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## »I Have Not Met a More Profound and Intelligent Orthodox Theologian than Him«: John Zizioulas in the Letters of Holy Father Justin (Popović)

*»Ne poznam bolj globokega in inteligentnega pravoslavnega teologa, kot je on«: Janez Zizioulas v pismih svetega očeta Justina (Popovića)*

**Abstract:** In this study, the author offers an answer to the question: what does Justin Popović think and write about his young contemporary, professor of theology, John Zizioulas? Analysing the personal correspondence of Popović, Zizioulas and Atanasije Jevtić, he concludes that all the fragments in Justin's letters where Zizioulas is mentioned are extremely affirmative and testify to the Elder's love for the young theologian. Professor Zizioulas is »dear Zizula« for Father Justin, he regularly sends him his greeting, prays for him, wants him to grow up in holy virtues, considers him a worthy student of Father George Florovsky, and concludes, after his personal meeting, that »he has never met a deeper and more intelligent Orthodox theologian« than him. St. Justin is also completely aware of the ecumenical activities of Zizioulas and has no problem with that. On the contrary, he gave the highest praises about him in the period when Prof. John was a very active ecumenical worker. This article proves the thesis that, according to the opinion of both Zizioulas and Popović, Orthodoxy must be present in the ecumenical dialogue, as a Church open to diversity, and not as a confession closed in on itself. Zizioulas shows this through personal engagement in ecumenical dialogue and Justin wholeheartedly supports him in this, according to their correspondence from 1966. to 1971. That is why zealot-minded anti-ecumenists cannot refer to Father Justin as a man who was against a healthy and theologically established ecumenical dialogue. Fr. Justin was actively supportive of every patristically founded »ecumenist«, such as Zizioulas.

**Keywords:** John Zizioulas, Justin Popović, Atanasije Jevtić, ecumenical dialogue, neopatristic synthesis

**Izleček:** Avtor v prispevku odgovarja na vprašanje: kaj Justin Popović misli in piše o svojem mladem sodobniku, profesorju teologije Janezu Zizioulasu? Z analizo osebne korespondence Popovića, Zizioulasa in Atanasija Jevtića ugotavlja, da so vsi fragmenti v Justinovih pismih, kjer je omenjen Zizioulas, izjemno naklonjeni in pričajo o ljubezni starca do mladega teologa. Profesor Zizioulas je za patra Justina »dragi Zizula«, redno mu pošilja pozdrave, moli zanj, želi, da raste v svetih krepostih, ima ga za vrednega učenca patra Jurija Florovskega in po osebnem srečanju ugotavlja, da »globljega in bolj inteligentnega pravoslavnega teologa«

*od njega še ni srečal. Justin se dobro zaveda tudi ekumenskega delovanja Zizioulasa in s tem nima težav. Nasprotno, največ pohvale mu je dal v času, ko je bil prof. Zizioulas zelo aktiven ekumenski delavec. Članek potrjuje tezo, da mora biti po mnenju tako Zizioulasa kot Popovića Pravoslavna cerkev prisotna v ekumenskem dialogu in odprta za različnost, ne pa da kot veroizpoved ostaja zaprta vase. Zizioulas to kaže z osebnim angažmajem v ekumenskem dialogu in Justin ga pri tem iskreno podpira, sodeč po njunem dopisovanju od leta 1966 do 1971. Zato goreči nasprotniki ekumenizma patra Justina ne morejo označevati kot človeka, ki je bil proti zdravemu in teološko uveljavljenemu ekumenskemu dialogu. Pater Justin je aktivno podpiral vsakega patristično utemeljenega »ekumenista«, kot je bil tudi Zizioulas.*

**Ključne besede:** *Janez Zizioulas, Justin Popović, Atanasije Jevtić, ekumenski dialog, neopatristska sinteza*

## Introduction

On Thursday, February 2 this year died the greatest theologian of the Orthodox Church of the last decades, Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon (January 10, 1931–February 2, 2023). The theological opus of Metropolitan John, since April 8, 1993 a member, and since 2002 the president of the Academy of Athens, is enormous and amazing, not only in quantity. The range of topics he analyses is very wide (Zizijulas 2014a; 2014b; 2019), but it can be concluded that the teaching about the Church, ecclesiology, is the source and backbone of all his thoughts (2012). The Metropolitan starts from the experience of the Church, and once again, he verifies all his theological theses with the Church's – eucharistic and eschatological – way of being (Zizioulas 1997). With such an approach, already as a young theologian, he starts to put Orthodox theology back on the path of the original experience of the Church Fathers, established by the Eastern methodology of Church experience, as a prerequisite for theology. Even more directly than his great teacher, Father Georges Florovsky, the Metropolitan of Pergamon directed the Orthodox Church and its word – theology, towards patristic, biblical, and particularly liturgical sources (Chiapetti 2021). As is well known, any resistance to inertia causes a reaction (Szöllösi 2017). Reactions to the Metropolitan's work have begun and continue to this day. That great man of Orthodoxy did not leave anyone indifferent. All of them, in accordance with their powers, theological skill and ecclesiastical feeling, responded to his propositions and to his constantly consistent, steadfast, and principled, methodologically almost perfect, conclusions (Japundžić 2015).



In this essay, I wish to bring to your attention exactly those *reactions* to the theology of John Zizioulas, and that during the formative period of this Greek theologian, at the beginning of his theological work. We will try to dialogue with the Holy Father Justin of Ćelije (1894–1979) and ask him: what does he think about the young theologian Zizioulas, how does he perceive his actions, his work and activity, and what does the already recognized Serbian dogmatist expect from him? We will look for answers to these questions in the letters of Fr. Justin (Popović 2020), as the ultimate and direct source of his deepest and most sincere observations. We will start by asking how Fr. Justin heard about Zizioulas and how he got acquainted with his work. Then we will chronologically follow their encounters, both through their works, which they exchanged through intermediaries, and through their personal, face-to-face, meetings. Finally, we will present some conclusions of our analysis of the meetings and dialogues of two great Fathers and teachers of the Church of God having enormous ecumenical importance (Štrukelj 2016, 97–104).

## **1 Father Atanasije (Jevtić) – the silent mediator of the great meeting**

After the Easter in 1966 (around the middle of April, since that year the Easter was celebrated on April 10), Fr. Justin from the Ćelije Monastery writes to Hieromonk Atanasije, thanking him for the »wonderful books« that he has already sent him.<sup>1</sup> Then he adds: »I am particularly happy that the Church Fathers are beginning to speak more clearly and loudly through today's Greeks, their descendants, especially through younger theologians.« He then instantaneously expresses his prayerful desire: »If only the patristic Orthodox theology would be freed from the stinging and poisonous Scholastic and Protestant rationalism.« The following sentence of the same letter is unquestionably related to this: »I will read with great joy the study of dear Kyrrios Zizioulas Ἡ ἐνότης τῆς Ἐκκλησίας [...], and send some of my remarks, and perhaps opinions, to you in about one month.« (Popović 2020, 178)

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1 Hieromonk Atanasije is the first translator of the works of John Zizioulas, and at the same time the closest student of Abba Justin (Popović) (Vukašinović 2014, 54.61).



There are many messages in these few sentences in Abba's letter. In the context of the analysis of the »neo-Babylonian slavery« of contemporary Orthodox theology, in the framework of liberating our theological thought from the large deposits of Roman Catholic and Protestant methodology, completely alien to the Eastern Orthodox patristic approach to the Mysteries of Theology, Fr. Justin expresses hope for the young Greek theologians of his time. From them, the descendants of the Holy Fathers, he expects a patristic revival, which, for our theology, would be an antidote to the Western sterile rationalism and numb academicism. In direct connection with those expectations is the young Greek theologian, to Father Justin »dear Kyrios Zizioulas«, and his book *The Unity of the Church*. Although the title is not complete, it is clear that it deals with the then newly published doctoral dissertation of Zizioulas *The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries* (1990). It is obvious that Fr. Atanasije Jevtić acquired it and *urgently* sent it to his spiritual father in Ćelije, as soon as it was published in 1965 in Athens. It is evident that the young hieromonk Atanasije had spoken to Justin about Zizioulas before, since Justin already called him dear, even before reading his dissertation. It is obvious that Fr. Atanasije (Jevtić) was an intermediary in getting to know these two great dogmatists, first through their books, and then in person, which we will discuss further on.

According to the promise, »in about a month«, in the letter he sent to his spiritual child Atanasije on Apodosi of Pascha of the same year (May 18, 1966), Father Justin expresses some views on the doctoral dissertation of John Zizioulas: »Study by Ζηζιούλα: very interesting. I have learned a lot. Particularly important: understanding the Episcopate; transition from the Holy Eucharist to Episcopacy; and the transition from the 'one body' of the Church to apostolic succession; and the place of episcopate in the Church.« (Popović 2020, 181) And immediately after these words, a great praise of the young theologian follows: »It is obvious that he is a worthy student of the famous Fr. Florovsky.«

If we know that for Fr. Justin, Florovsky is »the most divinely inspired contemporary apostle of Orthodoxy« (2020, 185), then the words of praise that Justin addresses to Zizioulas gain additional weight. The Archimandrite of Ćelije was known to speak highly of other theologians, for example P. Evdokimov and A. Schmemmann, but he is also known for harsh words for



some »authorities«. Thus, there are no such words for Bulgakov, but he says: »I almost can't stand him because of his restless mind towards the Church Fathers.« (259) Here we see Abba's openness towards theologians, towards their thoughts, but also a serious critical reading of their works. He does not praise them outright but thinks cautiously when he draws conclusions about their theology and its benefit or harm to the Church of God.<sup>2</sup>

Now, let us go back to the already mentioned words of Father Justin: »I have learned a lot« from the study of young doctor Zizioulas, »a worthy student of Florovsky«. This is what St. Abba of Ćelije wrote when he was 73! When Justin spent time with Florovsky in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Zizioulas was not even born. In his deep theological and spiritual maturity, however, our Venerable Abba speaks about the theological novelties that were revealed to him by a young 35-year-old Greek theologian. It was not difficult for him to admit it at all. That's what, in front of others, academically and spiritually composed and venerable people do. Justin specifically mentions three realities, which Zizioulas clarified for him with his new perspective, and all three concern the episcopal office. These are precisely the following:

1. the place of the episcopate in the Church, the place that is connected again with the service of unity performed by the bishop (Zizioulas 2010, 221–236);
2. episcopate, the Church and apostolic succession, by which Church services are connected with Eschaton, and not simply with history and with the succession from the Church of the future Jerusalem to the local Church, and not from an individual to an individual (Zizioulas 1997, 171–204.247–253);
3. the relationship between the episcop(acy) and the Eucharist, a unique conclusion explaining that the authority of the bishop, his honour and power stem from his liturgical place and service (Zizioulas 2010, 236–254).

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2 On differential criticism, spiritual reasoning, which had previously protected Justin from extremism, reductivism and other temptations, see the excellent study: Lubardić 2012, 381–453, particularly 442–446.



The framework of our study does not allow us the possibility of a deeper analysis of this topic, but we can conclude that Father Justin sensed the most subtle and original moments of Zizioulas's dissertation, the same ones that the Bishop of Pergamon would deal with throughout his life, underlining their existential consequences (17–41). Let us also add that the extraordinary patristic foundation of Zizioulas's dissertation and all the conclusions he presented were exceptionally important to Justin. Affirmative words of young Atanasije about the young Greek theologian would not be enough to impress Fr. Justin. Only the critical insight and theological conclusion that »I am particularly happy that the Church Fathers are beginning to speak more clearly and loudly through today's Greeks, their descendants, especially through younger theologians«, particularly through Kyrios John Zizioulas, lead our father to express such praise to him and to compare him to memorable Florovsky.

## 2 Kyrios John Zizioulas about Father Justin

In the spring of 1969, our mediator, hieromonk Atanasije (Jevtić) sent several books to John Zizioulas to Geneva, among which was the work of Father Justin of Ćelije *Man and the God-man* (orig. *Čovek i Bogočovek*), which was published in Greek. In his letter of gratitude (sent from Geneva to Paris, on April 29, 1969), John Zizioulas responds to Atanasije with the following words:

I don't know how to thank you! First, because you remember me, and then because with these books you are giving me something priceless. I have always desired to have the book of Father Justin *Man and the God-man*. I have believed it is important, but now that I've barely read the first chapter, I'm literally delighted. Each line I read, I feel like shouting: 'That's exactly what I've been feeling all this time, and I want to say that!' In each line, all the Church Fathers are together with one voice. It is the Church, Catholic, Holy in its Catholic expression. When a man lives every moment of his life in the midst of Western Christianity and reads this book, he feels that he is finding himself again. May God protect Fr. Justin, unto many years, to pray and guide us. (Popović 2020, 47–48)



Before any deeper analysis of this excerpt from the letter, we want to underline the Christian dignity and spiritual aristocratism that echo from the opening words of gratitude (»I don't know how to thank you!«, primarily because »you remember me [...].«). All of us who had the opportunity to be with the Metropolitan of Pergamon and talk with him, testify to the elegance, sophistication, dignity, and subtlety that this great theologian exuded. These are quite obvious from the analysed letters, and anyone can see that without any effort. That segment of his personality also has its own theological assumption:

- I. the man is a gentleman because he is an icon of Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth, life and death;
- II. belonging to the spiritual aristocracy comes from the future belonging to the community of the best, the truest aristocrats, whose exceptionality is manifested in immortality;
- III. elegance, on the other hand, is the result of refinement in dealing with others, who are also called to live in the Future Jerusalem and who already manifest it with dignity.

Therefore, on the basis of Orthodox Christology, eschatology and the anthropology, the man should become Lord and already a gentleman now (Zizioulas, 2007, 246–247).

Equally important to us is the following part of the letter and Zizioulas's vision of Justin's work, which was delivered to him. His excitement for the long-desired book is connected with the experience of much-needed Eastern Orthodox testimonies in the then less and less Christian West. Zizioulas found himself in the Abba's book. »In every line, all the Fathers are together with one voice«, says the future Metropolitan of Pergamon for the theological method of Fr. Justin. Justin and John found themselves in the Church Fathers, in their teachings, in their entire works, but primarily in the patristic methodology. In the Fathers, as living persons, who are present at every Eucharist, the two of them found and recognized themselves. This contains the neo-patristic synthesis; this is how the manifestation of the maxim with which Father Georges Florovsky started patristic renewal in our theology should look like: »Forward, to the Fathers.« Forward, to them means – to meet them at the liturgical gathering, because there they straightforwardly explain the secrets of theology, the Holy Scriptures,



and their works. Justin and Zizioulas met at the gathering of the Fathers at the Holy Liturgy, in the Holy, Catholic Church. That is why the Greek said about the Serb: »In every line, all the Fathers are together with one voice,« and Justin about John: »He is a worthy student of the famous Fr. Florovsky.« That's why John prays to God to »protect Fr. Justin, unto many years,« trusting in the prayers and guidance of our Holy Father.

The young theologian's opinion about Father Justin's book reached the author himself, who then wrote to Atanasije, to that blessed »insider« of the relationship between the Abba of Ćelije and the Greek theologian: »The opinion of 'dear Zizioulas' about the book Ἄνθρωπος καὶ Θεάνθρωπος is very valuable to me. Give him my regards: may he continue to grow with the 'growth of God' through holy virtues.« (Popović 2020, 259)<sup>3</sup> On Easter 1970, Fr. Justin among other things, writes to his »beloved, immortal child in the Risen Lord,« Fr. Atanasije: »I immediately put down sister Marianta in the Memorial Book for 40 Holy Liturgies. Blessed is the mother who gave birth to such a Christ-loving and wise-in-Christ: [John] Zizoulas.« (274)

It is obvious that the relationship of Fr. Justin and John Zizioulas continuously deepened. At John's request, the Archimandrite of Ćelije immediately entered the name of Zizioulas' mother, Marianta, asleep in the Lord, into his Memorial Book and mentioned her at the next 40 liturgies, as if he had known her. This only confirms mutual fondness between the two great theologians, who at that time had neither seen each other nor officially met. John Zizioulas entrusts his late mother to the intercessory prayers of Holy Father Justin. Father Justin, on the other hand, accepts to serve as an intercessor before God and adds great praise to both mother and son: namely, he calls blessed the mother who gave birth to such a Christian as John Zizioulas, such a Christ-loving and wise son-in-Christ. We must ask ourselves if Zizioulas had ever received such praises later in his life, praises which go beyond the assessment of his academic work and theological contribution and reflect his Christian character. All this is based on reading Zizioulas's dissertation (wise-in-Christ) and, we are certain, on the testimonies of Fr. Atanasije (Christ-loving).

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3 And some time later, in October 17/30, 1969, he once more returns his greetings to Zizioulas, next to St. Bishop Dionysos of Kozani (Popović 2020, 263).





On July 9, 1970, Zizioulas wrote to Atanasije again, after he learned that he was going to visit his spiritual father. He uses the opportunity to ask Atanasije to be again his intercessor before Father Justin, to mention him to Fr. Justin and recommend him to the Elder's prayers: »I rejoice and glorify God that you will visit the Elder. He does not know me, but please tell him that I desire his prayers and I always pray that the Lord will make me worthy to visit him. I will wait to see you, to tell me news about him.« (48)

These words clearly show the confidence in the prayerful intercession, the faith of the man of the Church that *the other* is his Saviour, that I entrust salvation to another, and not to my own strength or meagre human dignity. Here we find the living contours of that theology of the other(-ness), so dear to the Bishop of Pergamon that he would devote his most mature years to this very topic.<sup>4</sup> These words reveal the awareness and faith in the holiness of the other, but also the need to see him, physically touch him, to visit him, to get to know each other. Indeed, Kyrios Zizioulas really names Justin – the Holy Man. That's what is written in his letter to Fr. Atanasije four months after the previous one, after Atanasije told him everything he had experienced and do with Justin during his long stay with him:

I have rejoiced and I praise the Lord for making you worthy to spend so many days near your Elder. I envy you and I think that I should soon try to visit that Holy Man, whom the Lord keeps alive and far from his beloved martyrdom, only and solely for our sake. It is significant that you write to me about the fire of martyrdom that burns in his heart. He is right to be concerned about the superficiality with which those in charge handle huge issues of faith, on which the salvation of our people depends. And unquestionably, all of us who do not take care, even giving our lives, for the salvation of that people, are responsible – we who have received the heritage of the Church Fathers and Saints with the True Faith, blood, and tears of the venerable [...] Your prayer and the prayer

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4 As evidenced by his book *Communion and Otherness*, published in English, and soon translated into Serbian, Russian and Italian.



of the Elder and Church Fathers and Confessors and of St. Nectarios may give us all the enlightenment and strength we need today. Here, where I live and teach (Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland), I see every day how indispensable the voice of the Church Fathers even today is. Most of the huge problems that the man of the West is facing today originate from the distortion inflicted on the spirit of the Church Fathers. The more deeply I study things, the more I realize that all the problems of modern man are different only on the outside, in form, and not in essence. It is astonishing how many of these problems stem from misunderstandings about the Holy Trinity, Christology, etc. If the Lord gives me strength and time, I intend to write something about it. (48–49)

We have conveyed this longer passage from the letter without interruption, in order to look at several important moments, which concern both of our Fathers. First of all, we see the intense longing with which Zizioulas talks about Justin and how much he desires to see him. He already sees him as a confessor of faith, as the one who suffers, but does not experience the martyrdom itself, according to God's providence. The providence of God is not an abstract category, it is about the Lord's actions in history, always through a concrete person, for the sake of a certain community. This is the meaning of the Zizioulas' words that Father Justin »is by God kept alive and far from his beloved martyrdom, *solely and only for our sake*«. However, we also read about the martyrdom which Fr. Justin suffers all the time, and it does not concern the isolation, the communist persecution, the suffering that he personally undergoes. Namely, it is about Justin's grief and concern for the unity of the Church and the theological witness in his time, throughout Orthodoxy. In many places we see how deeply Fr. Justin is dissatisfied with the situation in the Ecumenical Orthodox Church, among the Russians, in Constantinople, particularly among us. He is very strict in his disapprovals with that situation, as well as with everyone who is responsible for it.<sup>5</sup> Zizioulas agrees with him: »He has the right to worry about the superficiality with which *those in charge* manage huge issues

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5 It is enough to read these words of his: »Thank you for the excerpt from *Figaro* about the decision, about the unfortunate, about the catastrophic decision of the wretched, slavish [Russian] Synod. They thereby deprived themselves of their rights, and are nothing more than criminal administrative robots, from which every apostolic and patristic grace has fled.« Christ will save the Church from such and similar Judean exploits. (Popović 2020, 42)



of faith, on which the *salvation* of our people depends.« As we know from his complete opus, for Zizioulas, superficiality in decision-making means not solving problems on a secure foundation, on a theological basis, but building on sand, i.e. guided by socio-political and other historical, transitory assumptions.

Once again, we come across complete agreement between the Serbian and Greek theologians. This is also confirmed by the third part of the quoted passage of the letter: all the problems of the West, Zizioulas judges from the personal experience as a professor in that same West, originate from weak, bad, patristically unfounded Western theology (primarily Triadology and Christology). That is why the voice of the Church Fathers is the salvation for the West, claim both Justin and Zizioulas. That's why Zizioulas is asking God to help him see Justin, to share experiences, in order to convey the authentic voice of the living holy father to the West.

### 3

#### **The meeting of Father Justin and professor Zizioulas »face to face«**

A little less than a year after this letter, the Lord answered the prayers of John Zizioulas: in September 1971, he visited Father Justin in Ćelije. He writes to Atanasije from Edinburgh on May 5, 1972 (49), that it was hard for him to find Ćelije, that he walked for an hour, wandered without encountering anyone. However, »brother John«, as Atanasije calls him, continues, »the reward I received was great«. He calls his meeting with Fr. Justin the reward and continues in the prayerful spirit: »If only the Lord would make me worthy to visit him again.« From the same letter, we learn that Zizioulas also talked to Abba about his »personal matter«. Bishop Atanasije thinks that the topic was the upcoming John's heirotonia. It is possible, because John adds that he did not receive »clear and specific advice regarding what to do«. The reason for Justin's indecision was his disappointment with the state of the affairs of Orthodoxy at that time. We do not know the details, because John did not want to write down precisely what Father Justin had in mind, but only casually added to Atanasije: »When, in the name of God, we meet, I will tell you in detail. I certainly leave that question unresolved.« What we know for certain is that John was consecrated as a bishop only 15 years after this meeting, in June 1986. We are currently



more interested in the question: how does John describe the reward that he received, seeing Justin? Who did he actually see?

As we have said, Zizioulas called it an indescribable joy and a blessing from God to see Fr. Justin, or more precisely, to talk to him and particularly »to see his face«. He continues, in exaltation:

Just for a person to see his face is enough. What brightness of a child's soul and the sanctity! How humble and bright in face the wise become by the grace of God! I praise God for making me worthy to get to know him. His character and his love will remain unforgettable to me. We have said a lot, but not enough. The more you talk to him, the more you want to stay with him. May the Lord protect him, for our sake. And may we always have his prayer. (49)

A wise man with a bright face, simple in abundance of love, whose personality attracts the conversational partner to never leave him – this is how Zizioulas describes Father Justin. These descriptive expressions are abundantly used by hagiographers (writers of biographies), faithfully following the Gospel paradigm. Doesn't apostle Peter speak similarly when he says to Christ: »Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (ῥήματα ζωῆς αἰωνίου). We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God (ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ).« (Jn 6,68-69) Just like Peter, Zizioulas, looking at Justin's transformed face, says that he wants to stay with him, because he recognized him and named him the Holy One (man) of God.

But what or who did Justin see in the young Kyrios professor John Zizioulas? After they got to know each other and the young theologian left, Abba Justin said the words which Bishop Atanasije conveyed to us. Those commendatory words of Abba Justin are in the title of this paper because they are powerful and prophetic. The recognized Orthodox theologian, venerable confessor of faith of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Abba Justin of Čelije said that »he has not met a more profound and intelligent Orthodox theologian than« Zizioulas (Popović 2020, 48).

These words of Justin should be compared with the famous sentence of the great Roman Catholic theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cardinal Yves Congar, about the same theologian: »John Zizioulas is one of the most

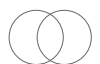


original and profound theologians of our era. His originality and depth come from an all-pervading and coherent reading of the traditions of the Greek fathers on the subject of that living reality we call the Church.« (Congar 1982, 88) In the last part of the study, we will try to further interpret these words of Father Justin, strictly contextualizing them (placing them within their time frame).

#### **4 Abba Justin, John Zizioulas and ecumenism**

Today, in some theological, but also in many journalistic circles, the prevailing attitude, which is persistently and forcefully imposed, is that Fr. Justin Popović is the principal opponent of ecumenism, ecumenical dialogue, and dialogs with non-Orthodox Christians (Popović, 1995). Everyone also knows how eagerly the professor and the Metropolitan of Pergamon, John (Zizioulas), participated in a large number of bilateral and multilateral commissions of the ecumenical dialogue area, even in the World Council of Churches itself (Zizioulas 1990, 215). Superficial and vague analyses easily place these two theologians in an antagonistic and rival relationship. From their letters we directly see that the two of them had an extremely close relationship that was transformed from an academic one into an intimate and direct, deeply personal Church relationship (Justin calls John dear, he values his theological opinion, he complains to him about the fate of the Orthodoxy in the world, Zizioulas calls Justin the holy man, asks for his prayers for himself and for his beloved ones, his late mother, rushes to meet him, confesses to him his greatest torments). All this happens approximately in the period of 1966–1971. This chronological determination is important to us. Here's why.

With an elementary insight into the biography of John Zizioulas, we note the following important moments from his rich life filled with service to the Church (Fontbona 1994, 75–81; Spiteris 1992, 363–416). Shortly after receiving his doctorate, Zizioulas became an assistant to professor Konidaris in 1965 at the Department of Church History of the University of Athens. Immediately after that, the extraordinary ecumenical activity of Prof. John began. As early as 1966, Nikos Nissiotis (1925–1986) (323–361), a great protagonist of the ecumenical movement, introduced him into the work of the »Faith and Order« Commission of the World Council of Churches



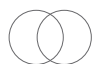
in Geneva, and Lucas Vischer (Swiss Reformed theologian, who was that year elected director of the »Faith and Order«) notices his exceptional theological gift and appoints him as a permanent member of the mentioned commission. Zizioulas was particularly noticed during his work in two groups, of which the first studied the development of synodal structures, and the second the Eucharist. In the summer of 1967, the WCC asked him to move to Geneva, to become a permanent member of the Secretariat of the Faith and Order Commission, which he did, and remained in Geneva until 1970. In that period, we particularly note his significant participation in the theological commission »Catholicity and Apostolicity« (1967–1968), in which the representatives of the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church conducted a dialogue. The fruit of that research is Zizioulas's text *The Eucharistic Community and the Catholicity of the Church*, which, after the French original (Zizioulas 1969, 67–88), was published in English (1970), then in German (1971) and soon in Serbian (1971). The translator from French into Serbian was, of course, hieromonk Atanasije Jevtić (*Herald Serbian Orthodox Church* 1971, 110–121). I would like to mention that from the letters of Atanasije and Justin, we can easily observe that every choice of articles to be translated and published, as well as the issues of the time of publication and evaluation of the journal (editor) in which the translation was to be published, was assessed by Fr. Justin. Only after his blessing, Atanasije sent the article to the chosen newspaper. This information will also be important for our conclusion.

Zizioulas, furthermore, on July 4–20, 1968 participates in the session of the 4<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala (Sweden), especially in the section on liturgical service (together with J. M. Tillard, M. Thurian and J. J von Allmen, and under the presidency of J. Meyendorff). Supplementing the list of ecumenical activities of professor Zizioulas in the *indicated* chronological framework, we also add the International Ecumenical Colloquium on »intercommunion«, held in Geneva from March 23 to 28, 1969 (Fontbona 1992, 79). We should not forget Zizioulas's concrete answers to current ecumenical issues from the Orthodox point of view, in the form of texts on ordination, baptism, anointing, the authority of the Bible or on the relationship between our Church and non-Chalcedonian ecclesial communities, articles written from 1967 to 1971, always in the context of an ecumenical gathering, session or conference.



This short bio-bibliography of John Zizioulas shows that the period of active correspondence and meeting of the Greek theologian with Fr. Justin is at the same time the period when the Greek is *extremely active as a promoter of ecumenical dialogue*. Zizioulas not only writes studies on very complex and ecumenically open topics, but, as we have seen, *becomes a respected member of the WCC and a responsible theologian of its key commission*, the theological department, Faith and Order. To express the thought directly: Father Justin Popović spoke highly of Kyrios professor John Zizioulas in the period when the young Greek theologian was becoming the central figure of ecumenism, taking over the baton of ecumenical dialogue from Florovsky, Meyendorff and Nissiotis. This conclusion, confirmed by Justin's letters, his intimate and most sincere views, cannot be reconciled with the quasi-zealotic efforts to place Abba Justin and Zizioulas in opposing camps. Father Justin's fight against Genevan ecumenism, which is indisputable and completely correct, did not in any way concern Prof. Zizioulas, who in the same period, was an official and employee of the WCC in the midst of Geneva. What does that mean?

The most important anti-ecumenical writings of Fr. Justin were created in the period when the transition from theological to political topics took place in the WCC (Cvetković 2015, 243–262). Instead of discussing the triadological assumptions of our faith and the ecclesiological consequences of these facts, the majority of Protestant members of the WCC began to lower the issue of the work from the theological to the ethical, political, and social levels, with a change in the methodology of the work and often simply uncritical outvoting of Orthodox positions. These »dogmatic minimalism and political concessions« (259) were the basic paradigmatic assumptions that Fr. Justin harshly criticized. No false unity in pietistic love nor ideological politicking or humanistic peaceful coexistence are allowed in the Orthodox Church. At the same time, with equal force, the Archimandrite of Čelije never questioned the need for Orthodox theologians to participate in the ecumenical dialogue, the necessity to bear witness to *theology*, to be true in love (Matić 2013). Whenever he knew that an Orthodox representative in ecumenical councils, commissions and gatherings was a serious and recognised theologian, he always supported such effort and such a person and prayed for him. He also did that for his long-time acquaintance and friend, »and a relative considering theological views« (Jevtić, 2004, 112), the *ecumenist* priest Georges Florovsky; in the



same way he appreciated the *ecumenist* Holy Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović («whom he called Saint even during his lifetime»), as well as the youngest of them, the most profound theologian, a layman at that time, and great ecumenist John Zizioulas.

## Conclusion

In this research, we wanted to offer an answer to the question: what does Venerable Justin of Čelije think and write about his young contemporary, professor of theology, John Zizioulas? We have analysed the direct testimonies, the personal correspondence of our holy father, considering that the epistolary form can display his attitude most directly. Almost all the places in Abba's letters where Zizioulas is mentioned are extremely affirmative and testify to the Elder's love for the young theologian. For Father Justin, professor Zizioulas is «dear Zizula», he regularly sends his greetings to him, prays for him, wants him to grow up in holy virtues, deems him a worthy student of Father Georges Florovsky, and concludes, after his personal meeting, that «he has never met a deeper and more intelligent Orthodox theologian» than him.

St. Justin is fully aware of the ecumenical activities of Zizioulas and has no problem with that. On the contrary, he gave the highest praises about him in the period when Prof. John was a very active ecumenical worker. He originated from Justin's attitude, with which we bring this study to an end: «If we Orthodox were patristically Orthodox, we would not be afraid of any 'ecumenisms'.» (Popović 2020, 185)

«Ignorant and hostile critics», as well as «extreme fanatical false followers of Popović, the so-called zealots,»<sup>6</sup> who project their weaknesses (hatred) and fears (ignorance and theological illiteracy) onto Father Justin, cannot refer to Venerable Father Justin as an anti-ecumenist. Looking at the personality and work of young professor John Zizioulas, Father Justin recognised that he was a patristical man of holy virtues, established in Orthodox

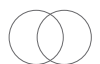
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6 We use and fully adopt these impeccably precise expressions of Prof. Bogdan Lubardić, PhD (2012, 445).





experience, an Orthodox ecumenical hard worker, and he was not afraid either for him or for what Zizioulas would witness in the inter-Christian dialogue for more than half century. We know that Father Justin was not wrong. The saints are recognized in their greatness and aptitude, in their love for others, in their freedom for others, in their Christ-like path and effort »so that no one perishes«. Because, »in every line, all the holy fathers are together, with one voice«.



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