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ABSTRACT

Christology and Mariology
in the theological thinking of Saint Cyril of Alexandria

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Cuvinte cheie: *Christology, Mariology, ancestral sin, image, likeness, hypostatic union, human freedom, Theotokos, iconography, dogma, ransom, deification, anthropology, revealed*

ABSTRACT

The present work, entitled "Christology and Mariology in the theological thinking of Saint Cyril of Alexandria", represents an analysis and a systematization of the main chapters on the dogma regarding the hypostatic union and its consequences, having as a starting point the work of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, a defining author for the Orthodox Christology. No other, either accepted by the Church, or contested, gave birth to equally many questions or offered equally many answers on a capital topic of the Christian teaching. While Saint Athanasius the Great held an essential role in the construction of the Trinitarian dogma, Saint Cyril of Alexandria is the one who could pass beyond the difficulties of human understanding towards the sense of all things: the soteriological masterpiece of the embodied Son of God.

Going through the writings of the great hierarch of Alexandria, we observe the accent put on the complementariness of the dogmas, along with the Christological basis of these truths of faith revealed and preserved-clarified by the Church with a view to saving man. The Church dogmas represent the immanent expression of the transcendent thoughts and reasons existing since eternity in God or the *embodiment* of the divine words regarding the sense and reason to be of the created world.

The unity of the dogmas is not generated by some abstract principle; the unitary basis of the dogmas is not constituted by a system of values and ideas or a human reasoning, but by the *Person of Christ*, Who unites in Himself heaven and earth, the created and the uncreated: «The Christian dogmas are many and yet one, because Christ is one, but in Him are given all the conditions and all the means of our deification. And, the Person of Christ, as the embodied Son of God, and, therefore, His work, starts from the Trinity to bring the people back in communion with the Trinity»¹. Christ is the Unique Truth or the absolute Bosom of

¹ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (TDO)*, vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (IBMBOR), București, 1996, p. 58.

all the meanings and reasons. But, He is not only the Supreme reason, but also the Father's Son, the Person over Whom the Father together with the Spirit rejoice. In Christ, the Holy Trinity reveals Itself as the tri-personal Spring of our adoption. The Christological dogma makes obvious the Trinitarian basis of all the truths of faith.

The theological particularities of Saint Cyril's work consist in the Christological synthesis, marked by the soteriological perspective, and the Trinitarian oikonomia of salvation. The *Christocentrism* of his thinking is not in contradiction with the *theology of the Spirit*, the accentuation of the Person of Christ being concomitant with the highlighting of the Trinitarian intersubjectivity both on the intra-Trinitarian level, and in the loving manifestations *ad extra* of the Father through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The affirmation of the Christocentrism simultaneous to the confession of the Trinitarian dimension of the realization of the masterpiece of salvation highlights the triadological character of the dogmas or shows Saint Cyril as the «repository par excellence of the spiritual and theological heritage» of Saint Athanasius and of the Treimic vision of Cappadocian origin².

According to Saint Cyril, the divine-human Person of Christ represents the *foundation* of the faith in the Holy Trinity: «Since the faith devoid of curiosity has been set in us first, as a foundation, it is on this that knowledge is built, therefore, lifting us *to the measure of the age of Christ* and *to the perfect and spiritual man*. It is for this reason that God says as well: «Behold, I will put in the foundations of Zion a chosen stone, of great value, a Chief cornerstone»³. Because Christ is to us beginning and foundation towards holiness and justice, certainly by faith and in no other way. Because this is how He takes shelter in us»⁴. The faith in the Holy Trinity is the departure point towards the communion with the Father in the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

The idea of deification, as participation to the communal life in love of the Holy Trinity, constitutes another dominant note of the theological thinking of

² Cf. Pr. Prof. Boris Bobrinskoy, *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, translation from French by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, Editura (Edit.) IBMBOR, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 294.

³ Is. 28, 16.

⁴ Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan (Comentariu la Ioan)*, 4, 4, PG, 73, 629A.

Saint Cyril. To be *in God (deified)* means to be in communion, namely to persist as a person. The communion and the persistence as a person are interdependent and suppose the partaking of the Supreme Person or of the perfect communion of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. The perfect divine life postulates the plenary simultaneity of the unity of Being and of the diversity of the Persons. The basis of the perfect communion is constituted by the unique divine nature or the hypostatizing of the same nature in a complete manner, by receiving it in full from the Father by birth and by procession. So, our communion as persons implies the participation by grace to the divine nature subsisting in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If «the distinct unity between the divine Persons is assured by the community of nature»,⁵ both the communion with God and that among us supposes our being impressed with the divine powers and traits of the thrice-hypostatized nature. It is due to this fact that Saint Cyril emphasizes *our partaking of the divine nature*.

*

The present work comprises seven sections, the first and the last of them being represented by the Introduction and the Conclusions. I preferred this structure because even since the *Introduction* I established not just the technical details related to the elaboration of the work (justification of the choice of the subject, aim, research methods, structure of the work), but I also inserted at the same time an updated presentation of the life and work of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, preparing the framework for the presentation in the next parts.

Part two, entitled “Preliminaries to Saint Cyril's Christology. From the fall into sin to the restoration in Christ”, starts with a brief presentation of the Christological framework concerning the state of the fallen man, the consequences of this state and the reestablishment of the human nature by the restoring sacrifice of the Savior Christ for the human nation.

After the fall into sin, the deification also becomes salvation or humanization of a Person of the Holy Trinity to reestablish man from the

⁵ Idem, *TDO*, vol. 1, p. 60.

perspective of grace and from an ontological perspective: God becomes man for man to be made God. In Christ, the human nature reaches the perfect partaking of and the perfect union with the divine nature, Christ becoming the source of our communion with God.

Part three presents and analyzes "The constitutive concepts of Saint Cyril of Alexandria's Christology". It presents an analysis of the main aspects of the Embodiment of God's Son become the Son of Man, and the rapport between the divine nature and human nature in the divine-human Person of Jesus Christ.

A preferred topic of Saint Cyril's theology is God's «name of Father»⁶. In fact, it is around God's name of Father that all Saint Cyril's theology revolves. Both the creation, and the salvation are the work of the Holy Trinity. By the creation of man, and by his redeeming re-creation, by the Son, in the Holy Spirit, God wants to extend *His love as a Father* also in the limited existential plane of the beings. By the creation of man in the Son, the Father updates His Fatherly love to Man, whom He thought since eternity. And by the Savior's redeeming activity, man is reactuated in the position of son, or Christ answers the Father's love perfectly also as a man. With Saint Cyril, the affirmation of the creative and redeeming collaboration of the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit, is simultaneous to the prodigious presentation of the intra-Trinitarian relations. And this way of approaching the *problems of oikonomia* simultaneously to *the mysterious theological aspects* demonstrates the accent that the Holy Father puts on man's filial destination and on the happiness of the whole cosmos by their getting engulfed in the Most Holy Trinity's love, or on the interpenetration of the dogmas: triadological, Christological, anthropological and cosmological.

The re-establishing and the perfecting of man as son in the Son is realized through the Resurrection and Ascension, as crown of the redemption masterpiece. Thus, the Trinity and the Resurrection represent *the fundamental dogmas of Saint Cyril's work*⁷.

The Resurrection constitutes the spiritualization and the partaking of the human nature of the power of life and incorruptibility in an absolute manner in

⁶ Cf. Sfântul Chiril, *Comentariu la Ioan*, 11, 7, PG, 74, 500D-501A.

⁷ Cf. Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

Christ, while the Ascension constitutes its introduction in the life of the Most Holy Trinity. The partaking of the divine life of the Holy Trinity is simultaneous to the re-establishing of the communion with the Father in the Son, by the Holy Spirit, because, on the one hand, the fullness of life is the expression of perfect love, and, on the other hand, the Resurrection is *an act of the Trinity*: «The body will produce off-springs and will be brought back to life, yet not without Christ. Because He has made Himself the beginning of our resurrection and the door of the setting of the tent in a more obvious manner. This is what has been told through one of the Holy Prophets: «I will lift up David's fallen tent»⁸. Because Christ's tent, Which according to the body was coming from God's seed, is the first fallen tent, which has been lifted to incorruptibility through the power of God and the Father»⁹. The simultaneity of the partaking of the incorruptible life and of the re-establishment of the communion with the Holy Trinity, in Christ, can be seen as well by the highlighting of the special role of the Holy Spirit – the spirit of communion and of love of the Son by the Father and of the Father by the Son - in the act of the Resurrection.

However, the following mention needs to be made: in the other people, the state of resurrection does not suppose, automatically, also the communion with the Holy Trinity. To partake of Christ's Resurrection, by the Holy Spirit, as state of adoption of us, in the Son, we need to participate ourselves to the spiritualization of our body. This refers to the ontological-ascetical component of the salvation realized in Christ or to our contribution, helped by Christ, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to the process of spiritualization, to the defeat of sin and to the strengthening of our spirit with a view to the resurrection¹⁰.

All this highlighting of the filial destiny of man or of his dignity of partner of the dialogue of love as *partaking and participation to the divine nature*, emphasizes man's paradoxical character as created person participating to the divine life, partaking in «traits equal to those of Those Who are not from here»¹¹: man is co-bearer with God, in Christ, of the divine traits and powers. At the same

⁸ Amos 9: 11.

⁹ Sfântul Chiril, *Comentariu la Ioan*, 4, 5, PG, 73, 644.

¹⁰ Cf. Idem, *Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, 1, PG, 68, 149B-C.

¹¹ Idem, *Glafire la Geneză*, 1, PG, 69, 20B.

time, it emphasizes once more the Trinitarian foundation of the dogmas or the fact that all the truths of faith are founded on the *Unique Truth* of the Tri-Une God.

Part Four presents "Saint Cyril's Christology in the context of the 5th Century Christology", approaching an updated vision, which takes into account the bibliography to day. Is presented in detail the history of the formulation of the Christological teaching, a history that goes beyond the debates of the Third Ecumenical Synod (Ephesus, 431), continuing with those that led to the drafting of the Symbol of Union between Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Antiochians (433) and, later, as a general recognition of the value of his Christological contribution, at the 4th Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451). In the end are presented the two perceptions on human liberty: the one elaborated along the line of Saint Cyril and the one having Blessed Augustine as a representative.

The interpenetration of the truths of faith and their focus on the Trinitarian dogma in Saint Cyril's theology, results as well from the analysis of the Eucharistic dogma according to the vision of the great hierarch of Alexandria. The teaching of faith regarding the Mystery of the Holy Communion represents for Saint Cyril an applied Christological doctrine, with major implications in the re-establishment and deification of man, opposed to the philosophical Christology, of abstract nature, of Nestorius¹².

For Saint Cyril, theology is not an abstract philosophic discourse, but life, experience, partaking of the Logos. The dogma, as divine truth of faith, is lived or is known only by experiencing it. The theological discourse of the Holy Father always sends to the concrete or to the living. So, the dogma has a living applicability in the mystic and liturgical experience or in the confession, and the teaching of the truths of faith combines with their living in the mystic life and and in the cult of the Church.

The unity of the dogmas and their Triadological grounding confers a mystical or apophatic character to all the teachings of faith. The dogmas in their Trinitarian dimensions are the *spoken image* of the ineffable community in love of man with the Holy Trinity, in Christ.

¹² Cf. Drd. Ion Caraza, «Doctrina euharistică a Sfântului Chiril al Alexandriei», in *ST*, XX (1968), no. 7-8, p. 541.

Saint Cyril is a theologian of *the lived truth* or of the communion, so that in Saint Cyril's theology the anthropological dogma has marked aspects of participation, and the Triadological dogma, a mystical character of participation. Saint Cyril is the *theologian of Christ's unity*¹³ and, implicitly, of the paradoxical union or of the communal love between God and man, based on the human nature n-hypostatized in the divine Logos.

Saint Cyril's method is exegetic and theological, as he continually refers to the Holy Scripture¹⁴. According to the great hierarch of Alexandria, the Holy Scripture is par excellence «the spring of true knowledge»¹⁵. And to feed on it, we need faith. Faith is the effect of the influence of the divine grace on us. It is closely related to the work of the Holy Spirit, Illuminer of our mind and Revealer of divine mysteries¹⁶. The true faith and the Church dogmas, we have inherited them from the Holy Apostles and from the Holy Fathers.

“The influence of the Saint Cyril's Mariology on the Orthodox theology” constitutes Part Five. The entire Christological dispute of the fifth century was triggered in close relation with the recognition or non-recognition of the dogmatic truth that the Virgin Mary is God-Bearer. This truth, together with the kenosis, lies at the basis of the hypostatic union of Christ, the reality of the redeeming masterpiece of God's Son being closely related to the affirmation of this truth: if in Jesus Christ there is only a unique Subject bearing the two natures and working through them our salvation – the Word (Logos) of God, then naturally we need to affirm that the Virgin Mary is a Bearer of God; and, on the contrary, if the Mother of the Lord is not a Bearer of God then the One born from her according to His human nature is not the Son of God and thus the whole masterpiece of redemption would be compromised.

Saint Cyril, aware of the importance and the consequences of this teaching insists on the Virgin Mary being Bearer of God even from the first

¹³ Cf. Jean Tixeront, *Histoire des dogmes dans l'antiquité chrétienne*, vol. III, Paris, 1928, p. 79.

¹⁴ Cf. Jean-Marie Labelle, «Saint Cyrille D'Alexandrie, témoin de la langue et de la pensée philosophiques au V^e siècle», in *RSR*, 1 (1978), p. 147; Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, Pantheon, New York, 1959, p. 147.

¹⁵ Cf. Sfântul Chiril din Alexandria, *Împotriva lui Iulian*, 6, PG, 76, 821B.

¹⁶ Cf. Idem, *Comentariu la Ioan*, 11, 10, PG, 74, 540B-C.

anathematismata, showing by this the close connection between Christology, soteriology and Mariology: "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is truly God and by this the Holy Virgin is Bearer of God, that she gave birth physically to the Word (Logos) from God-the Father, Who made Himself body: let him be anathema". Actually, the defrocking of Nestorius and the official condemnation of his Christological doctrine at the Council of Ephesus in 431, took place through the proclamation of the Virgin Mary as « God-Bearer » highlighting by this the identity of person between Jesus Christ and the Son of God – the Embodied Logos.

Part Six "The finality of the Christic image" is a presentation of the interpretation that the theologian of Alexandria offers on this theme of intense debates in the 4th century, from a Christological an anthropological perspective.

Speaking about the state of the man fallen into sin, Saint Cyril of Alexandria characterizes it as *a disease*¹⁷ of man. Man has lost the primordial harmony with God and with the entire creation, but he is responsible for what he chooses to do¹⁸ Although Satan is the father of sin¹⁹, man sinned by free choice, because he chose to listen to Satan instead of God.

For this reason, obedience to God is the weapon against sin and the demons. On the contrary, our continual sinning makes the demons be stronger than man's mind²⁰. The sinful passions in us give them the power to rule over us, for this reason Saint Cyril of Alexandria speaks about "the slavery to the sinful passions" or about "the slavery to Satan", from which Christ has redeemed man. For this very reason, in our fight against the sinful passions, we have God as *ally* because Satan, as Saint Cyril says, has God as his enemy, in his desire of destroying us. And while the demons propose to us only bad things, God gives us the power to continually set ourselves free from his chains²¹.

In essence, Saint Cyril of Alexandria speaks about the *darkening* of the image of God in man, through sin, as about a dramatic reality, which took us out of the communion with God, but did not annul our freedom to choose. For this

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, col. 1001.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, col. 149.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, col. 148.

²⁰ Idem, *Comentariu la Ioan*, in "PG" 74, col. 149.

²¹ Idem, *Scrieri. Partea întâi. Închinarea și slujirea în duh și adevăr*, p. 50-51.

reason, the bad is a personal action, of the demons and of people, which occurs via a choice contrary to God and not an ontological reality.

The communion with Christ, in his work "Worship and Service in Spirit and in Truth", is expressed by the key syntagm: "Christ in a state of continual sacrifice". Because Christ fulfills all the Law and the Prophets and redeems the man fallen into sin.

Yet, Saint Cyril proves himself an authentic mystic interpreter of the Old Testament, because he illuminates for us its Christological places. The sacrifices, for him, indicate Christ's presence full of the Holy Spirit. Because the entire course of the Old Testament revelation has Christ in the spotlight. For this reason, in Christ, we are redeemed and adopted spiritually, being made partakers of the unapproachable light of the Most Holy Trinity²².

Because Christ, by His humanity transfigured to the full, gives us all, with no trace of selfishness and of favoring anyone, the power to fight with the sinful passions from ourselves and to transfigure ourselves spiritually. And this because Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross had two fundamental consequences for mankind: it set us free from the bondage of sin (John 8: 32) and gave us the power to become sons of God by grace (John 1: 12-13). By His resurrection from the dead, we have made ourselves sons of the resurrection, it is precisely for this reason that our Baptism is death and mystical resurrection together with Christ.

Yet, Saint Cyril underlines that Christ's passion is redeeming and sanctifying for us. Because it purified us from sin, which had entered our being by our distancing ourselves from God. Christ centered our humanity in good, because it had become inclined, by contrary will, towards disobedience²³.

So, through the death of the embodied Son of God, the Father saw mankind with loving eyes. Because His death made an entrance for us to the Father, in the Holy Spirit, giving us the possibility of eternal communion with the Most Holy Trinity. Christ offers Himself to God as *first fruit* of mankind, for the

²² Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Jertfa lui Hristos și spiritualitatea noastră prin împărtășirea de ea în Sfânta Liturghie*, in "O", no. 1, 1983, p. 106-107.

²³ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Scieri. Partea a doua. Glafire*, translated by Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, EIB, București, 1992, p. 371-377.

people to live a new, spiritual life. For this reason, the Evangelical living is not according to the letter of the Law but through the renewal of the spirit²⁴.

For Saint Cyril, Christ is the accomplishment of what had been prefigured by the copper snake. Because He took sin upon Himself, Himself being without sin, to defeat all the sins in His body²⁵. Saint Cyril shows that the reason of our redemption through Christ was corruption, which had entered us through sin. He healed our humanity, because it had grown wild²⁶. And only He could defeat the tyranny of the demons²⁷.

Yet, he was able to do this because He assumed humanity in His preexisting person. And by assuming what He was not – namely man – Christ united in Himself the natures in an inseparable way²⁸. Because it was only in this way that He could communicate to mankind the incorruptibility and the holiness of His divinity. By His death He filled, all that is ours, with life²⁹. Because death could not have been defeated neither by a soul, nor by an angel, nor by the Logos Himself, but only by a resurrected body, united, inseparably, with the Divinity³⁰.

In his Comment on *The Gospel according to John*, Saint Cyril of Alexandria offered to us a mystic-moral interpretation of redemption. And, at the same time, he spoke of the universal importance of the salvation through Christ. Because, through Christ, he was saying, "the entire creation was saved, and also the Angels. [...] Because we have been saved through Him and He is all our strengthening and the salvation of the supernatural spirits"³¹.

Part Seven, "Conclusions", briefly presents the results of our research, offering new perspectives in the contemporary ecumenical dialogue.

The special importance of the Christological doctrine of St. Cyril of Alexandria is emphasized as well by the novelties he brings: he introduces the expression "two natures" in the Christology of Alexandria, accentuates the mystery of the union of the two natures, systematizes the theory of communication of the

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 422-428.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 436-439.

²⁶ Idem, *Către Romani*, V, 18, in "PG" 74, col. 789.

²⁷ Idem, *Omilia pascală*, 24, in "PG" 77, col. 888.

²⁸ Idem, *Tezaurul despre Sfânta Treime*, 32, in "PG" 75, col. 504.

²⁹ Idem, *Despre Sfânta Treime*, V, in "PG" 75, col. 936.

³⁰ Idem, *Comentariu la Ioan*, XX, 19, in "PG" 74, col. 705.

³¹ Idem, *Glafire*, in "PG" 69, col. 549. Cf. Nicolae Chițescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 126.

traits and especially looks from another perspective, entirely soteriological, to the progress of the human nature in the Savior: through the entire redeeming masterpiece accomplished in time, the Word of God gives back to the human nature the divine grace which He, having it as God, acquires now, for us, also as a man. The Church kept in her terminology, for the union of the two natures, Saint Cyril's formula: "ένωσις κατ' υπόστασιν", remaining at the same time in the spirit of the great father of Alexandria, who would not leave the impression that by the words said he covered the full extent of the mystery, a fact for which he sometimes accompanies the union of the two natures with the adverbs become official at Chalcedon: inseparably, distinctly, in an unchanged manner, or calling the union « ineffable ».

Therefore, the Mystery of the Embodiment of the second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Mystery of the union of the Son of God with the human nature cannot be encompassed with the mind and enclosed in some formulas or doctrinal systems. Christology means the correct understanding of the way our salvation is realized and for this reason with Saint Cyril the deification of the human nature represents the truth concentrating in itself the entire Christological and soteriological teaching.

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