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Patristic Perspective of Communication and Communion. **The Ontological and Dialogical Relationship between God and the Human Person**

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Abstract

Although God is unseen to the creatures, He communicates through His uncreated energies in order to reveal Himself and be in communion with the people. God is revealing Himself as Trinity, the unknown Father is made known throughout the world by the Son and the Holy Spirit. The human being can be fulfilled as person only in relationship of communication and communion: in ontological and dialogical relationship with Christ, man can be in a real communion with the other human beings and with the Triune God.

Keywords

human person, meeting, communication, ontological and dialogical relationship, communion

I. Patristic perspective of communication and communion

In patristic theology, God remains absolutely inaccessible in regard to His Being (knowing God through the Being is impossible), so His Being can't be a subject of knowledge or sight. However, His divine Being is revealed, communicates Himself through uncreated and divine energies.

The divine being is greater than words, it's inexpressible. However, the Son of God communicates, presents the Father, the characteristic of the Word being able to "*speak* about the Father's nature... Knowledge can be offered or *communicated* to creatures through the Son's will... "no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him» (Matt 11, 27)"¹.

God's revealing Himself as Trinity, the unknown Father is made known throughout the world by the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The central thought of patristic theology is that without a relation with Christ in His Church, communion cannot be achieved between man and God and through God, with the entire creation².

During the post-apostolic period, the notion of communion had more a moral and social meaning.

*"The teaching of 12 Apostles and Letter of Barnabas contain some communion demandings, available for all members of the Christian community: a Christian life based on the idea of communion assumes first the practice of moral virtues. The first of these virtues is avoiding loneliness and opening for a life in communion"*³.

Thus, Barnabas was urging: "Don't live lonely, closing in thyselfes as if you're already righteous, instead gather each others in a place, taking care of each other"⁴.

¹ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu (The Vision of God)*, Editura IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1995, pp. 20-21.

² Fr. Gheorghe POPA, *Comuniune și înnoire spirituală în contextul secularizării lumii moderne (Communion and spiritual renewal in the context of modern world secularization)*, PhD Thesis, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest, 1998, p. 161.

³ Fr. G. POPA, *Comuniune și înnoire spirituală...*, pp. 116-117.

⁴ Fr. Ioan MIHĂLCESCU, Matei PĂSLARU, Gheorghe N. NIȚU, *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici (The writings of Apostolic Fathers)*, Bucharest, 1927, p. 55.

The model of life in communion was Jesus Christ:

“He was proposed to all Christians as model and ideal of holiness. Christians were sensing His presence in the Church and in their hearts that became eternal church through Baptism and were longingly waiting for His eschatological return and full communion with Him”⁵.

According to Saint Ignatius of Antioch, communion is achieved among local eucharistic communities that together were representing the entire unified Church with Christ.⁶

Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, in his main paper against heresies, describes “the idea of progressive revelation of God, that creates all things from nothing, through the Word... Unknown in His greatness, God is revealed from love through the Word”⁷.

The spiritual growth of man

“lifted by the Spirit and Word to the state of communion with the Father, gains an eschatological meaning in the writings of Saint Irenaeus... The expression of the Father through the Word communicates life to those who see God..., and seeing God in the Kingdom of heaven communicates eternal life, making the man imperishable”⁸,

in perfect communion with God.

For Clement of Alexandria, contemplation of God is the highest happiness and the perfect Christians are the saints that permanently live in communion with God⁹. He sees the model of communion from the fighting Church in the heavenly Church, affirming the existence of real communion between those two Churches through common prayer¹⁰.

⁵ Fr. Gheorghe POPA, *Comuniune și înnoire spirituală...*, p. 118.

⁶ Ioannis ZIZIULAS, *Ființa eclesială (The ecclesial Being)*, Ed. Bizantină, Bucharest, 1996, p. 166.

⁷ ST. IRENAEUS OF LYON, *Împotriva ereziilor (Against heresies)*, IV, 20, 4, PG 7, 1034, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 29.

⁸ ST. IRENAEUS OF LYON, *Împotriva ereziilor*, pp. 31-32.

⁹ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stomatele (Stromata)*, IV, 22, PG 8, 1345-1348 in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ Gheorghe CHIȘCĂ, “Ideea de comuniune în Ortodoxie” (“The idea of communion in Orthodoxy”), in: *Orthodoxy*, XXI (1969) 3, p. 406.

Patristic Perspective of Communication and Communion...

Origen affirms that God is communicated through the words of the Holy Scripture and Theology is “knowing God through the Word”¹¹, through contemplation, the Christian is deified in communion and unity with God¹².

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria sustains the presence of Logos in beings, God revealing Himself through His works. For Saint Athanasius, communion with God is the Christian purpose that can only be achieved through Christ, the incarnated Word, “who defeated sin and death communicating to the creature incorruptibility and future deification”¹³.

Saint Basil the Great affirms that God communicates Himself through works or energies: “when we say that we know our God through His energies, we do not say that He could be closed in His Being. Because if His works descend to us, His Being remains inaccessible”¹⁴.

For Saint Basil, communion is trinitary, speaking of knowing the Holy Trinity in the Holy Spirit through the Son and about the “intimacy with God” and “unifying love”¹⁵.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus affirms that “in this world, we communicate with God *blurred*, just like Moses, because God put the darkness between Him and us”, that’s why in order to know God, light, contemplation and illumination from the Trinity are required¹⁶.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa says: “it is true that he who’s with a clean heart sees God, but also that no one ever saw God. Actually, He who’s invisible through the nature becomes visible through its energies”¹⁷.

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the

¹¹ ORIGEN, *Ps. CXVII*, PG 12, 1581, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, pp. 46-47.

¹² ORIGEN, *Io. XXXII*, 17, PG 14, 817 A, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 52.

¹³ ST. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Despre Întrupare (On the Incarnation)*, 8, PG 26, 991 C, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 59.

¹⁴ ST. BASIL THE GREAT, *Scrisoare către Amfilohie (Letter to Amphilochius)*, PG 32, 869, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 65.

¹⁵ ST. BASIL THE GREAT, *Hom. Quod est Deus*, 6, PG 31, 344 B, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 67.

¹⁶ ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Or. XXVIII*, 4, PG 36, 32, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 69.

¹⁷ ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *A șasea omilie la Facere (The sixth homily to Genesis)*, PG 44, 1269, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 72.

“darkness through which Moses entered Mountain Sinai represents a form of communication with God, superior to the contemplation of the burning bush in which God revealed Himself to Moses... If God reveals as light, then as darkness, this means that it’s impossible to spot the divine Being”¹⁸,

which remains incommunicable.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian considers the Church as “place of sanctification, where unity with God is achieved through the Mysteries”¹⁹.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem details the sacramental aspect of contemplating God, affirming that “only the Son and Holy Spirit have pure vision on Father’s being, on which they participate fully”²⁰, in communion.

Saint John Chrysostom affirms that “all that we can see in God is what He managed, and we are not even seeing His pure Being”. This is “God’s mode on how it’s revealing Himself”. Thus, God reveals Himself through management”²¹.

This management or oeconomy of God, “inaccessible through His being, corresponds, according to Saint John Chrysostom, to the works or revealing energies”, manifestations or God’s exit from His Being by His merciful will. This descent is completed with the Incarnation of the Word: “God revealed Himself in human body, because of this God shall be seen in Christ’s humanity”²².

For Saint Cyril of Alexandria only the Word is Son by nature, unlike us, where due to the Incarnation we can become “sons through participation”: “to partake of Son’s deification, in the trinitarian communion, means to be penetrated by godliness, just like hot iron in the fire is penetrated by heat from the fire, leaving the beauty of inexpressible Trinity shine upon us”²³.

¹⁸ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 74.

¹⁹ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 78.

²⁰ ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catehism VI*, 2, PG 33, 540, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 79.

²¹ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Despre incomprehensibilitatea lui Dumnezeu (On the incomprehensible nature of God)*, III, 3, PG 48, 722, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, pp. 79-80.

²² VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 81.

²³ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Comoara (Treasure)*, 5, PG 75, 65-68, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 83.

Patristic Perspective of Communication and Communion...

Saint Cyril of Alexandria sees in perfection, a result of participation to the sacramental life of the Church. Especially, the unity with God is achieved through the Mystery of Eucharist, the “bodily union with Christ”²⁴.

The Christian’s purpose, according to Diadochus of Photice is the “unity with God in love”²⁵. Saint Dionysius the Areopagite shares the same thought, confirming that the Christian’s ultimate target is unity with God, “unity that’s above all knowledge”²⁶.

In this context, we can observe the apophatic dimension of communication and knowledge of God: knowing through unknown or knowledge above knowledge and communication of God through uncreated energies, but also the incorruptibility of His being.

Deification, unity in grace, is possible, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor, by the model of hypostatic unity of the dual natures in Christ’s Person, and perfect communion is personal, of the personal human with the personal God²⁷.

Saint John of Damascus develops the idea of communion Christ’s Person: in the hypostatic union, “the divine nature remains inaccessible in itself, but it’s being... penetrates the created being and communicates itself to it... Christ’s humanity partakes of the divine glory, giving us the possibility to see God”. Seeing face to face, from the Kingdom of God, shall be the communion with Christ’s Person²⁸.

For the hesychast theology, contemplating the uncreated light is not the final target, but expression of communion with God that the man is permanently looking for it. Therefore, Saint Symeon the New Theologian affirms:

“God is light and communicates Its brilliance to those who unite with Him, to the extent that they’re purified... In the experience of divine light there is no ecstatic depersonalized state... what makes the experience of His light inexpressible in human language is the communion with a personal God”²⁹.

²⁴ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Despre Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan (Commentary on John)* VI, 54, PG 73, 577 B-578 A, in: VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 84.

²⁵ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 99.

²⁶ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 104.

²⁷ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, pp. 114-115.

²⁸ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 120.

²⁹ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, pp. 124-126.

For Saint Symeon the New Theologian, seeing face to face is an existential communion with Christ where each person finds its purpose, knowing God personally and being known and personally loved by God.

Saint Gregory Palamas sustains that “the divine nature must be called both incommunicable and communicable”, for we can partake of God through grace, God staying in His being though, totally inaccessible. God’s nature is “communicable but not in itself, but through energies”. God communicates Himself through grace³⁰.

Thus, although God is unseen, unknowable and inaccessible to the creatures, keeping His transcendence, He communicates through His uncreated energies to reveal Himself and be in communion with the people.

II. The Person - accomplished through communication and communion

In the Christian teaching, the man is gifted by God with the possibility to overcome and transcend the material world:

“this overcome is only possible by focusing on the absolute personal model, God. Only by relating to the supreme-personal structure, the Holy Trinity, the man can overcome his own nature, fulfilling himself as a person. Also in the Holy Trinity, he finds the perfect model for communion and interpersonal mutual love”³¹.

Thus, next I will reveal certain aspects of patristic contribution regarding the definition of *person*. “As living reality and concept, the person is a gift of patristic theology... The concept of *person* is born through the Church’s effort to express its faith in the Holy Trinity”³².

Credits to the Cappadocian Fathers for transforming in trinitarian theology, the concept of static impersonal substance (from the ancient philosophy) in the concept of personal communion substance, with living

³⁰ VI. LOSSKY, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 134.

³¹ Vasile CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie. Analiză comparată” (“The person in Christianity and philosophy. Compared analysis”), in: *Theology and Life*, New Series, VIII (1998) 1-4, p. 51.

³² V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, p. 58.

Patristic Perspective of Communication and Communion...

and dynamic character³³. Thus, they placed the concept of *person* at the core of trinitarian communion.

For Saint Basil the Great, “God’s nature is communion” and communion is ontological and relational (“thus, the unique substance concurs with the communion of the Three Persons” of the Holy Trinity)³⁴.

Regarding the personal communion in the Holy Trinity (perichoresis), the Greek Fathers of the Church said that “God’s unity (the One God as principle of personal-trinitary life) doesn’t rely on the unique substance of God, but in the hypostasis, i.e. in Father’s Person.

He is the cause of the Son’s birth and of the Holy Spirit’s procession. Thus, the ontological principle of God resides within the person”³⁵.

The person occupies an important place in the Christological dogma:

“The hypostasis of godly Word has assumed humanity through Incarnation, thus becoming the hypostasis of humanity. Thus, the Son of God assumed the nature and not the human person”³⁶.

Christian Anthropology is closely related to the Trinitarian and Christological dogma. This connection is discovered in the Church, where the “ecclesial hypostasis”³⁷ is achieved in relation with God and other people, in communion. This “ecclesial hypostasis” is an “image of absolut personal existence of God where the Persons are in complete communion”³⁸.

Christ has revealed the mystery of the person and it can only be experienced by the man within the Church, as fulfillment of the man as person. The person becomes through baptism “ecclesial hypostasis”, “as rebirth and a new way of existence in the ecclesial communion, in relation with other Church members... Through Baptism, the man becomes a being in communion... he also appropriates the communitary way of existence characteristic to trinitary Persons”³⁹.

³³ V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, p. 63.

³⁴ Pr. Dumitru POPESCU, “L’actualité de la theologie trinitaire des Trois Saints Hierarques”, in: *Nouvelles de l’Eglise Orthodoxe Roumaine*, 1991, 1, p. 17.

³⁵ V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, p. 65.

³⁶ V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, pp. 65-66.

³⁷ Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *L’être ecclesial*, Geneve, 1981, p. 45.

³⁸ V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, p. 73.

³⁹ V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, pp. 74-77.

As a member of the Body of Christ, the Christian is partaking of the Holy Mysteries, freeing himself of individualism and egocentrism, expressing his will and learning communion, unity with God, by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ.

The person is permanently trying to be in loving relation with others, has the will to be in communion because “only *in* and *through* communion he could confirm his identity and particularity”⁴⁰.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae affirms that “for the human conscience, whatever’s known is not done through its power... It gets richer, by time, through knowing the external phenomenons of nature, but also from the communication of other humans”⁴¹.

For the Holy Fathers “knowing the Truth or personal Existence of God means to communicate with the Truth Itself”⁴², knowing the Truth and being achieved in love and communion.

Therefore, man created in the image of God can be fulfilled as a person only in relationship, by communicating with God and in the ecclesial communion:

”Only in the Trinity, which is a unity of distinct persons, is the character of being person fully assured. The person without communion is not person, while communion is conditioned by a common nature. We do not know what the divine nature is in itself, apart from the fact that it is all-perfect. But we do know that the divine nature is the basis of the all-perfect communion between the divine persons. No nature whatsoever of a spiritual character has subsistence apart from person; neither is the person fully person apart from nature, hence apart from the basis for communion. Properly speaking, the human person does not even exist except in the communion of nature with other persons. The eternal communion after which we yearn has its origin and fulfillment in the one eternal co-essentiality of the divine persons of the Trinity. And if unity without confusion between the divine persons is assured by their sharing in a common nature, then

⁴⁰ V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, p. 76.

⁴¹ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu (The immortal image of God)*, Ed. Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1987, pp. 214-215.

⁴² V. CRISTESCU, “Persoana în creștinism și filosofie...”, p. 90.

Patristic Perspective of Communication and Communion...

certainly the communion between God and those who believe is assured by their participation, through grace, in the divine nature or in the energies irradiating from the common nature of the three divine persons, which is to say, from their loving community”⁴³.

III. The ontological relation between *me* and *You*, as meeting and dialogue

Father Stăniloae took the idea

“of the word’s power to call people to communion, from the philosopher Martin Buber, famous for his thesis on dialogical existence, on existence as meeting, as life of dialogue... The cry for communion comes from the human being, from here the preoccupation towards others and their view... Not answering to communion results in sick existence, the death of loneliness”⁴⁴.

The book of philosopher Martin Buber, *Me and You*, could be seen as a real “bible of meeting and dialogue”⁴⁵. For Buber, “the authentic dialogue between past, present and future is the living dialogue, tried by any of us hour by hour, moment by moment throughout our earthly life”⁴⁶.

In the conception of Buber, the man is defined through language: “the fundamental fact of human existence is the man among the people. What particularly defines the people’s world is *language*. After the first verse of John’s Gospel, Martin Buber formulates main idea: *In the beginning*

⁴³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, Volume I: *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, translated and edited by Ioan IONIȚĂ and Robert BARRINGER, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brooklyn, Massachusetts, 1994, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Fr. Adrian IONIȚĂ, *Hristologia neopatristică în gândirea părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae (Neo Patristic Christology in Fr. Stăniloae’s thought)*, PhD Thesis, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest, 2010, pp. 64-65.

⁴⁵ Ștefan Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu (Me and You)*, translated from German and preface by Ștefan Augustin DOINAȘ, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1992, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 5.

is the relation. To a first true of cosmogenesis is joined a first true of anthropogenesis. The transition from *was* to *is* suggests more precisely that we are in an eternal present”⁴⁷.

According to Buber, the relation “is an ontological event, because its space is the Spirit’s place of manifestation, the superior dimension of human existence. The relation par excellence is the one that the language expresses through the verbal pair *Me-You*, meaning a relation between persons. The possibility of this relation stands in the postulation of an a priori: each man possesses before any social experience, a partner, that’s its born *You*; thus, any man is meant to relate with the other... Arguments for a born *You* are offered by the primitive man’s language and by the very small child’s behaviour”⁴⁸.

The man is *ontologically* structured to respond to the others, in order to live in communion:

“the man’s answer to his *You* is the phenomenon, par excellence, spiritual, the seal of the human being. The spirit doesn’t reside though in any of those two terms of relation: he is not within *me*, not within *you*, but within *them*... There are three zones of existence where the man can achieve the authentic meeting and dialogue: nature, society and God. Anything from nature, any man could become a *you* of a *me*, when the requested person engages in a real way of living together... The man accedes to *You* through *Me*”⁴⁹.

The relation is interpersonal and assumes the dialogue between man and God as model:

“*You*’s domain is the sphere of liberty and liability... Nonessential relationships are between individuals, the authentic relationship blossoms between persons... The relationship model is between *Me* and God, the eternal *You*... Relation with Him is not search though, but ambush, and the concrete evidences of joining it are prayer and sacrifice”⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁰ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 8.

In the relationship, the man is valued as participant to the personal meeting with God:

“on the same line with the theories of merging the ego in self, and of the mystical theory of ecstatic fusion with God, Buber supports the doctrine of revealing the self of the eternal You, which addresses to the person who is ready to receive him... From a gnoseological point of view, Martin Buber confers *me*, i.e. to the individual self, a double status: *me* is a meeting partner in *me-you* relationship..., but *me* is also subject of knowledge and of the experience with Him. Between *me* and *you*, in the real human life, a relationship of mutual participation is established, of mutual addressing and responding which makes the ontological event of meeting possible. This is based on the born *you* and practiced as disposition of *you* to address and respond, once the two partners are staying face to face”⁵¹.

The relationship can also be seen as a dialogue because “both persons face each other in the *me-you* relationship, respond each other’s calls, not because they are related, but because they are mutually radical... Relationship is a meeting, presence, mutual addressing, dialogue.”⁵²

Thus, the human existence has a dialogical aspect. “Me, in its essence, i.e. the one from *me-you* relationship can’t be thought... only with its meeting partner, who is *you*. The existence has a dialogical character. Essential dialogue can only be achieved between two persons: *me* and *You*”.⁵³

Conclusion

The central idea of the patristic theology is that God can not be known in His Essence, so His Essence can not be an object of knowledge or seeing. But the divine Essence is revealed and is communicated through the uncreated and deifying energies.

⁵¹ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 8.

⁵² Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 8.

⁵³ Șt. Aug. DOINAȘ, Preface to Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, p. 9.

Communion involves communication with Christ in His Body – the Church; the model and the source of communion being the Holy Trinity. Outside of a relationship with Christ and His Church cannot exist a real communion between man and God, and in God with the whole creation.

There is an ontological relationship between me and You, as meeting and dialogue. So, we can speak about an ontological and a dialogical relationship between God and man.