

Breaking communion with heretics and the 15th canon (I-II Constantinople)

„Heresy, this frightening sin which comprises blasphemy against the Holy Spirit within it, makes the man totally estranged from God and, estranging him from God, surrenders him to the power of satan”¹

St. Ignaty Brianchaninov

Given that in the last two years the subject of breaking communion with the ecumenists has become very actual and that this topic is almost exclusively discussed in the context of the 15th canon of the Synod I-II of Constantinople (861), there have arisen a lot of opinions and very diverse interpretations regarding the subject, some of them being even contradictory. We would like to clarify some questions regarding the cessation of commemoration and the aforementioned 15th canon, desiring to reduce as much as possible such divergences and to avoid harmful interpretations.

The historical context in which the 15th canon was settled

The wrong interpretations of the 15th canon are primarily caused by the lack of a complete view on the Synod I-II Constantinople, for the historical context in which this Synod assembled and reached its decisions is fundamental for the interpretation of the 15th canon.

3 years before this Synod, namely in 858, as a result of a conflict between the holy patriarch Ignatius and Bardas, brother of the holy empress Theodora (†866), whom he removed from power, St. Ignatius was unjustly deposed from the patriarchal throne. In the same year the great scholar and prominent theologian St. Photius the Great, who was still a layman, but had already acquired an imposing theological authority, in the course of just a few days was tonsured into monasticism and went through all ecclesiastical degrees, being enthroned *„forcibly and unwillingly”²* as patriarch on the day of the Nativity of our Lord in 858.

There followed a period of trouble in the Church, because many Christians did not want to recognise the new patriarch due to the way he had been enthroned. In order to pacify both parties, it was decided on the one hand that no clerics can break communion with their bishop for *„certain guilt”* (personal sins, administrative infringements etc.) until he has been condemned by a synod (canons 13, 14 and 15), and on the other hand it was decreed that *„from now on no layman or monk can rise straightaway to the heights of the episcopate, but after being first tested in the ecclesiastical degrees, he can receive the ordination of the episcopate”* (17th canon)³, so that there should be no recurrence of similar situations.

What we should not look for in the text of the 15th canon

Thus the Synod had the purpose to heal a situation of schism. But in order to avoid the interpretation that breaking communion for the reason of heresy could be also treated as a schism, especially because the iconoclast heresy was completely defeated just a few years before (in 843), in the 15th canon, in its second half, it was underlined that *„For those who separate from communion with their president because*

¹ St. Ignaty Brianchaninov – [On heresy and schism, cap. 3](#)

² Foreword on the First and Second Synod [rom. Prolegomena despre cel ce se zice Întâiul și al Doilea Sinod], [Pidalion, 1844](#)

³ The 17 canons of the Synod assembled in the Church of Holy Apostles which is called First and Second with interpretation, canon 17 [rom. Cele 17 canoane ale sinodului celui în Biserica Sfinților Apostoli adunat ce se zice 1 și al 2-lea tâlcuite, Canon 17], [Pidalion, 1844](#)

*of some heresy condemned by the holy councils or fathers [...] not only are not subject to the penalty settled by the canons [...] but are also worthy of the honour befitting the Orthodox*⁴.

In fact the second part of this canon states that the orthodox who separate themselves from the heretical *false-bishops*, even if the latter have not been condemned by a synod, can not be judged through the anti-schismatic canons 13, 14 and 15, since „*they have not sundered the unity of the Church by a schism, but have endeavoured to protect the Church from schisms and divisions*”.

In other words the 15th canon does not represent a „guide” or an „instruction” for ceasing commemoration of heretics, as it is treated by some, but it only expresses the only situation in which breaking communion is not a schism.

It’s interesting that Athonite monks who fought against the unia of Lyon in the 13th century wrote a confession of faith to the emperor in which they justified their separation from the heretical patriarch John Vekkos firstly based on Scripture, then on the 1st canon of the Quinisext Council, then on the „Tomos of unity” and only after that they mentioned also the 15th canon of the Synod I-II.

There are a lot of cases in the history of the Church when orthodox christians, monks, priests and bishops have broken communion with heretics long before the 15th canon was issued in 861. Therefore it is important not to treat the subject of the cessation of commemoration exclusively in the context of the 15th canon, because it does not exhaust the topic, having a totally another purpose than that of providing an exact definition of the procedure for ceasing commemoration of heretics, and therefore it has many gaps, meaning that it does not give a clear answer to the questions which we naturally could ask ourselves, namely:

- What is actually the purpose of breaking communion?
- Is the cessation of the commemoration of heretics optional or compulsory?
- Whom should the orthodox commemorate instead of the local bishop who fell into heresy?
- What’s the relationship between the walled off christians and bishops from other dioceses?
- Should communion be broken only with the heretics or also with those who maintain communion with them?
- Do the mysteries of the heretics continue to be valid if they have not been condemned yet by name?

Obviously the 15th canon does not give a clear answer for these questions, since it has been issued for a completely different purpose, that of stating which separation is a schism and which is not a schism. Consequently, the attempt to answer them exclusively in the context of this canon, isolating it from the rest of the Tradition of the Church, leads inevitably to misinterpretations, a fact which can be witnessed following the recent polemics.

The answer to these and other similar questions should be sought in the Holy Scripture, the decisions of the Local and Ecumenical Synods and in the acts and writings of the Holy Fathers, a work which should necessarily be done in order to avoid splits and misinterpretations. But before this it is important to realize the limits of the 15th canon and not attribute to it ideas that it does not contain.

Further we will try to express the answers that we have found for the questions listed above. Actually they don’t pretend to be an expression of the ultimate truth, but represent a synthesis of the studies which we have made seeking a patristic answer for these problems, therefore we kindly ask the readers to come with criticisms and suggestions, so that we could help each other on the way to salvation.

⁴ The 17 canons of the Synod assembled in the Church of Holy Apostles which is called First and Second with interpretation, canon 15 [*rom. Cele 17 canoane ale sinodului celui în Biserica Sfinților Apostoli adunat ce se zice 1 și al 2-lea tâlcuite, Canon 15*], [Pidalion, 1844](#)

What is the purpose of breaking communion with heretics? Is it optional or compulsory?

Regarding the act of the cessation of commemoration there have been formulated some interpretations which state that it represents a „note of protest” or that its purpose is „convocation of a synod” which would condemn the heresy, but we don’t find such ideas in the text of the 15th canon. If treated separately, they can seem pretty noble. But to what extent do such ideas coincide with the intents of the Holy Fathers? What thought drove them to break communion with heretics and to teach us to do the same?

In one of his epistles, St. Theodore the Studite says: „*If one gets into this trap [the abyss of heresy], the communion with heretics separates him from Christ and casts him away from the flock of the Lord*”⁵. Also in other letters: „*The communion given by a heretic or by one obviously condemned for his way of life estranges from God and throws you into the hands of the devil*”⁶, „*Communion with heretics is not a common bread, but a poison that does not harm the body, but blackens and darkens the soul*”⁷.

It is clear that for St. Theodore breaking communion with heretics is a question of salvation! But since some so-called theologians have endeavored to denigrate St. Theodore the Studite, saying that he expressed just some personal opinions that do not concord with the Scriptures and other Holy Fathers, let us see some other witnesses.

The holy Apostle John the Theologian says: „*If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed*” (2 John 1:10). Why can’t we receive and salute him? „*For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds*” (2 John 1:11).

St. John Chrysostom tells us about the relationship with heretics: „*Do not have any communion with them – don’t eat with them, don’t drink, don’t bind friendships with them, neither relationships, neither love, neither peace*”. For what reason? „*Because if someone links up with heretics in these things, he becomes alien to the Catholic Church*”⁸. Writing to a monk about a new heresy that had appeared in those places, St. Basil the Great says: „*That’s why I beg you to put this for an ecclesiastical examination and to withdraw from the communion with heretics, knowing that disregard for this question destroys our zeal for Christ*”⁹.

St. Joseph Volotsky, who confronted the heresy of the judaizers¹⁰ in the XIV-XV centuries, said: „*If he will turn out to be a heretic, we will try not to receive either his teaching or his Communion, and not only will we receive no Communion from him, but we’ll condemn him and expose him with all our power, so that we do not become partakers of his perdition*”¹¹.

Here is how the aforementioned Athonite Confessors justified their separation from the heretical patriarch John Vekkos: „*He who receives the heretic is ought to the same condemnation as him [...] How can we rightfully recognize them as heads and judges of the Orthodox Church and how can we proclaim their commemoration as an orthodox one in the church and especially at the Lord’s Supper, so that it should continue to sanctify us without defilement?*”¹².

In his letter to the Christians from Spain about some apostate bishops from there, St. Cyprian of Carthage says: „*The crowd should not comfort itself that it can remain untouched by the contagion of sin if it is in communion with a sinful bishop and gives him the permission for the unjust and unlawful service as its*

⁵ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 245\(433\)](#). To the curator Constantine.

⁶ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 58](#). To the wife of a spatharos called Mahara.

⁷ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 24\(83\)](#). To the son Ignatius.

⁸ St. John Chrysostom – [A word about false prophets, false teachers, about heretics and about the signs of the end of this age, cap. 7](#)

⁹ St. Basil the Great – [Epistle 254\(262\)](#). To monk Urvikius.

¹⁰ For basic info about this heresy see „[Sect of Skhariya the Jew](#)”

¹¹ St. Joseph Volotsky – [The enlightener](#), Word nr. VII

¹² [Epistle of the Hagiorite Fathers](#) to the emperor Michael Paleologos with the confession of faith against the unia of Lyon (1272-74)

hierarchy, since the harshness of God threatens and says through the prophet Hosea (9:4): „**Their sacrifices shall be unto them as the bread of mourners; all that eat thereof shall be polluted**”, teaching and showing that all those who get polluted by the sacrifices of a profane („from outside the Church”) and unlawful bishop are totally partakers of the sin”¹³.

St. Nectarios of Aegina gives us the same confession: „The lack of external communion (with heretics) defends us from the **internal estrangement (from God, from truth)**”¹⁴.

There is such a complete consonance between the words of the Scriptures and all of these Holy Fathers regarding the communion with heretics and its consequences for ourselves! When reading these words with care, we cannot diminish the importance of the act of breaking communion, saying that it has a purely disciplinary or administrative purpose, or that it is just a note of protest or a strategic action for a possible synod. Communion with heretics is, first of all, a big threat to the salvation of our soul, whence it is a natural measure to break it, so that we do not become partakers of their perdition and not estrange ourselves from Christ.

Therefore can we even ask if this measure is optional or compulsory? It could be optional only inasmuch as we are unconcerned about our salvation. If the Church teaches us that in this way we endanger our salvation, can a faithful Christian ask if it is optional or not?

Whom should the Orthodox commemorate instead of the local bishop who fell into heresy? What’s the relationship between the walled off Christians and bishops from other dioceses?

According to the order of the Church, it is mandatory for the priests to commemorate their bishop at the holy services (if he is „not having any grounds for condemning the bishop with regard to religion or justice”¹⁵), meaning the ecclesiastical ruler of that specific territory (in addition to this there can be commemorated also other bishops). If he falls into heresy and his commemoration is naturally terminated, there is no canonical basis for commemorating a bishop from another diocese instead.

The Holy Fathers who talked in detail about the cessation of commemoration, e.g. St. Theodore the Studite and the Athonite Confessors from the 13th century, do not write at all about who should be commemorated instead of the local heretical bishop or which formula should be pronounced instead.

Therefore we can consider that the formula „All the Orthodox bishops” (or „All the Orthodox episcopate”) that has been used in the 20th century and in recent years, expresses fairly well the ecclesiological realities and does not break the canonical order of the Church.

Another important question is: to what extent can the orthodox bishops from other dioceses get involved in matters of the Christians who have walled themselves off from their heretical bishop? Regarding this question there are many witnesses from Church Tradition.

For instance St. Gregory the Theologian writes that he has been invited to Constantinople by Orthodox priests and laymen¹⁶, who had a single little church in Constantinople¹⁷, to shepherd them and to confront the heretics who dominated the capital city of the empire¹⁸, having archbishop Demophilus as their leader. Judging strictly from a canonical point of view¹⁹, St. Gregory had absolutely no right to come to a foreign diocese to take care of the local flock, but in the time of heresy these norms can not be applied the same way as in the time of peace.

¹³ St. Cyprian of Carthage – [Epistle to the Spanish Clerics and Laymen about Basilidus and Marcyallus](#)

¹⁴ St. Nectarius, metropolitan of Pentapolis – About the relationship with heretics, Publ. Papangopoulos *apud* Fr. Sava Lavriotis – Patristic interpretation of the 15th canon

¹⁵ Canons of the Holy Apostles, Canon 31

¹⁶ St. Gregory the Theologian – [De Vita Sua](#), 592-608

¹⁷ The life of St. Gregory the Theologian

¹⁸ St. Gregory the Theologian – [De Vita Sua](#), 609-611

¹⁹ Can. 2 of the 2nd Ecumenical Synod, Can. 8 of the 3rd Ecumenical Synod, Can. 35 Apost., Can. 13, 22 Antioch s.a.

The same thing is affirmed by St. Theodore the Studite. Being asked by one of his disciples if they can have communion with priests ordained in Italy and Sicily (the canons prohibit ordain of priests for foreign dioceses), the holy man answered: „***In the time of heresy, when there is necessity, not everything happens exactly according to the rules determined in the time of peace. We see that blessed Athanasius and the most holy Eusebius acted in the same way, as they both ordained people from outside their region***”²⁰.

St. Basil the Great with his bishops also asked fellow bishops from the West not to be indifferent about the state of affairs they were in, but to come there to summon together a large synod which could „*cast the heresy out and offer the Churches the word of peace, bringing to agreement those who think the same way*”²¹.

Thus Orthodox bishops absolutely have the right to be involved with and to help the Christians from dioceses that are controlled by heretics. This refers to the actual struggle against the heresy, as well as to the solving of pastoral problems, such as the ordination of priests or other matters that require a hierarch’s involvement.

Should communion be broken only with heretics or also with those who maintain communion with them?

Since this question is not treated in the 15th canon, it unfortunately became a stumbling-block, despite the fact that Holy Fathers are really firm about it. For example in his letter to some monks, St. Athanasius the Great says: „*My beloved, deign to avoid those who have clearly impious thoughts and **run away from those who, considering that they don’t think like Arius, are actually in communion with the wicked***”²².

St. Nikephoros the Confessor, making a confession of faith in his epistle to St. Pope Leo III, wrote: „*I anathematize those who relinquished the tradition of the saints and joined the depraved and deadly teachings of those who dared to sow tares in the field of the Orthodox Faith **and all those who follow them, as a shame for the Church of Christ, I abhor and anathematize them***”²³.

While being less rigid in this regard, St. Theodore the Studite still says that we cannot have communion with those who maintain communion with heretics, even though the first ones have an Orthodox mindset: „*Regarding the Orthodox priest that out of fear of persecution commemorates the heretical bishop I answered you before and I will say again: if he does not serve together with the heretic and does not have communion with such people, he should be received in the community for psalmody, blessing of the meals, and this out of oikonomia, **but not for Divine Communion***”²⁴.

Here we must take note of a factor that is repeated often by St. Theodore the Studite in his epistles, namely that this *oikonomia* can be applied towards the clerics that maintain communion with heretics **out of fear of persecution**, not out of uncertainty, friendship, apathy, wickedness or other reasons, as is affirmed by some who take this teaching out of context.

The conscious communion with heretics is a great betrayal and any man who has the fear of God should be aware of that. Of course this doesn’t mean that all those who maintain the communion with ecumenists should be treated the same way as the ecumenists themselves, we see this attitude at St. Theodore the Studite and other Holy Fathers, e.g. St. Athanasius the Great who was asked *in what way those who had fallen into communion with Arians should be received*, and answered: „*Regarding those who fell and led the wickedness, the penitents should be treated with leniency, but should not be given a place in the*

²⁰ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 87\(275\)](#). To monk Methodius, questions 1 and 2.

²¹ St. Basil the Great – [Epistle 88\(92\)](#). To the bishops of Italy and Gaul.

²² St. Athanasius the Great – [Epistle to those who endeavor in the monastic life](#)

²³ St. Nikephoros the Confessor – [Epistle to Pope Leo III](#)

²⁴ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 40](#). To the son Naucratius.

clergy, but those who were not workers of the wickedness by themselves, but have been engaged in it through need or violence, they should be forgiven, and should be given a place in the clergy”²⁵.

Thus the separation from the heretics implies also breaking eucharistic communion with those who continue to be in liturgical unity with them, even if the latter have an Orthodox mindset and maintain this communion out of fear or by compulsion. On the other hand, we should be aware of human weaknesses, so such people should not be treated the same way as the evident heretics.

Do the mysteries of the heretics continue to be valid if they have not been nominally condemned yet?

Unfortunately the question of the validity of mysteries performed by heretics has raised a lot of disputes and misinterpretations, for that reason we need to make a multilateral analysis of this idea. But first of all let's emphasize that it's not the presence or absence of grace among the heretics that is urging us to depart from communion with them, but the wish to stay in the truth and separate from falsehood, the love for Christ and the avoidance of eternal death. In the works of Holy Fathers we do not see this obsession towards this matter either.

Also in all the years that we have been studying this problem and been trying to take an Orthodox position towards the heresy of ecumenism, we have not been preoccupied by the question of the validity of heretics' mysteries. More than that, the present study has been made by us rather because we have been constrained by the situation, as we observed that there an excessive emphasis has been placed on this matter and especially on the idea that the mysteries of the heretics are indisputably valid. So this fact determined us to study the patristic attitude towards this question.

Generally the assertion that the mysteries of heretics are valid is based on the fact that the ecumenists have not been condemned by name yet, which means that there a distinction is created between condemned heretics and uncondemned heretics, a distinction that can't be found in the writings of the Holy Fathers. Usually in support of this idea there are brought two arguments: St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite's interpretation of the 3rd apostolic canon and the fact that the 3rd and the 7th Ecumenical Councils decided to receive those who had been ordained by the Nestorian and Iconoclast heretics before the latter's condemnation without repeating their cheirotonia. But let us see how justified are these arguments.

In the footnote of the aforementioned interpretation, St. Nicodemus says the following: *„The canons order the synod of the bishops that are alive to defrock the priests, or to excommunicate or to anathematize the laymen **when they break the canons**. But if the synod will not apply the defrocking of priests, or excommunication, or anathema of laymen, then these priests and laymen **are not actually defrocked, nor anathematized**”²⁶. In other words, the penalties laid down in the canons do not become automatically valid, but first have to be proclaimed by a synod of bishops.*

At first sight one could understand that this refers also to the condemnation of heretics, who would therefore continue to be members of the Church until an orthodox synod would condemn them. But since the heresy is not a regular sin or an ordinary canonical violation, but as St. Ignaty Brianchaninov says: *„Heresy is the rebellion and revolt of the creature against the Creator, the rebellion and revolt of the most tiny and limited being, the human, against the all-perfect God”²⁷*, let us see if in the aforementioned interpretation St. Nicodemus (and the canons on the whole) treat the heresy along with all canonical violations (that can be moral, administrative, disciplinary etc.), since we have seen that, for instance, the 15th canon of the Synod I-II has different regulations for heresy and for ordinary canonical violations.

²⁵ St. Athanasius the Great – [Epistle to Rufinian](#)

²⁶ Canons of the Holy Apostles, Canon 3 (footnote), [Pidalion, 1844](#)

²⁷ St. Ignaty Brianchaninov – [About heresy and schism, cap. 1](#)

For example the 14th canon of the Synod of Serdica states that a priest has to accept his defrocking, **even if he has been defrocked unjustly by the bishop**, until this decision should be overturned by a synod. It looks like this canon contradicts the 15th canon of the Synod I-II, which states that in such cases the Orthodox priests „*not only are not subject to the penalty laid down by the canons, but are also worthy of the honour befitting the orthodox*”. Actually this apparent contradiction between the canons refers to different situations, one is in regard to a defrocking proclaimed by an Orthodox hierarch and the other is about the relationship with a heretical hierarch.

For instance we know from St. Gregory Palamas that „*if [bishops] abandon Orthodoxy, they lose not only their ecclesiastic authority, but even the title of christians, as their anathemas have no value at all*”²⁸. So St. Gregory of course continued to serve after he had been condemned for ceasing commemoration of the patriarch in 1344²⁹. Heresy is not just an ordinary canonical violation, since for example the First Ecumenical Council did not issue a single canon condemning Arius and Arians, as they have been condemned within the meetings of the Council. It would be a mistake to relate to heretical hierarchs through the prism of canons that refer to orthodox hierarchs.

On the other hand St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite reveals that even the defrocked priest is not totally estranged from the priesthood, saying that „*In his epistle to Niketas, Joseph Bryennios says that those [sacraments] that defrocked priests have dared to perform are holy and valid. The same thing is witnessed by the wise Eugenios Voulgaris in his critical studies of the grammar of Neophytos, citing Nicholas Kabasilas in his support*”³⁰. Obviously if the 3rd and 28th apostolic canons had referred also to the heretics, it would be impossible for the interpreters to recognise their power to perform holy services even after their condemnation. Let’s not confound decrees relating to those who are sinners, but are Orthodox, with those relating to the heretics!

Furthermore, if in the aforementioned interpretation St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite referred also to heretics, then it really would be a great blasphemy to deny the authenticity of the mysteries performed by heretics that have not been condemned by name yet. In that case, in order to keep us away from such a blasphemy, the Holy Fathers would have underlined over and over again that uncondemned heretics have true mysteries and when, on the other hand, they denied the heretics’ mysteries, they certainly would have indicated that they refer to already condemned heretics. But there is no such distinction in their writings. Furthermore we have a lot of Holy Fathers’ witnesses regarding the mysteries performed by heretics and we certainly can not suspect them of blasphemy!

For instance St. Theodore the Studite refused to recognise as a bishop the one who talked in an Orthodox way, but maintained communion with heresy, and also he denied the ordinations performed by the latter until his repentance: „*You gave a good answer to the priest and hegumen: those who have been ordained by a bishop who has turned out to be a heretic, although he says that the synod was bad and that we perished, have been cast out from the priesthood. For why, while recognising this, does he not run away from perdition, evading the heresy, to be a bishop of God? Then his ordinations will be received immediately. Or why, in a time of the domination of heresy, has the hegumen sent the brethren for a heretical ordination?*”³¹.

St. Joseph Volotsky, whom we mentioned before, said: „*Without the grace of the Holy Spirit none of the priests can do anything. But the heretics had the wicked satanic spirit within themselves; how can they bind and loose in heaven and on earth?*”³². Could we admit that this *satanic spirit* enters the man as a

²⁸ „Rejection of the epistle of Patriarch of Antioch”, „Letter to nun Xenia”, PG 150, 1045BC *apud rom. Stâlpii Ortodoxiei, Viața și nevointele celui între sfinți părintelui nostru Gregory Palamas*, Arhiepiscopul Thessalonicului, ed. Egumenița, 2006, p. 83

²⁹ *rom. Stâlpii Ortodoxiei, Viața și nevointele celui între sfinți părintelui nostru Gregory Palamas*, Arhiepiscopul Thessalonicului, ed. Egumenița, 2006, p. 71

³⁰ Canons of the Holy Apostles, Canon 28 (footnote), [Pidalion, 1844](#)

³¹ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 40](#). To the son Naucratius.

³² St. Joseph Volotsky – [The enlightener](#), Word nr. XII

result of a synodal condemnation? But in this case we must conclude that such a synodal condemnation, that diabolizes the man, is a great sin!

Here's what St. Basil the Great wrote about bishop Fronton, *who pretended to be Orthodox, but received his ordination from Arians*: „*I won't count among the priests of Christ one who has been promoted to leadership by the filthy hands of heretics for the devastation of the faith*”³³.

When St. Hypatius of Rufinian was asked: „*Why did you delete his name [Nestorius', our note] without waiting to see what will happen?*”, the holy man answered: „*Since I heard that he talks indecently about my Lord, I broke communion with him and don't commemorate his name, because he is not a bishop anymore*”³⁴.

Writing about the 7th Ecumenical Council, St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite says the following in *The Rudder*: „*This synod was assembled against the pagans and persecutors of Christians, strugglers against the Holy Icons (iconoclasts), whom it anathematized, especially Athanasius, Constantine and Niketas, who were false-patriarchs (pseudo-patriarchs) of Constantinople in the time of the iconoclasts*”³⁵. Let us remind ourselves that in the 15th canon of the Synod I-II, the bishops who preach the heresy are also called *false-bishops* or *pseudo-bishops*. But if without a synodal condemnation they continue to be legitimate hierarchs, then it would be truly a great blasphemy to deny their episcopal and patriarchal dignity, as we have seen before.

We consider that in this matter the crucial point is the question: what separates a man from the Church – the heresy or the synodal condemnation by name?

The holy Apostle Paul says: „*A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself*” (Titus 3:10-11), and here is the interpretation of St. Theophylact of Bulgaria: „*[The apostle] talks here about an incorrigible heretic, completely subverted, who is condemned of himself, meaning he has no exoneration. Because he can't say: nobody blamed me, nobody taught me. So if after the admonition he persists in the same, then he is condemned of himself*”³⁶.

But in order to avoid any doubts that this self-condemnation means also separation from the Church, let us see some more patristic witnesses.

When the 5th Ecumenical Council was accused of anathematizing Theodore of Mopsuestia posthumously, since they considered that a dead person can not be condemned, the Holy Synod responded: „*Don't they know, or maybe they know but feign ignorance, that the anathematization is nothing else but separation from God? Even if the wicked did not receive it from somebody through words, he proclaims anathema against himself through the deed, separating himself through his wickedness from the true life*”³⁷.

St. Nikephoros the Confessor considered that „*when they [iconoclasts] rejected our glorious and pure faith, they departed themselves from the great and indivisible body of Church as rotten and tainted members and recklessly joined the assemble of the heterodox*”³⁸. Thus they separated themselves from the Church through the rejection of the true faith, not through a „synodal condemnation”.

³³ St. Basil the Great – [Epistle 232\(240\)](#). To the presbyters of Nikopolis.

³⁴ *rom. Străjerii Ortodoxiei. Luptele monahilor pentru apărarea Ortodoxiei*, Arhimandrit Vasilios Papadakis, Ed. Egumenița, 2015, p. 102

³⁵ Foreword about the Holy and Ecumenical Seventh Synod [*rom. Prolegomena despre Sfântul și Ecumenicul al Șaptelea Sinod*], [Pidalion, 1844](#)

³⁶ St. Teofilact of Bulgaria – [Interpretation of the Epistle to Titus](#)

³⁷ The Holy and Ecumenical Fifth Synod, second of Constantinople, Meeting nr. 8, „[Acts of the Ecumenical Synods](#)”, vol. 5, Central Typography of Kazan, 1913

³⁸ St. Nikephoros the Confessor – [Word in defence of the our immaculate, pure and true christian faith and against those who believe that we are worshipping idols](#)

In one of his epistles to his son Naucratius, St. Theodore the Studite says: „*I witness before God and men: they departed themselves from the body of Christ, from the higher throne, where Christ put the keys of the faith, against which, by the promise of the Unlying One, the gates of hell, meaning the mouth of the heretics, have not prevailed and will not prevail until the end of time (Matt. 16:18)*”³⁹.

In the Paterikon compiled by St. Ignaty Brianchaninov, Abba Agathon gives the following explanation on why he accepted all accusations except the one that called him a heretic: „*Heresy is separation from God. The heretic separates himself from the Living and the true God and unites himself with the devil and his angels. He who is separated from Christ has no God anymore, to Whom he could pray for his sins, and has perished from all points of view*”⁴⁰.

St. Gregory Palamas gives us the following witness: „*Those who belong to the Church of Christ dwell in the truth, so those who don't have the truth, don't belong to the Church of Christ, no matter how much they proclaim lies when they call themselves holy shepherds and hierarchs and are called this way by others. Because we remember that Christianity is not defined by external appearance, but by the truth and exactness of the faith*”⁴¹.

Discussing the mystery of chrismation, St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite makes the following commentary: „*How can the heretic sanctify the Chrism, being without the Holy Spirit, as one who is separated from Him for heresy and schism (meaning split) from the Catholic Church?*”⁴², he doesn't say „separated because of the synodal condemnation”, but „for [reason of] heresy and schism”.

St. Cyprian of Carthage asks himself: „*Can the one who opposes and acts against the Church hope that he is within the Church, when the blessed apostle Paul, reasoning about the same matter and showing the mystery of unity, says: „There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-5)*”⁴³ And the 68th Apostolic canon forbids anyone to receive a second ordination „*unless indeed it be proved that he had his ordination from heretics; for those who have been baptized or ordained by such persons cannot be either of the faithful or of the clergy*”⁴⁴.

Also St. Nikephoros the Confessor says the following about the iconoclasts who previously signed the Orthodox Confession at the 7th Ecumenical Council, but after that fell again into heresy: „*All these things were confessed with their own hands by those who have separated themselves from the Church now. And if they renounce their own confession, then they trample upon their own crosses and put themselves under the aforementioned anathematization and in no case are they within the Church*”⁴⁵. Obviously those whom talks St. Nikephoros about had not been condemned by name at that time.

But in order to dispel any doubts, let's take a look at what the iconoclasts said about themselves at the 7th Ecumenical Council. Here is the confession of an iconoclast bishop which desired to return to the Church: „*That's why I, Basil, bishop of the city of Ancyra, wishing to join the Catholic Church, am giving this written confession...*”⁴⁶ (continuing with an Orthodox Confession of faith and anathematization of the heresy), meaning he considered himself to be already outside the Church. And Theodore, bishop of Myra, said: „*And I, a sinner and unworthy, after long reflection and a thorough discussion have chosen what's*

³⁹ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 63\(122\)](#). To the son Naucratius.

⁴⁰ [Paterikon compiled by St. Ignaty Brianchaninov](#)

⁴¹ St. Gregory Palamas – Rejection of the epistle of Patriarch of Antioch *apud rom.* Stălpîi Ortodoxiei, [Viața și nevoitele celui între sfinți părintelui nostru Gregory Palamas](#), Arhiepiscopul Thessalonicului, ed. Egumenița, 2006, p. 82

⁴² The Canon of the Holy Local Synod which assembled for the third time in Chalcedon in the time of Cyprian with interpretation *rom.* Canonul Sfântului Localnicului Sinod a treia oară adunat în Calcedon în timpul lui Ciprian tâlcuit, [Pidalion, 1844](#)

⁴³ St. Cyprian of Carthage – [About the unity of the Church](#)

⁴⁴ Canons of the Holy Apostles, Canon 68, [Pidalion, 1844](#)

⁴⁵ St. Nikephoros the Confessor – [Word in defence of the Universal Church regarding the new dispute about the holy icons](#)

⁴⁶ Holy Ecumenical Synod the 7th, Second of Nicea, Act nr. 1, „[Acts of the Ecumenical Synods](#)”, vol. 7, Central Typography of Kazan, 1909

*the best and am begging God and your holiness to unite me, a sinner, along with the others, with the Holy Catholic Church*⁴⁷. Other hierarchs had similar speeches, asking to be received into the Church by the Council.

The fact that this attitude is natural was proved by the whole 7th Ecumenical Council. Thus „His Holiness, patriarch Tarasius, said: „*How should we regard this heresy, that has appeared again in our days?*”

John, the most reverend deputy of the apostolic see in the east, said: „***Heresy separates any man from the Church***”

The Holy Council said: „That’s obvious”⁴⁸.

The heresy separates the man from the Church, not the synodal condemnation, since the Councils are obedient to God, not vice versa: „*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us*” (Acts 15:28).

We see from this multitude of witnesses that the heretics, even those uncondemned, were considered and even considered themselves to be outside the Church, being condemned of themselves. Of course we can not accept in any way that, being outside the Church, they had the power to perform authentic mysteries (the existence of mysteries outside the Church is a heretical ecumenist thesis). But how can we explain the fact that those who were ordained by them have been received without repeating their ordination?

Right in the acts of the Council we can see that this measure was applied towards those bishops who repented and rejected the heresy in front of Orthodox hierarchs, and this decision was made based on a letter of St. Athanasius the Great in which he says: „*Those who have fallen and have been defenders of the wickedness should be forgiven if they repent, but should not receive a place in the clergy, but those who did not lead the wickedness, but have been involved in it through need and violence, it was decided to forgive, and to offer them a place in clergy*”⁴⁹. We see that regarding the heads of the heresy St. Athanasius doesn’t say that they „should be deposed”, but „*should not receive a place in the clergy*”, so he did not consider them to be clerics before their repentance.

After hearing this witness from St. Athanasius and other Holy Fathers, the 7th Ecumenical Council decided that those heretics (and those ordained by them) **who rejected the heresy and did not have other canonical impediments** should be received without repeating their ordination, so it’s not about an unconditional recognition of all the mysteries performed by iconoclasts.

Therefore the interpretation that the mysteries performed by the heretics before their condemnation are *a priori* valid, is wrong. Only an Orthodox Council can receive the ordinations performed by heretics, on condition that the ordained men reject the heresy of those who have ordained them and do not have other canonical impediments.

One more proof of this fact can be found in St. Theodore the Studite, who wrote to bishop Euthymius about some priest: „*You know, Your Grace, that by the common voice of the confessors that are still on the earth and those who have recently passed away to the Lord it was determined that consecrated persons, that once have been upbraided for communion with heretics, should be banned from serving until the time of the higher Providence’s discretion*”⁵⁰.

Actually the theory concerning the salutary activity of grace amongst the uncondemned heretics defies not only the Christian conscience, but even human morality. After all, knowing that the heretics, after their condemnation, pull away with themselves whole peoples and local churches, isn’t it a great moral fall to deprive so many people of grace and salvation? If Nestorius, Dioscorus or the heretical popes of Rome were true hierarchs and a multitude of people received through them the grace of salvation, would

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, St. Athanasius the Great – [Epistle to Rufinian](#)

⁵⁰ St. Theodore the Studite – [Epistle 83\(271\)](#). To Euthymius, bishop of Serdica.

it not be a real act of misanthropy to condemn them and therefore so many generations of Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Syro-Jacobites or western peoples? For it is obvious that the majority of ordinary people did not understand the theological subtleties and have just followed their bishops. If the latter really were authentic bishops before their condemnation, wouldn't it be wiser to just forbid them to preach their heresies or, in the end, to cut off their tongue so that they could not spread the poison of their teaching, but could remain within the Church together with the crowds that followed them?

On the other hand if only a conciliar condemnation by name is valid, then what's the point of the anathematizations that are not pronounced against somebody in particular? „*If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be anathema!*” (Gal. 1:9) – why would the Apostle pronounce a condemnation with no validity?

On the same note: what's the point of the anathematizations pronounced against persons who have passed away? If only the conciliar condemnation separates one from the Church, then we ask ourselves: did Origen, Constantine Copronymus and other heretics die within or outside the Church, since they were condemned much later than their death? The anathema that has been pronounced against them signifies the fact that they have separated themselves from the Church during their lifetime, because you can't separate from it after passing away, so the Council just ascertained their fall away from the Church, pronouncing anathema against them.

In one of his sermons on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, St. Theophan the Recluse says the following: „*Whether or not is there pronounced **anathema against your teaching and your name**, you are already under it when you philosophize against the Church and persist in this philosophy*”⁵¹.

In the end we would like to advise the Christians that fall in this trap, that is, recognition of the validity of heretics' mysteries (even of those uncondemned), to remember the decision of the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia from 1983, that, being hurled against ecumenists, states the following: „*Those who do not distinguish the priesthood and mysteries of the Church from those of the heretics, but say that the baptism and eucharist of heretics is effectual for salvation, anathema!*”. Let us stand well, let us stand with fear, let us attend!

Based on all the above-stated, we conclude that:

- The canons that have been laid down for the usual ecclesiastical problems can not be used as a guide for the relationship with heretics.
- The Holy Fathers do not make a clear distinction between those condemned by name and uncondemned heretics, calling all of them *heretics*.
- Heresy separates a man from the Church, heretics are *condemned of themselves* and fall away from the Church when they insist on their heresy, rejecting the admonitions given to them.
- Based on the example of the 7th Ecumenical Council, orthodox councils can receive the repentant heretics (and those ordained by them) in their current ecclesiastical rank, on condition that they don't have other canonical impediments.
- There is absolutely no basis for the belief that mysteries performed by the heretics (condemned, or uncondemned) are effectual for salvation. On the other hand there are a lot of patristic witnesses that deny the authenticity of their mysteries. Thus the recognition of the mysteries of heretics is one of the basic theses of the pan-heresy of ecumenism.
- Since the break of communion with heretics is not based on the validity/non-validity of their mysteries, but first of all on the fact that otherwise we endanger our salvation, the matter of „validity of mysteries” of heretics is not decisive for our actions and should not be regarded with the obsession that can be observed nowadays.

⁵¹ St. Theophan the Recluse – [Manuscripts from the cell](#), What is anathema? Word on the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

We can wall ourselves off from ecumenists without stepping in the trap of discussions regarding the action of grace in their mysteries, answering the same way as St. Maximus the Confessor did when he was asked:

„– So, you are the only one who will be saved and all the others will perish?

He told them:

– *The three young men who did not worship the idol that has been worshipped by all the people did not condemn anybody (Dn. 3:18), since they did not look upon the others, but looked not to fall by themselves from the true worship of God [...] But I prefer rather to die then to have my conscience disturbed by the fact that I have slipped in any way regarding the faith*⁵².

So help us God!

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1/14 december 2017 (†St. Prophet Nahum, †St. Philaret the Merciful)

PS: for any error in the above-stated we as for forgiveness, we are always open for any suggestion or objection at: redactia@lumea-ortodoxa.ro

⁵² [The acts of the process and interrogations of St. Maximus the Confessor and his disciples](#), rom. Actele procesului Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul și a ucenicilor lui, pt. 6