

ECUMENICALLY MINDED IN A TRADITIONALIST SOCIETY OR TRADITIONALLY FORMED IN AN ECUMENICAL WORLD

Ecumenicity has been a feature of the Church since the moment of the Pentecost, when Christ's message was shared to receivers from the different cultures of the world, in many languages. It has been variously expressed through the centuries, a fact which has not created more unity, but constant fractioning. Ecumenical dialogue was institutionalised because it was widely believed that division compromised the Gospel.

Today, ecumenical dialogue is pursued against a very complex political and social background: we witness on the one hand the advance of globalisation and, on the other, war, violence and conflict for which often religious motives are claimed. If one adds the irreversible mutations that the planet is undergoing as a result of climate change and mass social phenomena, such as migration, a picture of common responsibility emerges. The ecumenism of the 1940-60s, enthusiastic and assertive, now undergoes crisis and change that ought to enable it to face the local and international issues, on which the Church must provide guidance. This presentation will be confined to highlighting several aspects of the pre-ecumenical identity of Orthodoxy¹, from a rather personal perspective, its ecumenical vocation in the contemporary world and the difficulties that could prevent it from promoting inter-confessional dialogue.

The Orthodox Church is engaged in international ecumenical dialogue at all levels. The autocephalous organisation entitles each local Church to make its own decisions independently from the others, without bearing on interchurch relations.² While it is united in the statement of faith, Orthodoxy has not always been able to also project "operational unity, clearly visible at historical moments"³, but this is an issue for the

¹ We would like to emphasise that by "Orthodox" we never mean traditionalist, ultra-traditionalist, nationalist or other connotations that have emerged in various languages, but refer to the doctrine of the Orthodox Church, by which we designate the Eastern Church. We speak of the faith of the Ecumenical Councils to which now belong local Churches such as the Greek Church, including Mt Athos, the Russian Church, the Serbian Church, the Romanian Church, the Bulgarian Church, and their diasporas around the world. The honorary primate of the Orthodox Church is the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), but *de facto* each local Church has a collegiate leadership presided over by a Patriarch.

² Some Orthodox Churches withdrew from the ecumenical movement under pressure from forces among the younger members of hierarchy in the Church. Their motivation is faithfulness to the old tradition and the scepticism toward any human construction, including the inter-confessional structures, and the belief that the leaders of the ecumenical movement have shown inconsistency in their programmes and a lack of vision in which God should hold the central place.

³ Radu Preda, "De la apologie la lobby" (From Apologetics to Lobby), in the collective volume *Un suflet pentru Europa. Dimensiunea religioasă a unui proiect politic (A Soul for Europe. Religious Dimension of a Political Project)*, Anastasia, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 189.

agenda of future pan-Orthodox assemblies. After centuries of divisions, the 20th century, marked by intense ecumenical dialogue, yielded many results in terms of the Churches' better mutual knowledge and participation in dialogue. In the 20th century the first efforts were made towards eliminating the cliché of Western and Eastern Christianity as two entities antagonistic in their attitude and content: the Western, guided by Christologically oriented theology and the Eastern, founded on the Trinitarian theology, expressed pneumatologically.⁴ This led to the view of the West as excessively judicial, accurate, scientific, rationalistic, and uncompromising, and the East as conciliatory, forgiving, accommodating, spiritual, mystical and focused on living the faith. The new political reality in 21st-century Europe requires us to reconsider such clichés and tone down exaggerations that do not benefit the inhabitants of the continent. As members of the European Union, Romania and Bulgaria have the opportunity to introduce Orthodoxy in the West and hope to contribute to the changes in the political, economical and ecumenical paradigm. The conditions of freedom and democracy guaranteed by the present state system help them to develop free dialogue, without outside pressures, as was the case of the ecumenism politically initiated, sponsored and controlled during the communist years, through the well-known Interconfessional conferences, held before 1989.⁵ In the new European political context, the Churches in the two countries cannot and do not want to be isolated from initiatives that may promote the chances of their specific witness in an enlarged Europe.

“Called to be the One Church”. Unity as a desideratum

The ecclesiological document with the title quoted above, proposed by the 9th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches to be reflected on by the member Churches, shows their desire to be the “One Church” in an international sense. Christian unity is the fruit of God’s work, when he is not impeded by people. Christ prayed for unity (John 17: 21), His Church prays for unity incessantly and it formulated its first dogmatic, canonical and disciplinary decisions, focused on unity, during the whole ecumenical period of synods involving all Christendom. The apostle’s witness (*martiria*) is one of unity, expounded in the writings of the Church Fathers and actualised or spread in the world through the hierarchy of apostolic succession. The Orthodox Church has only produced and celebrated services and prayers for unity and peace. All discord is not from God, and Jesus firmly kept in check any movement towards disunity among the Apostles (Matthew 20: 21-28).

I noted above that the Orthodox Church consists of local autocephalous Churches. Their autocephaly is not a plurality independent from the will of Christ the founder, but the witness of the Gospel in a given geographical context in conciliary communion. Orthodox conciliarity is expressed by liturgical meetings or synaxes that proclaim unity. These ways of expressing the unity, apostolicity, conciliarity and holiness of the Church constituted the main elements of the dogmatic formulations, the liturgical

⁴ Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation. Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements*, WCC Publications, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2000, p. 57 sq.

⁵ Huub Vogelaar, “An Ecumenical Journey in Romania: Orthodox Protestant Relationships since 1989”, in the *Research Annuals of Al. I. Cuza University of Iași*, tome XI, 2006, p. 482.

practice, and the canonical and missionary organisation in the early Christian centuries, i. e. what is now known as the Church Tradition.

Since it is an aim of the Lord Saviour, unity must be the main focus of every Church. From a current ecumenical perspective, one can refer to the unity of the baptism made in the name of the Holy Trinity, yet this unity is not similar to that before the great schism, as it does not involve partaking communion from the same chalice and is not reflected in the “visible union of the Churches”. The Ecumenical Patriarch⁶ Batholomew I recently stated that confessional unity is the sign of genuine commitment on the way towards symphonic or ecumenical unity within Christianity: “Whoever does not support the unity of Orthodoxy cannot claim sincere and constructive participation in ecumenical dialogue”.⁷ By extrapolation, this statement is also valid in the Churches of the Reformation. The Orthodox faithful does not pray only for those who share his confession, but also “for the peace of the whole world, for the stability of the holy churches of God, and for the unity of all.”⁸ The peace and unity of the Liturgies of St John Chrysostomos and St Basil the Great (4th c. AD) became the ideals of the world ecumenical movement at the turn of the 20th century. In the post-comunist societies, the unity of Orthodoxy rests on three pillars that constitute the “*ecclesia domestica*” (the Church of home): the family, the school and the parish. These are the institutions that provide religious education and their declining status is not just a sociological or cultural matter but also a vital and religious one. Religious life requires then to keep the light of baptism burning, which is symbolised in worship by the candle lit in the church. That is why the candle is used at the most important moments in life: when praying, when receiving the Holy Communion, at Easter, at baptism and at the funeral service, hence in everything that prepares one’s entrance into the light of resurrection.

Tradition as faithfulness in Christian life

Tradition is the legacy of the guidance, worship and spiritual life formulated by the Church through the Ecumenical Synods, which passes on faithfully the teaching of the Saviour Jesus Christ. Orthodoxy makes a distinction between the Holy Tradition, the repository of the Revelation, together with the Scriptures, which extends to the 8th century and the dynamic tradition, i. e. the subsequent theological formulations and developments that help the faithful in their genuine experience of the Gospel. Tradition is ecumenical, and ecumenicity is its chief feature. The Patriarch of Constantinople did not become “ecumenical” in order to demarcate a geographical area, but to guarantee the unity of Christianity and the uniformity of the Gospel in all the inhabited world

⁶ As has been reported in the media, a recent ruling by a Turkish court has prohibited the use of the title “ecumenical” to the Patriarch of Constantinople, a fact that underlines even more the need for Christian cohesion.

⁷ Interview with Dr. Ștefan Toma, in *Telegraful Român*, year 155, no. 15-16/15 April 2007, p. 7.

⁸ Formula used in the Great Litany, chanted at every service in Orthodox worship. See *Liturghierul (Book of Holy Eucharist)*, EIBMBOR, București, 1995, p. 118.

(*oikoumene*). The “ecumenical” Church was from the earliest times called “Heaven on earth” as it celebrates the eucharistic experience of a world that undergoes unification and transfiguration; in the “ecumenical” Church, the work and sacrifice of Christ for the world are constantly actualised as a factual, not ceremonious reality. In Orthodoxy tradition is expressed in worship, the expression of the beautiful experience of the Gospel through chanting and communion, because worship prefigures the kingdom of God. The biblical truth of faith was first expressed in worship, then formulated as a dogma to provide the criteria of salvation to those who seek God.

As long as the goal of all Christians is to serve God and achieve personal salvation, their work begins with the “Eucharist” or the “public thanksgiving”. According to a Russian theologian, “prayer is the path to God.”⁹ Communal prayer means entering into communion with the heavenly Church, comprising those who lived on earth and now form the “communion of the saints”. For this reason the faithful must never feel alone in prayer. Populating the walls of the churches with frescoes of the saints is at once a fruit of the piety of those who painted them and a coming together of the heavenly and the visible world. In the saint the material becomes spiritual through virtue and divine grace. In prayer, one comes nearer to the models of sanctity and becomes aware of one’s own belonging to God’s great family. The one who believes experiences the truth of the eternal life in the Liturgy, which is the only time when the one can feel like the angels, for that is the time one must abandon “all earthly concerns”.¹⁰

Personhood is another focus of Orthodox theology. The human person is integrated in theology day by day not only in ceremonies. It manifests its religiousness in all the moments of existence. For this reason the participation in Orthodox worship does not require special conditions on the part of the worshipper: every one is welcome as they are, regardless of their social standing, moral stature or age. Worship eternizes the presence of Christ among people according to the biblical model. He continues to speak, to heal and to help as he is God. In the traditional Orthodox milieu, one’s personal life is not independent from one’s faith and one does not have just an occasional interest in Church ceremonies; one experiences the gift of faith in communion on a permanent basis.

Closely related to the issue of the human person is the focus on the environment of human life. Since the earliest times, Orthodoxy has experienced, individually practised, rigorous ascetism. The obligation to abide by a discipline of life is not restricted to certain members of the religious community or order. This is perhaps the reason why there are no monastic orders, but monastic and married clergy. True Christians are

⁹ Ignatie Briancianinov, *Despre Rugăciunea lui Iisus: experiențe extatice (On Jesus Prayer : Extatic Experiences)*, Volume One, translated from Russian by Adrian and Xenia Tănăsescu Vlas, Cartea Ortodoxă, București, 2004, p. 168.

¹⁰ Rev. Prof. Ion Bria, “Spre plinirea Evangheliei”. *Dincolo de apărarea Ortodoxiei: exegeza și transmiterea Tradiției (For the Fulfillment of the Gospel. Beyond the Defence of Orthodoxy: Exegesis and the Transmission of Tradition)*, Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2002, p. 134.

aware that they were placed in the midst of creation, in relation to which they have certain obligations, the greatest being that of transfiguring and bringing creation back to the Creator. The aim of the discipline achieved by practising fasting and charity is to test one's will, to reject overindulgence in food and bodily gratification and to ensure careful use of the vital resources within the creation. This demonstrates a realistic approach of the created, of the good and the evil that are present in the world, the aim being the integration of the natural environment in the spiritual process of salvation. The integrity of creation results in a concern for the integrity of the Church as secret Body of Christ extended in the world and as an institution of divine origin that makes use of an organised structure. The Church is organised empirically, according to human norms and criteria, yet even as a human institution it reflects the divine principles as foundation and object of mission. The Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic not because this is what Orthodoxy chooses, but because this is the will of its Head, Christ. Its "catholicity" is comprehensive not geographical. This shows how the Orthodox Church embodied in local Churches has a fully universal character.

The Church is guided towards salvation by Christ through the Holy Spirit who is the source of grace. According to Orthodox teaching, grace is an uncreated energy, originating in the One divine person, being shared to the Church through the Holy Sacraments, as the Church progresses towards *eschaton*. The Church is a bringer of hope, thanks to the extent of its work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit and to the eschatological purpose of its mission. Grace is the *sine qua non* condition on which the human person is restored in full communion with God and can "receive the right to eat from the tree of life" (Revelation 2: 7). One can then realise that the tradition of the Church is not unilaterally Christological, but involves the participation through grace in the Trinitarian life.

The human being is not historically independent from Christ. The link between God's world and the human world was restored by Christ through Mary, hence the importance of Mariology, in close connection with ecclesiology. Without Mary the believer may claim philosophic fulfilment but will fail to grasp the material nature of Christ who became human and will not share in His life and sacrifice. Through her will (Luke 1: 38), the inexpressible and ineffable transcendence of the Old Testament is humanised and causes God to be present in the world and in the human life as a personal experience. Thanks to Mary, the faithful has the permanent liturgical experience of resurrection as an act of Christ's benevolent omnipotence. The role of Mary is symbolically highlighted by her being painted on the altar apse, bearing the Infant Christ in a medallion on her chest, a symbol of Christ-bearing Humanity. The sphere of Tradition also includes the worship of saints and icons, which determine a specific anthropology: the human person is the image (*eikona*) of Christ, Who is the image of God (Philippians 2: 6 – 11). Human nature is historically sanctified through and in the Church, through the Holy Sacraments. The role of the Church is not primarily to change the behaviour of the people, but to give them the freedom to become children of God, by choosing independence from the created things and becoming aware of man's superiority as master, prophet and servant of creation. Asceticism is the means to exercise the power to become detached from material

things. Only through asceticism can man realise that God's love is more important than matter. Most of the saints were great ascetics; they did not hate matter, but sanctified it and offered it as a gift of Liturgy.

Given that the aspects mentioned above are among the features of the Church tradition, it is not surprising that in the 21st century there is a movement towards rediscovering genuine tradition (and traditions), which in the latter half of the 20th century was suppressed or distorted in a series of works, often making sarcastic or even denigrating statements about the "Orthodox world" or the "Balkan area".¹¹

Globalisation, uniformisation and Orthodox identity

The European Union is now more rich and more diverse from a religious point of view with the membership of 25 million Orthodox. This poses a challenge both for the political and social world and for the religious one, too. The Christian voice must be heard at the highest levels of European fora on issues that call for consensus with the rest of European Christianity. It is not an unproblematic time, as the Metropolitan Daniel of Moldavia and Bucovina highlighted in the Christmas Pastoral Address in 2006: "The European Union is an area of religious indifference and secularisation, understood as life without personal or communal prayer." A first shortcoming besides those related to deviations from Christian moral, was thus highlighted before Romania's full accession. The European enlargement makes globalisation an irreversible process, associated with uniformisation and levelling of ethnic, cultural and religious identity. It does have many positive effects, but besides these there is conspicuous lack of compassion for particular human problems and for the human community in general, which are the object of the Churches' ministries.¹² As a world reality, globalisation stands for "associated with free-market economics and the consumer culture promoted throughout the world by commercial media", as stated by the WCC General Secretary, pastor Samuel Kobia. He adds: "conveyed and defended by militarised western powers", this form of globalisation includes trends towards economic and social Darwinism of a dog-eat-dog world."¹³

Under the circumstances (tradition values versus globalisation values) one can understand why some have been suspicious of Orthodoxy and have labelled it an obstacle on the way to modernisation and social emancipation. Such prejudice went so far that, in 2006, Western politicians could declare that "The Europe ends where Orthodoxy begins". Genuine ecumenical relations would have helped many lay people

¹¹ Rev. Prof. Ion Bria, *Spre plinirea Evangheliei...*, p. 5.

¹² Rev. Prof. Constantin Rus, "De la participare la parteneriat. Bisericile Ortodoxe în Consiliul Ecumenic al Bisericilor" [From participation to partnership. The Orthodox Churches in the World Council of Churches], in volume *Simpozionul internațional: Ortodoxia Românească și rolul ei în mișcarea ecumenică (International Symposium: Romanian Orthodoxy and its Role in the Ecumenical Movement)*, Vasiliana 98, Constanța, 2006, p. 33.

¹³ In an address delivered in India, February 2007, www.oikoumene.org

to evaluate fairly an Apostolic faith such as Orthodoxy. The statement is a result of partial knowledge and also of the subjectivity of the mediaeval Western theology that presented it in simplistic manner as an institution of liturgical anachronism.

Another prejudice regarding Orthodoxy is the notion of ascetic and spiritual maximalism. It is claimed that severe, frugal life would be the only path to God, not only for monastics but also for the laity. Asceticism is also supposedly supplemented by dogmatic radicalism, which makes some people who are unfamiliar with Orthodox spirituality consider that membership of this Church directly involves a touch of fundamentalism. In a recent article, Elisabeth Ber Siegl wrote that in the West Orthodoxy is treated as “Religious nationalism, primitive anti-Western attitude, integrism and obscurantism”. Further claims refer to the patriarchal organisation and the relations between the hierarchy and the faithful lay people. This picture is fuelled, and therefore partly justified, by the anti-Western stance of certain conservative Orthodox circles. They consider that globalisation is a satanic work and ecumenism an ecclesiological heresy that corrupts the qualities of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.¹⁴ Through ecclesiology, it would also affect apostolic teachings such as the teaching about grace¹⁵, about the possibility of holiness, about divine hierarchy and others. To give an insight into the tone of these conservative circles, I will quote a remark about the Orthodox participation in the European Ecumenical Assembly, held on 4 – 9 September 2007 in Sibiu: “Let us pray that God will protect us from the renewal of the right faith and hope that our Church hierarchs who have planned the Assembly be guarded by the demons of “renewal” that will be brought along by the swarm of heretic leaders from across Europe, who will congregate in Sibiu this autumn”.¹⁶

One must therefore conclude that Orthodoxy must be known as it actually is, not through the prism of prejudice. Its virtue is not anachronism but the capacity to preserve the identity of communities by incorporating their culture in the liturgy, even in the midst of the process of globalisation. It goes along the lines of the initial goals of the founders of the European Union who in the 1970 declared: “We do not align nations, we unite people” or “When the cultural and spiritual identity declines the Union can no longer be called ‘european’”.

Given the importance of the person in Orthodoxy, the popular culture predominant in the West and exported all over the world through consumer goods, media and entertainment, is now being questioned. Orthodoxy advocates international action, but only for the purpose of evangelisation and of spreading the Good News. All the

¹⁴ See the *Athonite Letter*, on www.credo.ro, checked on 12 July 2007.

¹⁵ An attempt to re-consider the role of the grace in the the contemporary theology was made by the VIIIth General Assembly of WCC in Canberra. It eventually failed given the different understanding from the Free Churches of the Spiritm which led to a tension inthe relationships among the Free Churches and the traditionalism that determined the constitution of the Special Commission of WCC for Dialogue with the Orthodox.

¹⁶ See www.ortodoxie-ecumenism.com.

experiences of preaching Christ according to imperialist criteria have proven to be utter failures and sad moments in the life of the Church that promoted them. Orthodoxy has the gift of not imposing one culture over another, through the Gospel, but of incorporating their culture in the liturgy without a loss of identity.

Orthodoxy – a faith of dialogue?

In light of the above statements, this appears as a legitimate question. The answer is a firm “Yes! It is a faith of dialogue!”, with the amendments made by Fr. Staniloae ever since the 1980s. He noted that the future role of Orthodoxy depended on three factors:

1. The fidelity to Christ, expressed in the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition, eternally experienced in the Church;
2. The accountability to the faithful of the particular time when theology is pursued;
3. The openness to the eschatological future, i. e. the fulfilment of the faithful and the concern for the deification of matter.

In its ecumenical engagement, Orthodoxy has proven that it possesses the essential elements for the dialogue with the other historical Christian Churches, when dialogue is undertaken in a spirit of honesty and love for Christ. In the dialogue with the Roman-Catholic Church convergence points are found that go back to the theological experience of the first millennium, of the Church of the Synods and of shared history. Such convergence refers to the patristic tradition of the seven Ecumenical Synods, the sacramental doctrine and practice, the apostolic succession of episcopacy and priesthood, the existence of common martyrs, ecclesiological convergence, the lifting of the 1054 anathema. It is worthwhile recalling a statement of the Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna: “Faith is generally the same, what is different is the place of the Pope of Rome in the hierarchy of Christianity”.¹⁷

The attempts at dialogue with the Roman-Catholic Church after the schism, with the famous councils of Lyon (1274) and Ferrara-Florence (1438-1439), failed because the basis of dialogue was not the search for Christian unity, but political and military reasons. The two Churches developed in parallel, constantly growing apart, so that the experience of the separation was most keenly felt in the 20th century, when the anathema was mutually lifted. Major obstacles in ecumenical witness included the crusades, the establishment of Latin patriarchates in the West and a certain „ form of „ecumenism”, practised by Rome, which led to social and religious turmoil and the emergence of the Uniate or Greek Catholic Church. Hilarion Alfeiev, the Russian Orthodox bishop of Vienna considers that the stalemate in the dialogue with the Vatican is due to the positive interpretation that Vatican gives to the uniate method. Although there are many theological points of convergence, the dialogue with the

¹⁷ Rev. Constantin Coman on www.ortodoxie-catholicism.ro/category/ortodoxie/ecumenism.

Catholic is difficult because there remain obstacles in understanding divergent theological perspectives, “historically accumulated and politically manipulated.”¹⁸

In relation to the Protestant Churches, Orthodoxy manifested openness ever since the 17th century with the famous correspondence between the Patriarch Jeremiah of Constantinople and Protestant theologians from Tübingen. There are elements that can be explored in common by the Churches. This explains the decision of Orthodox Churches to join the predominantly Protestant World Council of Churches in 1961, at the Third General Assembly in New Delhi. Among the convergence points with Protestantism, one should mention the theology of the Holy Spirit, the concept of local Church, the relationship between Gospel and culture, the search for visible unity in theological plurality.¹⁹ The dialogue with the Churches of the Reformation seems therefore to be more accessible as there are many aspects that need to be rediscovered and mutually shared.²⁰

Beyond these general aspects, there are certain obstacles in the modern world that prevent productive ecumenical dialogue. According to the Catholic Archbishop of London, Murphy O’Connor, they are distrust, apathy and impatience.²¹ Distrust is the fruit of ignorance. It is fuelled by the fear of contamination and sustained by radical confessionalism. Consequently, the opportunities for dialogue are avoided and the other confessions are presented in terms of their differences from one’s own confession. The Romanian theologian Ion Bria considers that true dialogue between the West and the East will only be possible when “provocative and exclusivist representations” will stop.²²

Apathy is caused by the fact that, individually, everyone tends to use the faith in proportion to their own spiritual needs, according to the market economy mentality. Apathy feeds on the frustration caused by the failure to solve certain problems in the dialogue, in an ecumenical pilgrimage that has been going on for almost a century. After the General Assembly in Porto Alegre there has been much talk of an “ecumenical spirituality”, intended as an impetus for the coming together of the Churches, apparently against generalised apathy. Although it is biblical, ecumenical spirituality is deficient, due to the lack of interest in the Holy Scriptures and an increased unilateral interest in political and social issues where ecumenical dialogue often seeks refuge. There is diminishing focus on theology, on inter-community, on understanding God’s plan, which has caused modern man to be reluctant to the ideal of Christian unity.

¹⁸ Bogdan Tătaru Cazaban, “Pentru un ecumenism al contemplativilor”, în volumul colectiv *Un suflet pentru Europa. Dimensiunea religioasă a unui proiect politic*, Anastasia, București 2005, p. 189.

¹⁹ Rev. Prof. Ion Bria, *Ortodoxia în Europa. Locul spiritualității române (Orthodoxy in Europe. The Place of Romanian Spirituality)*, Trinitas, Iași, pp. 155-156.

²⁰ Bogdan Tătaru Cazaban, *art. cit.*, p. 189.

²¹ Donato Giordano, “Le prospettive dell’ecumenismo e del dialogo in Italia”, in *Odigos* (XXVI), no. 1/2007, p. 20

²² Rev. Prof. Ion Bria, *Spre plinirea Evangheliei...*, p. 122.

Finally, impatience is characteristic of the enthusiasts who want to see unity accomplished, by casually overcoming specific differences. This attitude can lead to more problems than solutions. The ecumenical pilgrimage is long and strenuous and involves a thorough understanding of the mystery of Christ. Diplomatic and ecclesial compromise risks causing more difficulties, which is why honest and open dialogue must be preferred. From the Orthodox perspective, the ecumenical movement is not called to build a new Church or a super-Church, but to provide an environment for theological dialogue and exchange between cultures, communities and peoples.²³ Unfortunately, viewed from the East, it involves actions, documents and official relations, at national and international official and clerical level, which at grass roots level are perceived as everyday news.

Challenges and risks of institutional ecumenism

Spiritual life is a victim of the phenomenon of laicisation and desacralisation of the modern society. Through the instruments it employs, its guiding ideas, focus and language, ecumenism follows the same line. At ecumenical conferences, the Orthodox have emphasised that personal faith must not be replaced with social activism. The main focus of Christians must be mission as evangelisation or re-evangelisation and not the substitution of civil organisations. For the Christian Orthodox, the Church is the environment, the place and the state of prayer and of meeting with God. This explains why even in relatively poor areas people are very generous and sacrificial when it comes to contributing to the building of a church.

Some Orthodox do not accept ecumenism because they do not see the connection between “prayer, mystic silence, the celebration of the Eucharist and the abolishment of the death penalty, debt relief for poor countries, consumer society, women’s cultural and political rights; between fasting, voluntary poverty and the accumulation of wealth.”²⁴ The excessive focus on economic, political, ecological or sexual issues causes inner void and outer excentrism. The fear of “contamination” explains the reservations of certain Orthodox milieus as regards their involvement in wide-ranging ecumenical action.

Laicisation also leads to a tendency to promote spirituality without religion, in which metaphysical search becomes a personal issue. Spirituality, it is now claimed, has dethroned religion. There are various forms of such “privatisation of religious life”, where God is received and “formatted” but the Church or any similar institution has no place. The hunger for the new and the exotic apparently makes any kind of spirituality

²³ Rev. Prof. Constantin Rus, “De la participare la parteneriat. Bisericile Ortodoxe în Consiliul Ecumenic al Bisericilor” [From participation to partnership. The Orthodox Churches in the World Council of Churches], in the volume *Simpozionul internațional: Ortodoxia Românească și rolul ei în mișcarea ecumenică (International Symposium: Romanian Orthodoxy and its Role in the Ecumenical Movement)*, Vasiliana 98, Constanța, 2006, p. 32.

²⁴ Rev. Prof. Ion Bria, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

to be substituted to the Christian one. As we noted above, of crucial importance in Christian life is the Trinitarian spirituality expressed pneumatologically throughout the Church tradition.

A major risk is the tendency to promote activist, circumstantial ecumenism that lacks genuine spirituality. It disrupts not only the mission of ecumenical institutions but also that of the local Church, its actual *raison d'être*. Being ecumenical does not necessitate calculations, does not depend on the social and political progress of a particular system, but is a sincere conviction coming from a purified heart. It is a state of humility and desire for Communion. According to the Bulgarian theologian Emil Traycev, the beginning of authentic ecumenism lies in “the voluntary acknowledgment of human failing, which leads one to the need of Eucharistic communion with Christ and with the others.”²⁵ In other words, when detached from the Church’s liturgical experience, when lacking sincere *metanoia* and Eucharistic *koinonia*, ecumenism can be easily mistaken for just a department for ecclesial diplomacy.

Another aspect that causes concern among the Orthodox with respect to the object of ecumenical dialogue was highlighted by the 7th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Canberra. For the first time the theme of the assembly referred to pneumatology, yet Orthodox participants were surprised by the confusion that prominent new-protestant theologians made between the Person of the Holy Spirit and “spirits” of animistic type, going flagrantly against the Church’s millenarian tradition. Further anxieties included the propensity towards syncretism, the inclusive language, pressures from feminist movements and the increasing place of sexual minorities. For the first time the Orthodox realised that in ecumenical milieus their voice had not been considered, due to them being a minority in decision-making bodies. Canberra marked the start of a series of unilateral decisions from the Orthodox, some Churches, such as the Georgian and the Bulgarian choosing to leave WCC, while the Russian Church reconsidered its participation in voting sessions in its capacity as voting member. Orthodox in general adopted after that moment a more reserved attitude in relation to certain topics.

Orthodox anxiety regarding ecumenical themes also focuses on the risk of syncretism and relativisation of the doctrinal foundations of apostolic Christianity. It is not unexpected that, while in many cases ecumenism led to unifying actions among Churches from the same family, it has also had contrary effects, the Orthodox milieu being particularly affected. One can identify two directions in the Orthodox Church, the pro-ecumenical and anti-ecumenical, the former being keenly focused on the new, on dialogue and on originality, the latter remaining faithful to the apostolic truth. To a lesser extent this situation applies at inter-Church level, where certain Orthodox Churches are manifest more openness to dialogue and others are wary of the results of such dialogue.

²⁵ Emil Traycev, “A Symphony of Hearts”, in the volume *Simpozionul internațional: Ortodoxia Românească și rolul ei în mișcarea ecumenică (International Symposium: Romanian Orthodoxy and its Role in the Ecumenical Movement)*, Vasiliana 98, Constanța, 2006, p. 20.

Orthodoxy is needed in ecumenism

There have been many articles detailing the Orthodox contribution to the ecumenical movement, which is why we will not concentrate on this aspect.²⁶ There has been mutual contribution, which is primarily beneficial to the faithful. During the communist regime, the participation of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical dialogue was facilitated most likely by their opposition to militant atheism. Ecumenism was the hand that the Churches in the West extended to the Orthodox Churches confined behind the “iron curtain” and provided a milieu for the Orthodox to express themselves even partially freely. Then, Orthodox theologians were educated in a spirit of mutual understanding and dialogue, the disadvantaged social groups were helped and the Church could rely on foreign support.

The freedom brought by the changes in Eastern Europe caused fundamental shifts, from government to the freedom of belief and expression. In promoting ecumenical attitude after 1990 a key role was held by newly established schools of theology and the introduction of religious education in public education. The teaching of religion has provided a unique opportunity for pupils to be genuinely informed, in irenic spirit, about the other religions and denominations. However, results have been modest since there is no common syllabus for ecumenical formation. The teaching of religion on a confessional basis causes the results to be dependent on the teacher and the priest or pastor, and on their qualification and openness to dialogue. There exists self-criticism in this area, as that made by Rev. Viorel Ionita, Director for studies within the Conference of European Churches who pointed out, in the article ‘Churches and Ecumenism in the present Romania’²⁷, that there is not a consistent plan for the teaching of ecumenism in the 14 Faculties of theology of Romania: ‘We cannot evaluate how ecumenism is taught in these theological academies, and even less we are able to determine what is said about the image of the others. But we do know that the subject of ecumenism has a low priority. If lectured it is done from an apologetic perspective. The intention is mainly not to learn from the others, but to affirm one’s own identity’.²⁸ The critique of this marginal position of the subject ecumenism in theological faculties does not refer only to the Romanian situation. It can nowadays be found all over Europe. It is generally known that the professors who teach the subject are, as a rule, systematic theologians, who tend not to search for connection points among the Christian traditions.” Many of the decision-makers in education are steadfast in their attitude towards any type of ecumenism, which they assimilate to the “art of confessional compromise”.

²⁶ An article on this issue, Dr. Daniel Ciobotea, “Le témoignage orthodoxe dans le Mouvement Oecuménique”, in *Nouvelles de l’Eglise Orthodoxe Roumaine*, XIX, no. 6/1988, pp. 61-65 and no. 1/1989, pp. 48-53.

²⁷ Viorel Ionita, “Kirchen und Ökumene im heutigen Rumänien”, *Glaube in der 2. Welt* 29/7-8, (2001), pp. 12-17.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

A second factor that facilitates and encourages mutually revealing dialogue is the migration of people from former communist countries to the West and also the mobility of European citizens in general, such as foreign investors in the East European business environment. Thus people come into contact with members of other Churches, which prompts them to ask questions that they never considered while living in a monochrome religious environment. Some of them are former nominal Christians who develop an interest in religious life and become more aware of their own identity thanks to the comparison with others. When their religious needs are met in another Church, they experience a feeling of familiarity and mutual understanding with its members. In practice, nowadays there is no reference to East and West in Europe, partly owing to the contribution of practical ecumenism, which welcomes, provides aid and witness and seems to overtake institutionalised theological ecumenism.

The need for confessional identity is an important factor in the dialogue with other religions. The awareness of one's own religious tradition diminishes damaging relativism. It is known that certain aspects of this relativism were the chief motives for disputes, separations and schisms. The awareness of the personal identities of participants in discussions give a real and irenic importance to dialogue.

Orthodoxy in the ecumenical world: a self-critical perspective

Beyond the official Orthodox position in relation to the other denominations, within itself there is a growing gap between Orthodoxy as a tradition and the Christian Orthodox faithful who experiences the tradition. Orthodoxy has sometimes been presented in triumphant tone. It has been condescending and critical of the fallen West, whose theology developed chaotically after the schism of 1054 and which gave rise to Enlightenment and Rationalism, desacralising the human society. Orthodoxy has not been free from similar influences which, though not affecting its essence, affect Church members in equal measure. Religious indifference, rationalism and agnosticism, the movement towards syncretism and indistinct spirituality are nowadays present in traditionally Orthodox milieus. Their incidence is increasing as social differences emerge and in proportion to one's freedom to choose and to express oneself. Therefore a self-critical assessment of Orthodox mission may benefit its engagement in the ecumenical movement.

Regarded as "holy" and placed alongside the Scriptures, Tradition is often mistaken for superstitions, while dogma is confused with theological opinion or pious yet superficial ideas. The confrontational attitude towards other Christian denominations, the theology built on the "words" of the Church Fathers (quoted randomly and out of context), the liturgical legalism by which some evade moral demands, cause certain Orthodox Christians to not feel any more part of the "Church" of Christ. Living according to the spirit of the Tradition requires fidelity, love and generosity, and the openness and humility to learn from one another.

A local problem that Orthodoxy is facing is that its voice is much less heard in the midst of the world where it exists. One can refer to the magnificent patristic tradition, yet it only remains a nostalgic ideal, no longer applied to daily life. Despite their criticism of the West, the Orthodox must learn from its fight against secularism and the ills of the modern society. Outside, the practice and rites of the Church established by the original Tradition have been faithfully preserved, yet inside not much progress has been made in “attaining to the whole measure the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4: 13). For some being Orthodox nowadays means having an antiquated faith, knowing dogmas by heart and repeating liturgical formulae they do not understand.

Life in keeping with the Tradition of the Church means becoming a member of “God’s people”, as highlighted by the Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, whom I shall quote in extenso: „There is no such thing as a single Christian, an individual Christian. To be a Christian means to be a member, a limb – a real limb like a hand – of the Body of Christ. To be constituted in this way is a very earnest problem because in a body, as St. Paul puts it, when a limb suffers, the whole body is sick. When one of us falls, we do not say that „my hand is painful”: the whole body suffers. We have lost this sense of being a body. Oh yes, we try these days to recapture it by saying that „we must be a community”. No! We must not become a community. To become one of many communities of people who are like-minded, who share the same tastes, who believe in the same God, who proclaim the same things, amounts to a sort of religious association. It is not enough to become Christ’s own club! A body is not a collection of individuals who have nothing to do in common, except share the objectives while never caring for each other. And if we care, it should not be simply social caring, a sort of courtesy and kindness and good behaviour. A body is not that! Neither is the body the laos of the party as contrasted with the clergy. The laos as the people of God is the total Body of Christ. A priest, a bishop, a patriarch is part of this laos. There is hierarchy in the Church, but it is a hierarchy of service, not of power. We should be able to proclaim the gospel with conviction and authority because of what people see in us as a living body, and as persons connected one to another, not because we have power. A hierarchy of submission, obedience and subjection on all levels is a heresy against the Church. We must recapture another attitude which is sobornost, conciliarity, unanimity – all united in the mind of Christ and in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To be the laos of God, as clergy or lay persons, is to recognise that in this world in which God has no recognized place, where He is an outsider, a tramp, we are the place of His indwelling presence. To be the laos of God is to be sent out into the world to bring joy, hope, light and newness of life.”²⁹

To conclude, to be Orthodox in keeping with the tradition means not only to show fidelity to the faith of the “primitive” Church,³⁰ to add interpretations, dogmatic *scholia* and critical commentaries to the patristic theological legacy, but also to live and to meditate on the Gospel in the context of the Eucharistic and post-Eucharistic liturgy. To be in the spirit of the tradition means to assign theological designations to

²⁹ Andrew Walker and Costa Carras (eds), *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2000, pp. 236-237.

³⁰ Andrew Walker and Costa Carras (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 1-3.

new ecclesial experiences. This does not mean that the modern man should abandon the pre-Constantinian dynamism of transcultural coverage. Fr. Dumitru Staniloae shows that the place of “the theologian is where the divine revelation meets human history and the transfiguration of the world occurs. To be in the spirit of the tradition is to redefine those parts of the transcultural heritage that have not been expressed due to political and social restrictions, those imposed not only by communism, but also by Enlightenment and Rationalism. It means a return to the origins or a re-emergence of the religious.³¹

Conclusions

From the above reflections certain necessary conclusions can be drawn for those who wish to understand what it means to be traditionally formed in an ecumenical world and ecumenically minded in a traditionalist society. Personally, I experience this reality as an unconfessed tension: in ecumenical milieus I feel more Orthodox than I would like to be, and more ecumenical in the Orthodox environment than those who know me would expect.

There are both positive and negative sides to this ecumenical effervescence. A limited number of Christians, usually those with broad cultural outlook, are committed to ecumenical initiatives under conditions of freedom. Unfortunately, most of the lay persons in this category have only relative knowledge and superficial experience of Orthodox life, being ready for easy, “fashionable” ecumenism. The ecumenical climate has generally deteriorated in the last 17 years due to the rapid changes in the social milieu which the Orthodox Church has had to face: on the one hand, the expectations of society, which hopes that the Church will solve all kinds of social and educational issues, and on the other the missionary undermining from liberal Christian denominations and critics in the civil society. The tendency to fill the public space, formerly reserved only for state authorities, has triggered a competition among the Churches or denominations, resulting in a tense atmosphere. In Romania there are issues such as the restitution of Church assets, the relations between the Orthodox Church and the Greek-Catholic Church, the Catholic presence at all levels in Romanian society after 1989 and also the proselytism practised by Free Churches in the name of the freedom of expression, issues that make ecumenical dialogue very complicated. One of the few ongoing programmes of working together was the establishment in Romania of the Interconfessional Bible Society, comprising 12 member Churches, the object of its activity being the publication of the Holy Scripture. It does not claim to be an ecumenical but an interconfessional body, given that Neo-Protestant Churches regard ecumenism as an ambiguous formula that dilutes Christian identity.

Since there was ecumenical participation during communism too, often the former regime and ecumenism are equated. Interconfessional conferences set up before 1989 focused on themes similar to political issues. After the fall of communism nationalist

³¹ Rev. Prof. Ion Bria, *op. cit.*, p. 1415

sentiment reemerged aggressively along with a rejection of ecumenical thinking, which reminded of the bad reputation of politically supervised meetings. In general Orthodox is allegedly phyletism, and the life of the Church is presented jointly with that of the ethnic history.

Genuine ecumenism could be promoted through theological schools, where it is part of the curriculum, though it is presented in an apologetic Orthodox perspective that highlights differences of heterodox Churches or denominations. The practise applies in all the theological schools, regardless of confession and country. There is a structure for interchurch dialogue, AIDRom, the Ecumenical Association for Interchurch Aid in Romania, established by WCC as an agency in 1991, which seeks to function as a platform for ecumenical dialogue. More than 10 years ago there was a proposal to transform it into a National Council of Churches, but the idea was abandoned. The activity of this body has become less intense in the last few years as ecumenical relations have been confined to the top of the hierarchy. The Roman-Catholic Church and the Neo-Protestant denominations are not part of this organism. Though there is openness to dialogue among the Church hierarchy it is mostly due to diplomatic activity. Among the faithful practical ecumenism is practised, involving assistance and peaceful coexistence, with mutual respect of the identity of the other, yet actions are not consistent in this field. Interconfessional dialogue must go forward, yet no final goal is foreseen. Local attempts soon fail when fundamental issues of theology and liturgical life are approached.

Theologians are aware of the differences that separate the Churches and do not foresee more profound unity in the near future. An example is provided by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I who declared at the 12th General Meeting of the Conference of European Churches in Norway: 'Our unity is genuine, but it is still incomplete. Despite all the progress that has been made in our quest for visible unity – and for this we glorify God – we Orthodox remain convinced that the time has not yet come for us to share together at the Lord's Table in His sacramental Body and Blood. There continues to be serious doctrinal questions over which, as Churches, we still are in disagreement; and so, according to our Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist, it would be unrealistic, and even untruthful, for us to share in Holy Communion'³². Cardinal Walter Kasper made a similar assertion during an ecumenical, Orthodox-Catholic meeting: 'There is no ecumenism without conversion. The Lord's mandate goes a step further. The ecumenical dialogue is an exchange not only of ideas but – as Pope John II emphasizes – of spiritual gifts. Both of our churches are rich in gifts of the Spirit. Both of us have rich liturgical, spiritual theological traditions which are not contradictory but complementary, as was so clearly recognized in times past. The full communion we envisage will not be and cannot be an impoverished uniformity but a rich and flourishing unity in pluriformity. Unfortunately we cannot yet meet around the Lord's Table of the spiritual poor, and of all those in our time who are thirsting and are exhausted, where we can serve them together. Together we can speak up for justice and peace, for forgiveness and mercy'.³³

³² See www.cec-kek.org

³³ Maria Neagu (ed.), *Religious Life*, No. 533, 2003.

I would like to end on a more optimistic note, by quoting a contemporary theologian who states that the alternative to ecumenism is not anti-ecumenism but improved ecumenism. Romania, which is recognised as the Orthodox country most open to ecumenical dialogue, has the experience of practical ecumenism rather than interconfessional rapprochement. Perhaps this is essentially the purpose of cooperation, to assist those in prisons, hospitals, orphanages, or the streets in acts of recognition of Christ's will to follow His example. In this way, a traditionalist realises his usefulness in a multicultural world, and the modern people can understand and become part of the millenarian Tradition of the Church.

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