Article

Receptive Ecumenism as a Way Forward: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective

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Abstract: Receptive ecumenism is one of the most important contemporary methodologies of inter-Christian dialogue. The theological vision behind the concept of receptive ecumenism is a valuable source of inspiration for the revitalization of the culture of dialogue within and between our churches and societies. Receptive ecumenism has the potential to transform closed and exclusivist identities into open and mutually constitutive realities, which value highly the theological and spiritual riches of the Christian other and learn from them. This article argues that, even though the notion of receptive ecumenism has been elaborated by a Western Catholic theologian (Paul Murray), its implementation by Eastern Christianity should not be seen as the adoption of a methodology foreign to the ethos and spirituality of Orthodox faith. The article shows that the vision and practice of receptive ecumenism resonate with the main doctrinal formulations of Orthodox Christianity (Trinitarian theology, Christology, and eschatology).

Keywords: receptive ecumenism; Orthodox Christianity; dialogue; Trinitarian theology; Christology

1. Introduction

Orthodox Christianity has been a protagonist of the ecumenical movement almost from the beginning, making an important contribution to the restoration of communion among Christians and churches (Grdzelidze 2021; Tsompanidis 2014; Oeldemann 2014; Basdekis 2006; Limouris 1994; Tsetsis 1988; Zernov 1986). While it is true that fundamentalist groups within Eastern Christianity did not cease to look at the ongoing ecumenical movement with irritation, for a long time their criticism remained marginal and had no major impact upon the dialogical trajectory of the Orthodox Church (Makrides 2016; Kalaitzidis 2014). However, over more recent decades, Orthodoxy has been confronted with the rapid growth of anti-ecumenical and anti-Western sentiments among its members, which has very often been coupled with new developments in geo-political competitions and culture wars. The vehement contestation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church by ultra-conservative groups immediately after the closing of the event in June 2016 is a telling example of this anti-ecumenical phenomenon, which seems to attract more adherents today. Instead of dialogue and receptivity to alterity, it is an ethos of conflict and ghettoization that tends to be promoted as the norm by certain anti-ecumenical groups (Ladouceur 2016, 2017). The solution to this problem can only lie in a combination of theological reflections and actions to rekindle and strengthen the dialogical spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy. While not abandoned, this commitment to dialogue and conversation is continuously and increasingly contested from various sides.

This article starts from the conviction that the theological vision behind receptive ecumenism could be a valuable source of inspiration for the revitalization of the culture of dialogue in Orthodoxy but also in other Christian traditions. Receptive ecumenism is not the only way out of the crisis affecting the Orthodox Church. Insights from other ecumenical models and visions of dialogue can equally make a valuable and necessary contribution to this process. However, unlike other models of theological dialogue, the unique feature of

receptive ecumenism lies in its conviction that the practice of listening, loving, and learning from "what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us" (Spadaro 2013; Hawkes and Balabanski 2018) should always stand at the center of Christian life and guide its actions. For this reason, it has the potential to transform closed and exclusivist identities into open and mutually constitutive realities, which value highly the theological and spiritual riches of the Christian other and learn from them (Pizzey 2018). However, since receptive ecumenism was coined by a Roman Catholic theologian, its embracement by Eastern Christians might be felt as something alien to the Orthodox tradition and theological vision. It might look like an ecumenical method foreign to the ethos of Orthodox theology. That being so, this article claims that the implementation of receptive ecumenism in Orthodoxy should not be seen as an import from outside. This methodology of inter-Christian dialogue resonates with the basic theological principles of Eastern Christianity. In other words, the call of receptive ecumenism to an exchange of theological and spiritual gifts by Christians finds its roots in the main doctrinal formulations of the Orthodox Church.

The article is divided into three main parts. The first part offers an overview of receptive ecumenism, with particular attention to essential aspects that need to be further incorporated into its vision and program. The second part explores the Trinitarian and Christological foundations of receptive ecumenism to show that the practice of learning and receiving from the other is both anchored in and inspired by the two major doctrines of Orthodox Christianity. The third part looks at the eschatological orientation of the Church to show how it fosters the implementation of receptive ecumenism and the formation of open and dialogical identities, which sees the Christian other not as a threat but as a source of enrichment and spiritual progress.

2. Receptive Ecumenism and Orthodox Christianity: An Overview

The theoretical foundations of receptive ecumenism, which is a fresh approach to contemporary inter-Christian dialogue, have since 2006 been elaborated by Paul D. Murray in a series of projects organized by the Center for Catholic Studies of Durham University. As Gregory A. Ryan emphasized, even though its various principles and elements "have recognizable roots in earlier ecumenical and ecclesiological thinking", it is appropriate to say that receptive ecumenism "as a distinctive approach emerged from Paul Murray's work" (Ryan 2021, p. 7; see also Coman 2018, 2020a). The publication of the volume *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning. Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Murray 2008a; see also Murray 2008b) could be regarded as the official birth certificate of receptive ecumenism on the international scene, laying down its key principles, convictions, and assumptions. Since then, receptive ecumenism has generated positive reactions from academia, ecumenical bodies, and church representatives (see, for example, Murray et al. 2022). In this work of reception, theologians of different confessions and from all over the world developed further the model of receptive ecumenism, mapping its previously uncharted territories, testing its core principles, and highlighting its ecclesial transformative role. Antonia Pizzey (2019), Gregory A. Ryan (2020), Kimberly Hope Belcher (2020), and Sara Gehlin (2020) are just a few of the emerging theologians whose doctoral dissertations reflected on the method of receptive ecumenism. No less than five internationally acclaimed conferences have so far been organized to discuss the fresh strategy of receptive ecumenism and explore its potential for further development: "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism" (January 2006); "Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to Be Church Together" (January 2009); "Receptive Ecumenism in International Perspective: Ecclesial Learning in Context" (June 2014); "Leaning into the Spirit: Discernment, Decision-Making, and Reception" (November 2017); and "Transforming Ecumenism–"Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches" (June 2022).

What exactly is receptive ecumenism? Receptive ecumenism refers to a methodology of inter-Christian conversation that invites churches and traditions to place at the center of their ecumenical agenda the self-critical question "what, in any given situation, can one's

own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?" (Murray 2008c, p. 12). According to Murray, the key assumption of the method of receptive ecumenism is that "considerable further ecumenical progress is indeed possible but only if each tradition, both singly and jointly, makes a clear, programmatic shift from prioritizing the question 'what do our various others first need to learn from us?' to asking instead 'what do we need to learn and what can we learn–or receive–with integrity from our others?'" (Murray 2008c, p. 32). In other words, the question "how might they become more like us so that divisions might be eased?" shall be replaced with the following one: "how might we become more like them in diverse particular ways so that specific difficulties that we experience in our own thought and practice might be eased?" (Murray 2008c, p. 32). That being said, the project of receptive ecumenism encourages each tradition to develop even more the sense of self-criticism and to show increased receptivity to the particular gifts and achievements of other traditions. Receptive ecumenism considers that the old strategy in inter-Christian dialogue, which struggled to achieve unity among different churches through a clarification of the doctrinal misunderstandings and conflicts of the past, proved to be unfortunately unrealistic and without significant positive results. For this reason, a new strategy that addresses creatively the disagreements between traditions by learning from the ecumenical other is much needed. Receptive ecumenism claims that if each tradition reimagines itself with particular emphasis on the principle of learning and receiving from other traditions, then changes will take place on many levels and even a common mind on disputed doctrinal matters would be much easier achieved. If all traditions were asked to implement receptive ecumenism, then all would be moving in a direction that would both deepen their unique identities and draw them closer to one another (Murray 2008c, p. 32; and Coman 2018, pp. 245–46). Receptive ecumenism is a complex methodology of dialogue, which remains intimately linked to the spiritual dimensions of Christian life (prayer, liturgy, and the praxis of metanoia) (Pizzey 2019, p. 121). It requires genuine openness to the transformative and enriching experience of the encounter with other churches and traditions.

Even though Orthodox reactions to receptive ecumenism have so far been muted, Murray's methodology of inter-Christian dialogue has not gone unheard by Eastern theologians. Kallistos Ware and Andrew Louth were the first Orthodox theologians to write on receptive ecumenism from an Orthodox perspective. Kallistos Ware stressed the idea that receptive ecumenism should signify "more than learning and receiving from one another; the effectiveness of such a process depends on both sides being prepared to learn and receive from God" (Ware 2008, p. 46; see also Porumb 2017). Andrew Louth cherished receptive ecumenism's spirit of openness to learn from the others, too. However, he claimed that the task of transposing from one tradition to another is almost an impossible task, especially because each tradition sees itself as a seamless and symphonic unity of faith, worship, and practice; one cannot simply dislocate one if its elements and transfer it to another tradition (Louth 2008, p. 361). While important, Louth's remark echoes a disputed thesis of the Eurasian movement, supported by several Russian Orthodox theologians and philosophers at the beginning of the previous century: both Eastern Europe and Central Asia "stand together as a unique cultural type over against the civilization of Germano-Latin West Europe." As a result, "each type possesses the closed unit of a distinct organization" and "any cross-civilizational hybridization here could only be a kind of organic aberration" (Baker 2014, p. 236). Hopefully, the reception of Murray's methodology of ecumenical interaction will continue in the Orthodox world and beyond both critically and constructively, with serious attention to the contribution it can make to the advancement of dialogue between Christian churches. There are two avenues for the further expansion and growth of receptive ecumenism.

The first avenue aligns with Kallistos Ware's proposal that the horizontal dynamics of receptive ecumenism needs to be complemented by the so-called vertical dynamics of inter-Christian dialogue, in the sense that the willingness of each tradition to learn and receive from the Cristian other must emerge from and remain anchored in the openness of all traditions to learn and receive from God. It is perfectly true that Murray's notion of

receptive ecumenism argues for receptivity towards the gifts of God in the Christian other, which means above all openness to the presence of the divine reality in other churches and traditions, to the way in which God's all-embracing love is experienced and lived outside the canonical borders of one's own tradition. Nevertheless, a stronger emphasis on the vertical dynamics of receptive ecumenism would convey the message that the path towards unity and reconciliation is neither simply a human construct, which would require only horizontal efforts and initiatives, nor a conversion of one church into another; it is ultimately a gift from God and a conversion to the unity of the Trinity, that is, to the mystery and plenitude that transcend our local particularities and cultural values, which had very often collided with each other throughout history (see also Coman 2020b, p. 206; Ciobotea 2009, p. 37). This horizontal openness shall always be accompanied by the vertical one, which helps each tradition discern the genuine fruits of God's presence in the Christian other and receive them with integrity and respect. The vertical dynamics of receptive ecumenism functions as a sort of spiritual preparation through prayers, liturgical celebrations, and meditation so that one can truly embrace what in the horizontal exchange of gifts is worthy of reception and dismiss what is otherwise objectionable and potentially harmful. All these spiritual practices also purify traditions and churches from any kind of reciprocal mistrust and hostility, which makes them resistant to one another, giving them in turn the courage and determination to cultivate the art of loving, listening, and learning from the other. That said, the vertical dimension renders the horizontal interaction between churches and traditions into a truly transformative journey, equipping each partner with the virtue of both openness to alterity and hospitality to accommodate the theological and spiritual gifts of the other into one's own life.

The second avenue refers to hermeneutics. Receptive ecumenism, as the method of learning and receiving from the Christian other, needs to be informed and shaped by robust hermeneutics. Receptive ecumenism, as "a crucial learning opportunity" (Murray 2019, p. 916) that strengthens the identity of each tradition and moves churches towards one another, requires hermeneutical precision and clarity so that the process of receiving from the Christian other can be a genuine work of spiritual maturation and a real growth in communion and dialogue. Hermeneutics should lie at the center of receptive ecumenism, especially because in each act of learning from the other an interpretative distinction between what is to be received with faith and integrity and what is to be set aside must operate with discernment and critical thinking (see, for example, Caputo 2018, p. 7). This is to say that a hermeneutics of spiritual and theological discernment needs to protect the values of receptive ecumenism while avoiding the risk of incorporating into one's own tradition elements that, for various reasons, do not bring the desired outcome. Moreover, any act of understanding of the Christian other and the learning opportunity that follows thereof encounter a major challenge: how to experience, understand, and receive from the other as the real and objective other, without any denaturation or falsification of the image of the other. No authentic receptivity between churches and tradition can take place if the image of the Christian other is distorted or if the otherness of the other becomes a projection of one's own self and identity. How can receptive ecumenism avoid projectionism? How can it be assured that the openness of one tradition to another involves receptivity to the other as the real other and not to a prefabricated image of the other? How can the other be allowed to be the other and absorb their riches without entering the vicious circle of projectionism and distorted representations of the other? All these questions show that dialogue in the horizon of receptive ecumenism is not an easy task but a challenging one as it stands in need of a complex hermeneutical reasoning, which ensures responsible and valid learning.

3. Grounding Receptive Ecumenism in Trinitarian Theology and Christology

Since receptive ecumenism has been developed by a Roman Catholic theologian, the reception of its principles by other churches is also a matter of a meta-receptive ecumenism. Nevertheless, receptive ecumenism should not be felt by other Christians as something

foreign and imposed upon them from the outside, especially because it has roots in earlier practices and theological reflections carried out by all traditions and churches. In addition, the core practice of receptive ecumenism can be anchored in the Trinitarian and Christological thoughts shared by all churches and traditions, particularly in their understanding of divine *perichoresis* and communicatio idiomatum. The pneumatological dimension of receptive ecumenism has already been emphasized by several scholars (Murray 2018a, 2018b; Guidero 2016). Given the ontological gap between the divine realm and the human realm, any reference to receptive ecumenism in relation to the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas functions only analogically and with due respect to the limitations of such a connection. Receptive ecumenism does not reduplicate divine *perichoresis* or the exchange between the divine nature and the human nature in Jesus Christ; it can only take inspiration, insight, and determination from them, while being guided by God's transformative and deifying grace. One should also be aware of the risk of projectionism involved in any attempt to connect receptive ecumenism and Trinitarian theology (Kilby 2000; and Van den Brink 2014).

3.1. Trinitarian Perichoresis and Receptive Ecumenism

Divine *perichoresis* is the example that the act of receiving from the other structures the dynamics of intra-Trinitarian relationships. *Perichoresis* is the English transliteration of the Greek term περιχώρησις and refers to the "co-inherence or mutual interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity" (Kilby 2011, p. 383), which involves absolute openness, receptivity, and an exchange of gifts between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Gavrilyuk 2017). The notion derives from the Greek noun *chora* (χώρα), meaning "space" or "room", and from the verb *chorein* (χώρειν), meaning "to contain", "to go forward" or "to make room" (Durand 2005, p. 23). The particle peri (περὶ) is used to disclose the idea of reciprocity. In the history of Christian doctrine, the term appeared in the fourth century in the Christological writings of Gregory of Nazianzus. Maximus the Confessor took the term from Gregory and turned it into an almost technical concept that described the interpenetration between Christ's natures. At the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the next one, however, the notion of *perichoresis* was transferred to the doctrine of the Trinity by Pseudo-Cyril and John of Damascus (Thunberg 1997, p. 264). The concept of *perichoresis* was understood in two different ways by Greek patristic authors: earlier writers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Macarius of Egypt, and Maximus the Confessor) employed it with the sense of "rotation", "alternation", "interchange with", or "reciprocity"; the meaning of "interpenetration" emerged only when the notion was applied to the Trinity by Pseudo-Cyril and John of Damascus (Prestige 1928; Lampe 1961; Harrison 1991). Modern theologians prefer the meaning of mutual interpenetration and indwelling. For example, Miroslav Volf defines perichoresis as "the reciprocal interiority of the Trinitarian persons. In every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons" (Volf 1998, p. 209). The metaphor of *perichoresis* as a "circular dance" is equally embraced by Dumitru Stăniloae. Yet, the Romanian Orthodox theologian is of the opinion that much more is involved in the Trinitarian relations "than the mere motion of one person around the other, for there is in fact a certain interior presence of the one within the other" (Stăniloae 1980, p. 38). *Perichoresis* means reciprocal interiority: "a passage" of each divine person through the other persons so that "each divine person manifests the divine fullness in a form that shows the effects of this passage" (Stăniloae 1980, p. 39; Moltmann 1991, p. xv).

It is precisely this understanding of *perichoresis*—a fellowship and sharing so open and intimate that each divine person makes room for and welcomes the gifts of the other persons—that becomes the Trinitarian grounding of receptive ecumenism and its source of inspiration. Just as the life of the inner Trinity is a continuous and reciprocal exchange of gifts to the extent that each divine person rejoices in the unique features of the other two persons and embraces them with love, so too the interaction between churches and traditions needs to be guided by an exchange of theological and spiritual riches. As

mentioned above, the limitations of the human nature do not allow for perfectly realizing on a human plane the very mode of divine existence. For example, due to the ontological gap between God and humans, Andrew Louth is quite reluctant to speak of the Trinitarian communion as a model for human communion (Louth 2013, p. 31). However, even though it is impossible to reduplicate divine life on a human plane, Trinitarian communion shall remain the source of inspiration for human interactions, for human life can also become a form of sharing and loving, despite all limitations and sinful inclinations of the human nature. The model of divine *perichoresis* is a reminder that churches are called to imitate, as humanly as possible, the dynamics of the Trinitarian life and celebrate the mutual enrichment between traditions through openness and receptivity towards the unique gifts of the Christian other. Any ghettoization, isolation, and refusal of alterity is a betrayal of the vocation of the human person: to grow from the image of God to the likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

3.2. Communicatio Idiomatum and Receptive Ecumenism

Communicatio idiomatum (communication of properties) is the Christological foundation of receptive ecumenism, especially because the interaction between the divine nature and the human nature in Jesus Christ is an act of reception and exchange: while the divine and human natures in Christ are distinct, the specific and unique attributes of one nature are ascribed to the other in virtue of their hypostatic union in the incarnate Son of God. John Meyendorff spoke of communicatio idiomatum by saying: "In the hypostasis, the two natures of Christ accomplish a union without confusion. They retain their natural characteristics; but, because they share a common hypostatic life, there is a 'communication of idioms' or *perichoresis*" (Meyendorff 1983, pp. 154–55). Vladimir Lossky referred to divine *perichoresis* as follows: "This compenetration of the two natures, at the same time a penetration of the divinity into the flesh and the possibility henceforth acquired by the flesh to penetrate into the divinity, is called *perichoresis pros allelas*, as Saint Maximus the Confessor writes, or in Latin, communicatio idiomatum" (Lossky 2017, p. 116; see also Lossky [1944] 1976, p. 145). Most often, communicatio idiomatum "refers to a set of rules of proper predication–what one may properly say of Christ on the basis of the *hypostatic union*. Sometimes, however, the phrase refers to a description of the way in which one nature acts upon or infuses the other in that union" (Higton 2011, pp. 108–9).

Two major models of communicatio idiomatum have emerged in Chalcedonian Christology throughout the centuries. The first model understands the communication between the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ as a *symmetrical exchange* of properties or attributes: due to the hypostatic union, Christ's divine natures receive the attributes of the human nature and vice versa, while each nature maintains its ontological integrity. The model of a symmetrical interchange of properties is clearly present in Maximus the Confessor's theology: "even though we see the distinction of His parts, we properly attribute things divine to divinity and things human in Him to humanity; nonetheless, on account of the unity what is proper to one nature, we attach through reciprocal communication to the other" (Maximus the Confessor PG 91, c. 120A, in Stăniloae 2011, p. 48). Drawing upon Maximus's Christology, Stăniloae also emphasized that in Christ "the attributes of one nature are always imbued with those of the other" (Stăniloae 2011, p. 47). The second model understands communicatio idiomatum as an *asymmetrical or unilateral reception* of all the communicable attributed of the divine nature by the human nature in Christ. In other words, the permeation is a one-way street: from divinity to humanity. The Christology of John of Damascus seems to go in this direction when he says that "the nature of the flesh is deified, but the nature of the Logos does not become carnal" (John of Damascus, PG 94, 1461C, in Higton 2011, p. 108).

Receptive ecumenism resonates more with the symmetrical exchange of gifts between the divine and human natures in Christ, even though communicatio idiomatum is proper to the hypostasis of the incarnate Logos and cannot be extended to any other person or web of relations. However, the openness of each nature towards the other in Christ could inspire

churches and traditions to embrace an ecumenical methodology emphasizing receptivity, learning, and listening. Just as in Jesus Christ each nature welcomes the attributes of the other one, so too in ecumenical interactions a methodology that cherishes openness towards alterity and receptivity to the unique gifts of the other should be implemented. Furthermore, just as in Christ the exchange of gifts between the divine and the human nature continues to preserve the identity of each nature, so too in inter-Christian relations receptive ecumenism does not promote the transformation of one church into another; on the contrary, receptivity to the gifts of other churches is a source of self-knowledge and self-understanding, which consolidates one's own identity while remaining open to the wisdom and insights of the others. As André Scrima used to say, "the shortest path to ourselves is through the other" (Scrima 2004, p. 216) and "the movement that brings us to ourselves is the same movement that brings us to the other, to the extent that we will not reach our own plenitude unless we pass through the other" (Coman 2020b, p. 202). Receptive ecumenism does not encourage unity as uniformity but as a place of diversity and mutual receptivity, which fosters open identities through dialogue and exchange of gifts.

4. Receptive Ecumenism, Eschatology, and Dialogical Identities

The previous section of this article referred to Trinitarian theology and Christology as incentives for the embracement of a receptive ecumenism by Orthodox Christianity. The last section of this article shows, even briefly, how the plea for receptive ecumenism in Eastern Christianity could be motivated by another important incentive: the eschatological orientation of the Church. Even though eschatology had until recently been considered as having to do only with the end of history, such a theological vision no longer defines the Christian understanding of the *eschata*. Eschatology, as Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon pointed out, is "the end times making itself present to us now" (Zizioulas 2008, p. 155) in the Eucharistic event, albeit only as a foretaste to the fullness that is yet to come. The eschatological foretaste of the Church neither exhausts eternity nor invites Orthodox Christians to a mere passive waiting of the Kingdom, even if this Kingdom remains essentially God's gift (Moltmann 1970; Metz 1969). In addition, the penetration of the eschatological future into the present confronts the Orthodox Church with a sort of incompleteness and orients its lives and actions towards the Kingdom of God and its fulness.

How does the eschatological orientation of the Orthodox Church inform the dialogical identity promoted by receptive ecumenism? In a nutshell, eschatology deconstructs any anti-ecumenical impulse and challenges self-sufficient identities by showing that openness towards the Christian other is not optional but essential for the Orthodox Church's permanent growth in truth and holiness. There is no secret that the Orthodox Church claims to be the Una Sancta because it sees itself as the genuine Body of Christ and the continuation of his presence throughout history (Florovsky 1950, p. 157). However, Eastern Christian theologians acknowledge the fact that the Orthodox Church is *already* and *not yet* in the possession of Christ's plenitude. As Dumitru Stăniloae emphasized, the Orthodox Church is the fullness or the plenitude of Christ "in a certain potential state but in motion or progress toward the full actualization in the eschaton" (Stăniloae [1978] 2003, p. 299; 2012, p. 85). The Orthodox Church in its totality advances towards an eschatological fullness, which means its complete experience of God and total integration in the mystery of Christ, when God will be all in all and our knowledge of the Triune God will be made complete. As long as the Orthodox Church finds itself on its way towards the Kingdom, its "knowledge of God is fragmentary and has a degree of relativity" (Stăniloae 1971, p. 173). Relativity does not mean that there is no certainty about the truth the Church has been given by Christ; it rather means that, prior to the eschaton, truth is not static but dynamic. For this reason, the Eastern Orthodox Church is constantly invited to advance on its path to an even deeper communion with God and to assimilate more fully the spiritual riches of the divine life.

The progress of the Orthodox Church in communion with God cannot and must not remain an internal and self-sufficient process, without any concern for the way in which the genuine experience of God as lived and interpreted by other churches and traditions can contribute to Orthodoxy's growth in knowledge of the divine reality. There is no consensus among Orthodox theologians concerning the ecclesial status of other churches and traditions, but most of them acknowledge at least degree of ecclesiality outside the canonical boundaries of their own church (Jillions 2009). It is true that some Orthodox and non-Orthodox theologians might look at this statement with suspicion. However, as problematic as this statement might be, the recognition of degrees of ecclesiality outside Orthodoxy, coupled with the eschatological orientation of the Orthodox Church, still offers a solid basis for the implementation of receptive ecumenism in Eastern Christianity. Degrees of ecclesiality means that other churches and traditions share in God's life and truth, too. That being the case, the Orthodox Church's assimilation of the genuine spiritual and theological riches of other churches could enrich its own understanding of God and could help Orthodoxy progress in communion with the divine reality, moving this way towards the eschatological future and the complete experience of God. For this precise reason, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Orthodox Church has the duty to listen to and incorporate into its own life the spiritual and theological richness of other churches. In this way, its own experience of the divine is enlarged by the way in which the light of the Gospel has authentically flourished in other traditions and has been differently embodied by other people outside the canonical boundaries of Orthodoxy. This receptivity does not imply the accumulation or the integration in the life of the Orthodox Church of any type of experience or the enjoyment of any insight coming from outside Eastern Christianity. The practice of discernment is, therefore, important in any interaction with other Christian churches and in the act of learning and receiving from them.

5. Conclusions

This article reflected on the theological and spiritual foundations of receptive ecumenism. In so doing, it argued that the theological vision behind receptive ecumenism is in harmony with several doctrinal formulations of Orthodox Christianity. For this reason, Orthodox Christianity should not be suspicious towards receptive ecumenism because its emphasis on learning and receiving from the Christian other is the logical conclusion of its Trinitarian, Christological, and eschatological ethos. By way of conclusion, several remarks are worth highlighting.

First, the rediscovery of a culture of dialogue is much needed in all spheres of public life, especially given the increased fragmentation of today's society and its political and religious climate into opposing camps that seem to occupy separate realities. Even though it is debatable whether the metaphor of an "ecumenical winter" accurately describes the current dialogue crisis that churches are facing ad intra and ad extra, it is true that the most urgent challenge "remains to keep the 'Olympic flame' of ecumenism burning" (De Mey 2022, p. 489). This task becomes even more urgent in Eastern Christianity, which was confronted with an explosion of fundamentalist attitudes after the closing of the Holy and Great Council of Crete in July 2016.

Second, the implementation of a theological discourse that values openness towards other churches and traditions is instrumental in offering Orthodox people inspiration to heal polarizations and see in the Christian other not a threat to one's own identity but an opportunity for mutual enrichment and growth. Receptive ecumenism, which places the practice of learning from the Christian other at the center of its agenda, has the potential to revive the interest in the Christian other, not as a source of endless tensions and conflicts but as a sine qua non *condition* for unity and common spiritual progress.

Third, receptive ecumenism and its value of learning from the Christian other are not alien to the basic principles of Orthodox Christianity. On the contrary, the practice of openness and receptivity towards the other is deeply anchored in the theology and spirituality of Orthodox Christianity. Receptive ecumenism is rooted in Trinitarian *perichoresis*, which

refers to the exchange of gifts between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Receptive ecumenism finds inspiration in Christology, too. The interaction of the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus Christ is the exemplary exchange between two realities. Furthermore, the eschatological orientation of the Church invites Eastern Christians to always remain open to the authentic experiences of God outside the canonical borders of Orthodoxy. The integration of such experiences into the life of Eastern Christianity leads to the Orthodox Church's growth in communion with God and its advancement towards the eschatological future. That being the case, this article pleads for the embracement of receptive ecumenism by Orthodox Christianity.

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