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Mystery of Christ in the Life of the Saints - Reflections on the Confession of Faith -

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Abstract

In this study, the author highlights the confessing force of the saints in the history of the first Christian centuries, in the context of idolatry and heresy. On the one hand, he emphasizes the unity between the Gospel-dogma-worship, and on the other hand the unity between Prophets-Apostles-Saints in the life of the Church. At the same time, he brings to light the unity between holy life and confession, between holiness and the sacramental life of the Church. The testimony of the saints saved the dogmas of the Church from the conceptual and experimental distortions that idolatry and heresies proliferated and spread. The saints have sometimes confessed the catholic faith of the Church with their life, being existentially integrated into the “canon of truth” and the “rule of faith”.

Keywords:

Lives of the Saints, dogmas, Church, Truth, Mysteries, confession, idolatry, heresy

The unity of the dogma-spirituality-cult in the ecclesial environment, as the medium of God’s experience, facilitated a firm attitude of the Church - attitude based on the testimony of the saints - in her encounter with the idolatry of the world in which she was born. Until the Church proclaimed

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the dogmas within the Ecumenical Synods, she was forced to delimit, starting from the biblical writings and the experience of the Christian communities, both between Christ's Gospel and its mystifications under the influence of heresies and between the teachings of Jesus Christ's Gospel and idolatry which, according to Pauline theology, was understood as well as confusion between Creator and creature and worship of demons. The saints delimited themselves from idolatry by confessing the faith in Jesus Christ with their lives in the context of an idolatrous and polytheistic world of the Roman Empire, and they revealed heresy as an attitude contrary to the faith and catholicity of the Church.

I. Christ's Mystery in the Lives of the Saints

Evangelical dogma was vividly rooted in the consciousness and life of Christian communities and thus the delineation between early Christianity and idolatry or polytheism of antiquity was achieved through an affirmation of the sanctity of life assumed within the community and catholicity of the Church. Reference to Christ was fundamental since it should comply the exigencies of a life "according to the Truth". The Canon of Truth and the rule of faith were an existentially fact integrated experimentally and ecclesially¹. One of the many x-rays that early Christian writings present in terms of the manner of converting people and its implications to the demands of Christ's Gospel through a fundamental change in their lives is presented by Saint Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher.

"We who formerly delighted in fornication, but now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to every one in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with

¹ See Sfântul IRINEU DE LYON, *Împotriva ereziilor. Combatere și răsturnare a gnozei cu nume mincinos*, I, II, 3, transl. Petru Molodeț, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2016, pp. 123-124. John BEHR, *Formarea Teologiei creștine. Drumul spre Niceea*, I, transl. Mihai G. Neamțu, Editura Sofia, București, 2004.

men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies, and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God the ruler of all”².

Epistle to Diognetus depicts the same evangelical life of the Christians of the first centuries. In this writing, idolatry is systematically dismantled and some solid arguments are expressed against idolatrous practices and especially against “lifeless” deities, things done by human hands. The author of the letter to Diognet contrasts the life that the gospel proposes and the life generated by idolatry. It also signals the social integration of Christians and their delimitation of any immoral act that the pagan society from that time accepted or even encouraged. The Christian life was a paradoxical life; although the Christians lived in a certain historical-political, social-cultural context, they were aware of the itinerary and the eschatological purpose of their life.

“For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure

² Sfântul IUSTIN MARTIRUL ȘI FILOSOFUL, “Apologia I”, 14, in: *Apologeți de limbă greacă*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 2, transl. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Pr. Prof. Olimp Căciulă, Pr. Prof. Dumitru Feciorul, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1980, pp. 33-34.

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all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven”³.

The Christians of the first communities imitated the Old Testament prophets and the apostles who were models of holiness. There was and still is the awareness of all Saints’ unity around the Sacrament of Christ or rather within the Sacrament of Christ, for which the ages were made. The exhortation of Saint Ignatius Theophore was for Christians to remain in an indissoluble connection with the prophets and the Gospel⁴. In addition, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* urged Christians to “daily examine the faces of the saints to find rest in their words”⁵. Saint Clement the Roman urges Christians to imitate those who preached the coming of Christ, namely Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Abraham, Job, Moses, David, and who received a good testimony from God⁶.

This communion in holiness, and this unbroken string of holiness that gives unity both to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the Holy of Holies being Jesus Christ, is also described by St. Paul in the Epistle to Hebrews 11, 1-40. After reminding the faith of the Old Testament saints from Abel to the prophets and about the sufferings they all endured in confessing their faith, St. Paul shows: “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect”. And he goes on: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin

³ “Scrisoarea către Diognet” V, 1-16, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, transl. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1979 pp. 339-340.

⁴ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Epistola către Smirneni”, VII, 2, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 184; See also Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, *Epistola către Filadelfieni* IV, 1, p. 179 “...we must love the prophets”.

⁵ “Învățătura celor 12 Apostoli” IV, 2, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 27.

⁶ Sfântul CLEMENT ROMANUL, “Epistola către Corinteni” I, XVII, 1-6, XVIII, 1, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, pp. 55-56.

which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith” (Hebrews 12, 1-2). Thus, the prophets lived according to the teachings of Christ, which is why they were persecuted, being animated by His grace⁷. Saint Ignatius Theophore emphasizes that - starting from the sanctity of the prophets’ life centred on waiting for the coming of Christ - “not Christianity believed in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity in which all the language that believed in God was gathered”⁸. Martyrs - shows Eusebius of Caesarea - have shown “an apostolic and prophetic charisma”⁹. Through communion in holiness and faith with the Saints of the Church before him, Saint Gregory Thaumaturgus expressed “the old face of the Church and by his appearance he shaped the old ordinance of the Church as if a holy icon, so that his contemporaries would believe they lived with their fathers over 200 years ago, who then shone like lights”¹⁰.

Saint Basil the Great, speaking of the eschatological dimension of holiness, states that in the Kingdom those who attain holiness and become saints will see God face to face “with angels, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors and with all those who have pleased God for ever”¹¹. When examining the meanings of the names of the Holy Spirit, St. Basil the Great calls on both the Scriptures and the unwritten Tradition of the Fathers¹², considering that zeal in unwritten traditions is an apostolic way (I Cor. 11, 2; II Thess. 2, 15)¹³. He gives the example of Iraeneus, Clement the Roman, Dionysios the Roman, Dionysios the Alexandrine

⁷ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Către Magnezieni” VIII, 2, IX, 3, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 167.

⁸ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Către Magnezieni”, VIII, 3, p. 168.

⁹ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina” XI, 1, h, in: *Scrieri*, partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 13, transl. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, p. 414.

¹⁰ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Epistola 28”, I, in: *Scrieri*, partea a III-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 12, transl. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornișescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988, p. 166.

¹¹ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Cuvânt despre asceză. Cum se cuvine să se pregătească monahul” II, in: *Scrieri*, partea a II-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 18, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, p. 74.

¹² Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Despre Sfântul Duh”, IX, in *Scrieri*, partea a III-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 12, p. 38

¹³ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Despre Sfântul Duh”, XXIX, p. 84.

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who used the Trinity doxology that the heretics said it was an invention of Saint Basil. He shows that, although the author of the formula “We praise the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit God” is unknown, this was rooted in the Church, the people saying this formula without having the awareness that it was wrong in any way, especially since the conscience of the martyrs did not deny this formula¹⁴. He also gives the example of Gregory the Great of Neo-Caesarea who confessed the divinity of the Holy Spirit, his speech being that of the Apostles and Prophets, as he was “a man who walked in the same Spirit as those, walked in the footsteps of the saints and fulfilled his evangelical moral life with accuracy”¹⁵. Saint Basil the Great specifies that the term indicating the deity of the Spirit and His honouring together with the Father and the Son is “so loved and familiar to the saints”. It was “attested by such a long custom - which began at the time when the preaching of the Gospel began - and, more importantly, with (full) sense of piety and holiness”¹⁶.

Starting from these realities, we can affirm the unity of the Scripture and Tradition in the spirit of holiness. The unity of the Holy Prophets-Apostles-Fathers facilitates the unity between Scripture and Tradition, both seen in an indissoluble relationship within the Church as the keeper of Revelation. This unity between Scripture and Tradition makes the Saints of all ages to dwell in an inextricable and unmistakable unity between them: the Prophets, the Apostles, and the Saints.

II. Confession of the Sacrament of Christ and pagan polytheism

Gods' immoral acts - in fact people self-proclaimed gods - were in contrast to the sanctity of the God confessed by Christians. Evangelical dogma - the Trinity and the Dyad - which were proclaimed by the Church in the context of heresies, were experienced and affirmed in the framework of a life committed on the path of holiness. First and foremost, the sanctity of the worshiped God made a difference in the conscience of Christians. Moreover, this worshiped God of Christians was experienced in their personal and community life based on the Revelation transmitted to the

¹⁴ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Despre Sfântul Duh”, XXIX, p. 87.

¹⁵ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Despre Sfântul Duh”, XXIX, p. 87

¹⁶ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Despre Sfântul Duh”, XXIX, p. 88.

Church as a personal God. The early Christian writers repeatedly pointed to the inadequacies and absurdities of idolatry and polytheism, paralleling the God of Revelation and the god of polytheistic religions. In fact, it was about life and death, a perspective with soteriological implications proven through the exercise of holiness and not a simple intellectual exercise from curiosity or philosophical speculation.

The apologists have demonstrated the absurdity of polytheism, the limited, confused, and immoral character of the deities, which are images of some unfortunate and powerless people, subject to corruption and death. The transition from an idolatrous life subjected to vices of all kinds to a holy life, based on the faith and love of Christ, implies a spectacular change in human life, a renewal of the life on new co-ordinates and a rediscovery of the authentic potentialities of the human being in its path to perfection.

The uniqueness of God is acknowledged as a central teaching of faith in the Christians' lives. There is only one God – Oneness in Trinity and Trinity in Oneness - alive, loving, eternal, omnipresent, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise, merciful, and incorrupt. The distinction between God the One and the diversity of the gods was very sharp in the confessions of the saints' faith. The One God was Alive, Creator and Savior, and the idols of the heathen were nothing. They were, in fact, the representation of people subject to corruption and death, they were "inanimate matter". Procopius, the first of the martyrs of Palestine, responds before the judges - who command them to offer sacrifices to the gods - that he knows only one God "who is worthy to sacrifice to Him as He wills"¹⁷. Martyrs Alpheus and Zacchaeus also confessed "there is only one God and one king, Jesus Christ", which for the pagans of the time, exponents of polytheism was a blasphemy¹⁸. Eusebius of Caesarea says Apphian gives the example of "faith in God the one" through his confession. He tells Urban the governor who was preparing to sacrifice to idols that "it is not right to leave the one and true God and sacrifice to idols and demons"¹⁹. Agapios "the martyr of our teaching" was taken to the arena to fight with the beasts during the time of Emperor Maximin, "for the only true faith"²⁰.

¹⁷ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, "Martirii din Palestina", I, 1 in: *Scrieri*, partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 13, p. 395.

¹⁸ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, "Martirii din Palestina", I, 5, p. 397.

¹⁹ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, "Martirii din Palestina", IV, 8, pp. 400-401.

²⁰ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, "Martirii din Palestina", VI, 3, p. 404.

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Although Christological dogma was not proclaimed during the persecutions of Christians, they experienced its essential content present in the Gospel and in unity of faith with prophets, apostles, and fathers, confessing Jesus Christ as God and Man before a polytheistic world. The central confession of the martyrs was that of Jesus Christ as God and Man and of the Holy Trinity as creator, forerunner, and saviour of all creation: man and cosmos. This confession of faith was authentic in the Holy Spirit.

Eusebius of Caesarea presents a picture of the martyrs, who have confessed Christ with the same ideal: perfection. This picture of the martyrs comes as a response to the various modes of persecution to which the Roman emperors subjected the Christians of the first centuries. Jesus Christ was confessed by different people, of all ages, of all social and cultural conditions, distinguished not only by age, but also with regard to spiritual education, but also not with regard to spiritual life. They were people who “endured torments of many kinds and adorned themselves with different crowns, but all aiming for the perfect martyrdom”²¹. They all formed together “a spiritual or ecclesial family”²².

“And thus, under a small form, they completed the representation of a perfect church of many persons. And so this admirable selection of all these martyrs and such as these, while we looked upon them, although they were not many in number, lo !they still bore the semblance of a many-stringed harp, which consists of chords that do not resemble each other--the tenor and base, and flat, and sharp, and medial, all of which are well arranged together by the art of music. Like this resemblance, also, there were among them young men and old men together, and slaves and free, and clever and simple, and noble and common, and believers together with hearers (catechumens), and deacons with presbyters: all of which were variously harmonized together by one all skilful--the Word--the only (begotten) of God. And they displayed each individually the excellency of the power within them by the endurance of tortures, and at the place of judgment produced the melody of a glorious confession”²³.

²¹ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina”, IX, 2, XI, 1,a, pp. 410, 413.

²² EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina”, XI, 1, f, p. 414.

²³ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina”, XI, 1, g, p. 414.

Origen shows that in addition to the martyrdom itself, “martyrdom in front of the world”, there is still a secret martyrdom, which is based on the awareness of the sanctity of life as a full participation in the life of God²⁴. There is indeed a deep connection between the sanctity of the martyrs and Christ’s confessors and the “bloodless martyrdom” which includes both renunciation of the world and asceticism understood as “killing” the passions and irrational movements.²⁵

Idolatry is perceived by the Church of the first centuries as an “unclean faith”, a “deceitful faith”, a “faith of the demons”. In the Lives of the Saints, in the confessions of their faith in Jesus Christ, the only true God reveals the intrinsic connection between idolatry and demonology. The saints considered the pagan deities to be demons, and their worship was considered a cult of demons, and the sacrifices to gods - to which Christians were called - sacrifices to demons. Basically, in the conscience of the Saints, there was no separation and no substantive distinction between idolatry and demonology. Satan is the father of those who tortured and martyred the Saints for their faith in Jesus Christ. The error of these idolatrous pagans was a devilish and dark wandering placed at the opposite point to the faith filled with light and love confessed by the Saints. Christ and the Holy Trinity are the center of the confession of the saints’ faith in relation to the idolatrous attitude of the world where they confessed. Idolatry was associated with spiritual blindness, sin, devil, and hell, while the faith in the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - was the faith in the three-person, living, true, loving, saving, uncorrupted, and eternal God. According to the Trinity model, the Saints remained united in the love of their faith and they confessed the truth of their faith together and firmly. This love unites the Saints not only in a common confession, but also in a common passion for faith. Thus - within pagan polytheism - light was called darkness and darkness was seen as light. But Christ and His saints brought the light of the Kingdom into the religious darkness of the Empire.

In many cases when the saints performed miracles through the power of Christ in their holy life, the pagans perceived these wonders as witchcraft.

²⁴ ORIGEN, “Exorație la martiriu” XXI, in: *Scrieri alese*, partea a III-a, trad. Pr. Prof. Constantin Galeriu, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 8, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 368.

²⁵ See Thomas SPIDLIK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului creștin. Monahismul*, transl. Diac. Ioan I Ică jr, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2000, p. 23.

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The world of that time - caught in the witchcraft of demons - measured the miracles of God with the same measure among the people who did not aim at the spectacle, the spread of the passions, nor the demonization and loss of freedom of those who saw them, but the conversion to a new, and holy life in Christ. Sometimes wizards, seeing the power and wonders of the Saints, believed and converted. The presence of light on the faces and bodies of the Saints - something unnatural to the pagan and dark world of sin - was associated with certain witchcraft practices, the only ones capable of doing such things in the pagans' opinion.

III. Confession of Christ's Mystery and heresy

In principle Both dogma and heresy do not constitute theoretical axioms which then pass into practice, but they are forms of life which meet and collide in a certain historical setting, whereas dogma as a just life cannot coexist peacefully with heresy, which, ultimately, is the alteration of this life. Thus, both dogma and heresy are evaluated not from the perspective of the criteria of historical primacy, but from the perspective and according to the criteria of life, which do its bearers in Christ and the Church witness on a personal and community level²⁶.

In the religious, cultural and social context of the Roman Empire Christianity faced three major challenges, capable at any time of distorting the true faith about God, man and world: Judaism, Hellenism, and Gnosticism, the latter synthetically containing several Judaic and Hellenistic elements. The perspective of these three great conceptions of the faith revealed and kept in the Church was different from what the Christians lived and confessed. Thus, regarding the fundamental dogmas of the Christian life, triadological and Christological - a series of confrontations and disputes did not delay. These eventually led to the dogmatic and sober expression of the Church in the Synods and to the crystallization of the teaching of faith that was authentically experienced in close relationship with the spirituality and cult of the Church community. Saint Basil the Great observes that the heretics who confuse the persons reach Judaism, or

²⁶ Nikos A. MATSOUKAS, *Teologia dogmatică și simbolică*, vol. II: *Expunerea credinței ortodoxe în confruntare cu creștinismul occidental*, transl. Nicușor Deciu, Editura Bizantină, București, 2006, p. 13.

by opposing the nature - material and spiritual, they reach paganism, since they disregard both God's scripture which is inspired and the traditions of the apostles²⁷. Thus, there was, on the one hand, an attempt to introduce into the Church and into the Christian life the error of the Elines, thus distorting the dogmas of the Church received from the Apostles. On the other hand, there was the risk of the Jews being led astray into the Church, who disobeyed the prophecies about Christ and thus distorted the dogmas of the Church received from the Apostles in unity with the Prophets.

The saints testified the Church's faith in a strict delimitation from the heresies of the time, even though some of them were taken by the emperor himself and thus they endangered their earthly life. They followed incessantly the words of the Apostles and the settlements of their previous Fathers. Thus, with this authority that came from the Scriptures and the Tradition of their forefathers, the saints stood before the heretics and even the emperors, obfuscating any teaching foreign to the spirit and life of the Church. through the ineffable presence of the Trinity within it, worship which was the root of their life , was placed in a strict delimitation of the idolatrically or heretically structured life of the world at that time. Through the writing of the apologists, the Church called the heresiarchs to demonstrate why they believe their heresies to be apostolic. The origin of their Churches, and the number of bishops, are required, in other words the apostolic succession. Moreover, it was wanted to investigate the heretical doctrines that existed during the Holy Apostles and to highlight the similarities between those and the later heresies.

“Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, while they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion, and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality — privileges which no other rule directs than the one tradition of the selfsame mystery (...) Now, what that was which they preached — in other words, what it was which Christ revealed to them — can, as I must here likewise prescribe, properly be proved in no other way than by

²⁷ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Despre Sfântul Duh”, IX, p. 91.

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those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves, both *viva voce*, as the phrase is, and subsequently by their epistles. If, then, these things are so, it is in the same degree manifest that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches— those moulds and original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God. Whereas all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savours of contrariety to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God. It remains, then, that we demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we have now given the rule, has its origin in the tradition of the apostles, and whether all other *doctrines* do not *ipso facto* proceed from falsehood. We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different *from theirs*. This is *our* witness of truth”²⁸.

The heresies have nothing to do with Revelation or Scripture where the data of Revelation were expressed in writing. In this context of the assertion of one’s own inheritance by each heresy, it is very important to see whose the Scriptures are. By whom and to whom has the true teaching of Christians been entrusted, based on the true Scriptures, interpretation, and tradition?²⁹

In their confession, the saints went to the end, considering heresy as a separation from the catholic body of the Church. Any dogma foreign to the body of the Church was alien to the life of the Church. Thus, there could be no unity or expediency between the dogmas of the Church and the heresies that were nothing but distortions of the Church teaching and thus separation from the Catholic body of the Church. Moreover, heresy meant separation from God Himself. St. Cyril tells the heretics that if Paul - in whom Christ dwells - is a bearer of God, then what he said about the divinity of the Son is true, since Paul would not be a bearer of God, if the

²⁸ TERTULIAN, “Contra ereticilor”, XX-XXI, in: *Apologeți de limbă latină*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 3, transl. Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, Eliodor Constantinescu, Paul Papadopol, Prof. David Popescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1981, pp. 152-153.

²⁹ TERTULIAN, “Contra ereticilor”, XX-XXI, pp. 150-151.

Son is not God by nature³⁰. Everthing and everyone who separates man from Christ and His Church was considered - starting from the biblical vision - to be subject to the devil. Not only was idolatry considered a work of the devil, but those who supported this work were subject to the devil. Heresy was also considered the work of the devil, but a much more refined one, coming from within the Church.

The distinction between idolatry / heresy and true faith and life is made according to the source criterion from which each comes. Thus, Christians were aware that idolatry and heresy are nothing but works of the devil that, in contradiction with the true faith and life of the Church, creates a certain type of life, of morals on a personal and community level. Of course, the fundamental criterion by which this distinction was made was concentrated in the Divine Revelation kept and experienced within the ecclesial frame as a faith and experience of the Saints from every time. The paternity of the saints has its origin in God, and the paternity of the idolaters and heretics has its origin in the devil. Idolatry and heresy can be understood as generators of foreign life from the life of the Church and her saints.

“For like as they who have chosen to live excellently, and are therefore even now called saints, may without hazard call God their Father, so to the wicked is the wicked one rightly ascribed as father, seeing that they form the image of his wickedness and perversity in their characters. For not altogether is he who begot of himself conceived of as father by the Divine Scripture, but he too who has any conformed to his own character, of whom he is said to be therefore father. Thus does the Divine Paul too write to certain, *for in Christ Jesus through the Gospel did I beget you*. As then (as we said) some are conformed both to God and to the holy fathers through likeness in manners and holiness; so to the devil too and to those like in conduct to him are some rendered like-minded, suffering this through their own depravity. Therefore to the saints the saints are fathers, but to the wicked the wicked who betake themselves to them, most

³⁰ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, “Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan”, IX, in: *Scrieri*, partea a IV-a, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 862.

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befittingly. And the one, who in holiness take the impression (so to say) of the Divine Form on their own souls, and have the confidence that befits own sons, will with reason say *Our Father which art in heaven*: the bad again will be ascribed to their own father, begotten as it were through likeness unto him unto equal depravity with him”³¹.

Of course, the life of the Church in which the life of the Saints was grafted made the difference between the authentic teaching - experienced in the Church community since the Apostles - and the other heretical teachings influenced by either Judaism or paganism. Eusebius of Caesarea states that the heretic Marcion, when he met Saint Polycarp, asked: “Do you know me, Polycarp? He replied, “Yes, I know the firstborn of Satan!”³². For Saint Antony the Great the teaching of the Arians is irrational and fruitless “it is not the teaching of the Apostles, but of the demons and their father, the devil”³³. In order to confess the faith of the Church, Saint Anthony descends from the mountain - at the request of the bishop and the brothers - and comes to Alexandria where he teaches the people that the heresy of the Aryans is before the antichrist, thus dividing between those who belong to darkness and those who belong to the light:

“And he taught the people that the Son of God was not a created being, neither had He come into being from non-existence, but that He was the Eternal Word and Wisdom of the Essence of the Father. And therefore it was impious to say, ‘there was a time when He was not,’ for the Word was always co-existent with the Father. Wherefore have no fellowship with the most impious Arians. For there is no communion between light and darkness. For you are good Christians, but they, when they say that the Son of the Father, the Word of God, is a created being, differ in nought

³¹ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, “Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan”, V, 5, pp. 617-618.

³² EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Istoria bisericească”, IV, 14, 7, in: *Scrieri*, partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 13, p. 158

³³ Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, “Viața Cuviosului Părintelui nostru Antonie”, LXXXI, in: *Scrieri*, partea a II-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 16, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988, p. 239.

from the heathen, since they worship that which is created, rather than God the creator”³⁴.

The Church’s faith was confessed and formulated in dogma by the Fathers of the Church, not being separated from the ascetic and mystical dimension of their life, grafted onto the life of the Church. Heresies were thus separations from the will of God expressed through the Church, through the dogmas of the Church, which were inextricably linked to the life of the Church, lived and confessed in an exemplary way by Saints.

All the heresies of the Church were decanted and rejected in the lives of the saints. The saints were not indifferent to any heresy with the awareness that any heresy that distorts the Catholic faith of the Church has immediate repercussions also in the life of the Church, since between the faith and the life of the Church there is an internal, interdependent, and indissoluble relationship. Many times heresies were found to be deceitful by the miracles that the saints did in comparison with the heretics before the people. The saints showed in their lives that there is no communion between them and heretics, between what they learned and what the heretics learned, between the life that the heretics proposed and the life that the saints proposed as models of sanctity from Christ’s power working in them.

We observe that the dogmas of the faith were received or not through the Mysteries of the Church. They concern what we have already stated, that is not the formulation of an abstract concept, but the expression and confession of an ethos of Catholic life, revelatory founded and ecclesially-sacramentally experienced. These struggles for asserting the belief in the strict delimitation of heresy as a separation of truth and its distortion are integrated into the manifestations of personal and community life that become implicitly the testimony of truth and communion against falsehood and idolatry. It was a great division in early Christianity, as some assumed orthodox dogma, while others rejected it.

Thus, we identify in the lives of the saints a true dogmatic consciousness, a consciousness that is confirmed by a common partaking with the Holy Mysteries of the Church. The breaking of communion in faith leads implicitly to a rupture of communion in Mysteries. And the restoration

³⁴ Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, “Viața Cuviosului Părintelui nostru Antonie”, LXVIII, p. 232.

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of communion in faith by the confession of a common faith based on revelation leads to the restoration of communion in Mysteries and to the common partaking with them. The saints repeatedly show that there can be no communion in the Sacraments unless this communion exists previously in regard to the dogmas of the Church.

This dogmatic conscience runs through the whole patristic tradition, being affirmed and clarified more and more intensely in relation to the different heresies of the historical periods that the Church goes through by confessing her faith in a sublime way, through her saints. Faith is not confessed according to the adhesion of mobs, it is not an ideology that changes according to favorable or unfavorable circumstances or conjunctions. It is a revelation of the eternal will of God, which is not changed either by the diverse attitudes of the mob, nor by the agreements between patriarchs and emperors. The saints point out that faith is not a simple concept of human subjectivity, but a part of the objective project of God's will revealed in history, a project man is called to participate to in order to accomplish perfection. But the faith confessed by the saint is not confined to the sphere of individualism or subjectivism but it is the Catholic faith of the Church, it is the faith proclaimed by the Gospel and the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. One of the oldest Christian writings - *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* - speaks of the "dogma of the Gospel"³⁵, and St. Ignatius Theophorus, a direct disciple of the Holy Apostles, urges Christians of his time to strive to be strong "in the dogmas of the Lord and the Apostles"³⁶. Saint Clement the Roman urges Christians in Corinth to return to "the glorious and holy guide of Tradition"³⁷. About St. Polycarp, who ends up as a martyr, St. Irenaeus states that he had "always learned the same teaching he received from the Apostles and kept the tradition of the Church which was the only true one"³⁸.

The churches of Asia and all his followers have testified that Polycarp was "a witness of the truth" who constantly testified against the heretics that there is only one truth, the one preached by the Church and received from the Holy Apostles³⁹. Eusebius relates that the martyred deacon Valens

³⁵ "Învățătura celor 12 Apostoli", XI, 3, p. 30

³⁶ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, "Către Magnezieni", XIII, 1, p. 168.

³⁷ Sfântul CLEMENT ROMANUL, "Epistola către Corinteni", I, VII, 2, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 49.

³⁸ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, "Istoria bisericească", IV, 14, 4, p. 157

³⁹ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, "Istoria bisericească", IV, 14, 5, p. 157.

had rich knowledge of Holy Scripture. He “kept in his heart so closely remembered the text of Scripture that he did not need to read it, because he was able to reproduce entire paragraphs from any bible book”⁴⁰. About the appreciation of Scripture, the knowledge and fulfilment of its demands, the martyr bishop Silvanus also sets an example. The saints did not live and did not testify contrary to Scripture or without Scripture, but from Scripture, with Scripture as the first book of their lives and confession. This fact brought them into unity of life and confession with the Prophets and Apostles, as people through whom God expressed His will in history.

“Nor was he worthy of honour on this account only, but also for his great knowledge of the holy scriptures; for his memory was completely stored with the scriptures, so that he could repeat God’s scriptures by rote like one in whose memory the whole scriptures were deposited. Of course, you could have admired his character and life of high philosophy, but they did not even come close to the power of his memory. For he had written entire parts of the Holy Scriptures “not on stone tablets”, nor on the skins of animals eaten by worms or time, but, as the Apostle god says, «in fleshly tablets of the heart». This meant precisely in his luminous soul and in the clear vision of his mind, so that when he wanted, a true word-treasure came out of his lips, whether it was texts from the Law and prophets or from any another passage of the historical books, from the Gospels or from the Apostle. I myself confess that I was truly appalled when I saw this man for the first time standing in the middle of the crowd gathered in the church and reciting entire parts of Holy Scripture. Until I did not see him but just heard him, I thought someone was reading, as is the custom in our meetings, but when I came closer him, I realized what was happening. All the others stood with calm eyes around him, while he had only the eyes of the mind at his fingertips and he spoke directly like a prophet”⁴¹.

We observe how not only the Scripture of the New Testament remains in the attention of the Saints of the Church, but also that of the

⁴⁰ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina”, XI, 4, p. 416.

⁴¹ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina”, XIII, 7-8, p. 423.

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Old Testament. The Old and New Testaments form a unitary whole in Christ, the Old Testament being in its various hypostases the face of the eschatological times revealed in Christ.

IV. The unity dogma-spirituality-worship as existential fact and as delimitation from idolatry and heresy

For the first Christians the sanctity of life as delimitation of sin and heresy was authenticated by a steady integration into the sacramental dimension of the Church as the keeper of Revelation. This sacramental integration of the Christian life guarantees the sanctity of life and the delimitation from sin, idolatry, and heresy. The ecclesial-sacramental dimension implied not only a communion in the Sacraments, but first a communion in the Truth, the Truth that was genuinely experienced in the Sacraments within the community.

Thus, the delimitation of heresy “as a foreign and poisonous weed” is achieved by placing “inside the altar” taking into account the hierarchy, the commandments of the Apostles and Christ himself⁴². The authenticity of the Christian life is emphasized in participating in the unity between the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ, present in the community of love, the Church and the Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ. The exhortation was very clear: “seek to participate in one Eucharist; that one is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ and one is the cup for union with His blood”⁴³. Neither the prophecies, nor the Law of Moses, the gospel, and nor even the suffering of each of us convinced the heretics about Christ, says St. Ignatius⁴⁴.

We meet a concrete affirmation of the fundamental role of the hierarchy within the sacramental dimension of the Church. Christians must be united with the bishop as Christ is united with the Church. Saint Ignatius is convinced that by gathering Christians around the Eucharist and the hierarchy “Satan’s powers are destroyed” and prayer is intensified. The

⁴² Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Epistola către Tralieni”, VII, 1-2 in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 172.

⁴³ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Epistola către Filadelfieni”, IV, 1, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 179.

⁴⁴ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Epistola către Smirneni”, V, 1, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 183.

emphasis falls on communion in the confession of faith, in the Mysteries, and in the Christian life. He warns those who tried to evade this communion, not to participate in it:

“Let no man deceive himself: if any one be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God. For if the prayer of one or two possesses such power, how much more that of the bishop and the whole Church! He, therefore, that does not assemble with the Church, has even by this manifested his pride, and condemned himself”⁴⁵.

This way of life was “after the truth”, among the Christians of Ephesus, no heresy arose because they did not listen to anyone more than Christ, and whoever remains in Christ lives the truth⁴⁶. This image of the community of Ephesus presented by Saint Ignatius Theophore was not unique in early Christianity, but we cannot say that there were no exceptions to this sublime way of living corresponding to holiness in Christ. Church life has always been beset by heresy and immoral deeds. That is why both the Holy Apostles and the Saints of the Church have struggled to affirm the truth of life in Christ, to confess faith in His divine-saving humanity, while at the same time embodying the confessed ones in their lives. Holiness as abiding in righteous thoughts and deeds also means abiding in the truth and knowing the “dogmas of godliness” through a concrete confession of living in Christ as heavenly living in contrast to that which is passionate and purely earthly. Thus, by grace and by the purity of life, every man is holy in Christ, Who has holiness by nature.

Confession has personal-ontological connotations. Clement the Roman asks and answers in this regard: “In what way do we confess him? Doing what he says and not breaking his commandments; to honour him not only with our lips, but with all our heart and soul”⁴⁷. The confession

⁴⁵ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Epistola către Efeseni”, V, 2, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 159.

⁴⁶ Sfântul IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Epistola către Efeseni”, VI, 2, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Sfântul CLEMENT ROMANUL, “Epistola a II-a către Corinteni”, III, 4, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 95. “Epistle to Diognetus” warns that “he who thinks he knows something without a true and confessed knowledge of life, knows nothing; he is deceived by the snake because he does not love life ” (XII, 6, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 346).

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of the first Christians focused on expressing the relationship between the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Judgment of Christ. This was the essence of the word “preached from the beginning”⁴⁸. Whoever did not confess this account of the events of salvation in Christ was not in agreement with the Gospel, and therefore not with the ecclesial-sacramental-centred Christian life in accordance with the Gospel.

Thus, the sanctity of life based on the Divine Revelation preserved and fructified in the Church constitutes the essential criterion of delimitation between the Christian life and the pagan or idolatrous life. By comparing Jesus Christ with gods like Hercules, Asclepius, Dionysus, Origen questions the sanctity of each person’s life and the holiness of those who told their deeds. In the case of the Lord those related are not legends as they were written by eyewitnesses, witnesses “who have proven through deeds and a whole lifestyle that they were convinced of the truth of what they saw, demonstrating the credibility of believing their story through their sufferings they endured for the sake of their teaching”⁴⁹.

In saints’ lives, there is conformity between life and confession or confession and life, life becoming a continuous confession as we find in the case of the Holy Apostles and Evangelists, the witnesses of the Truth. They fought against both heresy and idolatry. This means they fought against those who opposed the “dogmas of truth” contained in Holy Scripture, removing many souls from idolatry and heresy⁵⁰. Thus, they set an example of authentic faith anchored in the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament as delimitation from idolatry and heresy.

As there is a kinship between the bodies, so there is between the ways of life, the man clinging to the one similar to his. The identity of the lifestyle in holiness imitating the law of love will make the saint to live with the saint, just as the identity of the lifestyle in passions will make the passionate to live with the passionate. The coexistence of a holy man and

⁴⁸ Sfântul POLICARP AL SMIRNEI, “Epistola către Filipeni”, VII, 1-2, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, p. 211.

⁴⁹ ORIGEN, “Contra lui Celsus”, III, in: *Scieri alese*, partea a IV-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 9, transl. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe, Române, București, 1984, p. 184.

⁵⁰ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, “Închinarea în Duh și în Adevăr”, IV, in: *Scieri*, partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 38, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1991, p. 144.

a passionate man would cause different lifestyles to generate conflicts, the lover of passions hating the lover of virtues, the evil will fight the good as he does not aspire to the same way of life⁵¹. There is a great difference between their wills and the Saints understood this fact and sought not to please people more than God, confessing God both before those who were idolaters and before the heretics, though they were persecuted by them. That is why St. Paul affirms in reaction to the wickedness his preaching was received with: “being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it” (I Cor. 4, 12). Everyone who commits himself to the holiness and confession of Christ must be prepared to suffer the ridicule of the world, of that world fallen into idolatry and heresy and subjected to passion and apostasy. “If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15, 20). However, those who suffer with Christ, in the conditions of history, will also reign with Christ in His eternal kingdom. (II Tim. 2, 12). This consciousness was alive in the apostolic age, in the life of the martyrs, and later in the monastic life. Confessing true teaching is no stranger to suffering for it. Thus, we can affirm that the dogmas of the Church - and this fact can be identified only by a minimal analysis of the context in which the Church formulated her dogmas - were “born” through a certain sacrifice, and their confession implied a sacrifice that the saints brought to the altar of the Church faith.

⁵¹ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, X, pp. 961-962.