



Annals of the International Annunciation- St. Justin-Conference 2025

Beginning to read Stăniloae: The Problem of Ecumenist Dialogues

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Abstract:

There is widespread dissensus about Saint Dumitru Stăniloae's relationship to the ecumenist project of furthering Christian unity through dialogues between representatives of the different Christianities. This essay, after offering some evidence for his robust endorsement of that project, explores the ways in which the Saint has used the term "dialogue" in his theological writings, discusses possible strategic intentions and expectations that might have motivated his initial endorsement, and offers a vision of reasons for his later disappointment with the project. By taking up the final portion of his *Dogmatics* on eschatology, an analogy is suggested between Stăniloae's own attempt to harmonize the Divine justice, as combined with respect for human freedom, with the Divine love on the one side and, on the other side, the possibility of an Orthodox project of harmonizing commitment to the integrity of the faith, as combined with respect for the choices of our heterodox brethren in Christ, with a focus on prayer for one's person-to-person ecumenical dialogue partner. By following such a route, it is argued, Christians concerned about Christian unity can accommodate the warning of another newly recognized Saint, i.e., Justin of Ćelije, that such unity cannot be achieved in purely humanist ways.

Key words:

Stăniloae, ecumenism, dialogue, eschatology, mission



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1. Introduction

This presentation attends to one aspect of my very limited experience of reading¹ (merely translated) texts by the newly glorified Romanian Saint Dumitru Stăniloae: Quite often, I find him using formulations and arguments that disturbingly resemble heterodox, and in particular Roman Catholic, ways of proceeding and phrasing.²

By qualifying the adoption of heterodox language as “disturbing,” I confess from the very start my critical attitude vis à vis the “ecumenist project.” My position reflects not only my own status as a convert to Orthodoxy, who left the Western Christianities “for a reason.” I am also deeply convinced of the crucial role of theological (in the sense of tradition-anchored, i.e., not in the sense of linguistically differentiated) language for expressing the faith. My concern is with the subtle tendency of identical linguistic expressions (if they come from different traditions), when used in framing mutual agreements between members of different faiths, to obfuscate underlying disagreements regarding their meanings. That is to say: Obviously, each Orthodox nation has formed its native language according to the need to give voice to their common faith, and to celebrate their ecumenical unity in that faith to which Christ Himself has called them (Jn 17,21). Non-Orthodox nations, on the other hand, have formed their own languages of faith in terms of their own heterodox traditions. Only the former ecumenical unity corresponds to the “unity in diversity” Stăniloae sees the Holy Spirit maintaining in the Church as “open sobornicity.” Consensus statements involving the latter, on the other hand, tend to render any supposed ecumenist unanimity deeply misleading.

But then I also come across very clear distinctions, pointedly setting off Stăniloae’s own Orthodox theological approach from those of heterodox Christians. This happens most explicitly in his dogmatic writings,³ and less in other works. Could it be that he has chosen to be more accommodating when addressing a wider, i.e., interdenominational audience? And what might his theological motives have been?

My presentation attends to this puzzling experience in view of St. Dumitru’s lifelong loving engagement with ecumenism, or, as I prefer to call it, the ecumenist project (reserving the first expression to the *oikumene* of a Church that preserves unity across cultural, geographical, calendar

¹ My deficiency is especially obvious in view of Stăniloae’s early writings, in which Bordeianu finds much – as he argues – unwarranted criticism of an insufficiently understood heterodoxy (2013, 20ff).

² My experience here seems to resemble the one referred to by Vivier-Muresan who worries about Stăniloae’s “exceedingly cataphatic” language (2021, 447). A good example for the use of such language is the collection of essays published by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press (Stăniloae, 1980a); but perhaps the fact that the translator is a Basilian (i.e. Roman Catholic) priest also plays a role.

³ Stăniloae, 1985-1995.



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and linguistic differences⁴). As a convert to Orthodoxy, my spiritual growth was inspired and guarded by a spiritual son of St. Justin of Ćelije. This other great theologian of the 20th century had regarded the ecumenist project as the major pan-heresy of our times.⁵ The patently positive attitude to ecumenism betrayed by St. Dumitru makes one wonder. How can the one true Church accommodate the mutually incompatible attitudes of two contemporary saints? The challenge thus arises to uncover some underlying unanimity that could remove that scandal.

This essay seeks to meet that challenge. While boldly facing St. Dumitru's surprising examples of "hetero-speak," it explores the acceptably Orthodox sense of their use by placing these examples in the context of Stăniloae's larger theological framework. Such contextualization, so I shall submit, can also open a horizon in which the ecumenist project's recognized failure can be met with a properly Orthodox (and quite St. Justin-compatible) Stăniloean response.

The argument proceeds in five steps. The first (#2) offers an example of robust endorsement of the ecumenist consultation and cooperation project by St. Dumitru. The second step (#3) explores the (quite idiosyncratic) theological meaning that saint attributes to the term "dialogue." That meaning clarified, thirdly (#4), the immediate context (and theological subtext) of those initially noted puzzling statements suggests their merely strategic function: They offer those invested in the ecumenist dialogue-industry a re-interpretation of their specifically 'confessionalist' "unity in diversity" model that turns that model theologically upside down. A fourth step (#5) offers an explanation for the strategy's failure, as acknowledged by Stăniloae himself in his later years. The fifth and final step (#6) explores the resources his eschatological theology offers in view of a more promising outreach of properly Christian love to dialogue partners from the divided confessions.

2. The puzzle of heterodox-speak in Stăniloae's works

Reading the saint's essay on *The Problems and Perspectives of Orthodox theology* (1980b), one is struck by formulations that differ profoundly from other contemporary Orthodox texts. This holds with particular intensity for Stăniloae's response to the institutionalization of ecumenist dialogues.⁶

⁴ This understanding of „ecumenicity” is pointedly affirmed by Sandu (2012, 65), whose very balanced and encompassingly discerning presentation of Romanian ecumenicity has impressed me.

⁵ Popovic 2000.

⁶ A similar result can be found in his essay on “Open sobornicity” (1980c, 61, see also 63f), where the Holy Spirit is likened to a “spiritual milieu” as a bridge which “brings all together” in a way reminiscent of St. Augustine's vision of the Spirit as the “bond of love” between Father and Son. Such expressions understate the personhood of the Holy Spirit as a hypostasis of His own, and which on the very next page (op.cit., 62) the author also highlights but relativizes again on p. 63, where the Spirit is the “bond” between Father and Son, and on p. 66 with the Spirit appears as “living relationship” of Father and Son.



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One finds

- an endorsement of Orthodox theology itself becoming ecumenist: *Orthodox theology can become a truly ecumenical theology and so contribute greatly to the ecumenical cause.* (1980b, 221)
- a welcome of the world-wide institutionalization of ecumenist dialogues: *Prompted by this common desire for Christian unity, Orthodox theology has begun to study the doctrine of the other churches in an irenic spirit, and to help along the progress of dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the other churches, a dialogue which is already moving towards the official level.* (loc.cit)
- an endorsement of unity among the multiplicity of denominations recognized as “Churches”: *Orthodox theology can be of great help in bringing the Churches together...*
- a willingness to downplay the spiritual relevance of doctrine disclaimed as “rigid and opaque: ... because of the close connection it [i.e., ecumenism] makes between doctrine and spirituality, and because of the living spiritual core it looks for in every doctrinal formulation. In this process the doctrinal formulae of one Church cease to be rigid and opaque expressions opposed to equally rigid and opaque expressions used by the other Churches. Instead, they are seen to suggest the meanings of a living reality which shines through the formulations of one Church and encounters the living meanings of the doctrines of the other Churches,”
- a recognition of identical spiritual concerns across denominations: *The different teachings of the Churches, if they take into account the spiritual effects which they themselves produce in the lives of men, can find a common interpretation corresponding to the spiritual purposes and necessities which are a matter of concrete concern to the Churches in the lives of their faithful.* (all 1980b, 221f),
- an acceptance of Western theology’s adjustment of doctrinal formulations to human reason: *[This] Orthodox contribution to the rapprochement of the churches..., represented by the spiritual interpretation of doctrine, joins with the contribution of Western theology in its efforts to understand doctrinal formulations more flexibly and in conformity with the nature of human reason. This Western approach presents no fundamental contradictions to an understanding of the same doctrines that grows out of a spirituality penetrated by grace.* (op.cit., 222)
- a readiness to extend the ecumenist ambition for unity to non-Christian religions and non-believers in general: *Orthodox theology ... by emphasizing the sobornic or communitarian aspect of any true Christian life, can open up vast perspectives similar to those we have seen, not only on the level of Christian ecumenism, but also on the level of relations between Christians and mankind in general.* (idem),
- a willingness to reduce the role of Christ in such dialogues to a “subject of thought:” *Christians are able to introduce Christ into the lives of the rest of men by entering into communion with them, because Christ is a joint subject with the faithful in their own thought, feelings, and actions. For in a dialogue which is the expression of a sincere and profound*



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communion, one partner always introduces something of his own life into the life of the other. (idem),

- and an endorsement of the more recent turn from ecumenist doctrinal consensus-negotiation to social cooperation:⁷ *Orthodox theology will be increasingly characterized ... not only as an ecumenical theology but as a theology concerned with the aspirations and the problems of mankind as a whole, a theology which is concerned to provide ever deeper foundations for human cooperation and for the service of all mankind. (op.cit., 222f).*

In light of such statements, one cannot but ask whether Romania's newly glorified saint could really have invoked Orthodoxy's theological *proprium*, its mystical character, understood as what resists all meticulous definition, merely to establish – as we could phrase it, taking up a criticism of Schelling by Hegel - a space of darkness in which “all cows are black.”⁸ Is it really conceivable that he did so merely in order to comply with the increasing disregard of doctrinal fine points among ecumenists in the West? Could St. Dumitru thus have abused Orthodoxy's focus on spirituality in order ecclesially to compromise the Truth-commitment undergirding the union into which Christ had called His followers? The terms used in those statements,

such as “contribute,” “begun to study... in an irenic spirit,” “to help along the progress of a dialogue ... already moving,” “bringing the Churches together,” “take into account,” “find a common interpretation,” “joins with the contribution of Western theology,” “understand doctrinal formulations ... in conformity with the nature of human reason,” “can open up vast perspectives ... similar to those ... on the level of Christian ecumenism,” “Christians are able to introduce,” “in a dialogue ...one partner always introduces something ... into the life of the other,” “Orthodox theology will be increasingly ... an ecumenical theology... concerned with the aspirations ... of mankind,” or “to provide deeper foundations for human cooperation”

seem to place the author's major focus on precisely that autonomous human agency which St. Justin of Ćelije has denounced as “humanist” betrayal of God's call to Divine-human synergy.⁹

According to St. Justin, it was precisely such confessed humanism that has characterized the ecumenist project from the start: Here Christ's call to unity had been answered by efforts not only (legitimately) to improve mutual understanding among the separated denominations by a more careful study of each faith community's doctrinal commitments. Rather, the ambition has been to overcome all remaining theological disagreements through compromise formulas each confession can then interpret in their unassailably own ways. The diversity preserved by such separate

⁷ As Father Tibor Imrenyi pointed out, This line of argument is usually supported by Christ's priority given to right action over against false teaching. In Lk. 10,25-7 and 17, 11-8. But of course the context here is Christ challenging the scribes and pharisees, not with relativizing the Truth of His mystical body, the Church.

⁸ Hegel, 1807, XIX.

⁹ Popovic,1994.



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interpretations is then – as it were – cleansed of any conflict potential by means of a universally imposed (and allegedly “spiritual”) ethos of mutual acknowledgment and affirmation. The goal of Christian unity thus is reconfigured as “unity of reconciled diversity.” It gets advertised as unavoidable resort for finite, immanence-constrained humans finding themselves confronted by an unassailably transcendent Divine Other. Even more, the ecumenist project’s native concern with the multiplicity of Christian faiths is extended into concern with the multiplicity of the world’s religions. And this extension gets “justified” (even by St. Dumitru himself) in view of Christ’s own turn to mankind ‘as a whole.’ This turn of universal love is then taken to invite ecumenists to extrapolate an affirmation of equal rights for all spiritually minded persons, i.e. rights to devise their respectively cultural own, humanly fabricated images of what (anyway) ‘forever evades the human grasp.’

Additional plausibility for such suspicion seems to derive from Stăniloae’s emphasis on humans’ spiritual progress. At least on first reading, this suggests agreement with the way in which the more modernity-affirming heterodox advertise the need for adjustment to changing (scientific and social) “spirits of the time.” Even though the author’s discussion of science would be worthwhile analyzing further, the limited space allowed here restricts our focus on Stăniloae’s praise of the increase in psychological knowledge and know-how: Here his emphasis on good human relationships seems to support Western advocates of ecumenism in their preoccupation with a purely man-made peace: Such peace is here taken to be safeguarded by a human right to have one’s religious persuasions not only tolerated but also – as a guarantee against the risk of discrimination and even hostility – welcomed and psychologically affirmed.

Obviously, this picture of Stăniloae’s vision of the ecumenist project is incomplete. The author of a three-volume *Dogmatics* surely cannot mean what such isolated statements suggest. As we will see, the context of what has been extracted so far has another story to tell. Still, (1) how can one explain the extent to which these statements mimic extensive agreement with what the heterodox advocates of ecumenist dialogues affirm? (2) Why does St. Dumitru engage their language to such an extent? And anyway, (3) why does he join in their advocacy of such dialogues after all?

The next section offers a preliminary answer to the last of these questions by exploring what “dialogue” theologically means for the saint; the preceding questions will be addressed further down.

3. St. Dumitru’s theological understanding of “dialogue”

In common usage, dialogues differ from mere conversations by being somewhat goal-directed (and



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ending when the goal is reached). On the other hand, they differ from pointedly goal-directed discussions and negotiations by pursuing what one may call the surplus-value of some more encompassing insight. Their constituent questions and answers, claims and challenges, value-affirmations and -criticisms are embedded in a framework that facilitates at least some personal sharing.¹⁰ Dialogue partners do not (typically) meet in fixed roles as representatives of certain ideological positions or interest groups. They present themselves as real face-to-face people. Even while they are situated within networks of group-related claims and commitments, they act as individuals willing personally to relate to one another. The sharing imposed by this format ranges from informal or formalized exchanges among equals, aiming at some mutual agreement (or agreement to disagree) to involvement in a pedagogic setting, where students' attention, interest and goodwill must be kept alive by keeping them busy with regular responses. The format thus accommodates settings of equality among dialogue partners as well as settings of inequality in position, knowledge and authority.

Still, in contrast to other forms of communicative action (such as cooperative work, dancing, or music), dialogues are commonly understood as discursive. It is this feature which one finds surprisingly downplayed in St. Dumitru's theological use of the term.

The introduction to his *Orthodox Dogmatics* deals with natural and supernatural revelation, an area where God is described as communicating with His human creatures. Here, St. Dumitru recognizes "dialogue" in sometimes distinctly non-discursive ways:

1. The rational order of the created world is not explained – as in Roman Catholicism – in metaphysical terms (by identifying God with reason, such that He – as it were – could simply not do otherwise but impose a rational structure on nature). Instead, that order is presented as issuing a Divine call towards humans created in the Divine image. This call challenges them to respond by developing their own rational faculties through efforts at exploring that rational world order.¹¹ In the process of such exploring, humans are taken increasingly to realize (as we may add: one aspect of) their own Divine likeness. It is this robustly non-discursive co-existence of a creation-implied call and humans' lifelong investigative responses, which Stăniloae designates as (an equally lifelong, so we may add) "dialogue." Here "dialogue" appears not as a finite and limited project as in the common use of the term. It appears as established by the transcendent God for the

¹⁰ One might think here of the dialogue-concept of Martin Buber which Jitianu has presented as one of St. Dumitru's sources (2006, 372).

¹¹ One might think here of the way in which Berger sees "Stăniloae's personal-ontological interpretation of the logoi" envisaging "the contemplation of nature, which is the ability to see the logoi of things unaffected and undistorted by passionate attachment," as "a form of personal dialogue between God and the human person." (2013, 400)



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purpose of helping His human creatures along on their infinite path towards the deification they had been created for.¹²

2. Another non-discursive “dialogue” within the realm of natural revelation is offered by the continuously offered Divine “voice” of human conscience and humans’ case-by-case response to its promptings.
3. St. Dumitru recognizes that those Divine calls of natural revelation are properly discerned only by the saints. As for the rest of fallen humanity, additional Divine-human “dialogues” are presented through various forms of supernatural revelation. They all seek to awaken humans’ receptivity, and ability to respond to, a God Who is willing “dialogically” to engage with His human creatures. These “dialogues” come
 - A) in terms of Divine actions, i.e., extraordinary events (miracles). These are meant to communicate that there is a higher power not only within, but also beyond the rational order of nature; they ask for a response of awe, faith, and gratitude.
 - B) in terms of – here indeed discursive – messages to prophets. Only they, after all, have attained enough spiritual sensitivity to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit informing them about Who God is. They are therefore called to guide His chosen people to acts of faithful obedience to the covenant they had agreed to enter,
 - C) in the context of Christ’s incarnation: Here a new kind of Divine-human/human discursive dialogues is established between Christ, His friends and enemies. Here a Divine teaching about His salvational mission is offered and confirmed by miracles. Here, moreover, an invitation is extended into an emulating fellowship with Christ, and a liturgically offered memory of gratitude that would enable His followers to engage in such fellowship,
 - D) in terms of the missionary task imposed on the disciples: They are expressly charged with inviting other humans into that same fellowship and teach them to obey Christ’s salvific instructions,
 - E) in terms of the Church as the body of Christ and led by the Holy Spirit. Here a mystical setting is provided for an eternally continued (again not exclusively discursive) dialogue between Christ and His faithful, calling for their (mostly non-discursive) response of obedience and progress towards ever increased Christ-likeness,
 - F) in terms of Tradition and Scripture, instructing believers more specifically (and again not exclusively through written words) how to respond towards working out their deification,

¹² Here, Stăniloae’s account recalls a similar vision offered by St. John Chrysostom, when he portrays the paradisaical beauty of the created world and the happiness it offers to the humans placed in its “garden” as “calling for” a human response of gratitude, love and willing submission.

The subject of creation as a Divine gift inviting humans to enter into dialogue with the Holy Trinity has been extensively treated in the literature, see e.g. Apetrei (2011) and Berger (2018, 11).



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- G) in terms of a faith that had been awakened by personal sharing, inviting newcomers into the community of that Church and the Divine love sustaining her community (1985, 62),
- H) as well as, finally, in terms of a (discursively mediated) theology that in turn is grounded in a (not exclusively discursive) prayerful response to Christ's call and identified – throughout the ages - as support for mankind's spiritual progress.

As all of this makes clear, St. Dumitru's theological understanding of "dialogue" derives from His vision of the Divine love for those whom He created in His image. This image-character comes with a gift of freedom even God's desire for communion will not overrule. According to this understanding, dialogue does not primarily focus on passing on information, or on reaching an agreement about facts. Instead, that "dialogue" is about sharing the Divine life with His human dialogue partners.

4. Different models of ecumenism and strategic ambiguities

Given Stăniloae's own, pointedly unusual and robustly theological understanding of "dialogue," what insights can be derived concerning his vision of ecumenist dialogues, as suggested by the quotes adduced in the second section of this essay? Here, after all, we are not dealing with the Divinely "dialogical" condescending, aimed at lifting up creatures made of dust into communion with God, as described in the previous section. Instead, our concern now is with a human setting explicitly designed for exchange among equals. We are dealing with a purportedly "theological" undertaking based not on prayerful exchanges WITH God but in academic research ABOUT God. At stake is a task conceived as entrusted to experts for negotiation about ways of reformulating doctrine, so that it can be accepted by all dialogue participants.

To be sure, here as well Christian unity is the goal, or more specifically: unity among people of different Christian (and tendentially also other) faiths. Once again, that ecumenist unity is not, as in Stăniloae's theological understanding of revelation, to arise from the union between deified man WITH his deifying Creator, but from human negotiations ABOUT that Creator. Of course, Stăniloae's theology emphasizes the need to extend the vertical human-divine union to the horizontal level: He recognizes the Divine call for efforts directed towards establishing interhuman community through acts of love as the prominent way of promoting one's vertical union with God. To be sure, such unifying acts of love are understood by both Stăniloae and his Western dialogue partners as deriving from a Divine imperative (Jn 13-34-5). Yet only Stăniloae's account envisages the Divine author of that imperative not as a distant law-maker or command-issuer. Instead, he envisages God as persistently involved in His Own dialogical nudging, directed at His Own human



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dialogue partners. St. Dumitru envisages such nudging not only in view of ever renewed dialogical efforts as such, but also in view of rightly orienting those efforts.

Both understandings of “dialogue,” thus, are presented as motivated by Christ’s call for unity among His followers. But while the ecumenist version starts out with accepting a multiplicity of “churches,” Stăniloae, as a closer reading of his essay shows, always speaks from within “the” one holy universal and Apostolic Church, i.e. the Orthodox Church. Likewise, the “spirituality” invoked by ecumenists for “liquifying” doctrinal formulae remains limited to subjective responses. That is to say; its “liquified” results remain oriented towards weakening the specifics of doctrinal content about which participants might disagree.¹³ Stăniloae, in contrast, invokes “Spirituality” as limited by the life of that one and only Church. Its “liquifying” function is designed for the purpose of overcoming merely external formalisms. It is directed towards recognizing doctrine not as dead letter but as manifesting the distinctiveness of a properly Christian life.

And to be sure, both understandings of “dialogue” seek to establish (at least, even though not exclusively Christian) unity amid the diversity of faiths imposed by the multiplicity of existing confessions (or also religions). Both envisage such unity in terms of a “reconciled diversity.” Yet only Stăniloae proposes Orthodoxy itself as the proper model for such unity-in-diversity: He sees it engaged in unfolding, in Orthodoxy’s space- and time-spanning “spiritual progress,” the inexhaustible richness implied in the original Divine revelation. And he sees Orthodoxy preserved in its internal coherence as faithfulness to its Apostolic roots. The ecumenist vision, on the other hand, stipulates each of the many Christian denominations (and sometimes also religions) as equally entitled to their respectively different, culturally variegated conceptions of a Divine power that forever transcends the human grasp. Stăniloae, again, emphasizes the ever-sustained Divine initiatives of graceful outreach into human immanence as calling for a faithful response to the robustly content-rich specifics presented by that Divine outreach. The ecumenist agenda behind the unity-in-diversity project, on the other hand, pursues a merely social and political peace on earth. This is why it also imposes on dialogue partners the willingness to renunciate all claims to universal validity, or to truth. Stăniloae’s Church-based unity-in-diversity, in contrast, explicitly rests on “Truth,” recognized as the person of Christ.

All of this supports the conclusion that a theologically “enlightened” reading of the strong endorsement of ecumenism offered by the essay on *Problems and Perspectives of the Church* should be understood in terms of the author’s quite idiosyncratic, i.e., robustly Orthodox understanding of ecumenism. Just like St. Justin Popovic, St. Dumitru opposes what St. Justin latter denounced as “Christian humanism”, i.e. the attempt to safeguard peace on earth with purely human

¹³ They might even, as Father Tibor suggested, invoke Christ’s own “doctrinal generosity” as expressed in Mk 9,38-41 as “whoever is not against us is for us”, disregarding, of course, the obverse “whoever is not with me, is against me” (Mt. 12,30) which, in St. Justin’s interpretation, demands a clear choice between the kingdom of the devil and the kingdom of Christ..



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means. Just like St. Justin, St. Dumitru acknowledges the need to turn to a ‘theandric’ solution. While St. Justin associates this solution with allowing Christ to live within the human heart, St. Dumitru, with his more community-oriented mindset, associates it with the life of the Church.¹⁴

Still, a question remains: As the theological context of St. Dumitru’s endorsement of ecumenist dialogues has made clear, he conceives such dialogues in terms of a missionary outreach. Why, then, does he undertake such painstaking efforts to hide that ambition? Why does he speak so extensively in ways every ecumenist dialogue partner would welcome as signaling Orthodoxy’s final coming home to the Western culture of interdenominational (and interreligious) recognition and affirmation? Why does he lay out false tracks suggesting an already imminent theological union, as exemplified by statements directed to Roman Catholics such as:

... by its rational criticism of those older formulae of Christian teaching which lent a mythical prestige to certain equally rationalist concepts, Western theology often leads toward the same spiritual and mystical core of Revelation, and so by this path comes to merge with Orthodox theology (1980b, 217),

Or to Protestants such as:

Western theology... especially ...Protestant theology – has moved from considering the Scripture as an absolute norm in itself to understanding the Tradition of the primitive Church as the living basis of Scripture...In following this direction western theology is moving along the path towards a fuller understanding of the church (op.cit., 220)

Perhaps we must assume an effort at *captatio benevolentiae* after the model of St. Paul’s outreach to the Athenians, when he praised them for a piety he subsequently dismantles as misguided (Acts 17, 22-23). Perhaps St. Dumitru, unhappy about the arrogant superiority claims issued by some Orthodox participants in the ecumenist project¹⁵, wished to exercise what he called “the tact of love.”¹⁶ Perhaps, in other words, he wished to maintain a friendly contact in order to secure among his dialogue partners sufficient welcome for his subversively staged efforts at winning them over. He may thus have used that ecumenist-speak as a (kind of missionary) bait, luring his partners into a linguistic net in which they might inadvertently find themselves forced into conclusions they will discover only later to have removed them from what their own denomination affirms.

But perhaps in Psalm 102,5 we could find a theologically even more charitable explanation:

¹⁴ Remembering St. Justin’s critique of “Christian Humanism” as the betrayal of a properly Christ-informed theandric life, one may regret that St. Dumitru uses that same term for the spiritual progress of the Church resulting from her members’ Christ-informed engagement with the created world.

¹⁵ Bordeianu (2011, 27ff) offers some evidence in this direction.

¹⁶ Cf the quote offered by Toroczka 2013, “, p. 30



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When praising God as “ἐμπιπλῶντα ἐν ἀγαθοῖς τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν σου”, the psalmist invokes “desire,” i.e., a term that usually connotes passions, and thus a mark of fallen mankind that enslaves true human freedom. Yet that which such passionate desire is satisfied with is called “good things”. One thus might stipulate such Divine satisfying of an initially mere fallen-state psychological yearning as designed to turn that yearning towards what is really (God-perspective) “good.” It becomes possible, in other words, to conceive of the Divine love as condescending to humans’ limited grasp of what they desire, in order subtly to turn that grasp in the right direction. Here, in other words, we could envisage God strategically using the fulfillment of still merely passion-inspired wishes towards inspiring a more appropriate gratitude that can open the heart to Divine instruction about real goods. Perhaps St. Dumitru followed such a pattern of love: Perhaps, in ostensibly yielding to heterodox (fallen-world-) union-desires, he wanted to do so in a way that might bring his ecumenist fellow-Christians’ towards the real “good” of union in Truth.

5. The later decline of Stăniloae’s missionary optimism.

Cyprian Toroczka’s painstaking examination of St. Dumitru’s lifelong engagement with ecumenism concludes by quoting several interviews towards the end of his life. These attest to the Saint’s increasing disillusionment not only with the project’s goal of real Christian unity, but, even more, a pronounced opposition to the very attempt of reaching that important goal through ecumenist dialogues. He must have turned from hope (through strategic concessions and incessant ‘burnt-offerings’ of appreciation and recognition) of being able to help his heterodox dialogue partners open their heart to the Orthodox message, to resignation and withdrawal. How can that final turn be explained?¹⁷

It is perhaps helpful to remember that dialogues are not primarily about sharing information the partners involved might consider relevant. Rather, given that personal-involvement element of dialoguing mentioned above, sharing here involves existentially relevant visions of the respective Christian (or other) faiths. Stăniloae’s *Dogmatics* insist on the importance of such sharing for enabling recipients to respond to, and thus activate, the dialogue-relationship offered them by God Himself. God is here included as something like a silent background-dialogue-partner. In other words, St. Dumitru had linked such sharing with a witness that imposes a certain extent of personal

¹⁷ In posing this turn as a serious problem, i.e. in taking seriously Saint Dumitru’s later change of mind, my approach differs from the one adopted by Bordeianu (2024). This scholar rightly defends Stăniloae against hostile charges of nationalism, fascism and antisemitism, assuming (mistakenly, in my view) that the additional charge of anti-ecumenism would support such misrepresentation. He therefore dismisses as irrelevant the Saint’s later statements, which for the interpretation offered here present evidence for the central role ecclesiology also plays for Stăniloae’s vision of sobornicity. In my modest opinion, St. Dumitru’s later disappointment with the ecumenist project betrays his theological depth rather than supporting improper allegations.



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self-giving informing the invitation into the community established by that faith. Given Stăniloae's missionary agenda, present even in his *Dogmatics*, such witness cannot but invite the audience into the Church, and thus into (theologically) "dialogical" communion with the Divine Logos (and the Holy Trinity).¹⁸ To reach its goal, such sharing depends on two presuppositions: The one offering the witness must be a spirit-bearer, i.e. he must speak from within his own communion with God.¹⁹ And the one addressed must offer not only, as in Socratic dialogues of teaching, some willingness to listen and learn, but even more, a certain amount of advance trust, or some willingness to accept (after critical weighing, to be sure) the other's leadership.

It is precisely such willingness the later Stăniloae, after a life devoted to the ecumenist cause, had to acknowledge as lacking in his heterodox dialogue partners. In what concerns Roman Catholics, even though they are dogmatically closest to Orthodoxy, their misguided insistence on exclusive and universal truth as rooted in their claim to papal infallibility renders them deaf to critical reasoning: "If you tell them that they lack something, they get angry and refuse to discuss." (quoted by Toroczkai 2013, 32). In what concerns Anglicans and Protestants, on the other hand, their very setup of rules for participation in ecumenist dialogues imposed on participants is confining: It imposes a willingness not only to share and enrich each other through personal witness, but also to observe a mutuality in approving of everything thus shared, and to integrate it into one's own faith. It imposes, in other words, an entrance condition of mutually acknowledged equality in authority. And it is this condition which effectively entrusts what should be recognized as religious truth to each participant's subjective or culturally collective own construction. Such an institutional setting, as St. Dumitru admitted at the end of his life, forecloses all theological discernment. 'The Fathers of the church held no ecumenical council with Arians and Nestorians' and: 'ecumenism is misunderstood if one is kept from addressing the difference between truth and heresy,' as his quotes in Toroczkai (2013, 31) can be paraphrased.

The personal witness St. Dumitru (after being delivered from Communist prison) had hoped to offer to his dialogue partners throughout his subsequent life had been meant to offer a friendly relationship of trust and help. Yet, as he recognized in the end, such offer must not be allowed to compromise (what he recognized as a not altogether liquifiable) doctrine.

¹⁸ In other words: once one recognizes the Orthodox Church as the one (THE ONE) that possesses the fullness of truth (Bordeianu 2011, 29), the ambition to have ecumenist dialogues look for "the spiritual core in doctrinal formulations," even if these at first sight seem to contradict each other, should lead one eventually to accept St. Dumitru's later acknowledgement of the fact that what can be recognized as properly "spiritual" about such "core" is inseparable from the life of that one Church. It is the common cup that places limits on the openness of sobornicity.

¹⁹ Father Tibor here reminded me of the words of the Apostle Paul: "My message and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power." (1 Cor 2:4). He also quoted the way in which St. Spyridon resolved a dogmatic quarrel about the Holy Trinity at the First Ecumenical Council: "he asked for a brick, held it up, made the sign of the cross over it, and fire burst forth from the brick, water gushed out from beneath it, and the clay remained in his hand,"



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6. Coping with ecumenist failure

The previous sections have focused this paper's project of "reading Stăniloae" on his attitude to ecumenist dialogues. These sections

- attended to the puzzle presented by his seemingly unconditional endorsement of such dialogues,
- explored the (quite idiosyncratic) theological sense in which he uses the term "dialogue,"
- engaged that sense for reconstructing the original puzzle in terms of a rhetorical strategy that also emulates God's own condescending offer of love,
- and took account of St. Dumitri's sense of that strategy's failure.

This final section is devoted to "reading Stăniloae" in search of a way out of that failure.

At issue, once again, is a goal all Christians are called to pursue, unity. The longing for such unity is alive also among heterodox believers in the West. Yet they have barred their access to such unity by insisting on a method (i.e. their rules for ecumenist dialogues) that obstructs access to that goal. In this predicament, Orthodox Christians, called by their Divine creator to participate in the deification they were designed for through good works²⁰, cannot but wish to help. But like God Himself, Who created humans as persons, i.e. with freedom of will, they cannot seek to overrule the will of those insisting on their own unhelpful ways. How can one help people who are dead-set on refusing what is "really good"? Is there an aspect of the Divine love humans could seek to emulate?

Perhaps there is: At the very end of his three volume *Dogmatics*, in its sixth part devoted to eschatology, one might take Stăniloae presenting God Himself as situated in just such a predicament. At issue is the commonly stated vision of a "conflict between Divine love and a justice that respects human freedom." This vision concerns both the souls' condition between their earthly death and the Final Judgement and their condition after that judgment. At least to an un-attentive reader, Stăniloae seems to confront that very difficulty: He seems to envisage a Divine charity (as it were) forced by the Divine respect to accept an eternity of hell for those who willfully refused His offer of grace, thus defeating His will that "all be saved."

Now surely, St. Dumitru, like all the Fathers he quotes, admits that, after death, the soul can no longer influence her state. She can no longer influence her allotment to either a heavenly or a hellish intermediate waiting place for Christ's second coming (1995, 209). Attending to the common concern about those permanently committed to hell, St. Dumitru asks whether it would not be more

²⁰ ... and through bearing witness to what deification means: "this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17,3). (I owe this quote to Father Tibor Imrenyi, CDH).



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charitable to annihilate them, rather than exposing them to infinite suffering. In response to that latter concern, he quotes St. John of Damaskus: The very fact of being allowed to remain existent allows even those suffering in hell to participate of the (admittedly meager) “good” their being represents over against its alternative, non-being. (op.cit., 224).

St. Dumitru recognizes the limits of such a solution. After all, the claim that “being”, merely as such, should not only ontologically count as “good,” but also be experienced as such, is hard to render plausible. The idea that maintaining the eternally damned in existence could count as an extension of Divine charity runs aground on all the suicides of this fallen world: Each one of them, after all, must have preferred the non-being they hoped to secure by killing themselves to any “good” metaphysicians might attribute to their staying in existence. In commenting on St. John’s proposal, Stăniloae therefore adds another thought: By maintaining those eternally damned in existence, God not only affirms their value as persons (even if they resist His love), but He also maintains some sort of relationship to them, even accepting His own pain about their sustained rejection. So we may ask: What would it mean to pursue such a theological solution with regard to the heterodox ecumenists of our day?

Let us rehearse the analogy before turning to the Saint for a solution.

Somewhat similar to human souls who, after being separated from their bodies, are “dead set” on the way they have shaped themselves during their incarnate life on earth, heterodox believers are “dead set” on their model of ‘unity through ecumenist acceptance of religious relativism.’ Just as those souls are no longer free to change their position, committed ecumenists have walled-in themselves in their defensive position. In either case, we confront the taking of options directed against the Divinely dialogical offer of grace: in the case of souls, this refusal reflects their lifelong pursuit of a purely earthly happiness; in the case of ecumenist dialoguers their theological choice of a purely humanistic union. In either case, such misplaced choices condemn the choosers to a setting in which their longing (here for happiness, there for unity and worldly peace) remains with them, but is forever (in the first case: in eternity, in the second case: until a – very unlikely – change of mind) frustrated. At least with the former, and even more so with them after the Final Judgment, there is no more chance of changing that plight.

Now let us turn to a conceivable solution: In his own eschatological teaching on the situation of the souls after death, St. Dumitru envisages the Divine mercy to distinguish between different ranks or stages of depravity: Some of those souls landed in the fore-room of hell, because they intentionally chose hatred over love. Others, however, had merely neglected answering the Divine call. They were seduced into sins they (during their earthly life) failed to repent, to confess and to set straight through compensatory efforts. But if given a chance, they would be grateful to either be moved up one or another level of alleviated torment, and infinitely more grateful for being admitted to even the lowest rank of those envisaging the glorious presence of God. (1995, 266).



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With this distinction, St. Dumitru opens a way that could at least attenuate the conflict between love and justice, or between charity and respect for human freedom: By placing both within the cosmic dialogical framework of creation and salvation, he stipulates a connection arising between those who pray and those for whom they pray. He takes this connection to hold, even if the latter (i.e., the departed for whom the living keep praying) are no longer able to reciprocate. He insists that the establishment of such a connection is not contingent on being accepted by, nor does it overrule the will of, the ones prayed for (op.cit., 269). Instead, the one praying adopts a responsibility for the one commemorated in his prayer, and this “sends a stream of love” to the latter (op.cit., 268). Stăniloae thinks that this stream can still open that latter one for (some at least minimal, so we surmise) community. Moreover, the prayer of the Church achieves additional power from the Spirit of Christ. This is why God Himself calls on friends and relations, inspiring them to respond in love by praying for their deceased, and for offering good works on their behalf.²¹ He does so by suggesting the thought of such loving after-care to the heart of such friends and relations. Just like St. Justin of Ćelije, who sees Christ Himself acting from within our heart, if only we offer Him that heart as his proper dwelling, so St. Dumitru sees God Himself working out those acts of love within the ones willing to respond to His call.²²

We are here confronted with a communally modified model of the way in which the Divine yearning for union with His deified human creatures can be reconciled with His respect for human freedom, even among those who rejected that love. We might conclude that Stăniloae’s theological anthropology sees man’s image-of-God character as extending not only to reason and free will, but in addition to a relationship with his Creator, and thus with the Trinitarian community of love (as inspiring the life of the Church). Whether accepted or rejected by man, this ontologically based relatedness cannot be broken.²³

Let us utilize now this eschatological vision for the analogy we have suggested between those who are “dead” and those who, while still are alive, are at least provisionally “dead set” on having their own ecumenist way! Let us give credit to the fact that the latter are still appropriately moved by a yearning for Christian unity, even if decidedly deaf to the Orthodox invitation into real unity! Might not God also call us (Orthodox “know-betters”) to engage in prayer and good works performed in the name (or for the sake) of our misguided Christian brothers? Unlike with the prayer He calls us to with respect to our dead relations and friends, such ecumenism-furthering prayers,

²¹ One might think here of Christ’s own words (Mt. 24,22) about the sufferings that will prepare His second coming, and about the prayers of the saints for shortening the time of that suffering. (This shortening the time refers to the Just, still alive before His second coming.

²² This is confirmed by a further form of „dialogue“: in his final discussion of eschatology, St. Dumitru characterizes even virtue as „not a private affair“ but as a dialogue with God (2013, 72)

²³ One might even speculate (going beyond St. Dumitru’s account in the *Dogmatics*) that even those committed to eternal damnation can at least experience the fact of this relationship as what gives meaning to their continued existence.



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after all, can still be sustained by the hope that the one or the other, for whom we personally take the responsibility of praying, might eventually change his mind after all. We thus might conceive ourselves as being challenged in our own personal freedom prayerfully to ask for a rightly directed restoration of their freedom. And we as well, in attending to that call, might discern God's own working out the good results hoped for by our decision to respond. We could recognize our "going along" with His initiative as properly Divine-human synergy.

Engaging Stăniloae's own theological resources, we can thus envisage a way of avoiding the sorry resignation in view of a rightly inspired ecumenism, which seems to have burdened the end of his own holy life.

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