

Pr. Radu BORDEIANU

Duquesne University, Pittsburgh

THE BIBLICAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND THE ECCLESIAL NATURE OF THE BIBLE: AN ANALYSIS OF FR. DUMITRU STĂNILOAE'S ECCLESIOLOGY

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Abstract

Fr. Stăniloae wrote an ecclesiology based on the Holy Scriptures and invited Orthodox theologians to open sobornicity, namely the acceptance of the various ways in which God manifests himself outside of Orthodoxy, in order to have a more complete understanding of divine revelation. Revelation—and especially the Scriptures—is entrusted to the Church. At the same time, however, the Church has the duty to remain within the truth of the Scriptures. Dissentions within the Church are symptomatic of the tension between the authority of the Scriptures over the Church and the interpretative authority of the Church in regards to the Scriptures. Both the orthodox and the heretics of the early centuries claimed to interpret the Scriptures under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, unanimously within their communities; is it possible to find an external criterion to establish who was right? Presenting the difference between the orthodox truth and the teachings of the other communities, Fr. Stăniloae affirmed that the Church must not search for an objective, exterior criterion for the truthful affirmation of its teachings, such as papal authority or the predominantly literal biblical interpretation in evangelical Protestant churches. In Orthodoxy, after long periods of time, the entire Church (clergy and the people) listens to the voice of its common conscience, receives the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and discerns how to remain faithful to the truth of Scriptures and Tradition, in continuity with the ways in which previous generations have lived the divine revelation. This process reflects the interior conscience of the Church, which sometimes takes a tacit form, while other times it is manifested in ecumenical synods, which have to be later received by the Church. Through his description of the authority of the Church, through his entire ecclesiology and through the way in which he interpreted the Scriptures in the spirit of the Fathers, of the Liturgy, and in dialogue with contemporary society, Fr. Stăniloae highlighted the biblical nature of the Church and the ecclesial nature of the Bible.

The New Testament could not have been written, transmitted, and interpreted without the community of the Church. Nor could the Church have continued in its existence and perseverance in the truth without the Bible. Throughout much of the history of the Church, these two principles stood side-by-side, in a constructive tension. But this was not always the case. Beginning

with the disputes addressed in the New Testament, continuing with the Christological controversies that opposed different readings of Scripture, and ending with the position of several mainline Protestant churches towards homosexual marriages, the two principles clashed, raising the following questions: 1) Does the text of the Bible stand above the Church's position when the latter goes astray, or 2) does the Church discern the will of God even when it contradicts the literal meaning of the Bible, such as when *Ps* 136/137,9 urges us to take the children of our enemies and smash them against the rock, or when slaves are told to obey their masters (e.g., *Eph* 6,5)?

Concerning the first question, the Orthodox confessors of the faith unmasked the biblical misinterpretations of their opponents. In regards to the second issue, an allegorical interpretation of the Psalm inspired us to stifle temptations while in their infancy – these temptations being symbolized by the children of the Babylonian enemies – and smash them against the Rock who is God; concerning passages that affirm slavery, the Church also looked at other biblical texts that speak against slavery and recognized the contextual limitations of the passages that tolerated slavery. This tension points to a significant question: how does the Church persist in the truth when confronted with conflicting interpretations of the Bible? The difficulty is amplified when different churches agree internally, thus achieving internal unanimity in their interpretation of Scripture, but disagree with other churches, such that there is no unanimity of scriptural interpretation in the Church understood in its totality, that is, beyond confessional divides. In this case, to simply say that the Church has the authority to interpret Scripture does not solve the problem. To say that the Bible stands above the Church is equally insufficient when two opposing positions claim to provide a correct biblical interpretation.

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae offers the following suggestion: the Church should not seek an external authority that would legalistically solve all conflicts. Rather, over long periods of time, the entire Church (clergy and the people alike) look at their common conscience, listen to the guiding voice of the Spirit, and discern how to stay true to the Scriptures and Tradition, in line with previous generations. The discernment of truth reflects the inner conscience of the Church, which sometimes takes explicit forms in councils. In his response, Fr. Stăniloae moved away from the terms of neoscholastic polemics concerning the interpretation of Scripture and pointed to the organic interrelationship between Bible, Church, and Tradition. By situating Scripture within Tradition, and both in the life of the Church, while also emphasizing the authority of revelation over the ecclesial community, he showed that the Church is intrinsically biblical and the Bible is intrinsically ecclesial.

Fr. Stăniloae's use of Scripture

Before analyzing Fr. Stăniloae's understanding of the relationship between the Bible and the Church, it is important to offer several general considerations about his use of Scripture. His admirers praise him for writing a neo-Patristic synthesis – as Fr. Georges Florovsky urged Orthodox theologians to do¹ – but remain silent on his biblical sources. Fr. Stăniloae's critics (even sympathetic ones) consider that some of his writings are highly speculative, overly philosophical and patristic, but not sufficiently rooted in the Scriptures.

Elsewhere I have argued that Fr. Stăniloae was the first to write a neo-patristic synthesis systematically, rather than historically, as does Florovsky². I stand by my affirmation and I believe that herein lies one of Fr. Stăniloae's major contributions to Orthodox theology, thus aligning my position with that of his admirers. I suggest that Fr. Stăniloae also began to develop a „neo-biblical” theology – if I may propose this term – which is based on Scripture beyond a mechanical repetition of biblical passages and renders the biblical text contemporary while staying true to the Orthodox tradition of interpretation. In other words, patristic theology is primarily biblical exegesis, and Fr. Stăniloae continued to emphasize the authority of Scripture as the Fathers did.

In the following pages I intend to argue that oftentimes Fr. Stăniloae's theology is explicitly biblical and that the Bible represents the backbone of his arguments rather than being there simply for decorative purposes. He dedicated entire volumes to the interpretation of the Scriptures, such as *The Evangelical Image of Jesus Christ*. His ecclesiology is rooted deeply in the Scriptures. For example, in just four pages that explain the authority of the Church, he used 24 biblical passages, a multitude of patristic and liturgical references, and contemporary Western scholarship³. Fr. Stăniloae thus provided a model of Orthodox biblical scholarship: the Bible is used as a source of theology, the reception of the Bible in the Fathers of the Church as well as our liturgical tradition should mark the Orthodox character of our biblical scholarship⁴, and our Orthodoxy

¹ Florovsky wrote: „It should be more than just a collection of Patristic sayings or statements. It must be a *synthesis*, a creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the Holy Men of old. It must be *Patristic*, faithful to the spirit and vision of the Fathers, *ad mentem Patrum*. Yet, it must also be *Neo-Patristic*, since it is to be addressed to the new age, with its own problems and queries”. Florovsky's „Address at 80 Years of Age”, apud: Andrew BLANE, „A Sketch of the Life of Georges Florovsky”, in: A. BLANE (ed.), *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1993, p. 154.

² Radu BORDEIANU, *Dumitru Staniloae: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, T&T Clark/Continuum, New York, 2011.

³ Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, „Autoritatea Bisericii [The Authority of the Church]”, in: *Studii Teologice* 16 (1964), 3-4, pp. 200-204. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are mine.

⁴ For consideration on an Orthodox reception of the Bible, the need to move beyond a neo-patristic synthesis and to include biblical exegesis as the Fathers were attentive to do, see for

should not be enclosed in itself, but rather be in dialogue with Western scholarship. While I do not claim that Fr. Stăniloae was a biblical scholar, I submit that he gave us a glimpse of what Orthodox biblical scholarship might look like, distinct (though not separate) from Catholic, Protestant, and historical-critical approaches to the Scripture.

Other times, however, Fr. Stăniloae was content to theologize with the Fathers and in the spirit of the Fathers, without explicitly rooting his arguments in the Scripture. His neo-patristic synthesis is implicitly biblical, but, as his sympathetic critics would say, Fr. Stăniloae's biblical presuppositions remain often-times implicit or transpire indirectly through the Fathers. Regarding Fr. Stăniloae's speculative writings, one must admit that today's biblical interpretation cannot happen in a philosophical vacuum, as it did not happen in patristic times. In this sense, Fr. Stăniloae used the thought of existentialist philosophers just as the Fathers used the philosophy of their time in their reading of Scripture.

When describing the Patristic method of biblical interpretation, Fr. Stăniloae noted that the Fathers always remain faithful to „the Spirit of the Church”, or „the voice of the Church”, or „the faith of the Church”. He continued: „They show that *the faith of the Church stems from the biblical text* [emphases mine]. ... The entire faith of the Church is contained in the Bible”⁵.

Moreover, the Fathers looked for the spiritual sense of the Scriptures, highlighting God's actions, as opposed to a historical method that is mainly concerned with details about the original biblical context. The Fathers uncover newer and newer meanings in the words of the Bible, surpassing the immediate meaning of these words with their spiritual concerns. As one of the Philokalic fathers wrote, „every time we read a verse in the Bible, we find something new, a new sense. These multiple and always new senses are the senses of the divine work, totally different from the natural action of humans or of nature”⁶. Furthermore, the Fathers interpret the Bible

„in a state of admiration, praise, and thanksgiving. Their exegesis is a doxology and almost a prayer. All the writings of the Fathers are an interpretation of the Bible. One could say that during the Patristic period, theology was always biblical theology, (...) a doxological commentary of the Bible”⁷.

Fr. Stăniloae's biblical interpretations followed the same pattern as the Fathers: continuity with the tradition of the Church, concern to maintain the

example Alexander GOLITZIN, „Theophaneia: Forum on the Jewish Roots of Orthodox Spirituality”, in: Basil LOURIE, Andrei ORLOV (ed.), *The Theophaneia School: Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism*, Gorgias, Piscataway, 2009, pp. xvii-xx.

⁵ D. STĂNILOAE, M.A. COSTA DE BEAUREGARD, *Mica dogmatică vorbită: dialoguri la Cernica* [Brief Spoken Dogmatics: Dialogues at Cernica], Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1995, p. 124.

⁶ D. STĂNILOAE, M.A.C. de BAUREGARD, *Mica dogmatică vorbită...*, p. 123.

⁷ D. STĂNILOAE, M.A.C. de BAUREGARD, *Mica dogmatică vorbită...*, p. 123.

biblical character of the faith, interest in renewed meanings of the sacred texts, and a doxological attitude.

On a different preliminary note, the references to the Bible in this essay should be understood with a certain dose of fluidity, in a true Orthodox spirit. At one end of the spectrum, the term „Bible” is used generously: technically speaking, the Church had a primary role only in the decision of the canon of the New Testament, relying on the Rabbis to decide the canon of the Old Testament (though, obviously, the early Christian canon of the Old Testament was larger than the Jewish canon); the same is true when considering the ecclesial character of the transmission and interpretation of the Bible: the Church relied on manuscripts and interpretative traditions from within Judaism, so the Bible does not have an exclusively ecclesial character, but it is also dependent on the Synagogue. Thus, technically speaking, the Church is primarily associated with the New Testament while Rabbinic interpretations are related to the Tanakh, but in this essay I use the terms „Church” and „Bible,” generously. At the other end of the spectrum, the references to the Bible are merely representative of a larger revelatory context, which goes even beyond what scholasticism would call „Tradition”. Fr. Stăniloae saw revelation as encompassing not only the written and orally transmitted word, but also acts and images through which God reveals himself. These are so important, that a theological language that would actualize the Bible but „would no longer express the content of these acts of revelation would no longer be a Christian theological language”⁸. For Fr. Stăniloae, the criterion for the Church’s truthfulness is not only the written word of Scripture, but the entire revelation.

Still concerned with the way in which the Church actualizes the presence of Christ throughout the ages, Fr. Stăniloae further emphasized the importance of staying true to the image of Christ as reflected in the Gospels and, I would add by extension, the New Testament. He wrote that the Gospels reflect the true identity of Christ, and Christ is always actual, in the sense of current and relevant for our times. As the Body of Christ, the Church cannot stop being evangelical in its endeavor to be actual. Both the person of Christ and its reflection in the Gospels must endure throughout the process of actualization. The Church must remain biblical. In this regard, Fr. Stăniloae wrote about the Gospels:

„They are not defeated by time because Jesus Christ is not defeated by time, but he defeats all times through what he gives us, responding to the needs of each age, as well as to the needs that cannot be satisfied in time

⁸ D. STANILOAE, *Theology and the Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1980, p. 125. Along the same lines, Fr. Stăniloae wrote: „Even more damaging, however, is theology which entirely abandons the revelation in Christ which has been preserved in holy scripture and in the tradition of the Church in order to adapt itself to what it thinks representative exclusively of the spirit of the age” (Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Experience of God: Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1998, p. 89).

[i.e. on this side of the eschaton]. Jesus Christ gave us the awareness of the eternal value of his words (...) «Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away» (Mt 24, 35)⁹.

Given the limits of this article, it is impossible to present here the way in which Fr. Stăniloae actualized the word of God in his theology of the Church, or to analyze extensively the biblical foundation of his ecclesiology¹⁰. Suffice it to say that he made ample use of biblical images for the Church and explained them in the spirit of the Fathers and the Orthodox liturgical tradition, presenting the relationship between the Trinity and the Church as a significant contribution to ecclesiology. Especially significant is Fr. Stăniloae's description of the Church as the adopted children of the Father, an aspect very rarely, if ever, addressed by contemporary ecclesiologists. But Scripture is such an essential source for Fr. Stăniloae that even when there are virtually no other contemporary ecclesiological sources on the relationship between the Father and the Son, he wrote a biblical ecclesiology based on the biblical motif of adoption or sonship (υιοθεσία). For Fr. Stăniloae, the nature of the Church is biblical in the sense that the Bible offers prescriptions for how the Church is called to be, standing above it as an ideal that needs to be attained, and at the same time standing within the Church, describing what the Church already is.

Characteristic to his entire theological corpus, Fr. Stăniloae's discussion of the relationship between revelation and the Church is deeply spiritual: revelation is meant to make God present to us and to divinize us, an act which God accomplishes through the Church. He wrote:

„The bond which links Christ with us, his outpouring upon us, our gradual assimilation to him, our spiritualization which is like his own – all these are effected by Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church. This is the prolongation of the divine act revealed on the day of Pentecost”¹¹.

Elsewhere, Fr. Stăniloae compared reading the Scriptures with the Eucharist, such that the Word of God becomes nourishment for the Church. He based his arguments on Origen and St. Maximus the Confessor, the latter affirming that even in the Old Testament there was a partaking of the Word through Scripture¹². Moreover, Fr. Stăniloae added, the Word of God has to be read in „the Body of God” – an interesting designation for the Church, one must note – or in the Body of Christ in which the work of Christ is felt¹³. These spiritual considerations add an important aspect to the understanding of the biblical

⁹ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Chipul evanghelic al lui Iisus Hristos [The Evangelical Image of Jesus Christ]*, Ed. Centrului Mitropolitan Sibiu, Sibiu, 1991, p. 284.

¹⁰ For more on this subject, see R. BORDEIANU, *Dumitru Staniloae: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, pp. 41-145.

¹¹ D. STĂNILOAE, *Theology and the Church*, p. 129.

¹² D. STĂNILOAE, M.A.C. de BAUREGARD, *Mica dogmatică vorbită...*, p. 125.

¹³ D. STĂNILOAE, M.A.C. de BAUREGARD, *Mica dogmatică vorbită...*, p. 129.

character of the Church, not only in a doctrinal sense, but also in the sense that revelation is the means by which the Church partakes of God and unites itself with God, being deified (θεώσις).

Fr. Stăniloae's spiritual writings do not emphasize only the biblical character of the Church but also the ecclesial character of revelation and, more specifically, the ecclesial character of the way in which revelation is received in the faith. If spirituality in general has an ecclesial character, as opposed to an individualistic misconception of spirituality, that is especially the case with respect to faith. One's faith is rooted in the faith of the community; that faith remains true and grows only within the Church. Moreover, without belonging to a community, one cannot share the fruits of one's faith, nor can one support others in their growth in the faith¹⁴. To grow in the faith, one needs the support of those who are more advanced in the faith, which lead Fr. Stăniloae to speak of a „supple hierarchy” in the Church, one that does not necessarily coincide with ecclesial hierarchy. From the perspective of spirituality, the divine mysteries are more fully revealed to those who are higher up in the hierarchy of holiness than to those on the lower steps. Those who are spiritually advanced have grown in their experience of the truth of the Church and they instruct the others in that faith¹⁵. Based on Fr. Stăniloae, one could thus conclude that the ecclesial character of revelation has a spiritual-hierarchical dimension, as well.

Spirituality is also relevant for the correct interpretation of Scripture. Heresies do not necessarily ignore the Scriptures, but rather their interpretation is flawed because they do not go deeper than the surface of the biblical text, they do not reach beyond the literal meaning or the „veil” of the letter. In a state of prayer, however, the Spirit takes a person to the depths of the word of God¹⁶. Fr. Stăniloae's position does not necessarily mean that all those who misinterpret the Scriptures are necessarily ill intentioned or that the literal meaning of the text is unimportant. Rather, by persisting prayer, those who are disunited dogmatically can find a common ground in their spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures, in the living spiritual core of dogmatic formulations, an idea that he later affirmed explicitly¹⁷.

A final way in which Fr. Stăniloae understood the biblical character of the Church was to affirm that the Liturgy is eminently biblical. The liturgical text is either a direct quotation, or a paraphrase, or an interpretation of a biblical text formulated in biblical terms. Such is the case of the ancient liturgies, be they Byzantine, Latin, Frankish, Roman, or Spanish. Moreover, patristic hymns are

¹⁴ D. STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pa., 2002, pp. 62-63.

¹⁵ D. STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁶ DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, „Criteriile prezenței Sfântului Duh”, in: *Studii Teologice* 19 (1967), 3-4, p. 125.

¹⁷ D. STĂNILOAE, *Theology and the Church*, pp. 221-222.

filled with biblical expressions¹⁸, so the entire liturgical life of the Church is eminently biblical.

Having briefly defined a fluid understanding of the Bible in relationship to revelation and the Church and having outlined some methodological considerations about Fr. Stăniloae's use of Scriptures within the patristic, liturgical, spiritual, and contemporary cultural contexts, it is now important to turn to the diversity-in-unity of the Bible and the Church, the latter becoming an unity of diverse instances of God's revelation.

Open sobornicity: diversity in the Bible and the Church¹⁹

The biblical character of the Church has an additional meaning in Fr. Stăniloae's understanding of open sobornicity: the diversity of the Bible is imprinted upon the Church.

In 1971, Fr. Stăniloae wrote an article entitled „Open Sobornicity,” a term aptly summarized by Turcescu as the acceptance of every valid theological insight in other theological traditions without running the risk of doctrinal relativism²⁰. Fr. Stăniloae wrote this article as a positive reaction to the „Scripture and Tradition” document of the Faith and Order meeting in Aarhus (1964). The document notes the unity of the Gospel as reflected in diverse, complementary, or even contradictory biblical testimonies²¹. These testimonies reflect the diversity of God's actions in different historical circumstances and the diversity of human answers to God's actions. So, in what Fr. Stăniloae calls a justified and wise declaration, the document recommends that biblical interpreters should not attach themselves to just one biblical passage, as central as it may seem, because this would lead to a misunderstanding of the richness and variety of the Bible. Fr. Stăniloae then applied this recommendation to ecclesiology. Most schisms occur due to a unilateral attachment to a scriptural passage without regard to the diversity of the Bible. Church unity became understood not as a balanced unity of apparently contradictory points, but as a uniformity that suppressed the complexity of ecclesial life. Fr. Stăniloae added:

¹⁸ D. STĂNILOAE, M.A.C. de BAUREGARD, *Mica dogmatică vorbită...*, p. 128.

¹⁹ I discussed some aspects presented in this section in R. BORDEIANU, *Dumitru Staniloae: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, pp. 27-38.

²⁰ Lucian TURCESCU, „Eucharistic Ecclesiology or Open Sobornicity?”, in: L. TURCESCU (ed.), *Dumitru Staniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, Center for Romanian Studies, Iași, 2002. In the same volume, Roberson analyzes „open sobornicity” and its value for promoting Christian unity. Ronald G. ROBERSON, „Dumitru Staniloae on Christian Unity”, in: L. TURCESCU (ed.), *Dumitru Staniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, pp. 120-122.

²¹ On the contributions of Ernst Käsemann and Raymond Brown in this sense, as well as another description of the same development within the WCC, including the Fourth World Conference of Faith and Order, Montreal (1963), see Michael KINNAMON, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends*, Chalice Press, St. Louis, 2003, p. 55ff.

„The restoration of unity is for Western Christianity a matter of abandoning the plane of exclusivist alternatives. It must rediscover the spirit of Orthodoxy which does not oppose one alternative or the other, but embraces in its teaching and equilibrium the points affirmed by both forms of Western Christianity. (...) Of course, we must not pride ourselves with a satisfactory actualization of Orthodoxy on the plane of spirituality and with efficacy in the lives of the faithful. Besides this, Orthodox sobornicity nowadays must be enriched with the spiritual values actualized by Western Christians”²².

Fr. Stăniloae’s concern here is to call both sides to action and counteract triumphal attitudes that de-entice Orthodoxy from being open to Western values. All churches need to learn from each other in order to not only to maintain diversity, but also to come to a symphonic unity without uniformity, just as the Scripture is unitary and diverse at the same time²³. Being confined within one’s own limits means to regard a certain experience of God’s actions as ultimate and exclusive; this results in a limited experience of God. However, God’s actions in different historical contexts, although valuable, have a relative value in the sense that only if we search for the other manifestations of God’s revelation and bring them together in unity, do we find God fully. Concretely, Orthodoxy could benefit from Catholicism by strengthening its unity, while from Protestantism it learns to give more value to all instances of God’s revelation. Fr. Stăniloae concluded:

„Sobornicity is more than embracing in common all the modes of revelation and expression of God into the world or in life. (...) Sobornicity is also an increasingly comprehensive and embracing openness towards God who is above these [revelations]; it is a continuous advancement in God’s infinitely spiritual richness. This sobornicity that is *open*, transparent, and continuously surpassed, also implies a certain *theological pluralism* [emphases mine]”²⁴.

These considerations are not intended in a relativistic sense, as if there were no unique truth of revelation. Nor do they negate the understanding of the Orthodox Church as the one that possesses the fullness of truth. They are meant to say that Orthodoxy needs to be enriched and even corrected by other historical instances of God’s revelation. This conclusion was not only the result of Fr. Stăniloae’s ecumenical encounters, but the same idea emerged when he looked

²² Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Sobornicitate deschisă [Open Sobornicity]”, in: *Ortodoxia* 23 (1971), 2, p. 171. To give just one example, on the same page Fr. Stăniloae admitted that, at times, Orthodoxy has fallen into the temptation to emphasize either ordained or universal priesthood over the other. This is why, for the Orthodox, unity in diversity, or „sobornicity must be more than a theory; it must be a practice”.

²³ See the same idea in Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere Ortodox [The Coordinates of Ecumenism from the Orthodox Perspective]”, in: *Ortodoxia* 19 (1967), 4, pp. 517-518.

²⁴ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Sobornicitate deschisă”, p. 178.

at his own tradition. Based on no less than fourteen biblical passages in just one paragraph, he explained that already in apostolic times revelation had a dynamic character. While being essentially one, it took a variety of forms depending on the context in which it was being applied. Throughout this process, Christ remains the same and is made relevant in the Spirit by the renewed interpretation of the Church²⁵.

In defining the Church as „the burning bush lit by the fire of Christ and a guiding lamp towards the eternal Kingdom of God”²⁶, Fr. Stăniloae presented diversity-in-unity as an essential mark of the Church. One of the reasons why he chose the image of the burning bush is because in the Church there is a multiplicity of voices, a multiplicity of prayers, a multiplicity of means to proclaim Christ’s teaching, but they are all in harmony and unity, just as the unified light of the burning bush is produced by the union of the multiple lights coming from the burning branches²⁷. Here, again, Fr. Stăniloae emphasized diversity-in-unity as an essential characteristic of both the Church and its teachings.

In his own special way, despite his occasional polemical tone, Fr. Stăniloae was considerably open to the West. He applied open sobornicity both knowingly and unknowingly. He relied on Western philosophers and theologians, biblical and patristic scholarship. He also adopted the positive influences that Western theology had upon Orthodoxy, such as the three offices of Christ or the designation of seven sacraments, sometimes unaware of their Western origin. Without discussing these two issues in detail, but related specifically to the theme of this essay, it is important to mention that Fr. Stăniloae corrected the neoscholastic exaggerated systematization, even separation, of the three offices precisely on biblical grounds²⁸. Concerning the sacraments, Andrew Louth criticizes Fr. Stăniloae for „defending [their] Dominical institution in a very forced way”²⁹. A careful reading of the *Dogmatics*, to which Louth refers here, shows that Dominical institution is at best marginal in the 133 pages that Fr. Stăniloae dedicated to the sacraments, and, in the case of Marriage, it is simply nonexistent³⁰. True, Fr. Stăniloae considered that the Anointing of the Sick originates „through the Apostles, from Christ himself”³¹, thus confirming Louth’s criticism. But elsewhere Fr. Stăniloae acknowledged that Christ did not explicitly institute

²⁵ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God I*, pp. 44-46.

²⁶ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului [Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Humankind]*, Ed. Omniscope, Craiova, 1993, p. 213.

²⁷ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, pp. 214-215.

²⁸ D. STĂNILOAE, „Temeiurile teologice ale ierarhiei și ale sinodalității [The Theological Foundations of Hierarchy and Synodality]”, in: *Studii Teologice* 22 (1970), 3-4, pp. 167-168.

²⁹ Andrew LOUTH, „The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae”, in: *Modern Theology* 13 (1997), pp. 259-260.

³⁰ D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology]*, vol. 3, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 118-135.

³¹ D. STĂNILOAE, *Dogmatics 3*, p. 135.

all the sacraments. Instead, the Apostles have applied different events in Jesus' life or his sayings to their pastoral necessities, resulting in the sacraments³². Moreover, he rejected the scholastic understanding of the character conferred by sacraments as biblically and patristically unfounded³³. Open sobornicity has its risks and has to be conducted with careful discernment, but it is a necessity in order to stay true to the diverse nature of the Bible and the Church.

From this section, one could conclude that Fr. Stăniloae brought a significant contribution to the understanding of catholicity or sobornicity: the Church is catholic in the sense of orthodox, and this orthodoxy is not monolithic but is intrinsically pluralistic because it is based on the Bible, which is a plurality of revelations in unity, and because the Church lives the content of the Bible diversely in diverse contexts. That is the case because the Church has the authority to actualize revelation in various contexts and because it is empowered by the Spirit of Truth to remain faithful to the revelation contained in the Scriptures, as I discuss next.

The authority of the Church

St. Irenaeus affirmed that „where the Church is, there too is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace: and the Spirit is Truth”³⁴. Fr. Stăniloae understood this passage to reflect the persistence of the Church in the revealed truth because the Spirit of Truth continuously guides the Body of Christ, completing that initial revelation of Christ:

„The Church infallibly understands the meaning of revelation, because she herself is the work of revelation, of the Holy Spirit, and because she moves within revelation as one who is organically united with it. The Holy Spirit who, together with Christ, is the author of revelation, the one who brought the Church into existence and the one who inspires Scriptures – this same Spirit is at work within the Church, helping her to understand and to appropriate, in an authentic and practical way, the content of revelation, that is, Christ in the fullness of his gifts”³⁵.

Not only does the Spirit maintain the Church in the truth, but also the reverse is true: one of the criteria for the presence and activity of the Spirit in the Church is the preservation of the fullness of revelation by the Church. Thus, while the Holy Spirit makes the Church, at the same time the Church is a sign of

³² D. STĂNILOAE, „Numarul Tainelor, raporturile între ele și problema Tainelor din afara Bisericii [The Number of the Sacraments, Their Relationships, and the Problem of the Sacraments Outside the Church]”, in: *Ortodoxia* 8 (1956), 2, p. 192.

³³ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Numărul Tainelor, raporturile între ele și problema Tainelor din afara Bisericii”, pp. 206-207.

³⁴ *Adversus Haereses* III 24:1. Quoted in D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God 1*, p. 58.

³⁵ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God 1*, p. 58.

the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit³⁶. Similarly, Fr. Stăniloae wrote in his *Dogmatics* that „Scripture guarantees the preservation of the living, unaltered faith in the Church, though, in its turn, Scripture is made fruitful by the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of faith, and is preserved through that Spirit within the community of the Church ever since its foundation”³⁷. Both the biblical character of the Church and the ecclesial character of the Bible are evident in these considerations. In a larger sense this time pertaining to revelation, Fr. Stăniloae affirmed the same relationship: „The Church keeps revelation vital; revelation keeps the church vital. Thus, *revelation receives an ecclesial dimension*; its expressions or dogmas become the expressions or dogmas of the Church” [emphases mine]³⁸.

These passages show that revelation is a two-way process, involving both God’s disclosure and the response of the community through reception, transmission, and preservation of the divine truth. Because Christ and the Spirit have revealed the word of God to the Church and empowered it to receive that truth and preserve it throughout the ages, Fr. Stăniloae offered a dialogical definition of the Church: „The Church is the dialogue of God with the faithful through Christ in the Holy Spirit”³⁹. To define the Church dialogically as he did, is the maximum degree in which one could speak of the biblical character of the Church. At this point it is important to develop the Church’s response in the manifestation of its inner and explicit authority.

Inner authority

In an essay dedicated to Fr. Stăniloae, Mihail Neamțu argues that for the early Church, tradition had an authority that could not be objectified, but was a mystical presence in the Church; synods and magisterium are rather later institutions⁴⁰. Neamțu does not base this specific position on Fr. Stăniloae, but he writes in the same spirit: the Church has a personal identity that remains apophatic and communitarian, rejecting any external authority. Hence, „the truth confessed by the Church is an invisible reality in which we participate and which we cannot possess”⁴¹.

By emphasizing the inner, mystical authority that the Church exercises in its interpretation of Scriptures, Fr. Stăniloae and Neamțu find themselves in accordance with a venerable Eastern tradition, ranging from the Pauline expres-

³⁶ D. STĂNILOAE, „Criteriile prezenței Sfintului Duh”, p. 122.

³⁷ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God I*, p. 43.

³⁸ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God I*, p. 65.

³⁹ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God I*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Mihail NEAMȚU, „Confesiunea apostolică, hermeneutica Scripturii și limbajul teologic al Ortodoxiei”, in: Teodor BACONSKY, Bogdan TATARU-CAZABAN (eds.), *Dumitru Stăniloae sau paradoxul teologiei*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 2003, p. 320.

⁴¹ M. NEAMȚU, „Confesiunea apostolică, hermeneutica Scripturii...”, p. 353.

sion, „the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2, 16), to Irenaeus’ understanding of *regula fidei* – „canon of truth,” to be precise – as the means of Scriptural interpretation that heretics do not have by virtue of their separation from the Church in which the truth is transmitted at Baptism⁴², to Florovsky’s description of the „mind of the Fathers,” the „mind of the Church”⁴³, or the „catholic mind,” which is the language of the Scriptures, the worshipping Church, and the Fathers⁴⁴.

Faced with such a theological tradition, Orthodox theologians should not look in vain for an objective ecclesial authority that decides *immediately* the correct interpretation of Scriptures, regardless of how natural it would be to seek such an authority. Mark Powell made a very convincing argument that both the Catholic understanding of Papal infallibility and the evangelical-Protestant view on the inerrancy of the Bible respond to the human need for „epistemological certainty”⁴⁵. It is a basic human need: we want to know the truth *immediately* and without the possibility of appeal – an ultimate authority that gives us the certainty of what we know. Orthodoxy rejects such an authority, but Orthodoxy does not reject the possibility of having certainty about the truth. The Church in its totality speaks the truth with authority because it is the Body of Christ – The Truth. But the Church does not speak *immediately* as problems arise; it needs time to listen to the Spirit and to discern the truth. When it speaks, the Church sometimes uses synods and then the decisions of these synods are received as authoritative in the life of the Church, especially in its liturgical life.

Neamțu is correct to say that synods came into existence relatively late, but in my opinion he does not give enough credit to the synodal tradition of the Church. Acts 15 provides a clear synodal model that speaks unanimously under the inspiration of the Spirit. Moreover, Metr. John Zizioulas presented synods as a eucharistic necessity deeply rooted in the New Testament, which later evolved to ensure eucharistic discipline across various regions where a person excommunicated by a bishop was not allowed to receive Communion from another bishop⁴⁶. Synods have spoken authoritatively throughout the history of the

⁴² See John BEHR, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*. St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 2006, pp. 52-62.

⁴³ Georges FLOROVSKY, „St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers”, in: *Bible, Church, Tradition, Collected Works I* (ed.), Nordland Publishing, Belmont, 1972, pp. 105-120.

⁴⁴ G. FLOROVSKY, „The Church: Her Nature and Task”, in: *Bible, Church, Tradition, Collected Works I*, Nordland Pub. Co., Belmont, 1972, p. 58. G. FLOROVSKY, „Western Influences in Russian Theology”, in: *Aspects of Church History, Collected Works 4*, Nordland, Belmont, 1975, pp. 181-182.

⁴⁵ Mark E. POWELL, *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation of an Ecumenical Issue*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2009, pp. 1-17. Fr. Stăniloae briefly addressed the same issues in D. STĂNILOAE, „Criteriile prezenței Sfintului Duh”, p. 103.

⁴⁶ John D. ZIZIOULAS, „The Development of Conciliar Structures to the Time of the First Ecumenical Council”, in: *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement*, WCC, Geneva, 1968, pp. 36-38. See also D. STĂNILOAE, „The Theological Foundations of Hierarchy and Synodality”, pp. 165-178.

Church. On rare occasions – such as in the case of ecumenical councils – the confessions of faith proclaimed by these synods were recognized by the entire Church as inspired by the Spirit, as speaking the Church's mind. After a long process of reception, the Church acquired an epistemological certainty that it was ready to defend as the true interpretation of Scriptures.

In line with the Eastern tradition that affirms the inner authority of the Church, it is true that the Church does not *immediately* act as the authoritative interpreter of Scriptures. In line with the equally venerable synodal tradition, the Church ultimately speaks its mind about the correct interpretation of Scriptures, by virtue of being the Body of Christ Who is the Truth and under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth.

Returning to Fr. Stăniloae's theology, it should be noted that he rejected the possibility that Orthodoxy would have an authority modeled after biblical inerrancy or Papal infallibility. On the one hand, his insistence on the ecclesial character of the Scriptures is a clear refutation of the theory of biblical inerrancy. On the other hand, he characterized the infallibility of the Pope as an authority exterior to the Church, as opposed to an inner authority of the entire Church, encompassing all its members, i.e. clergy and the people alike, its history, interior life, synods, their reception, and, ultimately, revelation:

„Having as its subject the entire Church, infallibility has only one criterion, namely that of the inner evidence, or the realization of revealed truth, as lived by the entire Church in the past and today. In the subject of the entire Church resides the testimony of revelation as lived from its beginning. This testimony is corroborated with the exterior proof of adherence to the sources of revelation. Based on this criterion, the Church in its entirety judges ecumenical synods, as the ultimate forum”⁴⁷.

From the larger context of this quote it results that the ultimate forum that proclaims the truth is not the ecumenical synod, but the entire Church as it receives the decisions of the synod based on the way in which it has lived revelation throughout history. The catholicity of the Church resides in its organic character, in which each member manifests the entire faith of the Church and is responsible for the proclamation of the entire faith. Each member of this organism contributes to the kindling and multiplication of the faith in the others. However, this common responsibility for the faith does not nullify the differences between various ministries in the Church. The priests and the bishops educate the faithful and verify their faith before the distribution of the Eucharist. The faithful, on their part, discern the faith of the clergy when that faith is reflected in sermons. The faithful can either accept the content of the sermon as reflective of the faith of the Church, or raise their voice to express their rejection. Another way to reject the wrong teaching is to not appropriate it spiritually. That was the

⁴⁷ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, p. 198.

case when Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople preached his heresy rejecting the title „Theotokos”. The faithful spoke up against him despite being persecuted by the Patriarch and required the convocation of the third ecumenical council, which ended up condemning Nestorius⁴⁸.

Thus, the inner authority of the Church represents the common consciousness that the entire Body possesses tacitly; it is the inner evidence inspired by the Spirit and transmitted through generations in order to keep the Church faithful to the initial revelation. That inner evidence becomes explicit when the people respond to various theological propositions and when they receive the decision of the councils in the process called, reception.

If Fr. Stăniloae defended the interior authority of the Church in dialogue with the Catholic position on Papal infallibility, he also defended the authority of the synods in dialogue with the eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanassieff. Afanassieff considered that synods are manifestations of universalist ecclesiology, standing legalistically over the fullness of the local church⁴⁹. Considering both his addressees, Fr. Stăniloae described the authority of the Church in dialogical terms, in which both partners are equally necessary. The synod is needed to proclaim the faith of the Church and the faithful need to receive its decisions. To place ultimate authority either in the synod or in the reception by the faithful, as do some recent Orthodox theologians that Fr. Stăniloae leaves unnamed, is a fragmentation of the dialogue. Most importantly, both synods and the faithful must take into account the Scriptures and Tradition, or revelation as it has been lived 1) *by the faithful of each diocese* 2) *from the beginnings*⁵⁰. I would venture to say that Fr. Stăniloae emphasized these two elements because he addressed eucharistic ecclesiology that speaks of the fullness of the local church but, he added to Afanassieff, the faith of the local church needs to be in communion with the faith of other dioceses, both in space and in time.

Explicit authority

Already in 1964, when Vatican II was still in session, Fr. Stăniloae noted with satisfaction the insistence of some of the council fathers concerning the need for papal decrees to be rooted in the faith of the entire Church, the consensus of the college of bishops and, ultimately, in agreement with Scripture and

⁴⁸ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, pp. 204-205

⁴⁹ Nicolas AFANASSIEFF, „The Church Which Presides in Love”, in: JOHN MEYENDORFF (ed.), *The Primacy of Peter: Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1992, pp. 98-103. And yet, Afanassieff added, ecumenical councils could also be seen as charismatic events that point to the need for universal primacy. See also Fr. Stăniloae’s view on synods as the instance in which bishops extend their authority beyond their local church, even when disciplining other bishops. Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, „Slujirile bisericești și atribuțiile lor [Ecclesial Ministries and their Attributions]”, in: *Ortodoxia* 22 (1970), 3, 1, p. 463.

⁵⁰ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, pp. 209-211

Tradition⁵¹. Despite remaining a minority position, this limitation to papal infallibility was reflected later in the final version of *De Ecclesia*, a version that remains marked by two competing ecclesologies: one stressing papal authority and the other emphasizing the communion among bishops in union with the entire Church. Fr. Stăniloae considered that the two competing ecclesologies were not harmonized because both those who advocated the authority of the Pope and those who insisted on the authority of the college of bishops ended up rooting their respective authorities in the juridical power conferred by their ordination, rather than rooting their authority in the apostolicity of the entire Church, whose faith they are called to represent⁵². In an earlier article, Fr. Stăniloae explained that if the inner life of the Church is at the root of infallibility, then papal decrees should be subject to reception. The Church should accept the Pope's decisions based on its experience of the truth or its inner evidence, and not on papal authority, which thus becomes exterior to the Church. Moreover, papal authority becomes intermittent, as opposed to the Church's continuous persistence in the truth. Papal statements should be infallible because they are rooted in the life of the Church and received as such. Thus, Fr. Stăniloae disagreed with Vatican I and II's decrees that the Pope's pronouncements *ex cathedra* are infallible *ex sese, non ex consensu Ecclesiae*⁵³.

Fr. Stăniloae's considerations are very important for a balanced understanding of the inner and explicit aspects of Church authority: explicit statements are authoritative, but only to the extent that they are rooted in the inner experience of the Church and go through the process of reception. However, reception should not be seen as above the council, but rather one should understand the two as dialogical, mutually conditioning each other.

Any discussion of the explicit authority of the Church must include an ecumenical component, since Christianity cannot gather representatives of all the faithful in a unified synod. Fr. Stăniloae was not entirely consistent on whether an ecumenical council possible in today's context of a disunited Christianity, although I argue that he leaned towards a negative answer. He affirmed that Vatican II was not an ecumenical council in the full sense of the word because it did not give voting rights to non-Catholic observers⁵⁴, thus implying that all Christians need to agree on matters of faith proclaimed by an ecumenical synod.

Elsewhere, however, he considered that, even in the present state of a divided Christianity, the Orthodox Church could convene an ecumenical council by itself, since Orthodoxy has preserved the fullness of truth. But then Fr. Stăniloae immediately qualified his statement by affirming that Orthodoxy needs to address

⁵¹ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, p. 190. Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Doctrina Catolică a infailibilității la I-iul și al II-lea Conciliu de la Vatican”, in: *Ortodoxia* 17 (1965), 4, p. 475.

⁵² Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Doctrina Catolică a infailibilității...”, pp. 485-488.

⁵³ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, p. 199.

⁵⁴ D. STĂNILOAE, *Theology and the Church*, p. 46.

the question of Christian reunification and, importantly for our theme, that non-Orthodox churches are still united with the Orthodox Church and with revelation, so they cannot be ignored by a Pan-Orthodox synod or by an ecumenical council. He is worth quoting at length:

„The Church has not been able to debate the problems that determined the schism, when the schism was taking place. The Church was unable to take measures to impede that unfortunate process. Since it could not do so at that time, the Church must find the opportune moment to debate in an ecumenical council the problem of separated churches, but in a way which, even though late to prevent the separation, contributes most effectively to its repair. In this sense, *coming closer to the Orthodox theologians who maintain that an ecumenical synod must be a synod of the entire Christianity*, I believe that the synod must at minimum pose the questions of the entire Christian world of today, with a maximum possibility of finding a solution. Today, the parts that were engaged in the dispute are no longer within the Church, but have evolved as separate organisms. But they have not broken the relationship with the Church and with the fundamental truths of revelation, which would have justified the Church to be totally indifferent towards them. Instead, the existence of other Christian confessions is not a matter in which the Orthodox Church would be disinterested, but is *the only significant dogmatic issue* that has interested Orthodoxy since 1054 and 1517 onwards. (...) [After applauding the centripetal tendency of union among contemporary Churches, Fr. Stăniloae added that] Contemporary ecumenical movements within world Christianity show that we are getting closer to the time when the Church could talk in an ecumenical council about the relationships with the separated Christian confessions *in the same spirit as ancient ecumenical synods discussed such issues, namely in a way that contributes with maximum efficiency to the reunion of Christianity* [Emphases mine]⁵⁵.

It is true that sometimes Fr. Stăniloae was unduly harsh towards Catholic and Protestant churches. But when put in the context of his entire work, such instances are incidental and inconsistent with his commitment to Christian reunification. Given the passage quoted above – and there are many, many more such examples – I find it inexplicable that Fr. Stăniloae has been labeled as anti-ecumenical by those who take disparate statements out of the context of his other writings. It is disingenuous to portray him as anti-ecumenical, if, even when affirming the fullness of the truth as preserved by the Orthodox Church, he advocated for Christian reunification, dialogue with other faiths, reception of Western ideas through open sobornicity, and reliance on Western scholarship, to mention just a few points on his ecumenical agenda.

In light of Fr. Stăniloae's considerations, I would add that Orthodoxy can interpret the Scripture within its own communion, but needs other Christians as

⁵⁵ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, pp. 212-214.

well in order to receive the richness of their testimony to different ways of living the unreachable depth of the Gospels. While Fr. Stăniloae did not say this, I would add that even from the perspective of the fullness of truth, Orthodoxy suffers because of the lack of unity within Christianity. This ecumenical perspective is very important for the ecclesial character of the Bible. The entire Church – not only Orthodoxy – receives, preserves, and transmits the Scriptures. Orthodoxy has preserved the fullness of that truth in the sense of staying true to revelation, but Orthodoxy cannot have the fullness of truth in an exclusivist sense, as if there is no truth outside of Orthodoxy. And, because there is truth outside of its canonical borders, Fr. Stăniloae taught Orthodoxy to engage in open sobornicity, in finding the truth revealed in other Christians.

Orthodox theologians should be inspired to engage in ecumenical dialogues and speak within the mind of the Church, according to the inner evidence of the truth. The task of the theologian is rather difficult because the Orthodox Church has very few authoritative statements compared to the Roman Catholic Church. In this regard, Orthodoxy is true to the inner nature of its authority. But there are individual theologians and spiritual figures who do not shy away from very serious condemnations of what they perceive as incorrect interpretations of Scripture. Some even claim to represent the Orthodox position on the matter, despite the nonexistence of such synodal decisions. To a certain extent, taking positions on various issues is intrinsically connected with the calling of the theologian and of the spiritual mother and father. However, when taking attitudes, one should remember the Orthodox insistence on apophatism, Fr. Stăniloae's holistic understanding of authority, and the fact that on this side of the eschaton we still see dimly, as in a mirror (1 *Cor* 13, 12). One needs both boldness, in light of the inner nature of authority, and humility, in light of the existence of authoritative bodies that explicitly proclaim the truth in the Orthodox tradition. Both are possible at the same time.

Not only theologians, but also the Church needs to be at the same time bold and humble in its exercise of authority. Fr. Stăniloae considered that the authority of the Church is limited by three factors: 1) its authority comes from Christ, which keeps the Church humble and responsible to its head; 2) the Church must respect the revelation contained in Scripture and Tradition; and 3) the Church does not receive a new revelation, separate from the initial revelation⁵⁶. Paradoxically, the limits of the authority of the theologian, spiritual figure, or the Church become life-giving and creative means through which the Church persists in the truth. Fr. Stăniloae wrote in this regard that „the limitation of the authority of the Church in the preservation and expression of the contents of revelation does not mean a limitation of its life in God. On the contrary, this limitation ensures the correct life in the divine infinite”⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, p. 190.

⁵⁷ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Autoritatea Bisericii”, p. 191.

Theology applied

Fr. Stăniloae's ecclesiological principles analyzed above are certainly rooted in the reality of the Church. And yet, they are not simply descriptive of the life of the Church, but also prescriptive in the sense that they provide an ideal toward which the Church aspires. It is now time to apply these principles to the reality of the Church, which is marked by several challenging realities.

First, the Orthodox claim to have preserved the truth faithfully throughout history does not mean that the majority of the faithful in the Orthodox Church have preserved the truth at all times. During the Arian controversy, for example, numerically speaking, most of the East did not persist in the truth. In the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, the true Church retreated in the desert, as Florovsky wrote, and the majority was Arian or Semi-Arian⁵⁸, but in the end the faithful remnant minority won the day and the truth was reestablished.

Second, for almost sixteen centuries the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox have interrupted communion because of the refusal of the latter to accept the decisions of the third and especially the fourth ecumenical councils, as well as the councils that followed. On their part, the Eastern Orthodox have rejected the biblical interpretation of the Oriental Orthodox concerning the identity of Christ. But in the twentieth century, following a sincere dialogue, the two churches realized that their differences are terminological, rather than theological, and proposed that they should re-establish communion. Already in 1965, before any official dialogue between the two traditions took place, Fr. Stăniloae was noting the essential similarity between the two faiths and identified terminological, political, nationalistic, and social causes for their schism⁵⁹. Nowadays, in several parts of the world – mostly with the tacit, though sometimes with the explicit approval of their bishops – Eastern and Oriental Orthodox receive Communion together, even though communion has not been reestablished officially.

In light of the above considerations, I am willing to admit that the majority of the Eastern Church fell away from the truth during the Arian controversy and that the same majority, if not totality, of the Orthodox Church has been wrong in living separate from an important part of its constituency, namely the Oriental Orthodox churches. But I am unwilling to say that the Eastern Church lost its infallibility. Instead, the Orthodox Church has remained in the truth guided by the Spirit of Truth (*Jn* 16, 13). Fr. Stăniloae was right in pointing out that

„Arbitrary opinion» (*haireisis* – heresy) can be characteristic at certain periods even of some members of the hierarchy. But the Church in her totality

⁵⁸ Georges FLOROVSKY, „The Historical Problem of a Definition of the Church”, in: *Ecumenism II: A Historical Approach*, Nordland, Belmont, 1989, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Posibilitatea reconcilierii dogmatice între Biserica Ortodoxă și Vechile Biserici Orientale”, in: *Ortodoxia* (1965), 2, pp. 5-27. Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, „Acțiuni și poziții noi în eforturile de apropiere între Bisericele Ortodoxe și Bisericele Vechi Orientale”, in: *Ortodoxia* 24 (1972), 1, pp. 113-119.

as body of Christ is the one who does not err and who receives what is not erroneous, that is, what does not jeopardize the salvation of her faithful, whether this emanates from theologians, from hierarchs, or from the laity⁶⁰.

Third, in the spirit of fairness, a charitable attitude towards the historical existence of Orthodoxy should be reflected in a similarly charitable attitude towards the historical existence of non-Orthodox churches, to the extent to which we are dealing with theological categories of the same caliber. Just to be clear, a high standard is at stake here: essential aspects of Christology, the veneration of Virgin Mary, and the number of ecumenical councils. When engaging in ecumenical dialogues, we should remember the magnitude of these issues compared to the differences that separate us today⁶¹.

A charitable attitude towards other churches does not automatically mean condoning any development as legitimate. Case in point, I have mentioned in the beginning of this essay several mainline Protestant churches that have approved homosexual marriages based on their new interpretation of Scriptures. The first major Church to do so was the Episcopal Church in the United States of America⁶². It is obvious that the purpose of my study has not been to address this issue, which is very complex and I leave it to biblical scholars, ethicists, sociologists, and policy makers⁶³. And yet I have raised the questions of reception, unanimity, or the authority of the Church, and it is an indisputable fact that the Episcopal Church USA has decided to allow homosexual marriages. Fr. Stăniloae's understanding of the biblical character of the Church and ecclesial character of Scripture brings an important contribution to this discussion, namely the inner authority of the Church. Given that within the Episcopal Church USA, there is, virtually, unanimous agreement on blessing homosexual marriages, one might be tempted to say that this specific community has voiced *its* inner authority, the way *it* understands the Scriptures today, the way *it* has discerned the will

⁶⁰ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God I*, p. 86.

⁶¹ Emmanuel Lanne asks rhetorically whether the Orthodox are not closer to Roman Catholics than to the Oriental Orthodox, since the two traditions share an identical Christology and recognize the seven ecumenical councils, and yet the Orthodox apply a more „liberal” practice towards the Oriental Orthodox in regards to shared Communion. Emmanuel Lanne, „Quelques questions posées à l'Église orthodoxe concernant la «communicatio in sacris» dans l'eucharistie”, in: *Irénikon* 72 (1999), pp. 435-452.

⁶² It is worth mentioning that already in 1956 (obviously, long before the developments under discussion here), Fr. Stăniloae approved of the practice to receive Anglican priests in the Orthodox Church without re-ordination, thus recognizing their orders. D. STĂNILOAE, „Number of the Sacraments”, p. 215.

⁶³ This essay is rather meant to look within Orthodoxy, from within Orthodoxy. Fr. Stăniloae himself wrote primarily in dialogue with his fellow Orthodox. His isolation during the Communist regime was certainly a major factor in this regard. He does refer sometimes to other churches, at times using unfair caricatures, but his main concern was Orthodoxy, ranging from the Arian controversy that was based on biblical arguments, to the Oriental Orthodox Churches and ending with the eucharistic ecclesiology of Afanassieff.

of God. While taking the opposite position, most Orthodox would affirm that homosexual marriages are improper because *they* understand the Scriptures differently and *they* have discerned the will of God differently. Significantly, an Episcopal Church that does not have an institutional teaching authority has made a pronouncement on this issue, while the Orthodox Church that does have such an institutional teaching authority did not make such a pronouncement. Moreover, the situation risks to be trivialized as an „us versus them” situation, where each party considers to be right internally and there is no way to bring the two positions in conversation because of a lack of common ground.

But Fr. Stăniloae added a very important aspect to the inner authority of the Church, besides the voice of the community and its interpretation of revelation, criteria that I have already applied above. That element is the continuity with the way in which the Church has lived revelation from its beginning. From this perspective, an Orthodox could make the argument that the Church has continually rejected the legitimacy of homosexual marriages without necessarily getting into sociological or policy considerations. An Episcopalian would respond that the Church has also supported slavery, for example. An Orthodox could in turn point to the multitude of biblical passages that either tone down or simply reject slavery (e.g. in Christ «there is neither slave or free» – *Gal 3, 28*), as well as instances in patristic theology or the Church’s canonical tradition that resulted over time in the abolition of slavery. Slavery has been often seen as limited by the historical context, but that is not the case of homosexual marriages. The historical aspect of Fr. Stăniloae’s understanding of the inner authority of the Church thus becomes extremely important.

One final consideration: I am not proposing any new principle compared to Fr. Stăniloae’s theology. He counteracted triumphalist attitudes within Orthodoxy with an honest and humble look at our history, as when he referred to heresies as adopted temporarily by some members of the Church, to Orthodoxy’s need of open sobornicity, or to the Oriental Orthodox Churches, as discussed above⁶⁴. Questioning with love is allowed and even encouraged – this is how tradition develops within itself. I certainly hope that contemporary Orthodox theologians are willing to follow Fr. Stăniloae’s example. Respect for his legacy does not mean the simple repetition of his theology. It rather means to appropriate his enormous contributions to theology and then continue his work. It means to appropriate his considerations about the Spirit guiding the Church, which remains the infallible Body of Christ and provides the Orthodox Church with a

⁶⁴ It is also worth mentioning in this regard that Fr. Stăniloae realized that the Fathers who were defending the veneration of icons could not explain fully the relationship between type and prototype because they lacked a full understanding of the uncreated energies, which would come only later. Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia Ortodoxă [Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy]*, Ed. Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1986, p. 65.

solid basis for claiming to provide the true interpretation of the Scriptures throughout history. Respect for Fr. Stăniloae also means considering both the internal struggles for truth within Orthodoxy and the differences between Orthodoxy and other Christians. Perhaps Orthodoxy needs an exercise in humble self-evaluation of the times when a significant number of its faithful have not lived up to the truth that Orthodoxy, paradoxically, continued to transmit in its inner ecclesial life. Contemporary Orthodox theologians should continue Fr. Stăniloae's legacy and address this point as well, an aspect that, to my knowledge, he did not sufficiently address.

To put it positively, where diversity does not break unity, Fr. Stăniloae's theology should inspire us to recognize the richness of the Spirit's revelation, the different ways in which God revealed himself in different contexts. His understanding of „open sobornicity” should also inspire us to take what is valuable in other traditions and appropriate them in Orthodoxy. To put it negatively, Fr. Stăniloae's references to the infallibility of the Church and the Spirit's guidance as the Church interprets the Scriptures enable Orthodoxy to unveil the incorrectness of others' interpretations of Scripture. Indeed, a very bold attitude, but this boldness is rooted in the beliefs that have been transmitted uninterruptedly since the Apostles, in the inner evidence of the Church as well as its explicit proclamations throughout history.

The Bible has been given to the Church, is transmitted in the Church and has to be interpreted in the Church, as the Spirit guided it from the beginning, sometimes as an inner voice, other times through explicit proclamation. At the same time the Bible stands as a criterion for the Church. In other words, the Bible has an ecclesial character and the Church has a biblical character.

Rezumat: Natura scripturistică a Bisericii și natura bisericască a Scripturii. O analiză a eclesiologiei Păr. Dumitru Stăniloae

Eclesiologia Păr. Dumitru Stăniloae este ancorată în Sfânta Scriptură. S-a scris mult despre teologia sa neo-patristică și despre operele sale care privesc Sfinții Părinți ai Bisericii. Dar caracterul biblic al teologiei Pr. Stăniloae nu este tot timpul evident. Așa cum rezultă și studiul de față, Părintele Stăniloae a promovat o *eclesiologie bazată pe Scripturi*, așa cum a procedat atunci când a descris Biserica prin prisma realizării înfierii noastre de către Tatăl, în Hristos, prin Duhul Sfânt, sau când a subliniat că Biserica este un rug aprins, unitară și diversă în același timp. Astfel, el a prezentat un *model de teologie biblică Ortodoxă*, distinctă – dar nu separată – de studiile biblice catolice, protestante, sau istorico-critice. Teologia biblică ortodoxă înțelege Scriptura prin prisma felului în care Sfinții Părinți au receptat textul biblic și prin tradiția liturgică și duhovnicească a Bisericii. Unitatea și diversitatea Bisericii este dată de Sfintele Scripturi, care sunt unitare și diverse, arătând diferite (sau chiar contradictorii) feluri în care Dumnezeu a lucrat pentru mântuirea oamenilor din diferite timpuri și diferite locuri. Păr. Stăniloae

i-a îndemnat pe teologii Ortodocși la *sobornicitate deschisă*, adică la însușirea felurilor în care Dumnezeu S-a manifestat în afara Ortodoxiei, pentru a avea o viziune cât mai completă asupra revelației dumnezeiești.

Revelația – și mai ales Scriptura – sunt încredințate Bisericii dar, în același timp, Biserica are datoria să rămână în adevărul Scripturii. Ca Trup al lui Hristos aflat sub inspirația Duhului Sfânt, Biserica rămâne infailibilă chiar dacă unii membri rătăcesc de la calea adevărului. Și totuși lucrarea lui Dumnezeu în Biserică nu anulează importanța răspunsului Bisericii la revelație, fapt pentru care Părintele Stăniloae a definit Biserica dialogic. Atunci când apar neînțelegeri în Biserică (cum a fost în cazul ereziilor primelor secole creștine), se întetește tensiunea dintre autoritatea Scripturii asupra Bisericii și autoritatea interpretativă a Bisericii asupra Scripturii. Atunci Biserica Ortodoxă trebuie să mărturisească adevărul credinței pe care a păstrat-o neîntrerupt și să răspundă felului greșit în care diferite comunități bisericești interpretează Scripturile. Atât ortodocșii cât și heterodocșii primelor veacuri susțineau că interpretează Scriptura sub inspirația Duhului Sfânt, în unanimitatea propriilor comunități. Se pune astfel întrebarea: Cum se deosebește adevărul Ortodoxiei de afirmațiile celorlalte comunități? Părintele Stăniloae răspunde în felul următor: Biserica nu trebuie să caute un criteriu exterior pentru mărturisirea adevărului, precum autoritatea papală sau sensul predominant literal în care unele biserici protestante citeșc Biblia. În Ortodoxie, după lungi perioade de timp, Biserica întregă (cler și popor) ascultă glasul conștiințe comune, primește inspirația Duhului Sfânt și discernce asupra persistenței în adevărul Scripturii și al Tradiției, în continuitate cu generațiile precedente care au trăit revelația dumnezeiască.

Acest proces de mărturisire a adevăratei interpretări a Scripturilor este de fapt rezultat al unei reflecții a conștiinței interioare a Bisericii, care uneori ia o formă tacită iar alteori se manifestă în sinoade ecumenice receptate ulterior de către Biserică. Păr. Stăniloae accentuează astfel aspectul interior al autorității Bisericii ca „gând al lui Hristos” pe care Sf. Ap. Pavel spune că îl are Biserica (1 Cor 2, 16), sau *regula fidei* – „canonul adevărului” la care se referea Sfântul Irineu, sau ceea ce Florovsky a numit „gândul Părinților”, „gândul Bisericii”, ori „gândul catolic”. Această autoritate interioară nu răspunde nevoii de siguranță epistemologică imediată, fără posibilitatea de contestare. Părintele Stăniloae îndeamnă Biserica la răbdare în discernerea adevărului și ascultarea Duhului Adevărului, care necesită mult timp. În cele din urmă însă, prin sinoadele ecumenice care sunt apoi receptate de toți credincioșii, Biserica ajunge la siguranța epistemologică ce i-a inspirat pe martiri de-a lungul secolelor. Autoritatea interioară a Bisericii și autoritatea explicită a sinoadelor ecumenice se condiționează reciproc. Astfel, Ortodoxia trebuie să respingă atât o *abordare exclusiv juridică*, exterioară a autorității Bisericii, cât și tendința unor teologi contemporani, precum Afanassieff, de a caracteriza sinoadele ca o manifestare a eclesiologiei universaliste. Este interesant de menționat în acest sens că, deși nu a fost tot timpul consistent în această privință, Părintele Stăniloae a preferat să considere că Ortodoxia singură nu poate convoca și întruni un sinod deplin ecumenic, fără participarea și receptarea celorlalte Biserici. Deși Ortodoxia a păstrat adevărul revelat de-a lungul veacurilor, există adevăr și în afara granițelor ei canonice, fapt pentru care teologii Ortodocși au datoria să intre în dialog cu alți creștini, într-o *sobornicitate deschisă*.

Aceste principii eclesiologice trebuiesc aplicate în viața concretă a Bisericii. De-a lungul istoriei, Biserica Ortodoxă a avut nevoie de timp pentru a mărturisi adevărul, ca atunci când s-a luptat cu Arianismul sau când „s-a desprins” de Bisericile Vechi Orien-

tale. În primul caz, majoritatea Răsăritenilor au îmbrățișat arianismul sau semi-arianismul. În cel de-al doilea caz, o neînțelegere terminologică și alți factori umani au stat la baza schismei. Și totuși, prin prisma teologiei Părintelui Stăniloae, se poate afirma că Ortodoxia și-a păstrat infailibilitatea. Mai mult decât atât, Bisericile Ortodoxe de astăzi caută să repare schismele veacului cinci. Păr. Dumitru Stăniloae a îndemnat la unitate creștină în cadrul mișcării ecumenice și este greu de înțeles de ce uneori el însuși este prezentat ca anti-ecumenic. Teologia Ortodoxă contemporană are datoria de a respecta opera Părintelui Stăniloae și de a continua în spiritul biblic, patristic, liturgic, pe care l-a moștenit de la acest mare teolog. Unul din modurile în care teologia sa poate fi îmbogățită este de a identifica principiile ei ecumenice și de a le aplica dialogurilor actuale. Acolo unde diversitatea nu amenință unitatea, teologia Părintelui Stăniloae trebuie să ne inspire în recunoașterea bogăției felurilor în care Duhul Adevărului S-a făcut cunoscut în felurite locuri și perioade ale istoriei. S-ar putea îmbogăți Ortodoxia cu alte tradiții creștine? Părintele ar răspunde pozitiv. În același timp, însă, atunci când se întâlnește cu alte tradiții, Ortodoxia are și datoria de a mărturisi adevărul pe care alții l-au pierdut pentru că au încetat să interpreteze Scriptura în continuitate cu felul în care Biserica tuturor veacurilor a păstrat adevărul în conștiința ei interioară.

Prin felul în care a descris autoritatea Bisericii, prin felul în care și-a elaborat întreaga eclesiologie și prin felul în care a interpretat Scriptura în spiritul Sfinților Părinți, a vieții liturgice Ortodoxe și în dialog cu contemporaneitatea, Părintele Stăniloae a arătat că *Biserica are un caracter biblic iar Biblia are un caracter eclesial*.