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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS:

**THE CANONICAL ATTITUDE OF CHURCHES
IN THE FACE OF THE REDEFINITION OF
FAMILY AND SEXUALITY IN THE EUROPEAN
CONTEXT**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to critically investigate how the Orthodox Church responds to the redefinition of the family in the contemporary context marked by ideological pluralism, accelerated secularization, and legislative pressures regarding the recognition of new forms of cohabitation. The topic is all the more relevant as the redefinition of the concept of family is not just a semantic shift, but implies a profound change in anthropological, moral, and spiritual vision.

The Orthodox Church, the guardian of a millennial tradition and a revealed anthropology, is called upon to articulate a coherent response that is faithful to its teaching and at the same time relevant to contemporary man. The thesis focuses on three main directions: the canonical and doctrinal foundations of marriage and family, the impact of new identity policies on religious life (with an emphasis on the EU's LGBTIQ Strategy 2020–2025), and confessional reactions to the redefinition of sexuality and family. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the tension between tradition and modernity in the sphere of family ethics.

Secularization, in its classic sociological sense, refers to the process by which religious institutions lose their influence on public life, and religious values and norms are gradually replaced by rationalism and moral individualism¹. In this context, the family—as an institution of divine origin in Christian theology—is increasingly perceived as a flexible social construct. This view is reflected not only in culture but also in legislation, through the acceptance of cohabitation, same-sex marriages, homosexual adoption, or the redefinition of gender as a subjective identity.

The paper starts from the premise that the Orthodox Church's response cannot be reduced to simple conservative opposition, but requires a theological, canonical, and pastoral articulation capable of offering coherent alternatives and maintaining a connection with pluralistic society.

The main purpose of the research is to show that the Orthodox canonical response involves: reaffirming the sacramentality of marriage, defending the traditional family as a space of communion between man and woman, and developing a pastoral strategy that combines doctrinal firmness with sensitivity to the challenges of today's world.

The thesis is structured in three major chapters, preceded by an introductory section covering the thesis argument, the state of research, methodology, and research limitations. Thus, the doctrinal, canonical, and pastoral foundations of Orthodox teaching on the family are analyzed, and an assessment is proposed of how the Orthodox Church can respond, faithfully to Tradition and with pastoral responsibility, to the new challenges posed by European policies on gender equality, sexual identities, and the legal recognition of new forms of cohabitation. The work is organized around three main axes: first, it analyzes the theological and canonical foundations of the family in Orthodoxy; second, it discusses the implications of the European Union's Strategy for LGBTIQ

¹ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 13.

Equality 2020–2025 on religious life and freedom of conscience; and third, it analyzes confessional reactions to this redefinition of sexuality and family.

Chapter I - Canonical and doctrinal perspective on the Holy Sacraments, and in particular on the Sacrament of Marriage, in relation to various attitudes and behaviors with sexual implications

In the Orthodox view, marriage is not a mere social convention, but a Holy Sacrament, instituted by God since the creation of the world, through the union of Adam and Eve (cf. Gen. 2:24). This sacramental dimension is essential for understanding the Christian family as a microcosm of the Church and as a living image of the communion between Christ and His Church. Unlike modern secularizing views that consider marriage to be a mere social convention based on the agreement of the parties, Orthodox theology affirms that the family is an ontological structure, inscribed in human nature itself, created "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). In this sense, the family is not only a human reality, but also a Christological reality, a "small Church" in which spouses, united through the Sacrament of Marriage, become co-workers with God in building life and perfecting love².

The Cappadocian Fathers, as well as later Byzantine authors, did not see marriage as a concession to human weakness, but as a call to communion. Thus, the purpose of marriage transcends procreation, incorporating profound spiritual dimensions: the mutual sanctification of spouses, moral support, the acquisition of virtues, and growth in love. Patristic texts and church canons define marriage as an indissoluble union, liturgically blessed, with theological, moral, and anthropological purposes³.

St. John Chrysostom states that "the love between spouses must be like the love between Christ and the Church," highlighting the ontological character of the conjugal union, not just a contractual aspect⁴. In the same spirit, Saint Gregory the Theologian teaches that "marriage is a path to deification when lived with purity and holy love"⁵. In general, canonical and synodal decisions prohibit alternative forms of union that contravene the order of creation: cohabitation, bigamy, extramarital sexual relations, and, in particular, same-sex relationships.

This doctrine has been reaffirmed in modern times, for example, at the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016), where it is emphasized that the family is based exclusively on the marriage between a man and a woman and that any other model is contrary to divine revelation⁶.

2 Ioan Zizioulas, *Ființa eclezială*, București, Ed. Bizantină, 2004, p. 121.

3 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, București, Institutul Biblic, 1997, pp. 45–47.

4 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Efeseni*, PG 62, pp. 143–144.

5 Sfântul Grigorie Teologul, *Cuvântări teologice*, SC 250, Paris, Cerf, 1978, pp. 201–203.

6 Documentul *Taina Cununii și impedimentele acesteia*, în *Documentele Sfântului și Marelui Sinod*, Creta, 2016.

Therefore, the Orthodox doctrinal-canonical foundation of the family remains firmly anchored in biblical and patristic tradition, offering a theological vision of marriage as a sacrament and a vocation to perfect communion.

Chapter II – STRATEGY ON EQUALITY FOR LGBTIQ PEOPLE 2020-2025 AND ITS IMPACT ON RELIGIOUS LIFE

The Strategy for Equality for LGBTIQ Persons 2020–2025, launched and adopted by the European Commission, is the first programmatic document at the European Union level that addresses in an integrated manner the issue of the rights of persons with diverse sexual orientations and identities, an unprecedented initiative in the legislative and political space of the European Union. The document promotes the elimination of discrimination, the legal recognition of new forms of family, and the encouragement of respect for diversity in all areas of society⁷.

Although the Strategy is based on premises related to equal treatment and human dignity, from the perspective of the Orthodox Church it raises a number of theological and moral issues. In particular, it targets aspects related to the redefinition of the family and possible pressure on religious freedom, if traditional views are interpreted as discriminatory. Thus, from an Orthodox theological perspective, this Strategy represents a major challenge. Not only does it redefine the family on strictly legal and subjective identity grounds, but it also implies ideological pressure on religious freedom, as opposing views are often labeled as discriminatory. Thus, religious opposition to same-sex marriage or gender ideology risks being criminalized, which opens up an area of conflict between the right to free religious expression and the rights of sexual minorities⁸.

The strategy explicitly promotes the recognition of same-sex marriages in all member states, as well as the cross-border recognition of civil status documents (marriages, adoptions, gender identity). For churches that remain faithful to biblical teaching on the nature of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this trend represents not only a pastoral challenge but also an institutional one. Acceptance of such policies would imply a renunciation of fundamental components of revealed Christian anthropology.

The document states that "equality is a fundamental value of the European Union" and that all member states must guarantee the full protection of LGBTIQ persons, including through the recognition of same-sex marriages or partnerships⁹. This contradicts Orthodox teaching that

⁷ European Commission, *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025*, COM(2020) 698 final.

⁸ Andrei Kuraev, *Freedom of Religion and European Integration*, în *Orthodoxy and Modernity*, Moscow, St. Tikhon's Press, 2018, p. 88.

⁹ COM(2020) 698 final, pp. 4–5.

marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman, with the purpose of procreation and spiritual communion.

Furthermore, the Strategy involves promoting education on gender diversity and sexual orientation in schools, which may conflict with the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their own religious beliefs¹⁰. Thus, the implementation of this policy risks creating tensions between the European legal framework and the freedom of conscience of believers, and these measures, although presented as combating discrimination, may conflict with the right of parents to decide on the moral education of their children, a right recognized in numerous international conventions, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The Orthodox Church, through various official statements, has expressed restraint and caution towards this Strategy, but also theological firmness, emphasising that protecting individuals does not imply validating behaviours contrary to Christian anthropology. Its position is clear: every person is worthy of love and respect, but not all behaviors are compatible with Christian morality and cannot be liturgically blessed¹¹. Thus, a distinction is made between the person and the behavior, between ontological dignity and ethical legitimacy. This principle is essential in Orthodox ethics, which does not condemn the person, but sin as a form of alienation from God.

At the same time, concerns have been raised about the impact of European policies on the autonomy of religious groups and on the balance between the majority values of a state and supranational directives. Imposing the recognition of certain forms of marriage in states where the religious majority rejects such concepts raises serious questions about the cultural and democratic legitimacy of these measures. This opens up a broad discussion about subsidiarity, national identity, and democratic pluralism.

In conclusion, the LGBTIQ Strategy 2020–2025 marks an ideological turning point in the European Union, institutionalizing an anthropological vision that is incompatible with the religious traditions of many member states. Although its stated goal is inclusion and equality, this policy risks becoming a tool for exerting pressure on religious freedom and on the diversity of moral and cultural beliefs. From this perspective, the Orthodox Church is called not only to defend itself, but to offer a coherent alternative discourse, anchored in Tradition and capable of articulating an anthropology of dignity and communion in Christ¹².

Therefore, the LGBTIQ Strategy is perceived in traditional religious circles not only as a policy of inclusion, but also as a possible vector of accelerated secularization, which relativizes fundamental moral norms and attempts to impose a new anthropological vision in the public sphere.

¹⁰ European Parliament, Resolution of 18 December 2019 on public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people.

¹¹ Patriarhia Română, *Comunicat privind Strategia UE pentru egalitatea persoanelor LGBTIQ*, 2021.

¹² Conferința Episcopilor Ortodocși din Europa, *Comunicat asupra libertății religioase*, 2021.

Chapter III – CHRISTIAN CONFESSIONS' RESPONSES TO THE REDEFINITION OF FAMILY AND SEXUALITY

The legal and cultural redefinition of the family has generated varied responses among Christian denominations. Although the reactions are not homogeneous, a doctrinal axis of opposition (especially in Orthodoxy and Catholicism) can be distinguished, as well as one of accommodation (in some Protestant denominations). This diversity highlights not only the complexity of the subject, but also the contemporary crisis of moral authority in Christianity.

The Orthodox Church, through its pan-Orthodox bodies (such as the Holy and Great Council of Crete, 2016) and through the statements of local autocephalous churches, has taken a clear stand against the redefinition of marriage. Synodal documents reaffirm that "the free union between a man and a woman" remains the only legitimate form of family in the Orthodox tradition.

For the Orthodox Church, this strategy is perceived as an attempt to replace a revealed anthropology with an ideologically constructed one. The family is not simply a form of cohabitation between two partners, but a sacramental space of communion between man and woman, which iconographically reproduces the love between Christ and His Church. Therefore, any attempt to equate same-sex marriage with the sacrament of marriage is, from a canonical and dogmatic point of view, a theological aberration and a spiritual danger. The official position expressed by the Romanian Patriarchate in its communiqués from 2020–2022 strongly reaffirms this view, emphasizing that "protecting individuals does not imply validating behaviors contrary to Christian anthropology."

Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, such as the Russian, Greek, Serbian, Romanian, and Bulgarian Churches, have taken a firm stance against the legalization of same-sex partnerships, which they view as an attack on the sanctity of marriage. The Orthodox Church of Greece, for example, has described the recent legalization of same-sex marriages as a serious break with Greek and Christian tradition, and some hierarchs have called for the excommunication of Orthodox parliamentarians who voted for the law¹³. In Serbia, Bulgaria, and Georgia, local synods have issued pastoral documents reaffirming the exclusivity of heterosexual and procreative marriage. In addition to doctrinal opposition, these Churches have also articulated concerns about cultural and legal sovereignty, warning of the danger of ideological uniformity that ignores contextual specificities.

In Russia, the Orthodox Church actively collaborates with the state in promoting conservative legislation on the family and the ban on "propaganda of non-traditional relationships." The Moscow Patriarchate has categorically condemned the promotion of gender ideology in

13 Mitropolia de Pireu, *Comunicat oficial*, februarie 2023.

schools, considering it a form of "moral colonization" of the Orthodox space¹⁴. The Romanian Orthodox Church has supported the Coalition for Family in its effort to amend the Constitution to enshrine marriage between a man and a woman¹⁵.

At the same time, it should be noted that in some Orthodox circles, a complex apologetic discourse is developing, which is not limited to denying gender ideology, but proposes an anthropological counter-narrative: man is a relational being, created "male and female" (Gen. 1:27), with a vocation for communion and transfiguration. Sexuality is not reduced to an aspect of identity, but is integrated into an ascetic and mystical journey. Thus, the rejection of same-sex marriages is not a simple ethical refusal, but a positive affirmation of a teleological vision of the human being.

The Roman Catholic Church, although expressing itself in more diplomatic and pastoral language, maintains its firm doctrinal position on marriage as a sacrament between a man and a woman, oriented towards love, fidelity, and openness to life. Magisterial documents, such as *Familiaris Consortio* or the statements of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, exclude the recognition of same-sex marriages¹⁶.

Pope Francis, although adopting a more inclusive pastoral tone and an empathetic discourse towards LGBTIQ people, has reiterated the impossibility of blessing same-sex couples: "God cannot bless sin," repeating that "the union is between a man and a woman," warning against "ideologies that seek to erase differences"¹⁷. Likewise, in the encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), he reaffirms that the family is the "domestic church," the place where life is born and educated in love. At the same time, he warns against the "ideological colonization" exercised by gender ideology, considered a denial of the sexual difference created by God¹⁸.

At the same time, the national episcopates of Poland, Croatia, Slovakia, and Hungary have issued critical statements regarding the LGBTIQ Strategy, considering it incompatible with the traditional values of Christian peoples. In Poland, for example, the Church has collaborated with the authorities to protect the education system from ideological interference, and in Hungary, the government has adopted a constitutional amendment reaffirming biological gender identity and the heterosexual nature of marriage. These actions confirm the synergy between part of the Catholic world and conservative governments in defending traditional family values. At the same time, in some dioceses, Catholic bishops have launched parental education campaigns emphasizing the priority right of parents over the moral and religious content of their children's education.

Protestant reactions are more varied and offer a much more fragmented landscape. In the West, many Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed churches have adopted policies of inclusion,

14 Biserica Ortodoxă Rusă, *Poziția asupra noilor forme de uniuni sexuale*, 2016.

15 Patriarhia Română, *Comunicat privind sprijinul pentru Referendumul din 2018*.

16 Papa Ioan Paul al II-lea, *Familiaris Consortio*, nr. 11–14.

17 Vatican, Dicasterul pentru Doctrina Credinței, *Responsum ad Dubium*, 2021.

18 Papa Francisc, *Amoris Laetitia*, nr. 56.

approving same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT clergy. Notable examples include the Episcopal Church in the US, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. They argue that Christian love and social justice require the recognition of sexual diversity.

On the other hand, many evangelical, Pentecostal, and neo-Protestant churches in Eastern Europe and the Global South reject these trends. They uphold a literal interpretation of Scripture and consider same-sex marriage to be incompatible with the Gospel¹⁹. In these circles, redefining the family is seen as a spiritual crisis and a cultural attack by secularism. This polarization has led to internal divisions. The Anglican Church, for example, is facing a split between liberal provinces in the West and conservative ones in Africa and Asia.

The confessional response to the redefinition of the family highlights a profound crisis of theological authority in the Christian world and a major tension between fidelity to doctrinal tradition and the desire for cultural relevance. While the Orthodox and Catholic Churches maintain a common front of traditional teaching, the Protestant world is divided between adaptation and resistance. In this increasingly pluralistic landscape, the defense of the Christian family becomes a criterion of confessional identity, a prophetic sign, and a field of public witness.

Therefore, this chapter highlights not only the diversity of confessional reactions, but also the profound rift that is emerging between a Christianity faithful to Tradition and one accommodated to the dominant culture. The response of the denominations is not only doctrinal, but also identitarian: the family thus becomes an indicator of fidelity to revelation and a sign of ecclesial discernment. In the context of a constantly changing normative climate, Christian denominations are called upon to offer not only a defensive reaction, but a living and articulated testimony of their vision of man, love, and communion.

CONCLUSIONS

The theological, canonical, and social analysis carried out in this paper has shown that redefining the family in the context of secularization is one of the most profound challenges facing contemporary Christianity. It is not just a matter of legislative or cultural change, but of a paradigm shift in terms of anthropology, sexuality, and the meaning of human communion. In an age marked by moral relativism, ideological pluralism, and institutionalized secularization, the Orthodox Church is called upon not only to respond, but to formulate a coherent, credible testimony anchored in its own Tradition. For Orthodoxy, the family is not a socio-cultural construct, but a theological reality, a concrete expression of ecclesial communion and a vocation to holiness.

¹⁹ Alianța Evanghelică Europeană, *Poziție oficială*, 2019.

In the face of these transformations, the Orthodox Church bases its response on its two-thousand-year-old teaching on the Sacrament of Marriage, reaffirming that the authentic family is founded on the sacramental union between man and woman, blessed by God. This vision is not just a moral norm, but a theological reality that expresses the communion between Christ and His Church.

From this point of view, any alternative form of union—whether cohabitation, civil partnership, or same-sex marriage—is considered inconsistent with the order of creation and the divine purpose of the family. At the same time, the Church warns of the spiritual and social risks involved in the breakdown of traditional moral norms: an increase in divorces, a decline in birth rates, the alienation of children, and the weakening of interpersonal relationships²⁰.

However, the Church's canonical response is not limited to prohibitions. It also involves a pastoral strategy that combines doctrinal fidelity with compassion and spiritual discernment. People who live outside the ideal of the Christian family are called to repentance, but not excluded; they are accompanied spiritually through economy, so that they may rediscover the profound meaning of blessed communion²¹.

In relation to legislative pressures, such as those expressed by the EU Strategy for LGBTIQ Equality, the Church does not reject the idea of the dignity of every person, but cannot accept the moral equivalence of all behaviors. It supports religious freedom and the right to publicly express one's faith and traditional anthropological values²².

Confronted with the redefinition of the family, the Church is compelled to take twofold action: apologetic—by coherently reaffirming its teaching—and missionary—by accompanying people in a pluralistic society. In an age when secularization is eroding moral landmarks, the Christian family becomes a prophetic sign, a call to responsible love and authentic communion.

This work argues that the Orthodox Church, through its fidelity to Tradition and its pastoral discernment, is capable of offering not only a "no" to the redefinition of the family, but above all a "yes" to life in Christ. In a confused world, its message about the family remains illuminating: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

This research aims to make an original contribution to the field of canonical theology and social ethics by articulating a systematic and comparative analysis of how Christian denominations respond to a major contemporary challenge: the redefinition of family and sexuality in the context of new European policies on equality and inclusion. Therefore, we believe that the originality of the work lies in several key areas:

20 Patriarhia Română, *Mesaj pastoral despre criza familiei contemporane*, 2020.

21 Ierotheos Vlachos, *Psihoterapia ortodoxă*, București, Sophia, 2011, p. 346.

22 Conferința Episcopilor Ortodocși din Europa, *Comunicat asupra libertății religioase*, 2021.

Firstly, we believe that the study makes use of interdisciplinary methods of analysis (theological, legal, sociological), offering a coherent synthesis between traditional Christian doctrine on the family and the impact of recent policies promoted by the European Union, constituting a work that comparatively examines the official positions of the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and Protestant denominations on the LGBTIQ Strategy 2020–2025.

Secondly, the research aimed to make a minimal contribution to the development of a contemporary Orthodox theological discourse capable of responding to ideological pluralism without abandoning the principles of revealed anthropology, a model of balanced Orthodox response: apologetic in content but missionary in expression, faithful to the teaching of the Church, but attentive to the complexity and fragility of the contemporary human condition.

Thirdly, we hope that this thesis will make a concrete contribution to the field of comparative ecclesiology. By analyzing confessional reactions at the global level, the work highlights the doctrinal convergences and differences between various Christian traditions, thus providing a useful framework for interconfessional dialogue and for the development of public policies that are sensitive to religious diversity.

Finally, the research proposes a theological approach to a deeply politicized topic, restoring the spiritual and pastoral dimension of the discourse on the family. In an age dominated by polarization and ideologies, the work emphasizes the prophetic role of the Church, not through aggressive identity claims, but through the reaffirmation of truth in love and openness to authentic pastoral accompaniment.

Thus, the contribution of this thesis lies not only in its analytical approach, but also in its constructive value: it offers a model of theological thinking that is faithful to Tradition and at the same time capable of responding to current challenges with lucidity, discernment, and hope.

Although this paper provides an extensive analysis of Christian denominations' response to the LGBTIQ Strategy 2020–2025 and the redefinition of family and sexuality, it inevitably has certain methodological and thematic limitations.

Firstly, the research focused mainly on the majority Christian denominations in Europe and North America, without sufficiently detailing the positions of other religions (such as Islam or Judaism) or minority denominations with regional impact. Furthermore, it mainly consulted institutional sources and official documents, without systematically including the voices of local communities, ordinary believers, or non-formal organizations active in the field of family ethics.

Secondly, the approach was deliberately focused on the theological and canonical dimensions, leaving less room for exploring the psychological, bioethical, or philosophical dimensions of the topic. Therefore, in terms of future perspectives, research directions may include:

Extending the analysis to non-European contexts in order to understand how these issues are articulated in the cultural and religious contexts of Africa, Asia, or Latin America; investigating how religious communities respond in practice (through pastoral care, liturgy, catechesis) to these challenges, beyond official statements; studying the impact of these policies on young people and Christian families, including through qualitative methods (interviews, case studies), or developing a contemporary Orthodox theology of sexuality that integrates modern challenges without dogmatic compromise, but with realism and pastoral discernment.

Therefore, this research is intended to be a solid foundation and a starting point for further developments in the field of Orthodox canon law and applied theology, Christian bioethics, and religious dialogue in contemporary pluralistic society.