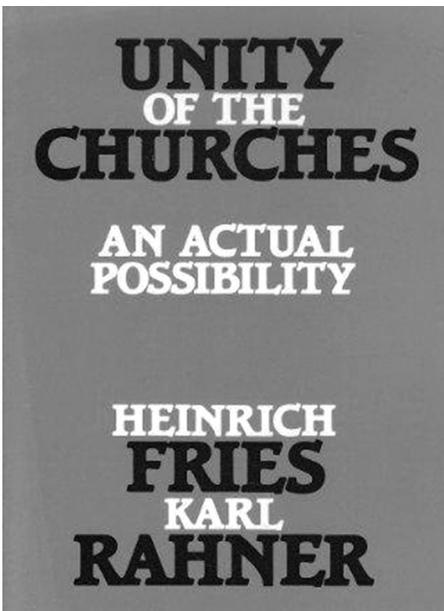


## Ecumenism in Dialogue

JEAN NEDELEA

**Karl Rahner and Dumitru Stăniloae**



HEINRICH FRIES and KARL RAHNER,  
*Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*,  
transl. RUTH C. L. GRITSCH and ERIC W. GRITSCH  
(Philadelphia: Fortress Press; New York:  
Paulist Press, 1985).

### Jean Nedelea

Assistant professor at the "Justinian the Patriarch" Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest.

### Preamble

**A** TRUE CLASSIC of Catholic theology, Karl Rahner (1904–1984) deeply influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic thought. He was trained in the Jesuit spiritual and academic environment, becoming a member of the Society of Jesus when he was 18 years old. After studies in philosophy at the universities of the Jesuit Order in Tisis (Austria) and Munich, he studied theology at the Jesuit University of Valkenburg (the Netherlands). Between 1934 and 1936 he was a doctoral student in philosophy at the University of Freiburg, where he studied with the famous philosopher Martin Heidegger. He became a doctor of Theology in 1936, and in 1937 he started his academic career in Innsbruck, where he taught Dogmatic Theology and the History of Dogmas until 1964. He continued his didactic activity in Munich (1964–1967), teaching courses on the Christian outlook on the world (*Christliche Weltanschauung*) and Religious Philosophy in Münster (1967–1971), where he was

the head of the Department of Dogmatic Theology and History of Dogmas. His monumental work—published in the series *Sämtliche Werke*, in 32 volumes (40 tomes)—marked the shift from a highly speculative scholastic theology, reluctant towards philosophy and generally towards modern thinking, to a theology that is mindful of “the signs of the times” and of the life of late-modernity man. Karl Lehmann, one of his disciples and assistants, considered that his master had succeeded in taking down the “bastions” of scholastic rationalism and had achieved a great victory against the “sclerosis of thought modes and empty formalism.” In his turn, the famous Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann considered Rahner the “architect of the new theology.”

About Karl Rahner it has been rightly stated that he was part of the avant-garde of Catholic ecumenism.<sup>1</sup> His theology maintains, at least in the background, a fresh and sustained ecumenical dialogue with Protestant theology. His last book, *Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit* (1983) (*Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, 1983), written together with the Catholic theologian Heinrich Fries and published a few months before his death—deemed by some a testamentary work<sup>2</sup>—, is the expression of his efforts to contribute to the unity of the Christian denominations and, at the same time, the expression of his conviction that the unity of the Churches is truly possible. The project for the unity of the Churches proposed by the authors of this book is, naturally, marked to a great extent by the stylistics of Catholic theology.

Among Rahner’s ecumenical theological writings, *The Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility* is the only work that exceeds the strict confines of the Catholic-Protestant dialogue, being also relevant for the dialogue between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The authors of this book intended to put forth a project for the unity of the Churches, being convinced that the “ecumenical project has become an urgent existential issue for Christianity and for the Churches” and that “this unity is a matter of life and death for the Christians of our time, a time when the faith in God and in His Christ is threatened by a militant and worldly atheism and by a relativist skepticism even in countries where atheism is not a state religion.”<sup>3</sup>

In order for the unity of the Christian Churches to pass from the speculative sphere into concrete life, Rahner and Fries formulated eight tenets, presented in the form of theses, widely commented at the time. Except for the first thesis and the fourth, which have a high relevance in understanding the entire approach of the authors, hereinafter I will insist particularly on those theses commented on by Karl Rahner.<sup>4</sup>

## (Syn)Theses for the Unity of the Churches

**T**HE 1<sup>ST</sup> thesis: *The foundational truths of Christianity, as these are expressed in the Holy Scripture, in the Apostles' Creed and in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, are mandatory on all particular Churches (Teilkirchen) within the future single Church.*<sup>5</sup>

From the commentary related to the first thesis, we learn that the Church of the future may exist only in the form of a community of faith. The faith of this community of the future may not be “an act of faith of any kind,” but an objective, determined faith. From the perspective of the Christian faith, there is a pre-eminence of the community of faith over the individual faith. However, this community has transferred the faith in Jesus Christ into the Holy Scripture, which has thus become “an original document of the Church’s faith,” a normative document for all future generations. But since the Christian message must reach the people of every historical age, in order to liberate and save them, it must be always retransmitted and retranslated, always taking into account the specific context and the problems of each and every age.<sup>6</sup> The authors thus plead for the cultivation of an ever-renewed faithfulness to the origins, to the Early Church. And, if faithfulness to the origins implies faithfulness to the Scripture, this faithfulness may always be renewed by the interpretation of God’s Word in different historical contexts. From the ever-renewed interpretation of the Scripture were born the Confessions of faith of the Church: first the Apostolic Creed, and, later, the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, to mention only the most famous symbols of faith of the Church. The place of origin of these Confessions of faith is the Baptism, as a Sacrament of faith, and the divine service.<sup>7</sup> Within the divine service, these Confessions of faith become, at the same time, acts of honoring, praising and glorifying God. The authors further pointed out that if in the West the Apostolic Creed was normative, in the East the normative one was the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Although it was not represented at the Council of Constantinople, Western Christianity acknowledged the Creed thanks to the “quality of its content and its compliance with the Scripture.”<sup>8</sup> This Creed later received special honor both in the East, and in the West. The Reformed Church and the Ecumenical Council of the Churches also acknowledge the value and the special importance of this Creed for the faith.<sup>9</sup> “The permanent validity of the Confession of faith of Nicaea and Constantinople is the guarantee of the continuity and identity of the Church in time.”<sup>10</sup>

However, the insertion of the Filioque addition to this Creed, at the local Synod of Braga (675), caused the “violent theological disputes that have



KARL RAHNER  
(1904–1984)

not been fully settled until the present, although ecumenical solutions are currently being sought.”<sup>11</sup> If the Eastern Churches do not remove the Filioque addition as heretical, neither should the Roman Catholic Church ask them to insert Filioque in their Confessions of faith.<sup>12</sup>

By the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, the faith in the Holy Spirit as life-giving Lord was particularly proclaimed. And since the Church appears as a “creation and as a work of the Spirit,” “credo in Spiritum Sanctum” implies “credo Ecclesiam.” In its capacity of creation and Sacrament of the Spirit, the Church is protected from immobility and rigidity, because the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of living dynamism. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes, therefore, an event and *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, that is, a Church always open to renewal.<sup>13</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thesis: *On the above basis, a realistic faith-principle (Glaubensprinzip) can be introduced: in no particular Church may a doctrinal proposition (Satz) be rejected in a deliberate and confessional way if that doctrinal proposition is a mandatory dogma in another particular Church. Moreover, beyond what is comprised in the 1<sup>st</sup> thesis, no express, positive confessional statement in one particular Church is to be required as mandatory in another particular Church. Rather, it is to be left to a wider-reaching future consensus (Konsens). In the first place, this concerns authoritative (authentisch) but non-defined doctrinal declarations of the Roman Catholic Church. It is especially to be observed in ethical questions. In accordance with this principle only that is to be done which is the current practice in each Church with regard to its own adherents.*<sup>14</sup>

Throughout their history, the Christian denominations have had their own faith, theology and dogmas. The unity of the Churches, say the authors, may not be reached solely based on the mutual recognition of the Scripture and of the aforementioned Confessions of faith, as the theology of all the denominations has historically undergone an evolution that must be taken into account.

In order to better understand this thesis, the author resorted to a brief description of the current political-intellectual situation, also drawing a parallel with the periods when the separations between the Christians occurred. In the past, theological debates were conducted on the basis of a rather limited conceptual and experimental (spiritual) material, and therefore those involved in the dialogue could easily understand one another's statements, even though this did not mean they were always also agreeing with each other or that they were not contradicting one another. The theological debates were reserved to the learned people, and the uneducated popular masses would accept the doctrine imposed by decrees. But at present, no matter how educated one is, he/she cannot consider himself/herself otherwise but ignorant in relation to the vastness of today's science. Even the experts in certain fields are ignorant in relation to the totality of the knowledge in their own field. The pluralism of contemporary knowledge does not tolerate mere systematizations, as it happened in the past.<sup>15</sup> Rahner then noted that the contemporary theological language has become more and more specialized and that is why a biblicist, an expert in dogmatic theology and a canon law expert, for instance, find it increasingly difficult to understand one another. Naturally, such a specialized language also makes the inter-denominational dialogue difficult.<sup>16</sup>

In such a pluralist context, formulations of faith as concise as possible and focused on the unifying essence are absolutely required. But in order to be able to achieve this identification and focus on the essential truths of faith (the Holy Trinity, Christ, the Mediator of salvation and the Church founded by Christ), we can resort to a "hierarchy of truths." In this "hierarchy of truths," for instance, the truth about the mandatory magisterial authority in the Church is not one of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. The believers live in the Church, although they neither negate, nor can explicitly state certain truths of faith, as, for instance, this one about the ecclesiastical magisterium. But this "rudimentary," inexplicit faith does not exclude the believer from the community of faith. Rahner suggested that there was a certain specific "hierarchy of truths" even in large social groups and in the cultural circles within Catholicism. Moreover, even the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, as the famous theologian believed, confirmed, starting from the "hierarchy of truths," the legitimate difference between the theology and the spirituality of the Eastern and Western Churches.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas in the times of the Reformation the Christians argued among themselves from irreconcilable positions, at present we can speak about agnoseological-theoretical tolerance that might make possible the unity of Churches. A mandatory pre-requisite for this unity is, however, to emphasize that common,

clear and explicit faith which can afterwards create a climate conducive to discussing the controversial issues.<sup>18</sup>

According to Rahner, his ecumenical project was also confirmed by the prefect of the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of that time, Joseph Ratzinger,<sup>19</sup> who had stated (it is true, as a theologian, and not as a prefect) that in the event of the union with Rome, the Eastern Churches (and here he referred strictly to the Orthodox Churches) may keep the doctrine they had at the time of their separation.<sup>20</sup>

The 3<sup>rd</sup> thesis: *In the one Church of Jesus Christ, made of the united Churches, there are regional particular Churches which can continue to keep their previous structures. These particular Churches can remain in one and the same territory, since this is quite possible in Catholic ecclesiology and in the actual practice of the Roman Catholic Church, for example in Palestine.*<sup>21</sup>

Before commenting on this thesis, Rahner stated that until Pope Pius XI, the Roman Catholic Church did not know the path of interconfessional dialogue and of actual unity, either in the relationship with the Eastern Churches, or in the relationship with the communities of the Reform, but employed only the path of conversion. But such path to unity is an unrealistic one because it abolishes the specificity of faith and worship.

In his commentary, the famous theologian resorted to two decrees of the Second Vatican Council: *Lumen gentium* (13) and *Unitatis redintegratio* (14, 16, 17, 18). Both council documents speak about the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches and about the concrete possibility of restoring their unity.<sup>22</sup> Starting from these council documents, Rahner wrote that in the future united Church there may and even must exist “a legitimate pluralism of the particular churches, with their own Liturgy, with their own constitution, and their own theology.”<sup>23</sup> A homogenization of the particular churches may no longer be a Catholic ideal, and the autonomy of the Eastern Churches is legitimate within the unity. However, Rahner acknowledged that this legitimate autonomy was practically violated by Catholics many times, as even the Council admitted.<sup>24</sup>

The German theologian then spoke about national Catholic Churches such as the French or the German Church, the Polish or Italian Church, each with its own history and tradition, which may be seen as particular Churches in the one Church. Then the Churches in North America or South America, which have acquired or are still defining their own identity, based on the history of the nations that constitute them, may become great regional particular Churches in the same one Church. These great national or regional Churches do not have a

unity commanded by Rome, nor are they the sum of the eparchies within their territory, but “are theological entities that Rome cannot ignore within the dialogue.”<sup>25</sup>

We are reminded then that, according to the newer Church Law of the Catholic Church (can. 372§2), “on the same territory may be established several particular churches, that differ from one another by the believers’ rite . . . and this does not oppose Church’s being.”<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, in the single Church of the future, on the same territory may coexist several particular Churches with different rituals, ethos or canonical rules.<sup>27</sup> The institutional representatives of the theologies of particular Churches should merge for a more efficient activity.

The authority which should determine the validity and applicability of these theses of the Churches’ unity is represented, according to Rahner, by the pope and the bishops. Similar things could also be said for the Orthodox churches. But to recognize this authority will be much more difficult in the Churches of the Reformation. As in these Churches the human factor and individual faith have such a significant role, unity might be rejected. As to sacramental life, Karl Rahner believed that from this point of view the Roman Church and the Orthodox Church may reach unity without too great difficulty, because both Churches acknowledge the validity of seven Sacraments.<sup>28</sup>

The 4<sup>th</sup> thesis: *All particular Churches shall recognize, as a truth and as a law (Sinn und Recht) the Petrine ministry of the Roman pope as a concrete guarantee of the unity of the Church in truth and love.*

Although this thesis was commented on by Fries, we note several relevant ideas. 1. The actual reason for the separation of the Eastern and Western Churches was the domestic and foreign policy of the pope; 2. The separation of the Western Churches in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was far more serious than that between the Eastern and the Western Churches, as it affected faith in its very core. 3. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Imperial Church came to an end, but the Restoration occurred and brought a sort of a worship of the pope pushed to the verge of tastelessness and blasphemy. 4. The definition of Vatican I on the pope’s primacy as *ius divinum* occurred at the time when the period of the state Church ended and, by this, pope’s political power came to an end. When the Church state could not be kept any longer, the pope’s moral authority and his primacy within the Church had to be emphasized urgently and the statements regarding papacy (*summepiscopate*) had to become mandatory for the Catholic faith. 5. Vatican II Council resumed the formulations of Vatican I and kept even its mistakes, such as, for instance, the statement regarding the authority *ex sese* of the decisions *ex cathedra* of the pope, and not based on the consent of the Church. 6. In “Nota praevia”

to *Lumen gentium* there is a statement that proves a wrong understanding of the papal ministry, even greater than those of Vatican I: “The pope, as a supreme shepherd of the Church, may exercise his full power at will at any time, as his ministry requires.” 7. In a visit to the Geneva headquarters of the World Council of Churches, Pope Paul VI declared: I am Peter—Peter’s ministry, created for the unity of the Church, has become one of the great obstacles to achieving this unity. 8. Ten years after the removal of anathemas by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, Pope Paul VI kneeled and kissed the feet of Metropolitan Meliton to demonstrate “in an extreme form” how much he is willing to do for the unity with the Orthodox Church. 9. According to Ratzinger, Fries reminds us, in order to achieve unity between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, the mutual recognition of the legitimacy of their specific developments is required.<sup>29</sup>

The 4<sup>th</sup>b thesis: *The pope for his part expressly binds himself to recognize and respect the independence (Eigenständigkeit) of the Teilkirchen. He declares (iure humano) that he will exercise his highest teaching authority (ex cathedra), as described in the First Vatican Council and in Catholic theology (nach katholischen Prinzipien) in such a way that juridically and in fact it will correspond to a general Council of the whole Church. Thus his future ex cathedra definitions will be arrived at through contacting (Fühlingnahme) the world-wide Catholic episcopate.*<sup>30</sup>

In the unified Church, commented Rahner, the particular Churches are called to acknowledge pope’s Petrine ministry. But this acknowledgement, although it must come from the recognition of the need for papal ministry for the unity of the Church, does not mean to recognize the decisions of Vatican I with respect to the pope’s ministry in the Roman Church.

In his turn, however, the pope is obliged to acknowledge the full independence of the particular Churches, an independence consistent with the very being of the Church. And this recognition of the independence of the particular Churches as a “fundamental basis of ecclesiology,” is not, of course, at the pope’s discretion, since it relates to the very being of the Church, it is *ius divini*.<sup>31</sup>

Rahner then remarked that a special rule should be found for the exercise of the Roman magisterial primacy in the unified Church. The pope’s fundamental right to make decisions *ex cathedra* may not be refused in the unified Church either. This right will be exercised directly, at least in the Western particular Church, at the head of which he will remain as the patriarch of the West. As a matter of fact, a bishop or a patriarch will be able to make decisions that are valid in his particular Church, as his authority comes from the ministry of divine right: “It is possible, as well, that an episcopal or even patriarchal leader of another particular Church make magisterial decisions that apply first only in his

own Church, as such a leader of a particular Church must have and exercise such a teaching authority he has through his very ministry and which is not actually given to him, through delegation, from the pope."<sup>32</sup>

The Jesuit theologian believes that, in the future, papal encyclicals might be addressed to the particular Churches, but he warns that they must take into account the great differences of mentality, of faith and of theology of their addressees. There might even exist a sort of Congregation of the faith which should maintain, from the institutional point of view, the unity and purity of the doctrine in the entire Church. But this Congregation will have to observe the specificity of the particular Churches. It will exercise its teaching ministry in the particular Churches and also on their teachers through the bishops.<sup>33</sup>

Highly original is Rahner's proposal that the pope's decisions *ex cathedra* be subjected to the analysis of a "higher instance" than the papal authority. This instance would be the College of Bishops, made of bishops elected from and by various particular Churches, which will have the mission to check popes's statements *ex cathedra*. They should carefully analyze and then explain these decisions as clearly as possible, in such a way that any potential suspicions with respect to the wish of imposing certain papal teachings by excess of authority be removed.<sup>34</sup> However, Rahner stated: "Such a study and its transparency should not necessarily mean that future definitions will not be juridically possible otherwise except by the consent of the College of Bishops as such, like in a Council proper. Even under the premises of such studies, the pope could permanently issue such definitions in which his full power is obvious compared to the other bishops."<sup>35</sup>

The difference between the magisterial authority of the College of Bishops united with the pope and the authority of the pope "alone," Rahner wrote, is such a subtle thing that it is very hard to notice. Also in the future unified Church, the pope will be the leader and head of all the particular Churches. To elect the pope, the partner Churches will participate through their representatives, in a sort of electoral College, and the pope will continue to have the right to propose a successor for himself.<sup>36</sup>

The 7<sup>th</sup> thesis: *Without prejudice to the theological legitimacy of the now existing ministries in the separated Churches as judged by a given Church, all particular Churches commit themselves from now on so to undertake ordination through prayer and the laying-on of hands that the recognition of such ordination presents no difficulty to the Roman Catholic Church.*

This thesis brings into discussion one of the delicate issues of the inter-Christian dialogue: the issue of the mutual recognition of priestly ministry. Rahner noted

that, in this respect, between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church there is not a sacramental issue, but only a legal issue. However, the mutual recognition of priesthood by the Catholics and the Reformed raises great issues. The Roman Church has not recognized either the Anglican or the Reformed priesthood. Therefore, as long as the priesthood is not recognized, the other Sacraments cannot be deemed valid.<sup>37</sup> But, Rahner wrote, if the premises proposed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> thesis are accepted—namely, if disputes on controversial topics are dropped in the hope of a wider future consensus—, we can hope for a common agreement in respect of priesthood as well.<sup>38</sup>

## Brief Evaluation from the Perspective of Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology

FATHER STĂNILOAE involved himself both theoretically, as well as practically in the inter-Christian dialogue, often commenting on ecumenical events or elaborating on themes in an ecumenical spirit.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike Karl Rahner, who spoke about a hierarchy of dogmas and about a dogmatic “neutrality” for a full dogmatic agreement in the future, Father Stăniloae rejected any form of dogmatic relativism, even if strategically used, as well as the distinction between main and secondary dogmas.<sup>40</sup> In point of fact, dogmas are the expression of the genuine experience of life in Christ, and not a sum total of theoretical, speculative interpretations about God. They are grounded in the very communion of perfect love of the Holy Trinity<sup>41</sup> and are, therefore, expressions of the divine life bestowed over the world.

Father Stăniloae proposed a project of Christian unity which is fundamentally different from that submitted by Rahner and Fries, essentially because it sees the unity of the Church in the unity of faith and in the unity in Sacraments, and not in papacy. This ecumenical project was developed by the Romanian theologian particularly in his study entitled “Coordinates of Ecumenism from the Orthodox Point of View.”<sup>42</sup>

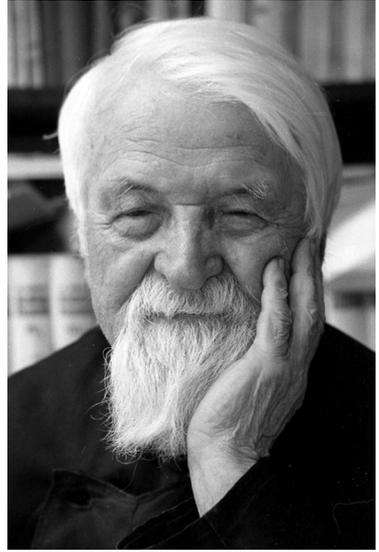
We learn from this study that Father Stăniloae envisaged “a Christianity united in faith, not an administrative or organizational one” (520), but a Christianity open to the world, to the people of any denomination and religion, to believers and unbelievers, as Christ the Lord assumed in Himself the entire human nature and came to serve each man, regardless of race or creed (535).

The exchange of visits that took place in 1967 between Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople, by which it was intended to restore the “full communion” between the Orthodox and Catholics, prompted Father

Stăniloae to express his point of view with respect to the union of the two Churches.

From the very beginning, the Romanian theologian expressed his reservations about what he termed “the Athenagoras doctrine,” which consists in cultivating a dialogue of love that may cause “waves of sentimental words, which ignore the important truths of faith, without which Christianity may not last for a long time” (497). Moreover, he pointed out that the dialogue between the Orthodox and the Catholics must be conducted on equal footing, reminding that the sons of Zebedee had been admonished by the Savior for their wish for primacy (499).

Father Stăniloae also criticized the position of Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon, in which he saw “a certain disregard for theology” (also manifest in Rahner’s project), obvious in his avoidance of the theological discussions about the differences between the two denominations<sup>43</sup> and in his references to only what unites us. At the same time he warned that some Orthodox theologians erroneously believed that the schism had been caused by terminological inaccuracies, and “not by doctrine and acts”:



DUMITRU STĂNILOAE  
(1903–1993)

*Unfortunately, however, the Churches’ separation was not caused by formal and minor, non-doctrinal efforts, but by serious differences in understanding Christ’s teaching. And these differences did not concern only the theologians, but the entire Church. Avoiding an open theological discussion about these differences, undoubtedly in the spirit of love, would arouse in the broad circles of the Orthodox believers the suspicion that their deception is sought, their deprivation of the belief they inherited from generation to generation from the Apostles, their being imperceptibly carried into the stable of Peter’s successor. (508)*

Similar to the Rahner–Fries project, the Vatican has proposed since that time a communion in the Sacraments by circumventing and relativizing the doctrinal differences. To the call of Pope Paul VI—“Unite with Us, beloved sons, gather around Our unique person and our supreme office . . . *Nolite timere* (Do not be afraid!),” Father Stăniloae answered: “We confess that we are afraid of the man who declares himself the sole representative of Christ, depriving the Church of the possibility of a direct communication with Him” (503). To this unity,

proposed both by Pope Paul VI and by the Rahner–Fries ecumenical project—a unity finally given in the person and office of the pope—, Father Stăniloae opposed a completely different view on the unity of the Church.

In the opinion of the Romanian theologian, the unity of the Churches must be achieved solely in “the integrity of the apostolic teaching” (513), in “the unimpaired apostolic typology” (514), present in the New Testament and in the Early Church. Unlike Rahner, who emphasized the diversity of the ecclesiological conceptions that existed in the Early Church, Father Stăniloae confessed that in the single Church highly contradictory interpretations are not justified, as, for instance, some people speak about a special magisterium, and other people deny it, some people deem worship necessary for salvation, while others deem it irrelevant (515). The unified Church needs the institutional dimension, but it should not be defined primarily by the legal aspect, but rather by the sacramental aspect and by the sacramental and pastoral role of the magisterium, acknowledged by all its members (516).

Observance of the apostolic tradition and, therefore, the recourse to the single Church is achieved particularly through sobornicity, understood both as universality, as well as integrity of the doctrine, namely, both as extensive sobornicity (sobornost), as well as, particularly, intensive sobornicity. The apostolicity and sobornicity of the Church interpenetrate and determine each other. Faithfulness toward the apostolic teaching implies the “ecumenical” experience by all the members of the Church of the Truth experienced and proclaimed by the Apostles. Sobornicity does not imply understanding and imposing the truth by the ecclesial magisterium and, eventually, by a single person, but experiencing and deepening it by way of each and every believer of the Church. The pope’s infallibility, Father Stăniloae believed, is not just an added doctrinal tenet alien to the apostolic Tradition, but “a tenet that deforms and narrows that integrity,” a distortion of sobornicity by replacing the interpretation of the truth by the entire Church with its “absolutist” interpretation by one person (518). In exchange, “the episcopal synodality is merely the organic reflex of the general sobornicity of the Church” (519).

Gathered in synod, the bishops make decisions in communion with their own believers and with the other Churches, and the synodal decisions return then to the local communities, to be endorsed by “testing/putting them into practice,” by having the entire Church experience them. Only in this way unity and diversity, the institutional aspect and the charismatic one are kept in a perfect balance. Which means that sobornicity is in real harmony with the existence and independence of the local Churches (519). Only a greater rapprochement in faith may bring a more genuine spiritual communication, and not an administrative, organizational unity “of this world.” Finally, the Romanian theologian

noticed and pointed out a Roman centralism which he deemed a “burden” both for the Roman Catholic Church, as well as for the other Christian denominations in dialogue with it (521). This papal centralism causes tendencies of separation and of community autonomy of the Protestant type (523) or, as Rahner himself remarked, of the charismatic type in the Roman Catholic Church itself.

As an alternative to the centralist or sentimental-relativist ecumenism, Father Stăniloae proposed an ecumenism grounded on “open sobornicity,” an ecumenism according to which: a) God works even beyond the frontiers of the Church and b) Churches can come closer to one another through unity in diversity, learning from God’s work in a world that becomes increasingly unified in its diversity (527).

## Conclusions in the Horizon of “Open Sobornicity”

**F**EW BOOKS on Christian unity have aroused such a keen interest among ecumenists, theologians and Church leaders as the work of Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner. The rich literature produced in response to this project is clear evidence in this respect.<sup>44</sup>

From the perspective of Dumitru Stăniloae’s theology, the entire ecumenical project proposed by Rahner and Fries is extremely relativistic and diplomatic and is focused on the idea of Church unity seen in the person and authority of the pope. The two Catholic authors depart from a certain doctrinal relativism to devise a very uncertain future unity. That is why we are not surprised that none of the three great Christian confessions essentially found its place in this project, although, as it was to be expected, there were also some theologians who appreciated this ecumenical vision.<sup>45</sup>

In his analysis of the ecumenical project proposed by Rahner and Fries,<sup>46</sup> J. Ratzinger pointed out that we are dealing here with “a form of ecumenism of authority,” to which Protestantism is not alien either. When he remarked, however, that true ecumenism is neither that of the “the base,” cultivated a lot by the Churches of the Reformation, nor that “of authority,” typical of Catholicism, but the one that cultivates the close unity between the “action of authorities and the genuine life of faith,”<sup>47</sup> the future Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged the profound vision of Stăniloae on ecumenism understood as “open sobornicity.”

□

*(Translated by ANCA MĂLUREANU)*

## Notes

1. Karl Rahner's ecumenical works were collected in *Sämtliche Werke (sw) 27, Einheit in Vielfalt: Schriften zur ökumenischen Theologie*, eds. Karl Lehmann, Johann Baptist Metz, Albert Raffelt, Herbert Vorgrimler, and Andreas R. Baltogg (Freiburg i.Br.–Basel–Vienna: Benzinger-Herder, 2002). Detailed information about Karl Rahner's ecumenical involvement is offered by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt in "Editionsbericht," *sw 27: IX–XXV*. Among the studies about Rahner's ecumenical theology we mention: Robin Christopher Ryan, *The Quest for the Unity of the Christian Churches: A Study of Karl Rahner's Writings on Christian Ecumenism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1992); Karl Lehmann, "Karl Rahner als Pionier der Ökumene," discourse at Karl Rahner Akademie Köln, 2003; Birgitta Kleinschwärzer-Meister: "'Katholisch und (deswegen) ökumenisch': Karl Rahner und die Ökumene," *Una sancta: Zeitschrift für ökumenische Begegnung* 60 (2005): 164–177; Hans-Joachim Schulz, "Karl Rahners Sakramententheologie: Zugang zu Ostkirche und Ökumene," in *Wagnis Theologie: Erfahrungen mit der Theologie Karl Rahners*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg–Basel–Vienna: Herder, 1979), 402–416. In the Romanian theology, the Baptist theologian Ciprian Simuț presented and evaluated Fries' and Rahner's joint ecumenical project in the work *Unitatea bisericii în teologia lui Karl Rahner și Heinrich Fries*, eds. Corneliu C. Simuț and Ramona Simuț (Oradea: Ed. Universității Emanuel, 2009).
2. Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *Karl Rahner: Gottgeheimnis Mensch* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1995), 185. Hilberath offers in this volume a very suggestive account of Rahner's contribution to ecumenical dialogue (183–208).
3. "Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit," in *sw 27: 287*.
4. The 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> theses are commented by H. Fries, while the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> by K. Rahner (*sw 17: 291*). Obviously, as it is a work written "by two hands," each of the authors subscribed to the other's interpretations. For the presentation and comment on these 8 theses, see Ryan, 351–391.
5. *sw 27: 294*. For the English translation of the theses, I used Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, transl. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; New York: Paulist Press, 1985).
6. *Ibid.*, 294–295.
7. *Ibid.*, 296.
8. *Ibid.*, 298.
9. *Ibid.*, 299.
10. *Ibid.*, 300.
11. *Ibid.*, 299.
12. *Ibid.*, 300.
13. *Ibid.*, 302.
14. *Ibid.*, 303.
15. *Ibid.*, 305–306. See also Simuț, 27–28.
16. *Ibid.*, 306–307.
17. *Ibid.*, 310–312.

18. Ibid., 314–315.
19. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre: Bausteine zu einer Fundamentaltheologie* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1975), 209: “Unity may be achieved, in this case, on the following basis: on the one hand, the East should renounce to fight against the Western evolution of the second millennium as a heretical evolution and accept the Catholic Church as legitimate and orthodox in the form in which it has been in its evolution, while on the other hand, the Westerners should recognize the Church of the East in the form in which it was kept.”
20. See *sw* 27: 316.
21. Ibid., 317.
22. See, particularly, articles 16, 17 of “Decree on ecumenism,” *Unitatis redintegratio*.
23. *sw* 27: 319.
24. Ibid. “Eine möglichst weitgehende Homogenisierung der Teilkirchen ist kein katholisches Ideal, wenn das Konzil auch zugibt, daß in der konkreten Praxis Roms auch nicht selten gegen die legitime Eigenständigkeit der Kirchen des Ostens innerhalb der Einheit der ganzen Kirche verstoßen worden ist.”
25. Simuț, 42.
26. *sw* 27: 323.
27. Ibid., 324.
28. Ibid., 326–328.
29. Ibid., 330–331, 332–333, 339.
30. Ibid., 351.
31. Ibid., 351–353.
32. Ibid., 354.
33. Ibid., 353–354.
34. Ibid., 355–356.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 354, 359.
37. Ibid., 377–378.
38. The other three theses, commented by Fries, have the following content: The 5<sup>th</sup> thesis: *Following ancient tradition, all particular Churches have bishops at the head of their larger sub-divisions. The election of bishops does not need to be made in the way currently normal in the Roman Catholic Church. (In any case, canon 377.1 knows other ways of appointing bishops than the free choice of the pope).* The 6<sup>th</sup> thesis: *The particular Churches live in mutual brotherly exchange in all dimensions of their life, so that the earlier history and experience of the once separated Churches can bear fruit in the life of each and all.* The 8<sup>th</sup> thesis: *Between the particular Churches there is sharing of pulpit and altar* (ibid., 360, 371, 383).
39. The most important studies of Dumitru Stăniloae on ecumenism are “Mișcarea ecumenică și unitatea creștină în stadiul actual,” *Ortodoxia* (Bucharest) 15, 3–4 (1963): 544–589; “Documentele doctrinare de la Montreal,” *Ortodoxia* 16, 4 (1964): 577–597; “Posibilitatea reconcilierii dogmatice între Biserica Ortodoxă și Vechile Biserici Orientale,” *Ortodoxia* 17, 1 (1965): 5–27; “Conceptia Bisericii Romano-Catolice despre alte Biserici și atitudinea ei față de acestea în condițiile ecumenismului ac-

tual,” *Ortodoxia* 17, 2 (1965): 267–283; “Iubire și adevăr: Pentru depășirea dilemei ecumenismului contemporan,” *Ortodoxia* 19, 2 (1967): 283–292; “Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere ortodox,” *Ortodoxia* 19, 4 (1967): 494–540; “Relațiile Bisericii Ortodoxe Române cu Bisericile Vechi Orientale, cu Biserica Romano-Catolică și cu Protestantismul,” *Ortodoxia* 20, 2 (1968): 209–224; “Problema uniatismlui în perspectivă ecumenică,” *Ortodoxia* 21, 4 (1969): 616–626; “Întrebări ale ecumenismului contemporan,” *Ortodoxia* 22, 2 (1970): 296–300; “În problema intercomuniunii,” *Ortodoxia* 23, 4 (1971): 561–584; “Sobornicitatea deschisă,” *Ortodoxia* 23, 2 (1971): 165–180; “Relațiile ecumenice ale Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în ultimul sfert de veac,” *Ortodoxia* 25, 2 (1973): 166–175. On how ecumenism was reflected in Father Dumitru Stăniloae’s work, see Ronald Roberson, “Ecumenism in the Thought of Dumitru Stăniloae,” *Symposium*, 6/1, *The Theological Legacy of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae and its Ecumenical Actuality* (New York: The Romanian Institute of Orthodox Theology and Spirituality, 1999): 43–54; id., “Dumitru Stăniloae on Christian Unity,” in *Dumitru Stăniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, ed. Lucian Turcescu (Iași–Oxford–Palm Beach–Portland: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2002), 104–125; Ion Bria and Dagmar Heller, eds., *Ecumenical Pilgrinus: Profiles of Pioneers in Christian Reconciliation* (Geneva: wcc Publication, 1995), 226–230; id., “The Impact of Father Dumitru Stăniloae’s Theology on Ecumenical Movement,” *The Word of Truth* 3–4 (2000): 25–30; id., “Teologia Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae și hermeneutica ecumenică,” *Caietele Universității “Sextil Pușcariu”* (Brașov) 3, 2 (2002): 28–37; Pr. Conf. Dr. Nicolae Moșoiu, “Viziunea Părintelui Profesor Dumitru Stăniloae despre ecumenism—o introducere,” *Caietele Universității “Sextil Pușcariu”* 32, 2 (2002): 77–105; id., “Sobornicitatea deschisă—paradigma pentru ethosul ecumenic—viziunea creatoare a Părintelui Profesor Dumitru Stăniloae,” in *Hermeneutica ortodoxă ca dezvoltare teologică în Tradiție* (Sibiu: Astra Museum, 2013): 460–516.

40. The Romanian theologian quoted St. Basil the Great, who wrote: “Therefore no discrimination in dogmas is allowed, because dogmatic belief is a unitary and organic whole, of which, if we tried to pull out and throw away those issues we deem ‘petty’ and as ‘not having a great power,’ according to the arbitrary judgment of each of us, we could not remark the important dogmas among them, but we would injure the faith, or better said, we would reduce preaching to an empty notion.” Preotul Profesor Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2003), 272.
41. *Ibid.*, 1: 81.
42. Stăniloae, “Coordonatele ecumenismului,” 494–540. I mentioned the pages quoted from this study directly in the text, between brackets.
43. “As there has been created in some circles, through a certain propaganda, such a mood which deems as ‘non-ecumenical,’ in ‘bad taste,’ ‘retrograde,’ or lacking in Christian love any mention made by the Orthodox theologians with regard to the differentiating aspects that separate us from Catholics and which must be openly debated” (*ibid.*, 509).

44. See Patrick J. Cogan, S.A., "H. Fries and K. Rahner's *The Unity of the Churches: Three Responses*," *Ecumenical Trends* 14 (1985), 97, apud Ryan, 392.
45. Ryan offers a brief survey of the positive and negative ways in which the ecumenical project of Fries and Rahner was received (395–403).
46. In 1984, while he was a prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal J. Ratzinger formulated one of the toughest criticisms against the ecumenical project presented, bluntly declaring that, although ingenious, this project "remains an artificial exploit of theological acrobatics which, unfortunately, does not live up to reality." Joseph Ratzinger, "Luther and the unity of the churches: an interview with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 11 (1984): 216.
47. Joseph Ratzinger, "Zum Fortgang der Ökumene," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 166, 4 (1986): 245.

### **Abstract**

Ecumenism in Dialogue: Karl Rahner and Dumitru Stăniloae

In a time of rising religious pluralism and multiculturalism, the ecumenical project proposed by the Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries, materialized in the joint work *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, reminds today's Christians that the desire for reconciliation and unity in love and truth is a sacred evangelic ideal. This study sets forth the theses of the most challenging ecumenical project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as a critical evaluation of this project from the perspective of the Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae. Through this study the author wishes to contribute to what the President of the Romanian Academy, Ioan-Aurel Pop, called the shift from "I tolerate" to "I respect," with reference to the sincere engagement of Christians in their joint endeavor to reach the unifying truth by means of love, at a time when the surge in relativism undermines any identity.

### **Keywords**

ecumenism, K. Rahner, D. Stăniloae, H. Fries, unity, Churches, "open sobornicity"