

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382  
89 (4), pp. 62-82, 2021

# **The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Current Theological Debate. The Contribution of Father Dumitru Stăniloae**

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## **Abstract**

The Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of all the Mysteries, but this foundation is put in a special light by the Eucharist, as an update, by the power of the Holy Spirit, of the essential saving acts of Christ. Through His Sacrifice and Resurrection, which become accessible to all people in the Eucharist of the Church, Jesus Christ draws the members of His Mysterious Body, the Church, to share in them and live them existentially in the life of the Church and the world. In this paper I present Father Staniloae’s teaching on the place and significance of the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the context of the other Sacraments of the Church, and how it relates to each of them. The common foundation of all the Sacraments is highlighted, but then the specificity of each of them was underlined, and the relation of this specificity to the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

## **Keywords**

Eucharist, sacraments, Church, Dumitru Staniloae, Ioannis Zizioulas, Nikolai Afanassieff, Alexander Schmemmann

## I. General considerations

Jesus Christ ascended to heaven is present in His Church in many degrees and ways, but His most direct, complex, and powerful presence in the Church is through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Through this Sacrament Christ the Lord is present amid God's new people with His Body and Blood, which is offered to believers for the remission of sins and eternal life. The issue of teaching about the Eucharist has constantly attracted the attention of theologians and the Church to capture the most important aspects of this Sacrament for the lives of people and the world. In view of the depth of this work in the life of the Church, as well as its close connection with the whole economy of salvation, there were certain moments in theological debates when some coordinates of this Sacrament were unilaterally captured to the detriment of others, to outline a partially distorted picture of the Eucharist.

If we refer only to the last decades, we can see a certain effervescence of theological reflection on the implications of the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the life of the Church and of the faithful, on the one hand, but at the same time the impetus that these debates have received because of the ecumenical opening, by which the Churches have been animated in the past decades.

In the following we would like to capture some aspects and coordinates of the Eucharist in the recent theological debate, also based on the exceptional theological contribution of Father D. Stăniloae in this respect<sup>1</sup>. In order to highlight the delicate points of this Eucharistic debate, we consider it necessary to make some theological sketches with reference to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, in general, and its specifics in the thought of the mentioned Romanian theologian.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most important contributions of the Romanian theologian on this subject we mention: "Sinteză ecleziologică", in: *Studii Teologice*, VII (1955) 5-6, pp. 267-284; "Autoritatea Bisericii", in: *Studii Teologice*, XVI (1964) 3-4, pp. 183-215; "Din aspectul sacramental al Bisericii", in: *Studii Teologice*, XVIII (1966) 9-10, pp. 531-562; "Biserica universală și sobornicească", in: *Ortodoxia*, XVIII (1966) 2, pp. 167-198; "Teologia Euharistiei", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXI (1969) 3, pp. 343-363; "Transparența Bisericii în viața sacramentală", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXII (1970) 4, pp. 501-516; "Sobornicitatea deschisă", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIII (1971) 2, pp. 165-180; "În problema intercomuniunii", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIII (1971) 4, pp. 561-584; *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, ediția a III-a, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 2003, vol. III, pp. 83-126.

## II. The place and importance of the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the context of the other Sacraments of the Church

Through all the seven Sacraments of the Church, Christ shares His divine and eternal life with the members of His Body – the Church. Through each of them, Christ as their true Maker transmits states or stages of His perfection to those with whom He is united through His deified humanity. If in the other Sacraments Christ is present through His work, which He distributes to those who believe in Him, through the Eucharist Christ gives Himself with His Body and Blood, transforming the gifts of bread and wine brought by the faithful to the Liturgy, through the epiclesis of the Church. At the heart of all the Mysteries is the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. All the power of the Mysteries springs from the power of Christ's Sacrifice and Resurrection. Every Mystery inaugurates a direct, personal, and specific relationship of each believer with Christ. Among the Mysteries, the Eucharist represents the culmination, which crowns this relationship of the believer with Christ. Therefore, it is the coronation of the work of the Sacraments of Baptism and Anointing. "The Eucharist implies in it the power of full death over the separate existence of God, begun by Baptism and developed by Anointing"<sup>2</sup>. This is the deep theological reason the three Sacraments are performed together because their work is also a whole, which is an ascending dynamic. The Eucharist is also connected with the other Sacraments, reflecting rays of light, and meaning on the other sacramental acts as well. The Eucharist has a special connection with Confession, which in the practice of the Church precedes the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, cleansing the soul of the believer for the worthy reception of the Eucharistic Christ. Not without importance in its specific work is the Eucharist in connection with the Sacrament of Marriage, which prepares the bride and groom so that they may sacrifice to one another by Christ's power of self-giving, who gave himself as a man to the Father, in full obedience to His will, by partaking with the crucified and risen Christ. Thus, the Christian bride and groom work for their own salvation in the Christian family, as they also become obedient to God and do His will, following the example of Christ, Who became obedient to the Father "unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2, 8) and they partake with. The Sacrament of the Priesthood

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<sup>2</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, p. 84.

highlights the specifics of Christ's work in His Church through those whom He consecrates, to be His visible organs: bishops and priests. They are urged, by the very act of ordination, to partake directly and personally in the saving work of Christ, the culmination of which was His sacrifice and resurrection, and which they perform and partake of in the Liturgy of the Church. In this way, the bearers of the sacramental priesthood of the Church through their own ministry need the power of Christ's sacrifice, which they receive through the Sacraments, to give themselves to Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in a continuous obedience to God the Father and Christ – the Eternal Hierarch. They always receive new impulses in their priestly ministry, to bring those, they have in their pastorate in connection with this mysterious sacrifice of the Eucharist, to partake with, as a source of power and life, warmed by the rays of Resurrection.

The connection of the Eucharist is also evident with the Sacrament of the Holy Anointing, as the Sacrament of regaining physical and mental health. Through the Anointing, the believer acquires powers to be able to bear sufferings of all kinds more easily, but in this state new perspectives are opened to him on life and death, on health and disease. Therefore, the faithful confess and partake with in connection with the celebration of the Sacrament of the Holy Anointing, precisely to be able to receive the gifts of this Sacrament more directly and deeply for regaining health.

### **III. The Foundation of the Eucharist – The Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ**

At the heart of all the Mysteries is the Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ, because they share with the believers the new life of Christ, raised above evil and death. In other words, through the Mysteries believers receive the renewed, perfect, and deified humanity of Christ, beginning with all the states through which He passed His humanity, beginning with the Incarnation and all His other acts, components of the economy of human salvation. culminating in His Death and Resurrection. But these culminations of salvation are more prominent and obvious especially in the Eucharist, in the sense that through the Eucharist we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, sacrificed and risen, and made actual by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist.

That is why the Holy Eucharist has a double character: of Sacrifice and Mystery. In general, when we speak of the Mysteries of the Church, we know that through them God shares His gifts with us through the love of His grace. In other words, Christ shares in the sacrament of His saving work, which we receive as a gift from Him; on the other hand, through the Mysteries the believers ascend to God, through an act of self-sacrifice, so that they may be better able to share in His salvation. As such, all the Sacraments of the Church are at once a Sacrament and a Sacrifice. But the most obvious movement from God to man and the ascension of man to God is the Eucharist. The two aspects of Sacrifice and Sacrament are inseparable in the Eucharist. The updating of Christ's Sacrifice in the Eucharist takes place through the power of the Holy Spirit, so that believers may share in it.

“The Spirit transforms the community sacrifice of bread and wine, of her life, into the sacrifice of Christ, into His sacrificial body, which Christ brings to the Father, but then gives to the community for food and drink, so that it may be filled even more with His sacrificed body. His sacrificial personal Body meets His mysterious Body in Eucharistic bread and wine. The sacrificial body of the Lord in the Eucharist is only His Body, but He has in Him the gift of the community or its sacrifice to present it in Himself and this, to the Father”<sup>3</sup>.

From here, some theologians speak of three bodies of Christ: His personal Body, His Mysterious Body (Church), and His Eucharistic Body. In reality,

“it is only one Body, because the mysterious Body or the Church is only an extension of the personal Body, through the Eucharistic Body of the Lord. But the Eucharistic Body of the Lord does not annul its distinction from the personal Body of the Lord or from His mysterious Body, because the Eucharistic Body is how Christ forms and nourishes His mysterious Body, the Church.

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<sup>3</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, p. 114. See also: Dumitru POPESCU, *Iisus Hristos Pantocrator*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, pp. 330-331.

Only in this sense is Christ the heavenly Bread, which is given for food and never ends”<sup>4</sup>.

The Holy Eucharist also has an anamnetic character, in that it perpetuates the “remembrance” of the fact that Christ incarnated, sacrificed, and rose to Heaven. We have proof of that. But its “memory” is perpetuated as a real fact continued with ourselves. This “remembrance” is a remembrance by the remaining Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen in union with us. Related to this remembrance is the remembrance of Christ’s promise that He will remain, as the Incarnate, crucified, and risen, in union with us. Through the Eucharist we “announce” the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Son of God as man, not only by following them as past deeds, and not as a repeated reality, but prolonged unseen and in us<sup>5</sup>.

Through the Eucharist as Sacrifice and Sacrament, Christ initiates a living dialogue with the Church and with each member of her. This dialogue progresses continuously with the premise of Christ’s self-sacrificing devotion to which is added the self-sacrifice of believers.

#### **IV. The Holy Eucharist – seen in the sense of Christ’s saving dialogue with His Church**

Through the Eucharist as the Sacrament of the Church, a continuous dialogue is realized between Christ and His Church – His mysterious body extended in history. For the community of His mysterious Body, though partaking of His Eucharistic Body and Blood, is not to be confused with Christ, but remains permanently distinct from Him and in connection with Him.

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<sup>4</sup> D. POPESCU, *Iisus Hristos Pantocrator*, p. 330;

<sup>5</sup> D. STĂNILĂ, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, p. 99. “St. Paul (I Corinthians 11, 26) shows that this proclamation is understood as our further experience of the Lord’s death and resurrection, by the fact that our experience of His death and resurrection in us is the central theme of his preaching and epistles. The proclamation of the death and resurrection of the Lord becomes through the Eucharist not the theoretical proclamation of past deeds, but the proclamation of the experience of deeds that are perpetuated in us”.

“In the case of confusion with the personal Christ, the community would lose the character of the community of persons, depersonalizing itself. Believers always keep in mind that through Christ they bring themselves, even though they are brought by the power of Christ, and through this, Christ also brings them. Especially at the time of communion, the community, though closely united with Him before, receives only the Body of Christ. For Christ always remains distinct from it as the One who shares. Unity with Christ goes through different gradations, but always the persons of the believers remain distinct, as partners in the dialogue and as those who share in Christ”<sup>6</sup>.

Here comes the dynamic character of the dialogue of Christ, the One who gives himself for communion through the Eucharist, and the community of His members, who receive the gifts of Christ, enter into a dynamic of gifts exchange between Him, the Eucharistic Christ and His mysterious Body. St. Paul also highlights this dialogue of Christ with His Church, when he speaks of Christ – the Head of the Church and the Church – His Body. (see: I Corinthians 12, 12, Ephesians 1, 23; 4, 4; 5, 23-30). Seen in the context of the relationship between Christ – the Head of the Church and the Church – His Body – the Eucharist becomes a means of communication and communion and of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

“The Eucharist is the way Christ enters into the psycho-somatic being of believers to ascend with them to the Father. In the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom or that of St. Basil the Great, the Eucharist is first the sacrifice of the Church which is transformed on the altar table into the Body and Blood of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and Christ, who assumes it in the heavenly Altar, descends in the Church, remaining in heaven, to partake of the faithful with His Body and Blood, for the remission of sins and eternal life. In this liturgical vision, the substantial aspect of the Holy Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ is indispensably united with the personal aspect, because only in this way can we speak of the Holy Eucharist as a means of Christ’s encounter

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<sup>6</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, p. 114.

with believers and believers with Christ, of Christ's descent in the Church and the ascension of the Church in Christ"<sup>7</sup>.

Clarifying this dialogical relationship of the Church with Christ through the Eucharist is especially valuable, as it avoids certain unilateral positions that some theologians have regarding the place of the Eucharist for the life of the Church and the world. Some Romanian theologians have provided important clarifications from this point of view, against the tendency of some to understand the Eucharist as a kind of center of gravity of the Church instead of Christ, "disregarding its role as a means of dialogue between Christ and the Church for the perfection of believers"<sup>8</sup>. A Romanian theologian sees this vision of the Eucharist in Orthodox theology, based on the theology of Nicolae Cabasilas, who in his work "Life in Christ" understands the Eucharist as the all-powerful means by which Christ descends into history to transfigure the world and history through his divine power.

"Cabasilas places such a strong and unilateral emphasis on the descent of Christ into the world that it gives the impression that the communion of eternal life is no longer so much at the higher level of the Trinitarian communion, but here below, at that of the Eucharistic communion in the Church, because what interests him from the historical perspective is not so much the ascension of the faithful to communion with the Holy Trinity, but the descent of Christ into history and into the world"<sup>9</sup>.

Also in this direction is the Eucharistic theology of another contemporary Orthodox theologian, Joannis Zizioulas, who conceives this Sacrament also in the sense of the center of the Church, starting from the concept of Truth and Person, as well as the role of the Holy Spirit. In his reference work<sup>10</sup> this theologian seeks to understand the Eucharist starting from Christology. Thus, he states that

<sup>7</sup> Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, Editura Diogene, București 1996, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Ființa eclezială*, transl. Aurel Nae, Editura Bizantină, București 1996. This theologian wrote other important works from this point of view, such as: *Euharistie, Episcop, Biserică. Unitatea Bisericii în dumnezeiasca Euharistie și episcop în primele trei secole*, doctoral thesis, published in Athens in 1966 and in Romanian at Editura Bazilica a Patriarhiei Române, București 2009.



“We can understand Christ as an individual, on the one hand, conceived in a historical and objective way, appearing as Truth. In this way of understanding Christ, the distance between Him and us is covered by certain means that serve as the means of communicating the Truth to us, such as His words embodied in the Scriptures and, perhaps, Tradition, transmitted, interpreted, and even exposed by a certain teaching of the Church – all this being done with the assistance and guidance of the Holy Spirit”<sup>11</sup>.

This is a vision of this author, regarding Christology, and the other vision speaks of

“a type of Christology in which Christ, although a private person, cannot be conceived as appearing Himself. When we affirm that He is the Truth, we understand, in this second type of Christology, His whole personal existence, that is, His relationship with His Body, the Church, with ourselves. In other words, when we say Christ, in this case, we mean a Person and not an individual; we mean a relational reality that exists «for me» or «for us». The Holy Spirit is not here to assist us in filling the gap between Christ and us, but it is the Person of the Trinity who is currently realizing in history what we call Christ, this personal and relational entity of our Savior. In this case, Christology is essentially conditioned – and not just secondary to pneumatology; in fact, it is pneumatologically constituted. There is no distance between Jesus Christ – the Truth and us to be covered by the means of grace. By updating the event of Christ in history, the Holy Spirit realizes at the same time His personal existence as a body or community. Christ does not exist first as Truth and then as communion; He is both. Any distance between Christology and ecclesiology disappears in the Spirit”<sup>12</sup>.

According to Zizioulas, the experience of Truth takes place in the existence of the Church, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and in the most direct and concrete way through the Eucharist.

<sup>11</sup> Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Ființa eclezială*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>12</sup> Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Ființa eclezială*, p. 119.

“The Eucharist Reveals Christ — the Truth as God’s «visit» and «ark» in history and creation, so that God may be «contemplated» in the glory of His Truth and «shared» in His communion of life. That is why the Church has no other reality or experience of the Truth in His capacity as a perfect communion as the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic assembly, the Word of God addresses man and creation not as an outward interpellation, as in the Old Testament, but as a «body» that is, within our own experience, as our part of creation. For this reason, the Word of God does not dwell in the human spirit as a rational knowledge or in the human soul as an inner mystical experience, but as a communion within a community. Truth is thus not something «expressed» or «heard», nor does it belong to the realm of statement or logic, but something that is an ontological truth: communion itself becomes Truth”<sup>13</sup>.

This understanding of the Truth and the Eucharist also has important consequences for the connection of this Truth with the whole cosmos. Through the Eucharist, Christ identifies not only with the Church, but also with the cosmos.

“In Zizioulas’ theological conception, God, the Church, and the cosmos find their center of gravity in the Eucharist. If for Cabasilas, the Eucharist was how Christ descends into the world, to ascend with the world in an eschatological perspective, for Zizioulas we see that the Eucharist is the center of gravity of Christ, and with it of the whole cosmos. It seems that the world no longer recapitulates in Christ, but recapitulates in the Eucharist, which identifies with Christ. The center of gravity of the Church moves from heaven to earth. The consequences are not hard to imagine”<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, some Romanian Orthodox theologians have noticed some problematic, if not serious, aspects regarding the excessive emphasis placed by other Orthodox theologians on the role of the Eucharist in

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<sup>13</sup> Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Ființa eclezială*, p. 12

<sup>14</sup> Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, p. 103.

the Church and in the world. They noticed some resemblance to Roman Catholic theology, through the exaggerated emphasis on the Eucharist and its worship, in a way independent of the Person of Christ. Thus, the theologian Zizioulas sees the Eucharist as

“acting directly from Christ, who, through the Holy Spirit, is no longer so much a personal existence but a community, forgetting that Christ is never alone, but always with the Father and the Holy Spirit in communion. of the supernatural life of the Holy Trinity. Zizioulas sees Christ only in relation to ecclesial communion, without considering His communion with the Holy Trinity”<sup>15</sup>.

To look to Christ in this sense unilaterally in the Eucharist is to overshadow His role as Head of the Church, and the Church is highlighted as His Body through the work of the Holy Spirit.

“The shortcoming of these conceptions is that they see only Christ in the Eucharist, without seeing the Eucharist in Christ, with two important consequences. On the one hand, there is a tendency to confuse or separate the work of redemption carried out by Christ from His Person, and on the other hand, the Holy Eucharist is disregarded as a means of dialogue between Christ and the faithful”<sup>16</sup>.

In this way, the Eucharist is no longer understood in all its complexity as the Mystery of the unity of the Church with Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit in the love and goodwill of the Father. Having an essential function of Christ’s dialogue with the members of His Body, the Church, the Eucharist promotes the holy communion of these members with the whole Holy Trinity, but also the communion and unity between these members, on the one hand, and between them and Christ, through the Holy Spirit, on the other hand. By making such a communion, the Eucharist also has implications for the Church’s connection with the whole of creation, which she wishes to draw under the light of grace and love of the divine Sacraments.

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<sup>15</sup> Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, p. 106.

## **V. Eucharist and the Church: Eucharistic ecclesiological theories. The problem of intercommunication or Eucharistic communion**

Starting from the very close connection between the Eucharist and the Church, some Orthodox theologians have formulated some ecclesiological theories, to achieve a more direct rapprochement between Orthodoxy and the other Churches. But before referring to such theories, it is necessary to make some clarifications regarding the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church.

The Church means the penetration of the immortal life of Christ into believers, so that they may share in His immortal life and be saved through it. Christ's full union with men and their sharing in his divine life takes place through the Eucharist. But through the Eucharist the faithful enter the communion of life and love of the Holy Trinity. By partaking of the Eucharistic Christ, the members of the Church become His mysterious Body. Through His Body and Blood, Christ extends to people who believe in Him and confess Him, constituting the Church – His Body, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the general framework for understanding the Eucharist as the Sacrament of the Church, through which it is constituted, expanded, and consolidated, as a Body well formed by all its joints, as the Apostle of the Gentiles says (Ephesians 4, 16). Thus, the Eucharist and the Church have been a special attraction for Orthodox theologians, and not only, as they tried to highlight, the implications of this connection for the today world, in theological-ecclesiological, missionary, and ecumenical aspect.

In the following we will refer especially to the formulation of some Eucharistic ecclesiological theories and the answer given to them by Father Dumitru Stăniloae, to better understand their echo in contemporary theology.

One of these theories is that of *Eucharistic ecclesiology as opposed to universalist ecclesiology*. The author of this theory is N. Afanassieff<sup>17</sup>, Russian Orthodox theologian from Paris. According to him, Eucharistic ecclesiology must be opposed to universalist ecclesiology. Thus, based on

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<sup>17</sup> Among his most important works we mention: "L'Eglise qui préside dans l'amour", in : *La primauté de Pierre dans l'Eglise Orthodoxe*, Neuchâtel, Editions Delachaux et Niestle, 1960, pp. 7-64; "Una Sancta", in: *Irenikon*, nr. 4, 1964; *L'Eglise du Sainte Esprit*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1975.

universal ecclesiology, it is impossible to hold a meeting of the Churches, because apart from the universal Church, which includes all that is the Church, there is no Church. And since both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church consider themselves the Universal Church, each considers the other to lack this “universal” quality. According to Afanassieff, there is no Universal Church, of which all the local Churches belong, to be a full Church. In his view, wherever the Eucharist is celebrated, led by a bishop, there is the full Church, regardless of whether it is in communion with the other local Churches<sup>18</sup>.

Referring to the opposition between the two ecclesiologies: Eucharistic ecclesiology and universalist ecclesiology, the theologian Afanassieff states the following:

“In the order of universal ecclesiology, the Church of God on earth is a universal body, embracing all the local Churches that exist on earth. All the attributes of the Church: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity refer to this universal body. The local churches, as parts of the Universal Church, do not possess these attributes themselves: they possess them only through the Universal Church, provided they are part of it. This is the fundamental thesis of Cyprian as well as of modern universalist ecclesiology. But there is another thesis, opposite to that of Cyprian: all the attributes I have indicated belong to the local Church. We find this thesis in primary ecclesiology, which I call Eucharistic. The fundamental difference between universalist ecclesiology and Eucharistic ecclesiology consists precisely in the opposition between these two theses, an opposition which is naturally reflected in the conception of the unity of the Church”<sup>19</sup>.

Afanassieff notes in connection with the Church that this is the Body of Christ, which is manifested in all its power and complexity in the Eucharistic assembly of the local Church, as Christ is present in the Eucharist with the fullness of His body.

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<sup>18</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Biserica universală și sobornicească”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XVIII (1966) 2, p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> Nikolai AFANASSIEFF, “Una Sancta”, p. 452 sq.

“That is why the local Church possesses the fullness of the Church, in other words, it is the Church of God in Christ. The fullness of the nature of the Church conditions its unity, which finds its expression in the Eucharistic ensemble of each local Church. The church is where the Eucharistic assembly is. This thesis can be formulated in another way: where the Eucharist is, it is the Church of God and where the Church of God is, there is the Eucharist. It follows that the Eucharistic assembly is the distinctive empirical sign of the Church...”<sup>20</sup>.

In this expression of the Russian theologian we catch a restriction of the concept of the Church, a unilateral expression of its significance, life and meaning. To the importance of the Eucharist for the local church, Afanassieff adds the importance and role of the bishop as an empirically distinctive sign of the local church. This theologian analyzes the place of the bishop in universalist ecclesiology and its significance in Eucharistic ecclesiology. In addition to the Eucharist, as a hallmark of the Church, Afanassieff also adds the bishop, as a hallmark of the local Church, as the bishop is introduced into the concept of the Eucharist. He states:

“The basis of the mystery of the bishop, respectively, of his ministry is the Eucharistic assembly, which means that he presides over the Eucharistic assembly. Consequently, when we speak of the Eucharistic assembly, we are speaking of a bishop. According to universal ecclesiology, on the contrary, the bishop as a principle of the unity of the local Church is not included in the Eucharistic assembly, but is considered, because this ecclesiology detaches him from the Eucharistic assembly. This difference, insignificant at first sight, had enormous consequences for the whole ecclesial organization and especially for the notion of unity. According to the Eucharistic ecclesiology, the unity of the Church is a true unity, because it is the unity of the Body of Christ, in other words, of Christ Himself, and finds its concrete expression in the Eucharistic assembly. In universal ecclesiology such a principle is not applicable, for in the Church understood as a universal organism there is not and cannot be a universal

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<sup>20</sup> Nikolai AFANASSIEFF, “Una Sancta”, p. 452.

Eucharistic assembly. So, according to this ecclesiology, the principle of the Church does not reside, as we have seen, in the Church itself, but only in one of its elements, that is, in the episcopate<sup>21</sup>.

Afanassieff's conception of the Eucharist also contains other elements concerning the Church, but we will not refer to them, but we have mentioned only those which emphasize the connection between the Eucharist and the Church.

It should be noted at the outset that Afanassieff believes that through his Eucharistic vision he can contribute to the unification of the Churches, regardless of the importance of the unity and confession of the apostolic faith<sup>22</sup>. For Afanassieff, the Eucharist constitutes the Church, without being conditioned by the truth. According to him, the Eucharist would not relate to the truth; according to him, the truth and the Eucharist would be two separate realities, as if Christ in the Eucharist were not the Logos or the Reason of all things, as if the Eucharist were not, from a point of view, on the horizon of truth, as if it could not be misunderstood and practiced and therefore inefficient, or without full efficiency<sup>23</sup>.

According to the Eucharistic ecclesiology, love is that which can overcome doctrinal differences, as they do not prejudice the Church, if the Eucharist is celebrated, led by the bishop of the Eucharistic assembly.

“To think that the removal of dogmatic differences is a condition for the reunification of the Churches is tantamount to persevering in division. Thanks to an effort of love, with all the existing differences, the communion between the Churches can

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<sup>21</sup> Nikolai AFANASSIEFF, “Una Sancta”, pp. 453-454, apud: D. STĂNILĂOAE, “Biserica universală...”, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> He states this explicitly when he says: “The ground seems clear enough for me to move on to the essential question of the present study: What are the relations between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, considered from the point of view of Eucharistic ecclesiology? It is clear from the previous pages that these relations are defined by the absence of fraternal communion between the two Churches.... For Eucharistic ecclesiology, the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church are both Churches, or more precisely, each local Church in the two groups remains a Church” (*Una Sancta*, p. 464).

<sup>23</sup> D. STĂNILĂOAE, “Biserica universală...”, p. 172.

be restored and the reunification of the Catholic Church with the Orthodox Church can become possible”<sup>24</sup>.

In this sense, there is a certain contradiction or opposition between love and truth, since only love unites, and truth separates or divides. Love and truth are two facets of the same reality; love and truth cannot be separated from each other. In Christ, incarnate love and truth coexist, they cannot be broken.

Afanassieff’s theory, and especially his Eucharistic ecclesiology, influenced the thinking of other Orthodox theologians in the diaspora. Among them, we must mention A. Schmemmann<sup>25</sup>, who adopted the concept of “Eucharistic ecclesiology”, which he adopted, with some modifications, in his theological conception. It should be noted in his position that, like Afanassieff, he no longer opposes the Eucharistic ecclesiology to universalist ecclesiology, but combines the two, stating that he bases universalist ecclesiology not on a legal basis but on a Eucharistic basis.

But the sense of universalism of the Church highlighted by Schmemmann opens the door to the acceptance of a certain primacy of the bishop of Rome<sup>26</sup>. In the vision of this theologian the Church is also the Eucharistic assembly, since the Church is the Body of Christ. Hence the authority of the bishop in the Church, in fact, the highest ecclesiastical authority, based on his charism to preside over the Eucharistic assembly and to make possible the celebration of the Eucharist. In Schmemmann’s view, this theological view is in opposition to Roman Catholic theology, according to which the power of the bishop does not emanate from the sacramental grace of the bishop, but is based on a power or right given by God to the bishop, independent of the grace of ordination or of the Eucharist. In conclusion, the universality of the Church is based on this non-sacramental power in the West.

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<sup>24</sup> N. AFANASSIEFF, “Una Sancta”, p. 470.

<sup>25</sup> Among his most important works in this regard are: *Euharistia – Taina Împărăției*, transl. Boris Răduleanu, Editura „Anastasia”, București, f. a.; *Aus der Freude leben*, translation into German of *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, Walter Verlag Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau, 1974; *Din apă și din Duh*, transl. Ion Buga, Editura Symbol, 1992; *Introducere în teologia liturgică*, transl. Vasile Bârzu, Editura “Sofia”, București 2002 (this work first appeared in New York in 1966, and the second English edition also appeared in New York in 1996); *Biserică, lume, misiune*, transl. Maria Vințeler, Editura “Reîntregirea”, Alba Iulia 2006.

<sup>26</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, “Biserica universală...”, p. 175.



“In the beginning Schmemmann fought this ecclesiological or supra-ecclesiological and supra-Eucharistic universalism, of a legal nature, which found an exaggerated expression in Catholic doctrine and in which the local Churches are considered component, inferior parts of the Universal Church, and bishops are component members and inferior to a college above which the pope sits”<sup>27</sup>.

The doctrine of a Eucharistic-universalist ecclesiology has theological and ecumenical values, which this theologian is not shy to point out. Only he gets out of here, to sketch a legal-universalist and primitive ecclesiology. He states that

“the Church is realized as an organism, as the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. But as the Eucharist is not a part of the Body of Christ, but the whole Christ, so the Church which is realized in the Eucharist is not a member or part of the whole, but the whole and indivisible Church of God, which is and manifests itself in every place. Where the Eucharist is the *whole* Church is, that is, all the people of God gathered in his bishop. In this perspective, the local Church, as a sacramental organism, as a gift of God made to men in Christ, is not a part, it is not a member of a larger local or universal organism: it is the Church”<sup>28</sup>.

Unlike Afanssiev, Schmemmann does not stop here when he speaks of the local Church, but he states that it must stand together with all the local Churches in the communion of faith and truth. Each local Church and all together, sitting in communion, constitutes that Church “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”.

Certain nuances would still be needed regarding the definition of the local Church and the truth in which they must stand, highlighting the precariousness of the simple statement about the Church as a Eucharistic community. Schmemmann is of the opinion that the primacy of the Bishop

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<sup>27</sup> D. STĂNILĂ, “Biserica universală...”, p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> A. SCHMEMMANN, “La notion de primauté dans l’ecclésiologie orthodoxe”, in: *La primauté de Pierre dans l’Église orthodoxe*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1960, p. 129.

of Rome is necessary for the preservation of the Churches in connection with faith and life, which, of course, cannot be accepted as a primacy of supreme power, but must not be reduced to an honorary presidency. The meaning of this primacy is rather to see that the local Churches guard and express their unity in faith and in life, not to allow the local Churches to isolate themselves from each other, to lose their universal vision<sup>29</sup>.

*Eucharistic communion or intercommunication* is a coordinate of theology related to the Eucharist, its meaning and purpose. During the last century, several attempts have been made by the theologians belonging to the various Churches to facilitate the rapprochement between them, going as far as to invite and accept the members of the other Church to the Eucharistic communion. Romanian theology, in general, was very reserved in terms of an easy communion between the Churches, without the existence of a communion or unity in the same apostolic faith. Father Stăniloae has theological thoughts of great theological finesse and beauty when he speaks of the necessity and meaning of sharing together in the Eucharistic Christ. Those who want to practice intercommunication will not really reach the true unity of the Church, because they

“remain separate in terms of their ecclesial faith and identity. But can you be united in Christ, on the one hand, and divided, on the other, to others? Can you think of important points differently than others, being with them in the same Christ? Or can you be fully in Christ with those who think of Him in many ways other than you? What else is communion with them in Christ, since you do not have the same thoughts about Him as those who claim to be in Him?”<sup>30</sup>

The communion with the Holy Sacraments expresses the reality and the profound unity of the Church, that is, of those who form the Body of Christ, as its living members, permanently connected with the Head of the Body of the Church – Christ. “The full unity that is achieved between believers and Christ through Holy Communion is prepared”, says St. Maximus the Confessor, “by the unity that is gradually achieved between believers and God, between their thoughts and divine Reason during the

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<sup>29</sup> A. SCHMEMANN, “La notion de primauté...”, p. 143 sq.

<sup>30</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, “În problema intercomuniunii”, p. 562.

Holy Mass”. The Gospel and the Symbol of Faith commonly confessed, before the Anaphora, are important moments in advancing the unity of the faith. For you cannot partake of the full Christ without believing in Him, in unity and fullness, with those who share with you in the same Christ<sup>31</sup>. The communion of common thoughts, feelings and will is a kind of premise of the communion in Christ, Who wants to draw all to unity with Himself and among themselves. The unity achieved through the Eucharist does not come

“as a common physical essence, in those who share, or among themselves, but as a crowning of the spiritual unity of thoughts and love, to which the faithful have grown, through the Holy Spirit, praying together on God, praising Him in common, jointly confessing the same faith, bringing the common offering of bread and wine. They have prepared themselves to be «a Body and a Spirit» with Christ”<sup>32</sup>.

The Eucharistic communion in Orthodox teaching is in solidarity with the unity and fullness of the faith, having the conviction that in the Eucharist we share in ourselves the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, as the true God and the true Man, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the Church represents an ontological unity and communion of Christians with Christ in the Holy Spirit and between them. Father Stăniloae strongly emphasizes the arguments that to share in the crucified, risen, and ascended to heaven, we must be in the unity of faith in Christ.

“Without unity in faith and without a Church in this sense, such a Eucharistic communion could not be achieved. The Church, the extended body of the incarnate Word, continues to feed on the Eucharist, but it is given from the beginning as such an extended body of the incarnate Word in which He continues to offer Himself as food as a personal body to those who are part of His extended body or want to be part of Him”<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Dumitru RADU, “Caracterul ecleziologic al Sfințelor Taine și problema comuniunii”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXX (1978) 2, p. 357.

<sup>32</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, “Teologia Euharistiei”, p. 359.

<sup>33</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, “În problema intercomuniunii”, p. 564.

The Eucharistic communion means a coronation and a confirmation of the unity of faith of the members of the Church, on the one hand, but also a deepening of this communion of Church faith, on the other. In this way, there is an indestructible link between Eucharistic communion, communion in faith and ecclesial communion, each of the three types of communion, involving, confirming, and supporting the other two. And in this one can see the richness, depth, and beauty of Orthodoxy.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Romanian Orthodoxy and, with it, Romanian Orthodox Theology have the opportunity this year (but, in fact, this is a permanent mission of Orthodox theology) to reflect with the utmost care and responsibility on the Sacrament of the Eucharist and Confession, as Sacraments of the Church, and how Jesus Christ, who is exalted to heaven at the right hand of the Father, is with His Church until the end of the ages, and especially through the Sacraments of the Church. In these pages we have referred to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, in the context of some theological debates, which have created a certain creative effervescence, starting with the second half of the last century and until today. At the same time, we have tried to briefly describe some of Father D. Stăniloae's theological contributions in this regard.

I have shown above what is the place and significance of the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the context of the other Sacraments of the Church, and how it relates to each of them. The common foundation of all the Sacraments was highlighted, but then the specificity of each of them was highlighted, and the relation of this specificity to the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of all the Mysteries, but this foundation is put in a special light by the Eucharist, as an update, by the power of the Holy Spirit, of the essential saving acts of Christ. Through His Sacrifice and Resurrection, which become accessible to all people in the Eucharist of the Church, Jesus Christ draws the members of His Mysterious Body, the Church, to share in them and live them existentially in the life of the Church and the world.

In this way, Jesus Christ draws the Church – His Body – into a permanent dialogue with it. He unites himself with the Church and with each of its members, through the Eucharist, but He always remains the One Who is always above her, drawing her higher and higher on the ladder of communion with Himself, and thereby with the Holy Trinity.

The Eucharistic communion cannot take place under any conditions, but only as far as the believers are first in the communion of the faith, confessing with a thought and a heart “the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. The unity of the faith is the sine qua non of the true communion of the Eucharistic Christ.

The theological debate I mentioned about the Eucharist has profound ecclesiological implications, for the Eucharist itself has a major ecclesiological dimension. During these debates, several theories related to the Eucharist or the so-called ecclesiological and Eucharistic theories were formulated, the echoes of which can still be heard to this day. Father Staniloae himself was concerned about them, trying to give some useful answers in such a theological debate. Among these Eucharistic and ecclesiological theories were mentioned the Eucharistic ecclesologies formulated by theologians: N. Afanssieff, A. Schmemmann, J. Zizioulas, but also the complex issue of intercommunication or the Eucharistic communion itself.

The fact that Orthodoxy cannot accept intercommunication under any circumstances does not mean a lack of love for people on its part, but rather its great responsibility for the precious treasure entrusted to it by Christ, more precisely, on Himself, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as a means of the maximum personal encounter and union of Christ with us, with His Church, and, at the same time, of the members of the Church among themselves. Through this, the Church is always constituted and consolidated, as a source of permanent irradiation of the love and life of Christ towards all humanity and creation.