenges and Perspectives

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## Abstract

Many people wonder if the believers of other faiths or religions will also be saved, if we have to talk to relatives who have embraced other religious concepts, how to communicate and how to behave with those who declare atheists? Many Christians manifest a certain kind of behavior in such situations: radicalism that can become, at any time, fanaticism. Unfortunately, there are people who have an inappropriate attitude in certain situations, or toward some people, because of mental paradigms or even religious intolerance. We encounter religious conflicts even among people who preach peace, dialogue and love. This may seem paradoxical, so it is necessary to find ways of dialogue to eliminate interconfessional conflicts, to create a natural environment of honest and peaceful communication. In order to find possible solutions for this challenges I will try to emphasize some aspects of the ecumenical vocation of Orthodoxy today.

## Keywords

Orthodoxy, dialogue, ecumenism, diplomacy, common prayer, mission, unity

## I. The etymology and meaning of the term “ecumenical”

From an etymological point of view, the word “ecumenism” comes from the Greek language: *ὁ οἶκος*, *οὐ* = house, the dwelling; also used with the meaning of “the house of God” (Matt 12, 4); *ἡ οἰκουμένη*, *ης* = the

inhabited earth, the world; *οἰκέω* = to live, to live with someone, to dwell<sup>1</sup>. Initially, the term “ecumenical” indicates the territory of the Greek-Roman empire. At the same time, it was used to distinguish between the civilized world and the barbarian territories<sup>2</sup>.

In the New Testament, the term is used to denote: “all the world” (Matt 24, 14), the people, the inhabitants of the “world”, “the world” (Lk 2, 1; 21, 26; Rev 3,10), “all the world”, “the world” (Acts 11, 28; 19, 27; Rom 10, 18), “the world to come” (Heb 2, 5).

The ecclesial meaning of the term is viewed in connection with the spread of the Christian community throughout the Empire, and since the fourth century it has been designated the “Christian world”, with dual significance (political and religious): the Christian Empire and the whole Church<sup>3</sup>.

The ecumenical appropriation of the Church, which encompasses the believers from all places, times and gentiles, united by faith in Christ, therefore refers to its universal quality (in this sense, the Ecumenical Councils are significant, showing the Church’s willingness to dialogue, in order to establish or restore the truths of faith, received everywhere and by all).

## II. The importance of ecumenical communication within the Ecumenical Movement in order to restore Christian unity

The Ecumenical Movement is a process of rebuilding the visible unity of the divided Churches throughout history, through the path of theological dialogue and agreements, common testimony and mutual assistance<sup>4</sup>.

The desideratum of the Ecumenical Movement remains the transformation of “oikoumene”, as inhabited earth, into “oikos”, into the house of God, in which all Christians live<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Maurice CARREZ, François MOREL, *Dicționar grec-român al Noului Testament*, transl. Gheorghe Badea, Editura Societatea Biblică Interconfesională din România, București, 1999, pp. 200-201.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas LOSSKY, Jose Míguez BONINO, John POBEE, Tom F. STRANSKY, Geoffrey WAINWRIGHT, Pauline WEBB (eds.), *Dictionary of Ecumenical Movement*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2002, p. 840.

<sup>3</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *The meaning of ecumenism*, Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Pr. Ion BRIA (coord.), *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă de la A la Z*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> Pr. Ion BRIA (coord.), *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, p. 256.

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Thus, the ecumenical mission consists in preaching the Gospel of Christ to everyone, thereby resulting in the importance to be given to theological communication.

Ever since its establishment, in 1948, the Ecumenical Movement has been marked by three fundamental visions: 1. the desire to achieve unity of faith between confessions, through theological dialogue, resulting in the visible unity of the One Church; 2. the cooperation of the Churches in the social sphere, through common involvement for justice, peace and preservation of creation, all understood as signs of the foretaste of the Kingdom of God, still from this world; 3. the evangelization or re-evangelization (through mission) of the entire world marked by secularization and globalization<sup>6</sup>.

Ecumenical communication follows both the unity of Christians in the one Church of Christ, as a divine commandment (John 17, 21), and the unity of Christ's confession, so "that the world may believe", unity in action (common actions), human unity and the unity of the whole creation<sup>7</sup>: "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in Him" (Eph 1, 10).

The existential unity of all people: "And He hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17, 26), but also the fact that every man (our neighbour) bears the "image of God" (Gens 1, 26) calls for openness to communication with members of other religions and cultures. In this sense, one can also speak about a macro ecumenism.

A critical ecumenical theology should not only pursue an ecumenism among Christians, but also an ecumenism oriented towards other religions, a global ecumenism: "We can not survive without a planetary ethos. There will be no world peace without religious peace. There will be no religious peace without dialogue between religions"<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, we can understand how theological discourse must be at the service of humanity, having the responsibility to promote interreligious

<sup>6</sup> Pr. Daniel BENGĂ, *Ortodoxia și ecumenismul contemporan. Evaluarea dialogurilor în contextul Uniunii Europene*, Suport de Curs, Master Istorie și Tradiție creștină, Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă "Justinian Patriarhul", Universitatea București, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *The meaning of ecumenism*, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> H. KÜNG, *Projet d'éthique planétaire. La paix mondiale par la paix entre les religions*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 9 *apud* Pr. Gheorghe POPA, *Comuniune și înnoire spirituală în contextul secularizării lumii moderne*, Doctoral Dissertation, Universitatea București, 1998, p. 241.

dialogue. The German Catholic theologian Hans Küng considers that there are four ways or approaches to the problem of truth in the context of religious diversity: 1. *fundamentalist attitude* (which affirms the exclusivity of one's own religion), 2. *relativistic attitude* (for which the problem of truth is overcome, what matters is the social impact of religions), 3. *the syncretistic attitude* (after which any religion has a truth of its own, which must integrate into a universal truth), and 4. *ecumenical attitude* (after which each religion has its specific criteria for truth, but has the responsibility to formulate universal ethical criteria). In his opinion, the true ecumenical dialogue is based on the fourth attitude<sup>9</sup>.

His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, highlights the consequences of the new ecumenical spirit (which arose with the establishment of the Ecumenical Movement), as follows:

“it has moved from polemic to dialogue, from confrontation to cooperative and fraternal help, from to discern the differences to emphasize first what is common. It has gone from mutual confessional hatred to mutual respect. This is how if, for centuries, the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church accused each other of being «the schismatic Church», they now began to regard themselves as «Sister Churches»”<sup>10</sup>.

In this context, one can even notice a change of paradigm, in the way of referring to Christians belonging to other confessions.

### III. The theology of Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae - a bridge of dialogue and rapprochement among Christians

Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, the most important Romanian theologian, has appreciated the merit of the Ecumenical Movement (“it is impossible not to be seen in its appearance and its actions the work of

<sup>9</sup> H. KÜNG, *Projet d'éthique planétaire. La paix mondiale par la paix entre les religions*, Seiul, Paris, 1991, p. 9 apud Pr. Gheorghe POPA, *Comuniune și înnoire spirituală...*, p. 241.

<sup>10</sup> *Cuvântul Preafericitului Părinte Daniel, Patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, la deschiderea lucrărilor ședinței Sfântului Sinod*, 8 iulie 2008, p. 3.

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God”<sup>11</sup>), because “it brought into the lives of the Churches a deep concern for the issue of their unity and urged them to enter into dialogue for this purpose”<sup>12</sup>.

Father Stăniloae encouraged a real dialogue between Christian Churches, but a dialogue without “transactions and compromises”, without confusing expressions and ideas, without “easy enthusiasm” and without relativisation of any truth of faith.<sup>13</sup>

Through the fullness of his work, Father Stăniloae

“has been noted himself as the most prolific Romanian theologian, who has built dialogue bridges with other Christian Churches and confessions, highlighting the ecumenical dimension and vocation of the Orthodox theology... The theology of Father Stăniloae continues to be used in the current ecumenical reflections as a connecting bridge and dialogue between Christians”<sup>14</sup>.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae was convinced that “our participation in the Ecumenical Council must pursue a single purpose: to bring world Christianity closer to the original Christianity that has been preserved in the Orthodox Church”<sup>15</sup>.

An authentic, non-ideological Orthodox theology, as Father Stăniloae presented, “can only be ecumenical in its very being, dialogical and open to the world... embracing the whole world in its prayer”<sup>16</sup>.

In the issue of intercommunion, Father Stăniloae states very clearly that the possibility of Eucharistic communion can not exist before the realization of the communion of faith<sup>17</sup>: “Orthodoxy does not conceive intercommunion before the realization of the dogmatic communion”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Mișcarea ecumenică și unitatea creștină în stadiul actual”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XV (1963) 3-4, p. 544.

<sup>12</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “În problema intercomuniunii”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIII (1971) 4, p. 561.

<sup>13</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “În problema intercomuniunii”, p. 562.

<sup>14</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *Vocația ecumenică a Ortodoxiei*, Institutul Ecumenic de la Bossey, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Arhim. Ioanichie BĂLAN (ed.), *Omagiu Memoriei Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae*, Editura Mitropoliei Moldovei și Bucovinei, Iași, 1994, p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *Vocația ecumenică a Ortodoxiei*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *Vocația ecumenică a Ortodoxiei*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Pr. Nicolae BORDAȘIU, “Biserica – Comuniune. Aspecte eclesiologice actuale”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXV (1973) 1, p. 124.

In the Orthodox tradition, sacramental communion “is not a simple manifestation of good relations between churches, but involves and expresses the unity of faith”<sup>19</sup>. Apart from the unity of faith, “there is no church communion. There is no alternative to dialogue”<sup>20</sup>.

Regarding this aspect, His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, confesses:

“It is necessary to reaffirm the fundamental principle of Orthodox ecclesiology and implicitly of Orthodox ecumenism, namely that the Holy Eucharist is not a means or a step towards the ecclesial Christian unity, but the most intense manifestation of the unity of Church, its crowning”<sup>21</sup>.

Father Stăniloae supports the possibility to learn in the context of ecumenical dialogue from the Christians of other denominations: from Roman Catholics we can learn regarding the unity, to anchor more deeply in God as the only source of unity, and from Protestants we could learn to accord more value to Holy Scripture.<sup>22</sup>

Father Professor Stăniloae encouraged inter-ecclesial dialogue,

“recognizing Catholics and Protestants as having the right to define themselves as «church» the form of religious organization community (calling them however *incomplete* churches). Famous, in this sense, is the Father’s concept of «open sobornicity», whereby one can initiate dialogues with other Christians, called to become constituent parts of the Universal Church”<sup>23</sup>.

Thus Father Stăniloae pleads for

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<sup>19</sup> Diac. Ioan BRIA, “Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericilor creștine”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XX (1968) 1-2, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Asociația Ecumenică a Bisericilor din România AIDRom, Comisia Ecumenică, *Charta Oecumenica*, 2, București, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Cuvântul Preafericitului Părinte Daniel, Patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, la deschiderea lucrărilor ședinței Sfântului Sinod*, 8 iulie 2008, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Sobornicitate deschisă”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIII (1971) 2, p. 176.

<sup>23</sup> Pr. David PESTROIU, “Ecumenismul – între susținere și contestare”, in: *Revista Teologică*, XVII (2007) 3, p. 321.

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“rediscovering and the renewal of the old practice of the Church: in the universal communion, all Christendom makes its contribution. *Open sobornicity* offers the premises of understanding between the different Churches by harmonizing the unilateral positions, adopted in time, by the Churches, in order to exclude one another, and by living a comprehensive unity, that accepts the pluralism and diversity of understandings, that communicate with each other, in a symphonic unity, without uniformity”<sup>24</sup>.

In the vision of Father Stăniloae, the principle of ecumenism is represented by the need to achieve the unity of faith, in order to reach then the Eucharistic communion between the Christian churches. “The search for unity by the Christian world is equivalent to the search for the Church. Christian unity means the Church, in which all Christians want to see themselves gathered”<sup>25</sup>.

The ecumenical opening of Father Dumitru Stăniloae “is not a simple adjustment to the fashion of the day, no short-term diplomacy, but a confession of truth in love, even when love has the tone of critical approach”<sup>26</sup>.

#### **IV. The Ecumenical dialogue - between ecclesial diplomacy and authentic confession of the own identity**

The religious dialogue must be “sincere, but equally diplomatic”<sup>27</sup>: with friendship, courteously, with respect for the values of the other, with openness to their knowledge and understanding, avoiding disputes and contradictions and emphasizing the common values, without accepting any compromise on faith.

<sup>24</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *Vocația ecumenică a Ortodoxiei*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Relațiile Treimice și viața Bisericii”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XVI (1964) 4, p. 503.

<sup>26</sup> † DANIEL, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Bucovinei, “Părintele Stăniloae – teolog al Ortodoxiei ecumenice”, in: *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie “Justinian Patriarhul” a Universității din București*, IV (2004), p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> Pr. David PESTROIU, “Religious Dialogue in Postmodernity. Necessity, chances, perspectives”, in: *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, IV (2013) 1, p. 156.

Christian dialogue is “the only way of uniting the Churches. But their union must not be reduced to a formal dialogue, but must be realized on the basis of truth, in order to reach the ontological unity of the Church, following the pattern of the Holy Trinity”<sup>28</sup>.

Truth must be confessed with love, faithfulness, peace, respect and love to all people who bear the “image of God”! Thus, the values of Orthodoxy can also be promoted in the context of Christian confessional pluralism, while respecting the religious freedom of everyone.

The Orthodox Church is open to interconfessional dialogue, participating in and contributing to the restoration of Christian unity, according to the Savior’s commandment: “That they all may be one” (John 17, 21): “this fact results from the hierarchical prayer of the Lord «that they all may be one», prayer that the Orthodox invoke in all services, and especially in Eucharistic prayer, when the Church prays «for the unity of all» in the «unity of faith»”<sup>29</sup>.

The urge to unity is a commandment, a desire, a prayer of the Savior, but also a mission and our responsibility to fulfill it.

In today’s world, where challenges are growing, searching for unity is essential.

“In an Europe united politically, socially and economically, Christian churches need to make substantial efforts to realize Christian unity. This unity is not limited to formalism or ecclesiastical diplomacy, but presupposes an ecclesial ontological unity, accomplished by Christ, preserved in the Church of the first millennium and continued in the Orthodox Church”<sup>30</sup>.

The Orthodox Church participates in the Ecumenical Movement with the desire to restore the unity of Christianity “based on the Eucharistic ecclesiology and on the Orthodox dogmatic unity of the Church in the first millennium”<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Pr. Cornel TOMA, “Teologia Ortodoxă și Dialogul Ecumenic (probleme și perspective)”, in: *Altarul Banatului*, XIV (2003) 7-9, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Pr. Cornel TOMA, “Teologia Ortodoxă și Dialogul Ecumenic (probleme și perspective)”, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Pr. Cornel TOMA, “Teologia Ortodoxă și Dialogul Ecumenic (probleme și perspective)”, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> Pr. Cornel TOMA, “Teologia Ortodoxă și Dialogul Ecumenic (probleme și perspective)”, p. 87.

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The Dogma of the Holy Trinity is “the foundation stone of the Ecumenical Movement, since any form of dialogue must relate to it, and interpersonal intertrinitarian communion is the model by which any form of human interaction must be guided”<sup>32</sup>.

In the Orthodox view, “the refusal of dialogue means a sin that leads to fundamentalism, exclusivism and religious fanaticism”. Dialogue involves “Eucharistic or ecclesiastical love, that is communion”<sup>33</sup>, so from the Savior’s commandment to love each other (John 13, 34) we must understand the importance and responsibility of ecumenical communication on the road to seeking communion.

The Ecumenism calls for a sincere reporting,

“openness to the one next to you, materialized not only in accepting the dialogue as such, but also in accepting him as a dialogue partner. The dialogue requires a strong assertion of some issues of our own identity. It is desirable that the dialogue partners share interesting information about their own religious groups and not stereotypically congratulate themselves on false, flattering appraisals”<sup>34</sup>.

In the ecumenical dialogue, there must be “a respectful and tolerant approach to discussion partners by leaving a sterile rhetoric, as a type of sermon or conference, and anchoring in consistent and constructive discussions”<sup>35</sup>.

The Orthodox theologian is responsible with availability for communication and strong knowledges about the teaching of Church, because through his involvement in ecumenical dialogues he bears witness to faith in Christ.

Therefore, mutual respect is the “foundation of the dialogue, and it springs from pure love toward God and neighbor”<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> Pr. David PESTROIU, “Religious Dialogue in Postmodernity. Necessity, chances, perspectives”, p. 334.

<sup>33</sup> Pr. Cornel TOMA, “Teologia Ortodoxă și Dialogul Ecumenic (probleme și perspective)”, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> Pr. David PESTROIU, “Ecumenismul – între susținere și contestare”, pp. 324-331.

<sup>35</sup> Pr. David PESTROIU, “Ecumenismul – între susținere și contestare”, p. 340.

<sup>36</sup> Pr. David PESTROIU, “Ecumenismul – între susținere și contestare”, p. 341.

## V. “The common prayer” - a form of ecumenical dialogue

A difficult and complex problem for ecumenical dialogue is prayer in common. In this context, it is necessary to mention the Decision of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church no. 6.745/29 October 2008, according to which, the Romanian Orthodox clergymen will assist, without liturgical involvement, to the ecumenical prayer organized by the other Christian churches, on the occasion of the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” (18-25 January of each year), only after prayer, can utter a word on the subject.<sup>37</sup>

Numerous ecclesiastical canons prohibit, under the excommunication punishment: prayer with the excommunicated ones (The Apostolic Canons, canon 10), with heretics (The Apostolic Canons, canon 45); entry into the synagogue (The Apostolic Canons, canon 44), receiving medical aid from the Jews (canon 11, Trulan).

All canons have to be interpreted in context (they were written in a specific context). Canons are not dogmas, but indications of how dogmas should be applied.<sup>38</sup>

We also encounter the prohibition of praying for those of other denominations (there were also extreme situations when members of other confessions or religions, who visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher or Mount Athos, were excluded by some Orthodox too exacting).

However, the Orthodox Church prays in its cult for the “unity of all”, for all creation, for *everyone* (interesting is the tradition of Epiphany day, the blessing of animals with Holy Water).

There are also situations when those who claim to be defenders of Orthodoxy encourage hate for those of other religions. We have to respect all people, because they all bear the “Image of God”.

Discernment is needed in the dialogue with the other confessions. The extreme attitudes are alien to the spirit of Orthodoxy, being contrary to the Savior’s teachings of loving one another and of helping our neighbor, regardless of his faith.

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<sup>37</sup> [http://basilica.ro/stiri/comunicat\\_de\\_presa\\_rugaciune\\_si\\_actiune\\_pentru\\_unitatea\\_crestina.html](http://basilica.ro/stiri/comunicat_de_presa_rugaciune_si_actiune_pentru_unitatea_crestina.html) (27.08.2019).

<sup>38</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, “The Church beyond Our Boundaries/the Ecumenical Vocation of Orthodoxy”, in: *The Ecumenical Review*, 56 (2004), pp. 211-225.

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Orthodoxy promotes love rather than confessional hatred, mutual help rather than isolation, peaceful communication and not religious war; therefore, we must look deeply and with great discernment. Orthodoxy is not exclusive and its members have no right to isolate or exclude those who are eager to know its beauties.

The ecumenical dialogue must lead to unity and it does not mean an abdication from one's own identity, but just a highlight of the true confession of faith.

The "common prayer" of the Orthodox and the representatives of other Christian denominations

"remains somewhat formal and theoretical, because Christian unity in Orthodoxy, according to the Eucharistic ecclesiology, is accomplished on the basis of full dogmatic unity and Eucharistic-sacramental unity... Orthodox believers consider the World Council of Churches an organization, not a religious association, nor a Church. That is why «common prayer» does not have an ecclesial or theological dimension, but it is just a form of dialogue, meeting and friendship"<sup>39</sup>.

## VI. The Ecumenical Vocation of Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy has an ecumenical vocation through its very being. Ecumenicity is the heart of Orthodoxy, since the One Church of Christ is universal, ecumenical (the Church of the 7 Ecumenical Councils), which is meant to include the whole world, to unite all members of the Body of Christ.

The Orthodox Church is the entire (Catholic) Church, it is not a religious denomination or association, but it is the Church of Christ. It is not equal to other denominations or to the *incomplete* churches and not complementary; considering like this, we relativize it.

The Orthodox Church has preserved unaltered the treasure of faith (not accepting any doctrinal or ethical innovation), for which it is appreciated by even the other denominations that recognize the merit of being a traditional and apostolic Church.

<sup>39</sup> Pr. Cornel TOMA, "Teologia Ortodoxă și Dialogul Ecumenic (probleme și perspective)", p. 88.

However exclusive and non-ecumenical might seem this vision it still remains a reference for participation in the ecumenical dialogue<sup>40</sup>. The Orthodox Church is looking for communication and cooperation, based on mutual respect and Christian love. At the same time, it is aware of its true identity, which it promotes with love and openness to other confessions.

This is the true ecumenism: to be able to present the truth without defamation or despising others, without treating them with arrogance, but honestly confessing, with firmness and determination. In the ecumenical dialogue, it is important to be aware of your own identity and to understand that it can promote “cooperation in society and improve mutual understanding and respect among people”<sup>41</sup>.

Christians, in their capacity as members of the Church of Christ,

“can and must work at ever deeper unity in society at all levels, starting with the family, but also at the proximity of the peoples of the world. In order to do this, Christians should not place God somewhere outside the world, yielding to the temptation of contemporary secularization, but they must affirm and confirm in their way of life, that Christ is working through them”<sup>42</sup>.

Therefore, a common confession of the Churches and Christian denominations is required, a confession of Christ as the Incarnate Logos. This confession must be present and contribute through the dialogue of love and the dialogue of faith to the continuous closeness to communion<sup>43</sup>.

## **VII. The importance of interconfessional and interreligious communication in the current multicultural and multireligious context**

Many of us are judging too quickly, without knowing the context and the person in question. Many members of other Christian denominations or even of other religions live a life dedicated to the precepts of their faith,

<sup>40</sup> Pr. Ioan SAUCA, *Vocația ecumenică a Ortodoxiei*, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Cardinal Arinze FRANCIS, *The Church in dialogue. Walking with Other Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990, p. 13 *apud* Pr. David PESTROIU, “Religious Dialogue in Postmodernity. Necessity, chances, perspectives”, p. 157.

<sup>42</sup> Pr. Ștefan BUCHIU, *Întrupare și unitate*, Editura Libra, București, 1997, p. 209.

<sup>43</sup> Pr. Ștefan BUCHIU, *Întrupare și unitate*, p. 225.

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surpassing sometimes the life of Christians only “with name”. Knowing them, you are impressed of their dedication, conviction and living. They are so faithful that you feel that they are engaged honestly in their faith.

Abroad, many non-Orthodox are delighted to discover the greatness, discretion and depth of Orthodoxy, confessing from the bottom of the heart, with sincerity and happiness, that they have never felt the presence of the Holy Spirit as in the Orthodox Church.

Some of them discover the significant and pedagogical role of icons as “windows to heaven” or the beauty of the cult. Others learn Orthodox songs, they are interested in different Orthodox traditions and values, so the desire to learn about our faith is very vivid.

A believer who wishes to advance in spiritual life has to learn something good from every human being. The Orthodox believer must remain open to the dialogue with all people. We can and we have the duty to live, with all the power, the beauties of Orthodoxy, confessing to those who want to discover it.

Sometimes, we think that if we are Orthodox we are the best! In a context where there are only Orthodox or a significant majority, there is, however, a risk: to be so excited about our membership in Orthodoxy, so that we may disregard the members of other confessions.

When you think that someone else may be lost, but you do not, just because you are an Orthodox Christian, when you do not communicate, because of confessional hate and do not accept other opinions, can you call yourself a Christian? Why to say that the others are not saved, but we... for sure? God is the One who will decide, because “the wind bloweth where it listeth” (John 3, 8), God having witnesses in all the earth.

A true Orthodox believer lives his faith and he is fulfilled in it, but that does not mean he must exclude the non-Orthodox, as the doomed ones. Orthodoxy does not preach the predestination, according to which God chooses some people to save and the others are condemned them to perdition. So, we need a lot of discernment when we look at the others.

In the Scripture we have a few moments worth to note. Christ listened to the Cananese woman, He communicated with her, even He blessed her with the healing of her daughter; He also spoke with the Samaritan woman (though the Samaritans were considered pagan by the Jews), proving that the barriers of fanatical and nationalist thinking must be overcome with the help of the neighbor’s love.

Saint Paul, the “Apostle of the Gentiles”, had the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the pagan peoples, succeeding in communicating the universal message of Christianity, in the conviction that Christ is the God of all. Even to the Jews he wrote a letter in which he adopted a peaceful attitude in order to preach the Truth, to confess the true faith.

If this is the right attitude towards those of other beliefs, why are there Christians who have other approaches, alien to the spirit of love, communion and unity?

To preserve the fidelity of faith, the attitude of the Holy Fathers was firm to the heretics. Now we have to adopt this attitude in keeping and experiencing our own beliefs, but we also have to keep in mind the dynamic aspect that provides for adaptation, contextualization and communication. We must not fall into relativism, nor in ethnocentrism. The traditionalist conception must be combined with the dynamic one in order to form a unity. These concepts are universal and permanent, not successive, therefore, they must be seen with the balance of realism and the discernment of Christianity.

It is desirable to be steadfast in your ancestral belief, to be so convinced of its authentic and unchangeable values so to be able to defend it even at the cost of life, but in a century of communication and information, the Christian must express and promote an attitude of dialogue and mutual respect.

The Christian must not accept any compromise (which would lead him to relativism), but he should not despise those of other beliefs, just because they are not like him. Tolerance implies respecting the others point of view, but it does not automatically mean you have to agree with it.

You can communicate honestly with an atheist, not trying to fight with him, but endeavoring to present him what you live in communion with Him, “The One Who is”.

Therefore, the correct attitude does not imply the adoption of a radical position, but the communication of the unique Truth of Christ, “to the ends of the earth”.

Remaining anchored in Orthodoxy, let us be so deep in our faith in order to be also authentic, that is humble, capable of adaptation to a constantly changing reality.

In a pluralistic society, we find how necessary it is to understand the importance of interconfessional communication. Retreats in “ivory towers”

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and blaming other denominations should be avoided. There is no need to give up our own religious beliefs, but we must communicate truthfully and behave naturally towards all people.

It is necessary to change the cultural and religious references, the way of looking at the other religions, but also to develop an interreligious and interconfessional ethical code that regulates the principles of communication, but especially those of a cooperation for the common good of all who will respond to this initiative.

So, the approach of interreligious and interconfessional communication must emphasize the honest dialogue, solidarity and diplomacy and must highlight “mutual respect, common spiritual experience and human solidarity”<sup>44</sup>.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Orthodoxy has an ecumenical vocation, by its very nature, therefore, it must be open to interconfessional and interreligious communication in the present multicultural and multireligious context. The theology of Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae can be valued in this sense as it constitutes *a bridge of dialogue and rapprochement among Christians*.

In the ecumenical dialogue it is very important not to start from the premise of imposing your views, but to propose and to find together with the others, common ways for helping to overcome “communication barriers”.

The purpose of ecumenical dialogue is mutual understanding and cooperation, exceeding the doctrinal differences and emphasizing the similarities, as a starting point of communication and collaboration, in communion.

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<sup>44</sup> Mihai HIMCINSCHI, “Orthodox Insights for a Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue”, in: *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 4:1 (2013), p. 84.