

Article

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from a Romanian Orthodox Perspective: A Historical and Missiological Analysis of Common Prayer

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Abstract: Every year, the member Churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) are called to actively participate in the meetings organized in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. From my perspective, these moments are an extraordinary opportunity to share in the richness of the Orthodox tradition, which means an act of confession and authentic witness. In the first part, I will present critically the canonical synthesis of the Orthodox, the concept of “Ecumenical Eucharist” and of Lima Liturgy, followed by the recommendations of the Special Commission for Orthodox participation in the WCC regarding confessional and interconfessional common prayer. Then, this article will make a historical presentation of the week of prayer. It is very important to know how this initiative started and how it was accepted at the beginning and over the years. At least in Romania, where we have an Orthodox majority, this week has become a controversial issue produced by those who are against ecumenical dialogue. A special attention is for the actual practice approved by the Romanian Patriarchate. Finally, the article will present the statements of the new Orthodox documents and it will end with some conclusions about this moment of common Christian witness.

Keywords: week of prayer; common prayer; ecumenical dialogue; Lima Liturgy; Special Commission; Romanian Orthodox Church



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1. Introduction

The research theme announced by the title of this study has been on my mind for several years. The reasons why I wanted to analyze the practice of common prayer within the modern ecumenical movement, especially in the meetings organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU), are multiple. I will mention only two of them, respectively the most important ones.

The first reason is based on my personal experience when I visited the Geneva Ecumenical Center in June 2016. At that time, I was not very familiar with ecumenical meetings, but visiting the chapel inside the Center left a deep impression on me. Arranged very carefully, the chapel remains to this day a prayer space for all Christians involved in the ecumenical dialogue. My attention was drawn to the Holy Scripture placed on a table, similar to the table of the Holy Altar in the Orthodox tradition. If in the Eastern Orthodox Churches on the table of the Holy Altar we find the Holy Gospel, on the table of the ecumenical chapel in Geneva there is the Holy Scripture, used for daily reading and for various ecumenical meetings. I also did not overlook the holy Orthodox icons, especially the one with the Holy Trinity, which gives the space something of the richness of the Eastern tradition¹.

The second reason why I wanted to carry out this study has to do with my presence at various international conferences with a multi-denominational presence. I recall here the meetings organized by The Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies (CEEAMS), in Osijek, Croatia. Here I had the opportunity to experience for the first time prayer in common with other Christians, from different traditions. Also, on the occasion

of participating in The Osijek Doctoral Colloquium (ODC) I had the opportunity to read together with other Christians texts from the Holy Scripture and to offer spiritual answers for personal situations.

I have to admit that at first all these moments made me wonder what the official position of the Orthodox Church on common prayer is. At least in Romanian Orthodox theology I do not know of any serious studies on this subject, with only one exception (See: [Perşa 2022](#)). From these considerations, the present analysis is necessary, especially with regard to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Every year, before this moment, those who are against ecumenical dialogue renew the language of hatred and anathematization towards those who participate, officially and unofficially, in this moment of common Christian witness.

2. Preliminary Remarks

For the Orthodox Christian, prayer is a source of dialogue with God. If the definition of the theologian is related to the practice of prayer, to a great extent, the life of the Christian can be defined by his or her involvement in prayer. Basically, the services performed in the Church are nothing more than prayers of praise and doxology for the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian dimension of Christian prayer remains an essential component of the theology of prayer.

In particular, in the Holy and Divine Liturgy, the Christian is called to participate in the common prayer of the Church. Through the act of receiving Holy Eucharist, prayer becomes a visible act, in which the entire community of believers participates. Moreover, personal and individual prayer, even performed outside the liturgical and church space, is also performed as a member of the Church. In other words, personal prayer is directly related to liturgical prayer. According to a dictionary of Orthodox theology, published for Romanian audience,

“The Christian, even when he prays “by himself”, in his room, he also prays as a member of the Church. The particular prayer represents the prolongation at home (in the room of the heart, of the cell and of the house), of the one prayer of the body of the Church by each individual member. Its foundation and content are given by the prayer of the synax or liturgical assembly” ([Vlad 2019](#), p. 793).

The involvement of the Orthodox Churches in the modern ecumenical movement, especially in bilateral dialogues and within the World Council of Churches, has provided the opportunity for the Orthodox to share the richness of their tradition. At the same time, the acceptance of ecumenical dialogue also meant the possibility of receiving certain influences from the cultic practice of other Christian traditions.

According to the analysis of the types of common prayers currently carried out at the level of the World Council of Churches, I have identified four forms or practices: a. *Free prayer*²; b. *The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle*³; c. *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*; d. *Global ecumenical online prayer*⁴.

In the first part I will present the canonical position regarding common prayer and how it has been interpreted by different theologians. In the second part, I will mention the moments of prayer and Eucharistic celebration at the General Assemblies of the WCC and the Orthodox position regarding their performance. In the third part, I will highlight the understanding of common prayer in accordance with the recommendations of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. In the fourth part, I will present the historical and theological elements of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Also here I will talk about the organization of this moment with reference to the Romanian Orthodox Church. In the last part I will mention the theological basis of the common prayer, but also about its reception in the documents of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church (June 2016) and in the Social Ethos Document published with the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in March 2020. Obviously, the conclusion will include the most important results of this study.

3. Canonical Synthesis about Common Prayer

At the end of an article signed by canonist theologian Iulian Mihai Constantinescu, in which he analyzes the prayers of the Holy Mysteries from a canonical perspective, the following is claimed:

“Those who affect ecclesial unity by participating in the prayers and ritual works of heterodoxes and excommunicates are subject to canonical punishments, the lack of dogmatic unity not being able to make possible an intercommunion with such ones” (Constantinescu 2022).

It is not my concern to present the entire content of this study. I am interested in this statement about praying in common with other Christians. According to this affirmation, the prayer itself can be considered as intercommunion with the non-Orthodox, but not a Eucharistic one. In this sense, I can present and argue that from a Romanian Orthodox perspective, there are two different well-known positions regarding the gesture of common prayer, namely:

- a. *Common prayers with non-Orthodox Christians are not permitted, based on the holy canons and tradition.* This positioning applies the principle of canonical exactitude. In support of this position, certain canons are mentioned, such as the 10th, 11th, 45th, 64th, 71st Apostolic canons, canons 6, 9, 32, 33, 34, 37 of Laodicea; canon 9 by Timotheos of Alexandria, canon 2 of the Synod of Antioch, canon 1 of the 4th Ecumenical Synod, canon 2 of the 6th Ecumenical Council, and canon 1 of the 7th Ecumenical Council. Of all these, the most important are the following two:
 - The 45th Apostolic canon: “Any bishop or priest or deacon who merely prays with heretics is to be excluded from communion, but if he permits them to act as clergy, he is to be deposed” (See: *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe* 2018a, p. 121);
 - Canon 33 of Laodicea: “It is not permitted to pray with heretics or schismatics” (See: *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe* 2018b, p. 93).

In Orthodox theology, one of the theologians who formulated a critical point of view regarding common prayer is the Greek priest Anastasie Gotópulos. Originally his work entitled *Prayer in Common with Heretics. Approach to the Canonical Practice of the Church*, was published in Greek in 2008. The second edition was published in 2009, and was then translated into Romanian in 2013. The author provides an analysis of the canons mentioned above and clearly states that,

“canonical prescriptions are clear, absolute and categorical in prohibiting participation in common prayer and worship with heretics or schismatics” (Gotópulos 2013, p. 22).

Most of those who support this position also mention the Encyclical signed by Patriarch Athenagoras in January 1952, but without explaining its general context (See Patelos 1978, p. 46). It must be said that those who are against these common prayers are those who do not even support Orthodox participation in the ecumenical dialogue. The conclusion of those who are in this group is clearly categorical, namely that it is not permitted for the Orthodox, laymen or clergy, to pray under any circumstances with non-Orthodox.

- b. *Common prayers with non-Orthodox Christians are permitted under certain conditions.* Concretely, prayer is possible as a common Christian witness, but it should not have a liturgical and eucharistic character. In this sense, theologians who support this practice believe that some canons should be updated for what we live today and not applied literally, considering their use for concrete situations in the past history of the Church. This positioning appeals to the principle of *oikonomia* (economy or ecclesiastical flexibility):

“The critical question concerning the meaning of the prohibition by the sacred canons on common prayer with the heterodox and schismatics in relation to today’s ecclesiastical reality obviously has to do with our contemporary appropriation and misappropriation of certain canons which are used indiscriminately,

or even injudiciously by some ecclesiastical circles in order to aim criticism at the Church hierarchy, under the pretext, indeed, of protecting endangered Orthodoxy from its participation in the Ecumenical movement” (Pheidias 2014, p. 609).

Personally, I am in the group of those from point b, but not without certain explanations. First of all, the presence of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical dialogue is not optional, but urgently necessary. The witness brought by the Eastern tradition is unique in its way and cannot accept the anti-ecumenical minority position of withdrawing from ecumenical dialogue. At the same time, although I am not a theologian specializing in the interpretation of the canons, it is clear that *ad litteram* they prohibit common prayer. However, from a missiological perspective, I can accept the difference that the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in WCC proposed for approval, namely that common prayer can be confessional and interconfessional. Specifically, the Orthodox can participate in the common interconfessional prayers, but they should not accept the active participation of the non-Orthodox in the confessional services, such as the Holy and Divine Liturgy. I will talk about the recommendations of the Special Commission later. Now I will analyze the historical and theological situation of the so-called “Ecumenical Eucharist” or simple “Lima Liturgy”.

4. “Ecumenical Eucharist” or “Lima Liturgy”

In accordance with the statute but also conceptually, the ecumenical dialogue has as its main objective the union of Christians in the same faith. The World Council of Churches represents the platform that offers Christians of different traditions, including the Orthodox, the chance for a dialogue to achieve this objective, but it cannot impose union or eucharistic concelebration. Unacceptably for the Orthodox, some member Churches of the Council practice intercommunion or Eucharistic hospitality. This practice has also been adopted by WCC General Assemblies and in some ecumenical conferences or meetings. However, as a reaction to the Orthodox position, what some have considered to be the Ecumenical Eucharist has now been abandoned. It is about the so-called Lima Liturgy or Eucharist. Within the Faith and Order Commission, in 1982 the document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) was approved. According to this document, the commission proposed a common theological understanding regarding the most important Sacraments of the Church: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. In order to put into practice these common positions, a Liturgy order was created to include elements of common worship and accepted by all Churches⁵. The main author of this text is Max Thurian, a member of the Taizé community⁶. According to my research, this “Ecumenical Eucharist” was performed at several important moments, namely: at the Meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order in Lima, on 15th January 1982 (Kinnamon 1982, p. 146); at the 6th General Assembly of WCC, in Vancouver, on 31st July 1983 (Gill 1983, p. 52) and at the 7th General Assembly of WCC, in Canberra, on 10th February 1991 (Kinnamon 1991, p. 236).

During the General Assembly in Canberra, an additional document was drawn up by Orthodox theologians in which they clearly state the disagreement regarding the celebration of the Lima Liturgy and that the Eucharist must remain the final expression of Christian unity⁷. After the signal from the Canberra Assembly, aware of the difficulty for Orthodox theologians to accept the Lima Liturgy, it was reaffirmed that it is not binding on all member Churches, but on the contrary remains at the liberty of each church to use and participate in when it is celebrated in the ecumenical framework. Moreover, between 20 and 27 April 1994, a Consultation on the Role of Worship within the Search for Unity took place in England at the invitation of the Faith and Order Commission. Here, a group met to study the forms, use and future role of the “Lima Liturgy”. It is interesting that the impossibility of its acceptance by the Orthodox and Catholics is mentioned again, but the celebration of this liturgy is still recommended (See: *Commission on Faith and Order 1995*, p. 139)⁸.

However, due to the clear positioning of Orthodox theologians regarding the celebration of this “ecumenical liturgy”, for the General Assembly in Harare in 1998, it was decided to replace it with other forms of prayer. Moreover, also at the request of the Orthodox, the

Assembly approved the establishment of a Special Commission to analyze the Orthodox presence and involvement in the World Council of Churches, including the role and manner of performing common prayer.

Today the concept of “Ecumenical Eucharist” is no longer used at the level of the WCC. As the theologian Peter Bouteneff has well pointed out, the Eucharistic communion must fulfill certain conditions. Those who partake of the same chalice must be full members of the Church and have a common teaching and faith. Until a common creed is reached, Eucharistic concelebration is impossible:

“Contrary to former practice, assemblies of the WCC no longer feature an “Ecumenical Eucharist.” We Orthodox were at pains to explain that the very concept of “Ecumenical Eucharist” was for us a theological impossibility” (Bouteneff 2014, p. 621).

It should be appreciated that the leaders of the Council understood the Orthodox position, explained in particular by the Report of the Special Commission, and the fact that they renounced the celebration of the „Ecumenical Eucharist” or the Lima Liturgy. Included in the report is a serious criticism of the “Ecumenical Eucharist”, even if some disagree with this renouncement:

“The Lima Liturgy is sometimes thought to be an ecumenically approved form for intercommunion between Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, thus creating the possibility that we might celebrate the eucharist together. This is not the case” (Final Report 2002, p. 23).

In the following, I will present at length the position of the Special Commission regarding common prayer within WCC meetings and the reception of the amendments suggested.

5. Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in WCC and Common Prayer

As I said above, as a reaction to those moments of Eucharistic concelebration or intercommunion, Orthodox theologians decided in two consultations held before the Harare General Assembly not to participate in any religious act prepared for that meeting in 1998. The first decision was taken at the Thessaloniki Orthodox Consultation (Thessaloniki Statement), held between 29 April and 2 May 1998, which formulated the following decision:

“A. Orthodox delegates participating at Harare will present in common this Statement of the Thessaloniki Inter-Orthodox Meeting. B. Orthodox delegates will not participate in ecumenical services, common prayers, worship and other religious ceremonies at the Assembly” (FitsGerald and Bouteneff 1998, p. 138).

Between 7 and 13 May 1998, the second meeting took place in Saydnaya, near Damascus, Syria, and it was accepted that even common prayers without a eucharistic character have become problematic for the Orthodox understanding (See: FitsGerald and Bouteneff 1998, p. 10). This position of the Orthodox theologians was taken into account and as a result of these discussions, in Harare the celebration of the Lima Liturgy was abandoned, even if some non-Orthodox theologians did not agree with this. The author of the official report from Harare would mention this tension and discontent in the introduction (See: Kessler 1999, p. 19). Moreover, the Harare Assembly approved the establishment of the *Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in WCC*, composed of sixty theologians, thirty from the Orthodox Churches and thirty from other member Churches (See: Kessler 1999, p. 152).

After the organization of four official consultations in the period 1999–2002 (Morges—December 1999; Cairo—October 2000; Berekfürdő—November 2001; Helsinki—May 2002), the Special Commission presented the *Final report of the Special Commission on Orthodox participation in the WCC* in September 2002, adopted by the Central Committee of the WCC (See: Central Committee 2003, pp. 151–90). The report analyzed and proposed many more amendments regarding Orthodox involvement in the WCC, but for my study I was only interested in the proposals for common prayer presented to the Central Committee by

theologian Peter Bouteneff. Essentially, theme V of the report proposes to make a difference between confessional prayer and inter-confessional prayer. In the words of the report,

“Confessional common prayer” is the prayer of a confession, a communion, or a denomination within a confession. Its ecclesial identity is clear. It is offered as a gift to the gathered community by a particular delegation of the participants, even as it invites all to enter into the spirit of prayer. It is conducted and presided over in accordance with its own understanding and practice. “Interconfessional common prayer” is usually prepared for specific ecumenical events. It is an opportunity to celebrate together drawing from the resources of a variety of traditions. Such prayer is rooted in the past experience of the ecumenical community as well as in the gifts of the member churches to each other” (*Final Report 2002*, p. 9).

In other words, the interconfessional common prayer does not have an ecclesiastical status, which means that the Orthodox can participate without being accused of violating the canons. This can be one of the interpretations of this differentiation between confessional and interconfessional prayer. I also noticed it in an analysis of a non-Orthodox theologian who regrets the loss of this ecclesial status of common prayers within the WCC, saying that it is a radical decision (See [McGeoch 2015](#), p. 129). In essence, the Special Commission wanted to display a balance. Beyond the internal criticisms among the Orthodox, the authors considered that a change of terminology does not mean so much for the common heritage in the ecumenical dialogue. Indeed, for me as an Orthodox⁹, the word “worship” implies more than a common prayer. It even suggests to me the possibility of performing the most Holy and Divine Liturgy.

Regarding the recommendations made by the Special Commission, I have to say that I continued to follow how their implementation went and that I was still pleasantly surprised. Beyond the adoption of the Final Report by the Central Committee in September 2022, I examined the next meetings of the WCCG commissions and even the General Assemblies. For example, upon a simple analysis of the minutes from the meetings of the Central Committee of the WCC from September 2006 and from February 2008, I noticed that in the contents the moments of prayer for the opening of the meetings were renamed in accordance with the recommendations of the Special Commission: “interconfessional common prayer” ([Central Committee 2007](#), p. 1; [2009](#), p. 1). Also, at the General Assembly in Porto Alegre, from 2006, it is stated in the official report that the worship committee „took special care to ensure that the common prayers would respect Orthodox liturgical sensibilities” ([Rivera-Pagan 2007](#), p. 12). At the Busan Assembly in 2013, moments of common prayer were organized taking into account the recommendations, even if not everyone agreed (See: [Senturias and Gill 2014](#)), as it also happened in Porto Alegre¹⁰. A guide has been prepared for the Karlsruhe General Assembly in September 2022 that mentions “common prayer” several times. In the words of Fr. Ioan Sauca, WCC Acting General Secretary,

“The Assembly Worship Planning Committee understands that common prayer is at the heart of every World Council of Churches assembly. We hope the collection of words and music presented here will provide a context for inspiration, reflection, illumination, and rejoicing” (*Oasis of Peace 2022*, p. xi).

As a conclusion for this part, as I have already stated above, I maintain my opinion that the distinction introduced by the Special Commission between confessional and interconfessional prayer is a good one. In accordance with the history of the Orthodox presence in the ecumenical movement, the decision of the Special Commission hoped to relax the situation within the Orthodox Churches. As for common prayer, the implementation of the Commission’s decisions was achieved only at the level of Orthodox delegations in the ecumenical movement, without major consequences at the internal level. My opinion is that the tensions remained the same and even increased in some Orthodox areas. However,

even today the recommendations remain valid, especially since we have no other current Orthodox decisions.

6. Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

6.1. Historical Dates

From a historical point of view, the most important landmarks of this “ecumenical tradition” must be remembered. I will address only four of them. First of all, the initiative belongs to the Episcopalian priest Paul Wattson (16 January 1863–8 February 1940) and it was put into practice before the founding of the WCC. In other texts, Wattson is called “a North American Anglican Priest”, but this has to do with the fact that the Episcopalian Church was part of the Anglican Communion. Wattson designed for the Church a Prayer Octave for Christian Unity, celebrated first time between 18 and 25 January in 1908. At that time in the Roman Catholic calendar it was the “Feast of the Chair of Peter”, up to 25 January, the day for the Feast of the Conversion of Paul. Other sources also mention Mother Lurana White, a person close to Wattson, as co-founder of this initiative. Nevertheless, in October 1909 he was received in the Roman Catholic Church and in this way, his initiative was accepted by Pope Pius X and assumed by the Roman Catholic Church.

Another important key date in the history of the WPCU is related to the person of Rev. Paul Couturier (29 July 1881–24 March 1953), a Catholic theologian, who changed the title of the Prayer Octave for Church Unity into the Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, in 1939.

The next important step was the decision that the Faith and Order Commission (of the WCC) should work together with the Roman Catholic Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (today known as Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity—PCPCU) in order to jointly prepare the Week of Prayer material. This happened in 1968 as a natural consequence of the establishment of a Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and WCC in 1965. Today, since 2004, the material are not only jointly prepared but also published together by both parties.

The last important key date for this project which has to be mentioned is the celebration in 2008 of the centenary, and also the common project between the WCC and Roman Catholic Church for the last forty years (1968–2008). The moment was also marked by the official visit of the General Secretary of the WCC to the Vatican, at the invitation of Pope Benedict XVI:

“This evening I cordially greet the Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, who has come to Rome to join us on the centenary of the Week of Prayer. I am pleased that members of the “Joint Working Group” are present and I greet them with affection” (*Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI 2008*).

This event took place on 25 January 2008 and was mentioned by the Central Committee as an important sign of cooperation between the Vatican and the WCC:

“This year in Rome, saw the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, vested as a minister of his church, participate in the liturgy of Prayer for Christian Unity in the basilica of St Paul’s-Outside-the-Wall, presided by Pope Benedict XVI. Dr Kobia joined the Pope in the procession with the other clergy to the altar; he addressed the pope in that celebration, and was in turn greeted by him, as they gathered to pray together that we may be one, so that the world may believe” (*Central Committee 2009*, p. 76).

Regarding the timing of the week, the WPCU has kept the same dates, although there were always discussions on this topic. In Europe it is celebrated in January, but in other parts of the world the date may differ depending on the holiday period. Regarding the material, in every year it „consists of a theme based on a scriptural reflection, an ecumenical service of common prayer, scriptural meditations for the eight days, and an account of the ecumenical situation in the region that prepared the materials” (*Roman Catholic Church and World*

Council of Churches 2022, p. 34). The resources are prepared by a local ecumenical group (this practice has been used since 1975), approved by both commissions, and in the final stage, the texts are sent to the local churches for use during the WPCU. The list of each year's theme can be consulted online¹¹.

6.2. Theological Observations

At the beginning of this study, I mentioned the different forms of common prayer within the WCC. Of all these—free prayers, the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, Global ecumenical online prayer, The Week Prayer for Christian Unity—the last one is the most well-known:

“Decades of experience of common prayer and spiritual sharing within the WCC constitute a heritage which cannot easily be ignored. Many Christians have the same experience in local situations; the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* is one of the most widespread examples of such experience” (*Final Report 2002*, p. 8).

At a first analysis of the material proposed for the year 2023, we can debate some ideas regarding the implementation of these common prayers, but also regarding the terminology used. First of all, the material is not mandatory. On the contrary, it can be adapted according to local situations, from a liturgical, social and cultural point of view. This guide on how to use the material can be found in the introduction to each year's texts:

“For churches and Christian communities which observe the Week of Prayer together through a single common service, an order for an ecumenical worship service is provided. Churches and Christian communities may also incorporate material from the Week of Prayer into their own services. Prayers from the ecumenical worship service, the “eight days”, and the selection of additional prayers can be used as appropriate in their own setting” (*Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022*, p. 1).

The biblical text for 2023 is taken from Isaiah 1, 17, probably also in the context of the war in Ukraine: „Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”. However, the use of the expression ecumenical worship is interesting: „an order for an ecumenical worship”. Probably, for us as Orthodox, „an order for common prayer” would be more recommended. Even more interesting is the use of the word liturgy within the instructions for the ecumenical worship service:

“The liturgy concludes with the prayers of the people, the praying together of the Lord's Prayer, the benediction and dismissal. There are indications for music at different points of the service and some suggested texts or hymns are found in the appendix. This ecumenical worship service has a simple order that can be adapted for local situations and traditions to allow for diversity of expression and expansion of the celebration to include other elements of practice, such as local rituals and prayers. Through the written words of this liturgy, it is meant to convey the emotions, struggles, and hope” (*Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022*, p. 10).

Considering what was presented about confessional and interconfessional common prayer, and about the word “worship” and “liturgy”, now the next question arises: where do we place the practice of the week of prayer for Christian unity? Is this a common confessional or interconfessional prayer? From a theoretical point of view, according to the composition of the texts for the week of prayer, it should be located in the area of inter-confessional common prayer. But I do not agree at all with using words like “ecumenical worship” or “liturgy” because they are again interpreted by Orthodox as inappropriate and in disagreement with the recommendations of the Special Commission.

6.3. The Romanian Orthodox Church Case

The activities during the WPCU in the Romanian Patriarchate are carried out mainly at the level of large churches in cities. There were situations when such an ecumenical

meeting was organized in the evening in the Patriarchal Cathedral in Bucharest, but the presence of the representatives of the other Christian traditions was official without any liturgical dimension. Moreover, a different church space was appointed for each evening in the week of prayer. At most, a non-Orthodox was allowed to give a short speech, but again without a liturgical connotation.

I appreciate that this situation became normative after the decision of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) in October 2008. This decision is a natural continuation of Decision no. 4276/9 July 2008. Basically, the synodal delimitation was officiated because of the gestures of two Orthodox hierarchs: In January 2008, Bishop Sofronie Drincec of Oradea prayed, on the occasion of the Epiphany during the religious service of consecrating water, together with the Greek-Catholic bishop of Oradea, Virgil Bercea. On 25 May 2008, Orthodox Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu, Archbishop of Timișoara and Metropolitan of Banat (1962–2014) took communion in a Uniate Church in Timișoara, in the presence of the Greek-Catholic bishop Alexandru Mesian.

Considering these situations, but also to respond to the reactions from the Orthodox public space, regarding the Orthodox participation of ROC in the WPCU from 2009 onwards, the following framework program was proposed:

“The prayer *Our Father*; reading the biblical text proposed in that year; reading the biblical text from John 17: 7–21; video projector presentation of social projects with inter-confessional participation and cooperation between different confessions; free discussions; singing of Beatitudes” (Decision no. 6745/29 October 2008).

In January 2014 an online petition was organized against the celebration of the Week of Common Prayer for Christian Unity in Romania¹². During the meeting of the Holy Synod in February 2014, it was very clearly stated that the Synod,

“reiterates the decision of the Holy Synod no. 4276 of 9 July 2008, by which it was decided that no hierarch, priest, deacon, monk, nun or lay faithful from the Romanian Orthodox Church is allowed to receive Eucharistic communion in another Christian Church, and that Orthodox clergy are not allowed to celebrate the Holy Sacraments and hierurgies with ministers of other cults, as well as decision no. 6745 of 29 October 2008 which establishes the way for the representatives of our Church to participate in the other Churches, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, respectively the fact that they will only attend the program held in the respective Churches, without wearing liturgical vestments” (Decision No. 13.605/20 February 2014).

In 2015, the Romanian Patriarchate published a new statute of the canonical disciplinary law, in which it is considered a pastoral-liturgical deviation to serve with heretics or schismatics. The text was approved by the Holy Synod of the ROC by decision no. 937/2015 in the working session of 5–6 February 2015. Considering that it is not specified whether this category also includes the common prayer within the WCC and especially on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I consider that the participation can be considered permitted:

“Art. 28-(2) The cleric who serves the holy things together with heretics or schismatics is sanctioned with a bishop’s rebuke (in case of ignorance) or is dismissed from clerical service; in case of recidivism, he is deposed” (*Regulamentul 2015*, p. 38).

It is interesting that in support of this measure, as a footnote, the following biblical texts and canons are mentioned in the statute: Matthew 10, 14; Mark 6, 11; Luke 9, 5; Acts 13, 51; 18, 6; 7, 45, 64, 70 and 71 Apostolic canons, 11 Trullan canon, 1 Antioch canon, canon 33, 37 and 38 of Laodicea, namely, the canons also highlighted by the theologians who are against any act of prayer with the non-Orthodox.

As a conclusion for the Romanian Orthodox case, I assume that the decisions of the Holy Synod of the ROC only partially took into account the recommendations of the Special

Commission. In other words, the prayer program proposed by the Romanian Patriarchate should be considered interconfessional and accepted by all believers. Unfortunately, the new statute approved in 2015 does not mention the recommendations of the Special Commission.

7. Holy and Great Synod, Social Ethos Document and Common Prayer

Regarding common prayer with other Christians, the documents of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, held between 16 and 26 June 2016, in Crete, do not mention this issue at all. However, the official document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* appreciates the involvement of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical dialogue, especially that in the WCC, as testimony to its tradition:

“The Orthodox Church, which prays unceasingly “for the union of all”, has always cultivated dialogue with those estranged from her, those both far and near. In particular, she has played a leading role in the contemporary search for ways and means to restore the unity of those who believe in Christ, and she has participated in the Ecumenical Movement from its outset, and has contributed to its formation and further development” (*Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World 2016*, §4).

Instead, the document published with the approval of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, entitled *For The Life Of The World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* recalls the common prayer within the ecumenical dialogue:

“Moreover, even if they cannot as yet enjoy perfect communion in the full sacramental life of the Church, all Christians are called by their baptism in the Holy Trinity to gather together in prayer, to repent of past misunderstandings and offences against their brothers and sisters, and to love one another as fellow servants and heirs of the Kingdom of God” (*For the Life of the World 2020*, §52).

Analyzing this affirmation, it can be seen that the basis of common interconfessional prayer is related to baptism and faith in the name of the Holy Trinity. We find the same understanding in the report of an Orthodox consultation from 26 May to 1 June 1998, held at New Skete Monastery, Cambridge, New York (FitsGerald and Bouteneff 1998, p. 143) and in the Special Commission Report (*Final Report 2002*, p. 16). According to most Orthodox participants in the ecumenical dialogue, the goal of the mission of the Orthodox presence in ecumenical circles is not the conversion of the non-Orthodox, but the testimony of its heritage. At the same time, we agree that theological differences are still a stumbling block between our full communion. Through honest dialogue, we can reach a decrease in them. Prayer is possible and even necessary to achieve unity in the same faith.

However, the differentiation introduced by the Special Commission between confessional and interconfessional prayer is missing. The lack of official clarification both in the documents of the Synod of Crete, and also in the document approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate remains a problem for the common interconfessional prayer practice, including the one performed during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In other words, the practice of common prayer was and continues to be a sensitive subject.

8. Conclusions

During my ministry as a deacon, I always wondered if the request from the Great Litany within the Orthodox Divine Liturgy—“For the peace of the whole world, for the stability of the holy Churches of God and for the union of all, let us pray to the Lord”—refers to other Christians. Honestly, I would like that to be the case.

In this research, I presented the Orthodox positions regarding common prayer. Some are just against any common prayers within the eucharistic liturgical services, as they are performed in the tradition of the Church. In this sense, the possibility of a non-Orthodox Christian to actively participate in any Orthodox service is unacceptable for the Orthodox conservative group. The Special Commission recommended that the common prayers be

drafted together with the Orthodox representatives. In fact, this criticism is also valid in the case of performing the Lima Liturgy, which is an ecclesiological impossibility. Only the Church can officiate the Liturgy, which is not the case of WCC. The WCC should not be interpreted as a church because it is only an institutional platform for dialogue.

From a personal perspective, in accordance with the amendments drawn up by the Special Commission, the Orthodox presence at the prayers specially composed for certain ecumenical moments can be accepted. A confusion arises if we consider the respective prayers as services in themselves, according to Orthodox practice. However, we should understand that Orthodox services are different in ritual and content compared to ecumenical prayers. Moreover, as long as they do not take place in consecrated Orthodox spaces, that is, in churches consecrated by a canonical Orthodox hierarchy, I do not see any problem with the interconfessional common prayer just as a common Christian witness.

In this sense, for a good revitalization of the moment of Christian witness during the week of prayer, Orthodox Christians must be informed about common prayers, which do not have the ecclesial and eucharistic character of Orthodox services. Perhaps this would offer the possibility of extending the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at the local and parochial level. If we stay together, we should also pray together. At this moment, for me personally, the difference between confessional and interconfessional is enough in order to share non-ecclesial prayer with non-Orthodox. Clearly, Christians in the WCC share common things and they want to discover them authentically. The ecumenical dialogue offers this possibility and common prayer should smooth the way to discovering in the others the image of the Triune God.

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Notes

- ¹ At the end of the General Assembly in Uppsala, in 1968, the Russian Orthodox Church offered the General Secretary of the WCC an icon with the Holy Trinity. I do not know if it is the same icon, but I do not exclude this possibility: “Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, on behalf of the delegation to the Assembly from the Moscow Patriarchate, presented to the World Council of Churches a copy of the famous Ikon of the Trinity by Andrew Rublov. «We present this with our sincere wishes to the (p. 270) World Council of Churches [. . .]. May the Triune God bless the Council, our whole fellowship and our brotherhood.» Dr Blake received the gift on behalf of the World Council of Churches and Dr Payne expressed the deep appreciation of the Council and of the Assembly. «This is something which moves us deeply and I assure you the ikon will be taken to Geneva and placed in our headquarters. I hope you will convey to the Patriarch our very sincere thanks for the gift.» (Goodall 1968, p. 271)”.
- ² I participated in conferences organized by non-Orthodox that included free prayer in the program, in connection with a biblical text or the theme of the respective conference. For example, the following was written about prayer at the Arusha Missionary Conference in 2018: “Prayer and spiritual life were at the heart of the whole conference. This indeed was a major highlight. The conference offered multiple spaces for joyful celebrations. It offered rich opportunities to be in God’s presence, rejoicing and lamenting before the triune God. Participants met for daily prayer—in the morning, at noon, and in the evening—which proved to be a well from which the participants drank deeply, finding unity and inspiration” (Jukko and Keum 2019, p. xxiii).
- ³ This is another prayer project initiated by the WCC in 1978. Every week we are invited to pray for Christians in different countries or regions: “The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle enables the churches to journey in prayer through every region of the world and through every week of the year affirming our solidarity with Christians all over the world, brothers and sisters living in diverse situations, experiencing diverse problems and sharing diverse gifts” (*A Faith That Does Justice* 2013, p. 18). More details can be found on the official website of the WCC and in the work *Pilgrim Prayer* (2021).
- ⁴ As an Acting General Secretary, fr. Ioan Sauca spoke about the importance of this way of prayer: “As many churches adapted to online prayer and worship, the WCC also adapted by providing opportunities for global prayer, regional prayer and daily prayer. This has been among the most inspiring developments—to be more deeply connected through prayer—to pray for one another and to pray together for our churches and our world” (*Pilgrims on the Path of Peace* 2022, p. 16). The project was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when common prayer was organized using the ZOOM platform with Christian people from all over the world. This moment was organized at the end of the annual week of prayer on 21 January 2021. See the record of this meeting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91tmRfxhVka>, accessed on 5 December 2022 (*Global Ecumenical Prayer for Christian Unity* 2021).

- 5 “In composing this liturgy for the Lima Conference, the aim was to illustrate the solid theological achievements of the Faith and Order document, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (cited henceforth as BEM). The Lima Liturgy is not the only possibility: the convergences registered in BEM could be expressed in other liturgical forms, according to other traditions, spiritualities or cultures” (Thurian 1983, p. 225).
- 6 The text can be analyzed in works such as Kinnamon (1982, pp. 147–55) and Thurian (1983, pp. 236–46). After the presentation of the first version, the original text of this liturgy was modified and adapted according to the new reactions and recommendations.
- 7 “The Orthodox are sorry that their position with regard to eucharistic communion has not been understood by many members of the WCC, who regard the Orthodox as unjustifiably insisting upon abstinence from eucharistic communion. The Orthodox once more invite their brothers and sisters in the WCC to understand that it is a matter of unity in faith and fundamental Orthodox ecclesiology, and not a question of a triumphalistic stance. For the Orthodox, the eucharist is the supreme expression of unity and not a means towards unity.” (Kinnamon 1991, p. 281).
- 8 The same enthusiasm about the Lima Liturgy can be found in another paper of the Faith and Order Commission, published in 1996: “The Lima Liturgy, produced by some members of the Faith and Order Commission drawn from different Christian traditions, while not an official document of the Commission has won widespread acceptance as a liturgy which is particularly appropriate for ecumenical gatherings. Some churches have undertaken a process to adopt this as an acceptable rite for use within their churches. The Lima Liturgy itself has uncovered a hunger for church approved liturgical texts which display an openness to the diversity of liturgical expressions of Christian spirituality” (*Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board 1996*, p. 136).
- 9 “The worship of the Eastern church is closely associated with its dogma and ethos. Without the worship, and particularly without the eucharist, which is the basis and the centre of the worship, both the dogmatic and ethical teaching of the church remain hovering in the air. Moreover, the organization of the church, being its third basic means of expressing itself, also has worship as its starting point” (Passakos 2004, p. 22). Obviously, for others the word worship may have a different connotation. In an article published by Dagmar Heller at the time of the change of these terminologies, she would say that: “Since this terminology is still under discussion and since, from a Protestant perspective, there is no fundamental difference between “worship” and “prayer”, I will use the terminology of “ecumenical worship” in this article. This may make it easier for Protestants to understand some of the difficulties expressed by Orthodox about ecumenical worship” (Heller 2004, pp. 244–45).
- 10 “Most delegates and participants wholeheartedly embraced the prayer gatherings held under a huge tent at the entrance to the university and appreciated the efforts to ameliorate the tensions of past assemblies. Some, however, were displeased that almost a quarter of a century after the pivotal statement authorized by Faith and Order at Lima in 1982, Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, and despite decades of ecumenical dialogue, the WCC was still unable to celebrate a common eucharist, the central Christian sacrament and act of worship” (Rivera-Pagan 2007, p. 21).
- 11 See the list here: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity>, accessed on 5 December 2022 (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022).
- 12 “It is necessary to distinguish between Christian love, which must be shown to every man, regardless of his religion, race or social status, according to the model of the Good Samaritan who helped his neighbor, and dogmatic compromise and the knowing violation of the canons of the Church . . . Please sign this petition in which we ask the Patriarch of Romania and the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church not to organize a week of “ecumenical prayer” in our country” (Să spunem un Nu categoric săptămânii de rugăciune ecumenică! 2014, https://www.petitiononline.com/spunem_nu_nu_categoric_saptamanii_de_rugaciune_ecumenica, accessed on 6 December 2022).

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