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The Triad of Full Authority in Orthodoxy: The Biblical Canon, The Dogmatic Canon, The Liturgical Canon

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Abstract

The Canon of the Church – the Biblical, Dogmatic/Philokalic, and Liturgical Canons – represents both the way in which God seeks us and the way in which we know or learn to respond to Him and open ourselves to Him safely. All Three are a single Reality, three distinct faces that lead us to the same God in different manners. They can never be separated, affirmed unilaterally, or mixed indistinctly, but must always be interwoven with discernment, each one supporting us in different needs along the path toward perfection. Therefore, the Church has always affirmed them simultaneously and congruently, being fully aware that they can in no way be separated (not even for the purpose of study), since that would lead to sterile unilateralities; nor has it proposed them selectively or disjunctively, which would diminish the integrity of the Truth revealed in the world. The Church's Tri-Canon stands, without doubt, as the complete embodiment of divine authority — the ultimate point of reference for the one who seeks to dwell in the sacred intimacy of communion with God, yet still outside the Garden of Paradise.

Keywords

Canon, Orthodoxy, authority, dignity, biblical-dogmatic-liturgical

I. Terminological introduction

Man yearns for models. Not only after the Fall, but even from the very act of Creation, the human being feels the need to admire, to learn, to imitate—because he is brought to life in the position of Child/Son¹. He is directly the Son of God through creation and then the son of man. Receiving life as a son, the need for models naturally arises. At the same time, after the Fall, the world experiences an evident crisis of models on the anthropological level, since, having fallen into sin in the infancy of Edenic existence, man no longer experienced uncorrupted fatherhood within the order of biological procreation. Thus, children born outside Paradise were deprived of perfect parents, teachers, and mentors—models necessary for flawless growth. Yet God Himself becomes both Father and Teacher in the absence of biological parents who fail miserably. We see this in God's direct pedagogy with Cain, while his parents stand in total bewilderment (Genesis 4), a divine intervention that continues throughout history in ways and nuances that only God can comprehend.

By our ontology, we are dependent beings. Our created existence makes us reliant on the Source of Life, without which we cannot exist. At the same time, our coherent growth necessarily requires Someone to guide and direct us in a world that becomes hostile whenever we step away from the intimacy of our relationship with our God. Hence, we need *authority*,

¹ All things in creation, and especially man, are founded in the image of the Son — in His posture of obedience toward the Father, from whom the entire source of existence flows. Creation bears within itself the distinctive character of the Son: to do all that the Father does and to respond to His love. And when, through disobedience, creation failed to fulfill the purpose given to it by the Logos with the Father's consent, the Son, seeing the failure of creation, did not renounce it but fully assumed His own work, for He is "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13, 8; cf. I Peter 1, 19-20). He is the Saviour of the world, because He is its Consciousness before the Father, regardless of the "form" through which He leads (or subjects) it to the Father — whether through Adam's obedience in Paradise, which would have grown into likeness, or through the Son's obedience to the Father unto sacrifice, brought about by Adam's disobedience. Details in: Gheorghe BUTUC, *Omul, Persoană devenindă*, Doxologia Publishing House, Iași, 2024, pp. 245-257, here p. 249.

to lead us towards *authenticity*, so that we may not waver in our choices or grope aimlessly in our actions. The Canon of Orthodoxy comes precisely to fill, within fallen humanity, this essential human need for authority and authenticity²:

“The Church cannot hold power over the Truth—especially when the Truth is a Person—but can only bear witness to Him and make itself wholly available to Him. The preaching of the Apostles, later fixed in Scripture, is likewise but an authorized testimony to the Truth of the Risen Christ, who remains perpetually present in the Church in a sacramental manner through the Holy Spirit. Bishops and councils confirm and defend the apostolic faith against heresies; they do not define faith or the Truth itself, but rather its right expression. They preserve and express the

² Truth and Love, in their inseparable relationship, constitute the full authority within the humanity assumed by Christ. Professor J. MEYENDORFF (*Living Tradition*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978, pp. 27-44) discusses the theme of authority in relation to truth in the two great Christian traditions, showing that while the apostolic Eastern Church has Truth at its center, in the Christian West this has been replaced by the external authority of the pope, of the Bible, or of the individual. The two differing conceptions of the Church and authority in East and West are the result of two divergent theological anthropologies: the Cappadocian–Palamite and the Augustinian. The Augustinian West holds a pessimistic vision of man: intrinsically sinful and prone to error, man receives from God an external, infallible authority (pope, council, or Bible), which vicariously and legalistically stands in the place of God and guarantees truth by protecting him from doubt, guiding him in discipline and submission toward God. In the East, however, each believer is called to grow in the Holy Spirit so as to personally experience the Truth, who is the Holy Spirit Himself—participating in Him and becoming a living personal manifestation and witness before the world of this Truth who is Spirit and Freedom. Such a conception excludes blind fideism and implies the free yet responsible participation of all in the Truth. Accordingly, the authority of the Church, Scripture, Tradition, bishops, and councils is auxiliary: they do not substitute for an absent Christ but express His living, personal, and sacramental presence. Consequently, in the Church, Truth depends on no infallible criterion of authority; it is, in the Holy Spirit, an experience constantly accessible within the community of the Church in its Entirety. The living Truth is its own criterion and requires no external guarantee. According to the masterful summary of father deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 58-59.

Church's permanence and continuity in time (succession and tradition) and in space (councils), in both Truth and Love"³.

II. The fallen human being's need for authority

From the life of the Church we learn that authentic authority, as it was revealed to us in Scripture, is of a Paternal nature ⁴. This means that true authority does not crush despotically or impose itself by force, but is naturally recognized as total Love, steadfast Truth, and unbound Freedom. It is the Father-Son relationship, witnessed by the Spirit, which the Holy Scriptures show to be essential both in heaven and on earth (John 8, 16; 10, 27-30; 14, 6-16). It is a relationship of total love and obedience that generates Life within itself and beyond itself—a reciprocity both personal and communal, meant to embrace all visible and invisible existence⁵.

“For I will not say that righteousness is born only once from God, but that it is continually born from Him in each of your good deeds. Just as God the Father eternally begets the Word, so too, if you have the Spirit of adoption, God gives you birth through each of your actions and through each of your thoughts; and thus being born, you are continually born as a son of God in Jesus Christ”⁶.

³ Cf. Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 58.

⁴ Fatherhood is directly linked to the Father–Son relationship and implies a continual (re)birth. This “idea of continuous birth underlies the possibility of permanent participation in divine fatherhood, not only through Baptism and the other Sacraments, but through the entire process of spiritual growth and formation.” For a terminological identification and a synthesis of the historical evolution of spiritual fatherhood, which encompasses the full expression of the Spirit's authority in the Orthodox East, see: Irénéé HAUSER, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în Răsăritul creștin*, transl. Mihai Vladimirescu, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1999, pp. 35-69, here p. 49.

⁵ See: Ierom. Ghelasio GHEORGHE, *Moșul din Carpați (Neofit pustnicul)*, coll. *Isihasm*, Conphys Publishing House, Rm Vâlcea, 1998, pp.132-144.

⁶ ORIGEN, *In Jeremiam IX*, 4, PG 13, 356C, sq.

The Power of Love in Truth is the supreme authority establishing the qualitative hierarchy of Life: the greatest bows down to the smallest without diminution, while the smallest naturally aspire toward the greatest without depersonalization—toward the Source from which all Good flows⁷. Yet instead of the *Power of Love* revealed to us by God in Jesus Christ, men have credited and preferred the *love of power*, through which hierarchical, tyrannical, and despotic authority is established—imposing itself through the sword, hatred, and influence, climbing to the pyramid’s summit over the “corpses” of the small and powerless.

God incarnate is the supreme Authority, for though Almighty, He made Himself the smallest: He became a zygote in the Virgin’s womb⁸, allowed Himself to be crucified in utter vulnerability, because He loved unto death, and rose again in the Power of the Father’s Love—to fill all space and time, all people and all things, with His transfigured presence.

Man, in turn, being made in the Image of the Almighty, is placed by God in the midst of creation “to work it and to have dominion over it” (Genesis 1, 26-27), God made man to be His icon and created likeness in the heart of the world, so that all creatures, looking upon man, might behold

⁷ Father Alexander GOLITZIN provides a monumental synthesis of the work on the heavenly and ecclesiastical hierarchies of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, which forms the foundation of the true hierarchy of consubstantiality (Cf. *Ex introibo ad altarem Dei. The Mystagogy of Dionysius the Areopagite with Special Reference to Its Predecessors in Eastern Christian Tradition* (Analekta Vlatadon 59), Thessaloniki, 1994, p. 44 pp.). He shows that “at the center of the Dionysian universe, all celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies are present in the celebration of the Eucharistic Synaxis, where all hierarchies gravitate around the altar on which rest the Scriptures and the Eucharistic Gifts, before which stands the hierarch—the preacher of the Scriptures and celebrant of the Mysteries—actualizing through all things the presence of the «more divine Altar», which is Jesus Himself in His divinity. [...] The Dionysian hierarchies are, therefore, the icon of a mystagogical cosmology and anthropology, for they are essentially a cosmic Christology. The entire Dionysian universe is in reality an immense theophany—an incarnation and transfiguration—functioning according to the model of the assumption and deification of Christ’s humanity”. Cf. Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr, *De la Dionisie Areopagitul la Simeon al Tesalonicului – integrala comentariilor liturgice bizantine*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2011, pp.145-147.

⁸ “His Body was being formed in the womb, and His Power was shaping all the members. The embryo of the Son was fashioned in the womb, and He Himself was forming the infants in the wombs [of their mothers]. Saint Ephrem THE SYRIAN, *Imnele Nașterii și Arătării Domnului*, 4, 160-161, transl. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, Deisis, Sibiu, 2010, p. 47.

God walking among them. He is the king of creation, yet a priestly king (John 10, 11), who interprets the world in a divine manner and shepherds it with the gentleness and tenderness of the Creator Himself.

III. Canon: The Restoration of man's authority and dignity in Orthodoxy

Man's tragedy lies in the fact that he did not remain in the divine dignity and nobility in which he was created, and with the Fall, he damaged even his own ontological authority, because he withdrew from the divine vocation and measure of life that had been given to him (Genesis 3, 9). Thus, instead of face-to-face conversation with God, there appeared an external mediation — a Law, a *Canon*, or a *Measure* — meant to (re)awaken man's awareness and bring him back to the natural dignity he had voluntarily abandoned (Genesis 3, 15). In this way, the *Canon* reprezintă un mod pedagogic de îndreptare a omului căzut⁹. ecomes a pedagogical

⁹ The Greek word *Kanōn* derives from the Semitic *qaneh*, measuring “reed”, which appears in Ezekiel 40, 3, 5-8; 42, 16-19 and which, in the Tradition of the Church, has acquired a polysemantic richness irreducible to the common meaning usually assigned to it, that of a synodal decree or a penitential prescription. Thus, “Canon” designates not only the number of prayers, psalms, or prostrations prescribed daily by a spiritual father for a monk or a penitent, but in Orthodoxy “Canon” is also the name of a musical and poetic form characteristic of Byzantine hymnography. In the Latin Church, “Canon” is the term reserved in the Roman Rite for the great Eucharistic Prayer at the heart of the Liturgy (Canon Missae), called in the East the “anaphora”. In ancient Greek usage “Canon” also meant precision, rule, standard, criterion, or regularity, giving rise to canonical lists and tables in astronomy and history. Thus, there appeared in the Christian sphere “canons” or chronological Paschal tables, as well as lists or catalogues of “canonical” clergy and later, (in the 4th century, with Athanasius the Great, but especially Augustine), lists of canonical biblical books and even Scripture itself as a “Biblical Canon”; meanings which were in fact added to the older usage (2nd – 3rd centuries) of “canon/rule of Truth or Faith”, which was distinguished from falsehood/heresy. See: Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, pp. 139-142. *A Greek Patristic Lexicon*, Oxford, 1961, compiled by G. W. LAMPE, lists on pages 701-702 for *Kanon* (derived from the Hebrew *qaneh* “reed”) the following meanings: 1. Rule of faith (derived from Scripture, transmitted by tradition, opposed to heresy); 2. Canon of Scripture; 3. Rule of ecclesiastic law (body of law; individual regulation); 4. Canon of behavior, moral standard (derivate: religious or monastic rule); 5. Liturgical order (in general;

means of correcting fallen man. It comes to substitute the possibility of man's direct vision of God and to give clarity to the divine Word which, after the Fall, would often be perceived dimly, distorted, or even rejected. In this way, a perpetual issue arises within humanity: *the relationship to authority*, which the Canon of the Church will seek to normalize, though not without evident difficulties:

“The fundamental problem in *addressing authority* within the Christian faith arises from the long-standing misinterpretation of ecclesiastical canons as epistemic criteria. The equally simple solution lies in freeing the canon from epistemological captivity and returning it to its original ecclesial understanding, which was soteriological, not epistemological. Epistemic criteria are the means and norms used to distinguish truth from falsehood, reality from illusion: reason, experience, memory, intuition, logical deduction, and so forth, whose proper domain is philosophy, understood as the theory of scientific knowledge: epistemology. The word ”canon”, which in the Church was never limited to the Bible but was also used for conciliar decrees or liturgical elements, essentially had two meanings: that of a list of authoritative books, persons, or elements, and that of a rule or standard of faith and life, a measure and benchmark for evaluating traditions, doctrines, beliefs, and actions”¹⁰.

Ultimately, the Canon stands in place of a Person and points toward a Person: first to God, the Trinity of Persons, and then to the receptive,

Eucharistic; of divine office); 6. Liturgical hymn divided into odes; 7. Ecclesiastical rank; 8. Logical sequence; 9. Tax, revenue.

¹⁰ Cf. Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, p. 106. The Reverend Professor presents the groundbreaking research of Professor William James ABRAHAM, pastor and theologian at the Faculty of Theology of Southern Methodist University in Dallas (Texas), who, in his work entitled *Canon și criteriu în teologia creștină de la Părinți la Feminism (Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology from Fathers to Feminism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998) rehabilitates the idea of the canon as the principle structuring the entire life and theology of the Church.

inspired Man, the Man of God filled with the Holy Spirit, who overturns the order of the Fall, desiring to live not by the serpent's voice, but by the Voice of Heaven¹¹. Such were the patriarchs, judges, prophets, and righteous ones, all those who placed themselves at God's disposal from generation to generation, culminating in the Mother of God, who within herself restored the entire condition of man from Paradise, reason for which God becomes incarnate and comes to teach us how divine life is to be lived in the midst of the Fall. Thus, in Jesus Christ, we behold both how far God can descend out of love for man and how high man can ascend out of love for God.

“Adam, by not keeping the commandment, fell from the grace that made him worthy of seeing God, and he clothed himself with the garment of shame, losing his rational glory and spiritual dignity. Therefore, the Word of God became man, to restore in man His image and to grant him likeness through grace, thus returning man to his natural state of communion”¹².

Therefore, the lives of those open to divine love and inspired by God, culminating in the Life of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and echoing through humanity in the Mother of God and in the lives of the saints, have

¹¹ Ultimately, *the supreme Canon of the Church is Jesus Christ Himself* who, according to Apostle Pavel (Galatians 6, 12-15; 3, 26-28) is the Crucified and Risen Lord together with the new creation. And, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor (*Mystagogia PG 91, 657-718*), just as God, the Creator of all, unites in His providence all diverse creatures through their unique relationship with Him as Pantocrator, so too does the Church, the mystical Body of Jesus Christ the Restorer, act upon all people (men, women, and children) divided by language, profession, character, learning, and rank, re-creating and regenerating them sacramentally and spiritually (mystically and mysteriously) and granting them a single form and a single name: the dignity of being and being called Christians, human beings restored in grace, who bear within themselves the Measure / Canon of Heaven brought down to earth and of earth lifted up into Heaven. Detailed at deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, pp.137-139.

¹² Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE “Introducere” to Saint MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Ambigua*, coll. *Filocalia*, vol. 3, translation, introduction, notes and comments by fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 21-29.

given rise to the Triad of the Canon in Orthodoxy: the *Biblical Canon* – the life of divine manifestation, or the dynamic of the Spirit in history – the *Dogmatic Canon* – the life of God experienced and expressed in human measure – and the *Liturgical Canon* – the intimate space of love between Man and God –, all these summarizing both the measure of God’s incarnation and the measure of man’s deification¹³. This canonical triadic synthesis is, in fact, a single path with a double direction, simultaneously marking God’s descent to man and man’s ascent to God, with multiple intersections and extensions¹⁴, but without predetermined shortcuts. In

¹³ This canonical triad, even if not presented as such in a systematic manner in patristic or classical dogmatic literature, can nevertheless be theologically inferred from the very structure of ecclesial life, which is founded upon divine Revelation in Orthodoxy. We may say that this threefold vision reflects the patristic principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*, according to which Faith/Dogma and Revelation/Scripture find their full expression in the prayer and living experience of the Church. Details in: John D. MEADE and Edmon L. GALLAGHER, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, pp. 1–25; Michael POMAZANSKY, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, trans. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 2005, pp. 17–30; Robert F. TAFT, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1986, pp. 31–55.

¹⁴ The diversity of meanings attested by the lexicons for the word “canon” in the language of the early Church clearly shows that in primitive Christianity we are dealing with an extremely complex and varied canonical heritage, composed of diverse elements related to liturgical and ecclesial life. It refers to materials, persons, and practices, most often repeated informally, by consensus—sometimes this consensus being also formally expressed—as means of grace and salvation, intended to mediate to the world the life and salvation of God, and to heal and guide the faithful along the path of a holy life. The purpose of these canonical traditions, or canons in the broad sense, is therefore soteriological, pastoral, and spiritual, not epistemological; and their proper realm is the Church, not the university. The canons are not limited to the biblical canon, the rules of faith or creeds, or the disciplinary prescriptions; they also include the principal forms of liturgical and sacramental life, the rites and iconography, the ecclesial structures and institutions of order, as well as the saints, fathers, and teachers recognized by the Church. (Thus, the Church possesses canonical lists of scriptural books, articles of faith, councils and disciplinary decisions, patriarchates, metropolises, episcopates, sacramental and liturgical services, saints, and Fathers, etc.). The essential point is that all these canons or canonical forms of Tradition are understood as gifts of the Holy Spirit, given for the spiritual edification of the Church and for the growth of Christians in the life of communion with God; thus, they possess a spiritual and grace-filled nature, and an eminently therapeutic, pedagogical,

essence, this Qualitative Triptych of Life in Truth governs the entire life of the Church—but only when all three are lived and applied together. Any unilateral emphasis or omission of one of them, or of any part of them results in severe damage to the clarity of Truth in the world, which is then replaced or distorted by personal opinions. Thus appears a schism between Truth and Reality, though they are meant to remain in perfect harmony. Therefore, Scripture, Dogma/Philocaly, and Worship must be held together as a single bundle, forming the Triptych (Tetrapod) on which the revealed Truth continually rests within the Church¹⁵. Otherwise, those who take only the Bible without Dogmas/Philocaly and Worship/Liturgy become a dull biblicist sect; those who take only the Dogmas without Scripture and Liturgy/Worship become a doctrinaire sect, speculative, intransigent, and devoid of love; those who take only Philocaly become sickly pietists and mystics, and those who retain only Liturgy/Worship without Scripture and Dogma/Philocaly risk becoming a formalist sect, ending in barren ritualism without the fruits of the Spirit.

“Orthodoxy is the full experience of life in Christ, in the Church, in the indissoluble unity of Holy Scripture, of dogmas, and of worship, as expressions and means of communion with God and with one another. These cannot be separated without deforming the very essence of Orthodox life, which is life in the Holy Spirit, after the image of Christ, in the saving work of the Father”¹⁶.

pastoral, and ecclesial purpose, being inseparably linked to the continuous process of initiation into the ineffable mystery of the life and revelation of the Living God within the Church. Cf. Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, pp.106-107.

¹⁵ This is the comprehensive vision of Father Dumitru Stăniloae—partly visible in his published bibliography, partly remaining unpublished, existing only as an intended theological synthesis. This approach has been confirmed and unequivocally supported by Father Ioan I. Ică Jr. in a lecture on Spirituality delivered at the “Andrei Șaguna” Faculty of Theology in Sibiu, on September 19, 2022. I was deeply moved to attend this lecture and to find my own reflections in this brief study/essay, written in the summer of 2019, affirmed and mirrored there, with the only difference being that Father Ică identifies in Father Dumitru Stăniloae’s theology and defends a “Tetrapod” of the Canon in Orthodoxy and Integral Theology, whereas in my work it appears as a Triad, since I place Dogma and Philocaly within the same equation, while they present them as distinct dimensions.

¹⁶ Fr. prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Editura Institutului

This Canonical Triad, the Triad of the Truth revealed and experienced in the Church, is entirely inspired by God. In fact, the *Canon* or *Measure* itself represents precisely this: the Church's intervention to delimit the Revealed Truth from the opinions of fallen man, maintaining as a fundamental Reference the *perfect balance between the divinity and humanity of the Incarnate Son of God*¹⁷. Thus, the Ecclesial TriCanon warns the negligent, identifies those fallen into heresy and alerts them to the danger of deception, and restores to balance those confused by opinions, feelings, sentimentalism, and illusions about God. It is, at the same time, a Triad of maximum qualitative exigency, with the full endorsement of Church Tradition; for this reason, no one can modify or reduce it by overlapping it, and no one can replace it. In this sense, the holy father Dumitru Stăniloae says:

“Each and all are limited in exercising their right to decide in matters of faith by their mutual interdependence and by the fact that they seek together an agreement among themselves in accordance with the Church's perpetual Tradition, restraining one another against any desire for domination that one or another might be tempted to display”¹⁸.

Every type of ecclesial authority is subordinated to this Triad, and no individual (patriarch or pope) or collective assembly (synod or council)¹⁹ can place itself as an authority above it.

Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1996, p. 18.

¹⁷ Details at: Saint IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Dogmatica*, trad. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2011, p. 291; J. N. D. KELLY, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed., Continuum, London, 2000, p. 143; Fr. prof. dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 2, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 103-104.

¹⁸ Fr. prof. dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Temeiurile teologice ale ierarhiei și sinodalității”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XXII (1970) 3-4, p. 165.

¹⁹ “In the most basic sense neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead, they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church”. Cf. Bruce M. METZGER, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 22.

This is precisely the reason why disagreements and even ruptures or schisms have arisen between different ecclesial traditions: believing themselves to be reformers, each prioritized only certain canonical elements:

“What the reformers did not know was that, in its tacit or explicit canonizations of multiple elements from its canonical tradition, the ancient Church never sought to promote any particular religious epistemology, nor to impose itself or any of its institutions as an epistemological norm. The Church did not intend to offer a religious science but rather spiritual means of grace, salvation, and sanctification. The guidance of the Holy Spirit, which it believed it possessed according to the Saviour’s promises, was never interpreted by the Church as an epistemic claim to its own authority, but, on the contrary, as a reference to the presence and action of God as the source of its truth. In short, the ancient Church understood itself as the witness and servant *of the Truth* – and only thus as its “pillar and foundation” – not as norm or authority/power *over the Truth*”²⁰.

In practice, this Tri-Canon is the fundamental reference point by which the Church guides herself through history without losing her way, ever hoping to make history itself the place of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. At the same time, the Tri-Canon of Quality continually confirms the life of holiness of the human being in the Holy Spirit, while man himself becomes the confirmation of the Tri-Canon or the full Measure of Truth filled with Love manifested in the world. Consequently, the role of the Church’s Theological Tri-Canon is to restore to man and through him to all creation, the divine Measure of Life, as it was given to us and as we were meant to live it

²⁰ Details at: William James ABRAHAM, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology from Fathers to Feminism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 160-161 in: deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, pp. 111-112.

IV. Biblical Canon: The dynamics of the Holy Trinity in history

It begins with a Garden, in Eden, and moves toward another Garden, that of the tomb of Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord and opens the perspective of the restoration of the Garden of Paradise, the Eden lifted to heaven (at the flood) and destined to descend upon the whole transfigured earth, as the New Jerusalem, filled with the power of the Lamb's Love in Truth (Revelation 5, 6).

The entire Biblical Canon is inspired, with the exception of a few biblical books which, although included in the Bible, are not part of the Canon²¹. Therefore, the Scriptural Canon contain invented tales, nor is it a mythological novel, or a dogmatic, cosmological, cosmogonic, or scientific treatise (although it also encompasses aspects of all these), rather, it is the narrative summary of the Love Relationship between man and God. It preserves concrete, historically identified characters, with shadows and lights, who generated events that either stood under the sign of a relationship with God or outside of it. Thus, there are two lines of events: on the one hand, that of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and others up to Christ and His saints, marking the genealogy of life and the history of deliverance and hope; on the other hand, that of Cain, Lamech, Nimrod, and others up to Judas and the Antichrist, marking the genealogy of death and the history of the Fall and despair. In essence, there is a history of

²¹ This division between canonical books and "apocryphal" books is of Protestant origin, first introduced in the edition of the *Septuagint* printed in Frankfurt in 1575. Nicolae Milescu (1636–1708), the first translator of the Old Testament into Romanian between 1661 and 1664 in Constantinople, adopted this division without realizing its Protestant nature. His translation later served as the basis for the Bucharest *Bible* of 1688. Being the work of lay humanists supported by Prince Șerban Cantacuzino, the translators failed to recognize either the division of the books or the Protestant indication attached to it which insisted on the obligation for all Christians, young and old, to read the Bible, a notion that directly contradicted the anti-Protestant "Confession of Faith" (The Shield of Orthodoxy) of Patriarch Dositheus of Jerusalem, approved by the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672, and who categorically rejects the Protestant division between canonical and apocryphal books ("all those books unjustly called apocryphal we consider them to be canonical") and explicitly forbids the reading of the Bible by all ("It should not be read by everyone, but only by those who possess proper discernment"). Cf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, pp. 145-146.

failure and promise, followed by a history of restoration, fulfilment, and transfiguration.

The lives concretely lived by all the biblical characters make up the entire Scriptural Canon of the Old and New Covenants (a word with essential implications in biblical thought)²², although the Story itself is one and the same from one end of the Bible to the other. It is a Love Story between God and Man, a family story, a nuptial story, highlighting how deeply in love God is with Man, that He desires to make with him a Mystery of marriage, a Mystery of Family—proving it at the price of His life and showing that Love (Agape) “is stronger than death” (Song of Songs 8, 6) and that through His faithful, unbetraying Love, even death becomes Life-giving²³.

Although the Biblical Canon is complete, the Love Story remains open to every person brought into existence; every human being born is called to become another page of Scripture, written by the Holy Spirit in the Book of Life without end, which will be revealed in its own time. And for this story not to become a mere fiction, there is an essential requirement: the Love to which we are called is fulfilled only under God’s conditions—whose Truth and Love are proven—and not under man’s, whose truth and love are wounded. Therefore, the Bible is a Canon because it reveals the conditions of Love in Truth, which are nothing less than the conditions of Life itself. We must emphasize: conditions, not conditionings! Hence, the role or function of the Biblical Canon is that of Continuous Verification of human life and experience. Scripture thus serves as the indispensable measure or criterion by which it is discerned whether we live within or outside God’s Love Story. It holds this *Supreme Authority* because, as the Fathers testify, “nowhere has the Spirit breathed with greater power than

²² Details at: Peter J. GENTRY, and Stephen J. WELLUM, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed., Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2018, pp. 487-526; 713-765; Scott W. HAHN, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2009, pp. 387-447; F. F. BRUCE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, coll. *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990, pp. 187-200.

²³ “Through the life-giving death of Thy Christ”; Liturgy of Saint Gregory the Dialogist.

in Scripture”²⁴. Yet we must remember that this Power / Authority do not belong to Scripture alone, but exist in harmony with the Dogmatic Canon and the Liturgical Canon, each fulfilling a distinct and complementary function in relation to the Truth.

“Scripture, being the living Word of God, represents the norm of Christian life — not an arbitrary constraint, but a means of grace through which His Love in Truth is verified, not imposed. As the Fathers of the Church say, the Holy Spirit has breathed nowhere more fully than in its pages — therefore, no spiritual experience is truly authentic unless it «sings» in harmony with Scripture”²⁵.

²⁴ Saint IRENAEUS, *Adversus Haereses* I. VIII. 1. Father John Behr, commenting on Saint Irenaeus, clearly shows that “the Apostolic Canon comprised not only a list of scriptural books to be received, but also the criterion for their right reading and interpretation. This latter is the famous «Canon of Truth», of which Saint Irenaeus wrote against the Gnostics of the second century, and which contains the «Rule of Apostolic Faith». Broader and more flexible in its formulations than the baptismal creeds, this «Rule of Truth» is neither a set of abstract theses about the content of Christian doctrine, nor a mere narrative summary of the Christian faith; rather, it seeks to summarize «the hypothesis of Scripture itself». If Scripture is the «body» of Truth, then the canon or rule of Truth, grounded in the Three Names received at Baptism, is its correct and unchangeable hypothesis, the one that enables us, when we read it, to see within it the portrait of a King—Christ—rather than that of a fox. It represents the crystallization of Scripture’s coherence, the premise for reading it on its own terms, expressing the order and connections through which Scripture reveals to us the one God, the Father, made known through His Only-Begotten Son, by the Holy Spirit, who speaks of Him through the prophets, in the preaching and the Church of the Apostles, the presbyters, and their successors — the heirs of the apostolic tradition. Most importantly, for Saint Irenaeus, the apostolic writings and the apostolic tradition are not two independent or complementary sources, but two modes of the one Gospel «according to the Scriptures». They both derive from the same Apostles and share the same content. By the end of the second century, normative Christianity was that which understood Christ by engaging Scripture on the basis of the Canon of Truth and within the context of the apostolic tradition. There was the firm conviction that there existed one right faith, one true reading of the one Scripture, inseparably linked to the confession of one Jesus Christ, the Only Son of the One Father, who alone has made the Father known”. Cf. John BEHR, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, part I, 2004, pp. 14-15, in: Ioan I. ICĂ jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, p. 85.

²⁵ Cf. IRENAEUS, *Against Heresies*, I, 22, coll. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldso, Eerdmans Grand Rapids, MI, 1956, p. 188.

Each of our lives falls along the line of the Mystery, of deification if it is in harmony with the Bible; yet in order to resonate with the Bible, Scripture must necessarily be known in its letter, in its context, and in its Spirit. More precisely, a free and continuous assumption of biblical catechesis, within the community, is indispensable; without it, Christian life cannot even begin. Hence the practice of public/liturgical reading and interpretation of Scripture, in order to avoid falling into individualistic understandings that may give rise to parallel biblical stories, outside God's Story with Man, as has already happened (see the apocryphal writings)²⁶ and continues to happen even now. The vigilant catalyst of the Church

The same idea will also be developed by the holy father Dumitru Stăniloae who shows that Scripture is the Word of Life, the source of grace-filled life, which does not impose itself as a constraint, but as a living power that invites communion. *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 2, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980, p. 275.

²⁶ See: J. K. ELLIOTT (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993; Cristian BĂDILĂ, *Evangelii apocrife*, Plural Collection, 4th enlarged edition, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2007. The decisive relationship for apostolic Christianity is that between the apostolic preaching of the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ (sacramentally actualized in the Church) and the Scriptures. This relationship was challenged in the mid-2nd century (around 140 A.D. in Rome) by Marcion and Valentinus. Marcion severed the Gospel of Jesus Christ—which he reduced only to the Gospel according to Luke and ten Pauline epistles—both from the Scriptures of the Old Testament (which he completely rejected) and from the other apostolic writings (Synoptic, Johannine, etc.). Valentinus, on the other hand, replaced the Gospel and the Scriptures of the Church with a higher gnosis—an esoteric “Gospel of Truth”—freely expressed in mythological compositions. This so-called revelation no longer interpreted the Scriptures or the Gospels but rewrote them freely, as a mythological “psychodrama” of the loss and rediscovery of the individual self, without reference to the Paschal mystery (the Cross and the Resurrection) or to the Jewish Scriptures (considered inferior). (Indeed, all references to the Paschal mystery and to Scripture are absent from the so-called Gospel of Thomas as well.) The reaction of the Church of Rome was not only the excommunication of Marcion and Valentinus, but also the formal clarification of the Apostolic Biblical Canon, which included both the Scriptures (the Old Testament) and the Gospels and apostolic epistles—not only those of Luke and Paul, but also those of all the Synoptics, together with the Acts of the Apostles, James, and Peter, the writings of the “pillars” of the Church of Jerusalem). Cf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, p. 84.

is the test of Love unto death (John 15, 13), applied with unobtrusive discernment and always in the name of Christ.

“The key to Scripture and to its symbolic coherence is the paschal mystery: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provide the ‘hermeneutical lens’ through which Scripture receives its true meaning and subject. It is not Scripture that explains Christ, but Christ crucified and risen who explains Scripture (cf. Luke 22, 44–49). We do not reach the crucified and risen Jesus Christ through history (as the moderns believed) nor directly, through immediate revelations (as the Gnostics imagined); the place of His revelation and the medium of relationship with Him is apostolic preaching, whose focus is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, explained through Scripture within the Church (in the context of the Eucharist)”²⁷.

Along this line, an urgent warning must be made — first concerning the practice of quoting Scripture rather than reading it. This habit generates parallel stories, fictitious characters and events, and sustains absurdities, irrationalities, delusions, lies, and pathologies of the most aberrant kind — since everything can be “justified” with a verse taken out of context. Anyone and anything can find “biblical support” through a fragmentary interpretation of Scripture. Then, another warning concerns the “negative double” of Scripture, a strange type of “hearing-based reading and interpretation,” reductionist and conformist, often sustained by the stereotypes of academic theology that relate to Scripture “from above,” superficially, without engagement or depth, in order to support hidden interests, tragically passed down from generation to generation, with almost no omission, with disarming precision from the standpoint of the Scriptural Canon, which for them remains submerged like a perpetual Atlantis.

²⁷ Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, p. 83.

“The scriptural Christ, the Christ who appears in the pages of writings recognized as canonical Scripture, is always the crucified and risen One. The *kerygma*, the proclamation that Jesus, the one who was crucified and who has risen, is Lord, which is so clear in the epistles of St. Paul, lies also at the foundation of how Jesus is depicted in the canonical Gospels. Any oral traditions concerning His sayings and deeds that might have existed among those who knew Him before His Passion were recontextualized in the canonical Gospels in the light of His Suffering and His proclamation as Lord and Christ. Moreover, the presentation of Christ that they offer was interpreted through Scripture in the light of the Cross. The four Gospels are not attempts to preserve exact evangelical accounts; they are scriptural testimonies and interpretations of the person of Jesus Christ based on the *kerygma*. There may well be historical material about Jesus in certain noncanonical Gospels, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, but in them the Cross is almost completely eclipsed, and engagement with Scripture is nonexistent. Conversely, the attempts to reduce the diversity of the canonical witness about Christ into a unified ‘Life of Christ,’ such as Tatian’s *Diatessaron* or Augustine’s *Harmony of the Gospels*, produced coherent and harmonious accounts, but by doing so they displaced Christ from the canonical Scriptures into a world created and limited by their own imagination”²⁸.

In this respect, the Golden Rule of the Biblical Canon is unwavering: *we must take the Christ of Scripture entirely or not at all* ²⁹. There is

²⁸ John BEHR, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, part I, 2004, p. 1, in: Deacon Ioan I. ICĂ jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, p. 84.

²⁹ Saint Irenaeus shall say: “Those who separate Jesus from Christ, and Christ from the Savior [...] do not receive from God the fullness of salvation. For it is impossible to divide what is indivisible, or to tear apart what is undivided; rather, one must receive in His entirety the same Christ Jesus, the Son of God”. Sf. IRINEU DE LYON, *Împotriva ereziilor*, III, 16, 6, transl. Dumitru Fecioru, vol. I, Editura Institutului Biblic și Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1981, p. 355. A contemporary development might sound thus: “It is either all of Christ or none of Christ! I believe

no middle path. And the interpretation and understanding of Scripture according to the Canon of Truth must take place in the Spirit of Patristic Tradition and within the Liturgical context/the Liturgy³⁰. Otherwise, we risk sharing the fate of the Jews, who, holding Scripture in their hands, yet interpreting it through their own understanding, missed God Himself, who had come fully into their midst through the Incarnate Christ.

V. The Dogmatic Canon: The life of God experienced and expressed in human measure

The intensive application and extension of the Scriptures within the Church gave rise to the *Canon of Dogmas*, created precisely as a safeguard to protect the Truth of Scripture, which some had misinterpreted or distorted. In other words, dogmas are both categorical boundaries against heresies and reaffirmations of the Truth contained in Scripture for new contexts

we need to preach again a whole Christ to the world — a Christ who does not need our apologies, a Christ who will not be divided, a Christ who will either be Lord of all or will not be Lord at all!”. Cf. A. W. TOZER, *The Best of A. W. Tozer*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, p. 219.

³⁰ All theological “principles”, from any age, clearly depend on their relationship with the Gospel and with Scripture, as well as with the order (*taxis*) introduced by the “canon of truth”, which restores the “hypothesis” of Scripture itself. The commitment to Scripture is thus inevitable. Reflection upon the canon of truth is, however, continuous within the Church; throughout her history she has elaborated ever new, more detailed, and more comprehensive explanations in defense of one and the same faith—faith in what was handed down from the beginning, the Gospel according to the Scriptures, the same Word of God — Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13, 8). The writings of the Fathers and Saints, together with iconography and hagiography, are likewise monuments bearing witness to the permanence of this commitment to the Gospel according to the Scriptures. All these possess a certain authority insofar as they point toward the same vision of the King, the evangelical icon of Christ. Moreover, in the light of the canon of truth itself, other realities are also called *canons*, such as the classical liturgical anaphora, which summarize the entirety of Scripture; the saints, whose lives and teachings embody the Truth, and who themselves become *canons* of faith and piety; and likewise the decisions of the councils, which constitute *canons* concerning the proper order of the Church and the people of God in particular circumstances”. John BEHR, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, part I, 2004, p. 48, in: deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, p. 86.

of life. “Dogma is the Church’s proclamation of the truth of Revelation, always expressed in terms appropriate to the spiritual and historical circumstances of the Church, and always maintaining faith against error and heresy”³¹. The Apostles, imitating Christ, spoke the Word of God in the Holy Spirit; and at the request of the disciples, they wrote the Gospels, thus extending the Old Scriptures, adding new content, and qualitatively fulfilling the old ones. The teaching of the Incarnate Christ and the preaching of the Apostles laid the foundations for the definitive shaping of Scripture; and the fixing of the Biblical Canon is the work of the Dogmatic Canon, which determined what belongs to Scripture and what does not. Hence, the Dogmatic Canon defines and provides the framework / limits for interpreting and applying the Biblical Canon. For this reason, every Dogma is perfectly biblical, indicating the boundaries within which we may speak of God and live with God safely³².

The Church has never dogmatized out of necessity. Within the Church, the criterion of experience has always preceded dogmatic formulations³³. The relationship of Love is lived, not theorized—and only when necessary, in order to preserve its intimacy. Thus, the appearance of heresies compelled the Church to formulate Dogmas, expressions directly linked to the Holy Fathers, that is, to those who experienced firsthand the relationship of love with God, the only ones capable of recognizing and articulating without error the Truth from above³⁴. Therefore, Dogmas are neither purely logical formulations nor the religious application of a philosophical system, nor the creation of a new one. They are paradoxical and always antinomic expressions, for they are the Life of God articulated in human words, and the incomprehensible cannot be fully contained or definitively defined. The

³¹ Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1974, p. 45.

³² Saint GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN, *Orationes*, 28, PG 36, 1181A.

³³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, pp. 45–48.

³⁴ See: VINCENT OF LÉRINS, *The Commonitory*, trans. and ed. by C. A. Heurtley, coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 11, Christian Literature Publishing, New York, 1894, pp. 132–135; IRENAEUS, *Against Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger, ed. John J. Dillon, vol. 1, Paulist Press, New York, 1992, pp. 32–35; TERTULIAN, “Prescription against Heretics”, trans. T. R. Glover, in: *Tertullian: Apology and De Spectaculis, Minucius Felix: Octavius*, Loeb Classical Library 250, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1931, pp. 245–265.

divine incomprehensibility is always enveloped in Mystery, a qualitative remainder that distinguishes the uncreated from the created, while at the same time constituting the “space” of continual growth in goodness.

“Dogmas are experiences of life in Truth—they are not opinions or judgments about reality, nor exercises in logic. Rather, they carry within themselves a living and profound responsibility toward the content of the experience of the entire ecclesial life”³⁵.

Dogmas are “another kind of incarnation of God”—another Body given to the Truth, which, after Christ, seeks to dwell within all creation³⁶, in all and through all. The Church, in essence, is a perpetual incarnation of God in history through the Holy Spirit, as Saint Maximus the Confessor says: “God ever desires to accomplish in all the mystery of His Incarnation”³⁷. For this reason, Dogmas are called the Trumpets of Truth, of the Truth filled with Love, as Saint Photius the Great declares: “Nothing is more filled with Love than the Truth”³⁸. Emptied of Love, however, dogmas become “deadly arrows”, which, in the hands of the inexperienced and unwise, lead to distorted forms of “religious eccentricity”.

Dogmas, or the divine Commandments, are impossible to fulfill without transformation and transfiguration. They are the Life of God becoming human life, and they sustain human life in its continual transfiguration into divine life. It is divine-humanity applied and experienced. Therefore, in God, Dogmas are normality and Reality. Such is God, and such has He revealed Himself to us. Likewise, for spiritual people, the life of God becomes their very own life. Dogmas appear as paradoxes only to the carnal-minded. To those who seek to claim from life a demonic form of autonomy, entirely outside the Creator.

³⁵ Gheorghe BUTUC, *Omul, Persoană devenindă*, Ed. Doxologia, Iași, 2023, p. 96.

³⁶ Ierom. Ghelasio GHEORGHE, *Moșul din Carpați (Neofit pustnicul)*, coll. *Isihasm*, Conphys Publishing House, Rm. Vâlcea, 1998, pp.125-131.

³⁷ *Ambigua ad Iohannem*, PG 91, 1084C-D.

³⁸ “Nothing is dearer than the truth” it is a popular paraphrase after: PHOTIUS I, *Photii Patriarchae Constantinopolitani: Epistulae et Amphilochia*, ed. Vasileios Laourdas and Leendert G. Westerink, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum, BSB B.G. Teubner, Leipzig, 1983, pp. xxvi–197.

In themselves, that is, through the Truth they contain and express, dogmas are an Authority that can hardly be falsified. Any attempt to rationalize them becomes heresy in assertion and, consequently, in practice as well. Only heresy is rational³⁹, the Truth of the dogmas is beyond belief. Hence, Dogma is a form of Authority that astonishes and overwhelms. It is an Authority because it imposes itself through self-evidence and presents itself with aristocratic dignity, as a Truth that cannot be refuted or rejected. It is the Truth that causes those who refuse it to stumble, and elevates those who embrace it. It wounds those who love it, and loves those whom it wounds. Therefore, Dogma certifies and confirms Reality as it is and as it was created by God, which is why the Dogmatic Canon is the authentic Measure of Life. It is the most natural of all that is natural. It is unaltered, uncorrupted Life. It is Life in all its simple complexity and complex simplicity. That is why both the simple man and the scholar alike can live dogmatically and find themselves reaffirmed by the dogmas

To live dogmatically means to live fully, to live with authority. It is the authority of experienced Truth, which draws others through its aristocratic authenticity. Yet, to renounce to dogmas is equivalent to abdicating from the Truth. In this sense, Orthodoxy as a whole is a Canon (Dogmatic), and the Canon (Dogmatic) is Orthodoxy⁴⁰. On the other hand, to relativize dogmas means to invent or multiply the Truth into fragmentary truths or opinions, which amounts to suspending the Truth altogether. In other words: many “truths”, no Truth. What we wish to emphasize is that when it comes to the Dogmatic Canon, selection cannot apply (just as it cannot in the case of the Biblical Canon or the Liturgical Canon). Indeed, whenever we speak of the Canon, we are reminded that we are not allowed to be selective. We do not take only what suits us. On the contrary, before the Canon we face a single great demand: all or nothing, as we have already noted in the case of the Biblical Canon. More precisely, we do not bring

³⁹ Mircea Vulcănescu it shows that heresy is more rational than dogma, for it is based on an effort of rational systematization that succeeds only at the cost of sacrificing part of the truth. In contrast, dogma is an affirmation of faith, a confession of a revealed content, the restoration of a religious truth. Cf. *Bunul Dumnezeu cotidian, studii despre religie*, ed. Marin Diaconu, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 58.

⁴⁰ Cf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 82-86.

the dogmas down to the level of our own understanding; rather, we ascend to their demands, to the height where they show us we were created to be.

In this sense, the Dogmatic Canon comes to show or to reaffirm the measure of human dignity, our royal stature, our authority, just as the Biblical Canon gives us the measure of prophetic dignity, and the Liturgical Canon emphasizes the priestly one — without confusion and without separation from one another. Thus, it becomes clear that a person who lives dogmatically, with firm reference points understood as meaningful boundaries, is a person of firmness and spiritual courage, one who discerns things rightly and knows clearly when, how, and to whom to say Yes or No.

Along these lines, however, we must keep in mind an essential warning which calls for a certain spiritual vigilance, so as not to confuse the content of the Canon of Truth with the forms it takes throughout history:

“The content of the canons is not the Truth itself, but the concrete modes of incarnation of that Truth in given historical forms, in the life of the Church, within space and time. Insofar as they are expressions of the revealed Truth and of the being of the Church, the canons are unchangeable; yet insofar as they refer to forms of manifestation belonging to a history in constant motion and transformation, they are, in principle, changeable [...] Authentic Orthodox canonical thought is therefore that which avoids both the «Monophysite» confusion and the «Nestorian» separation between the divine and the human, between the absolute and the relative, between the unchangeable and the changeable, between repetition and invention [...] The Church has remained the same, while the concrete forms of historical manifestation have changed, because what mattered for her was not the mechanical repetition of a past, even an apostolic one, nor its mechanical application to new realities, but fidelity to her true, primary, and only Canon: the most important one, unwritten in any collection of canons, which is contained in the dogmatic teaching about the Church as the eschatological and historical extension of the

divine-human Person of Jesus Christ the Lord [...] True Tradition does not remain alive either through mechanical, stereotypical repetition or through revolutionary invocation. (Neither repetition nor transformation are in themselves guarantees that errors will not occur in the Church; only the Holy Spirit, who both reminds and renews, ensures this.) It preserves its validity through both conservation and creativity, both requiring the continual discernment of the Spirit, to perceive the nuances demanded by the manifestation of the eternal, trans-historical reality of the Church, as well as by her creative incarnation and adaptation in the ever-new forms of historical reality”⁴¹.

The danger of dogmatism, however, manifests itself as uncompromising rigidity and gross obtuseness, visible in scholastic schemes, in religious sophisms, and in theological abstractions upheld by flawless discourses: without any condemnable heresies, yet without any real union with the Truth, consisting only of clichés and quotations recited around it, which makes it is very difficult to detect, yet it alters the entire patristic and Philokalic spirit of living within the Dogmas. It is a kind of “religious schizophrenia” for which there is no therapy, because there is no possibility of lucid diagnosis. Only from within the heart of Truth filled with Love can such a failure be recognized, named, and healed. That is why Father Stăniloae says, in an almost apothotic manner: “It is not the Dogmas themselves that are important, but their Spirit”⁴²; for the Dogmatic Canon

⁴¹ This warning was issued by Nikolai Afanasiev, who, starting from the canonical crisis within the Russian Orthodox communities in the diaspora divided into rival jurisdictions initiated a major reflection on the meaning and role of the canons in Orthodoxy. He first discussed the relationship between canons and canonical consciousness (Cf. “Les canons et le conscience canonique”, in: *Contacts* 21 (1959), pp. 112-127), and later addressed the question of the unchangeable and temporary nature of ecclesiastical canons (Cf. “The Canons of the Church: Changeable or Unchangeable”, in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 11 [1967], pp. 54-68). This debate was subsequently taken up, integrated, and further refined by Father Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, in *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 132-134.

⁴² Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, IInd edition, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1996, p. 5.

and Canon in general, by its very theological nature, acts in the manner of the Cross. On its vertical/spatial dimension, it unites heaven with earth, the heavenly with the earthly, the unseen with the seen; and on its horizontal/temporal dimension, it unites the past with the future, protology with eschatology, the anamnestic with the prophetic.

VI. The Liturgical Canon: The intimate space of love between man and God

It is the space where the *Biblical Canon* and the *Dogmatic Canon* are applied and experienced. It is the place where they intersect and intertwine delicately, where they acquire body and soul, that is, where they become Life - their ultimate purpose. It is the laboratory of celebration and of the transformation of the *Word of God* into its triadic liturgical hypostases: *the Word evoked and invoked* (prayers), *the Word proclaimed* (readings and preaching: the school of meaning), and *the Word communed* (the Eucharist), a union in Spirit and in Body, in Flesh and Blood, with God⁴³. It is the intimate setting of nuptial-hypostatic and familial-ecclesial Love between Man and God: of utmost interiority and of astonishing extension, through Christ, with oneself and with one another.

“Just as God, the Creator of all things, unites in His providence all diverse creatures through their unique relationship with Him as Pantocrator, so too does the Church act upon all human beings (men, women, and children) divided by language, occupations, characters, knowledge, and ranks, recreating and rebirthing them sacramentally and spiritually (in a mystical and mysterious way), and giving them one single form and one single name: the quality of being and being named (Christians), deriving from

⁴³ “From a strictly biblical perspective, Christian worship is understood as a celebration of the *Word of God*: it is proclaimed (in readings and preaching), evoked and invoked (in the prayer of thanksgiving/Eucharist/response), effectively realized sacramentally (in the consecration), and communicated (in Communion)”. Cf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, p. 286.

Christ; the grace and the one, simple, and indivisible power of faith make them, though different, have one heart and one soul (Acts 4, 32) and form, in all their diversity, one single Body under one single Head Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, neither barbarian, nor Scythian, nor slave, nor free man, but He is all and in all”⁴⁴.

However, for our experience with God, direct and unmediated, not to fail, the Liturgical Canon needs the Biblical and Dogmatic Canons, in order to authenticate and confirm what is truly lived in God, as opposed to what is merely imagined.

The Liturgical Canon encompasses both the communal experience of God and the personal one, that is, the two dimensions of the human person: in oneself and in relation. It represents the entire path of ascetic and spiritual ascent (purification–illumination–contemplation)⁴⁵ and the entire liturgical and communal experience summarized in the Orthodox

⁴⁴ “A complementary deepening of the Pauline theme of the «canonical form» of Christianity, the form of the new creation, of the Kingdom of God is offered by Saint Maximus the Confessor, beginning from his interpretation of the seven mysteries contained in the prayer «Our Father». A true synthesis of Christianity in its eschatological and spiritual essence, the Lord’s Prayer reveals God in the Holy Trinity, the adoption of humankind through grace, their equality in honor with the angels by doing the will of God, their sharing in eternal Life/the heavenly Bread, the reconciliation of human nature with itself through forgiveness, the abolition of the law of sin through the victory over temptations, and the overthrow of the power of evil through the patient endurance of trials and persecutions [...] Christians respond to this supreme revelation of divine, Trinitarian, and saving Fatherhood by living as adopted children of God, in holiness, imitating on earth the angels in heaven, thus overcoming the rupture introduced between heaven and earth by the fall into sin, and making all things into the Kingdom of God. Since this Kingdom belongs to Christ, only those enter it who bear within themselves, inscribed and engraved in their very being, the form of Christ the King, who is temperate, meek, and humble in heart, and who is, at the same time, the form of the beginningless Kingdom, which is the Holy Spirit”. Cf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 138-139.

⁴⁵ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și Mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2002, pp. 5-6, 425-440.

Liturgy, accompanied by the full experience of the saints. It is the Path through which we restore the priestly vocation of our being: to celebrate with gratitude and thanksgiving for the wondrous Gift of Life; to relate ritually to all creatures of creation, that is, to recognize the value and marvel of every being fashioned by God for us; to live continually in the State of Presence, as children before the Father, always in a Sacred Gesture of thanksgiving: “Thine own of Thine own”. It is, consequently, the way by which we allow God to be our King, that is, to serve us, the only way for us to become His children⁴⁶.

All the *authority* and unalterable measure of the Liturgical Canon stem from the fact that at the very center of Orthodox worship, as its perfect standard, stands the Divine Liturgy⁴⁷, and at the heart of the Liturgy lies the real Union with Christ the Lord, the very same One present in the Word of Scripture, in the inspiration of the Dogmas, and in the Philokalic Experience. In essence, we receive the King of Heaven to reign within us; thus, we acknowledge Him as King and desire to be in communion with His Kingdom, which through us, He wishes to come into being.

In the Liturgy, we encounter Christ the King first in His Words and Meanings, and then in the total mystical union through His Blood and Body, which become our own blood and body, and that of the entire Eucharistic ecclesial community. All the rest of the worship, of the Liturgical Canon, is a meticulous, measured, and deeply experienced preparation for this Great Encounter. Thus, we can say that the Liturgical Canon is the expression of the entire creation’s breathing together with God, while the Liturgy is the Heart that sustains this breath through which Man lives the Life of God, and God lives the Life of man: without interruption, without confusion, and without change, undivided and inseparable. Therefore, the role of the Liturgical Canon is to continuously transform us into a Eucharistic condition, a prosphoron through which Christ continues His Incarnation, in anticipation of the Great Wedding of the Lamb and the eternal Heavenly Banquet (Revelation 19, 7-10).

⁴⁶ See: Nicholas Thomas WRIGHT, *Cum a devenit Dumnezeu Împărat: Povestea uitată a Evangheliilor*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2015, 320 pp.

⁴⁷ Nenad S. MILOŠEVIĆ, *Dumnezeiasca Liturghie – Centrul Cultului în Ortodoxie*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2012, 240 pp. and Pr. A. SCHMEMANN, *Introducere în teologia liturgică*, transl. Ierom. Vasile Bârză, Sophia, Bucharest, 2009, p. 100.

“Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching; but unworthy is the one whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, lest you be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given over to death and be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself, crying: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God; through the Mother of God, have mercy on us”⁴⁸.

Especially when speaking of the Liturgical Canon, the great danger lies in the selective abridgment or truncation of the services, according to the ambiguous and gravely misinterpreted rule: “As the superior wills”⁴⁹, often applied erroneously and conveniently, masking ignorance or comfort. Another danger is the scholastic formula “ex opere operato” uncritically borrowed from the West into the East, which fosters the illusion that everything is accomplished automatically, by the mere operation of grace, placing the entire Liturgical Canon along a line of indescribable mimicry and theatricality. The direct consequence is formalism and ritualism, a plague sustained by both clergy and faithful who allow themselves to be drawn into the repetitive circle of empty forms, without hypostatic participation, without allowing themselves to be challenged by the Living Mystery to which our God invites us. From such people we often hear the excuse, “It’s fine like this”, which, in biblical language, is equivalent to idolatry (Malachi, 1, 6-14; 2, 1-4)⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ *The Book of Hours*, printed with the approval of the Holy Synod and the blessing of His Beatitude Father Teoctist, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2001, pp. 32–33.

⁴⁹ It is known that this reference originated in the period of fusion between the two great liturgical and typicon traditions, Jerusalem and Constantinople. Until the fusion was finalized, its purpose, so as to avoid disagreements, was to determine, in any given case, which of the two liturgical orders was to be followed at the service; the decision belonged to the highest-ranking hierarch presiding over the worship. Under no circumstances did this reference concern (nor does it concern today) any adjustment of the Liturgical Canon or of any other order of the services in worship.

⁵⁰ The exegetes of the prophecies of Malachi explain that all the wrath of the Lord Sabaoth against the Temple and the people stemmed from the indolence of the ministers who,

“At the end of the fourth century, we can therefore already see the first signs of the transition toward medieval sacramental theology. One of these signs is the formalization of Eucharistic theology through the emergence of the doctrine of the consecration of the gifts by a formula of transformation, which made Eucharistic realism dependent on the efficacy of this consecratory or transformative formula. But the most important sign of this transition, which also marks the crisis of sacramental theology, is the disintegration of the typological way of thinking, both biblical and liturgical, that characterized the apostolic Church and the first three centuries, through the emergence of three independent and opposing ways of understanding the Eucharist: figurative-allegorical and realist-physicalist. On the one hand, as typology turned into allegory, the Eucharist risked being understood merely as a figure or image of Christ’s sacrifice or of His saving Economy. On the other hand, in order to counterbalance this increasingly allegorical view, the true presence of Christ in the transformed Eucharistic species came to be interpreted in terms of an objective physical realism: the Eucharistic Body was substantially the physical flesh and the physical blood of Christ, veiled under the appearance of the accidents of bread and wine, so as not to provoke repulsion in those who partake of them. Medieval theologians believed they could avoid the extreme consequences of both figurative symbolism and physical realism through the theory of transubstantiation—founded, however, on the metaphysical distinction between substance and accidents, and implicitly on the assimilation of the Eucharist to a continuous Incarnation. This led to the transfer onto the Eucharist—now turned into an object of contemplation,

with negligence and carelessness, offered blemished sacrifices — something they would never do when bringing gifts to their earthly rulers. By doing so, they despised and dishonored God. This kind of arrogance is identical to idolatry, and even more abominable, says the prophet; it all arises from a spirit of formalism expressed in the well-known careless phrase: *It’s fine like this — God won’t be upset!*

adoration, and processions, and assimilated to the relics of the saints—of the devotion once directed toward the humanity and Passion of Jesus, who had become a heavenly Christ, accessible only through a whole series of ecclesial mediations”⁵¹.

Another danger is religious consumerism, where the emphasis falls on “I” rather than “We”, contrary to the perpetual desire of the Liturgical Canon: “that all must be one” (John 17, 21). By contrast, consumerists focus solely on how “I” receive or give something to God, with the stress placed on “my salvation,” “my Jesus,” “my Communion,” and so on. It is the maintenance of individualism, liturgically endorsed, in which one insists on self-serving demands addressed to a God who is seen as present and existing only for the needs of one’s own ego — on my terms, when and how I want. In short, I acknowledge God only if He does what I want, never when I do what He wants.

At the opposite pole of consumerism stands populism, according to which the Liturgical Canon is adapted and performed to please the masses, who in turn reward the clergy with admiration (feeding the ego) or remuneration (feeding comfort). This danger manifests not only in the shortening or lengthening of services, or in shifting their times “so that people can come and stay” at the service, but also in celebrating worship with exaggerated emotionalism—maintaining all sorts of sentimental and tearful impressions, often amplified by multimedia means, with ever-louder decibels, exaggerations in which Christ and all that is His become

⁵¹ “All these practical deviations and theoretical impasses could have been avoided had the ontological understanding of New Testament typology been preserved, typology which is not merely a method of interpreting the Old Testament, but an ontology of participation; in other words, typology refers to realities, not merely to meanings”. Therefore, the path of liturgical deviations goes hand in hand with that of biblical exegetical distortions. This manner in which biblical typology degenerates into mystical allegory is discussed by Fr. Professor Enrico MAZZA in two seminal monographs: *La mistagogia. La catechesi liturgiche della fine del quattro secole e il loro metodo*, coll. *Bibliotheca Ephemerides Liturgicae Subsidia* 46, Rome, 1988 and *Continuità e discontinuità, Concezioni medievali dell’Euharistia in confronto con la tradizione dei Padri e della liturgia*, coll. *Bibliotheca Ephemerides Liturgicae Subsidia* 113), Rome, 2001. Cf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 306-307.

nothing more than a mere backdrop to our own performances. It is clear: *the measure in all liturgical order must be taken from the Canon, not from the people*. We do not lower the Canonical standards to the people's pleasure; rather, the people are to rise, step by step, personally and communally, toward the measures of the Liturgical Canon, which are simultaneously Biblical and Dogmatic. Otherwise, the consequences are evident:

“In short, Revelation becomes fixed in imposing biblical codices, yet with the Biblical Canon there also arises biblicism and the reduction of the Bible to mere texts; the Canon of Faith becomes established not only in symbols but also in Dogmas, yet along with them emerge abstract dogmatism and a passion for doctrinal formulas; the Hierarchical Canon, once a sacramental and charismatic typology, turns into hierarchical bureaucracy, formalized through clericalism, leading to the fragmentation of the unity of the Christian people, further affected by competition among bishops, metropolitans, patriarchs, popes, and emperors; the Liturgical Canon becomes formalized, transforming from a transfigurative and martyrial eschatological celebration into an external ritualism adapted to private needs; and the Ethical–Disciplinary Canon becomes juridicized, turning into a form of church law equivalent to the civil laws of emperors”⁵².

Finally, a great danger arises from the excessive psychologization of worship and, even more, from the spiritual dismemberment caused by participation in the Mysteries while hiding unacknowledged vices. Too often, well-intentioned people who approach the Church with trust are misled and initiated into wrongdoing by those who themselves cannot overcome their own spiritual pathologies but cunningly conceal them beneath “the robe of the Church”. We live in times that demand at least a minimum of discernment, even when approaching the Church, so as not to fall prey to the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (against whom the Savior

⁵² Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., in: *Canonul Ortodoxiei I. Canonul Apostolic al Primelor secole*, Deisis/Stavropoleos, Sibiu, 2008, p. 316.

warns us in Matthew 17, 15), following the basic rule of sound sense: *whatever lacks meaning cannot be spiritual life!*

VII. Conclusion

The *Canon of the Church* — the *Biblical Canon*, the *Dogmatic/Philokalic Canon*, and the *Liturgical Canon* — is the way in which God seeks us and the way in which we learn to respond to Him and open ourselves to Him safely. All three are one single Reality, three distinct faces leading us to the same God in different ways. They can never be separated, affirmed unilaterally, or mixed indistinctly, but must always be interwoven with discernment, each sustaining us in different needs along the path toward perfection. For this reason, the Church has always affirmed them simultaneously and congruently, fully aware that they can in no way be separated (not even for study), for such division would lead to sterile unilateralities. Nor has it ever proposed them selectively or disjunctively, which would result in diminishing the integrity of the Revealed Truth in the world. *The Tri-Canon* of the Church stands, without doubt, as the form of *complete authority* to which the person who longs to abide in the sacred intimacy of communion with God may turn, outside the Garden of Paradise, yet on the way toward the Kingdom of Heaven, which is and is to come (Revelation 2, 1-51).