

kanonika  
K<sub>23</sub>

KEVIN SCHEMBRI

*Oikonomia*, Divorce and Remarriage  
in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

PONTIFICIO ISTITUTO ORIENTALE  
KANONIKA 23 / 2017



Edizioni Orientalia Christiana



VALORE ITALIANO™

The volume *OIKONOMIA, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX TRADITION* (Series Kanonika n°23) forms part of the various scientific and cultural projects launched by the Pontifical Oriental Institute during its centenary (1917-2017).

PONTIFICIUM  
INSTITUTUM  
ORIENTALE  
CENTENARIO  
1917  
2017

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Codice ISBN 978-88-97789-39-0

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Riproduzione vietata ai sensi di legge (art.171 della legge 22 aprile 1941, n. 633)

## FOREWORD

Very few Orthodox Churches have clear norms providing for the nullity of marriage; instead, the majority of these Churches have a discipline that dissolves the matrimonial bond through *oikonomia*.

Even though the Orthodox discipline is alien to the Catholic tradition, canons 780 and 781 of the *Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches* (CCEO) and articles 2 and 4 of the Instruction *Dignitas Connubii* state that a marriage between a Catholic and an Orthodox is governed not only by divine law and canon law, but also by the proper matrimonial law of the Church to which the Orthodox party belongs. These norms also declare that whenever an ecclesiastical judge is to decide about the nullity of a marriage between baptised non-Catholics, wherein at least one party is Orthodox, he or she must also consider the law by which the parties were bound at the time of the celebration of the marriage and whether that marriage was celebrated with a sacred rite.

On the 20th of October 2006, the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura issued a *Declaratio* that gave more indications in this regard, and on the 20th of December 2012, the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts presented further guidelines through the *Nota explicativa quoad pondus canonicum divortii orthodoxi*. In 2015, Pope Francis also made an explicit reference to the Eastern principle of *oikonomia* in *Mitis et Misericors Iesus*, the Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio* on the reform of canonical procedure for the nullity of marriage in the CCEO.

In light of these recent canonical developments, it is a pleasure for me to introduce to the reader the volume *Oikonomia, Divorce and Remarriage in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, written by Kevin Schembri, a Catholic priest and canon lawyer from the Archdiocese of

Malta. As the title suggests, this study offers a wide-ranging presentation of the doctrinal and canonical tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Churches concerning the sacrament of marriage, the principle of *oikonomia*, and the concession of ecclesiastical divorce and remarriage.

The book is divided in four main chapters that are followed by some concluding observations. In the first chapter, Schembri gives a general overview of the sacrament of marriage in the Orthodox tradition and investigates its historical development, theological understanding, liturgical celebration, and canonical regulation. The second chapter explores the principles of *akribia* and *oikonomia* and examines their role, purpose and application within the Christian East. Having thus paved the way, Schembri focuses on the Orthodox doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and outlines the main characteristics and foundations of this teaching, along with its expression in Byzantine liturgy and in several canonical regulations. In the fourth chapter, he delineates the main features of the Orthodox concession of ecclesiastical divorce and successive marriages for both widowed and divorced persons, while investigating the basis of this exception from the Scriptures, the Eastern tradition and other secular legislations. Finally, the study contains some very interesting and balanced concluding observations on these matters, given from a Catholic perspective.

Without doubt, this research is a valuable resource for the Latin Catholic world, particularly for those who are engaged in ecumenical dialogue, family ministry, and ecclesiastical tribunals.

Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio  
*Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts*

## INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the Second Vatican Council, precisely on the 29th of September and the 4th of October 1965, Melkite Greek-Catholic Archbishop Elias Zoghby made two interventions in the Council Hall, in which he boldly asked the Council Fathers to address the painful reality of the divorced members of the faithful, and to study whether a pastoral solution could be provided in the Catholic Church in view of the Orthodox tradition. Around a year later, while acknowledging that the interventions of his Vicar General for Egypt and Sudan had no practical effect on the Council, Melkite Greek-Catholic Patriarch Maximos IV maintained that the door on further research should not be closed, and proposed the setup of a commission, composed of Western and Eastern experts, with the aim of studying the conduct of the Church throughout the centuries regarding divorce and remarriage, particularly her recourse to *oikonomia* in the East and to the privilege in the West. Patriarch Maximos added that as long as the Church did not resolve, through its leaders, to do absolutely everything in its power to find a way out of this impasse, she was not entitled to enjoy a peaceful conscience<sup>1</sup>.

In the years following the Council, the Orthodox position on divorce and remarriage was the subject of numerous Catholic and ecumenical studies<sup>2</sup>. During the 1980 Synod of Bishops on the Family, some Synod

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<sup>1</sup> For a full transcript of the pronouncements of Archbishop Zoghby and Patriarch Maximos IV at the Second Vatican Council, cf. MELKITE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH, *L'Église Grecque Melkite*, chap. 15.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, renowned moral theologian Bernard Häring referred to the Orthodox approach to divorce and remarriage in at least six works. Cf. B. HÄRING, «Assistenza Religiosa», 921-930; ID., «The Synod», 231-257; ID., «No Way Out?»; ID., «Grundsatztreue», 317-319; ID., *Morale e Sacramenti*; ID., «A Theological Appraisal», 16-28. For a summary of the various attempts on the part of Catholic theologians and

Fathers and at least one working group, reiterated the proposal of Maximos IV and called for the setup of a study commission to investigate the Orthodox position. This call was eventually included – albeit in a much softened manner – in paragraph 14 of the official *Propositiones* which stated: «The Synod declared its wish that a new and deeper study be initiated into the pastoral care of these [divorced and remarried] faithful, “taking account of the practices of the Eastern Churches”, so that pastoral kindness can be brought more clearly to the fore»<sup>3</sup>. Around 87% of 206 Synod Fathers voted in favour of this paragraph<sup>4</sup>.

In recent years, the Orthodox practice was mentioned by two Roman Pontiffs as they answered questions regarding the possibility of reception of the sacraments by divorced and remarried members of the faithful. During a meeting with the diocesan clergy of Aosta, Italy, in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI observed that within Catholic circles, the Orthodox practice is often presented as a model for a possible pastoral solution<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, on his return flight to Rome from Brasil in 2013, Pope Francis focused on the theme of mercy and at one particular point opened the following parenthesis: «The Orthodox have a different practice. They follow the theology of what they call *oikonomia*, and they give a second chance, they allow it»<sup>6</sup>. A few months later, Francis convoked a two-stage Synod of Bishops with the intention of discussing the pastoral challenges of the family in today’s world. Cardinal Walter Kasper was chosen to introduce the debate with a keynote address at the Extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals in February 2014. On that occasion, the German prelate proposed, amongst other things, a pastoral solution concerning the divorced and remarried that is inspired by the Orthodox practice<sup>7</sup>. The working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) that was prepared for the second Assembly of this Synod dedicated a whole paragraph to the tradition of the Orthodox Churches on this issue<sup>8</sup>.

The book that you have in your hands builds on these developments and attempts to offer a comprehensive and systematic presentation of the Eastern Orthodox position on marriage, the principle of *oikonomia*,

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scholars to find a solid pastoral solution for the reality of the divorced and remarried members of the faithful, cf. B. PETRÀ, *Il matrimonio*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. GROOTAERS – J. SELLING, *The 1980 Synod*, 139-141.

<sup>4</sup> Häring reports that out of 206 Synod Fathers, 179 voted in favour of this paragraph, 20 voted against and 7 abstained. Cf. B. HÄRING, «The Synod», 243.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with Diocesan Clergy*, q. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Press Conference*, q. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. KASPER, *The Gospel*, 29-32. The following day, Pope Francis described the address of Cardinal Kasper as an example of «doing theology on the knees». FRANCIS, *Parole del Santo Padre*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Instrumentum Laboris*, 126.

ecclesiastical divorce and successive marriages. It contains a study that was submitted as part fulfilment for the degree of Doctorate in Canon Law which the author read at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, with the full backing of the Archdiocese of Malta, and under the diligent supervision of Prof. Janusz Kowal, S.J., from the same university, and Prof. Georges-Henri Ruysen, S.J., from the Pontifical Oriental Institute.

Aware of the broad diversity of rites and traditions within Eastern Christianity, this work is limited to the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, that is, the tradition of those autocephalous Patriarchates and Churches that are united in faith and order, and are in communion with the Patriarch of Constantinople, but are independent from each other in matters of organisation and administration. This tradition comprises the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia, and the Churches of Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, and of the Czech lands and Slovakia. Some of these Churches also recognise the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in America. Hence, unless otherwise stated, the terms «orthodox», «oriental» and «eastern» throughout this volume are not to be understood in reference to the traditions of the Assyrian Church of the East, the Oriental Orthodox Churches or the Eastern Catholic Churches<sup>9</sup>.

It is hoped that this book will add to the already rich Eastern tradition and contribute towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Orthodox approach to *oikonomia*, divorce and remarriage. It aims to present the Western Churches – particularly the Latin Catholic Church – with a valuable resource in their pursuit of ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox East, in their dealing with the ever-growing reality of mixed marriages, and in their ministry to the divorced and remarried members of their faithful. Hopefully, this study will also assist members of staff at Catholic ecclesiastical tribunals, as well as pastors and other pastoral workers engaged in family ministry as they encounter marriage situations that involve at least one Orthodox party.

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed presentation of the whole spectrum of Eastern Churches, cf. R. ROBERSON, *The Eastern Christian Churches*.

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