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The Concept of “Communion” in the Orthodox Dogmatics from Today. Reflection on Triadology and Ecclesiology

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Abstract

In this study, the author tries to present the implications of the concept of “communion” in Orthodox Dogmatics, with special reference to triadology and ecclesiology. On the one hand, he captures the changes that have taken place in the current Orthodox dogma regarding the importance and use of the concept of communion. On the other hand, he underlines the theological implications of this concept in current theology.

Keywords:

Orthodox Dogmatics, communion, triadology, ecclesiology, person, ontology

I. Introduction

Koinonia – communion¹ is among the most widely used terms in the cross-Christian dialogue of the 20th century to date. We find this term in the

¹ For a brief orientation on the term *koinonia* and its theological implications see: *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Ecumenical Perspectives on the 1991 Canberra Statement on Unity*, a study document requested by the Joint Working Group, eds. Günther GASSMANN and John A. RODANO, *Faith and Order Paper* No. 163 (Geneva:

New Testament and in the Fathers' thinking and it gradually re-entered the content and structures of Dogmatics. Therefore, there is a need for an in-depth reflection on its theological implications and meanings in today's Dogmatics. The expression *koinonia* makes place in the content and structures of twentieth-century Dogmatics as important chapters of Orthodox Dogmatics are renewed. This happens either through the recourse of the Fathers' thinking, or in the context of inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian dialogue against the background of the ecumenical dialogue.

If in the context of the inter-Christian dialogues there are a variety of theological-ecclesiological approaches from the perspective of the implications and meanings of the term *koinonia*, in the structures and content of Orthodox Dogmatics this term is articulated especially in the chapters on triadology and ecclesiology. But this term implies deep theological realities also in cosmology, anthropology, Christology and eschatology.

II. Oneness -Trinity - identity, alterity, simultaneity

We find the absolute model of communion in triadology. Communion in the Trinity involves several concepts that Orthodox theology uses in expressing the dogma of the Trinity: unity, identity, alterity, simultaneity. The Trinity gives us the absolute model of communion and alterity, a model that is reflected in cosmology, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology. The *communion* and *alterity* of the Trinity are reflected in these four compartments of Dogmatics. Alterity does not mean individualism, but it is a constituent part of unity, which is why God is not One *or* Three,

WCC, 1993); Thomas F. BEST, Günther GASSMANN (eds.), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (Geneva: WCC, 1994); Loreley F. FUCHS, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology: From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008; Nicholas SAGOVSKY, *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion*, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Michael KINNAMON, "Koinonia and Philoxenia Toward and Expanded Ecumenical Ecclesiology", in: *Ecumenical Trends*, 44: 10 (2015), pp. 1-5; George VANDERVELDE, "Koinonia ecclesiology ecumenical breakthrough?", in: *One in Christ*, 29 (1993), pp. 126-142; "Koinonia between Church and World", in: *Exchange*, 26: 1, pp. 2-39; Susan WOOD, "Ecclesial koinonia in ecumenical dialogues", in: *One in Christ*, 30 (1994), pp. 124-145.

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but *simultaneously* One and Three. Therefore, in present Dogmatics the separation between Being and Persons in God is overcome, as we speak of Trinity-Oneness based on patristic thinking². Thus, on the one hand, the substantialism of medieval scholasticism is surpassed and the inner relationship between Being and Persons in God is affirmed, hence a triadology of interpersonal and perichoretic communion and of identity of nature.

For this reason, not only the content, but also the structures of the Dogmatics of the past centuries have been surpassed, as they no longer deal separately with the *being of God* and the *divine persons*³. In the twentieth century, Vladimir Lossky made a separation from the Roman Catholic influences in Dogmatic. Starting from Théodore de Régnon's explanations, he notices the tendency of Western theology to first focus on substance in triadology and then to talk about hypostasis. The Latin regards personality as a mode of nature, while the Greek regards nature as a content of the person⁴. Lossky considers legitimate the two ways used by the Westerners - starting from the single nature to the person - and the Easterners - starting from the three persons to the common nature. These two methodologies were legitimate as long as they did not speak of *primacy*, the primacy of the being over the persons transformed into relations within the being, or the primacy of the persons over the being. Therefore, in theology it was necessary to be assumed the balance of antinomy between nature and persons, as "absolutely identical and at the same time absolutely different"⁵. Sometimes the substance is thought above the hypostasis, having an ontological priority over them. Avoiding

² Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2006², p. 65. "The Trinity is truly Oneness, because it is so, and the Oneness is truly Trinity, because it subsists accordingly. It is because there is only one deity, which is unitary and trinitarian".

³ See Cristinel IOJA, *O istorie a Dogmaticii în Teologia ortodoxă română*, Pro Universitaria, București, 2013, pp. 215, 230.

⁴ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, trad. Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, Anastasia, București, 1992, p. 87

⁵ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 86. In their Dogmatics both Macary Bulgakov and Silvester of Canev saw the Persons as relationships inside the Being, being thus influenced by the Western thinking (See Silvestru DE CANEV, *Theologia Dogmatica Orthodoxă (cu expunerea istorică a dogmelor)*, trad. Silvestru episcopul Hușilor, vol. II, Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, București, 1899, p. 1).

both the logic of Aristotelian thinking that gave priority to the individual and the logic of Plotinian thinking that gave priority to the general, the monad, the Cappadocian Fathers expressed both unity and alterity in the Trinity in ontological-personalistic terms and categories. Saint Basil the Great shows that in the Holy Trinity Persons there is a “continuous and infinite communion”, in the sense that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit do not break from the mutual continuity⁶. In turn, Saint Gregory of Nazianz speaks of “divine inter-subjectivity” - a phrase argued by Father Dumitru Staniloae - underlining “the infinite co-naturalness of the Three Infinite”⁷. Lossky appreciated that the monarchy of the Father opened a personal perspective on the Trinity, although he identified the risks of such a teaching: a) the risk that persons pass before nature; b) the risk of subordinationism. To address these challenges Lossky notes the Fathers’ recourse to the apophatical method by which they kept “their secret equivalence in the distinction between nature and hypostasis”, namely “God is secretly a monad and a triad”⁸.

The platonic and Neo-Platonic view of the trinity is surpassed:

“I have not even begun to think of Oneness and the Trinity bathed me in His glory. I have not even started thinking well of Trinity and the unity included me again. When one of the Three appears to me, I come to believe that it is everything, inasmuch as my eye is filled, and in what is above it I escape; for my mind is too narrow to comprehend at least the One alone, and there is no room for what is above. When I gather the Three in the same thought, I see a single flame, without being able to divide or analyze the unified light”⁹.

The Cappadocian Fathers succeeded in transforming the concept of substance that had an impersonal character in ancient philosophy into a concept of personal substance, which considers communion, primarily applicable to the level of triadology. From this perspective, nature is

⁶ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, *Epistola 38*, PG 32, 328. Saint Basil the Great speaks of the existential meaning of being, which is not something abstract. (*Epistola 237*, PG 32, 884).

⁷ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NAZIANZ, *Cuvântarea 40*, 43, PG 36, 417B.

⁸ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, pp. 91-92

⁹ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NAZIANZ, *Cuvântarea, 41*, PG 36, 417BC.

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understood as a nature-communion of Persons, thus exceeding its static and impersonal character. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae said, in the Divine Persons "the nature is not repeated, but is possessed in the total common mode"¹⁰, that shows uninterrupted communion. God - communion of People in Christianity becomes a living and dynamic God, present in creation and in people's lives, through His uncreated energies, which are not something abstract, but are energies that spring from the common being and have a personal character. This paradigm shift in the thinking of the time, elaborated by the Cappadocian Fathers was achieved through a profound reflection on the divine Revelation and on the implications of this Revelation at the level of the whole creation. Lossky emphasizes the mysterious identity of the monad and the triad, identity and distinction of the one nature and the three hypostases at the same time¹¹. He advocates a return to Christian thinking of the theological mode of the Fathers who, by introducing apophatism in triadology, "have transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity"¹².

In this respect, father Stăniloae asserts:

"The fact that we speak of divine hypostasis as subjects, does not mean that we reduce the divine nature to a non-subjective reality. The person does not bring the subject character as something new in the divine nature. For the person is only the mode of the real subsistence of nature. However, this does not mean that there is an impersonal being, which gives character as a subject. The being exists only in hypostasis, and if it is spiritual, in the conscious subject. But it can be said further: the spiritual essence subsisting only in the subject always implies a conscious relation between the subjects, so a hypostasis of them in several subjects, in a perfect co-penetration and mutual transparency (...) perichoresis"¹³.

¹⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Sfânta Treime sau la început a fost iubirea*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2005², p. 30

¹¹ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 79.

¹² Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 80.

¹³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1978, p. 295.

Therefore, starting from the theology of the Cappadocians, Father Staniloae states:

“It is necessary to see the divine being simultaneously as a unity-relation, and as a relation within the unity. Neither unity should be shattered in favour of the relationship, nor should the relationship cancelled in favour of unity. Now, the Holy Trinity is above the distinction between unity and relationship as we understand them”¹⁴.

So, the being sends to the person and the person to the being, the person being deeply ontological and the ontology being deeply personal¹⁵.

Of course, we cannot consider that all the Western theology is essentialist, since there are different nuances of triadology in the Western theological thinking. However, we can show that the tendency towards substantialism and psychologism, following Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, decisively marked the Roman-Catholic triadology. In an extensive analysis of the various approaches on substance / nature and hypostasis / person, Jean-Claude Larchet notes that

“Personalism and essentialism do not constitute the land on which Latin and Orthodox theology differ most (...), especially since in our days in Catholicism and Protestantism there have developed currents as radically personalist as those represented in Orthodoxy by Yannaras and Zizioulas”¹⁶.

Therefore, the concept of *koinonia* can be accurately expressed only insofar as in today's Dogmatics we will overcome the dialectic of the alternative between person and nature in God. That is the unilateral accents - nature precedes and predetermines the person or the person precedes and predetermines the nature - are converted into a simultaneity regarding the Oneness-Trinity, since in God there is no precedence and posterity.

¹⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I., p. 297.

¹⁵ Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ jr, “Persoană sau/și ontologie în gândirea ortodoxă contemporană”, in: *Persoana și comuniune. Prinos de cinstire Preotului profesor Academician Dumitru Stăniloae, 1903-1993*, Sibiu, 1993, p. 376.

¹⁶ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Persoană și natură. Sfânta Treime-Hristos-Omul*, transl. Pr. prof. Dragoș Bahrin and Marinela Bojin, Basilica, București, 2013, p. 372

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This reality is based on the fact that there is no nature without hypostasis, and a hypostasis without nature is an abstraction. From this perspective, and in order to maintain the balance and paradox of the Trinity, André de Halleux remarks that the Cappadocian Fathers meant by the term intra-divine *koinonia* "common divine nature" and not "dialogical" and "interpersonal" relationships. Thus, the "personalism of the Cappadocian Fathers cannot be opposed to the discourse on the essence", because their effort to distinguish the hypostasis of essence "was not detrimental to the essence", but gives both the essence and the hypostasis "an equal importance"¹⁷.

Beyond the unilateral accents that have marked and continue to distort Christian thinking, it is necessary to maintain a balance between person and ontology because only by maintaining the two terms of the paradox - substance / nature and hypostasis / person – it is expressed the simultaneous belief in God¹⁸.

III. Father's monarchy versus unity of nature?

We are under the influence of personalism, which made a career in Orthodox theology since the second half of the twentieth century and in delimitation with the substantialism of scholastic. Therefore, sometimes we have the tendency to consider that only the monarchy of the Father - which the Cappadocian Fathers testify in particular - represents the source of unity and communion in the Holy Trinity. On the one hand, we must emphasize that the Cappadocian Fathers not only affirm the monarchy of the Father as source of the intra-Trinitarian communion, but also the identity of nature. Therefore, the monarchy of the Father is not opposed to the nature of the Oneness of the Deity nor vice versa. Communion and unity in the Trinity is not only a relationship between Persons, but also a communion and unity of nature. The Divine Persons are in relation to one another without excluding nature¹⁹. The Father's monarchy does not

¹⁷ André DE HALLEUX, "Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire chez les Capadociens? Une mauvaise controverse", in: *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 17, 1986, pp. 265, 289-290.

¹⁸ See André DE HALLEUX, "Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire...", pp. 265-292.

¹⁹ V. HARRISON, "Yannaras on Person and Nature", in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 33, 1989, p. 288.

mean an overestimation of the Father's Person in the Holy Trinity and no inequality between the three Persons, as there is no "hypostatic primacy" of the Father in relation to the other Persons²⁰.

The eternal communion of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, distinct and undivided, is the ultimate basis and model of the Church. Orthodox theology speaks of the Father as *arche* and *monarchy*, in the sense that the Son is born of Him and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him from eternity. Although for some these properties of the Father give him the quality of a "primacy", we have to say that we can speak about the Father only in a Trinitarian way. This is where the Trinity perichoresis comes or what Father Dumitru Staniloae sought to express through *divine inter-subjectivity*. Without these, the Father or the monarchy of the Father risks being understood after thinking of the world in the categories of domination and of a primacy that subordinates the others or makes the others passive. If we assume such a vision, we suspend both the communion of the Trinity and the love understood as dynamic movement and interweaving, and dwelling without confusion of the Trinity Persons in an eternal self-dedication.

At the same time, the monarchy of the Father implies the notion of *reciprocity* in the Trinity, the term *hypostasis* shows that the divine nature is *relational*, that is, a relationality in which the substance is also active.

"The monarchy is also related to *homoousion* and of course to reciprocity of the two Persons undivided from the Father who is undivided, so that divine *ousia* should not be divided. So, in order to avoid a division of the divine nature, the monarchy as a «personal achievement» of the Father is not enough"²¹.

This means that not only does the Father give alterity to the other two Persons, but also that He allows them to dynamically give Him Their own alterity.

²⁰ For a critique of the tendency of ontological subordinationism in the Trinity through the personalistic ontology of Zizioulas and Yannaras see: A.-J. TORRANCE, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation*, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 293.

²¹ Pr. Prof. N. LOUDOVIKOS, "Alteritatea dictată: o critică a teologiei trinitare a lui Ioan Zizioulas", in: Pr. Prof. Ștefan BUCHIU, Pr. Asist Sorin ȘELARU (eds.), *Dumnezeu-Tatăl și viața Preasfintei Treimi*, Editura Trinitas, București, 2010, p. 374

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"This means that the monarchy of the Father is something not owned by Him, but given to Him by the other two Persons. The monarchy is not something imposed on others, because it requires the contribution of others to be achieved. The Father not only generates the consubstantial alterity of the other two Persons, but, at the same time, He depends on them for His own alterity to be fulfilled, in this eternal mutual dynamic self-giving of the divine substance"²².

We should see the monarchy of the Father from the perspective of a theology of the Father in communion, reciprocity and the dynamic gift of love. Thus, by birth and respectively through procession, he suddenly gives the divine being and the hypostatic existence to the Son and to the Spirit. Therefore, the Father is not only the principle of the hypostasis of the Son and of the Spirit, but also of their common divinity, which he shares through birth and procession. Father Staniloae notes: "each of the three divine Persons is united with the other two not only by their common nature, but also by their personal properties"²³.

IV. The Trinitarian Koinonia and the ecclesiology of communion

Ecclesiology - a central theme of theological debates in the twentieth century - is sine qua non related to triadology and Christology. The hypostatic union stands at the foundation of the theandric constitution of the Church - a fact that implies communion and alterity - and the unity-distinction of the Holy Trinity is the foundation of an ecclesiology of communion. *Koinonia* is organically linked to the ecclesiology of communion²⁴. *Koinonia* belongs to the being of the Church, the Church being *sancta communio*. In the New Testament *koinonia* is fundamental to understand the reality of the Church, touching on different basic concepts such as: common life (the Acts of the Apostles 2, 44, 47), to be in a heart and mind (4, 32), to have

²² Pr. Prof. N. LOUDOVIKOS, "Alteritatea dictată...", p. 376

²³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILAOE, *Sfânta Treime sau la început a fost iubirea*, p. 78

²⁴ Pr. Prof. Ion BRIA, "Ecclesiologia comuniunii", in: *Studii Teologice*, XX (1968) 9-10, pp. 669-681; J. M. R. TILLARD, *Eglise d'Eglises - L'ecclesiologie de communion*, Ed. Du Cerf, Paris, 1987.

it all in common (2, 44). Therefore, *koinonia* as a Christian way of life is integrated into the Church understood as a community of love. *Koinonia* refers to the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12), “to be in” and “to remain in” Christ (John 14, 20, 23; 1 John 3, 19-24).

The functionality and manifestation of *catholicity* reveal in the life of the Church the *perichoretical* life of the Holy Trinity. Structured according to the image of the Holy Trinity, the Church presents within it the antinomial character of simultaneous identity and diversity. The Church is an icon of inter-Trinitarian *koinonia*²⁵.

In the life of the Trinity, there is a unity of being and a plurality of persons. Orthodox theology has always expressed the *omousia* of the three divine Persons and their *hypostatic* difference. According to this model, the catholicity of the Church implies the manifestation of the whole in each part and the connection of each part with the whole. This reality reveals two aspects: communion and plenitude. Through them, everyone receives everything, but within the whole, everyone enjoys everything in communion.

“Each work of each member is performed by the whole body and each member fulfils a function of the whole body through his own function. Therefore, everyone is open to the work of the whole body and enjoys it. But no member is confused with the others, because each member takes the work of the whole body and the powers of the whole in its own form”²⁶.

In the Church, there is “partaking with (*koinonia*) the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13, 13). *Koinonia* with Christ means *koinonia* within the Holy Spirit, a work of unity and deepening of the believers through communion, in the Trinitarian divine life present in the Church as the kingdom of the Kingdom. *Koinonia* is not only a triadological reality and not only Christological

²⁵ On the implications of triadology in ecclesiology see also Philip KARIATLIS, “The exercise of Primacy in the Church: An Orthodox Theological Perspective”, in: *Phronema*, XXVI (1) 2011, pp. 27-47.

²⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996², pp. 188-189. See also Cristinel IOJA, “Synodality and Primacy in Orthodoxy. From the Point of View of Sobornicity”, in: *Primacy and Primacies in the Church*, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2017, pp. 13-24.

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and pneumatological, but also an ecclesial-sacramental reality. Through the Mysteries of the Church, the believers unite and live in koinonia with the Trinity that is with the living God. Koinonia begins in the Church, and the Mystery, and it always deepens in a process of deification of the man who is perfected in the eschaton. Therefore, koinonia also has an eschatological dimension. This eschatological dimension of koinonia is found in the worship of the Church and especially in the Mysteries and Liturgy of the Church.

The Liturgy introduces us to a special communion with the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the Liturgy, we find a blessing brought to the Trinity by the Church according to the ascending movement of man through the Spirit to the Son and through the Son to the Father. On the other hand, there is a blessing of the Church by the Trinity according to a downward movement from the Father, through the Son to the Spirit and through the Spirit to every man²⁷. Thus, in the Liturgy and in the Mysteries of the Church there is no longer any distance between the mystery of man and the mystery of the Trinity, but there is an inner relationship through which the mystery of man makes the experience of the Trinity mystery for deification.

The kingdom of heaven that the Holy Liturgy proclaims at the beginning, being called "Kingdom of the Trinity", meaning all who walk within it experience the Trinity. No one can enter the Kingdom of the Trinity without having previously experienced the Trinity in his life and this experience is fully realized in the Holy Liturgy. The ones who are ecclesiastically-liturgically integrated make the experience of the Trinity through a doxological participation in the mystery revealed to us by Christ in the Holy Spirit. Beyond the exclamations addressed to the Holy Trinity in the Holy Liturgy, the Holy Trinity appears five times with the name of the Trinity, each time in a doxological context²⁸. The aspects that reveal the pattern of intra-Trinitarian communion in the Church Liturgy are deepened in the Orthodox Dogmas. These are elaborated in a hermeneutic correspondence with both spirituality and the Church worship, the dogma having a doxological-ecclesial dimension.

²⁷ Boris BOBRINSKOY, *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, trad. Măriuca și Adrian Alexandrescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2005, p. 192.

²⁸ See Conf. Dr. Cristinel IOJA, "Taina Treimii și experiența ei în dimensiunea liturgică a Bisericii", in: *Dumnezeu-Tatăl și viața Preasfintei Treimi*, pp. 396-400.