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Relations between Orthodox and Roman Catholics  
at the beginning of the third millennium

– THESIS SUMMARY –

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**Keywords:** Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic church, Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue, Ecumenical Patriarch, Pope, bilateral relations, Joint documents, ecclesiology, primate.

## Summary

Of all the Christian confessions in dialog, our attention in this paper is centered on the two great traditional, historic Churches of the Christian world: The Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Although Christian denominations have multiplied and religious dissenters continue to emerge, we are talking about two major spheres of influence: the Western and the Eastern. With the exception of Protestantism, which is of a somewhat later date in comparison with Latin and Byzantine Christianity, the West and the East have almost always been in some antithesis. From this perspective, it would not be surprising that the two entities have experienced a mutual estrangement, despite the fact that a common primary tradition is nevertheless recognized. The evolution of historical, political, social, cultural and, last but not least, ethnic factors has contributed significantly to this state of affairs. On the other hand, dialogue and the desire for unity have never been effectively abandoned.

The work, entitled *Relations between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics at the beginning of the third millennium*, is presented both as a chronicle and an analysis; it therefore pursues a *double perspective*: historical and systematic, and its objective could not have been achieved otherwise, since the bland presentation of events, without penetrating to their essence and without observing the impact they produce, hijacks any treatment, which is intended to be historical in character, turning it into a banal exposition of information, more or less useful, but certainly difficult for the reader to follow. I have therefore tried to keep this work as far as possible from such an approach, which, after all, would not have been of any benefit. I also wanted that, through a happy interweaving of historical and analytical elements, it should have the expected scientific character. More specifically, the work aims to present *the development of the bilateral dialogue* between Orthodox and Roman Catholics *in three different directions*: *the plenary meetings of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue*, during which theological themes of common interest are addressed, *the official visits*, often reciprocal, undertaken by the heads of the two Churches, and *the joint involvement and response*, based on shared common Christian ethics and values, to the secular challenges of today's society. In another register, the work provides a direct contact with the documents adopted at the meetings

of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue and with the joint declarations, which are to be analysed by theologians from different areas of theological research.

*The objective* of the thesis is to present in a unified manner the major directions in which the relations between Orthodox and Roman Catholics are developing at the beginning of the new millennium. In order to be able to highlight the dynamics of this relationship, it was obligatory to point out their past and the previous stages of theological dialog.

*The aim* is to show that through dialogue the two worlds, the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic – the Churches they embody – can get to know each other better, come closer together, understand themselves better; find solutions in the spirit of the Gospel and in the spirit of the Holy Fathers; have the capacity to learn from the painful lessons of history and are willing to heal the wounds of the past; are able to formulate common responses to the heightened challenges of a world in search of a new identity. On the other hand, the purpose of this paper is also to provide an overview of how the dialogue is conducted, who are those actually engaged in the dialogue, how the dialogue work/meetings are conducted, where these meetings take place, what topics are debated, when the meetings can be organized, how the discussions are conducted and decisions taken, what are the consequences and how these dialogue meetings are received.

*The methodology* used in the present work is complex and diversified according to the research target pursued in each part of the work. Given the fact that the thesis aims at a predominantly historical treatment, the research method that stands out is the historical method; in other words, the immediate concern is to illustrate the course of the events on which we focus our attention: place, date, participants, incidents – if reported – and general impressions, the aftermath and impact of these events in the church life. We are therefore less interested in evaluating the results of the dialog from a doctrinal perspective. However, in order to evaluate all the constituent aspects of the treatment in the most complex and objective way possible, the historical method is not the only method used, other methods such as textual analysis, the synthetic method, the ecumenical method and the comparative method are also necessary.

The appearance of the first Theological Convergence Documents led to a significant increase in the number of theologians interested in this new bilateral theological trajectory. The documents and statements drafted following the plenary sessions of the Joint Dialogue Commission were studied at both the individual and commission levels. Several such consultation commissions have emerged, including the North American Orthodox-Roman-Catholic Theological Dialogue Consultation, the United States Conference of Orthodox Bishops, the Joint Catholic-Orthodox Commission in France, the Joint Orthodox-Catholic



Working Group "St. Irenaeus", etc. At the level of individual research, the theological dialogue between the two Churches has attracted the attention of many theologians and scholars, both in the country and abroad, materializing in studies and articles on the topic in question, or even in larger works, but focusing on a related topic, such as a purely ecclesiological or canonical approach to the outcome of this dialogue. We mention here the Roman-Catholic theologian Patrice Mahieu, with a quantitatively extensive doctoral thesis, in which he gradually presents two directions of dialog: one between Orthodox and Roman Catholics, and another between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, from a historical and analytical perspective. Other renowned theologians in whose studies – mainly from an ecclesiological perspective – the issue of bilateral dialog between the two Churches is found are: Yaroslav Z. Skira, Frans Bouwen, André de Halleux, Emmanuel Lanne, Ioannis Zizioulas, Hillarion Alfeyev, Jean Marie Roger Tillard, Kallistos Ware, all of whom are cited in the contents of the work. As far as local theologians are concerned, we mention first of all Fr. Ștefan Alexe, who has devoted himself to the subject since the beginning of the dialog, being a member of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue; Pr. Irimie Marga, whose doctoral dissertation presents in detail how the first seven plenary sessions of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue were conducted, as well as comments from a canonical perspective; Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, Pr. Patriciu Vlaicu, Cezar Vasiliu, Ioan I. Ică jr, Pr. George Grigoriță, Pr. Sorin Șelaru, also cited in the work. As a special mention, we should mention the doctoral thesis of Ioan-Veniamin Geoldeș, in which he approaches the theme of the bilateral dialog between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches from an ecclesiological and sacramental perspective, in which the historical factor is not neglected. The studies of the cited theologians, and in the same way the present work, have an obvious limitation, which is, first of all, the obvious chronological factor: given that the issue of bilateral relations between Orthodox and Catholics is a topical phenomenon, it is constantly updated and re-evaluated.

As for the structure of the work, it is divided into three main parts, in accordance with the three directions we have followed. The first chapter presents the meetings of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics, the highest forum of interdenominational dialogue in charge of analyzing issues related to the content of faith, according to a standardized plan: presentation of the participants, the course and the topics discussed in the plenary sessions. The content of the official documents resulting from these meetings was also analyzed – fragmentarily or in their entirety – as well as the primary reception of their message in the theological and lay environment. Special attention was paid to the Orthodox-Roman-Catholic theological dialog taking place in the United States, which is

both welcome and fruitful. It aims, at the level of the North American Theological Consultation of Orthodox-Roman-Catholic dialogue, to address both theological and practical issues, as well as to analyze the ecclesial situation at the global level in the context of the difficulties and challenges of the age. Moreover, the North American Theological Consultation of Orthodox-Roman-Catholic Dialogue meetings deepen, nuance and analyze the content of the Joint Commission Documents for a better understanding and reception. Over the years, the work of this mixed theological higher theological forum has been carried out regularly, without any syncopation, being – we could say – a reflection of the Joint Commission. The second part is devoted to the presentation of the official meetings of the Orthodox pontiffs and patriarchs – from which, of course, the presentation of the visits of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis to our country could not be absent – and the impact of these meetings. Finally, the third part presents common perspectives on everyday realities, based on the foundations of Christian ethics, with a view to preserving Christian values and maintaining conduct in conformity with the Gospel prescriptions, both at the individual and community levels, in the context of today's social challenges, with an increasingly radical emphasis on extreme individual fundamentalism in a consumer society. The chapter aims at a treatment of common humanitarian implications (calls for ceasefires in certain conflict regions, the question of terrorism, respect for religious freedom, modern-day martyrdom and migration) and the situation of Christianity in relation to today's society and its challenges. Special consideration was given to secularization and its concrete effects on the social environment, dealing with issues of bioethics (in vitro fertilization, abortion, euthanasia) and ecology (global warming, consumerism), challenges to which the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are called to offer a common response in accordance, as I said, with the norms of Christian ethics and evangelical teaching.

Therefore, with regard to the Joint Commission for Bilateral Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, it must be understood that it is a consultative and deliberative body of the Church, which was established following joint declarations at the end of the eighth decade of the last millennium. The beginnings of the Orthodox-Roman-Catholic dialogue, with the opening and rapprochement of relations between the two Churches, can be traced back to the 1960s. From the Catholic perspective, as a result of the discussions at the Second Vatican Council, where a delegation from the Orthodox Church participated as an observer and played an important role in the flow of events behind the scenes, Orthodoxy acquired a high appreciation compared to the situation in the historical period up to that time. The Council documents contain positive assessments of Orthodoxy, including legitimate traditions derived from Latin practice. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church,

following the Second and Third Pan-Orthodox Conferences in Rhodes, encouraged the local Churches to prepare and embrace bilateral dialog with the Roman Catholic Church.

A very important moment was the official meeting of Pope John Paul II with the same Patriarch Dimitrios I, following the visit of the Roman sovereign to Constantinople, which took place between November 28 and 30, 1979. The importance of this event lies in the fact that, following this meeting, in a solemn setting, the beginning of the theological dialog between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church was officially announced.

After a period of profound preparation, spread over several years, the theological dialogue between the two Christian entities of the West and the East made its first practical debut – after the official announcement in November 1979 – in 1980, when, between May 29 and June 4, the Joint Dialogue Commission met for the first time on the islands of Patmos and Rhodes. The inauguration of the Theological Dialogue took place festively on May 29 in the Monastery of "St. John the Theologian" on the island of Patmos. From the address by Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon, it is clear that the purpose of the meeting within the framework of this theological dialogue is the preparation for the "day of the Lord" (Revelation 1:10), that is, full Eucharistic communion "in purity of heart" and "together" (Acts 2:46).

Meetings of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue in the last century are as follows: the first general assembly of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue in Patmos and Rhodos, 1980; the second general assembly in Munich, 1982; the third general assembly in Crete, 1984; the fourth general assembly in Bari, 1986-1987; the fifth general assembly in Valaamo, 1988, the sixth general assembly in Freising, 1990; and finally the seventh general assembly of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue in Balamand, Lebanon, 1993. Meetings of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Roman Catholics have continued into the third millennium, and to date they have been held as follows: in Baltimore (2000), Belgrade (2006), Ravenna (2007), Paphos (2009), Vienna (2010), Amman (2014), Chieti (2016) and Alexandria (2023). These meetings have resulted in the drafting of official documents or communiqués on the content of the working sessions. Thus, in the period 1980-2023, seven Documents of theological convergence were adopted and published: *The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity* (Munich, 1982); *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church* (Bari, 1987); *The Mystery of the Priesthood in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, with particular reference to the importance of apostolic succession for the sanctification and unity of the People of God* (Valamo, 1988); *Uniatism as a method of union in the past and the present search for full communion* (Balamand, 1993); *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences Flowing from the*

*Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial communion, synodality/conciliarity and authority* (Ravenna, 2007); *Synodality and Primacy in the First Millennium. Toward a common understanding at the service of the unity of the Church* (Chieti, 2016); and *Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today* (Alexandria, 2023).

As a defining note on the official documents drafted by the Joint Dialogue Commission, it can be said that they present an *ecclesiology of communion*, which implies a shift from a unilateral and rigid vision of the Church to a more profound perception of its mystical, spiritual dimension. The identification and ecclesiological treatment at the three levels (local, regional and universal) has added value to bilateral relations, which have succeeded in identifying important similarities between the specific traditions of the two Churches. It is true that the salient problems underlying the separation of the two spheres of influence have not been fully resolved, and the road towards such a resolution is a long and rather delicate one. Issues such as *Filioque*, uniatism or papal primacy have not been fully resolved, as both Churches have different visions and perceptions on them, but important steps towards a common agreement have been taken and continue to be taken. The fact that there is at present no resolution of these issues should not be an alarming or discouraging factor for the future of the dialogue, but rather a spur to more effective dialogue and an even greater desire for a fraternal rapprochement.

In addition to the meetings of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue, the official meetings of Orthodox and Catholic hierarchs have been the visible sign of a strong communion of reference, which, as we have said, for almost a millennium was interrupted, despite the historical attempts at forced union, which were based on political rather than ecclesiastical ideals, clear proof that they did not materialize in the end. However, the diplomatic visits of the hierarchs of the two Churches, in particular those of the popes to the Orthodox area, but also those of Orthodox bishops to the Vatican, have encountered certain difficulties, especially in communist and ex-communist countries or in those where the issue of Uniatism – for example Ukraine and Romania – raises serious questions about diplomatic and inter-religious relations, even after the fall of the communist curtain and the fall of the Soviet Union.

The two official visits of the pontiffs to our country have had special connotations in terms of closer Orthodox-Catholic relations and have proved to be a conclusive example of fraternity and communion in the Christian spirit. The visit of Pope John Paul II to our country was a very special event for the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Vatican, in particular, but also for the entire Christian world in general, because it was present, above all, the feeling of brotherhood and belonging to unshakeable Christian values.

Secondly, this visit has recognized, on the one hand, the merits of the theological treasure of the Eastern European and, on the other hand, the Christian spirit, manifested in a communal and dialogical way, on the territory of our country. This had both an immediate and long-lasting impact, since the effect of the Pontiff's visit is still being felt more than 20 years after the event. Pope Francis' visit, however, had a predominantly pastoral character, aimed at the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic communities. Given this fact, the ecumenical dimension remains very much in the background. This dimension comes to life in the articulation of a convergent discourse aimed at drawing attention to the impact of the accentuated secularization facing today's society.

The beginning of the third millennium brings a new stage in bilateral relations between the Churches. Many of the problems that have caused tensions (for example, the question of Uniatism in Ukraine or alleged Catholic proselytism in Russia) have been clarified. Even if we take an optimistic view of the reciprocal visits of the hierarchs of the two Churches, bilateral meetings, etc., the road to full communion is still a long way from materializing: namely the attainment of Eucharistic communion. Some Orthodox hierarchs are still very reluctant to engage with the Roman Catholic Church: for example, the Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church ordered that no priests should pray with the Catholic clergy (which is why Pope Francis prayed alone in Sofia Cathedral) and that no priests should wear liturgical vestments. This is also the period that represented an important step forward in the relations of the Papal State with the Orthodox world in general. Cordial and close relations were established between the Papal State and the Orthodox Churches, especially with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. But the largest Orthodox Church still had its doors closed to the West and to the Catholic world, and the Russian hierarchy continued to refuse an official reception of the Roman sovereign on Russian soil, despite some obvious acts of courtesy on the part of the Vatican. The big surprise of the Roman bishop's meeting with the Moscow bishop came in February 2016. Pope John Paul II's wish was partially fulfilled in the person of Pope Francis, who met Alexei II's successor, Patriarch Cyril Cyril, at the Havana airport. I say partly because the meeting took place on neutral territory, in Havana, the capital of Cuba, and Russian territory remains closed to such a meeting. Unfortunately, the armed conflict that broke out in Ukraine was to break off relations between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Vatican, and at the time of writing the situation has remained unchanged.

But it should not be forgotten that the concerns of Catholics and Orthodox are not limited to the nuancing of dogmatic or liturgical differences, but also involve engaging in the resolution of issues in the humanitarian field, religious freedom, the right to life, bioethics, the

promotion of peace and inter-religious dialogue, etc., in a sustained joint effort. For example, the Joint Declaration signed in Havana by Pope Francis and Patriarch Cyril Cyril is one of the best examples of this.

Therefore, the meetings between the papal sovereigns and patriarchs, with the exception of the Bulgarian patriarch, have reaffirmed the importance of continuing the theological dialogue within the Joint Dialogue Commission, and the fact that during this period the Commission has adopted official documents is also due to the reaffirmation by the Primate of the desire for dialogue and their support for its deepening.

The response of the Churches together in the face of the current challenges that the context of today's world poses and whose solution – to the extent that this is possible – requires a "mission in unity". More specifically, these problems must first be identified, and then it must be examined how and to what extent they can be resolved through the involvement of the hierarchy and Church organizations. In order to achieve this, three lines of approach, common to both Churches, are envisaged: 1) humanitarian implications (appeals for peace in various armed conflict situations, terrorism, calls for respect for religious freedom, martyrdom, poverty and migration); 2) Christianity reflected in the family and society (Christian family, Christian youth, secularization); 3) bioethics and the environment (in vitro fertilization, abortion, euthanasia, consumerism and environmental protection). The sources that form the basis of the treatment are the texts of the Official Declarations signed by papal sovereigns and Orthodox patriarchs, the Joint Declarations of the Orthodox-Roman-Catholic Consultation in America and, where appropriate, since they are predominantly theological in content, excerpts from the Official Documents of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox, as well as other documents or statements drafted following official thematic meetings.

Despite the famous doctrinal and traditional differences which prevent the realization of full ecclesiastical unity, the two Churches have come to realize that they have an overwhelming common ground. Faced with the threats of secularism and its devastating effects, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches have realized that only by working together can they stem the tide of "modern" secular tendencies, some of which are in the process of normalization, others which have already entered into the collective consciousness of the everyday state of normality. The Church still remains the guardian of the unaltered treasury of spiritual values that Christians must share. Together, the Churches have realized that only in this way can they offer a valid and enduring example to those who are still in search of a system of reference firmly anchored in the unshakeable moral realities founded on

evangelical precepts. The Christian family and young Christians are urged to brave the secular tide, to "stand against the tide" so that they can pass on the Christian tradition and values of a Europe suffocated by the harmful libertinism of secular humanism. And if we have spoken of freedom, it must also be remembered that the true form of freedom that man can enjoy is freedom from sin, that is to say, the power of man to rise above sin, above lust, not to be a prisoner of it. There is a fundamental difference between this ultimate type of freedom and the secular type, which, on the contrary, creates dependence, shackling man, in fact, by the image of an illusory freedom, to transitory and fleeting pleasures.

In the same way, the results of a secular, consumerist way of life have an impact not only on man, as the main target of the phenomenon, but also on God's creation, i.e. the environment in which man has been placed. A consumer society implies an accelerated depletion of the planet's resources and an artificial intervention of human activity in the environment, and the effects of such a process are not long in coming: loss of biodiversity, climate change, excessive pollution, etc.

It is truly a difficult task that the Churches together are called to undertake. But it remains gratifying that sister Churches are tackling this mission together and realizing that the common background they share is quantitatively much greater than that which, at least for the time being, prevents the achievement of full unity.

The two Churches are called today to fight together against the secular destabilizing factor in order to preserve traditional Christian values and to defend their propagating medium: the Christian family, increasingly threatened by parallel forms of coexistence, sometimes even shameful, but which today is gaining more and more followers and supporters.

In conclusion, the analysis of the process of reception of theological dialog, the significance of bilateral meetings and common positions towards worldly realities shows that, despite their importance, there is a rather low interest in these realities within the Churches. There are several possible explanations: a fragmentary and insufficient knowledge of the evolution of theological dialog, a certain fear entertained by the hostile and increasingly vocal reactions, especially online, of fundamentalists for whom any interaction with other confessional environments generates a potential for doctrinal "compromise" / apostasy, and last but not least a low interest and insufficiently cultivated appetite for debates that challenge a step out of the confessional comfort zone. On the other hand, on the part of the members of the joint dialogical commission, there is an extreme caution in evaluating the results of the dialog themselves and promoting its importance for the life of the Church.

We do not know what the final outcome of the theological dialogue between the two Churches will be, and it would be hazard to speculate that a close unity can be glimpsed in the near future, given that the millenary separation has nevertheless left deep traces in the collective consciousness, and that the differences of a doctrinal, cultic, etc. nature that are the object of the continuing separation require a particularly careful and lasting treatment. Above all, however, we must understand that the idea of unity in diversity remains the key to understanding this bilateral dialogue, and the joy of brotherly love must energize this dialogue and ensure its continuity and effectiveness.