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The Theological Premises and Canonical Consequences of Church Synodality as Reflected in the Ravenna Document

Abstract

The dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church is one of the most important theological dialogues, since it is a dialogue between two churches with apostolic origins. We regard the Ravenna Document as the result of a major effort to bring the two churches closer together, but we may also assert that it opened a new chapter in the understanding of ecclesiology in all its aspects.



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Introduction

The dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church is one of the most important theological dialogues, since it is a dialogue between two churches with apostolic origins. Orthodox-Catholic dialogue unfolds between two churches with a two-thousand-year historical tradition: the Orthodox Church, which includes all the local Orthodox Churches, and the Roman-Catholic Church. Thus, the first premise is the apostolic nature of the two Christian churches, although this is laid claim to in slightly different ways: the Orthodox Church confesses a faith founded on all the Apostles, while the Roman-Catholic Church places St Peter the Apostle at the centre.

Although at the beginning of the official dialogue between the two churches, in 1980, there was a discussion of questions relating to the nature of the Church and the exercise of its power through the sacramentality of the mystery by the synod of bishops, as successors to the synod of the Apostles,¹ subsequently the emphasis shifted to the phenomenon of Uniatism, which threatens an honest dialogue between the two churches.

The Ravenna document is based on the theological methodology and analysis put forward and employed from 1980 to 2007 by the commissions for theological dialogue

¹ Irímie Marga, *În dragoste și adevăr. Dialogul teologic oficial ortodoxo-catolic, de la Rhodos la Balamand* (In Love and Truth. Official Orthodox-Catholic Theological Dialogue, from Rhodes to Balamand), (Paralela 45, Sibiu, 2000), p. 28

between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church. In order to gain a holistic picture of what was discussed over the course of almost three decades within the framework of these inter-Christian meetings, we shall summarise the main topics of theological and canonical interest.

At the first meeting, held in Rhodes, Greece, between 29 May and 4 June 1980, the following topics were discussed:

- a. The mystery of Christ expressed and achieved through the Holy Ghost as a mystery of the Church
- b. The Eucharist as the supreme sacrament of the Church
- c. The sacraments of Christian initiation and their relationship to the unity of the Church
- d. The relationships between the sacraments and the canonical structure of the Church
- e. Faith and sacramental communion
- f. The sacraments in relation to history and eschatology
- g. The sacraments and renewal of mankind and the world
- h. Liturgical differences in the ministration of the sacraments.²

In Munich, Germany, between 30 June and 6 July 1982, the topic was *The Mystery of the Church and the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity*,³ and in Crete, between 30 May and 8 June 1984, the discussion was on the relationship between *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church*, a document that was not completed until the next plenary meeting,⁴ held in Bari, Italy, between 29 May and 7 June 1986.

² *The First Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church, Patmos, Rhodes, 29 May – 4 June 1980*, topic no. 10615/1979 and 6082/1980.

³ *The Second Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church, Munich, 30 June – 6 July 1982*, topic no. 13006/1981.

⁴ *The Third Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church, Crete, 30 May – 8 June 1984*, topic no. 10130/1984.

Likewise, between 9 and 16 June 1987, talks resumed in Uusi-Valamo, Finland,⁵ on the subject of *The Sacrament of Ordination in the Sacramental Structure of the Church with Particular Reference to the Importance of the Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God*,⁶ and dealing with the working methods for future sessions. It was also at this session that the subject of the next meeting was decided upon: *The Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church*, held in Freising, Germany, between 6 and 15 June 1990.⁷

It should be emphasised that the Freising meeting was the last to have a profoundly theological nature, as meetings subsequent to 1990 were more apologetic and aimed at defending against Uniatism.⁸ The eighth meeting prior to 2007, when the Ravenna Document was issued, took place in Baltimore in 2000, where it was affirmed that the ecclesiological and canonical implications of Uniatism and the existence of Uniat Churches are deeply connected to the question of authority and of primacy in the Church.⁹

⁵ *The Fifth Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church, Uusi-Valamo, 19-27 June 1988*, topic no. 11527/1989.

⁶ *The Fourth Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church, Bari, 19 May – 7 June 1986 and 9-16 June 1987*, topic no. 9713/1986.

⁷ *The Sixth Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church, Freising, 6-15 June 1990*, topic no. 944/1991

⁸ ****The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholicism Dialogue, Documents of the Joint International Commission and Official Dialogues in the United States, 1965-1995*, ed. by John Borelli and John H. Erickson, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, a Crestwood, New-York and U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1996, p.245

⁹ Emmanuele Lanne, Michel van Parys, "Le dialogue catholique-orthodoxe à Baltimore-Emmitsburg", in *Irenikon*, nos. 3-4/2000, pp. 405-418.

Thus, dialogue between the two Churches brought to the fore theological issues, as well as issues relating to the contemporary canonical spectrum and the status of each of the Churches. The working method of the commissions that met over the course of almost three decades broadened the horizon for dialogue and the perspectives for a new hermeneutic of the shared Traditions, as well as the horizon for a different vision of the two Churches in the second millennium of Christianity.¹⁰

The Ravenna Document – Historical and Canonical Reflections

We regard the Ravenna Document as the result of a major effort to bring the two churches closer together, but we may also assert that it opened a new chapter in the understanding of ecclesiology in all its aspects. The title under which the Ravenna meeting was held, *The Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority*, systematises and deepens the Nicene-Constantinopolitan confession of faith, and also delineates the canonical limits of a church. It is not an exhaustive document that claims any total understanding of the identity of one or other of the two churches.

Rather, it attempts to question and to bring a wider perspective to aspects such as:

- a) the canonical limits of the Orthodox Church and Roman-Catholic Church and
- b) the relationship between them and the One, Holy, Catholic (universal) and Apostolic

¹⁰ Michel Stavrou, "Le dialogue catholique-orthodoxe sur la question de l'uniatisme à la lumière de la déclaration de Balamand 1993," in: *Teologia*, Arad, no. 4, 2007, p. 10.

Church, the Church that preserves unaltered the truth that brings salvation.

An understanding of these aspects is grafted onto a *de facto* understanding of the identity of the Church. In this sense, Father Dumitru Stăniloae asks: “What are we to do with identity? For, the idea has been put forward that we ought to shed our denominational identity, in exchange for a global identity. All have militated for the preservation of their own unity. But how are we now to achieve unity? Each Church believes that it possesses the absolute regarding Christ. I have it all in my own formulations, my own articulations, and at the same time, if another sees Christ differently from me, I sense that there is something that I lack. Ought I not then to incorporate what the other has into what I have? But how could I abandon my own articulations, since I must preserve them too? How am I to reconcile the two things?” His answer is as follows: we must deepen our own formulations, because in them we find the others’ meanings, total, multiple meanings; in this way we shall preserve our own formulations and have a perfect understanding with others. Pluralism of formulations, but identity of meanings, will perhaps in time bring identity of expression.¹¹

Metropolitan Damaskinos says: “the Orthodox Church, by identifying its canonical limits with those of the One, Holy, Catholic (universal) and Apostolic Church, does not accept the teaching that divine grace is conferred directly to the heretics or schismatics that lie outside its canonical limits. In this way it preserves the patristic tradition according to which the divine grace is imparted by the Holy Ghost only within the Church that constitutes the authentic body of Christ in the history of salvation.”¹²

¹¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Identitatea eclesială”, *DCTI*, Bucharest, 1981, p. 561.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 117.

Nevertheless, he asks whether a church might exist outside this Church and answers that, yes, it might, at least where there exists unity of faith and the apostolic succession with which it is closely linked.¹³

This is why the Ravenna Document argues on three levels (local, regional and universal) that “the Church of God exists where there is a community gathered in Eucharistic communion presided over, either directly or via its priests, by a bishop legitimately ordained in apostolic succession, who learns the faith handed down from the Apostles and is in communion with the other bishops and their churches. The fruit of this Eucharistic communion and service is that of gathering all those who have received the Spirit of Christ in Baptism together in authentic communion of faith, prayer, mission, brotherly love and mutual assistance. This communion is the framework in which ecclesial authority as a whole is exercised. The criterion of its exercise is communion.”¹⁴

The rediscovery of an ecclesiology centred on episcopal authority and the Holy Eucharist might bring about a reconsideration of western theology, which has lately placed a greater emphasis on an ecclesiology in which the Eucharist is one of the many means toward salvation. In this respect, the words of Ioannis Zizoulas are edifying: “In the western theological consciousness the divine Eucharist and the bishop ceased long ago to be linked to one another or to the being and unity of the Church. To believe that the bishop is an instrument of the Church and indispensable for its administration is not the same thing as uniting him with the nature of the Church and attributing ecclesiological content to the episcopal institution. Moreover, there is a difference between saying that the Eucharist is indispensable as one of the seven Sacraments of the

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20071013_documento-ravenna_en.html

Church and thinking of it as the supreme revelation of the Church itself. Only by thinking of the Eucharist as a revelation of the Church in its ideal and historical unity, and of the bishop, first and foremost, as the leader and head of the Eucharistic gathering that comes together in space and time, will we be able to recognise in each of them their deeper ecclesiological content.”¹⁵

Important also is the connexion between the local and the universal Church via episcopal authority. A canon received in both the West and the East expresses the relationship between the local Churches of a region: “The bishops of every nation (*ethnos*) must acknowledge him who is first (*protos*) among them and account him as their head (*kephalê*), and do nothing of consequence without his consent (*gnomê*); but each may do those things only which concern his own parish (*eparkhia*), and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity (*homonoia*), and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Apostolic Canon 34).¹⁶

We may also find this connexion between the local and regional and/or universal in the manner of the meetings of the regional Synods: “This rule, which occurs in many forms in the canonical tradition, applies to all the relations between the bishops of a region, be they bishops of a province or a metropolia or a patriarchate. Their practical application may be found in the synods of a province, region or patriarchate. The fact that the membership of a regional synod is always essentially episcopal, even when it also includes other members of the Church,

¹⁵ Ioannis Zizioulas, *Euharistie, Episcop, Biserică, Unitatea Bisericii în dumnezeiasca Euharistie și episcop în primele trei secole creștine*, (București: Ed. Basilica 2009), p. 24.

¹⁶ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20071013_documento-ravenna_en.html

reveals the nature of synodal authority. Only the bishops have a deciding vote. The authority of a synod is based on the nature of episcopal service itself and manifests the collegial nature of the episcopate in the service of the communion of Churches.”¹⁷

The order of the authority of the Synods in no way affects the nature of the catholicity of the Church since: “A synod implies the participation of all the bishops of a region. It is governed by the principle of consensus and harmony (*homonoia*) signified by Eucharistic concelebration, as it is implied in the final doxology of the aforementioned Apostolic Canon 34. Nevertheless, in his pastoral mission every bishop is the judge and is responsible before God for the affairs of his diocese (cf. St Cyprian, *Epistle* 55,21); he is, however, the guardian of the catholicity of his local Church and must take continual care to promote communion with the other Churches.”¹⁸

In the view of Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the bishop receives through the richer grace of his ordination the ability, among others, always to see, in the Holy Spirit, that which his flock sees, and all the bishops gathered together in synod have the ability to see that which their Churches or Church as a whole see, guided by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

The Ravenna Document rightly bases its discourse above all else on the members of the Church as the foundation of episcopal conciliarity: whatever its boundaries and canonical status might be, regional conciliarity demonstrates that the Church of God is not a communion of persons of local Churches severed from their human roots. Inasmuch as it is a communion of salvation and inasmuch as this salvation is the “restoration of creation (cf. St Irinaeus, *Against the Heretics*, 1, 36, 1), it embraces the human person in everything that binds it to the human reality created by God. The Church is not only a sum of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Natura Sinodicității”, in: *Studii Teologice*, nos. 9-10, 1977, p.613.

individuals; it is made up of communities with different cultures, histories and social structures. Communion at these two levels (synodal and Eucharistic) is permanently regulated by ecclesiastical canons and laws. This is what the Ravenna Document tells us in this respect: "The Churches regulate via the canons everything to do with the Eucharist and Sacraments, service and ordination, as well as tradition (*paradosis*) and teaching (*didaskalia*) of the faith. It is clear why there is a need for rules and disciplinary norms in this area."²⁰

Only in this direction is it possible to understand the rôle of the Ecumenical Councils, which succeeded in condensing and preserving a correct interpretation of the faith: "During the course of history, when serious problems arose that affected universal communion and understanding between Churches – be it in regard to the authentic interpretation of the faith, or services and their relationship to the Church as a whole, or the joint discipline that demanded loyalty to the Gospels – Ecumenical Councils were convened. They were ecumenical not only because they brought together bishops from all the regions and in particular the five major sees: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, according to the old order (*taxis*), but also because their solemn doctrinal decisions and their formulations of the common faith, particularly those regarding vital points, were binding upon all the Churches and all the faithful for all time and in all places. For this reason, the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils remain binding."²¹

It is true that in the East the canonical Tradition was preserved, according to which an Ecumenical Council became an institution before which it is not the canons that legislate the faith, but rather this event in the Holy Spirit Which guides the Church in such a way that it will give rise to the institutions it requires and which will be in keeping with its nature. The harmony between the Church and the councils is so profound

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

that even after the schism between East and West, which made it impossible to hold ecumenical councils in the strict sense of the term, both Churches continued to hold councils whenever serious crises arose. These councils brought together the bishops of the local Churches in communion with the See of Rome or, in a different sense of communion, the See of Constantinople. In the Roman-Catholic Church some of these councils held in the West were viewed as being ecumenical. This situation, which obliged both wings of Christianity to convoke their own councils, encouraged dissensions that led to mutual estrangement. Therefore, the means must be sought to allow the re-establishment of an ecumenical consensus.

The institution of the council must be understood not so much as a canonical and juridical aspect of ecclesiastical life, but as a fundamental aspect of the sacramentality of the Church, for which reason it is an authentic and permanent institution of the Church.²² On the other hand, the universal Church has a synodal structure, i.e. it is constituted as a catholic communion of local communities. The Church was worked in a synodal fashion from the very beginning, not only terms of the strict (episcopal) synodality characterised by the assembly of the Apostles without any other participants, as we discover in the text of the Gospels (or confirmed by the apostleship of St Paul, *Acts*, 13: 1-4), but also mixed synodality, through the gathering of all the members of the Church, as may be seen in the *Acts of the Apostles*²³ (the Apostolic Council, the Election of Matthew, the Election of the Seven Deacons).

This characteristic is in keeping with the Church's very essence of communion in faith. In this respect, the council is not only an expression of the Church, but an ontological institution, wholly corresponding with the structure of the Church as a conciliar

²² Ion Bria, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă* (Dictionary of Orthodox Theology), IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1994, p. 352.

²³ DHaddis Yeshanew, "Sinodalitatea în lucrarea Sfinților Apostoli", in *Studii Teologice*, series 2, year 23 (1971), nos. 7-8, p. 508.

body. In time, however, meetings of bishops became an increasingly widespread practice, on which the canonical norms have preponderantly pronounced, for even in the time of the primitive Church the bishops were subordinate to the council: "The council elects and ordains them, the council judges them, the council guides them, and when required it deposes them and replaces them with others."²⁴ For, if the mission of teaching and leadership is closely connected with the fulfilment of the Sacraments, a bishop cannot have jurisdictional primacy in the Church and infallibility in the area of teaching, because he does not have any basis for such primacy through any particular Sacrament. Thus, not having received special grace through a special Sacrament, no bishop can make individual decisions as to teaching or the running of the Church.

Thus, in the Orthodox world, as the bishops' right to administer the sacraments is equal, and each is ordained by a number of bishops in communion, their decisions on matters of teaching are also made in communion.²⁵ The very nature of the upper ecclesiastical hierarchy demands the spontaneous and necessary convocation of councils of neighbouring bishops when a new bishop is ordained in a vacant see.

This Eucharistic coming together, connected with the ordination of a new bishop, very quickly became a twice-yearly institution, whose authority spontaneously extended to the area of solving any ecclesiastical problems that might have arisen.²⁶ Bishops were no longer ordained from above, but rather through two or three bishops representing the bishopric in the past and from everywhere. Why was this so? Obviously, it was in order to make the new Bishop solidary with the Church

²⁴ Ștefan Lupu, "Sinodalitatea și/sau conciliaritatea: expresie a unității și catolicității Bisericii", in: *Dialog Teologic*, year 4 (2001), no. 7, p. 59.

²⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

²⁶ Boris Bobrinskoy, *Taina Bisericii (The Mystery of the Church)*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2004, p. 123.

of the past and the universal Church, not only in regard to the unchanged administering of the Sacraments, as the bishop does not have many Sacraments to administer, but also in regard to unchanged propagation of Church teaching. This can be seen in the fact that he does not have to administer a Sacrament in front of the ordaining bishops, but has to prove that he has mastered the Church's permanent teachings. Hence it can be seen that he is responsible for preserving the permanent and universal teaching of the Church in his bishopric.

In any event, "the history of the Orthodox Church proves that the practice of conciliarity shielded it both from any changes in matters of the faith, which the decisions of one alone brought to Catholicism, and from the chaos of individualist opinions found in Protestantism,"²⁷ so that it might be said that "the true teaching about the Church's conciliarity, which paradoxically and above all understanding combines unity and the distinction of those persons within it, is somewhat similar to the teaching about the unity of the being and distinction of the persons in the Holy Trinity or about the unity of the hypostasis and the distinction of natures in Jesus Christ.

All these teachings are characterised by the same combination of opposing sides. The undoing of this combination in order simplistically to take one or another side, the refusal to accept the mystery of this combination, has given rise to all heresies.²⁸ The council of bishops therefore has the task of defending the teaching about the faith and of formulating dogmas about the faith to combat any opposition that might come from inside or outside the Church.

There are three theological principles upon which the conciliarity of bishops rests:

²⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

²⁸ *Idem*, "Natura sinodicității", in *Studii Teologice*, series 2, year 39 (1977), nos. 9-10, p. 610.

The principle of communion – the source and model for the communion of bishops is the Holy Trinity. The communion of the Trinity shows that the principle of unity cannot rest in a single person, but in the communion of multiple persons. For this reason, the unity of the Church reveals itself as the unity of communion. In time, the institution arises as an expression of communion, and the structures are communion between persons who fulfil the same mission.

The principle of the transcendent origin of the Church's mission – corresponding to the three missions of Christ: Prophet, Archpriest, Emperor, with the ultimate aim of sanctifying the faithful. This work on the part of the bishops, sanctified from above, distinguishes them from the ranks of the faithful. In this way, the bishops become instruments of divine transcendence, whose mission is to elevate the faithful to communion with God. The work of sanctification presupposes communion between all those with that mission, however, as they all take part in the same priestly office fulfilled by Christ, and therefore their mission consists in bringing together all people in the same Christ.

The principle of complementariness between episcopal conciliarity and the general conciliarity of the Church – the two communions are not separate or parallel, but are in a relationship of openness and complementariness, inasmuch as the bishops are also members of the Church who have to work for their own personal salvation. The decisions of the councils are infallible only when they are received without opposition by the faithful, because only the Church in the entirety of its members remains the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Each limb of the Church is in the care of the *proestos*, but this relationship works both ways. A community is not ecclesial in nature without a bishop, but nor can the bishop attain the fullness of his mission unless he is in communion with the people and the other bishops within the framework of conciliarity. In bishop does not sit on the Council on his own behalf, but brings with him the entire community entrusted to

him. For this reason, in the Council is made manifest the conciliar communion of not only the bishops, but also the churches they shepherd. One sign of this awareness is the fact that only incumbent bishops are part of the Council of a local Church, those bishops that have been entrusted with a flock. The bishop is the icon of the presence and work of Christ in His Church and for this reason all the missions of the Church are carried out after being entrusted by the bishop.

Communion with the bishop, and through him the Church in its ecumenicity, makes the work of the priest or the layman the work of the Church, and this is signalled in each Holy Sacrament by the litany of peace or the threefold litany in which the local bishop is remembered.

The final part of the document shows us that primacy and conciliarity are closely connected, the one not being able to exist without the other. From this viewpoint, the canons of the first Christian millennium developed the prerogatives of the primate or *protos* and of conciliarity.

We may speak of the *primatum* rather than “privilege”, i.e. the prerogatives of honorary primacy. In any event, even some Roman-Catholic theologians and canonists have made a point of emphasising that in reality the text of Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council merely reiterates the content and meaning of Canon 3 of the Second Ecumenical Council, which makes express reference only to honorary prerogatives and privileges rather than the jurisdictional prerogatives of the *protos*.²⁹

The Fathers at the Quinisext Council therefore recognised “the same equal privileges” for Rome and Constantinople. Moreover, the collegial system of governing the entire Church (catholic or ecumenical) was confirmed through the five patriarchs.³⁰ This system of ruling the ecumenical Orthodox Church went down in

²⁹ V. Phidas, “La notion de primauté papale dans la Tradition canonique orthodoxe”, in *Nicolaus*, XIX, Bari, 1992, Fasc. 1-2.

³⁰ Christos Yannaras, “L’institution de la Pentarchie aujourd’hui”, in *Contacts*, 31 (1979), no. 107, pp. 283-289.

history as the “pentarchic system.”³¹ Outside the canons of the Ecumenical Councils, whereby the honorary hierarchical order of the principal sees of the original Church was strictly established,³² no other testimony of any nature whatever may have any conclusive value.

And therefore, from whatever point of view we might consider Conciliarity in the Church, we may conclude that it has played an extraordinary rôle in preserving the *taxis* and in passing down the Church’s teachings unaltered, as these were formulated at the Ecumenical Councils.³³ Introspection in Apostolic and post-Apostolic theology, as practised in the Ravenna Document, is an endeavour that must be continued at future inter-Christian meetings.

³¹ A. Popescu, “Colegialitatea episcopală, primatul papal”, in *GB* nos. 11-12/1969, p. 119.

³² Metropolitan Maximos de Sardes, *The Oecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church*, Patriarchal Institute, Thessaloniki, 1976, cap. «Teoria pentarhiei patriarhilor», pp. 233-244, Oreste Kerame, “Les chaires apostoliques et le role des patriarchats dans l’Eglise”, in *L’episcopat et l’Eglise universelle*, ed. Y. Congar and B.-D. Dupuy, Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1964, pp. 261-276.

³³ Christos Yannaras, “L’institution de la Pentarchie aujourd’hui”, in *Contacts*, 31 (1979), no. 107, pp. 283-289.