



Doctoral School of Theology

DOCTORAL THESIS
(SUMMARY)
**CHURCH SYNODALITY IN THE 9TH
CENTURY**

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In the year 1054, the Christian Church was shaken by a momentous event—the Great Schism, which divided Christianity into two distinct entities: the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Catholic Church. *“Unfortunately, subsequent attempts to eliminate the state of schism and to restore ecclesiastical unity between East and West ended in failure. This*

demonstrated that the Great Schism was a complex event with major political and religious implications, one that has not been overcome to this day.¹”

This profound rupture was rooted in a series of preliminary stages and complex causes, both political and religious. One of the early stages of the Schism was the growing divergence between the Eastern and Western Churches. This discrepancy was fueled by cultural, theological, and liturgical differences between the two. Over time, these divergences deepened, culminating in a series of conflicts and disputes. Theological and ritual differences became increasingly evident and contributed to the mounting tensions between East and West. One of the key points of disagreement was related to papal authority. The Catholic Church maintained that the Pope of Rome held supreme authority in the Church, while the Orthodox Church rejected this claim, advocating instead for a synodal model of governance. These religious tensions were further reinforced by political and cultural factors. The Byzantine Empire and the Western Roman Empire underwent significant political and military changes, which also affected the relations between the two Churches. Political interests and the struggle for territorial control played a significant role in exacerbating these conflicts. During the period when the Church remained united, for nearly a thousand years, differences in doctrine and practice gradually developed, ultimately leading to the Great Schism. While the Orthodox Church preserved unchanged the teachings of the first seven Ecumenical Councils, the West introduced theological changes that were not accepted by the Eastern Church. *“The schism between Byzantium and Rome was, without doubt, the most tragic event in the history of the Church; the Christian world was torn in two, and this division, which still endures, has greatly influenced the destiny of both East and West. The Eastern Church, which is essentially the true Church of Christ, saw its cultural and geographical sphere of action limited; historically, it became identified solely with the Byzantine world.²”*

Christianity has undergone numerous tensions caused by schisms or heresies. In most cases, these were resolved through decisions issued by local or ecumenical councils. However, some of these events deeply affected the life of the Church, and their negative consequences continue to be felt even today. The Schism of 1054 still marks Christian life to this day. Its beginnings were already foreshadowed in the 9th century, when doctrinal, liturgical, and canonical misunderstandings between Eastern and Western Europe began to generate numerous conflicts. Some of these differences had been identified as early as the

¹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Chifăr, *Istoria Creștinismului*, vol. III, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2002, p. 82.

² Arhimandrit Cleopa Ilie, *Călăuză în Credența Ortodoxă*, Editura Episcopiei Romanului și Hușilor, Roman, 2000, p. 21.

Sixth Ecumenical Council, through the issuance of 102 canons. The causes of this schism are serious and complex, and remain difficult to overcome even today³.

In the period preceding the Great Schism of 1054, the relationship between the Eastern and Western Churches was marked by a series of tensions and conflicts that paved the way for the final rupture. One of the first notable schisms that foreshadowed the Great Schism was the so-called “Minor Schism” or “Photian Schism.” This occurred in the 9th century and was primarily caused by the dispute between Patriarch Photius of Constantinople and Pope Nicholas I. Photius was enthroned as patriarch in 858 under controversial circumstances and began to challenge papal authority over certain territories in Illyricum. In response, Pope Nicholas I excommunicated Photius in 863, thus triggering a temporary rupture between the Eastern and Western Churches.

During the same period, another major issue that contributed to the tensions between the two churches was the controversy over the “Filioque” clause. This referred to the addition of the phrase “and the Son” in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Western Church adopted this formulation, maintaining that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (Filioque), whereas the Eastern Church rejected this addition, considering it an unacceptable alteration of the faith. This theological discrepancy was a major point of contention and significantly contributed to the escalation of tensions.

During the 9th and 10th centuries, the relationship between the Byzantine Empire (which was the center of the Eastern Church) and the Roman Empire (the center of the Western Church) became increasingly strained. Territorial and political disputes, as well as the competition for influence over other regions, fueled rivalries between the political and religious leaders of the two empires. The year 800 marked a significant moment in the relations between the two churches, with the coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor of the Roman Empire by Pope Leo III. This coronation was perceived as a violation of the sovereignty of the Byzantine Empire and provoked strong resentment in Constantinople. This act further consolidated the image of the papacy as holding significant political and religious authority in Western Europe, deepening the tensions between the two churches.

Overall, the period preceding the year 1054 was marked by a series of theological, political, and cultural conflicts and divergences that laid the groundwork for the Great

³ Constantin Claudiu Cotan, *Introducere în studiul istoriei creștinismului*, Editura Univesitară, București, 2017, p. 7.

Schism. These tensions ultimately culminated in the official separation between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054.

Although the actions taken by Rome and Constantinople were serious, it was initially believed that the quarrel between the two Churches would not last long and would not affect the life of Christians. Similar events had occurred in the past, and the Church had managed to overcome them. However, the schism of that time deepened over the centuries and today seems increasingly difficult to overcome⁴.

Finally, on July 16, 1054, the Schism became official when the legates of Pope Leo IX excommunicated Patriarch Michael I Cerularius of Constantinople, who in turn excommunicated the papal representatives. This definitive rupture marked the beginning of a lasting division in European Christianity between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Catholic Church. The Great Schism of 1054 had enduring consequences for the religious and cultural history of Europe and the Middle East, dividing Christianity and shaping the later development of both traditions.

The Great Schism should not be understood as the result of a single specific dispute. Political and cultural differences emerged alongside doctrinal issues. The separation took place over an extended period and officially reached a climax in 1054, in what is now known as the Great Schism.

The drafting of this study on ecclesiastical synodality in the 9th century, focused on the disputes between Patriarchs Ignatius and Photius, as well as on the political and religious context preceding the great event that split the Christian world in two (the Schism of 1054), is extremely valuable and relevant today. The 9th century represents a crucial period in the history of the Orthodox Church and of Christianity as a whole. It was marked by theological and political disputes that had a profound impact on the subsequent development of Christianity. A thorough understanding of these events and their context is essential for grasping the later evolution of the Church and the relationships between the various branches of Christianity.

The study of the dispute between Patriarch Photius and Ignatius, the detailed examination of the synodal period of the 9th century, and the political and religious differences that arose over time between the Eastern and Western Sees, make a significant contribution to theological research and offer an opportunity to explore more deeply the theological and practical doctrines that underpinned the division between the two Churches.

⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. Daniel Benga, „Urmările schismei de la 1054 pentru dialogul teologic dintre reformatori și ortodocși“, în *Teologia*, Anul VIII, 2004, nr. 3, p. 111.

By offering a deeper perspective on theological and ecclesiological sensitivities, it becomes possible to clarify how authority and synodality were understood and practiced by the Church during that period, thus contributing to the ongoing development of Orthodox theological thought.

Moreover, while until the 20th century Catholic scholars often sought to place the entire blame on the East, contemporary theology has adopted a more tolerant and balanced view of the events of the 9th century, interpreting the schism not as a strict dogmatic rupture, but rather as a crisis of authority and jurisdiction between Rome and Constantinople. In this context, the figure of Patriarch Photius—regarded in the Eastern Church as a great defender of apostolic tradition and confessor of the faith, through his rejection of the Filioque addition and his defense of synodality—has been canonized with the title *the Great* (*Saint Photius the Great*), his feast being celebrated on February 6. His legacy has been treated with increasing empathy, especially following the discussions at the Second Vatican Council, where he came to be seen as a great theologian of his time, a skilled diplomat, and a defender of Byzantine ecclesiastical autonomy, rather than simply a “schismatic,” as he had been previously labeled.

In modern scholarship, most theologians and Church historians view the “Photian Schism” as a complex ecclesiological and political crisis, in which Patriarch Photius defended the autonomy of the Eastern Church. He is now seen with greater understanding and balance by Catholic scholars such as J. Meyendorff, D. Stiernon, and even F. Dvornik, who emphasize that his election to the patriarchal throne of Constantinople was canonical according to the Byzantine norms of the time. They also note that Rome's attitude toward Byzantium in the 9th century was, at times, domineering, prompting Photius to react as a defender of Eastern ecclesiastical independence.

This view was also supported by Pope Benedict XVI, who stated: *“During the period of the schism between Rome and Constantinople, both Photius and other Church leaders played an important role in preserving the theological integrity and autonomy of the Orthodox Church, despite political and theological divergences. Photius was a defender of the patristic tradition and the teachings of the Apostles, which was later acknowledged even by some voices within the Catholic Church.”*⁵

This study is not only a contribution to the understanding of the history and theology of Christianity, but also a work that can significantly enrich Orthodox theological thought and

⁵ Papa Benedict al XVI-lea, *Credința Bisericii (The Faith of the Church)*, Editura Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2004, pp. 202–203

promote dialogue and reconciliation in the contemporary Christian world. In a world where dialogue and reconciliation between the various branches of Christianity are becoming increasingly important, understanding the history, the theological and ecclesiological differences that still persist today between the Eastern and Western Churches, as well as the political causes that preceded the division of 1054, can be crucial for fostering unity and mutual understanding between Orthodox and Catholic Churches, as well as among other Christian traditions.

Reflecting attentively on the issues discussed above, I made the decision to delve more deeply into previously written studies concerning the causes and motives that led to the rupture between the two Churches. In particular, I have relied on the following works: *Istoria Creștinismului* by Rev. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Chifăr, as well as studies and articles addressing the ecclesiastical and political life of the 9th century; the writings of Rev. Prof. Dr. Milan Šesán on Patriarch Photius and Rome; those of Rev. Prof. Ion Irimia on the religious conflict between Rome and Constantinople; the work of Rev. Lucian Colda – *Patriarch Photius the Great of Constantinople*; and the writings of foreign scholars such as J. Meyendorff, V. Grumel, F. Dvornik, D. Stiernon, among others, which are listed at the end of this study in the bibliography section.

Thus, I have written this thesis under the close supervision and guidance of Father Dr. Nicolae Chifăr, university professor at the “Saint Andrei Șaguna” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, within the “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, under the title: *Ecclesiastical Synodality in the 9th Century*.

The present work, preceded by a table of contents and introduction, is structured into three parts, each part divided into chapters, and further subdivided into subchapters. The study concludes with a set of conclusions and a comprehensive bibliography.

The initial part describes the ecclesiastical and political life within the Roman Empire, where Christianity spread rapidly, and the first Christian communities emerged through the missionary activity of the Holy Apostles and their successors. Eventually, the empire was divided by the rulers of the time between their sons, leading to the formation of the Eastern Roman Empire and the Western Roman Empire. The transfer of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great greatly strengthened the new religion. Thus, Constantinople—the *New Rome*—became the most important religious center, ultimately adopting Christianity as the official religion of the entire empire.

The inauguration of Constantinople as the new imperial capital led to a gradual decline in Rome's administrative importance, transforming it over time into a purely symbolic and religious center. After the death of the last emperor who ruled over the unified Roman Empire, Emperor Theodosius the Great (379–395), the empire was divided between his sons: Arcadius received the Eastern part with its capital in Constantinople, while Honorius received the Western part with its capital in Ravenna. While the Eastern part continued to grow politically, religiously, militarily, and administratively, the Western part slowly began to collapse. The deposition of Emperor Romulus Augustulus by Odoacer in 476 marked the fall of the Western Roman Empire, with Rome retaining only a spiritual role—that of papal authority. Meanwhile, the Eastern part—the Byzantine Empire—endured until 1453, when it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire.

Under these political circumstances, Christianity developed and spread “to all nations,” according to the command of our Savior Jesus Christ. However, over time, differences began to emerge between the two religious centers—Rome and Constantinople. To address religious issues, the Church implemented the Synod as the highest ecclesiastical authority.

Beginning in the 4th century, the distinctions between East and West became more pronounced and intensified over the following centuries as the Roman Empire gradually fragmented. From a hierarchical standpoint, the Eastern Church appointed a patriarch as its leader—a figure with greater administrative authority than a bishop or metropolitan, though equal to them in spiritual grace. In contrast, the Western Church acknowledged as its leader the bishop of Rome, known as the Pope, considered the Vicar of Christ on Earth and the successor of the Holy Apostle Peter. The Pope was regarded as infallible and held supreme doctrinal authority over all believers throughout the world.

By asserting the primacy of the papacy on the basis of the apostolic authority of Saint Peter, the Pope assumed the role of doctrinal and disciplinary leader for the entire Church, later adopting the title *servus servorum Dei* (“servant of the servants of God”)—a title that Christians in the East did not accept, viewing the Pope merely as *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”) among the patriarchs.

As a result of these disputes—as well as those stemming from the missionary efforts to spread the Christian faith to other nations—the divisions between the Eastern and Western Churches began to deepen, and doctrinal differences emerged. One of the key issues that triggered the dispute between East and West was the *Filioque* addition (“and the Son”), which the Western Church unilaterally inserted into the original text of the Niceno-

Constantinopolitan Creed. This conflict was further compounded by Pope Nicholas I's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Photius's election to the patriarchal see of Constantinople. Consequently, the schism unfolded gradually.

While Christians in both East and West initially shared the same faith, the two traditions began to diverge after the year 787, as disputes between the two Sees escalated. Mutual anathemas were exchanged, culminating in the tragic and decisive event of 1054—the rupture between the two Churches, known as the Great Schism.

The second part of the study addresses the Iconoclastic Crisis, which shook the foundations of the Byzantine Empire in two phases, as well as the accession to the patriarchal throne of the Eastern Church by Patriarchs Ignatius and Photius—whose appointments once again caused significant tensions, both among the imperial leadership (through their political support for one or the other) and in the already fragile relationship with the Western Church, due to Pope Nicholas's involvement in the jurisdiction of the Eastern Church.

Ecclesiastical life in the East experienced, throughout the first half of the 8th century and during the entirety of the 9th century, a series of theological controversies, political and religious tensions, and struggles for authority between the two Churches—Constantinople and Rome. During this period, the balance between Church and State was disturbed by two defining episodes: the prohibition of the veneration of icons (Iconoclasm), and the dispute between Patriarchs Ignatius and Photius, also known as the Photian Crisis. All of these tensions are considered to be a political and religious prelude to the tragic event of 1054—the Great Schism.

The first phase of iconoclasm was initiated by Emperor Leo III the Isaurian and continued by his son, Constantine V, who, misunderstanding the Second Commandment of the Decalogue—"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor bow down to it" (Exodus 20:4–5)—considered the veneration of icons to be a form of idolatry. Thus, he prohibited the veneration of holy icons throughout the empire. The persecutions against those who honored icons, initiated in 726 by Emperor Leo III and formally endorsed by the Council of Hieria (754), came to an end in 787 through the efforts of Empress Irene and Patriarch Tarasius, who, at the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, condemned the iconoclastic heresy and restored the cult of icons.

The second phase of iconoclasm resumed in 826 under Emperor Leo V the Armenian and continued under Emperor Theophilos, who led a harsh campaign against icon defenders until 843. That year, Empress Theodora, mother of Emperor Michael III, together with Patriarch Methodius, definitively reinstated the veneration of icons in the Byzantine Empire.

This event is known as the *Triumph of Orthodoxy*, and is still celebrated on the first Sunday of Great Lent—*Sunday of Orthodoxy*.

Within this broader context—an era marked by iconoclasm, imperial reforms, and political-religious tensions—the Eastern Church once again suffered, this time from within, through the conflict between Patriarchs Ignatius and Photius.

After the death of Patriarch Methodius—the one who had put an end to iconoclasm—in 847, Ignatius was elected to the patriarchal throne of Constantinople. A strict monk, Ignatius was the son of Emperor Michael I Rangabe and the grandson of former Patriarch Nicephorus. He had entered monastic life following the forced abdication of his father and the rise to the imperial throne of Leo V the Armenian, who compelled the young Ignatius—then named Nicetas—to become a eunuch, thus ensuring he could no longer claim imperial authority in the future.

Empress-regent Theodora, mother of Emperor Michael III, appointed Ignatius as Patriarch of Constantinople in an effort to consolidate post-iconoclastic Orthodoxy. However, Ignatius soon entered into conflict with the Byzantine aristocracy—particularly with Bardas, Theodora’s brother—whom Ignatius refused to admit to Communion due to his sins, provoking Bardas’s ire. In 858, under pressure from the imperial court and without the support of Theodora—who had been deposed by Bardas—Ignatius was forced to abdicate. In his place, a layman, the young Photius, was chosen. Despite his initial reluctance, Photius advanced through all clerical ranks within a week and was enthroned as Patriarch of Constantinople on Christmas Day.

Ignatius refused to recognize Photius's election, deeming him a usurper, and thus provoked an internal schism within the Church. To consolidate his legitimacy, Photius convened a synod in Constantinople in 861, which confirmed his patriarchate. In response to Ignatius’s appeal to Rome, Pope Nicholas I sent a delegation to Constantinople that initially accepted the synod’s decisions. However, the Pope later annulled the outcome of the synod and convened another council in Rome in 863, where Photius was condemned and Ignatius was supported.

In turn, Patriarch Photius, upon receiving the decisions from Pope Nicholas I, convened a second synod in 867, where he excommunicated the Pope for interfering in the governance of the Eastern Church and for introducing the *Filioque* clause into the Creed. That same year, Emperor Michael III was assassinated, and Basil I the Macedonian seized power. He removed Photius from the patriarchal throne and reinstated Ignatius, who led the Eastern Church until his death in 877.

After Ignatius's death, Photius was recalled. Due to his intellectual brilliance, he had been serving as a teacher at the imperial court. Now fully supported by the emperor, Photius convened a synod in 879, attended by papal delegates, who recognized him as the legitimate patriarch. Nevertheless, relations between East and West continued to deteriorate.

Thus, the disputes between Ignatius and Photius caused not only internal tensions within the Eastern Church, but also external ruptures. These conflicts opened a major rift between the Sees of Constantinople and Rome—a rift that had long been smoldering beneath the surface. Doctrinal differences, contrasting models of ecclesiastical authority, the effects of the iconoclastic crisis, the internal dispute between the two patriarchs, and the Pope's intervention all became direct precursors to the Great Schism of 1054.

The third part of the present work identifies by name the specific premises of the Schism that took shape in the 9th century. These differences became increasingly visible and progressively harder to reconcile. Whether cultural, theological, political, or ecclesiastical in nature, the roots of the Schism were not accidental—they were the outcome of a long process of mutual estrangement that began with the division of the Roman Empire.

In conclusion, the 9th century represents the period in which two models of ecclesiastical organization and two theological visions were clearly defined. Through doctrinal differences, political rivalries, and the struggle for control over the Christian world, the foundations were inevitably laid for the great rupture between the Eastern and Western Churches in the year 1054.