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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Relations between Rome and Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos

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Chapter I: The Byzantine Renaissance

Following the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, the Empire of Nicaea became the fundamental space for a complex Byzantine renaissance, which took place amid the collapse of the traditional order. Far from being limited to serving as a temporary refuge for the imperial elites, the Empire of Nicaea managed to build a solid political, administrative, and cultural framework, legitimately claiming the continuity of the Byzantine imperial tradition. An analysis of contemporary Byzantine sources, such as the chronicles of George Akropolites, Theodore Skutariotes, and George Pachymeres, provides an essential insight into the strategies through which the Nicene elites conceived and implemented policies to restore imperial authority. These sources, approached critically and contextually, not only recount the events of exile and reconstruction, but also allow for a deeper understanding of the political logic and ideological discourses that shaped this process of regeneration. The Byzantine Renaissance was not merely a reorganization of institutions or a reconquest of lost territory, but also involved a redefinition of imperial identity, adapted to new geopolitical and religious realities. In this context, the functioning of the Nicene administration, the formulation of a restorative imperial discourse, and the complex relations with the Latin world, as well as with Orthodox rivals in Epirus and Trebizond, reflect a flexible policy capable of managing both external pressures and internal tensions.

The personality of Michael VIII Palaiologos played a decisive role in this process. Endowed with exceptional political acumen and remarkable diplomatic skill, Michael managed to navigate skillfully between Latin threats, Orthodox rivalries, and internal crises. His decision to negotiate union with Rome, interpreted by historians such as Deno Geanakoplos as a diplomatic maneuver rather than a genuine doctrinal reconciliation, illustrates his political pragmatism. At the same time, the authoritarian measures adopted to enforce this policy generated internal resistance, fueling tensions that would profoundly mark Byzantine society.

The Byzantine Renaissance initiated in the Empire of Nicaea and continued with the reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 proved to be not only a military and political triumph, but also a manifestation of the intellectual and theological vitality of Byzantine civilization. The restored empire managed to keep the Byzantine heritage alive, adapt to new realities, and respond to the challenges of the post-Crusade world with innovative strategic and ideological solutions. This period therefore stands out as a crucial moment in the history of Byzantium, when tradition and innovation intertwined in a remarkable effort to survive and assert themselves in a hostile and fragmented context.

Chapter II: The diplomatic policy of Michael VIII Palaiologos

The reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 by Michael VIII Palaiologos represented not only the symbolic restoration of Byzantine authority, but also the beginning of profound religious and diplomatic changes in a deeply fragmented European context. The restoration of Orthodox Byzantium was viewed in the West with mistrust and hostility, being perceived as a challenge to the ecclesiastical order established after the Fourth Crusade and a challenge to the universalist claims of the Church of Rome. In a context where religious identity dictated political legitimacy, Michael VIII was forced to make religion an essential pillar of his diplomatic strategy. The redefinition of Byzantine foreign policy had as its primary objective the recognition of the papacy and the neutralization of the risk of a new crusade aimed at restoring the Latin Empire of Constantinople. The diplomacy of the Palaiologos dynasty,

animated by a subtle art of balance, sought to exploit the internal divisions of the West and take advantage of the pacifist tendencies manifested in court and royal circles. A fundamental element of this strategy was the contacts with Louis IX of France, a sovereign revered for his piety but who showed restraint towards the idea of armed intervention against a Christian emperor. The French king's caution created a favorable context for Byzantium, giving Michael the opportunity to initiate discreet diplomatic overtures with Rome, aimed at gaining time and defusing military pressure.

The first official steps towards the papacy, taken in 1262–1263 through an embassy sent to Urban IV, were accompanied by a correspondence written with rhetorical refinement, in which the Byzantine emperor invoked the ideal of Christian unity between the "New Rome" and the "Old Rome." Although avoiding explicit dogmatic commitments, the message expressed an apparent willingness to reconcile, relying on diplomatic subtleties designed to mask the real intentions. The pope's favorable response, reflected in a notable change in the title addressed to the Byzantine emperor, denotes the ambiguity and complexity of the relations between the two sides. Dogmatic obstacles, especially the dispute over the Filioque, remained insurmountable from a deeply theological perspective. In reality, Michael VIII used the rhetoric of union as a means of protecting the restored Byzantium, seeking a temporary compromise rather than a genuine merger of the two ecclesiastical traditions.

At the same time, the emperor attempted to build a system of flexible alliances: Genoese support, initially crucial for the reconquest of the capital, was maintained through commercial concessions, while overtures to Manfred of Sicily and other Western powers aimed to weaken the cohesion of the Latin camp. At the same time, his policy sought to counterbalance the influence of Venice, hostile to Byzantium, through calculated diplomatic maneuvers.

Chapter III: Relations between Rome and Constantinople during the Second Council of Lyon

Michael VIII Palaiologos, consolidating the authority of the restored Byzantine Empire, initiated a broad diplomatic strategy to gain international recognition. In this context, religious union with Rome was instrumentalized as an essential means of political legitimization and geopolitical protection. The emperor's diplomatic efforts culminated in the participation of an official Byzantine delegation at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274, an event that represented the peak of Palaiologian diplomacy and simultaneously generated a profound crisis of theological conscience within the Orthodox Church.

The council, convened by Pope Gregory X, was conceived as an integrated response to the multiple crises of medieval Christianity: the Muslim threat to the Latin states in the East, the need for radical ecclesiastical reform, and the dogmatic schism between the West and the East. Far from being merely a doctrinal forum, the Lyon meeting became the scene of intense negotiations, where theological interests and political imperatives merged in a profound manner.

In this equation, Michael VIII viewed the act of union as a strategic concession, intended to prevent a new Western crusade against Byzantium and preserve the existence of his fragile restored empire. The formal acceptance of the Latin formula *Filioque* by the Byzantine delegation, although necessary from a diplomatic point of view, provoked a vehement reaction within the Orthodox Church, where fidelity to patristic tradition was perceived as indissoluble from the very identity of the Church. The crisis triggered by the

proclamation of union generated long-lasting fractures, which materialized in the Arsenite schism and the Josephite schism, manifestations of a fundamental opposition to the dogmatic compromise imposed by imperial authority.

The paper emphasizes that, although the Second Council of Lyon was designed by the papacy as an ecumenical council, it failed to overcome the canonical rupture between Rome and Constantinople. The continued use of the term "council" reflects precisely this tension between the ideal of universality and the reality of the persistence of an irreconcilable division.

Within a coherent chronology of the evolution of Roman-Byzantine relations, the synod appears as a moment of convergence between the theological, diplomatic, and symbolic dimensions of Byzantium's survival in the 13th century. The acceptance of religious union, although conceived as a mechanism for protecting and affirming a new imperial identity, highlighted the fragility of the Byzantine model of integrating politics and theology, revealing the structural tension between the demands of doctrinal fidelity and the imperatives of statehood.

The proclamation of the union between the Church of Rome and that of Constantinople at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274, analyzed in the third chapter, did not produce the effects of political stability and confessional reconciliation expected by Michael VIII Palaiologos. On the contrary, the decision to unite generated intense theological and ecclesiological polarization within the Byzantine world, fueling social tensions, conflicts of authority, and new forms of resistance to Latin influence. In this tense climate, John XI Bekkos emerged as one of the most challenging figures of the 13th century Byzantine Empire, standing at the crossroads between fidelity to patristic tradition and the pressing demands of imperial politics.

Chapter IV: Patriarch John Bekkos - defender of the Union of Lyon

The fourth chapter addresses the complexity of the position of John Bekkos, initially an opponent of the union, who, following an in-depth study of the writings of the Church Fathers, fundamentally changed his view of the relationship between the two Churches. This doctrinal reorientation—expressed in the famous formula "*from the Father through the Son*"—led him to the conviction that union did not mean a betrayal of Orthodoxy, but rather a reaffirmation of a common theological truth, shared essentially by both the East and the West.

His appointment as Patriarch of Constantinople in 1275, in an extremely tense political and ecclesiastical context, made him a key player in Paleologian religious politics. Far from being a mere instrument of Rome or the imperial court, Bekkos asserted himself as a refined theological thinker, sincerely concerned with the unity of the Church and the recovery of patristic consensus. However, his theological activity, which took the form of polemical treatises and appeals for unity, was strongly contested by the anti-unionist camp, culminating in his official condemnation at the Synod of Vlachernae in 1285.

Although rejected and marginalized by his contemporaries, John Bekkos remains a leading figure in the attempt at theological reconciliation between East and West. His patristic interpretations, partly influenced by the ideas of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, reinterpret in an original way the procession of the Holy Spirit without compromising the monarchy of the Father. Thus, Bekkos builds a doctrinal bridge which, although unrecognized in his time, will later reverberate in the debates of the Council of Florence and in modern ecumenical reflections.

In recent theology and historical research, the figure of John Bekkos has undergone a substantial re-evaluation. Beyond the reductive label of "Latinophon," he is being rediscovered as a subtle theologian, deeply rooted in Tradition but open to interconfessional dialogue. His works, remarkable for their methodological rigor and sincerity of approach, are today appreciated as early expressions of a theological ecumenism based on patristic consensus rather than dogmatic compromise.

The figure of John Bekkos thus illustrates the fundamental tension between fidelity to the Orthodox heritage and the geopolitical imperatives of Byzantine survival. Despite the challenges and condemnations, he faced, his legacy remains an essential point of reference for any sincere attempt at reconciliation between the Orthodox Church and the Church of Rome.

Chapter V: The aftermath of the Council of Lyon (1274)

In the context of geopolitical fragility and external pressures that marked the second half of the 13th century, the proclamation of the union between the Church of Rome and that of Constantinople at the Council of Lyon (1274) represented an ambitious attempt by Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos to ensure the political survival of the Byzantine Empire through a restoration of ecclesiastical communion. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis, this decision did not lead to the desired consolidation, but precipitated a profound theological, ecclesiastical, and political crisis with major repercussions for the Byzantine world.

Externally, the union gave Byzantium a temporary diplomatic respite, managing to postpone Western military intervention, especially from Charles of Anjou, but it failed to eliminate latent threats. Emperor Michael VIII maintained an ambivalent relationship with the papacy, oscillating between formal displays of loyalty and tactics to avoid the effective implementation of synodal decisions, in a subtle but deeply precarious political game.

Domestically, opposition to the union grew rapidly and intensely. The clergy, monasticism, and various aristocratic groups perceived the union as a betrayal of traditional Orthodoxy, generating systematic resistance. The figure of Patriarch John XI Bekkos illustrates the complexity of this period: initially an opponent of union, he later became one of its most refined supporters, trying to find a point of convergence between Eastern patristic tradition and the Filioque doctrine. However, his support for unionist policy marginalised him, and his fate reflects the widespread failure of the reconciliation project.

The reign of Andronikos II Palaiologos, Michael's successor, marked the official abandonment of union with Rome and the rehabilitation of the anti-unionist faction. However, the return to traditionalist Orthodoxy did not bring the desired stability: the schism of the Byzantine Church aggravated ecclesiastical instability and weakened the internal cohesion of the Empire. Efforts at reconciliation were sabotaged by deep-seated resentments and the irreconcilable fragmentation of the ecclesiastical community.

In conclusion, as demonstrated in the last chapter of this thesis, the failure of the Union of Lyon should be understood not only as a diplomatic setback, but as a major turning point in Byzantine history, revealing the geopolitical, theological, and institutional limits of the Empire on the eve of its decline.

This last section of the thesis sought to synthesize the complexity of the phenomenon of church union, highlighting how the dynamics between theological doctrine and political strategy shaped not only the destiny of Byzantium, but also the subsequent evolution of relations between the Byzantine Church and the Church of Rome. It also emphasized how the

reverberations of these events continue to influence historical memory to this day, providing fertile ground for contemporary theological and ecumenical reflection.

Thus, the Council of Lyon appears not only as a political and religious drama of its time, but as a historical lesson on the difficulties of any genuine attempt at interfaith reconciliation in a context marked by deep identity frictions.

An analysis of the Byzantine journey after 1204 revealed the complexity of the process of imperial restoration and reconstruction of the political and religious identity of Byzantium in the context of the post-Crusade world. The Empire of Nicaea was not only a stronghold of resistance, but also a laboratory for Byzantine reinvention, where tradition and innovation worked together for the survival of a threatened civilization. The reconquest of Constantinople in 1261, through the efforts of Michael VIII Palaiologos, represented the culmination of this renaissance, but also the beginning of structural challenges in an increasingly religiously and geopolitically fragmented Europe. The attempt at religious union with Rome, although conceived as a pragmatic solution to save the Empire, highlighted the deep tensions between loyalty to the Orthodox tradition and the geopolitical imperatives of the moment. The figure of John XI Bekkos, as well as the subsequent schisms between the Unionists, Josephites, and Arsenites, demonstrate that in Byzantium, religion could not be reduced to a diplomatic tool without generating major crises of internal legitimacy. Far from achieving lasting stability, the period after the Council of Lyon was marked by ecclesiastical instability, political fragmentation, and gradual decline, reflecting the limits of the Empire's ability to simultaneously manage external pressures and internal tensions.

Ultimately, this thesis highlighted not only the failure of the union of Lyon, but also the broader Byzantine paradox: that of attempting to save political unity through confessional sacrifices, thereby risking the very identity cohesion that had underpinned the imperial tradition. The legacy of these turmoil, reevaluated today by both Byzantine historiography and modern ecumenical reflection, underscores how delicate and difficult the process of genuine reconciliation is in a context marked by historical rivalries and deeply rooted theological sensitivities. The lessons of late Byzantium, as gleaned from the present study, remain relevant not only for understanding the past, but also for the contemporary challenges of interfaith dialogue and the construction of unity in diversity.