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Christian Attitude in the Face of Human Divergences. A New Testament Testimony

Abstract

The Christian teachings revealed by our Saviour Jesus Christ should have led to a unitary corpus of the Church, built on a unique understanding and experience of the mystery of the human's encounter with God. The risk of promoting personal views, uninspired by God, has always been a reason for divergences and fractures among the religious community. Only a wise approach to the inter-human relationships, based on Christian love, was able to promote the community life of the Church in the spirit of unity and harmony.



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1 Introduction

God revealed Himself gradually in the Old Testament and finally, in the New Testament. We can differentiate between different levels of relationship with God: from a cult based on blood sacrifice, that neglected more and more the spiritual side of a sacrificial act (Isa. 1, 11-15; Ezek. 44, 10-13), the humanity came in Jesus Christ to the worship in “*spirit and truth*” (Jn 4, 23). From the moral principle of justice, so much invoked in the Law of Moses, we can see a transition to the principle of complete love of God and one’s own kind (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” Lk 10,27).¹ These are the coordinates of the Church’s life and cult, based on the transmission of the Holy Spirit in the world and the co-working of humans with His grace. This cooperation with God is possible only because Grace and Truth have come into the world through Jesus Christ (Jn 1, 17).

The revelation brought by the Son of God was necessary to surpass the boundaries of the Jewish people. As Light of the peoples (Mt. 28, 19-20), Jesus Christ guides us from idolatrous errors to the true God: “Jesus was about to die for the nation (Jewish), and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (Jn 11, 51-52).

¹ Florin Vârlan, The creation as gift-a manifestation on the outside of the intra-Trinitarian love, 2015, *ICOANA CREDINTEI. International Journal of Interdisciplinary Scientific Research*, 2/1 (2015), p. 26.

2 The unity of Christians

The acceptance of the divine revelation should have led to “one flock (and) one shepherd” (Jn 10, 16), starting from Jerusalem and “*until the end of the world*” (Acts 1, 8), building one Church, “*holy and pure*” (Eph. 6, 27), based on one faith, as one baptism (Mt. 28, 19), pure and without any wrinkles (sins or heresies), a beautiful bride of Christ, earned through “*His blood itself*” (Acts 20, 28).

The ideal of Christian unity was expressed by our Saviour during the Last Supper. An existential communion of believers with our Saviour Christ is needed, like the functional model of branches that spring from the living vine (Jn 15, 4-5). Through this sanctification of them into truth, the believers have the perspective that “all (should) be one, as You, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Jn 17, 21).

We can describe this model of unity as a Trinitarian one², as the ultimate unity to which all Christians are called to participate. This participation in the divine koinonia implies a spiritual transformation of the human being from the status of image of God (*imago Dei*) to the likeness with God (*theosis*): “We know that we are God’s children and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (I Jn 5, 19-20).

Therefore, the constant mission of Christianity should be the preaching of the Gospel and the experience with a maximum intensity of the authentic, divine love. Christianity is, in fact, a “*religion of love*” (Jn 13, 34-35)³ that leads us to practical wis-

² See Daniel Munteanu, *Pe urmele iubirii. Contribuții trinitare la o cultură a comunicării vindecătoare*, Târgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca 2013.

³ Petru Rezuș, *The specificity of the Christian religion*, *Ortodoxia*, 4 (1960), p. 514, (pp. 510-538): “Christianity is the religion of love. Love becomes all-encompassing and characteristic of this religion; it indi-

dom. Christians need to transmit a real flame of spirituality. This true force permits all people to relate efficiently to God here in history, i.e., during the earthly existence: "And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (I Jn, 5, 11-13).

Meditating on the strength of these words, still vibrant after so many centuries, we would expect that the inheritors of the divinely revealed message "*would also speak in the same way,*" as a result of impropriating the redeeming teachings. To be "*united in the same mind and in the same purpose*" (1 Cor. 1, 10), a problematic aspect of faith sometimes is actually a condition sine qua non of Christian existence, which was practically understood by all Apostles and Christian missionaries. The members of the Church should believe in Jesus Christ, but also live in communion with Him (Jn 11, 26). The authentic belief in Jesus Christ could not have been kept without the real living in communion with Him, in order to reach "the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4, 13). This is the status of the son of God.⁴

The signs of the first unity of the Church can be found in many texts of the New Testament. The book of *Acts* mentions that the communitarian life of the first Christians was so vibrant that

cates the new spiritual and victorious reality which locks on the spiritual orbit of the believers; it represents a psychical content and a new way of religious living, demanding total unity and structural transformations; it is the spiritual beginning of each believer and also his everlasting reward. All is love in Christianity and Christianity itself is love."

⁴ Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Vocabular de Teologie Biblică*, (București: Arhiepiscopia Romano-Catolică de București, 2001), p. 80: The acknowledgement of Jesus as Son announces the adoptive filiation of the Christians, the participation in Jesus's sonship and in the grace of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4, 6).

they renounced all daily or future materialistic preoccupations, absolutely necessary to the preservation of the economic life, in order to fully and truly live their spiritual encounter with the Saviour Jesus Christ (Acts 2, 42-47). This unity of their belief was so real that they spent even their belongings in order to make them useful in the ecclesiastical communion. Their communitarian prayer "*in one voice*," was so intense that it could cause, depending on the necessities, the visible overflow of the Holy Spirit, for support and edification (Acts 4, 24-31).

We can often read in the Epistles of the New Testament many appeals to the unity of the ecclesial community as a real body of Christ. Saint Apostle Paul is aware of the necessity of cultic and moral unity (1 Cor. 5, 9-13), of all members of all Churches founded by him (1 Cor. 7, 17; 11, 16; 14, 34; 16, 1). He was also aware of the necessity of doctrinal unity (Gal. 2, 14; 2 Thess. 1, 4; 1 Tim. 1, 3). His concern is eloquent in this regard: "And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11, 28).

The spiritual leaders and clerics appointed at the leadership of the Church ought to care of this unity (1 Tim. 1, 3; 1 Pet. 5, 1-4; 1 Cor. 4, 1-2). Furthermore, each member of the Church is called to participate in the making of the "*Body*" of Christ (1 Cor. 3, 1-9; 14, 12; 1 Pet. 5, 5-6). Christian unity is kept through humbleness and love, through selflessness and preoccupation for the help and love and one's neighbors (1 Cor. 10, 24; Rom. 16, 16; Gal. 5, 13-14, 24). Saint Apostle Paul summarized this principle: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6, 2). The genuine modesty of our Saviour Jesus Christ will serve as a reliable model to follow in the practice of humbleness and spiritual development.⁵

⁵ Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Comentar la Evanghelia de la Ioan*, (Oradea: Pelerinul Român, 1997), p. 63: "If the Jews would have not heard anything about Jesus Christ, before they saw Him, if they would have received this great and wonderful confession only by seeing Him, the simplicity and poorness of His clothes would have diminished His glory. Jesus

Therefore the unity of the early Church was based on the assumption of the religious Truth and the intense experience of personal and communitarian relation, through the members of the Church (Gal. 6, 2) with Christ the Saviour, through which they received the Holy Spirit.⁶

3 Diversity in Unity

However, unity does not imply the annihilation of the individual, of the human personality, or of the personal relationship that every member of the Church should develop, in an intimate way or even in terms of the collective cultic involvement, with God. The message of the Gospel is addressed, in principle, to every human being; still, the Saviour Himself acknowledged a subjective understanding of His words by the humans, due to the “opacity of ears” (Mt. 13, 9), that is, due to a closed-mindedness (the refusal to know the Truth) and a heart devoid of love of God and people. “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2, 14). If the refusal to know God pertains to the human freedom of choice, as an expression of the free will,⁷ the absence of love seems to express a natural human incapacity,

Christ was walking on the streets dressed simple and poorly so that all dared freely and with ease to approach Him and talk to Him.”

- ⁶ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Comentar la evanghelia după Luca*, (Oradea: Pelerinul Român, 1998), p. 35: “The Saviour received the First the Holy Spirit, although He Himself was the Giver of the Spirit, because that dignity would come to us through Him and so we would have the gift of our communion with the Holy Spirit.”
- ⁷ Marian Vilciu, Ion Croitoru, The dilemmas of the contemporary man situated at the crossroads between political liberalism, democracy and the expression of his religious convictions, *2nd International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts (SGEM)*, 1 (2015), p. 180, (pp. 177-187).

which should not be imputed. It is the classic dilemma or conflict: reason versus feeling.⁸ Despite this appearance, love, as a typically human emotion, is closely related to the understanding of Truth and of the reality to which man belongs. Such a pretext does not exist, and the Christian teaching relies on the principle of love between man and God, proven by man's love for his neighbor (Mt. 6, 12; Gal. 6, 2).

It is not the knowledge of divine mysteries, or the cultic manifestations practiced as a social obligation or as a program before God that leads to redemption. Nor does compliance with a specific set of moral principles bring about the process of salvation. It is the transformation of the soul through love, a process as natural and innate to man as it is problematic, because it stands against the original sin, deeply ingrained in man in the form of the typically human instinct for self-preservation and personal reaction, which is an individualistic hence selfish attitude, seeking out pleasure and satisfaction above all (Rom. 7, 14-23).

Despite these human tendencies known to the Saviour through the very human nature He assumed (Jn 2, 25), despite the diversity and plurality of human personality, His calling is convergent, to bring all humans to the likeness to God. But this calling allows diversity at the human level, which is the proof of divine love offered unconditionally, capable of conforming to each and every individual. True love implies respect and consideration for the loved one.

The members of the early Church belonged to various social categories (free people and slaves, rich and poor), to all kinds of nations, which implied different cultural baggage (outside the space of the Jewish people, "for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him" – Rom. 10, 12) and, despite the gen-

⁸ Florea Ștefan, Christian ethics and the ethics of contemporary man, Journal HEC forum, volum 20, 2008/3/1, editor Springer Science & Business Media, p. 52

eral mindset of the Antiquity, to both genders, men and women (Gal. 3, 28). Against the insurmountable cultural and religious differences of yore, now “the righteousness of God [comes] through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction” (Rom. 3, 22).

At the same time, the differences among the members of the Church were not to be hidden or neglected but reconsidered and accepted, because a change in human mentality was needed to achieve a superior perspective of man’s relationship with God, based on the choice and call of the Holy Spirit, as an expression of God’s will. “Consider your own call, brothers, and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (I Cor. 1, 26-29). Christians are chosen and called by God to salvation on the basis of His foreknowledge (Rom. 8, 29-30), which nullifies human judgment and the limitations of a superficial understanding of the reality before their time. Any earthly disparity matters not to those who are called, for they should impropriate their personal spiritual transformation to the unity of faith and life of the Church to which they now pertain, as parts of the same body (I Cor. 6, 15, 19; 12, 12-27; Eph. 5, 30).

Therefore, the unity of the early Church included a certain human and cultural diversity, which neither intruded upon nor diverted the redeeming work of the “*Body of Christ*.”⁹ Due to this structure, a different manner of address, a changed tone adapted to the problems of Christian communities, may be not-

⁹ Luminița Heliana Munteanu *et al.*, Art and moral values - a pedagogical approach through the hexadic model, *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 83 (2013), p. 439, (pp. 437-442).

ed in Paul the Apostle's speech. His relation to the community in Corinth expressed in the two epistles addressed to that Church is entirely different from that addressed to the Galatians. And the clear dogmatic and logical linearity in the epistle to the Romans is in contrast with the warm loving tone of the one addressed to the Philippians, or "to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker" (Phlm. 1, 1).

Furthermore, there is diversity in unity among the members of the same Church: the Judaizers alongside Christianized pagans (Gal. 2, 11-14); "political" parties within the same community (1 Cor. 1, 11-12; 3, 3-4); different visions regarding the role and significance of the agapes (1 Cor. 11, 17-22); confusion between the primacy of glorifying the Saviour or that of angels (Col. 2, 8-19); various attitudes towards the sin of lust and towards the Christians who still practice it (1 Cor. 5, 1-7). The weaknesses of ancient passions, such as drunkenness, still trouble the spiritual ascension of some believers (Eph. 5, 18). One can note a certain competition among the Charismatics, driven by vain ambitions (1 Cor. 12, 4-31), or a feminine libertinism of praying bare-headed, with hair adorned according to the fashion of the day, or even the exercise of the prophetic charisma (1 Cor. 11, 5, 13-16). Women's order and discipline in Christian gatherings are not yet attained, but they should be established and sanctioned, "as in all the saints' Churches" (1 Cor. 14, 34).

All these aspects, which address the issue of unity of early Church members, were not likely to impede its development but, on the contrary, the Church managed to integrate cultural diversity, the diversity of thought and typically human behavior in a certain constructive unity, constantly praising and supporting the transforming spiritual orientation of people living in Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

Relying on his documentation (Lk. 1, 1-3), Luke the Evangelist presents a unique episode in the canonical gospels, namely a broader perspective regarding those who carry out some action for the benefit of the people and of the same God even though they do not belong to the same religious movement. Upon his

return from the trial mission during which he exercised the apostolic charisma he would be fully vested with later on Pentecost, John, the “*beloved*” disciple, tells the Saviour: “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us. But Jesus said to him, Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you” (Lk. 9, 49-50).

The episode which John the Apostle describes to Christ the Saviour regarding the man he stopped from exorcizing because he was not one of Jesus’ disciples (Lk. 9, 49-50) entails the implicit question: Does God also have other ways to fight against evil and darkness than those granted and practiced in His legitimate Church? Could there be another way that God works in order to lead and rebalance this world from the temptation of darkness, thus giving it a chance for further existence?

Although the text does not explain how John the Apostle stops that man from his exorcistic preoccupations, his attitude remains the expression of damnable conviction, rising from the feeling of absolute authority emphatically claiming that there is no other way, that the Lord’s teaching and ways become private property, belonging to someone, which can be used “*with authority*” in any circumstance.

The answer of Christ the Saviour is obvious, contrary to people’s tendency to monopolize the divine capacity of working through men within the same creation.¹⁰ At the same time, the Saviour points to the human need to cooperate against that which is evil for everyone, a cooperation based on the adherence to the same Christ, the true Lord, and God, the victor of hell and death, in clear opposition to God’s enemy and to people associated with him. Hence, the Christian’s mission should not be against his own neighbors, against people, but against the

¹⁰ L. R. Neacsu, M. Vilciu, A. Anghel, *Intercultural Education - a Device for Promoting Moral Values in the Society of Knowledge, 6th LUMEN International Conference on Rethinking Social Action. Core Values*, 2015, p. 885 (pp. 883-887).

evil that presents itself in many guises, brought about by the “*killer of men*” and the “*father of lies*” (Jn 8, 44).

The abovementioned text was subject to multiple interpretations over time. The issue of heresies has always led to highlighting the need for unity of faith and obedience to Christ and His Apostles. Amidst intense struggles against the increasingly virulent heretics of his time, St. Cyril of Alexandria states, paraphrasing the Saviour’s answer: “I have come to rip all people out of the devil’s hands, to free those he enslaved and caught, to enlighten those who stood in the darkness, to heal the wounded, to lift up the fallen, so that I can gather those who have been scattered by the devil, the sons of God, together”.¹¹

St. Theophylact, the archbishop of Bulgaria, essentially considered that John the Apostle did the right thing when he stopped that person “(...) judging him as unworthy of working miracles, for he had not received the gift of miracles with them, nor had he been sent by God to do that, as they were, and by no means was he a follower of Jesus”. He would thus paraphrase the Saviour’s answer: “(...) My task is to gather in one the scattered sons of God, and his (the devil’s) is to scatter the gathered ones”.¹²

St. Theophylact, who lived in the 11th century A.D., in a historical age which overcame the great heresies of Christianity, manifested a specific understanding of the abovementioned text, preferring to pursue the line of the generous answer of the Saviour: “Let him do that, for he too crushes the power of Satan; and since he does not impede you from preaching, nor does he help the devil, he is on our side. Because whoever is not against God is for God, and whoever does not gather with God is with the devil”.¹³

¹¹ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Comentar la Sfânta Evanghelie de la Luca*, p. 149.

¹² Sf. Teofilact, arhiepiscopul Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sf. Evanghelii de la Luca*, (București: Sofia, 2007), p. 123, 151.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 123-124.

In conclusion, “in the apostolic action, we must accept the initiative of all those who claim themselves from Christ”¹⁴. Their position as fighters against evil is beneficial, and the initiative to rally the forces of light should always be welcomed with the joy of the consensus of Christian love. Only those who are against Jesus Christ cannot be in communion with Him, and, naturally, whatever they think they gather for their salvation/life is actually a waste of time and deceitfulness (Lk. 11, 23).

The conclusion is obvious: the divine teaching is not someone’s property; it was given to people so they can know God and the path to salvation, and remains valid until the end of this world. The issue of dividing people should be understood as a result of the dissociation and drifting caused by sin through the devil’s work, which is and will always be a constant temptation in the path of individual and community salvation of the Church of Christ the Saviour. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the stem of the vine, the Father cuts off every branch that bears no fruit and prunes every branch that does bear fruit so that it will be even more fruitful (Jn 15, 1-2). The unfruitful ones had their own time of existence and development until they proved to be useless. Pruning and the right to judge are always the Father’s prerogative (1 Cor. 3, 5-15).

4 Convergence

4.1 The Christians’ love for Christ the Saviour

The Christian faith is based on God’s love for people (Jn 3, 16), concretized in the salvation work triumphantly completed on the cross by the incarnate Son of God. Understanding the divine plan and guided by the work of the Holy Spirit, the Saviour’s Disciples proclaimed this Godly work to the world as a chance

¹⁴ *Evangelia după Luca, Introducere și comentarii după “La Bible du Peuple de Dieu”, colecția Biblioteca Scripturii, vol. 19, Paris: Le Centurion / Le Cerf, traducere în limba română, București: Arhiepiscopia Romano Catolică București, 2001), p. 142.*

for man's redemption, emphasizing the special role of the blood Sacrifice that Jesus Christ made for the salvation of all people ("*Christ died for our sins*", 1 Cor. 15, 3). Jesus Christ, the God-Man, gave his life as a sacrifice for those who would wish to follow Him on the path of defeating sin and death: "In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (Eph. 1, 7-8). This Sacrifice, constantly remembered by believers, was meant to awaken their souls to understand how strong the heavenly Son's love for them is and what great calling they have been addressed. At the same time, the Sacrifice of the Cross makes them responsible and teaches them how to look at this material world so as to acquire the status of the spiritual man, prepared through love and selflessness, to enter the kingdom of heavens. The intense experience of the personal relationship with God has become and remained a very important spiritual desideratum in Christians' life.¹⁵ Discovering the spiritual intensity which one can reach by orienting one's soul to God, the Christians of the Church could truly abandon both the material goods of this life and their own lives altogether, in order not to be separated from the love of Christ. St. Paul the Apostle provides the "*logic*" of such a thought shared by many Christians throughout the time: "Who shall separate us

¹⁵ St. Gregory the Theologian would meditate on man's call to meet God while still in this world: "Nothing seems greater to me than this: to silence one's senses, to exit the body of the world, to recollect oneself, to no longer indulge oneself in human things, only in the necessary ones; to talk with oneself and with God, to live a life that transcends the visible things; to bring godly, always pure images into the soul, without the interference of the earthly erroneous forms; to truly be a mirroring of God and of the divine things, and to become that even more, taking light of light (...); to receive, through the present hope, the future good, and to talk with the angels; already leaving the earth, though still being on earth, moving higher with your spirit." <https://teofanmada.ro/2017/01/23/sf-grigorie-teologul> (27-12-2019, 14:54).

from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? (...) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8, 35-39).

This sacrificial love for the Saviour has always had a convergent effect on Christians. Their selfless faith has contributed to the spread of the Gospel in the world, through the challenge of defying death, due to the strong spiritual connection which can be established between man and the very God.

4.2 Communion in Christ

What needs to be emphasized with regard to the Christians of the early Church is their fundamental preoccupation for physical and spiritual convergence within the community, for rallying around the specifically revealed treasure of faith by their increasingly close approach to the model of Christian life, which should be Christ the Saviour. This devotion was both spiritual and physical, through their life of religious communion commenced in the Church of Jerusalem, through Christ and with Christ (Acts 2, 42-47). This is the best example of Christian ecclesial community, also manifested, to a certain extent, in other later developed local churches, for "My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2, 2-3). In Jerusalem, the Church was founded on Pentecost, and its members, who gradually joined in, would benefit from the incipient and vibrant flame of the Christian faith. Their souls would fill with a holy fear upon partaking in the wealth of graceful, healing, or illuminating manifestations designed by the Holy Spirit through its Charismatics (Acts 2, 43). Their de-

sire for common Christian living and feeling was nurtured by their permanent encounter with the Triune God, praising the divine providence and continuously and joyously receiving, in their midst, new members called to salvation by the same God (Acts 2, 39, 47).

Their physical and spiritual unity lasted many years, even after the issue of receiving pagans in the Christian faith had divided the view of how they should be received and taught, or whether the requirements of the Law of Moses should be implied or not (Acts 15, 1, 24). The presence of the Pharisees who had become Christians in the Church of Jerusalem did not affect the ecclesial community (at least not until 62 A.D.),¹⁶ even if their vision of supporting the validity of the Law would carry on for several decades, St. Paul the Apostle being the most affected by their interventions in his missionary work (Acts 15, 5; 21, 20-27).

The Christian communities founded later in the world, in various geographical areas, benefited from this model of elevated spiritual experience, so they could practice and develop their own experience of spiritual life in their encounter with Christ the Saviour, an aspect instilled and supported by the founder of those particular communities: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15, 58). This devotion and search for the profound relationship with God was based on two factors:

- the feeling of their divine selection, as some who have that faith which is necessary for salvation, as opposed to the vast majority of pagans, which elicited a devout answer from man (Jn 15, 19; Rom. 16, 13; 1 Cor. 1, 28; Gal. 1, 15; Eph. 1, 3-5);

¹⁶ In that year of the death of the first bishop of Jerusalem, St. Jacob, the Lord's brother, the community divided when the time came to choose a successor. This was due to the group of Judaizing Christian Pharisees, who supported a certain candidate among them, with the clear intention of imposing the Law of Moses onto every Christian: Nicolae I. Nicolaescu *et al.*, *Studiul Noului Testament, pentru Institutetele teologice*, (București: IBMBOR, 1983), p. 270.

- the feeling of the actual spiritual and physical encounter with God; thus, through this devout faith, Christians became “*the temple of the Holy Spirit*”, which would determine an exceptional moral and spiritual attitude (1 Cor. 3, 16-17; 6, 19; “For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” 2 Cor. 6, 16).

4.3 The Apostle – the spiritual father of the community

The Gospel was spread throughout the world by the Apostles and Christian missionaries. For a while, the established communities benefited from the presence of the one who had brought the knowledge of the Truth to them and Christianized them. These communities always wished to remain in contact with their spiritual father who “*gave birth to them into faith*”, so that they could constantly receive clarifications regarding doctrinal or cultic matters (1 Cor. 5, 9; 7, 6, 10) and preserve the bond of love and the special relationship in which they were (Phil. 1, 1-18). Good news would always bring joy to everyone (Col. 1, 3-12), as the pain caused by sufferings, losses or shortcomings was shared by all (Col. 2, 1-2; 2 Tim. 4, 6-20). The unique position of the founding Apostle would spiritually engage him to the Christianized ones. Thus the feeling of love became mutual, but it would also offer him the necessary authority to guide, even to reprimand his spiritual sons, born into faith (1 Cor. 5, 5; Gal. 3, 1). In both cases, Christian convergence towards the same spiritual ideal was working. The Apostle remained himself a factor of unity for his flock (“Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me,” 1 Cor. 4, 16) and an ideal Christian spiritual model: “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Cor. 13, 11).

But what mattered the most in a religious community was the spiritual convergence resulting from the experience of the same faith, rightly and fully known and lived, in Christ the Saviour.¹⁷ This unity was created, kept and valued through love, so “they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2, 2-3). Despite the misunderstandings that sometimes arose within the same church, despite the insufficient doctrinal knowledge and the pagan habits from which some had not yet departed (1 Cor. 5, 11-13; 6, 7-11, 18; Gal. 5, 19-21), the members of each Christian community were still eager to better understand the spiritual reality to which they were called and, at the same time, they understood and accepted the need to right the wrong in their lives. This inner call towards Jesus Christ would bring about their illumination, awakening and spiritual reunion within the same Church. Through the authoritarian counsels of the founding Apostle (1 Cor. 1, 10), the teachings of the priests he ordained (Col. 1, 7; Tim. 1, 3-4), or the teaching of the Charismatics gifted with the “*word of wisdom and knowledge*” (1 Cor. 12, 8), or even through the prophets of the community called by God to transmit His word (1 Cor. 14, 3, 5-6, 39), the local communities turned to a better understanding of the Christian faith, to a genuine doctrinal unity (Gal. 6, 16; 1 Cor. 1, 10; Col. 2, 2), felt and lived vibrantly in the reverberations of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle would forever remain in the heart of the community as the sublime example of man in full communion with God, the best knowledge keeper and experiencer of His Mysteries, always selflessly ready for complete union with Christ (Acts 21, 13), but also loving and selfless for his sons born into faith (1 Cor. 16, 24).

¹⁷ Florin Vârlan, Jesus Christ, our teacher and our guide, *ICOANA CREDINTEI. International Journal of Interdisciplinary Scientific Research*, 4 (2016), p. 22, (pp. 21-26).

Forced to travel to other places for evangelization, the Apostles and the missionaries had to find a solution to maintain the connection with those they shepherded. The epistolary method proved to be the best solution to make up for the absence of the founding Apostle in a community (2 Cor. 13, 10; Col. 4, 16; 1 Thess. 5, 27) that always perceived him as a true spiritual father who had given birth to them into faith: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved" (1 Cor. 15, 1). Therefore, the epistles with questions or answers travelled great distances in order to maintain the necessary Christian spiritual and informative contact. But one does not find only information, advice and answers in the epistles; there is also a deep feeling of love and redeeming spiritual concern on both sides. This points to the Christian intention to overcome the physical space in order to unite all Christians in a concrete, divine and sublime love, which gives strength and meaning in the fight against sin (Col. 4, 10-18; Phil. 4, 21-22; Rom. 16, 3-23).

4.4 One Church in Heaven and on Earth

From Palestine, the Church spread all over the world. But the Apostles and its missionaries were constantly aware that every community they established developed a powerful and authentic relationship with Christ the Saviour. All these communities are real "*Churches*", possessing the fullness of the teachings, grace and guidance capacity to lead the believers on the path to salvation. They all form the Body of Christ and each of them is a part of this Body, according to the model of the human body (1 Cor. 12, 12-27). However, there is no difference among them regarding the redeeming work they are experiencing, as all of them are called to be a part of the same Body, each contributing in his or her own way, with his or her own role, to Its prosperity. Through the divine will, the Trinitarian Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are present in the Church, carrying out their redeeming work, whereas the Christians partake in

this divine-human communion. The Church of Christ exercises the same redeeming and sanctifying work over man, regardless of where it physically functions (1 Cor. 16, 19-20).

The proof of this superior conscience is to be found in communities' prayers for the Christian brethren from other lands (I Pet. 5, 13-14), whom they do not know, but with whom they feel united on the basis of the same faith and feeling of union with the same Lord Jesus Christ. Their spiritual convergence is also proven by the organization of delegations (1 Cor. 16, 3) which bare the signs of reverence and of pure Christian love for their unknown brothers and sisters from far away (2 Cor. 8, 1-15). These signs are the offertories collected with ardor, in a desire to express Christian gratitude and love, but most of all because they had learned to cherish the spiritual aspects resulting from such a sacrifice: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake, He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8, 9). Therefore, the Churches would salute each other, embrace and pray for one another (Col. 4, 10-18; Phil. 4, 21-22; Rom. 16, 3-23).

4.5 The Prayer

What actually unifies the Church of Christ and entails the effect of convergence is, nevertheless, the prayer of the believer, practiced in a group, but also individually, during the liturgical time (Acts 2, 46; 20, 7) or required by urgent needs (Acts 4, 24-30). It is the clear expression of the thirst for spirituality and the sign (and also the mechanism) of the love of God and one's own kind (Acts 4, 32; 1 Cor. 1, 4-6; I Thess. 5, 17; "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints" Eph. 6, 18).

But the Christian prayer was not focused on or limited to the members of the same community; it was recommended to be much more comprehensive and also address the pagans who had not yet come to believe, including prominent personalities

of the society, such as the emperor or the local governors (1 Tim. 2, 1-3). The prayer of the Church aims to encompass the entire issue of the human existence, sometimes focusing on common or individual goals (1 Thess. 5, 25; Eph. 6, 18-19), other times seeking to unify heaven and earth in the desire to forgive all people's sins and draw the divine grace upon all (Acts 4, 24-30; 16, 25; 20, 36). The prayer of the Church will always be the expression of the love of the members of the Christian community, poured on all people¹⁸ with generosity so as to create the Likeness of God in all human beings (Rom. 1, 8; 6, 17; 7, 25; 1 Cor. 1, 4; 2 Cor. 2, 14).

5 Extreme Solutions

The pastoral concerns of the Apostles also included a lot of attention paid to the unity of faith of the members of the Church, as ones who, knowing the path of the redeeming Truth, would draw upon them temptations meant to divert them, doctrinally and morally, from that path: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor. 1, 10). The presence of evil in the world was understood as an acknowledged fact, a consequence of the work of the devil, of the one who opposes the salvation of men (Jn 8, 44). This should be understood correctly and turned in favor of the people, challenged to gain their own place in heaven through spiritual effort: "Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine" (1 Cor. 11, 19).

¹⁸ Luminița Heliana Munteanu *et al.*, Art and moral values - a pedagogical approach through the hexadic model, *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 83 (2013), p. 438.

People's weaknesses, however, led to an inconsistent reception of the redeeming teaching (Acts 20, 30), reinterpreting the teachings (Gal. 2, 4, 11-14; Acts 15, 1-5), or even denying them due to one's own refusal of human transformation from the earthly into the spiritual man (1 Cor. 2, 13-15), truly the only one able to properly relate to God in a continuous spiritual ascension. This should be the man that Christ the Saviour desires and expects in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The issue of the Christian's not transforming from the earthy being into the spiritual one is inherent to and typical of man, who needs to face the hardest obstacle, self-knowledge and overcoming one's own weaknesses¹⁹, keeping a beautiful balance between the heart and the mind, through one's tireless desire for sanctification in the Holy Spirit. This struggle is constant and specific to Christianity but, unfortunately, too little acknowledged and impropriated, which made many people act rather physically than spiritually. Thus, the internal struggles, the attempt to impose one's own opinions and authority by force led to apostasies, heresies, rupture of the unity of the Church (1 Tim. 1, 20).

The Apostles' reaction and later that of the bishops succeeding them as leaders of communities soon came (Tit. 1, 13; 2, 15). The first correction made with a "*strong hand*" is that of the Apostle Peter, in the case of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who had tried to lie to the Christian community of Jerusalem about the depth of their faith and of their spiritual transformation (Acts 5, 1-10). Other corrections of conduct of the members of

¹⁹ Origen, *Omili la cartea Iosua*, 1, 7, (Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești, vol. 6, București: IBMBOR, 1981), p. 237: "Of course this earth, which is ours, the one too much filled with wars and fights, this earth will not be without any wars except through the work of the Lord Jesus. Among us there are many sinful peoples, who begin to dominate our souls without any warning. Inside us there are these Canaanites, among us there are the Perizzites, here are the Jebusites, how much work, attention and patience we need, in order to remove all these vicious peoples from us, so that at last our earth should be without any wars."

the same Church are to be encountered in the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, especially in the case of those Corinthian Christians who would appeal to courthouses (1 Cor. 6, 1-8).

The authority of an Apostle resides in the personal connection he has with Christ the Saviour through the Holy Spirit due to the fact that the assumed mission is the fulfillment of a godly command (1 Tim. 1, 1). That is precisely why he can transmit what God commands (1 Cor. 7, 10, 25), but can also give advice, as one who benefits from the communion with the Spirit (1 Cor. 7, 6, 12, 25, 40). In this position, Paul may command whenever he considers that certain things can be corrected through the weight of his words and the believers' obedience (1 Tim. 1, 18; 4, 11; 5, 7; 6, 2, 17; 1 Cor. 14, 37). At the same time, he also knows how to be forgiving when his tolerance is not interpreted as a weakness (2 Cor. 2, 10).

The radical measure which an Apostle can apply is the *anathema*, a Jewish means of excommunicating a person from a spiritual community, thus declaring him or her "*forsaken, cursed*" before God²⁰. Paul, the Apostle, has enough spiritual power and authority to apply the excommunication when necessary (1 Cor. 5, 3-13; Gal. 1, 8-9), solemnly declaring: "Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord!" (1 Cor. 16, 22).

Therefore anathema, the banishment from God, meant the exclusion of a certain person from the community of the Body of Christ, which inevitably led to damnation in the kingdom of Satan, as was the case of Hymenaeus, Alexander (1 Tim. 1, 20) and Fillet (2 Tim. 2, 17). Just like Elymas of Cyprus (Acts 13, 8), they were full of "*all the wickedness and deception*," sons of the devil, enemies of justice, never ceasing to "*twist the rightful ways of the Lord*" (Acts 13, 10).

²⁰ Ioan Mircea, *Dicționar al Noului Testament*, (București: IBMBOR, 1995), p. 33.

“A church discipline was imposed from the very the beginning, and it served to preserve the moral level of communities. Unlike the synagogue, though, the Church did not apply physical punishments, but spiritual, moral ones.”²¹

It should be noted that the circumstances in which Paul the Apostle would make use of such an extreme measure were only those provoked by unbelief or apostasy because the very perpetration of some sins would already exclude the Christians from their personal connection with God, as they were a part of the Body of Christ. Renouncing faith was renouncing grace (Gal. 5, 4), which broke the redeeming bond, and the unpunished bad example would proliferate (Gal. 5, 9).

Excommunication would not be applied for the exclusion of sinners from the Church, but only of those who refused the communion with the Spirit and the expiatory force of repentance or who declared themselves enemies of the Saviour. “If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal” (1 Jn 5, 16-17).

The heretics that emerged within the Christian communities had to be firmly excluded to avoid the spread of doubt (Tit. 3, 10-11). With his visionary power, the Apostle Paul would emphasize the way in which the apostasy from Christ the Saviour was to happen: “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will

²¹ Ioan Rămureanu, Milan Şesan, Teodor Bodogae, *Istoria Bisericească Universală*, (Ediția a III-a, București: IBMBOR, 1987), p. 97.

turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4, 2-4).

6 Conclusions

The modern man has now an extraordinary possibility of communication and information, which is both a great advantage and a great challenge of reaching everyone and everything, for it leads to dissipation. The epistolary communication of the past is today replaced by direct communication, often available worldwide. Ideas can spread over wide areas, but mystification can cause negative effects that are much larger than were once. The entire human tendency towards evil can propagate now at a greater speed and with consequences that are hard to face.

The so very fractured Christian world, as it is today, needs to relearn as quickly as possible what unity in diversity means, in order to prove its awareness regarding the fundamental commandment of Christ the Saviour, the love of one's kind. We must understand that God Himself loves all people and grants them life, whereas the religious dialogue of those who claim themselves as heirs of the revealed Word represents the basic request of love and faith in the Only Good, which can give meaning to the world we live in.

Our Christian faith should prove the power of love and life in the intense light of the Holy Spirit, to overcome the partisanship of what some consider to be defining to them. The separatist and isolationist attitude, based on the feeling of security provided by the thought of possessing the redeeming truth, will only do disservices to the unity and prosperity of Christ's Church, in a world which is increasingly sinking into relativism and consumerism.