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FUTURE PERSPECTIVES ON ORTHODOX-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE
ON THE BASIS OF CURRENT DOCUMENTS OF THE
GREAT AND HOLY SYNOD OF CRETE

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Abstract: The article deals with the ecclesiological challenges that rose after the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete (June 2016) following the encounter between East and West, as far as the orthodox-catholic dialogue is concerned. The conciliar restrictive formulations (included in the document “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”) concerning the denomination of other Churches caused negative reactions from the roman-catholic side, which questioned the future of the dialogue with the Orthodox Church. From that perspective, this study analyses the above-mentioned document and some other documents of the Council in Crete and sketches future perspectives on the orthodox-catholic dialogue. The main thesis of the present study is that, considering the ecclesiological debates that were held in Crete and afterwards, it becomes obvious that the theological orthodox-catholic dialogue needs a restart, arising from the spirit of the beginnings (the so called “plan for dialogue” adopted in Patmos/Rhodes, 1980). Some of the premises for this restart should be: the liberation of church-political strategies, the emphasis of the spiritual relevance and responsibility of the inter-Christian dialogue and a deeper consideration and implementation of the theological results of the different regional or unofficial dialogue groups. The study finalizes with concrete proposals of alternative themes of reflection for overcoming the aporias that the official theological dialogue is dealing with.

Key words: ecclesiology, orthodox-catholic dialogue, orthodox theology, ecumenical dialogue, church, confession, panorthodox synod, exclusivism, “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” (Crete 2016)

1. Introduction: the document regarding the relations with the “rest of the Christian world” and its shadows

The future perspectives on the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue can be debated in many ways. To centre this discussion on the documents of the “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” (2016, here shortened “Council of Crete”) is a serious challenge, doomed either of falling into terminological pedantries or of ending in an aporia. Why? The Council of Crete did not pursue the theological positioning towards a particular bilateral dialogue. In the documents of the Council (Melloni 2016), the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue is not mentioned as such and the document entitled „*Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian world*” (Melloni 2016, 1252-1292) is an alloy derived from two distinct pre-conciliar texts (from 1986), from which the paragraphs concerning each bilateral dialogue as such had been removed (by the 5th Pan-Orthodox Pre-conciliar Conference in October 2015) and the ones related to the ecumenical dialogue in general, and especially to the Orthodox commitment in the World Council of Churches had been kept (Ioniță 2014, 170-176; Getcha 2017, 277; Meimaris 2013, 113-121). That led to a certain imbalance in the final text.

There is no doubt that the text is the first conciliar document in the modern history of the Orthodox Church that stated officially its openness and engagement for the ecumenical movement. Therefore, the document “has a crucial ecumenical significance” (Getcha 2017, 287). Nevertheless, for the theologian involved in the ecumenical, or especially in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, who is used to make historical, dogmatic and hermeneutical differentiations, to follow different stages of the theological dialogue, to pay attention to ecclesiological nuances etc., the above-mentioned document of the Council of Crete creates frustration (Moga 2017). Three orthodox statements support this idea: Athanasios Vletsis notes that the pre-conciliar draft were „much wider” (Vletsis 2017, 168) and that the final text should have been “much longer, so that a concrete balance can be conveyed from the different dialogues” (Vletsis 2017, 169). Anastasios Kallis criticizes the new „conservatism of the Orthodox Church in its ecumenical position, expressed through an exclusivist ecclesiology” (Kallis 2017, 111). This ecclesiology is, in the opinion of Kallis, “in contradiction with previous statements of the Orthodox Church” (Kallis 2017, 113) and, as such, a sign of “stagnation” (Kallis 2017, 109). Also Stylianos Tsompanidis speaks in the same context about an “ecclesiological exclusivism” and a “tendency, to close the ecclesiological space of the Orthodoxy and to isolate it through institutional-canonical walls” (Tsompanidis 2017, 85).

Most known and debated is the first part of the paragraph 6 in the document. The pre-conciliar draft stipulated: “The Orthodox Church

acknowledges the historical existence of other Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her..." This formulation left open, that the ecclesial character of other Churches can be accepted as a reality. The final text is much more restrictive: "the Orthodox Church *accepts* the historical *name* of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her..." (Melloni 2017, 1256). This formulation was for the anti-ecumenical groups in the Orthodox Church still too ecumenical a statement, the virulent reactions coming after the Council from this side being well known (Vlantis 2017). As answer, several orthodox theologians and Church leaders have tried defensively to demonstrate in the last two years, that the formulation is a "good orthodox" one: the use of the word <Church> doesn't "give an ontological status to other Christian communities" and doesn't "recognize their ecclesiality" (Perşa 2017b, 153). This interpretation is surely a correct one, but it shows at the same time the whole ambivalence of the document. Towards the anti-ecumenists one argues that this formula is a guarantee for the non-acknowledgment of the other Churches as Churches, towards the ecumenical partners one emphasizes that the paragraph still uses the term Churches for the others. Can we afford this double hermeneutic?

Not only the wording in paragraph 6 regarding the way of understanding of the other Churches as "Church", but also other paragraphs of the document are affected by ambiguities whose direct applicability in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue is at least risky. For example: the same paragraph 6 states further that "a speedy and objective clarification possible of the whole ecclesiological question, and most especially of their more general teachings on sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession" (Melloni 2016, 1256) is needed. This clarification already took place within the official theological Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, in the documents of Munich (1982), Bari (1987) and New-Valamo (1988). So, if this explanation had already been submitted, what are the consequences for the ecclesial acknowledgment of the Roman-Catholic Church's sacraments?

Therefore, critical reactions to this document appeared promptly from the Roman Catholic theology. As Theresia Hainthaler emphasized during a symposium in Regensburg in the autumn of 2016, it is "strange that 36 years after Rhodes and 34 years after Munich, the dialogue partner refuses to grant Catholics the title of Church [...]. If the recognition of ecclesial existence of the Roman Catholic Church (*Kirche-Sein*) is not wanted, then even the name of the commission of dialogue is superfluous - this Commission should not exist." (Hainthaler 2017, 124-125) Paragraph 6 is, according to Hainthaler "a strong request to Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. One may ask whether there is still a basis for the Roman-Catholic Church to continue the theological dialogue as per its former form..." (Hainthaler 2017, 124).

The perception of the Orthodox participants at the Council regarding the relevance of this paragraph for the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue is quite different. Metropolitan Elpidophoros Lambriniadis outlined at the same Regensburg Symposium in September 2017 a more positive outlook of the ecumenical opening of the Council of Crete. He emphasises that, despite the mentioned paragraph, "...the Holy and Great Council did not follow those who wanted to deny non-Orthodox Churches the title of Church, but kept the term of Church for them." (Lambriniadis 2017, 32)

We are dealing therefore with two different interpretations of the same document. On the one hand, Hainthaler refers to the lacking of argumentative basis according to which the Church title for the non-orthodox ecclesial communities is quasi tolerated ("accepted" for historical reasons, but not "acknowledged"); she also refers to the previous ecumenical position from the last decades of the Orthodox Church towards this ecclesiological matter. On the other hand, Metropolitan Elpidophoros emphasises the positive outcome of the document from the perspective of avoiding a greater evil. These different perceptions are deriving from the gap between the theological accumulations resulting from the ecumenical dialogue on one hand and the actual main-stream ecclesial mentality present in the Orthodox Church on the other hand. Considering the ecumenical tradition and experience the Orthodox Church has already acquired, the document could be seen as a "deep disappointment" (Hallensleben 2017, 137); but taking into account the actual anti-ecumenical streams of the Orthodox Church, it is a rather ecumenical sign of life. Both points of view are to be taken seriously. – Barbara Hallensleben highlights this fact in her statement: for her the "disappointment" can be only the first perception; in case of a deeper analysis, one should admit that this "minimal consensus" found in Crete (in order to avoid an inter-orthodox schism) is part of a longer journey the Orthodox Church has to undertake in order to acknowledge the ecclesial being of non-orthodox Churches without renouncing to its ecclesiological understanding as the "holy, apostolic, catholic Church" (Hallensleben 2017, 138).

I do not want to go into the hermeneutic carousel of comments and criticism this text has generated (Perşa 2017). What I consider to be much more important than the discussions related to paragraph 6 or other paragraphs are *three general observations* that, indirectly, are relevant for the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. After that I will propose concrete solutions for overcoming the difficulties that the official theological dialogue is dealing with.

2. Challenges for the dialogue

2.1. *The chance of unformulated self-commitments*

The conciliar document “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian world” showed that the question of the ecclesial status of the other Churches/confessions is still open from an Orthodox point of view (Moga/Augustin 2015). The ecumenical opening coexists, in the document of Crete, with an exclusivist apologetical discourse (Tsompanidis 2017, 87). This duplicity between canonical strictness and theologically differentiated openness can be found up to a point in the Roman Catholic Church, too (see, for instance, the declaration “Dominus Iesus” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000). However, in the Roman Catholic Church there is an officially assumed limit beyond which the passing is not allowed, because that has become part of the modern dogmatic tradition: I refer to Unitatis Redintegratio.

Even though such an official document was missing in the Orthodox context, there has been an *orthodox ecumenical self-commitment* since the 1960s, confirmed and reconfirmed by the Pan-Orthodox Conferences, by the Patriarchs and by the official dialogue commissions. The disappointment of the dialogue partners consisted of having expected a document where all these self-commitments of the Orthodox Church representatives in the last decades would be systematically reaffirmed or rather strengthened.

My thesis: The Council of Crete pointed out that the Orthodox Church works better with unformulated, but prophetic “self-commitments” than with formal decisions, over which lies anyway the difficult problem of post-conciliar reception. The reasons are multiple. One of them is that, in the case of the formulation of a document, the Orthodox Church lives under the diachronic consciousness of absolute continuity with the first millennium, which renders quite difficult a historical-critical hermeneutics of tradition that should distinguish between the polemics of the 13th century, the exclusive discourses of the 18th and the dialogue of 20th century.

2.2. *The still unreceived ecclesiological visions of Florovsky and Staniloae*

The accumulations of the orthodox theology in the 20th century, especially of the orthodox ecclesiology, were not sufficiently taken into account in the mentioned document. The Italian editor of the Council texts in *Corpus Christianorum*, Alberto Melloni, notes in his short introduction of the documents of Crete: “the texts are... compromise texts, disappointing at times, even if interspersed with patristic theology. Only a few paragraphs [...] retain a theological quality able to speak at all” (Melloni 2016, 1110). This fact has to do with the deficient way in which theologians were involved in the pre-conciliar and conciliar process, but also with other formal factors, like the short duration of the Council.

Similar criticism was formulated also by a Council's insider, Brandon Gallaher, who participated in drafting the Message of the Council: "Some critics would say... that the Council documents... are theologically quite limited, bearing the fingerprints of a mix of Academic Greek School theology and post-Soviet reactionism." (Gallaher 2017, 67) Gallaher calls these critiques "perfectly legitimate" (Gallaher 2017, 68), but he warns at the same time against perfectionism.

Fact is: the ecclesiastical visions of the 20th century's great theologians, the majority having an ecumenical perspective, were received (if at all) only marginally, e.g. in the Encyclical or the Message of the Council. This omission doesn't have anything to do with an aporia of the orthodox way of thinking. George Florovsky (Florovsky 1989, 36-45; Hovorun 2017, 176-177) and Dumitru Stăniloae (Stăniloae 1984, 413-420; Barbu, 2014, 248-251) systematically submitted proposals for solving the dilemma of the ecclesiological status of other Churches without falling in relativism. Florovsky underlined the principle according to which the pneumatological and eschatological dimension of soteriology doesn't allow a simple reduction of the ecclesial mystery to the canonical borders of the Church. Stăniloae distinguishes different steps of ecclesial plenitude and even states that "the Church exists also in other Christian confessions" (Stăniloae 1978, 268).

It is not here the appropriate place for describing in depth the ecclesiological statements of these two theologians (Moga 2013, 94-109). Suffice to say: both voices are well known in the orthodox ecclesiological discourse as the two theologians benefit of an unchallenged, almost patristic authority in all ecclesial circles and streams. Taking such visions into considerations, the Council of Crete could have formulated a more comprehensible, extensive solution for this enquiry, one that is both genuinely orthodox and ecumenical. Similar to the Roman Catholic theology, the Orthodox theology can adhere to the model of gradual affiliation to the Mystery of the Church.

Since a statement that could have put the basis of a real, non-relativist ecumenical opening is lacking, the existence of the other Churches is apologetically approached, while real developments within bi- or multilateral dialogues are ignored. Just as *Unitatis Redintegratio* cannot be understood and apprehended without *Lumen Gentium*, so cannot the openness to ecumenical dialogue, formally assumed in Crete, be explained and contextualized, except only through a genuine ecclesiological substructure.

2.3. Cultural and theological plurality inside the Orthodox Church

The Council of Crete - counting as well the debates held during the Council but especially the reception process afterwards - revealed the *theological, cultural and historical plurality or even heterogeneity of today's Orthodox Church*. The anti-ecumenical movements are part of this plurality,

they are the expression of the *chronical arrhythmias at the core of the Orthodox Church*. Actually, when we talk about Orthodox-Catholic “dialogue”, whether official or unofficial, we ignore this very fact. In reality, *only parts of our Churches are in dialogue with one another*: while the “dialogue of truth” officially launched in 1980 can be “represented” by a committee “officially” assumed by the two Churches, it is clear that when we talk of a “dialogue of love” - initiated since the 1960s - we must bear in mind that it is not enough to see its practice among the popes and patriarchs. In order for the dialogue of love to become an ecclesial reality, it must be lived at all levels of the church. It’s not the case.

For this reason the Russian Orthodox Church is partly right when it states that the problem of Uniatism in Ukraine ought to be discussed: at least from the local point of view, since part of the Orthodox Church perceives it so, it is clear that, in that case (but not only), the dialogue of love suffers or is non-existent. Whether we like it or not, we need to pay attention to it. The dialogue of love is, just like in a marriage, not an automatism. Invoking the peak times of the 1960s does not help us solve today’s crises, just as the wedding album does not help once you are at the threshold of divorce.

All three points mentioned above are relevant regarding the future prospects of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue.

3. The relevance of the other conciliar documents related to the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church should of course not be reduced to the document referring to the relations with the rest of the Christian world. If we were to look carefully, also the other implemented documents, as well as the Encyclical and the Message, are equally relevant to the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. I will not go into details here, just want to mention a few points.

1. The document related to *fasting’s* significance (Melloni 2016, 1220-1252; Jovic 2017) shows that, for the further approach of the two Churches, the spiritual dimension should be a central one. Far from minimizing or relativizing fasting, the document reveals that, also in the 21st century, the Orthodox Church placed a special emphasis on an ascetic spirituality with profound implications in the sacramental life.
2. The document referring to the ecclesial autonomy (Melloni 2016, 1292-1315; Vlaicu 2017, Synek 2017, 92-93) shows that the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is not a symbolic one, for example, when it comes to granting autonomy to the regions of the Diaspora (Melloni 2016, 1298). Orthodox consensus is an active effort, Ecumenical Patriarchate having here the determining role.

This paragraph is relevant to the discussion of primacy in the Orthodox Church. The same is found in paragraph 2.f where the Ecumenical Patriarchate is mentioned as a calling court.

3. The “Orthodox Diaspora” document (Melloni 2016, 1314-1351) - already translated into reality by the Orthodox Episcopal Conferences - shows that the Orthodox Church has overcome the canonical chaos and can no longer be accused as incapable of managing the Diaspora-problem. Here as well, the primacy of the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate shows a consistency of thought, relevant to the discussion of the relationship between primacy and synodality.
4. The document referring to the Sacrament of Marriage and its impediments (Melloni 2016, 1350-1377) indicates that the experience of the Orthodox Diaspora has grown throughout Orthodoxy and that the principle of *oikonomia* related to the marriages between Orthodox and Christians of other denominations becomes a pan-Orthodox reality. This facet is relevant in order to prove that, in the practical dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics, regional or local ecumenical solutions (such as pastoral agreements on mixt marriages, like in Germany in the 1990s) have the power, with time, to catalyse all Orthodoxy. Beyond the ambivalent wording, the paragraph represents an important step in the practical-pastoral dialogue. On the other hand, the same document shows that Orthodoxy is not willing to compromise on “same-sex unions or any other form of cohabitation apart from marriage”. This element may serve as a warning for other Christian denominations.
5. The document related to the “Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” (Melloni 2016, 1376-1437) is a conglomerate of principles and short statements on social ethics, bioethics and fundamental theology (Makrides 2017, Kisic 2017). However, the document points out that Orthodox Church does not have a regional or even a national mentality but demonstrates a global conscience of responsibility and ethical solidarity concerned by humanity’s severe problems. Far from being a mere rhetorical figure, the affirmation of the principle of universal solidarity is the expression of an ecclesiology where the cosmic dimension is a central element.
6. The Encyclical of the Council (Melloni 2016, 1114-1187) is, through paragraph 3, an invitation to reconsider, from the point of view of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, certain moments of the history of theology. The affirmation of several important councils in the time between 9th and 19th centuries as “councils of universal authority” has direct implications for the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. These councils are: the “Great Council” under the

Patriarchate of Photius (879-890), the Palamite Councils (1341, 1351, 1368), the “Holy and Great Council” held in Constantinople in 1484 against the Union of Ferrara-Florence, the Synods in 17th century (1638, 1642, 1672, 1691) and the Synod of Constantinople in 1872 against the heresy of ethno-philetism. Starting from this paragraph, it is clear that we need in the near future a *debate on the common hermeneutics of the history of theology* beginning with the 9th century - and its dogmatic implications - *beyond* the topic of the Roman primacy. Orthodoxy can no longer be reduced to the Seven Ecumenical Councils: its theological profile is also closely linked to these synods with “universal authority”. That complicates things. But further ignoring such skeletons in the closet helps no one.

These brief observations related to the rest of the documents of Crete show that the Council cannot be overlooked as far as the future Orthodox-Catholic dialogue is concerned.

And yet, my pessimistic opinion from the beginning remains valid. The frustration is related not only to the ambivalence of certain paragraphs, but especially to *the question of accepting the Council of Crete by the entire Orthodox world*. At the moment, the reception and the acknowledgement of the documents issued in Crete by the four absent autocephalous churches is an open issue. It’s enough to quote for this the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church, published on 2.12.2017 as part of the “*Resolutions of the Holy Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church*”: “This Council cannot be viewed as Ecumenical, and the decisions taken at it cannot be viewed as binding for the entire Orthodox Church [...]. At the same time, we ought to recognize the Council on Crete as a significant event in the history of the Orthodox Church” (Resolution 2017). Regarding the documents, the Russian Orthodox Bishop’s Councils states critically: “...some of them contain unclear and ambiguous formulations, which do not allow us to consider them exemplary expressions of the truths of the Orthodox faith and the Church’s Tradition” (Resolution 2017).

Until a needed meeting of all Orthodox Church Primates or until a future pan-Orthodox Synod in which all Orthodox Churches participate are held, we will not know the status and relevance for the entire Orthodoxy of these documents. Therefore, for the moment, the relevance of the Council of Crete for the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue should not be over-emphasized - neither positively nor negatively. This fact was evidenced by the successful meeting of the Joint International Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue-Commission in Chieti (September 2016), few months *after* the Council of Crete.

4. Perspectives of the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue: the exit from defensive state and the affirmation of ecclesial congruences

In order to outline some elements of what is desired to become the prospects of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue in the future, I will allow myself to be idealistic and formulate some bold thoughts about it.

4.1. Liberation of politics

First of all, a tautology: the dialogue must comprise the whole body of the two Churches, should re-establish a breath of recognition of the sisterhood of the other Church in Christ, and thereby a strong wish for regaining visible unity. In order for this to happen, the *Orthodox-Catholic dialogue must free itself from the political and diplomatic determinations* that keep it bounded. Of course, the primacy and synodality theme, as well as that of ecclesiology in general, cannot be removed from its historical context and therefore cannot be freed entirely from the past or present political-church implications. Still, *church politics and diplomatic thinking should not paralyze the theological effusion* and spiritual longing for unity. This is currently the case. Official dialogue is grasped as somehow political, and *not as an expression of a spiritual uplift*.

The liberation from dialogue's political dominance cannot succeed through the total abolition of church diplomacy, but: *a. by creating alternatives; b. bringing the issues of the dialogue at regional and local levels.*

4.2. Spiritual-theological alternatives

By creating alternatives, I foremost refer to the positioning of dialogue in the centre of the church life. Although Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitrios I declared together in November 1979 that the two Churches already went through a "purification of the collective memory" (Declaration 1979) this therapeutic process must be repeated with each generation.

For the Orthodox, the Church is firstly a liturgical and spiritual reality; theology is in the Church life important, precisely because it is assumed liturgically and experienced in unity with spirituality. Knowing this, it is clear that the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue has no chances from the Orthodox perspective to become a topic of interest, unless it is seen in its liturgical and spiritual relevance. To be more specific: what important Orthodox monasteries perceived in the people's devoutness as epicentres of spirituality, are involved in one way or another as a lasting project of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue? We lack a Niederaltaich, a Chevetogne, a Bose in the Orthodox countries. We lack sustainable partnerships between Orthodox and Catholic monastic centres, those considered as such by believers.

In addition: the ignorance regarding the spiritual treasury of the other is still enormous. There is a colossal potential, especially in the cult

of the saints, in Marian devotion, in the piety of feasts that has not yet become a substance of real dialogue. Indeed, experts know about and experience it personally, but what about the rest?

Liturgy is a sensitive field of encounter. From an orthodox perspective, here we come across the strongest anxiety of contact when it comes to the dialogue with non-Orthodox. Praying together is still a taboo. Why? Precisely because Orthodox prejudices related to the liturgical life of Roman-Catholic Church are huge, especially after the liturgical reform. We should speak about this liturgical-theological issue as well: the dogmatic approach doesn't bring any fruit, if in the field of practical and liturgical theology the traditions will perceive each other as strangers.

But there are as well projects that bring some hope: St. John Damascene Students' House in Vienna where Catholic and Orthodox Catholic students and researchers live together, study together, pray together and share one another the fruits of their tradition.

Or, from my personal experience, the seminar of practical theology "Learning ecumenism and ecumenical reconnaissances", which I held for eight years at the University of Vienna with Professors Regina Polak and Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, through which we send Catholic students to experiment closely the life of Orthodox, Oriental and Evangelical parishes, and vice versa. Not a courtesy visit, but about 40 hours a semester, that students spend (in groups of two) in parishes, attending Church services, talking to priests and believers, taking part in parish related activities. This practical dimension of ecumenical knowledge, reflected with the support of a research concept of the parochial life of the other denomination is a necessity.

Such small but meaningful initiatives prove to us that there is still a ray of hope.

4.3. Regional Level of Dialogue

The official activity of the Dialogue Commission must be doubled by an *officially assumed regionalization of the Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue*. In part, this regional dialogue already exists, for example in Germany where it is institutionalized, same as in North America since decades. These examples ought to become the rule, so that the themes of the dialogue shall remain in the consciousness of the believers, but also in order to maximize the potential of local and regional collaboration. Such "*Regional Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue Committees*", preferably equally binding and important for the Churches' leadership as the participation in the International Dialogue Commission, should exist anywhere where there are Orthodox Episcopal Conferences (in the Diaspora), but also in every Orthodox country (where Catholic minorities also exist).

Often, for the Orthodox, the dialogue with local minority Catholic representatives (or vice versa with local Orthodox minority, for Catholics), is harder to establish than on the neutral ground of an International

Commission. The historical frustrations and the problems of the minority must be seriously considered in dialogue, the pastoral concreteness of an approach is more important than successfully adopting an international document, a fact that can remain without consequences, precisely because at local and regional level people ignore each other.

4.4. The rediscovery of the initial spirit of dialogue and a new theological affirmation on that which unites us

Despite the stagnation signs of the theological dialogue and the proposals coming from russian-orthodox side to focus the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue exclusively on ethical themes, in the sense of defending the traditional Christian values, *the original spirit of theological dialogue must be resurrected*. In order to see what I mean by this “spirit”, it is enough to read the speeches of Cardinal Johannes Willebrands and Metropolitan Chrysostomos Konstantinidis of Mira at the opening, respectively, during the first General Assembly of the Commission for Dialogue in 1980 in Patmos. The big difference between the speeches of those times and current ones consists in *the force, spirit and determination* that inspired those participating in the dialogue. Behind such speeches there was an *awareness that theological dialogue is not theological only due to the fact that it deals with faith related themes*, but primarily because *it is under the providential mark of a divine will to overcome separations*. As cardinal Willebrands said on 29.05.1980: “... all eyes of the Churches are directed towards us. Especially the eyes of God are directed towards us ... This meeting must be a remarkable moment of divine history, a moment of grace ...” (Piffel-Percevic/Stirnemann 1990, 59).

This type of awareness is lacking nowadays, or it exists only as a rhetorical form of ecumenical diplomacy. While facing the arguments of political realism, of functional scepticism and of diplomatic phraseology, one should rediscover the joy of theological dialogue. For this, the dialogue-plan confirmed in 1980 in Rhodes should be re-experienced, in other words, one should highlight with all strength - but also with all the necessary differentiation - everything that is common. These “elements which unite the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church” (Rhodos 1980) Plan-Rhodes is referring to, must be articulated and rearticulated so that they can be jointly confessed not only to the world, but also to the members of the two Churches.

For example: the orthodox-catholic dialogue could reflect on a *Christological and soteriological manifesto* that re-emphasises the fact that we are confessing the same Christ of the Apostolic Tradition and of the seven Ecumenical Councils. Even if it may seem superfluous, such a common confession would bring to the collective the core of the common faith: nothing is more valuable than the living relationship with the Saviour Jesus Christ. Such a manifesto should not be reduced to the repetition of the Christological dogma, but should establish connection with everything

we have in common within our christocentric spirituality, from the past and the present, assumed as *a life in Christ*. The Jesus prayer, for example, has entered a long time ago into the Western spiritual tradition too. Few Orthodox know this. Instead, Thomas Kempis's "Following Christ" was and remains a popular work in some Eastern Orthodox countries. The mutual recognition and inspiration of the great lines of devotion and of spirituality kept the East and the West close to each other, even in the darkest times in history and inter-confessional polemic. Such a manifesto of spiritual theology focused on Christology and the life in Christ may also reach those currents and groups of the Orthodox ecclesiastical body that usually ignore or combat ecumenical dialogue.

Similar projects could be conceived in the field of anthropology or even pneumatology, where Roman Catholic theology has made significant progress in the last decades. Or, even more handy: a common document about the Icon would have a strong resonance in the Orthodox Church.

What I mean by these examples is that the theological dialogue in what unites us is far from being settled. That is why any kind of dialogical depression is to be condemned. We must free ourselves, at least for now, from the rigid and inflexible approaches related to the papal primacy and synodality themes. Although decisive as a divergence point, the theme of the primacy could likely lead the entire dialogue and the perception of it towards a continuous aporia.

5. Conclusions

The present study commenced from the criticisms that one of the documents of the Pan-Orthodox Synod of Crete (June 2016), namely the "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World", kindled in the ecumenical environments. Particularly Roman Catholic theology sees in this text a certain ecumenical incoherence of the Orthodox Church, which reflects negatively on the future Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. The article's thesis was that, far from being a blockage, the "Crete momentum" can become the catalyst of a new beginning in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue.

The first part briefly examined the ecclesiological theme of the above-mentioned document: ambiguities expressed by Catholic partners can be clarified in the future on the basis of the dogmatic contributions already made in the 20th century by theologians like Florovsky and Staniloae. Beyond this, it must be borne in mind that, traditionally, Orthodox theology does not adhere to formal, dogmatic decisions. Much more important than the formal achievement of a document is preserving the already acquired balance between assuming an intact ecclesiastical consciousness (the Orthodox Church as the authentic continuation of undivided Church's tradition and faith) and opening up to the ecclesial

mystery of others, without falling into relativism or vice versa, in exclusiveness. This balance has given strength to the Orthodox commitment to the ecumenical dialogue of the last decades. Another aspect that nuances the perspective on the Council of Crete is that its relevance to the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue should not be reduced to the above-mentioned document. Other documents and the encyclical of the Synod imply elements of a particular importance for the future interrelation between Orthodox and Catholics.

The second part outlines the perspectives of Orthodox-Catholic theological dialogue, taking into account the remarks made in the first part of the study. It has been revealed that the real barriers for a joyous development of theological dialogue are built around the exclusive attachment to the ecclesiological theme (the papal primacy), whose approach is often affected by political and Church's interferences and interpretations. They "squeezed out" the prophetic force of the closeness between the two Churches and led to neglecting the dialogue's themes by the great mass of believers. It is therefore concluded that the dialogue requires a restart, commencing with the spirit of the beginnings and the principles established in Patmos and Rhodes in 1980, namely: emphasizing, first of all, what we have in common, both from the theological and spiritual points of view. In this context, it is necessary to: 1. liberate the theological dialogue of political and diplomatic determinations; 2. highlight the spiritual dimension of the meeting between West and East, including the practical spirituality and pastoral collaboration; 3. evaluate and reap the multiple benefits originating within various regional and informal dialogue groups and further enhance the dialogue on regional level, which is more visible through its concreteness in people's everyday lives; 4. approaching, in the official dialogue, relevant theological themes which do not contain major divergences in both denominations (e.g. anthropology, Christology). These themes, assumed not only dogmatically but also spiritually, would rekindle within the society and among believers the awareness that the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue is not only a Cabinet concern, but an essential part of the reconciliation between the East and the West.

If we understand theology - as we constantly highlight in the Orthodox context - as being closely connected with spirituality, then the crisis of theological dialogue is the implicit recognition of a spiritual crisis of each of the dialogue partners. We have so many gifts to share, we should not reduce them to apologetic programs or trivial political interests. We ought to rediscover the joy of reciprocal inspiration from the theological and spiritual accumulations each Tradition has gathered. Then will unity be much closer to us than we dare to dream.

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