



The mystery and the unity of the Church: Considerations from an Eastern Orthodox perspective

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Research Project Registration:**Project Leader:** J. Pillay **Project Number:** 04653484**Description:**

The author is participating as the research associate of Dean Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:

Received: 06 Apr. 2021

Accepted: 02 July 2021

Published: 31 Aug. 2021

How to cite this article:

Moşoiu, N.V., 2021, 'The mystery and the unity of the Church: Considerations from an Eastern Orthodox perspective', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 77(4), a6707. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6707>

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This article attempts an approach to discuss the mystery and the unity of the church and firstly, it underlined that the church cannot have a formal definition as the divine life extended from Christ's resurrected body into those who believe and receive the Holy Mysteries. At the same time, the process of becoming part of the church is a mystical one. In order for life in Christ to be possible, Christ must be formed in the human being. Becoming a Christian is described in terms specific to the process of birth (cf. Gl 4:19), its end being the formation of Christ in us. Then, the theme of unity is dealt with from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, not in isolation, but in connection with the Roman Catholic, Protestant and ecumenical concerns for unity and collaboration amongst Christians. The cosmic unifying vocation of the church was accomplished because of the five syntheses realised by her Head, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Then there are references to the Theotokological aspect of the church, Holy Baptism as the bond of church unity; Holy Eucharist as the *Mysterion* of ecclesial unity, the ministry of the bishop for unity and the unity of Christians in the one Church.

Contribution: The author, having experience in ecumenical dialogues as a former member of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and, at present, of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, tried to offer a balanced perspective on the sensitive theme of the unity of the Christians in the one Church, referring to some of the main relevant sources, which facilitate dialogue, mutual knowledge and collaboration.

Keywords: Church; *formation* of Christ (Gal 4:19); Theotokos; unity; *mysterion* vs. *sacramentum*; Holy Baptism; Eucharist; Lumen Gentium; Leuenberg agreement; Commission on Faith and Order documents.

Introduction

It might be underlined, from the beginning, that the church has already and fully her *unity* as the Body of Christ, so we do not have to search for her unity, but we must make efforts for the unity of all human beings in the one Church of Christ. In this respect, it is the unyielding conviction of the Orthodox Church that it lives in continuity with the beginnings of Christianity (Larentzakis 2007a:71). Continuity with the origination is a factor of utmost importance for the authenticity of the Christian life and is tied up with the concept of catholicity of the church and has an indispensable ecclesiological value. The Orthodox Church makes it the foundation of its ecclesial self – understanding of fullness. As Father George Florovsky underlined, 'catholic' (from *kath holou*, lat. *secundum totum*) means in no way an outward catholicity, because it is a qualitative criterion, rather than a quantitative one; it does not mean universal (*oikoumenikos*), on the contrary:

[T]he 'Catholic Church' can also historically turn out to be the 'little flock' (cf. Lk 12:32) (...) and it can turn out that 'heretics' are 'everywhere' – *ubique* – and the true Church is pushed into the background of history, into the 'desert'. This was often the case and it may happen again. But this empirical limitation and situation does not in any way destroy the 'catholic' nature of the Church. (Florovsky 1976:37)

The Orthodox Church is not a confession/denomination between many others, because it is not based on a confession of faith later than the Apostles era but it is *Una Sancta Catholica* Church (Bria 1997).

As a consequence, the best way to designate the identity of the Orthodox Church is the title 'Orthodox catholic Church', which is actually used by theologians such as Karmiris (1959), and in different encyclopaedia (Britannica.com; Ellwood & Alles 2007). The word 'orthodox' is intended to express the nature of the church's catholicity more clearly, by distinguishing the true church from heresies and schisms. It is also intended to point out that in the West, 'catholic' has lost its original

Note: Special Collection: Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu, Romania, sub-edited by Daniel Buda (Lucian Blaga University) and Jerry Pillay (University of Pretoria).

meaning, which expressed the full ecclesial reality of the church, and in the same time, to express 'its consciousness of having remained loyal to the authentic tradition of the undivided church' (Delikostantis 2007:206).

This consciousness and the study in original of the work of the Cappadocian Fathers have been determinant of the great scholar Jaroslav Pelikan's conversion to the Orthodox Church. He was professor at Yale University in the United States of America and is known as the most important historian of the creeds and the development of the Christian doctrine. In 2004, the Library of Congress of United States of America awarded him the John W. Kluge Prize for lifetime achievement. The distinction is offered to the fields where the Nobel prize is not awarded, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. It is worth mentioning that some family members remember him saying that he had not as much converted to Orthodoxy as 'returned to it, peeling back the layers of my own belief to reveal the Orthodoxy that was always there' (Timothy 2006).

For the Orthodox Church, fulness is a claim:

[F]ounded on the faith and continuity of the one Church, by keeping the apostolic faith extant in all its fullness and upholding the traditions as the gift of the Holy Spirit to all generations. (Nissiotis 1964:165)

The reflection on the identity of the true church assists in defining common grounds for recreating the *koinonia*¹ in the ecumenical domain. Fifty years ago, Metropolitan Damaskinos (Tveit 2011), who was also the secretary of the preparation of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church, proposed on behalf of the Orthodox side involved in the ecumenical movement:

The Orthodox Church is willing to participate in this common task as a witness which has preserved the treasure of the apostolic faith and apostolic tradition continuously. We do not expect a static restoration of old forms, but rather a dynamic regaining of the timeless ethos which alone can guarantee a true accord among 'all the ages. (Papandreou 1971:278–279)

The mystery of the church and of belonging to the church

From an Eastern Orthodox perspective, an exact and exhaustive definition, which could express the essence of the church in itself is not possible (Karmiris 1973:18). The church is a mystical reality; therefore, we cannot give her a definition, which means somehow to contain her within certain boundaries. The church being the Body of Christ, *genus proximum*,² if one were to put it thus, it is the very mystery of

1. Rooted in the Old Testament, the link between God and his people was the expression of mutual commitment (Jr 24:7). In the New Testament, *koinonia* is fundamental for understanding the reality of the church, designating different basic concepts such as: life together (Ac 2:44, 47), being of one heart and one soul (4:32), sharing everything (2:44) etc. *Koinonia* refers also to 'the body of Christ' (1 Cor 12) and to the communion with the Holy Trinity (Jn 14:20, 23).

2. Definition is the logical operation that determines the content of a term. Often a concept is defined by indicating the *proximum genus* and *specific difference*: *genus proximum* is a term of reference of the definition, the closest in meaning to the notion defined; the specific difference is the characteristic feature of the concept, which distinguishes it from other concepts contained in its *genus proximum*.

Christ ('*tes euseveias mysterion*', 1 Tm 3:16), and the specific difference includes, on the one hand, the direct presence of proximal genus, for Christ the Lord is living and is active in the church, and on the other hand, Christians live the life in Christ or, more precisely, the Lord Christ lives in them: '*Christ lives in me*' (Gl 2:20), '*Christ is in you*' (Rm 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5), '*Christ in you*' (Col 1:27), '*Christ is all, and is in all*' (Col 3:11), '*so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*' (Eph 3:17). Father Stăniloae (2012a) states that:

[T]he mystery of the Church is not separate from the mystery of Christ, nor that of Christ from the mystery of the Church, given that the Church is only the extension of the mystery of Christ and that the mystery of Christ, after Pentecost, does not stand on its own, apart from the mystery of the Church; and given, furthermore, that the mystery of Christ has only come into being in order to extend itself through the mystery of the Church. These two mysteries can be distinguished from one another in theory, but they are not separated in fact. (p. 7)

It is worth mentioning also that:

In Revelation chapters 1–4, Saint John the Evangelist, using some cosmic symbols, presents the mystery of the Church as understood in both historical and eschatological perspectives. The messages addressed to the catholic Church symbolised through the number and the individual existence of the seven historical city-churches from his time are addressed, in fact, to the hierarchs or the angels of these churches compared to the seven stars kept in the 'right hand' of 'the Son of Man' surrounded by the seven golden lampstands as symbols of the historical seven churches, and in fact as symbols of the entire catholic Church. (Birzu 2019:1)

In Paul Evdochimov's opinion, in the time of the Holy Fathers, the Church was such a powerful source of life that its nature was not even questioned. At the same time, the Church, through its mystical nature, is not suited to formal definition. The need to define is a symptom of the lack of ecclesial life (Evdochimov 1996).

As a result of the fact that the Church Fathers made no attempt to define the Church, most Orthodox theologians modelled their approach to Ecclesiology accordingly. Although the Church has a horizontal dimension, 'it cannot exist without its vertical one. Its origin, its source, its foundation, its archetype and its strength come from the very Triune God' (Larentzakis 2007:72). There is an ancient concept of the spiritual church, *pneumatike Ekklesia* (Clement of Rome 1901:202); or more precisely, according to Saint Irenaeus' formulation: '*Ubi ecclesia ibi est Spiritus Dei, et ubi Spiritus Dei, illic ecclesia*' (Saint Irenaeus 2002:474).

George Galitis underlined that the New Testament does not define the essence of the Church, 'but rather speaks of it in images and mysteries' (Galitis 1971:9). In fact, St. John Chrysostom emphasises that the church should be portrayed metaphorically: '*Hos en eikoni ten Ekklesian ypographontes, metaphorikos chromenoi ton logon*' (St. John Chrysostom, PG55, 199). It might be worth mentioning in this context that at the Second Vatican Council there was a very intensive discussion on the draft text 'On the Church', and that the

proposed first chapter on 'The essence of the Disputing Church' was replaced by the chapter on the 'Mystery of the Church' (Larentzakis 1988:8).

Father Dumitru Stăniloae³ also avoided to formulate a *definition* of the church; instead, he described the church as a *mystical and dynamical* reality, by saying that the descent of the Holy Spirit is:

[T]he act of transition from Christ's saving work in His personal humanity to the extension of this work within other human beings. Through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension, Christ lays the foundation of the Church in His body, and through these events, the Church's being exists in its potential form. However, the Son of God became man not for Himself but so that He could extend salvation from His body, as divine life within us. This divine life, extended from His body into those who believe, is the Church. This life shines forth from His body, which was raised up to the full state of pneumatization (spiritualization) through His Ascension and sitting at the right hand of the Father, within the deepest intimacy of infinite life and love that God directs toward human beings. (Stăniloae 2012b:2)

This means that as members of the church, 'all believers receive the Word as their fundamental hypostasis through the agency of His body extended in us' (Stăniloae 2012b:1), that is why we can live the life in Christ, not by imitating him, but having him as our superior hypostasis (cf. Gl 2:20).

As a result of the fact that the church is a mystery, the way we become part of the mystical Body of Christ is also a mystical process, that is, it is possible because of the Holy *Mysterries*. To be more precise we may speak about the process of *Christomorphisation*, which has its starting point at the Holy *Mysterion* of Baptism. In previous research (Moşoiu 2011), by using the terminology, mainly *morphe* (Phlp 2:6,7), *metamorphote* (Mt 17:2) and *morphoo* (Gl 4:19), it was offered a clear understanding of the way in which Jesus Christ takes *form* (*morphe*) in us through the Holy Spirit, as we receive the Holy Baptism, the Chrismation and the Eucharist. As a consequence of this process of receiving the beauty of the Son (*Christomorphisation*), or of changing the *garments of skin* (Gn 3:21) with *garments of light* (Gl 3:27), God the Father acknowledges us as sons and daughters (baptismal *υιοθεσία*). This new status of the human being is the most important aspect of the Holy *Mysterion* of Baptism and has a crucial significance for our spiritual life.

In the same published research it was mentioned that Father Dumitru Stăniloae uses the expression '*the form of the Church*' a number of times in his *Dogmatics*. It is possible that this

3. Dumitru Stăniloae is the most well-known Romanian theologian. The World Council of Churches asked him to contribute to various important conferences, understanding that his expertise is essential for the portrait of Orthodoxy. He is also considered one of the 'the Pioneers of Christian Reconciliation' of the 20th century (see, eds. Bria & Heller 1995). His *Dogmatic Theology* was published in English in 6 vol.: *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Vol. 1, *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, (Brookline, 2005); Vol. 2, *The World: Creation and Deification* (Brookline, 2005); Vol. 3, *The Person of Jesus Christ as God and Savior* (Brookline, 2011); Vol. 4, *The Church: Communion in the Holy Spirit* (Brookline, 2012); Vol. 5, *The Sanctifying Mysterries* (Brookline, 2012); Vol. 6, *The Fulfillment of Creation* (Brookline, 2013); for other English translations from his works: see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumitru_St%C4%83niloae

expression comes from St. Maximus the Confessor who in *Mystagogia* said that: '(...) to all of them the Church gives a single form (*theian morphen*)' (St. Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia* [1973]:35), and who, in turn was inspired by the *Carmen Christi* from *Philippians* 2. The expression *form of the Church* is not biblical and in the New Testament the only assertion regarding the *form* of God is in *Philippians* 2:6–11: '*Who, being in the form of God* (*morphe Theou*)'. The *Carmen Christi* from the *Epistle to the Philippians* is, according to Markus Bockmuehl, the most interpreted text in the New Testament (Bockmuehl 1997:26). Jesus Christ is presented here as the supreme example of self-sacrifice through *kenosis*.⁴ Being true God, and becoming true man also (*en omoiomati anthropon ghenomenos*), the Son of God takes the form (i.e. ontological or existential condition) of the slave (*morphe doulou*). At the Transfiguration (*Metamorphosis*), Jesus Christ did not receive what he had not already had, nor did he become what he was not, but he showed his apostles what he was. The verbal form *μορφωθῆ* (to be formed; from *μορφώω*) is a New Testament *hapax legomenon*.⁵ 'My little children, for whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you – tekna mou, ous palin odino mehris ou morphote Hristos en hymin' (Gl 4:19). In order for *life in Christ* to be possible, Christ must *be formed* in the human being. He has to become incarnate in each and every one of us. This metaphor, based on the child's development in its mother's womb, suggests that Christ has to reach maturity in the believer, through his belonging to the ecclesial community. Becoming a Christian is described in terms specific to the process of birth, its end being the *formation* of Christ in us (cf. Gl 2:20; Rm 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Col 1:27; Col 3:11). The receiving of the *form* of Christ is possible because of the Holy Baptism, when the priest, before the consecration of the water, prays to the Holy Trinity: 'Kai morphoson sou ton Christon (*form your Christ*), en to mellonti anagennasthai (...)' (*Mikron Euchologion* 1962:71). According to St. Nicolas Kavalas, to whom P. Nellas often made reference, the human being 'descends into the water of baptism as "shapeless and formless matter" (*hyle aneidous kai amorphos*) and rises "meeting the beautiful form" of Christ' (Nellas 1987:122). 'We are formed and shaped, and our shapeless and undefined life receives shape and definition' (Saint Nicolas Cabasilas 1865:537D, at Nellas 1987:122). The nature of the human being 'assumes the *form*, that is, the structure and mode of functioning – of the deified human nature of Christ' (Nellas 1987:122).

By baptism, christmation, the divine Eucharist and the rest of the spiritual life we are incorporated into Christ, we receive a Christian being, that is, a Christocentric and Christlike being, and the form and the life which correspond to it. (Nellas 1987:120)

In this way the Father finds the very form (*morphen, formam*; i.e. existential/ontological condition) 'of the Son in our faces

4. *Kenosis* doesn't consist of Christ's renunciation of his attributes as God, but rather it consists in the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature and its weaknesses and made them his own, untouched by sin.

5. The verbal form is a NT *hapax legomenon*, thought it is related to *μορφή* ('form' occurring three times: see Mk 16:12; Phlp 2,6,7) and *μόρφωσις* ('form/embodiment/formulation' occurring twice: see Rm 2:20; 2 Tm 3:5) (file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/Intermediate%20Biblical%20Greek%20Reader%20Galatians%20and%20Related%20Texts(1).pdf, p. 88).

and recognizes in us the members of the Only-begotten Son' (Saint Nicolas Cabasilas 1865:600B, at Nellas 1987:120) and adopts us as sons and daughters (*baptismal* $\nu\theta\epsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$) (Moşoiu 2011:235–236).

In conclusion, the church is a mystery and consequently the way we become part of the church is possible because of the Holy Mysteries.

The unity of the church and her cosmic unifying vocation

In the important document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Councils of Churches, called *Confessing the One Faith*⁶ it is stated that in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed the 'oneness had a special relevance in the face of divisions of the fourth century' (p. 83) and that:

[T]he life and unity of the Church are grounded in the communion of the Trinity. The Father willed it as the people of his possession, the Son redeems and offers it as his living Body, the Spirit gathers in into a unique communion. Thus, the Church is 'the people united by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Cyprian, *De Orat.Dom.*23). (p. 84)

The *oneness* of the church is explained from a Trinitarian perspective, and consequently from a Christological one: 'there is but *one Church*, one faith and one baptism. All the baptized are incorporated into one body which is called to witness to its one and only Saviour' (p. 92).

The unity of the Triune God is the archetype and the model of Church unity (cf. Jh 17). Saint Cyprian of Carthage, in the contest of persecutions and schisms, stated that:

[T]he unity of the Church comes from the divine strength and coheres in celestial sacraments, that is why, whoever does not hold this unity, does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and of the Son, does not hold life and salvation. (Damian 2010:94)

Moreover, he warned that to break the peace and the concord of Christ (in the Church) is to try to break the unity of the divine Trinity itself (Damian 2010:94). Although the Church is dispersed all over the world, 'this dispersion does not affect its unity because it is like members living in the unity of one body' (Damian 2010:95).

It is very impressive that St. Cyprian refers to the shirt of the crucified Christ, saying that the link of inseparable unity is shown in the Gospels by Christ's shirt as a sign and as a covenant, which sanctifies the unity of the Church' (PL 4, 519 AB-521 AB).

The Church is *one* as we confess in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, but, at the same time, her 'task is to achieve this unity as unity in plurality and not only to witness visibly to it "in the diversity of its historical forms"' (Larentzakis 2002:3). For this

6. *Confessing the One Faith. An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, Faith and Order Paper No.153, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1991.

may lead to the misunderstanding that the *status quo* of the different churches or their diversity be left as they are and that the fellowship or the unity of the church be just a statement (Larentzakis 2002:4).

In the New Testament *ecclesia* is used both in singular and in plural, but this does not translate into the fact that the local churches are 'branches' or 'outposts' of a 'central' Church. Referring to Ernst Kasemann who sees in the New Testament the basis for, not 'die Einheit der Kirche, sondern die Vielfalt der Konfessionen' ('the unity of the Church, but rather the diversity of the confessions') (Kasemann 1961:216), professor Konstantin Delikostantis observed that his thesis is only meaningful if these 'confessions' do not appear as the carriers of division, as is the case in today's church scene, but rather embody 'unity in diversity' in the sense of early Christianity. As long as confessionalism rules, ecumenical visions such as 'unity in diversity' or 'reconciled diversity' are ecumenicists' illusions. And then he underlines that 'there is no unity of the church without the discovery of the true meaning of catholicity, which is irreconcilable with confessionalism' (Delikostantis 2007:203).

Father Dumitru Stăniloae (Stăniloae 2012b) stated that:

[T]he unity belongs to the church's theandric constitution as the incarnate word's extended body. For the Lord became incarnate, was crucified and rose from the dead as a man in order to gather in Himself those divided, to gather them in the infinity of His love for the Father and of the Father's love for Him. (p. 57)

Stăniloae (2012b) also stated that:

[W]here Christ is, there is unity, because where Christ is, there is the Love who wants to embrace all persons in Himself and to present them to the Father. Therefore, unity cannot be obtained except by being rooted in Christ, the Word of God who has become accessible to us through the Incarnation so that He may gather all of us in His unity. (p. 57)

Moreover, only:

[T]he Person of God the Word as a free person explains the unity of all. He gives to all the capability of subsisting in a unity that is His unity. This explains the maximum unity accomplished in Christ, or the fact that God the Word becomes the Hypostasis of the human nature. (Stăniloae 2011:35)

The Romanian theologian (Stăniloae 2012b) also underlined that:

[T]his unification of all in Him constitutes the very essence of salvation. For this unity means unity in the blessed and infinite God. In fact, unity is not possible outside God, and thus neither is salvation. Christ extends Himself in us through His sacrificed and risen body, so that He may unite us and make us like Himself; He fills us with the same love that He has for God the Father and that God the Father, who is in Him, has for Him. (p. 57)

Because the human being is *eikon Eikonos* [the image of the Father] was created according to the Son's image (*Eikon*), Who in turn is the Image of the Father (cf. Col 1:15), as P. Nellas underlined: 'For St Paul the "image of the invisible God" is Christ. And man, as we shall see, is the image of the Image' (Nellas 1987:21).

Being *eikon Eikonos*, all humans came to live in order that, on behalf of creation, they may bring a decisive contribution to the maintenance and fulfilment of the all-encompassing mystery that is the union of God with creation, and that they:

[M]ay be the conscious and willing means through which God maintains and fulfills this union. Accordingly, the human being is brought forward as the last among the creatures, as a kind of natural bond or link (*syndesmos*) between the extremities of the whole, through its own members and as one who within himself brings into unity the things that had been separated, according to nature, by great distances. (Stăniloae 2012a:4)

But because through the fall of the first human beings, in the creation appeared a motion towards divergence and decomposition, which affected the human beings' own physical and spiritual integrity, the relations between themselves and with the creation. It is only through Christ that these broken relationships and the parts of creation have begun to recompose themselves 'so as to make possible their future transfiguration, for from Christ the unifying and eternally living Spirit is poured out over creation' (Stăniloae 2005:172). Being fully divine and fully human, our Lord and Saviour:

[P]laced in the midst of human beings a center from among themselves that could no longer be separated from God and that no longer was inclined to seek separation from other human beings or to cause division within creation. (Stăniloae 2012a:5)

That is why the *cosmic unifying vocation of the Church* was accomplished because of the five syntheses realised by his Head, Jesus Christ, as St. Maximus the Confessor underlined (Thunberg 1965:240–265):

1. *The synthesis between the sexes* was fulfilled through his birth (Thunberg 1985:81), which was foreign to sexual pleasure and his mother remained forever a virgin (Von Balthasar 1961:350). He delivered mankind from the sinful distinction between man and woman (cf. Gl 3:28), which was based on sensual pleasure; through full obedience and the correct use of the faculties of nature (Ambigua 41, in PG 91, 1309A; Quaest. ad Thal. 61, in CCSG 22, p. 93).
2. *The synthesis between heaven and the inhabited world*. This distinction is related to Adam's fall and his expulsion from heaven. The Saviour, through his incarnation, sanctified the world also and by dying on the cross realised this synthesis by entering heaven together with the thief (Lk 23:43) (Ambigua 41, in PG 91, 1309B; Ambigua 53, in PG 91, 1372D).
3. *The synthesis between heaven and earth* is accomplished by the ascension of the Saviour with his Body consubstantial with ours, showing, through his pneumatisation and ascension to heaven, the unity of the sentient world by the elimination of all the particularities and specificities that divided it (Ambigua 41, in PG 91, 1309 BC). This synthesis also has an ascetic and mystical connotation: Ascension also implies in it the call to overcome the weakness of the body and to 'live an angelic life', in order to celebrate the Liturgy together with the angels. The human being restored in Christ makes his or her life

like the virtuous one of angels and can ascend with his human nature, spiritually, incessantly to heaven (Ambigua 41, in PG 91, 1305 D-1308A). In this spiritual ascent, the heavenly powers help us to always do the good things (4 Centuriae of charity 2, 32, in the edition A. CERESA-GASTALDO, Capituli sulla carità, Rome, 1963, CSC, p. 108, p. 188). This leads to a resemblance by virtue of man to angels, also implying an angelic peace in this spiritual ascent (4 Centuriae de carità 4, 36, in CCS, p. 208).

4. *The synthesis between the intelligible and the sensible* was made by the Saviour through his ascension with the deified human nature to God the Father. This shows the destiny of creation to be a 'whole' in the cosmic Logos, that is, in Christ the Lord (Ambigua 41, in PG 91, 1305A and 1309C). Thus he showed that there is a common λόγος of all creation, regardless of the dichotomy between the sensible and the intelligible (Quaest. Ad Thal. 48, in CCSG 7, p. 333 and the following).
5. *The synthesis between the uncreated and the created* refers to the difference that separates all that is created from that which is uncreated, that is, from God, which exists through himself (Ambigua 41, In PG 91, 1304D). This synthesis is gradually achieved through all the acts of our Saviour and fully through his sitting at the right hand of the Father, in a state of continuous sacrifice. This is the source of *theosis* through grace and love, but without ontological identification with him (Ambigua 41, in PG 91, 1308B).

Now it can be better understood why the church is the union of all that exists and why:

[S]he is destined to encompass all that exists: God and creation. She is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan: the unity of all. In her are found both the eternal and the temporal, with the latter destined to be overwhelmed by eternity; both the uncreated and the created, with the latter destined to be overwhelmed by the uncreated, to be deified; both the spiritual things of all categories and matter, with the latter destined to be spiritualized; both heaven and the earth permeated by heaven; both the nonspatial and the spatial; both 'I' and 'thou', 'I' and 'we', 'we' and 'thou', united in a divine 'Thou', or in a direct, dialogical relation with Him'. (Stăniloae 2012b:13)

In order to summarise we mention that Father Dumitru Stăniloae uses the words: *unity, unification, unitary* and *unique* in relation to the Church. *Unity* belongs to the church's constitution as the incarnate Word's *extended body*. *The Son of God 'became flesh' (Jn 1:14), was crucified and rose from the dead as a human being in order to gather in Himself all those divided, to gather them in the infinity of his love for the Father and of the Father's love for Him (cf. Col 1:19–20). This unification of all in him constitutes the very essence of salvation (Stăniloae 2012b:57). The church is unitary because:*

[H]aving Christ in a full and intimate manner working within her, she is truly His extended body; that is, she is fully united with the Head and fully united within herself, that's why if the members of the Church do

not know each other, they cannot be consciously united among themselves, nor can they develop this unity. (Stăniloae 2012:65–66)

At the same time, the church, in the sense mentioned here, is the *unique* church in the full sense of the word 'church'. Hence:

[T]he Christian formations that do not have Christ intimately dwelling within them can be neither the body of Christ nor His bride. (...) Any full union of the faithful with Christ can only mean His intimate, full and working presence within them. And only this union represents the church in the full sense of the word. (Stăniloae 2012b:66)

In conclusion, although the church has already and fully her *unity* as the Body of Christ, as it was stated in the introduction, the *unity* is fundamentally a reality, a great gift of the future world, of the eschaton, an uncreated reality; thus it is a mystery of God. Therefore, its realisation does not come out of human effort, but is exclusively a revelation, an unveiling in history of a reality that comes from beyond history, from another world, from the world of the eternal Kingdom of God.

The Theotokological aspect of the Church

The Mother of the Lord, through whom heaven was united with the earth, is the first person to have received the gift of *Christomorphization*. The Son of God came down 'Himself as a hypostasis in her [the Virgin Mary] and began to *form* his body from her, with the working together of the Holy Spirit entire as a person' (Stăniloae 2012b:85), and thus the Mother of our Lord received the *form* of Christ, that is, his clothing of uncreated light: 'Thus she is the first to have achieved conformity (*symmorphos*) through the likeness with the Savior's death, and therefore also partook before all others of the resurrection' (Saint Nicolas Cabasilas 2010:231). Saint Gregory Palamas teaches us about the 'deiform life' of the Virgin Mary in his 'Homily about the entrance into the Holy of Holies and about the deiform life of our all-holy Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary' (Saint Gregory Palamas 2005:173–216), and he considers her 'the true Holy of Holies' (Ică 2008:387), 'a prototype of the hesychastic life' (Ică 2008:173–219). And St. Theophan of Nicaea calls her 'the true Earth and Paradise, center of the new creation', 'the true Heaven, the second receptacle of the divine plenitude, the summit of the hierarchy of the angels, the Mother of those deified in the Church' (Ică 2008:501–521) because in her the union of Heaven with earth took place, the union of God with man and with his creation.

It is important for us to mention that at the feasts of the Nativity, Dormition and Protection of the Theotokos, the first biblical reading is the Christological hymn (*Carmen Christi*) from Philippians 2, which says at the beginning '*who, being in the form* [ontological condition, ontological status, ontological state] (*morphe*, latin *forma*) of God' (Phlp 2:6). The name of the Mother of the Lord does not appear in the hymn, but this

passage is read because through the Holy Virgin Mary the Son of God received the *morphe*, *forma*, the ontological condition of the human nature.

In the *Hymn to the Theotokos* from the *Divine Liturgy* of St. Basil the Great, the Mother of the Lord is called 'hallowed Temple and mystical Paradise'. Therefore, we cannot speak of ecclesiology without making ample reference to the teaching about the *Theotokos*, that's why there is no separate chapter in an Orthodox Dogmatic Theology about the *Theotokos*, nor a *Mariology*. Instead, the teaching about her person and ministry is developed in the chapter on the *hypostatic union and its consequences*, and in the chapter on the church.

Therefore, it is very important to see that in the convergence text on ecclesiology of the *Faith and Order Commission* of the World Council of Churches we find references to the Mother of the Lord – *Meter Kyriou, Mater Domini* (Lk 1:43). She is called 'a symbol of and model for the Church', the term *Theotokos* being used, although in parentheses (!):

15. The response of Mary, the Mother of God (Theotokos), to the angel's message at the annunciation, 'Let it be done with me according to your word' (Lk 1:38), has been seen as a symbol of and model for the church and the individual Christian. The Faith and Order study document *Church and World* (1990) observed that Mary is 'an important example for all who seek to understand the full dimensions of life in Christian community' in that she receives and responds to the Word of God (Lk 1:26–38); shares the joy of the good news with Elizabeth (Lk 1:46–55); meditates, suffers and strives to understand the events of the birth and childhood of Jesus (Mt 2:13–23; Lk 2:19, 41–51); seeks to comprehend the full implications of discipleship (Mk 3:31–35; Lk 18:19–20); stands by him under the cross and accompanies his body to the tomb (Mt 27:55–61; Jn 19:25–27); and waits with the disciples and receives with them the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Ac 1:12–14; 2:1–4).⁷

It is worth mentioning also that in chapter eight of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, entitled: 'The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the Church', the *Theotokos* is called 'a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ'.⁸

Baptism as the bond of church unity

In the 'Lima Document', *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* we can read:

Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place.... The union with Christ which we have through baptism has important implications for Christian unity. (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982:3)

7. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>; See also the report of the 'Faith and Constitution' Commission: *The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, WCC, Geneva, 1990, p. 64. See also the report of the International Anglican-Catholic Commission: 'Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ', *Growth in Agreement III*, pp. 82–112; and the report of the Dombes Group, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints* (1997–1998), Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 2002.

8. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

Professor Hans-Peter Grosshans (2007) also underlined that Baptism is a visible bond of unity (cf. Eph 4:3–6):

[O]f all Christians who believe in their redemption through Jesus Christ and are united in the church as the body of Christ. (...). The one baptism into the name of the triune God *visibly* illustrates the unity of the Church. (pp. 242, 257)

It is very important to mention that in the same presentation we find useful clarifications concerning the word ‘sacrament’, which derives from legal and military language and emphasises the obligation, not the self-communication of the triune God in these sacred actions, as the word *mysterion* does (Grosshans 2007:246). Almost from the beginning of the Reformation period the dissatisfaction with the Latin term *sacramentum* was present in the Protestant Theology, and it was pointed out that it was an inadequate translation of the New Testament word *mysterion*. Zwingli complained about the word *sacramentum* and wished that the Germans had never accepted it into their vocabulary, whilst Friedrich Schleiermacher pointed that ‘the sacraments are to be understood in the light of the New Testament term *mysterion*, which has been preserved in the Orthodox churches’ (Grosshans 2007:247–248).

The churches’ delegates at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order ‘affirmed and celebrated together the increasing mutual recognition of one another’s baptism as the one baptism into *Christ*’ (eds. Best & Heller 1999):

Many churches are now emphasizing that baptism is baptism into *Christ*, not into this or that historic denomination. In baptism one becomes not a Methodist, Lutheran or Roman Catholic, but a Christian. (p. 3)

But this affirmation, ‘baptism into Christ, not into this or that historic denomination’, can be misleading, because for an Orthodox believer, the Holy *Mysterion* of Baptism offers the Christian identity, but at the same time the Orthodox one. In the prayer of Christmation the priest prays that the Triune God would ‘confirm him (her) in the Orthodox Faith’. In the Orthodox *ordo*, Baptism is not separated from the Christmation and Eucharist. One cannot regard Baptism separate from the entire Church life because the Baptism introduces the candidate in this very Church life. As Rev. Alciviadis C. Calivas (1998) rightly pointed out:

Baptism unites the believer not only with Christ but with his people, the Church. One is baptized into the community of faith to share its life, its values, its vision. Baptism, by bringing us into the glorified life of Christ and making us part of his deified humanity, integrates us into the Church, His body, where dying and rising is daily experienced in ascetic discipline in the life of prayer and in the Eucharist. (p. 4)

Professor Grigorios Larentzakis (2007) also outlined that through:

Baptism and Christmation, the newly baptized person does not just become a Christian as an individual, but also becomes a member of a most intimate community through his or her life within the existential *mysterium ecclesiae*. (p. 302)

However, big steps have been made towards mutual recognition of Baptism.⁹ Some Orthodox Churches, including the Romanian one, do not rebaptise the Christians who convert from the Roman Catholic Church and from the Protestant one, who were baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity, by using a special *ordo*, which includes Confession, Christmation and the Holy Eucharist.

‘The breaking of the bread’ (Ac 2:42): The Mysterion of ecclesial unity

The Holy Eucharist was from the very beginning the centre of Christian worship, the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, as seen in the words of institution: ‘*This is My Body*’, ‘*This is My Blood*’ (Mt 26:26–29). At the Last Supper, the Saviour mystically anticipated his Sacrifice of the next day. It was then that the Apostles received Holy Communion for the first time, thus continuing to be the mode of perfect union with Christ and between the Christians. The two disciples travelled together with the Risen Christ, but even though he spoke with them, explaining the meaning of his messianic ministry, they did not recognise him until after they had communed (cf. Lk 24:30–31). The two were thinking of the historical Jesus Christ, and suddenly the Eucharistic Christ was revealed to them, not near them, but inside their being. The anamnetic, sacrificial and mythical character of the Eucharist has been clear to Christians from the very beginning, as is apparent in St. Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 11:26–31.

Father Stăniloae (2012a) has stated that the reason for which the bread exists is to become body:

The intimate union of the bread and wine with the body of the Lord, hypostatized in the Word, transforms the bread into the body of the Lord, because this is the reason of bread: to be transformed into body. (pp. 91–92)

In the *Divine Liturgy* of St. Basil the Great, immediately after the *metabole* of the gifts of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, the priest asks: ‘And unite us all to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and the Cup in the communion of the one Holy Spirit’.¹⁰

Already in a text from the apostolic age, the *Teaching (Didache) of the Twelve Apostles*, the petition is made to God that those who communicate may be united in a way similar to the grains of wheat that have been brought together to make the Eucharistic bread (Stăniloae 2012a:83).

Karmiris (1962) also affirmed that:

[T]he *Divine Liturgy* is the center of the unity of Christians with Christ in the body of the Church. For it is through it *par excellence* that the Church is revealed as the body of Christ and the

9. See also the WCC document: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/one-baptism-towards-mutual-recognition>; an official study text of the Commission on Faith and Order. It is a further development and explication of the insights of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It links questions of Christian initiation with ecclesiology, mutual recognition of baptism and the basic bonds of Christian unity. The study text also deals with ongoing and more recent issues that prevent mutual recognition of baptism that impede the visible unity of the church in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship.

10. <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-divine-liturgy-of-saint-basil-the-great#divine>; viewed 17 March 2021

communion of the Holy Spirit, and the present age is united with the future one, the earthly Church with the heavenly. In the *Divine Liturgy* the whole body of Christ is included. (p. 565)

Father Dumitru Stăniloae always underscores the fact that the spiritual experience does not have only personal consequences but also impacts life in the Christian community and in the human society in general. In this sense, he said regarding the Holy Eucharist that those who receive the gift of the Eucharistic Christ also receive the power to give themselves to one another:

The Church is formed as a body made up of the faithful to whom Christ gives Himself fully through the Eucharist, and who through the power of Christ's Self-giving then give themselves to one another, in a movement of continual convergence and unification. (Stăniloae 1976:18)

This means that the Eucharist is also the act of realising and continually increasing the full unity of the church, as the extended body of Christ, hence the Eucharist perfects the work that was begun in Baptism and Chrismation.

The unity of the church and the ministry of the bishop

The theology of the episcopate is also centred on the Eucharist, starting with the role of the bishop as head of the Eucharistic community. In his important book on the unity of the church in the first three centuries Metropolitan Joannis Zizioulas stated that the identification of the Eucharistic assembly with the 'Church of God' led naturally to the coincidence of the structure of the church with that of the Eucharistic assembly through which canonical unity is connected with the essence of the church (Zizioulas 2001:41). Moreover, by referring to St. Cyprian's time, Metropolitan J. Zizioulas underlined that the catholicity of the local church is expressed by the bishop around whom the people are united. 'The Bishop is in the church and the church in the Bishop, and if anyone is not with the Bishop, he is not in the church. Whoever separates himself from the Bishop, separates himself from the church' (Zizioulas 2001:60). '*Ecclesia in episcopo. Episcopus in Ecclesia*. The bishops are bishops of God, the guardians of unity of the Church as they are one in a single undivided episcopate' (Damian 2010:98). But the episcopate does not have an authority *per se*, as professor K. Delikostantis (2007) rightly pointed out:

[T]he bishop is what he is as the officiant at the Eucharist. He does not officiate at the Eucharist because he is a bishop, that means because of his function in the administration of the Church. (p. 203)

Concerning the ontological equality of all the bishops, Meyendorff (1973) observed that it:

[I]s based on the principle that each one of them presides over the same catholic Church in a given place, and that no local Church can be more 'catholic' than another. (pp. 7–8)

The relation between the local churches and the representation at a general level is regulated by the 35 apostolic canon:

It behoves the Bishops of every nation to know the one among them who is the premier or chief, and to recognise him as their head, and to refrain from doing anything superfluous without his advice and approval. (...) But let not even such a one do anything without the advice and consent and approval of all.¹¹

Professor K. Delikostantis underlined that the synod has its roots in the local church structure, and the synodality 'keeps the balance between unity and diversity in the Church and has nothing in common with "synodal centralism (synod in place of a pope)"' and concluded by saying that 'there is no place in Orthodox ecclesiology for pyramid-like Church structures' (Delikostantis 2007:203) because 'there is no ministry which exists *above* the community but only *within* it' (Zizioulas 2005:43).

The unity of the Christians in the One Church: A general theological concern

This section is intended to show that the *unity* is a general concern of the Christians today, by offering references to some relevant sources. One of the foundational moments in the modern ecumenical movement is an encyclical letter issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate on 01 January 1920. As its opening words state, it was addressed 'Unto the Churches of Christ everywhere' and sent as a letter to the leaders of key Christian churches. It begins with St. Peter's words 'Love one another earnestly from the heart' (1 Pt 1:22) and underlines the conviction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate 'that rapprochement between the various Christian churches and fellowship between them is not excluded by the doctrinal differences which exist between them'. Then 11 ways in which 'a friendship and kindly disposition towards each other can be shown' are proposed, the first one being 'the acceptance of a uniform calendar for the celebration of the great Christian feasts at the same time by all the churches' (Ecumenical Patriarchate 1920).

The Orthodox Churches participated actively and constantly in bilateral and multilateral dialogues and in ecumenical gatherings. It is true that some withdrew from the World Council of Churches (WCC) membership mainly because of internal opposition. In order to avoid further misunderstandings and even new withdrawals from the WCC, at Harare WCC Assembly (1998), a special commission was created and its final report was published in 2002.¹² This report clarified the most sensitive issues for Orthodox members of WCC: *common prayer at WCC gatherings, decision-making process, and the theological criteria for churches applying for membership in the fellowship of the WCC*.

Regarding the Roman Catholic Church, the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, begins with the theme of unity of the Christian: 'The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second

11. http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/cannons_apostles_rudder.htm; viewed 25 February 2021.

12. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/final-report-of-the-special-commission-on-orthodox-participation-in-the-wcc>; viewed 20 February 2021.

Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only'.¹³ Although the Roman Catholic Church is not an official member of the World Council of Churches, there are full Roman Catholic members in all the commissions. Moreover, in the recent document of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, entitled 'The Bishop and Christian Unity: an ecumenical vademecum',¹⁴ it is stated in the first line of the *Preface*: 'The ministry entrusted to the bishop is a service of unity both within his diocese and of unity between the local church and the universal church'; the first paragraph of the *Introduction* has the title: 'The search for unity as intrinsic to the nature of the Church'. Then the Christian unity is seen as a concern of the whole Church, whilst the bishop is the 'visible principle' of unity. The first part is dealing with 'the promotion of ecumenism within the Catholic Church', the search for unity is being 'first of all a challenge to Catholics'. The document provides for practical steps at all levels, especially the appointment of ecumenical officers, including the using of media and websites, 'the ecumenical dimension should be present in all aspects and disciplines of Christian formation' (I, B,12).

Concerning the Reformation Tradition we have to mention here the Leuenberg Agreement (1973),¹⁵ the *Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe* (CPCE/GEKE, former 'Leuenberg Church Fellowship' until 2003) and the 12 volumes of Leuenberger Texte. The first volume has the title: *Die Kirche Jesu Christi. Der reformatorische Beitrag zum ökumenischen Dialog über die kirchliche Einheit/The Church of Jesus Christ. The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity*.¹⁶ As we can read right in the beginning of the Preface, after the 4th General Assembly of the churches participating in the Leuenberg Agreement held in Vienna from 03 to 10 May 1994: 'for the first time since the Reformation, protestant churches of Europe agreed on a common document about the Church'.

Then we have to mention *Porvoo Communion*,¹⁷ which is a communion of 15 Anglican and Evangelical Lutheran churches in Europe. The communion was established in 1992 by a theological agreement entitled the *Porvoo Common Statement*, which establishes full communion between and amongst these churches and Meissen Agreement, based on Meissen Declaration with which:

[T]he Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Church of England recognized each other as churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, and committed themselves to taking all possible steps to closer fellowship in as many areas of Christian life and witness as possible, as well as to strive together for full, visible unity.¹⁸

13. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html; viewed 25 February, 2021.

14. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/12/04/201205a.html>; viewed 20 January 2021.

15. <https://www.ekd.de/en/Leuenberg-Agreement-304.htm>, viewed 10 February 2021.

16. Verlag Otto Lembeck, Frankfurt am Main, 1995 (3. Auflage 2001).

17. <http://porvooecommunion.org/> 10 March 2021.

18. <https://www.ekd.de/en/Meissen-Declaration-289.htm>; viewed 15 December 2020.

The aim of these and other efforts is that, finally, all those belonging to the Reformation Tradition are in full communion, in order to contribute to the unity of the Christians.

From an *ecumenical perspective* we mention here the convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*,¹⁹ a document from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which addresses the Church's mission, unity and its being in the Trinitarian life of God. It is worth underlining that this document aroused interest all over the world and received many official responses, which were published and evaluated recently (2021) in two volumes.²⁰ This means a major step forward for the *rapprochement between* Christians.

Finally, we have to mention that the World Council of Churches at its general assemblies has adopted five unity statements, which aim at spelling out the nature of the unity sought in the ecumenical movement: New Delhi 1961, Nairobi 1975, Canberra 1991, Porto Alegre 2006 and Busan 2013. The first four statements are clearly presented by Professor Risto Saarinen (2007:150–182). The fifth statement on unity, Busan 2013, is entitled: 'God's Gift and Call to Unity – and our Commitment', and it is stated that:

The unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity of the whole creation are interconnected. Christ who makes us one calls us to live in justice and peace and impels us to work together for justice and peace in God's world.²¹

As a final conclusion we can say that the Orthodox Church is not a confession/denomination between many others but *Una Sancta Catholica* Church because it is not based on a confession of faith later than the Apostles' era. At the same time, the dialogue was and will be the only way of knowing and collaborating with others. Father Stăniloae proposed the expression *open sobornicity/conciliarity*²² in a moment when the churches, which were involved in the ecumenical movement and especially in the bilateral theological dialogue, were centred on their own models of unity and on defending their confessional identity. This defensive 'contraction' led to confessionalism, proselytism and anti-ecumenism. Father Stăniloae encouraged through all possible means not only the

19. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>, viewed 13 January 2021.

20. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-i> and <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-ii>; the Roman – Catholic response on: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/notizie-2019/2019-10-23-tctvc-catholic-response.html>; viewed 05 March 2021.

21. <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-18-world-council-of-churches.pdf>; 10 March 2021. https://www.academia.edu/36443273/The-Ecumenical_Vision_An_Overview_of_World_Council_of_Churches_Statements_on_Unity, viewed 12 March 2021.

22. The expression *open sobornicity* (conciliarity) means: knowledge, understanding, living-experiencing, confessing, valuing and actualising the Apostolic faith in its entirety to which all Christians are called (united according to their common nature but different in person, family, kin, tradition), caught in the dialogic texture between themselves and God in communion (*koinonia*), which can become more emphasised as their life tends to be *according to the whole*, to the plenitude (*kata holon*); see: Nicolae Moşoiu, 'The relevance of Acts 2:42 for the religious dialog – An introduction', in Dialogo Vol. 5- Issue 2- June 2019, <http://www.dialogo-conf.com/archive/?vid=1&aid=2&kid=170502-2>; <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=780570>

ecumenical prayer for unity but also the Orthodox priests' and believers' ecumenical education. At the *Eighth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, which took place in Harare (December 1998), there was revealed the fact that the so-called anti-ecumenical behaviour of some Orthodox groups is caused by the lack of an ecumenical and theological education.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

N.V.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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