Dogmatic Questions and Practical Issues in the Unofficial Bilateral Theological Dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

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In the following study we will try to identify some dogmatic aspects and practical issues which have resulted from the dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, that occurred between the 1960's and the 1980's, just in the beginning of the theological dialogue, in the so-called unofficial dialogue. We will mainly underline the non-theological factors that shaped the bilateral relations between these Christians over the centuries and when the dialogue was initiated.

Keywords: *dialogue, Church, Orthodox, Eastern, Oriental, dogmas*

Introduction¹

The very beginning of the unofficial theological dialogue between the two families of Churches is reported in an article entitled: “Four unofficial conversations. An experience of joy and hope”, written by Nikos Nissiotis and Paulos Mar Gregorios (alias Paul Verghesse), two well-known theologians from the second half of the last century, in the beginning of a book regarding the first attempts of reconciliation between the Ancient Oriental and Orthodox Churches². This is a short history of the first unofficial meetings between the two families of Churches and includes some of the studies that have been used during these meetings. Based on their beliefs that the divergences from the past should no longer be a barrier in the way of achieving a full sacramental communion between these Churches, the authors tried to show the main similarities between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental (Orthodox) Churches.³

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¹ See: Marius Florescu, “Ce mai e nou în dialogul teologic dintre Biserica Ortodoxă și Biserica Vechi Orientale”, in: *Altarul Banatului* (10-12/2018), p. 163-166.

² Paulos Gregorios et al., *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite? Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology*, Geneva, WCC Publications 1981, p. 9.

³ Two scholars from the Faculty of Theology in Sibiu consider that the 20th century was the century of ecumenism. In contrast the 21st century has begun with lots of fears about ecume-

The Unofficial Meetings and Their Results⁴

The first attempt to establish a bilateral meeting was in 1964, when theologians from both families gathered in Aarhus, Denmark, for informal conversations, in relation to the reunion of *Faith and Order* of the World Council of Churches was held in the same place a week later. What is most important is that from the very beginning each has formally recognized the Orthodox faith of the other. Their final statement stipulates that: “on the essence of the Christological teaching, we have found ourselves in full agreement”.⁵ The theological formula of Saint Cyril of Alexandria: “Mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene”⁶ was the main topic of the meeting. Although different terminologies are used for Christology, the theologians concluded that in fact “the same truth is expressed. Both sides voiced their common belief in a unity based on a theological foundation or on the unity of faith, and not so much on a pastoral and social cooperation. The faith has to be confessed in theological terms, but the terminology is sometimes misunderstood. Theologians of both families agreed on the need to create a new terminology to explain their mutual conception on Christology, and to avoid the terms that could be misunderstood”.⁷

The two families accepted “the full unity between the divinity and the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ, without separation, division, confusion

nism. Their book: Aurel Pavel, Ciprian Iulian Toroczka *The Truth and the False Ecumenism*, Sibiu, Editura Andreiana 2010, is looking for proper clarifications of why is such.

⁴ In the present study we take into consideration only the unofficial dialogue, due to the complexity of the official one. On the other hand, the unofficial dialogue starts from zero, while the official one has the premises already established.

⁵ “The Minutes of the Meeting and Other Reports”, in: *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, Winter 1964-1965, p. 12-15.

⁶ A deeper study of this formula is made by the Protestant theologian Hans van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*, Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements, Book 96, Leiden, Brill 2009. Also the Orthodox theologian Christine Chaillot, who has been very much involved in the development of the dialogue, makes remarks on it: Christine Chaillot, *The dialogue between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches*, Volos, Volos Academy Publications 2016. It seems that this formula has never been a monophysitic, but rather a dyophysitic, but it expresses the theology before the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, which was not yet developed by that time. Father Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae confirms this: there is equality between the formula of Saint Cyril and the Chalcedonian formula. Dumitru Stăniloae, “Posibilitatea reconcilierii dogmatice între Biserica Ortodoxă și Vechile Biserici Orientale”, in: *Orthodoxia*, 17 (1/1965), p. 24.

⁷ “The Minutes”, p. 14. When visiting Bucharest, the former Coptic Patriarch Shenouda III stated that: “We are one in faith, but in the past there was a kind of misunderstanding of the Greek terminology. Then the term «Monophysite» was simply understood as expressing the belief of one nature in Christ.” Constantin Coman, *Orthodoxia sub presiunea istoriei*, București, Editura Bizantină 1995, p. 293.

or change”.⁸ Further, “both families of Churches agreed, without reservation, on rejecting the teachings of Eutyches and Nestorius and to declare them as heretics”.⁹

Theologians stipulated that “the significant role of political, sociological and cultural factors in creating tension between both families which happened in the previous fifteen centuries, should be revealed and studied together. These aspects however, should not continue to divide the Churches”.¹⁰ The well-known theologian John Meyendorff, who personally participated in the meeting, noticed that, from the beginning, this agreement was acceded to with scepticism by the Greek language Churches, because they believe, on the contrary, that the institution of the Church itself is an important factor for unity and national independence.¹¹ A Greek theologian explains that for the traditionalist Churches of Greece or of Cyprus, for instance, the role that was played by the Church in the social and political fields throughout history is astonishing.¹² Nevertheless, another participant in the dialogue meeting, Metropolitan Ignatios Paralambis from Syria, argued that: “the non-theological factors characterized the entire context in the fifth and sixth centuries of the past millennium. In that time, at least from the historical perspective, most of the Ancient Oriental Churches were outside of the Byzantine Empire; therefore, it was somehow difficult for them to understand and to agree with the Greek or Latin dogmatic definitions of the Council of Chalcedon”.¹³ Later on, “when the first attempts at reconciliation came as initiatives of the emperors, the autochthonous populations from the Orient rejected them, being afraid that an acceptance will become a hidden purpose for an eventual domination exercised by the Byzantines”.¹⁴ Therefore, none should discuss Christology issues without considering the historical facts.

It was in the beginning of the 1950’s when at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, a theological conference entitled “Non-theological Factors that May Hinder or Accelerate the Church’s Unity” was organized. The participants agreed that such particular factors as: the isolation of the Churches, persecution, discrimination, nationalism etc., need a special attention in

⁸ J. Robert Wright wrote about several modern agreements regarding the four Chalcedonian adverbs: J. Robert Wright, “The Meaning of Four Chalcedonian Adverbs in Recent Ecumenical Agreements”, in: *St. Nerses Armenian Review* (1/1996), p. 6.

⁹ “The Minutes”, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹¹ John Meyendorff, *Les Chalcedoniens et le monophysites apres Chalcedon*, Paris, 1964, p. 11.

¹² Albanis Doudelet, *Les Orthodoxes grecs*, Turnhout, Brepols 1966, p. 203.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 205.

¹⁴ Joan M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1991, p. 115.

all theological debates, because “many divisions have arisen primarily from non-theological causes”.¹⁵ Regarding the same topic, the Romanian theologian Fr. Teodor Popescu stated that: “the schism between these two Orthodox Churches is a result of a very complicated process in which human, political and religious factors interfered”.¹⁶

In this light, it is essential to consider another dialogue that was developed by the Ancient Oriental Churches in the 1960's. This is the dialogue with the Roman-Catholic Church, which was started at approximately the same time as the dialogue with the Orthodox Church.¹⁷

Pope Paul VI initiated the dialogue in a fraternal meeting with Armenian patriarch Khoren I in May 1967. From the beginning, a question was raised about the real cause of the split between the Oriental Christians and the other churches, which had remained in communion until 1054. This question was first raised in 1951, when Pope Pius XII declared in the Encyclical *Sempiternus Rex* that “these Christians (the Oriental ones) seem to get lost from the right faith, mainly in words”.¹⁸ In another meeting between Pope Paul VI and Armenian Patriarch Vasken I it was stated that:

If we came on divergent opinions on the central mystery of our faith, due to some unfortunate happenings, to some cultural differences and of some difficulties in translation of elaborate terms, the research on these doctrinal difficulties must to be done again, to understand the causes that produced them and to be able to overcome them fraternally.¹⁹

The first unofficial ecumenical consultation between Orientals and Catholics was organized by *Pro Oriente Foundation* in Wien, in September 1971. The final declaration stipulates that:

For those of us who belong to the Occidental tradition, to speak about one nature of Christ may be deceptive, for such may be incorrectly understood as a negation of His humanity. For those of us

¹⁵ “Social and Cultural Factors in Church Divisions”, in: *Faith and Order* 10, Geneva, WCC Publications 1952, p. 27.

¹⁶ Teodor Popescu, *Condițiile istorice ale formării vechilor Biserici Orientale*, in: “Ortodoxia”, 17(1-3/1965), p. 28. See also a more recent study of Visarion Bălțat, *Factori istorici și personali în geneza Bisericilor Ortodoxe Orientale*, in: “Revista teologică”, Sibiu, 8 (80), nr. 2-3 (4-6/1998), p. 31-43.

¹⁷ See a brief overview of this dialogue in: Dietmar W. Winkler, Klaus Augustin, *Bisericile din Răsărit*, București, Editura Arhiepiscopiei romano-catolice de București 2003, p. 136-138.

¹⁸ “Acta Apostolica Sedis”, 43, 1951, p. 636, in: Ronald Roberson, *Bisericile Creștine Răsăritene. O scurtă prezentare*, Iași, Sapienția 2004, p. 259.

¹⁹ “Information Service”, 3 (III/1967), p. 13, in: *Ibidem*.

who come from the Oriental Orthodox Churches, to speak about two natures may also be deceptive, thus it may be incorrectly understood to say that in Christ there are two persons. But at the same time both parties are in agreement in condemning the heresies from the past, brought into the Church by Eutichios and Nestorius.²⁰

The document also continues by confessing that:

We have just realized how difficult it is to get satisfactory definitions for the terms *hypostasis* and *physis* and how much effort it takes to have them right in both contexts. That is why the consultation proposes to get a new terminology that may better express the mystery of Christ in current language.²¹

In 1989, when in parallel the Ancient Orthodox Churches have had fruitful theological discussions with the Orthodox Churches, in the frame of the official dialogue, a common accord is signed in the name of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Orthodox Syrian Malankara Church from India, where there is stipulated that: "in the unique Jesus Christ person, there is perfect humanity and perfect divinity and in the eternal Logos there are active and united in real and perfect the human nature and the divine one, with all of them".²²

Finally, in December 1996, in a common declaration between Pope John Paul II and the Armenian patriarch Karekin I, there was an acceptance of the fact that: "the linguistic, cultural and political factors have enormously contributed to the deepening of the theological divergences between the two families of Churches".²³

In the theological meeting that was held in Aarhus, the Orthodox and the Oriental also agreed to reject the term "Monophysite" as an appellative for the Ancient Oriental Churches, because of its pejorative connotation and because it was considered that this was not in accordance with the Oriental Churches theology.

The results of the Aarhus consultation were received with agreement by most of the Orthodox Churches and "have had an enormous impact for all of Christianity".²⁴ Generally speaking, theologians rapidly shared the idea that this kind of meeting should continue "until a full sacramental communion between these Churches is reached".²⁵

²⁰ *Communique*, "Wort und Wahrheit", Supplement, no. 1, Viena, Herder 1972, p. 182.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Gérard Daucourt, "First meeting for dialogue with Syrian Orthodox Church of India", in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, 27 November 1989, p. 2.

²³ "Information Service" 94 (I/1997), p. 30, in: R. Roberson, *Bisericile Creştine*, p. 259.

²⁴ "The Minutes", vol. 12, no. 2, Fall 1968, p. 57.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

The unofficial dialogue continued in Bristol (1967), for the second time. The parties first confirmed new areas of theological studies and their will to begin new approaches on the topics that still divide Churches. Christology remains one of the most disputed of all. As Bishop Seraphim from the Coptic Orthodox Church says:

...based on the teachings of our common Fathers of the universal Church. We also shall approach the Christological issue from the perspective of salvation, because we agree that human will is neither absorbed, nor suppressed by the divine will, in the incarnate Logos.²⁶

Secondly, the theologians began “to explore the adequate steps to restore the full sacramental communion between the Churches. A joint declaration should be drafted with a formula of agreement on the basic Christological faith in relation to the nature, will and energy of the one Lord Jesus Christ, for formal and authoritative approval by the Churches. There is also a need for a further examination of the canonical, liturgical and jurisdictional problems involved, such as: the anathemas, the acceptance or nonacceptance of a Council and all the agreements that are necessary before the full restoration of communion”.²⁷

Formally, but with a lot of enthusiasm, the rediscovery of the fact that Churches share the same teachings on Christology was a big step further in this dialogue. Theologians realized that “the past misunderstandings were marked by a profound lack of a common language and a dialogue. The main success of this meeting was in fact the rediscovery of a common Christology”.²⁸ This is still confessed by each side in a sensitive different way²⁹ but yet reflecting the same faith.

As might be expected, not all the theologians from both sides of the dialogue have had this feeling. Some of the Orthodox theologians say that there is the same Christology only in appearance, as long as the Oriental Churches continue to confess a “moderate Monophysitism”, by accepting

²⁶ <http://britishorthodox.org/glastonburyreview/issue-112-christ-he-who-is-towards-a-common-christology/>, viewed 19.06.2019.

²⁷ *The Minutes*, vol. 10, p. 101.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ It is obvious that the Oriental Orthodox do not give up their Cyrilian formula. While the Orthodox consider this formula as being “Orthodox” too, they need further explanations, as the dogmatic definition of Chalcedon. Father John Romanides stated that: “Both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian accept St. Cyril as the chief patristic exponent of Orthodox Christology. Yet both accuse each other of not remaining completely faithful to Cyril” in: Bishoy of Damietta, *Towards an Agreed Statement on Christology. Oriental Orthodox- Anglican Dialogue, Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia, 5-10 November 2002*, Geneva, WCC Publications 2003, p. 9.

the Cyrilian formula alone.³⁰ In this idea, Metropolitan Chrysostome of Myra stated in one of his articles that:

perhaps we should have in mind the willingness to bear one another's weaknesses, for the sake of a greater unity, not such that our common Christology be founded on compromise, rather that it be based on continuing to go that extra mile to understand more clearly what the other side means.³¹

In the Bristol meeting, theologians took into consideration the topics related to the following Councils, especially the Fifth and Sixth, which represented other types of divergences between the two sides, since the Oriental Churches did not recognize them. At this point, they found other common grounds of understanding in the dogmatic formulation. It was stated, that "the dogmatic definitions of the other three Councils (5th, 6th and 7th) were to be found in the theological statement"³² that we have mentioned above. This is because the Oriental Churches affirm that even they were not taking part in these Councils, they confess the dogmatic teachings decided by them.

The third unofficial conversation took place in Geneva, Switzerland in August 1970. Twenty-nine Orthodox and seven Ancient Oriental theologians attended that meeting. They worked in four directions:

first, to the reaffirmation of the Christological agreement; second, the differences that still existed between the two sides; the third is an attempt towards a statement of reconciliation; the fourth explored several practical steps that could contribute to the efforts of unity.³³

Regarding Christology, theologians have affirmed once again that this is completely the same in both theologies and looks identical with the theology of the 5th century. They concluded by declaring that:

our mutual agreement is not merely verbal or conceptual, it is rather a deep agreement that impels us to beg our Churches to consummate our union by bringing together again the two lines of Tradition which have been separated from each other for historical reasons for such a long time.³⁴

³⁰ Andrew McEntire, *The modern understanding of Monophysitism*, Ontario, Card Press 1993, p. 96.

³¹ "Le dialogue entre l'Eglise orthodoxe et les Eglises de l'ancien Orient. Appréciations et Perspectives", "Proche Orient Chrétien", Jérusalem, an. 30, fasc. 1-4, 1988, p. 19.

³² See also the whole documentation of the dialogue on <https://orthodoxjointcommission.wordpress.com/>, viewed 16.05.2019.

³³ "Troisième consultation non officielle entre théologiens orthodoxes et non chalcédo niens", in: *Proche Orient Chrétien, Jérusalem*, an. 21, fasc. 1, 1971, p. 38.

³⁴ <https://orthodoxjointcommission.wordpress.com/2013/12/14/recent-efforts-for-unity-between-the-two-families-of-the-orthodox-church/>, viewed 21.05.2019.

The Orthodox Church understands Tradition (cap. T) as unique for the whole Church;³⁵ therefore, the “two lines” are referring rather to the traditions with small t³⁶. Moreover, we think that the aforementioned statement needs deeper analysis, because we already have one Tradition, the Orthodox one, including the seven Ecumenical Councils, but many traditions. The Tradition is very important in the Orthodox Church, as she expresses it in Holy Scripture, while traditions are referring to certain ceremonies as: liturgical, pastoral, social etc. It is difficult to appreciate how there might be one Tradition with two lines, one with and the other without seven Councils, being accepted by the clerics and faithful.

From another point of view, sociologically speaking, for a European Christian it will be difficult to somehow share an identical theology about Christ, as one Christian from Latin America, who usually may see Christ as a liberator, or one from Africa who may share the African black theology. Unity does not mean only uniformity, but also diversity. One cannot travel on the path that leads to reunification of Christians without being convinced that the reunification presupposes diversity, indeed not in faith, but in traditions. And the diversity of language is included here.

John McIntyre speaks about the non-Chalcedonian and Chalcedonian theology in *The Shape of Christology*. According to him, there are contradictory elements³⁷, but also many similarities. He also analyses modern Christology in comparison with the theology of the past: “The Chalcedon has this chameleon-like quality of merging into the models with their varying concepts, structures and even methods, while still retaining a discernible presence”³⁸. The influence of Chalcedon is quite important, but any attempt to impose its identical words and rules to all Christian theologies is a challenge.

Above all, theologians gathered in Geneva acknowledged that despite their formal agreement in Christology, time comes to correct all differences that still exist in the attempt to overcome the disagreements from the past. These differences pertain to three basic ecclesiological issues:

³⁵ Ion Bria, *Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericii creștine*, București, IBMBOR 1968, p. 75.

³⁶ See the “Report of Section II: Scripture, Tradition and Traditions, Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal, 1963”, in: Michel Kinnamon, Brian E. Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva, WCC Publications 1997, p. 139-144.

³⁷ See also the Orthodox responses given in John Breck, “Reflections on the Problem of Chalcedonian Christology”, in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 33 (2/1989), p. 147-157.

³⁸ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark 1998, p. 336.

a) The meaning and the place of certain Councils

The Orthodox Church teaches that all the first seven Ecumenical Councils have had an essential role in defining the “truth in love” and therefore they set up a norm. The acceptance of their dogmatic definitions is necessary, as all constitute the spiritual treasure of the authentic Orthodoxy.³⁹ On the other hand, the Oriental Churches claim that during the fourth Council in Chalcedon (451) the Alexandrian Patriarch Dioscorus was reproved because he condemned Pope Leo’s Tome⁴⁰.

Historically, therefore, the Oriental Churches cannot accept a Council that anathematized their Orthodox leader. They can nevertheless accept recent reinterpretations of their Christology, which are very close to their traditional concept. Both families feel that the Council will constitute no obstacle once both sides have lifted the anathemas against Leo of Rome, Dioscorus of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch and others. Concerning the last three Councils, once the anathemas have been lifted, the Oriental Churches have declared that they will find in their contents subjects they have not been exposed to, such as the iconoclastic controversy. In the Oriental area, the defence of the veneration of icons has never been an issue, for icons have never been attacked,⁴¹

and it is the same with the veneration of holy relics.

Unfortunately, among other issues, the matter of acceptance of some Ecumenical Councils has created difficulties; the Orthodox Church believes that without the other three the accuracy of Orthodoxy is limited. On the other hand, the Coptic Patriarch Shenuda said once that, “while for you it is impossible to renounce one or more Councils, for us it is difficult to accept any other Council but the first three”.⁴² We are then faced with the question: “Is it possible that in spite of our different theological traditions to reach a common historical understanding of the Council of Chalcedon?”⁴³

The question of reception of certain Councils is an inside problem. Nowadays the opinions of different Christian theologians are divided regarding the acceptance of certain Councils in history. The Orthodox Church

³⁹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1988, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Mesrob K. Krikorian, “La reception des conciles”, in: *Istina* (4/1973), p. 390.

⁴¹ <https://orthodoxjointcommission.wordpress.com/2013/12/14/recent-efforts-for-unity-between-the-two-families-of-the-orthodox-church/>, viewed 21.05.2019.

⁴² “The Minutes”, vol. 16, (1-2/1971), p. 43-44.

⁴³ Michel Jan van Parys, “The Council of Chalcedon as a Historical Event”, in: *The Ecumenical Review*, 23 (10/1970), p. 305.

accepts seven which are considered as “Ecumenical” and therefore with authority for the definition of faith.⁴⁴ The Roman-Catholic Church goes further considering the other fourteen Councils as being faithful to the Tradition.⁴⁵ The Assyrian Church of the Middle East asserts that the first two Ecumenical Councils are representative for the faith, while the others are not.⁴⁶ Finally, the Ancient Oriental Churches stop counting the number of Ecumenical Councils after the first three accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Drawing a parallel between the aforementioned Churches, it becomes clear that the acceptance or non-acceptance of certain Councils is related to the process of reception.

The reception by various Councils was developed at one time in *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement*, edited by WCC Publications. One study included here belongs to the Romanian theologian Liviu Stan. He deals with the issue of the acceptance of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils from the Orthodox perspective:

The history of the Church shows us that all the acceptances occurred spontaneously, not in an organized way with judicial forms or directives. (...) Here was definitively the work of the Holy Spirit, the basic principle for any kind of dogmatic definition adopted by the Synods.⁴⁷

Regarding our dialogue, it was obvious from the beginning that the full acceptance of the following Councils by the Oriental Churches would not be an easy task. The categorical attitude in this direction is here clear: “We have always held that Chalcedon was not ecumenical. You continue to believe in Chalcedon; but do not expect us to accept Chalcedon. Let us be quite clear: Chalcedon is not acceptable to us. There should be no misunderstanding of the position of the non-Chalcedonian Churches; there will be no formal acceptance of Chalcedon”.⁴⁸

This is only one example of a kind of opinion expressed by the Oriental theologians in Geneva meeting. The former Coptic Patriarch Shenouda III expressed the same view in one of his discourses:

⁴⁴ “The Orthodox Churches consider that the Ecumenical Councils have no authority «ex sese», or of themselves, but only when they express the truth which exist in the Church as a whole. In order to be ecumenical the decisions of a council must be accepted by the entire Church, which alone possesses the infallible prerogative to speak «ex cathedra». Hamilcar Alivisatos, *The Proposed Ecumenical Council and Reunion*, Geneva, WCC Publications 1963, p. 83.

⁴⁵ Stephen F. Brown, Khaled Anatolios, *Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity*, New York, Facts on File Inc. 2002, p. 52.

⁴⁶ John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*, Leiden, Brill 2000, p. 17- 20.

⁴⁷ *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC Publications 1968, p. 70.

⁴⁸ “The Minutes”, vol. 16, p. 30-31.

As regards the Ecumenical Councils, we accept the first three (...), and we deny the Council of Chalcedon. I can say completely openly that all the Oriental Churches cannot accept the Council of Chalcedon. You (the Eastern Orthodox) have seven Ecumenical Councils; if you lose one you are not losing a lot.⁴⁹

Maybe this could be a kind of a joke but it expresses a serious position regarding such an important subject. And certainly the theological dialogue between these Churches was not initiated in order to negotiate the number of the Ecumenical Councils.

The position of Peter Theodore, a theologian from the Syrian Church can be a basis for further discussions:

If the Byzantines work out what they actually mean by *ecumenicity*, then there may be possibility for them accepting another. As for the Oriental Orthodox, I believe their position is much more pragmatic. It is the content of a Council which has authority. It is not given authority because it is later called *ecumenical*. So, I think a Council will be useful but I am not sure that the Eastern Orthodox are able to handle a new one since they have some problems dealing with old ones.⁵⁰

On the other side, Metropolitan Chrisostomos of Ephesus notes that:

Firstly, the 5th and 6th Ecumenical Synods without contradiction have added new elements for the understanding and acceptance of the Christological dogma and were not limited merely to maintaining the traditions. And as for the 4th Ecumenical Synod, the contribution to the Christological dogma is well known.⁵¹

Further, the same Metropolitan explains that:

The 4th, 5th and 6th Ecumenical Synods, after the first three Ecumenical Synods, have been the base and presupposition of the whole analytical Christological faith of the Church. Not accepting these Ecumenical Synods precipitates not accepting the whole Christological teaching of the Church.⁵²

A practical question may be raised in such a divergent case: could both sides confess the same Christology, but in different terms and at the same time re-

⁴⁹ Archimandrite Ephraim, Elder Epiphanius, Elder Luke and Archimandrite George, "Suggestions of a Committee from the Sacred Community of the Holy Mountain Concerning the Dialogue of the Orthodox with the Non-Chalcedonians", Mount Athos, February 1, 1994, http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/mono_athos2.aspx, viewed 21.05.2019.

⁵⁰ Sebastian Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, Hampshire, Variorum 1992, p. 127.

⁵¹ Archimandrite Ephraim, Elder Epiphanius, Elder Luke and Archimandrite George, "Suggestions".

⁵² *Ibidem*.

main in disagreement on the issue of reception of the Councils, and above all these, still to achieve the communion? Then does a common confession of the faith of the seven Ecumenical Councils still constitute sufficient ground for Eucharistic unity? Opinions diverge.

Furthermore, we have to see that also administrative decisions of Chalcedon may cause the rejection of it by the Oriental Churches. For instance, among the Chalcedonian decisions there was at least one concerning jurisdictional issues, as the “28th canon”, which claims that the Archbishop of Constantinople has certain privileges in regarding the extra territorial communities of the Orthodox Churches.⁵³ Then, how can anyone accommodate this canon to the life and contemporary vision of the Oriental Churches, which obviously remained outside of such a claim?

b) The anathematization or acclamation of certain controversial teachers as saints

The restoration of the sacramental communion presupposes that the anathemas from the past should be removed entirely. This issue may also block the tentative reconciliation between the Churches in dialogue. There are mainly two positions here: on the one hand the question of recognition of some teachers from the past, mutually anathematized by one of the sides, and on the other hand, the question of recognition of the saints who have been canonized after the schism. Theoretically, the second question comes after the first one; therefore, the recognition of the teachers is the most important issue. History shows us that in the fifth century both sides excluded several teachers considered as heretics. As a result, one side recognizes a certain person as a saint, while the other one considers that person to be a heretic.

In order to better understand how some theologians see the recognition of certain teachers, we should follow what was stated by the Holy Community of Mount Athos: “We Orthodox abandon our historic continuity and identity with the Church of the Ecumenical Synods (4th, 5th and 6th) if we accept that the Non-Chalcedonians were always Orthodox and that their fathers (Dioscoros and Severus) were Orthodox. Indirectly we accept that the above Ecumenical Synods were in error and now we are correcting them”.⁵⁴ Furthermore, “any attempt to compromise in these matters is unacceptable. Either the Synods have rightly taught the truth or Dioscoros,

⁵³ Father John Meyendorff wrote about this in: J. Meyendorff, “Chalcedonians and Non-Chalcedonians: The Last Step to Unity”, in: Maniyattu K. Kuriakose (ed.), *Orthodox Identity in India, essays in honour of V.C. Samuel*, Bangalore, Imprint 1988, p. 327.

⁵⁴ Archimandrite Ephraim, Elder Epiphanius, Elder Luke and Archimandrite George, “Suggestions”.

Severus and their successors were heretics or, if they were not heretics, then the Synods were in error”.⁵⁵

Concerning the same historical Dioscorus, the Holy Community is asking:

how is it possible to proclaim Dioscorus as a saint, who not only is accused as the ethical perpetuator of Patriarch Flavius' death, but also he anathematized Pope Leo for the Tomos from which full clauses were included in the terms of the 4th and 6th Ecumenical Synods?⁵⁶

It becomes clearer that the entire process of recognition of certain teachers from the past is a difficult task. Nevertheless, studying expressions and teachings from the fifth century implies a diversity of opinions and critiques nowadays. And because of the Tradition from both sides, established in the conscience of the Churches, this issue must be solved for re-establishing the full sacramental communion.

c) Jurisdictional issues in the theological dialogue

Furthermore, after the proclamation of the unity in faith and communion between the Orthodox and the Oriental Churches, another important issue remains to be discussed. It started from the fact that after union, two or maybe more bishops will reside in some cities. Thus, the theologians believed that: “the universal tradition of the Church does not demand uniformity in all details of doctrinal formulation, forms of worship and canonical practice. But these need to be further clarified”.⁵⁷ Knowing that nowadays in some parts of the world such as the Middle East and Africa there are Churches from both families, this is an important issue⁵⁸. Regarding unity in diversity: as long as there is an agreement that confirms the unity in sacraments, wherever there are different ways of worship, such differences may not be a barrier in expression of the full sacramental communion.

Theologians agreed once again that an official Joint Commission should be convened soon. They stated that the Christological statement should be using

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Acțiuni și poziții noi în eforturile de apropiere dintre Bisericele Ortodoxe și Bisericele Vechi Orientale”, in: *Orthodoxia*, 24 (1/1972), p. 117.

⁵⁸ There could be seen what the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church has adopted in 2016 regarding Diaspora and the episcopal assemblies in different part of the world: Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe din 1923 până în 2009 – spre Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe*, București, Basilica 2013, p. 242-250.

theology of Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch and that it be worded in unambiguous terminology that would make it clear that this explanation has been held by both sides for seven centuries, as is attested by the liturgical and patristic documents.⁵⁹

In the Geneva meeting (1970) it was also decided that all the documentation of the dialogue is to be published in “The Greek Orthodox Theological Review” periodical and thus the Churches in dialogue may study the results of the first three unofficial encounters.⁶⁰ Putting this in other words, theologians seek more practical methods of cooperation.

A year later, in 1971, thirty theologians gathered in Ethiopia, following the invitation of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, a very charismatic person and most devoted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.⁶¹

Most of the theological discussions in Addis Ababa addressed two points on the agenda: the lifting of the anathemas and the recognition of saints. The final statement affirms that:

delegates of both families of the Churches felt that such a step presupposed an essential unity in the faith and thus as previously discussed there was a need first for an official announcement of unity in faith. They agreed that once the anathemas against certain persons have ceased to be effective, there would be no need to require their recognition as saints by those who previously anathematized them.⁶²

As for the modality of lifting the anathemas,

it was suggested that there might be no need for a formal ceremony, but that it was much simpler to drop these anathemas gradually in *a quiet way* (our emphasis). The fact that these anathemas have been lifted can then be formally announced at the time of the reunification.⁶³

Regarding these issues, in a paper entitled “The Recognition of the Saints and the Problems of the Anathemas”, Russian theologian Vitaly Borovoy claimed that the Oriental Churches and Roman Catholic Church have

⁵⁹ http://www.coptology.com/AboutUs/download/common_faith.pdf, viewed 23.06.2019.

⁶⁰ The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church was one of the first among the Orthodox Churches who decided to recommend further study on this issue and to present in clerical assemblies the results of the dialogue: “Partea oficială, Sumarul şedinţei Sfântului Sinod”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, LXXXIII (7-8/1965), p. 235.

⁶¹ See the itinerary of the Ethiopian Emperor in Romania in the 60 and how much he felt touched by the Romanian Orthodox Church spirituality: “Vizita Împăratului Etiopiei la Patriarhia Română”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, LXXXII (3-4/1964), p. 135-138.

⁶² <https://orthodoxjointcommission.wordpress.com/2013/12/14/recent-efforts-for-unity-between-the-two-families-of-the-orthodox-church/>, viewed 16.06.2019.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

the same Apostolic Tradition, sacred origins, the same sacraments and in essence, the same dogmas. “Therefore, they are Churches, in essence, of a single faith, a single piety, and a single way of salvation”.⁶⁴ In his opinion, the mutual lifting of anathemas by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras was a wonderful reversal of the “terrible act” of separation that took place in the eleventh century. Fr. Borovoy then counsels the two families of Churches in dialogue to first restore the Eucharistic communion and only then worry about such problems as the mutual recognition of the saints.

But such affirmations need to be analysed with serious concern, because it is difficult to speak about a full sacramental communion without, first, recognition of saints. There is a link between the recognition of the same faith, the recognition of the saints and afterwards the beginning of a full sacramental communion. However, it is impossible to start at the end of a process and work backwards.⁶⁵

Conclusions

Analysing these gatherings and their results, let us first observe the real joy that has accompanied the dialogue. It was for the first time in 1,500 years that the two sides were sitting together and rediscovering the meaning of Christology. We have inserted in the aforementioned analyses a few particular opinions that sensitively differ from the opinions of the theologians involved in the dialogue. Through these we mean to prove, if there is such a need, that although the unofficial meetings issued statements concerning faith in almost all of the sessions, there were also other comments and a lot of criticism, much of it expressed later. In spite of this, the fact that the unofficial dialogue continued alongside the official one is a proof for the efficiency of the “unofficial” meetings in practical terms. The “practical consequences” for these unofficial gatherings is indubitably the ascension to “official” gatherings.⁶⁶

Thanks to these meetings, a great rapprochement was achieved, especially between the Churches, because the dialogue involved many bilateral visits at higher levels as well as at the level of clerics and faithful.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ D. Stăniloae, *Acțiuni și poziții noi*, p. 127.

⁶⁵ For comparison, see the sensitive case of the Orthodox Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu receiving Communion in a Greek-Catholic Church in 2008; for the Metropolitan's own point of view on this issue, see Nicolae Corneanu, *Pe aripile cuvântului*, Timișoara, Editura Învierea 2009, p. 246-251.

⁶⁶ The official dialogue has started in 1985 and has ended in 1993. See: M. Florescu, *Etapele unui dialog uitat. Spre comuniunea sacramentală deplină dintre Biserica Ortodoxă și Bisericele Vechi Orientale*, Sibiu-Timisoara, Astra Museum Sibiu, Eurobit Timișoara 2018, p. 44-68.

⁶⁷ Ioannis Karmiris, *The dialogue between the Orthodox and Non-Chalcedonian Churches*, Athens, 1965, p. 26.

The Churches sent their best theologians to the consultations. Each side tried to better defend its faith. In spite of all the criticism, mainly regarding the purposes of the dialogue, the impression of the theologians involved in the dialogue was that the time had come reconcile the divisions from the past.

The other topics taken into consideration touched, generally speaking, on most of the painful aspects in the relations between Churches: the reception of all the first seven Ecumenical Councils as a condition for establishing a full sacramental communion, the recognition of the saints by both sides, the request of lifting the anathemas, the common catechetical study for the youth etc.

The attempts of some theologians from the Orthodox Church to convince the Orthodox Oriental Churches to accept, without conditions, the exact definitions of faith from Chalcedon and also the definitions of the following Councils, was proven to be unsuccessful. Their dream expresses the need of sharing of the same dogmatic formulas for the Christological definitions; otherwise, the purity of the Orthodoxy might be ruined.⁶⁸

As the results have shown, in the past non-theological factors interfered in the manner of understanding dogmas, in the interpretation of the Ecumenical Councils decisions and in the whole Church life. Thus, nowadays, when new realities are facing Churches, there is a need for patience and hard work to discern the signs of the times and to conclude whether the time indeed has come to reunite the two families of the Churches.

The unofficial theological dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Ancient Oriental Churches opened the path for the official theological dialogue. Nevertheless, in spite of all the meetings and statements provided

⁶⁸ "We believe that a true union presupposes that the Non-Chalcedonians will accept the exact definition of faith of all the Ecumenical Synods, and also that they will accept all the fathers of our Holy Church such as St. John of Damascus, St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Gregory Palamas as saints who truly express those Synods. Every attempt that took place even from the time of holy Photius until today to unite the Orthodox and Non-Chalcedonians has asked their acceptance of the Holy 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Ecumenical Synods. This is the first time in history that no demand is made on them to accept the Holy Synods" in: Irineos Teodorakis, *Introduction Before the Conference of the Orthodox and Non-Chalcedonian Theologians*, Athens, 1970, p. 69. "Firstly, the 5th and 6th Ecumenical Synods without contradiction have added new elements for the understanding and acceptance of the Christological dogma and were not limited merely in maintaining the traditions. As regards the 4th Ecumenical Synod, the contribution to the Christological dogma is well known. The 4th, 5th, and 6th Ecumenical Synods, after the first three Ecumenical Synods, have been the base and presupposition of the whole analytical Christological Faith of the Church. Not accepting these Ecumenical Synods precipitates not accepting the whole Christological teaching of the Church, and naturally takes away the possibility of discussion and dialogue on the subject not only of the Ecumenical Synods but also on the very subject of Christology", in: *Ibidem*, p. 73.

by this bilateral dialogue a question remains: is the Orthodox sufficiently convinced that they confess the same faith with the Oriental? Nowadays many contest the very foundations of this dialogue.⁶⁹ Most of them say that there has to be a full acceptance of the seven Ecumenical Councils in order for the Oriental Churches to be recognized as full Orthodox. But, realistically, can there not somehow be such a possibility in the future, and does the entire dialogue have to be revised?

⁶⁹ Ion Vlăduță et al., *Acceptăm unirea cu monofiziții?*, Athos, Predania 2008.