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# Res novae



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*Bernard Goršak*

SAME FOUR-FOLD STRUCTURE OF SOBORNOST AND CHRISTIAN  
TRILATERAL SITUATION ETHICS

*Simon Malmenvall*

SMRT BORISA IN GLEBA KOT POSEBITEV KRŠČANSKEGA POLITIČNEGA  
IDEALA IN POJAV VLADARSKIH MUČENCEV

*Petja Mihelič*

RACIONALNOST ZNANSTVENEGA RAZISKOVANJA  
NARAVNEGA PRAVA

*David Petelin*

PRVI LASTNIKI PATIDENČNE HIŠE A NA GOSPOSKI ULICI 10  
IN DRUŽINA PEER V LJUBLJANI

*Jernej Šček*

PICCOLOMINIJEVO PISMO MEHMEDU IN  
KRŠČANSKA LECTIO CIVILNEGA HUMANIZMA

**Fakulteta za pravo in poslovne vede, Katoliški inštitut**  
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Odgovorni urednik:

Andrej Naglič

Glavni urednik:

Simon Malmenvall

Spletni naslov:

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E-pošta:

[simon.malmenvall@kat-inst.si](mailto:simon.malmenvall@kat-inst.si)

Uredniški odbor:

Philip Booth (Institute of Economic Affairs, London, Velika Britanija),  
Andres Fink (Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, Facultad  
de Ciencias Sociales, Buenos Aires, Argentina), José Ignacio Murillo  
(Universidad de Navarra, Instituto Cultura y Sociedad, Pamplona,  
Španija), Aniko Noemi Turi (Katoliški inštitut, Fakulteta za pravo in  
poslovne vede, Ljubljana, Slovenija), Mitja Steinbacher (Katoliški  
inštitut, Fakulteta za pravo in poslovne vede, Ljubljana, Slovenija),  
Anton Stres (Katoliški inštitut, Fakulteta za pravo in poslovne vede,  
Ljubljana, Slovenija), Zoran Vaupot (Katoliški inštitut, Fakulteta za  
pravo in poslovne vede, Ljubljana, Slovenija).

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# Vsebina

*Bernard Goršak*

Same Four-Fold Structure of Sobornost and  
Christian Trilateral Situation Ethics

**7**

*Simon Malmenvall*

Smrt Borisa in Gleba kot poosebitev krščanskega  
političnega ideala in pojav vladarskih mučencev

**26**

*Petja Mihelič*

Racionalnost znanstvenega raziskovanja  
naravnega prava

**69**

*David Petelin*

Prvi lastniki patidenčne hiše A  
na Gosposki ulici 10  
in družina Peer v Ljubljani

**85**

*Jernej Šček*

Piccolominijevo Pismo Mehmedu in  
krščanska lectio civilnega humanizma

**129**

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pregledni znanstveni članek

**Bernard Goršak**

doktor bioloških in biotehniških znanosti  
(Alma mater Europaea Maribor)

## **Same Four-Fold Structure of Sobornost and Christian Trilateral Situation Ethics**

**Abstract:** In search of the perfect ideal proponents of sobornost often look back to the first Christian communities. This is expected since the unity was probably their most distinguished attribute, as expressed particularly with the New Testament term koinonia. Some authors use sobornost and koinonia interchangeably as both describe basically the same concept of fellowship and sharing of property. Nonetheless, subsistence of such human fellowship requires as a precondition superhuman inner cohesive force which can originate only from God through his commandments and sacraments. This force can be construed as the four pillars, on which the whole catechesis is built: declaration of creed, seven holy sacraments, living by faith and prayer. As presented in this paper, same four pillars are also the building blocks of the Christian trilateral situation ethics and consequently affirm this ethics to be the primary ethics of any community living sobornost/koinonia.

**Key words:** sobornost, trilateral situation ethics, koinonia

## **Enaka štiridelna struktura sobornosti in krščanske trilateralne situacijske etike**

**Izvleček:** V iskanju popolnega ideala se zagovorniki sobornosti pogosto ozirajo k prvim krščanskim skupnostim. To je pričakovano, saj je bila enotnost verjetno njihova najbolj izrazita lastnost, zlasti ob upoštevanju pomena novozaveznega izraza koinonia. Nekateri avtorji izmenično uporabljajo sobornost in koinonia, saj oba izraza v osnovi označujeta isti koncept družbe in skupne rabe oziroma delitve lastnine. Kljub temu je predpogoj za obstoj takega človeškega združenja nadčloveška notranja povezovalna sila, ki pa lahko izhaja edinole iz Boga po njegovih zapovedih in zakramentih. To silo lahko razumemo tudi kot štiri stebre, na katerih je zgrajena celotna kateheza: izpoved vere, sedem svetih zakramentov, življenje po veri in molitev. Kot je predstavljeno v prispevku, so isti štirje stebri gradniki tudi krščanske trilateralne situacijske etike. To nas utrjuje v prepričanju, da je prav ta etika primarna etika vsake skupnosti, ki živi v sobornosti/koinoniji.

**Ključne besede:** sobornost, trilateralna situacijska etika, koinonia

## Introduction

The first condition of any Christian sobornost is baptism, which translates later in the life of the Catholic and Orthodox congregations in the participation in the Holy Eucharist. (Goršak 2020, 101) This notion has very practical implications as there is no baptism<sup>1</sup> in its canonical form and no eucharist without the tabernacle and the priest; and there is no priest without the bishop (who alone is at the same time also a priest). Hence, in order to constitute a valid Catholic or Orthodox koinonia community,<sup>2</sup> there must be, beside a larger or smaller group of believers, at least one bishop who can validly procure the baptism and all the other sacraments. According to Doherty (2011, 15), this is the very reason why at least one priest should be not merely an external collaborator but rather essential member of every Catholic or Orthodox koinonia community. Additionally, regular presence of a priest is of vital importance also in the sense of observation of the Communion in unbroken line ever since Jesus Christ established it on the Holy Thursday.

The very concept of koinonia is well-known among all Christian denominations, which presuppose that within Evangelical and Protestant Churches celebration of a communion as consubstantial act and without a priest, who was anointed by a bishop, suffices to constitute such a community. In the Catholic Church and Eastern Churches

1 Here we do not differentiate between various Christian denominations.

2 On the cited page Doherty speaks about the special priest's section being a part of their community. The intrinsic role that priests have in constitution of any community that lives sobornost is evident (although indirectly) also from the Chapter 11 of her book, which is dedicated to the outstanding significance of the Eucharist.

communion (respectively the host) was always believed to undergo transubstantiation as opposite to consubstantiation; this term first appeared only in the eleventh century, yet the belief of bread and wine changing its substance into Christ's body and blood was present among Christians since the earliest times. (Newman 2013, 118–121; Selwood 2010, 13) Greek Orthodox and other so-called Eastern Churches prefer to use in that respect other synonyms, like *metousiosis*, *metastoiceiosis* or *metabole*.<sup>3</sup>

The idea behind koinonia is in many ways ecumenical and for that reason the differences in the belief about the true nature of communion (consubstantiation as opposite to transubstantiation) does not hinder advocates of ecumenism coming from all Christian denominations to acknowledge common ground on which koinonia can be built. (Sagovsky 2000; Fuchs 2008) Prominent evangelical proponent of koinonia was late Chuck Missler, who, together with his wife, already in 1973 established the non-profit organization with the same name. (Koinonia House, 2020)

### **Four pillars of the Catechism and sobornost/koinonia**

In this article we keep our focus on the Catholic view of sobornost/koinonia, especially in its relation to the Christian trilateral situation ethics. Firstly, it is important to emphasise that the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2003) clearly shows its fourfold structure: the first part (or the first pillar

3 The term sacrament is not entirely in-line with the Orthodox theology as it is believed that God's interventions are rather mysterious and incomprehensible.

as we call it) is the creed, the second are the sacramentals, the third are the commandments<sup>4</sup> (respectively living-by-faith), and the fourth pillar are the prayers. Firstly, if we take a closer look at each of these four pillars, we see the obligation of everyone who has been baptized and belongs to Christ to openly profess his/her faith before other people. The creed entails God's revelation to the man and His gifts to the mankind (and all creation) as his Creator, Redeemer and Consecrator (Holy Trinity). Profession of creed is a man's reply to this revelation. The second pillar conveys all the seven holy sacraments and the holy liturgy as a visible and continuous manifestation (externalization) of Christ's Redemption, coming to pass only within the Holy Catholic Church. The third pillar represents the goal of the human-kind (its eschatology) as wanted by God: eternal life and the ways of achieving it.<sup>5</sup> The fourth pillar represents the importance and significance of daily prayer in a believer's life, especially the Lord's Prayer.

Any community which intends to live in a true Catholic spirit, must embrace in its daily life all the aspects of the faith, all its pillars. Embracing just two or three of them is insufficient and such community may not be a fellowship that lives true *koinonia*, true sobornost. Pitre (2020a) claims the same: first Christian communities were living by meeting all the criteria above, having all four pillars of the faith entirely embedded in their lives. Then, and only then, Christian unity (to be of one hearth and of one soul) can come to its full potential:

- 4 These are the Old Testament Ten Commandments and the New Testament Great Commandment.
- 5 Foremost by free-willingly accepting God's commandments and Grace as the bedrock of a daily decision-making and undertaking, especially in relation to the others.

where true love (agape) rules no other laws are necessary. (Newman 2013, 135) Whether achievement of such unity nowadays remains to be only a utopian ideal, is yet to be seen.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, pursuit of unity in multitude stays to be the sobornost's highest imperative—following apostle Paul's rapturous cry: "By sharing in the same loaf of bread, we become one body, even though there are many of us." (1 Cor 10,17)

At first glance, the phrase unity in multitude may come as a contradiction in terms. Thomas Aquinas was aware of it and offered a solution with the following statement: "The Eucharist is the sacrament of ecclesiastical unity, which is brought about by many being one in Christ." (2020, 7999) The "unifying force" is hence Christ himself, who only has the utter power to unify multitude of individual bodies (and intellects) to emerge as a new body (which is not only corporal but also intellectual). Such new body becomes a dwelling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, one body in Christ as a whole is much more than solely the sum of its parts. An individual may have or may not have to be a dwelling of the Holy Spirit, whereas the body in Christ, whose part he has become, surely is. Intellect

- 6 In urban areas this seems to be nearly unattainable; somewhat less unrealistic it may be in rural and remote areas. For instance, kibbutz communities in Israel and Amish communities in the United States (though not Christian communities) can serve as a proof that at least similar kinds of fellowships are possible even today.
- 7 It is not the purpose of this paper to go in-depth when and why a certain person may be or not be dwelling of the Holy Spirit. This may be a result of being in the state of a mortal sin, conscious rejections or some other reason. Suffice it to say that by becoming a part of koinonia fellowship one has not only to believe in the Holy Trinity but also to allow (respectively to enable) the Holy Spirit to become a constitutional part of the fellowship.

(reason) that inhabits such a body is the Holy Spirit himself, as each individual that composes the body freely surrenders his will (kenosis) to the third person of the Holy Trinity.

The question may be raised whether such act results in a complete abolition of any individuality, which would be replaced with collective thinking and behaving. The latter is a typical attribute of socialism and communism. Are the communities living according to the principles of koinonia (sobornost) and communism in fact related? There are several substantial distinctions between these two which need to be taken into consideration. First, the comparison of a koinonia community with the human physical body unmistakably depicts one decisive actuality: ongoing preservation of distinction among various body parts. Individuals that form a leg<sup>8</sup> are not quite the same as the individuals that form an arm, and those who make an eye are different from those that make an ear. The body parts are not uniformed; not even in a physical sense as they permanently remain morphologically distinct to each other. In communism, separation or differentiation of any kind is not a value, quite the opposite: there must be only one social class<sup>9</sup> and, consequentially, any external appearance has to be uniformed (manifested in wearing the same uniforms). Besides, the intellect that leads such "communist social body" is still purely human. Individual must renounce even some of his/her abilities in order to become fit as a building block of a communist society.

8 By the same analogy, the parts that form a leg are equally distinct among themselves as one leg has various parts within itself.

9 That is the working class, except for the ruling elite.

Communist body does not resemble any higher developed organic form known in nature; it is rather undefined amorph conglomerate of dehumanized individuals. The individual is of no vital importance to the whole and can be easily replaced. The parts are similar and equalized in function to such an extent that they cannot “endanger” at any point the whole with their own separate individuality. There is no relational ontology present whatsoever. The sense of comradeship and solidarity does not require intimate identification of each individual in his/her spirit with this ideal, but it is rather imposed from outside as a purely rational construct. In socialist and/or communist communities externalization has an absolute priority before internalization, opposite to the Christian communities.<sup>10</sup>

Christian communities that live sobornost/koinonia are thus something essentially different from any type of communist/socialist communities. Apostle Paul distinctively presents the unity of a body as a state of being where particular characteristics of each individual remain. Particularities can and must be regarded as various gifts, given to each by God and are as such of vital importance for the existence of the whole body. The honour of the every body part (individual) remains intact; moreover, those that are modest and less distinguished deserve more respect and honour so that the whole body does not suffer and may display care for a single part. The connection among all parts of such a body is intrinsically and ontologically relational: if one part suffers, the whole body suffers, and if one part enjoys honour, all the other parts joy with it. There must be a variation of the parts

<sup>10</sup> God's will should not be accepted by “brain-reason” alone but mainly by “hearth-reason.” (Jer 31,33; Acts 2,26; 28,27)

in order to have a fully functioning body. After the integration, abilities of an individual gain importance and become even reinforced as long as they do not serve own interests but the interests of the whole body. (1 Cor 12; Rom 12; Ep 4)

The head is Christ himself and the intellect is of the Holy Spirit; consequently, all decisions are restrained of any human selfishness. God knows me best and I become more of myself if I become part of the Church (His body) and stop clinching to my narrow egoistic understanding of what I should be or become but rather surrender this decision to God (kenosis). In that sense regular and joint celebration of the Holy Eucharist around a tabernacle, led by God's representative, the priest/bishop, is the prerequisite of permanent maintaining the living connection between the Head and the rest of the body. Adherents of koinonia fellowship do not only partake in the mystical body of Christ but also in his blood, as the life (of the body) is in blood. (Pitre 2020b; Gn 9,5; 3 Lv 17,11-14; Dt 12,23) We can find the authentication of such view in the paragraph 10 of the papal encyclical *Mortalium Animos*:

“For since the mystical body of Christ, in the same manner as His physical body, is one, compacted and fitly joined together, it were foolish and out of place to say that the mystical body is made up of members which are disunited and scattered abroad: whosoever therefore is not united with the body is no member of it, neither is he in communion with Christ its head.” (Pius XI 1928)

In Acts all four pillars are named in the same sentence (not in all English translations of the Bible, though) when describing the life of the first believers: “They devoted themselves

to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2,42) The Greek word for the fellowship is none other than *koinonia*<sup>11</sup> (Pitre 2020b), which in this case stands for the living-by-faith or commandments pillar (third pillar of the Catechism). Subsequently, apostles' teaching stands for the creed (first pillar), breaking of bread for the sacraments or the second pillar, and the prayers for the fourth pillar.

As we see it, these four pillars are reflecting the Holy Trinity itself: the first pillar or the creed, resumes the oneness and wholeness of the Trinity. It affirms its true nature and attributes, starting from the Father, continuing to the Son and concluding with the Holy Spirit. The second pillar or the sacraments reflects the Holy Spirit as He is the source of Divine Mercy and Grace, which are abundantly dissipating from that source onto whole humanity. The third pillar, living-by-faith, is denoted by the earthly life of Jesus Christ. He gave the humanity best possible example on how everyone's living-by-faith should be realized in accordance with the New and Old Testament commandments (encapsulated also with the term *imitatio Christi*). The fourth pillar or the prayer can be regarded as the embodiment of the Father. He is *Abba* to whom the first and foremost prayer, Our Father, from whom all other prayers derive, is devoted.

11 Interestingly, Slovene version translates this state of being "in fellowship" with "v občestvu," which is practically the same as Russian translation "v obščeenii." In the notes to the Slovene translation two possible synonyms are offered: "v skupnosti" and "v enodušnosti." The latter one means "in unanimity," which etymologically means to be in the state of one mind (or one spirit).

Even though there are four pillars, these pillars epitomise the Holy Trinity. Based on this cognition we may say that true Christian life (an example can be found in the early Christian communities) is always and, in every respect, determined by one or the other aspect of the Holy Trinity. This makes sense since the Holy Trinity is the greatest and central mystery of the Catholic faith. Finally, in line with everything delineated above, we may also conclude that sobornost and koinonia are nearly one and the same terms<sup>12</sup>. As already stated, there are many authors who rightly use both terms interchangeably, like Valliere (2000, 359), Slesinski (2020, 490) and Brown (2013, 16).

### **Christian trilateral situation ethics reflects basic structure of sobornost/koinonia**

In further progression of researching the main topic we have to ask ourselves the following questions: Can such clear differentiation of the four pillars that built the whole structure of the Catechism and the sobornost (koinonia) be also applied when analysing the Christian trilateral situation ethics? Are the building blocks of trilateral situation ethics the same as they are of the Catechism and sobornost? Trilateral situation ethics still needs to be elaborated in much more detail, but, as outlined thus far (Goršak 2019), it is clear that acknowledging God as the one of the three parties which constitute the triangle of situation ethics, demands as a prerequisite one's undoubted belief in God's existence,

12 Sobornost and koinonia are basically just Russian and Greek words respectively for unity and also interpreted as concepts (they have very little if none differences).

one's open declaration of the creed. Creed, as the first pillar of trilateral situation ethics, can be deducted by the very name of the ethics. Adding God to the bilateral relationship between two Christians as something inherent and indispensable means that both admit their own insufficiency (in terms of constituting valid Christian ethical relation) and profess same belief in the presence of God as the inseparable third party in such relation.

The sacraments are an essential part of the trilateral situation ethics as well. They are, above all, God's means of intercession in every believer's life. Coming from God himself they can be only holy and full of grace. Communion between both the believers and God by means of sacraments can be regarded as an assurance of an on-going perseverance and strength (quality) of mutual relationship within trilateral situation ethics. In analogy to this, one may say that the sacraments represent a kind of "fuel" that runs the "engine of communion" among all three parties. If the first pillar (professing the creed) represents static aspect of the entire structure,<sup>13</sup> then the second pillar (sacraments) represents its dynamic aspect. At the very basis of any Christian trilateral situation ethics we have two believers who openly declare their belief in existence of God and his will and deeds but remain in that declaration rather static. Subsequently, as the next imminent act, the same two believers have to open themselves to the God's grace and mercy (via sacraments) in order to assure dynamic influx of God's Spirit into their lives and by that becoming executioners of God's will—particularly in their daily interaction with each other.

13 In our analogy that would be then the engine.

This goes hand in hand with Khomiakov's theology. He writes lengthily about the importance of the sacraments for the life of the Church, especially the Eucharist and penitence—the former describes as a heavenly crowning, which is laid down from heaven on spiritual unity of the Church. (Khomiakov 1998, 124–125) Yet, it is worth mentioning, Khomiakov's theology was not without harsh criticism when it comes to understanding what the true nature of sobornost/koinonia is. For instance, Florensky reproaches Khomiakov to succumb in his theology to some sort of immanentism (Florensky 1998), which is predominantly attributed to the Protestantism. As Florensky sees it, immanentism strives creating all reality only out of humanity, separately from God. Supposedly, this immanentism has been introduced by Khomiakov with the idea of sobornost, which is, according to Florensky, in opposition to true Orthodoxy, since its essence is ontologism (in Orthodoxy all reality comes from God and thus it should be received accordingly). (Khomiakov 1998, 323) Berdiaev affirms something entirely different: for Khomiakov sacred tradition had always been extremely important since the spirit of sobornost rests in it. (Berdiaev 1998, 330) Furthermore, Berdiaev claims that sobornost of the Church does not have formal and rational features; it has nothing juridical, external and coercive—in its essence, sobornost is mystical (although Khomiakov apparently did not like this expression). To Khomiakov communion in love (that is true sobornost) is not a philosophical endeavour but religious act grounded in the living experience of the Eastern Church. Berdiaev further states: "Sobornyi communion in love is the ontological presupposition of Khomiakov's epistemology." (Berdiaev 1998, 332, 339) How, then, can anyone reproach Khomiakov to claim sobornost is striving to create its own reality, apart from God? Doherty in that respect writes that

sobornost is not living nor desiring the will of the community alone but it is rather expression of God's will for this community. (Doherty 2011, 13) Leaving aside the debate whether or not Khomiakov sees sobornost as a result of purely human endeavour or as some sort of divine intervention, mystical even, there are still two pillars of trilateral situation ethics that await to be defined in more detail.

In our view, the third pillar within trilateral situation ethics (living-by-faith) represents the transition from pure intimate understanding and sentience of sharing the same heavenly Father to acting accordingly in everyday matters. In other words, it represents the actualization (respectively externalization) of that what one feels intimately. This is ethics in its practical application. One may say that this third aspect (pillar) is putting everything in motion,<sup>14</sup> if the first one is the static and the second is the dynamic aspect. Once embracing the Christianity, one must, in the first place, be able to understand what the true essence of God's will is. Yet, to stuck at this point would still mean having only fruitless if not even dead faith. (Jas 2,14–26) The third pillar are our concrete everyday ethical decisions, our moral choices, our practical deeds. This actualization of the faith requires a move, a step toward the other. This act, however, if truly in line with the Christian trilateral situation ethics, is determined first and foremost by kenosis. (Goršak 2019) I cannot approach the other if I am full of myself, my own wishes, desires and presumptions. I can make the step "out-of-myself" and toward my fellow man (Christian or not) only by making enough space in my hearth in the first place. Someone who

14 In our analogy this would be the gears.

is full of himself/herself cannot build koinonia, neither can act according to trilateral situation ethics.

The fourth pillar, the prayer, is like a constant reminder that only in a full communion with other fellow Christian one can truly hope to fulfil requirements of trilateral situation ethics. Only by admitting our own insufficiency when evoking God's grace and His sacraments into our lives, we become worthy of participating in the world as Christians. As an individual believer one does not have the "right" to claim fullness of the faith's gifts only for himself: this is evident in the fact that no believer, not even the highest dignitary of the Church curia, has the right to distort Lord's Prayer by saying "My Father" instead of "Our Father." By emphasizing "Our" as the first word of the prayer it becomes clear that we have to pray primarily as a Church, as a community (congregation), and only then as individuals. Hence, regular praying (especially of Our Father) serves as a steadfast reference point to which an individual member and the Church as a whole always direct and correct their own ethics. This way, one's ethics becomes most effectively synchronized with the ethics of every other member of the fellowship (koinonia). Regular praying as a congregation exposes the deep intertwinement of all believers as something ontological and not something that is merely arbitrarily ascribed to the particular Church community as its accidental feature.

In this respect, it is important to clarify the distinction between who my brother/sister is and who my neighbour is. Christ's command speaks about the obligation of loving our neighbour and not our brother/sister. Certainly, my neighbour is every man and woman on Earth, who was, according to Christian teaching, made in God's image. Yet, not every neighbour

is my brother/sister. To constitute the notion of being my brother/sister we must both acknowledge having the same father. It does not suffice to make a general statement that every man and woman on Earth was created by heavenly Father and hence we are all brothers and sisters. If the children deliberately do not acknowledge their own father after he has revealed himself to them as such then with that act they rightfully reject not only the right to wear the title son/daughter but also the whole heritage that would otherwise belong to them. If God is the Father of all humankind *de facto*, it cannot be *de iure* for those who reject his fatherhood. God the Father offers his heritage to all humankind, but He will not force anyone to accept him as their Father. We see now how important praying Our Father is: it means that all those who pray it acknowledge to have the same heavenly Father and may call themselves brothers/sisters (even those who are waiting to be baptized). Consequently, only brothers and sisters who acknowledge the same heavenly Father can be members of a sobornost/koinonia community.

### **Conclusion**

Christian trilateral situation ethics cannot be actualised without fulfilling each and every of the four criteria: a) I can ethically value my next fellowman only in the presence of God, who made us both in His image; b) My next fellowman has the same right to access all God's gifts (sacraments) as I have and in that respect I am not different from him; c) For approaching my next fellowman and making a step forward to meet him I have to restrict my egoistic desires and reasons as an act of a submission (kenosis), which is a result of my love of God (*theophilos*) more than my love of a fellowman

(*adelfikos*); d) In order to establish ethical interaction with my fellowman Christian I have to acknowledge him/her to be indispensable part of the one Catholic Church, which only enables my true communion with God and make it complete and even possible. With these last four statements the whole sobornost/koinonia and Christian trilateral situation ethics circle finds its completion: creed as the static part, sacraments as the dynamic part, living-by-faith (commandments) as the motion, and prayer as the direction, where this motion should lead us. Finally, we firmly believe that with everything that has been presented in this paper one can come to only one conclusion: the first Christian fellowships, living koinonia, were living in accordance with ethics that we nowadays call Christian trilateral situation ethics; additionally, this ethics represents a bedrock of any community, which nowadays has the intention to follow the example of early Christian fellowships.

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