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INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL SCHOOL
DOCTORAL FIELD OF THEOLOGY**



**Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis
THE EUCHARISTIC ECCLESIOLOGY
IN THE THOUGHT OF THEOLOGIANS
NIKOLAI AFANASIEV
AND JEAN-MARIE ROGER TILLARD
AND CRITICAL EVALUATION FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF FATHER DUMITRU STĂNILOAE**

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**ARAD
2025**

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Abstract of the thesis

1. Context – The issue under investigation

The 20th century produced a shift in ecclesiology comparable to the great dogmatic clarifications of the Ecumenical Councils. What Christians of the early centuries experienced as obvious—the organic link between the celebration of the Eucharist and the birth of the ecclesial community—had been gradually overshadowed by successive historical stratifications. Medieval Western theology, mobilized in developing a precise vocabulary to express transubstantiation in the face of heterodox challenges, unwittingly operated a separation between the teaching on the Eucharist and that on the Church. The Mystery became an object of logical analysis, and ecclesiology became progressively juridical under the pressure of conflicts with civil power. This process, clearly observed by Henri de Lubac in his famous *Corpus Mysticum*, paradoxically reversed the terminology itself: the expression “corpus mysticum”, which in the patristic era referred to the Eucharist itself, migrated to the Church, while “corpus verum” passed from the ecclesial assembly to the sacramental Body. The reversal was not merely semantic but indicated a profound transformation in the very perception of the relationship between the two realities.

At the same time, Eastern theology was undergoing its own crisis, which Georges Florovsky would call “pseudomorphosis” or “Western captivity”. The external form of patristic vocabulary

survived in the dogmatic manuals of the 17th-19th centuries, but its original content had been replaced by conceptual schemes imported from Latin scholasticism. Macarius Bulgakov, whose treatises shaped generations of Russian and Romanian theologians, approached the Church in the chapter on Salvation as a society in which redemption is achieved, with the Eucharist appearing much later, among the means of grace. The scheme was, in fact, foreign to the Eastern liturgical spirit, for which the epiclesis pronounced “upon us and upon these Gifts” unites into a single transformative act the consecration of bread and wine and the constitution of the people as the ecclesial Body of Christ.

The collapse of the old world after 1917 forced Orthodox thinking to reexamine its foundations. Russian emigration, spread across the West, faced an unprecedented situation: parallel and conflicting jurisdictions, isolated and demoralized communities, a fragmented Church seeking its identity outside the structures that had defined it for centuries. The Saint-Serge Institute in Paris became the laboratory where this search took theological shape. There, in the tension between nostalgia for a Russia that no longer existed and the challenge of Western modernity, the question that would animate the entire contemporary ecclesial reflection emerged: **What is the Church, in essence?** Not what structures organize it, not what dogmatic formulas define it, but **what makes it exist as a living reality, present in history?**

The answer articulated gradually by the theologians at *Saint-Serge* looked precisely at what had been forgotten: the Liturgy, the Eucharistic assembly, the moment when the people gather around the Holy Chalice. Here, in the sacramental act itself and not in the administrative structures that surround it, lies the constitutive principle of the Church. Nikolai Afanasiev's condensed formula – “where the Eucharist is, there is the Church” – was not a simple academic thesis, but the answer to the existential drama of the Diaspora: the assembly that celebrates the Eucharist is not a filial branch lacking in plenitude, but the integral manifestation of the Body of Christ.

Almost simultaneously, a renewal movement was taking place in the Catholic world that would prepare the way for the reforms of Vatican II. Romano Guardini inaugurated at Maria Laach a new liturgical sensibility: the Liturgy ceased to be one of the Church's activities and became the permanent actualization of its nature. Odo Casel deepened this intuition through the theology of mystery, showing that in sacramental celebration we do not have a simple psychological commemoration, but a real participation in the unique Paschal mystery. Theologians of the “ressourcement” movement - De Lubac, Daniélou, Congar - rediscovered in the Greek Fathers an ecclesial understanding that had never been expressly formulated, precisely because it was lived as self-evident in liturgical practice. What scholasticism had separated into distinct chapters, patristics had kept united in the doxological experience.

This convergence between seemingly independent renewal movements - liturgical in the German Benedictine space, patristic in ressourcement circles, Eucharistic in the Russian Diaspora - cannot be explained solely by mutual intellectual influences. It points to a deeper work of the Holy Spirit who, at critical moments in history, brings temporarily hidden truths back to the surface of ecclesial consciousness. The rediscovery of the Eucharistic dimension of the Church in the 20th century belongs to this category of providential clarifications, which, without adding anything to the treasury of Revelation, elucidate aspects that had remained in the shadows.

The present study arose from the observation of this convergence, as well as from the persistent tension between theological theory and ecclesial practice. In every Divine Liturgy, we profess the Church to be “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”, but our daily experience confronts us with confessional fragmentation and the impossibility of shared communion. The Eucharist, meant to be the supreme manifestation of unity in Christ, paradoxically became a sign of our separation. This theological scandal, recognized as such by contemporary Orthodox thought, calls not only for pious lamentations but also for conceptual clarifications that open the way to overcoming it.

The central issue addressed by our study concerns precisely the understanding of how the Eucharist and the Church relate to each other. This is not a marginal question, but rather the key to understanding the ecclesial being. The answer we give to this

question determines how we conceive the relationship between the local and the universal, between hierarchical primacy and conciliar synodality, between dogmatic unity and the legitimate diversity of particular traditions. The tensions that have fractured Christianity over the centuries often have their roots in different understandings of this fundamental relationship.

2. The goal and the main question

The work seeks to clarify whether the ecclesial systems developed by two major theologians of the 20th century - the Orthodox Nikolai Afanasiev and the Catholic Jean-Marie Roger Tillard - reveal an inner consonance that could be exploited ecumenically, without falling into superficial irenicism or forced harmonization. This question is not purely speculative. If it can be demonstrated that the rediscovery of the Eucharistic nature of the Church transcends confessional boundaries, then the Eucharistic understanding of ecclesial being offers not only common ground for conversation but a real theological basis for rapprochement between traditions.

The answer to this question requires an evaluative grid that does not belong exclusively to one of the examined traditions. This is where Father Dumitru Stăniloae's central role in the architecture of the approach comes into play. The Romanian theologian's thinking does not function as a simple third point of view added to the other two, but as a hermeneutical instance, capable of identifying both the

areas of authentic closeness and the structural limits of the constructs examined. This capacity derives from the specificity of his synthesis, which combines the depth of patristic anchoring with openness to contemporary issues, dogmatic rigor with spiritual sensitivity, fidelity to Tradition with creativity in reformulating it for the present.

However, the aim of the research is not limited to noting similarities or differences. It seeks to articulate an integrative perspective that values the lasting contributions of the two theologians, while also correcting their inevitable unilateralities. This synthesis does not seek to produce a new ecclesial teaching, as if existing traditions were insufficient, but rather to identify how valuable insights developed in different confessional contexts can enrich one another in the service of the unity that Christ Himself demanded of His disciples.

The main question can be formulated as follows: in what measure does the similarity between Afanasiev's and Tillard's thinking indicate the rediscovery of fundamental ecclesial realities common to Christianity before the great schisms, and how can Father Stăniloae's synthesis facilitate the integration of these insights into a perspective capable of responding to current ecumenical challenges?

3. Objectives and hypothesis

The approach operates with a central hypothesis: although belonging to distinct confessional contexts and bearing specific theological accents, the ecclesiological constructs developed by

Nikolai Afanasiev and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard reveal a fundamental similarity that, when evaluated through Father Dumitru Stăniloae's thinking, yields the elements of an integrative perspective. This perspective is not merely an academic construct, but possesses the real capacity to respond to current ecumenical challenges and to renew the understanding of the unity of the Church.

Verifying this hypothesis requires achieving several complementary objectives. The first concerns the contextual reconstruction of the ecclesial systems studied. Any theology bears the mark of the circumstances in which it was born, and ignoring this fact leads to outdated or distorted interpretations. Afanasiev developed his Eucharistic understanding of the Church in the atmosphere of the Saint-Serge Institute, where Russian exile met Western intellectual effervescence. The painful experience of jurisdictional fragmentation - with communities belonging to the same tradition excommunicating each other - catalyzed the search for an ecclesial principle that would transcend canonical disputes. Tillard develops his theology in the context of conciliar renewal and direct participation in multilateral and bilateral ecumenical dialogues. The experience of these dialogues made him realize that visible unity requires not only diplomatic adjustments, but a radical rethinking of how we conceptualize the relationship between ecclesial identity and otherness. Father Stăniloae crossed perhaps the most dramatic context: communist persecution with imprisonment and marginalization, followed by a gradual reopening to dialogue. The

translation of the *Philokalia* during the darkest years of the totalitarian regime becomes an act of spiritual resistance and, at the same time, the discovery of a tradition that transcends confessional boundaries.

The second objective is to systematically analyze the thought structures of the two theologians. It is not enough to list themes and concepts; we must identify the perspective that organizes the entire construct, giving it internal coherence. In Afanasiev, this perspective is articulated around a decisive ontological shift: the transition from the category of possession to that of being in relation to the Eucharist. The Church does not “have” the Eucharist as one of its attributes; it “is” in and through the Eucharist. This understanding restructures the entire ecclesial thought, transforming the local assembly from part of an administrative whole into the full manifestation of the Body of Christ. For Tillard, the concept of *koinonia* serves as an organizing principle, enabling him to overcome the false oppositions between the local and the universal, and between unity and diversity. The formula “Church of Churches” does not designate a federation or a confederation, but rather a reality in which unity and plurality constitute one another, following the perichoretic model of Trinitarian communion.

The third objective is to develop theological criteria for evaluating contemporary ecclesiologies. These criteria are not imposed from outside, but derive from Father Stăniloae's synthesis and from the living Tradition of the Church that he actualizes. A solid

Trinitarian foundation constitutes the first such criterion: ecclesial thinking that does not root the reality of the Church in the life of the Holy Trinity remains superficial, no matter how ingenious its conceptual constructions may be. The Christological-pneumatological equilibrium forms the second criterion: both the absolutization of the Christological dimension (which transforms the Church into a mere extension of the Incarnation) and that of the pneumatological dimension (which dissolves it into charismatic spontaneity) betray the complexity of the ecclesial mystery. The integration of the ascetic dimension into the sacramental perspective constitutes the third criterion: an exclusively Eucharistic thinking that ignores inner preparation and personal effort in sanctification risks external sacramentalism. Creative fidelity to Tradition and eschatological consciousness complete this evaluative grid.

The fourth objective, methodological and transversal, aims to demonstrate that Romanian Orthodox theology, especially through the contribution of Father Stăniloae, offers an integral synthesis that transcends the unilateralities identified in the ecclesiologies examined. The concept of “open sobornicity” appears here as a paradigm capable of harmonizing the local-universal tension, simultaneously affirming autonomy and interdependence, unity and diversity in the life of the Church, without sacrificing one to the other.

4. Methodology

The methodological challenge of the study is to articulate perspectives born in radically different confessional contexts into a coherent theological conversation. It is not enough to juxtapose three parallel discourses - we must make them engage in authentic dialogue, preserving the specificity of each, but discovering the planes on which they meet.

The first methodological level is **contextual analysis**. Vladimir Lossky observed that “to distinguish does not always mean to separate or to oppose”. This remark guides our reconstruction of the historical framework of each theology. We are not looking for sociological determinism that exhaustively explains the emergence of ideas, but rather for how historical pressure becomes a catalyst for transformative theological insights. For all three theologians studied, the difficult context generates not defensive withdrawal, but creative openness. Afanasiev discovers in the jurisdictional crisis the key to Eucharistic ecclesiality - precisely because canonical structures had failed, he seeks the constitutive principle of the Church beyond them. Tillard transforms the ecumenical impasse into an opportunity to understand the Church centered on communion - precisely because conventional approaches were not producing results, he rethinks the very category of ecclesial unity. Father Stăniloae converts forced isolation into contemplative deepening that opens up to universality - precisely because he could not participate in international dialogues,

he elaborates a synthesis that anticipates the problems they will address.

The second methodological level consists of the **structural analysis** of theological systems. Georges Florovsky warned that “the first problem the contemporary theologian must struggle with is that of perspective”. This remark guides our effort to identify, beyond the thematic surface, the organizing principle of each thought. For Afanasiev, the distinction between what he calls “Eucharistic ecclesiology” and “universalist ecclesiology” is not merely an academic classification, but engages the entire understanding of the Church’s being. The former sees in every Eucharistic assembly the full manifestation of ecclesial reality, while the latter conceives of the Church as a single organism of which local communities are subordinate parts. For Tillard, the concept of *koinonia* serves as a hermeneutical key to the entire construct: communion is not an attribute of the Church but its very way of being. The Church is communion among people because it participates in the Trinitarian communion that constitutes the life of God Himself. For Father Stăniloae, the dogmatic, spiritual, and liturgical dimensions work together organically in a progression that is not only logical but also mystagogical: it starts from the revelation and knowledge of the Holy Trinity, passes through the Incarnation and the soteriological work of Christ, and culminates in the deification of man in the Church.

The third level is **comparative hermeneutics**. Paul Ricoeur outlined a form of “hermeneutic empathy” - not in the psychological

sense, but as a willingness to enter into the horizon of meaning of the other in order to understand them first in their own terms, before evaluating them from one's own perspective. This approach is applied through a double movement: first, an empathetic approach to capture the internal coherence of each construction; second, critical distancing, to identify real convergences and difficulties. When Afanasiev asserts that there is no such thing as a universal Church, and Tillard speaks of it as present in every local Church, we do not necessarily have a contradiction. For the Russian theologian, “universal” means an administrative abstraction that ignores Eucharistic concreteness. For the Dominican, the term designates the mystery of communion that transcends and grounds the local. Both reject the pyramidal model in which the local derives from the universal through fragmentation, but they articulate the alternative in different registers. Our hermeneutics seeks to discover the complementarity of these seemingly opposite perspectives, distinguishing between terminological differences (when similar realities are expressed by different terms), differences in emphasis (which are not necessarily contradictory), and real divergences that seem irreducible.

The fourth methodological level consists of **critical evaluation** using criteria derived from Father Stăniloae's thinking. These criteria are not applied mechanically, as an external grid imposed on the systems examined, but function as hermeneutical principles that allow us to identify how each theologian contributes to the

understanding of the Mystery of the Church: Trinitarian anchoring, Christological-pneumatological equilibrium, integration of the liturgical and the ascetic, creative fidelity to Tradition. The capacity of each ecclesiological construction to satisfy these requirements is thus evaluated, identifying both its lasting contributions and its structural limitations.

The sources for this approach primarily include the published texts of the three authors. For Afanasiev, the fundamental work remains *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, published posthumously in 1971, supplemented by articles and studies developed over four decades of theological activity. We draw on recent translations that have made his body of work accessible to English- and French-speaking audiences, as well as on collective volumes published in Russia that bring together texts previously inaccessible. For Tillard, we analyze his ecclesial trilogy - *L'Eucharistie, Pâque de l'Église, Église d'Églises*, and *L'Église locale* - as well as his numerous studies dedicated to primacy, synodality, and Catholic-Orthodox dialogue. For Father Stăniloae, we have used *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)* in its three volumes, supplemented by ecclesial and ecumenical studies from Romanian theological journals and other works on spirituality.

5. The structure of the thesis

The argumentative course of the study follows an ascending and integrative logic, starting from scriptural and patristic foundations,

passing through a critical analysis of contemporary systems, and culminating in the evaluative synthesis offered by Father Stăniloae's perspective.

The first chapter establishes the anchoring of the entire approach in the biblical and patristic foundations of the Church's Eucharistic understanding. The exegesis on *1 Corinthians* 10:16-17 shows the semantic complexity of the term *koinonia*, which means both communion with the Body and Blood of Christ and ontological participation in Christ's reality. The believer not only receives something from Christ but also enters into a relationship of being with Him. The Pauline formula “the many” (*hoi polloi*) articulates the Eucharistic paradox: the diversity of the members discovers, in their participation in the one Bread, the source of a cohesion that does not cancel out their particularities but transfigures them into organic unity. The chapter then traces the patristic development of this intuition. St. Ignatius of Antioch first formulates the constitutive link between the presence of the bishop and ecclesial reality, but his statement must be understood sacramentally, not administratively: the bishop makes the presence of Christ visible precisely by presiding over the Eucharistic synaxis. Saint Irenaeus of Lyon demonstrates that Eucharistic realism serves as an argument against Gnostic dualism, and Saint Cyprian of Carthage explores its implications for concrete ecclesial structures. The Byzantine syntheses of St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Nicholas Cabasilas see in the Holy

Liturgy the continuous actualization of the entire economy of salvation.

The second chapter analyzes the ecclesial thought of Protopresbyter Nikolai Afanasiev. The condensed formula - “where the Eucharistic assembly is, there Christ dwells, and there is the Church of God in Christ” - recovers the original patristic meaning of the term ἐκκλησία, different from the administrative-legal meaning it acquired in later developments. The Eucharistic assembly (*evkharističeskoe sobranie*) is not part of a larger reality, but the full manifestation of the Church wherever the people gather legitimately for the Holy Liturgy. The chapter then examines the Russian theologian's criticism of the juridical-hierarchical model. The ontological mutation brought about by the Constantinian transformation replaced the principles of the Kingdom of God with those of the earthly empire. Roman law penetrated the ecclesial structure, creating a state estranged from Grace. The bishop became a territorial administrator, priests became officials with delegated jurisdiction, believers became canonical subjects, and the Eucharist became a religious service offered by the institution. The profound incompatibility between grace and law is the cornerstone of Afanasiev's argument: grace creates freedom and personal communion, law establishes constraint and functional roles. The chapter concludes with an analysis of his proposal regarding primacy: St. Ignatius' formula about Rome, “the one who presides in love”

(προκαθήμενη τῆς ἀγάπης), opens up the perspective of an authority that presides not through jurisdiction but through witness.

Chapter Three presents Jean-Marie Roger Tillard's ecclesial understanding, centered on communion. The formula “Church of Churches” goes beyond the federative or confederative interpretation to express a reality in which unity and multiplicity coexist constitutively. The Church is, in its essence, communion - and this has its roots in the very life of the Trinity, participating in the eternal reality of the mystery of God. The communion of the Persons of the Holy Trinity not only provides an example to be imitated, but is the source, origin, and place where fraternal communion among believers and among Churches is founded. Catholicity receives a substantial redefinition in Tillard's thinking: the assembly becomes *catholic* precisely through its local character. In each local Church, seemingly contradictory elements converge, and it is precisely this harmonization that actualizes fullness. It is not geographical extension that makes a Church *catholic*, but the fact that it contains the entirety of the gifts of salvation. The chapter then analyzes the concept of ecclesial perichoresis, through which the Dominican transposes the Trinitarian dynamic into the life of the Church: just as in the Holy Trinity each Person possesses the divine being in its entirety, so each local Church possesses the ecclesial nature in its entirety. The perichoretic model leads to a dynamic understanding of episcopal authority: the faith that the bishop preserves is in him the

faith of the local Church, in communion with all the Churches throughout history.

In the **fourth chapter**, we analyze the two ecclesial systems comparatively, highlighting their similarities and differences. The major point of agreement is the refusal to treat the Eucharist as one of the Church's sacraments. Both theologians recognize it as the reality that generates ecclesial existence itself, transforming Henri de Lubac's intuition about the sacramental reciprocity between the Church and the Eucharist into a basic hermeneutical principle. Afanasiev introduces the concept of “Eucharistic assembly” to recover the original meaning of the term ἐκκλησία, while Tillard traces how the people not only perform the Eucharist, but become the very reality they celebrate. The divergences regarding primacy reflect big confessional differences. For the Russian theologian, any form of legal primacy represents a betrayal of the original Eucharistic ideal. The priority in love, which he attributes to Rome in the first millennium, designates the capacity of a local Church to offer a particularly clear witness, which the other Churches remain free to accept or reject. Tillard undertakes a more subtle operation, separating the historical layers in order to rediscover the authentic essence: the distinction between the seat (*sedes*) and its occupant (*sedens*) allows us to affirm that the authority of the bishop of Rome derives from the unique ecclesial significance of the Church he shepherds, founded martyrologically by the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Chapter Five presents the ecclesial thought of Father Dumitru Stăniloae, whose synthesis provides the evaluative criteria for the systems examined above. For the Romanian Orthodox theologian, the Church is not a human association, but the living icon of the Holy Trinity in the history of salvation. *Sobornicity* represents the way in which the Church actualizes the Trinitarian life in its own existence - not through the simple sum of its parts or through administrative centralization, but as a reality in which each local assembly carries within itself the whole Church without losing its specificity. This “unity of communion” differs both from the uniformity imposed from the center and from federalist fragmentation. The concept of “open sobornicity” expresses the awareness that dogmatic formulations, however precise they may be, do not exhaust revealed truth. The spirit of sobornicity presupposes legitimate pluralism: the recognition that the same truth can be lived and expressed in different registers, and openness to those who do not possess the same broad theological understanding. Tradition is a living reality, filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, who constantly actualizes the treasure of revelation without altering its essence. In this light, the dogmatic system is permanently open to the life, spirituality, and experience of the Church.

Chapter Six evaluates the constructs of Afanasiev and Tillard through the lens of Father Stăniloae's theological thought. The absence of a robust theological anthropology appears to be a major common deficit. In Afanasiev, Trinitarian references appear

sporadically and lack systematic development. His analogy- just as each divine Person contains the fullness of being, so each local Church contains the fullness of the Church - remains external, lacking development of how Trinitarian life effectively grounds ecclesial communion. Tillard shows a more acute awareness of the need for this foundation, but the concrete ecclesial application remains insufficient. The exclusive focus on the sacramental moment ignores the complexity of spiritual life. Concerned with the communal dimension of the Eucharist, Afanasiev does not develop the theme of inner preparation through which the believer becomes capable of cooperating with Grace. The Philocalic tradition of the “spiritual senses”, the ascetic discipline through which the soul progressively opens itself to divine realities, finds no place in his system. The absence of an eschatological perspective is another significant limitation. In Father Stăniloae's thinking, the Church functions as a pledge of the Kingdom, which already contains the future reality, but does not exhaust it. This tension between sacramental presence and the expectation of the Parousia shapes the entire ecclesial existence. The concept of *homo eucharisticus* proposed by the Romanian theologian offers an integrative alternative: man does not become a priest of creation through ritual gestures, but by entering himself, as a living sacrifice, into the Eucharistic dynamic.

6. Original results and contributions

The study validates the central thesis: the ecclesial systems developed by Nikolai Afanasiev and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, although elaborated in distinct confessional environments, reveal a significant inner closeness. Evaluated through the lens of Father Dumitru Stăniloae's theological synthesis, this convergence enables the articulation of an integrated perspective on the Church continually born from the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. This closeness attests to the rediscovery of a primary ecclesial reality that has remained alive in the heart of Tradition but has been progressively obscured by legal and institutional sedimentation. The independent encounter of a Russian Orthodox theologian from the Diaspora with a post-conciliar Catholic theologian, both grounded in the same constitutive intuition, signals a work of the Holy Spirit that brings ecclesial consciousness back to its sources.

The distinctive contribution of this approach lies in the systematic comparison between the two theologians who, although extensively studied individually, have not yet been confronted in such an analysis. The identification of consonances and divergences, of internal tensions within each system and of complementarities between them allows for a mature critical interpretation. The analysis revealed four major areas of contact that transform the parameters of contemporary theological debate. The first and most radical concerns the ontological status of the Eucharist in the constitution of the Church: both theologians go beyond traditional sacramental

functionalism, refusing to treat the Eucharist as one of the Sacraments of the Church. For them, it represents the very source from which ecclesial reality springs. The second convergence reveals the ontological fullness of the local Church: the recovery of the patristic distinction between καθολικός (qualitative fullness) and οἰκουμένη (geographical extension) allows us to move beyond the local-versus-universal opposition. The fact that this rediscovery occurs simultaneously in an Orthodox and a Catholic system demonstrates the non-conjunctural nature of the intuition. The third point of convergence concerns the reconceptualization of episcopal authority: both theologians go beyond both clericalization and democratization, proposing an understanding of episcopal ministry based on Eucharistic presiding. Criticism of legal models in favor of *koinonia* constitutes the fourth area of contact: the diagnosis that both formulate on the transformation of the Church into *societas perfecta* considers a deviation from its sacramental nature, beyond correctable administrative excesses.

The approach demonstrates that evaluating Eucharistic thoughts about the Church necessarily presupposes an anthropological foundation. Created in the image of the Holy Trinity and called to communion through participation in the divine life, the human person ontologically mediates the relationship between particularity and catholicity. Without understanding the person as an intrinsically communal being, who does not pre-exist the relationship in order to subsequently enter into communion, but is constituted precisely

through and in relationship, the tension between the local and the universal remains an unsolvable aporia at the theoretical level and a permanent source of conflict at the practical level. Modern individualism, which conceives of the person as autonomous and self-sufficient, inevitably generates ecclesial congregationalism. At the opposite extreme, anthropological collectivism produces depersonalizing institutionalism. The personalist perspective simultaneously avoids these traps by recognizing that the uniqueness of each person and their vocation to communion are not opposing realities, but two inseparable aspects of the same ontology.

The articulation of open sobornicity as an integrative paradigm is a unique contribution of the study. The concept proposed by Father Stăniloae overcomes the unresolved aporias of the systems examined, revealing the authentic mode of ecclesial existence, founded on the Trinity and actualized pneumatically. The ontological simultaneity of the local and universal dimensions - neither temporal succession nor part-whole relationship - thus becomes intelligible. Each Eucharistic assembly possesses ecclesial fullness precisely through its openness to all other communities and to the integral conciliar truth, not through isolation or autonomy. The divine perichoresis provides the original ontological model that functions as the real basis for the possibility of ecclesial communion, not as an analogy or external imitation. Father Stăniloae shows that the Trinitarian communion is not a moral ideal or an abstract model of perfection, but the ontological reality in which the Church effectively participates

through grace. The distinction becomes decisive: we do not imitate the Holy Trinity, but we participate in Its life through the uncreated energies.

The study proposes a dynamic complementarity instead of a premature synthesis. Recognizing that the tension between local autonomy and the demands of universal communion reflects a constitutive polarity of ecclesial life rather than a problem awaiting a definitive solution allows us to embrace complexity without capitulating to relativism or syncretism. It does not offer simple recipes for the divisions of the Churches, but rather reorients the questions asked. The transition from “who has authority?” to “where is the Church manifested?” and from “how are structures legitimized?” to “how do they serve Eucharistic communion?” reconfigures practical difficulties within a theological horizon that is more faithful to the apostolic Tradition and more open to the renewal brought by the Holy Spirit.

The organic integration of the ascetic dimension into the Eucharistic understanding represents a corrective contribution to the systems examined. Unceasing prayer and hesychastic experience do not oppose communal liturgical participation, but prepare for and extend it. The inner liturgy and the Eucharistic liturgy form a single breath of life in Christ. This perspective corrects both the external sacramentalism that marginalizes asceticism and the individualistic spiritualism that relativizes the Eucharist. The ultimate goal –

deification - unites all dimensions of ecclesial existence: dogmatic, liturgical, ascetic, and missionary.

7. General conclusions

The study confirms that the ecclesial systems developed by Nikolai Afanasiev and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, although elaborated in distinct confessional contexts, reveal an inner consonance that can be integrated into a comprehensive perspective through the theological synthesis of Father Dumitru Stăniloae. This convergence does not result from direct mutual influences or explicit coordination, but from the independent rediscovery of the same patristic intuitions about the organic connection between the Eucharist and the Church. The fact that this convergent rediscovery occurs in an era marked simultaneously by intense secularization and authentic ecumenical aspiration signals a discreet work of the Holy Spirit that brings to the surface of ecclesial consciousness truths temporarily obscured by the historical stratifications of confessional misunderstandings and pride.

However, the identified consonance should not be absolutized or transformed into an argument for superficial irenicism. The approach identifies significant structural limitations in both systems. Afanasiev's focus on the local Eucharistic assembly prevents him from articulating universal communion without entering into tension with his own premises. When each assembly possesses ecclesial fullness autonomously, the communion between assemblies risks becoming an external relationship. His patristic selectivity,

privileging almost exclusively the first three centuries, denotes an idealization of the early Church that ignores later legitimate developments. The absence of an integrated anthropology and the marginalization of the pneumatological dimension constitute other gaps. In Tillard, the tensions between theoretically proclaimed communal thinking and inherited centralized structures show the difficulty of reconciling incompatible paradigms. His intellectual sincerity leads him to acknowledge the problem, but the balance he proposes leaves the tensions unresolved. The common and most serious deficit is the marginalization of *deification* as the ultimate goal of ecclesial life. For the patristic tradition, magistrally updated by Father Stăniloae, the final goal of the entire divine economy remains ontological participation in the divine life – *theosis*. When this orientation is missing, the Eucharist risks being reduced either to a privileged community moment or to a purely doctrinal reality, losing its integral transformative character.

Father Stăniloae's theological synthesis provides the conceptual resources for overcoming these limitations. Open conciliarity overcomes unresolved aporias, revealing the authentic mode of ecclesial existence. This is not a compromise between Afanasiev's localism and Tillard's universalism, but a theological principle that establishes the Trinitarian ontological simultaneity of the two dimensions. Each Eucharistic assembly possesses ecclesial fullness precisely through its openness to all other communities and to the integral conciliar truth. The practical application of this principle

transforms the understanding of synodality and primacy: synodality designates the visible manifestation of the way in which the Church exists as a living organism in the Holy Spirit, and primacy becomes once again the service of unity within the ontological equality of all bishops.

Contemporary ecumenical dialogue indirectly confirms the validity of this synthesis. The documents from Lima, Munich, Ravenna, Chieti, and Alexandria progressively outline a common understanding of the relationship between primacy and synodality as interdependent, complementary, and inseparable realities. Father Stăniloae's direct participation in the drafting of the Munich Document and the echoes of his thinking in Tillard's theology attest to the relevance of his integrative perspective.

The study leaves open issues that intellectual honesty requires us to acknowledge. The concrete articulation of structures of communion between local Churches in a consistently Eucharistic perspective remains unachieved. Neither Afanasiev, with his radical rejection of any formal mechanisms, nor Tillard, with his proposal for a reinterpreted primacy, offers a fully satisfactory solution to managing the real conflicts that arise when communion is broken. The contemporary crisis in Eastern Orthodoxy, with the rupture between Moscow and Constantinople and the absence of arbitration instruments, painfully illustrates the price of theological coherence without viable institutional translation. The theological status of separated Churches raises unresolved questions: if every authentic

Eucharistic assembly is fully Church, how can the rupture of canonical communion be understood? The notion of "imperfect communion" offers a pragmatic solution, but does not resolve the theological tension. The status of the modern parish, in which the vast majority of Christians participate in sacramental life in communities that celebrate without the direct presence of the bishop, calls for reflection on how the bishop and priests together actualize the presence of Christ.

Future directions include deepening the pneumatological dimension of Eucharistic thinking about the Church - a theology of the epiclesis applied both to the consecration of the Gifts and to the constitution of structures of communion could articulate the relationship between grace and form in a more nuanced way. The integration of the eschatological dimension would preserve the open dynamic character of ecclesial structures, preventing both institutional rigidity and charismatic utopism. Applying the Eucharistic perspective to the concrete challenges of the present - the Ukrainian crisis in Orthodoxy, the synodal process in Catholicism, mutual recognition agreements - requires case studies that demonstrate the viability of Eucharistic thinking about the Church beyond its theoretical consistency.

The relevance of this approach goes beyond strictly academic interest. In the face of contemporary ecclesial crises, the need for robust thinking about the Church - trinitarianly grounded, ascetically integrated, eschatologically open - becomes acute. Father Stăniloae's

synthesis proves that patristic tradition offers sufficient conceptual resources for the necessary answers, without falling into the temptation of uncritically importing foreign categories or into nostalgia for outdated historical forms. The path to the visible unity of the Church passes through the assumption of the constitutive tensions of ecclesial existence and the cultivation of that open conciliarity which recognizes in the other not a threat to one's own identity, but a challenge to a fuller plenitude.