

THE RECEPTION OF THE HETERODOX IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE LIGHT OF THE CANONICAL-JURIDICAL PROVISIONS OF THE KORMCIAIA KNIGA

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Abstract. This article aims to analyze the canonical and juridical regulations concerning the reception of heterodox believers into the Orthodox Church, as they are reflected in the Kormciaia Kniga, one of the most important collections of ecclesiastical law in the Slavonic tradition. Based on the Byzantine sources adopted and adapted by this compilation, as well as on the historical and ecclesiastical context of the Slavic world, the study highlights how the Eastern tradition addressed the issue of heterodox Christians, navigating between the rigors of akribeia and the pastoral applications of ikonomia. Special attention is given to the sacramental status of heterodox communities, the conditions for ecclesial reintegration, and the variations in pastoral practice.

The article offers a comparative analysis of the Kormciaia Kniga, the Pidalion, synodical canons, and the canonical commentaries of modern Orthodox theologians such as Ioan N. Floca, Ioan Milaș, Liviu Stan, Nicolae V. Dură, and Cătălina Mititelu.

The conclusions reveal the pastoral discernment and canonical balance within the Kormciaia Kniga, along with its historical influence on later codifications in the Romanian Orthodox space.

This study demonstrates that the Orthodox Church has always sought to remain faithful to its canonical tradition while applying it with discernment and compassion, especially in cases involving those who sincerely seek communion with Christ and His Church.

Keywords: Kormciaia Kniga; reception of heterodox; Orthodox canon law; ikonomia; akribeia; ecclesial communion.

Introduction. The reception of heterodox Christians into the Orthodox Church has always represented a complex theological, ecclesiological, and canonical issue. At its core lie fundamental concerns such as the validity of sacraments, the real belonging to the Body of Christ, and the conditions for the restoration of ecclesial communion. The Orthodox Church has consistently confessed itself to be One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic — not merely as a dogmatic formula, but as a concrete reality grounded in grace, apostolic succession, and the preservation of the true faith. Therefore, the question of how the Church relates to communities outside its visible bounds is not only pastoral, but also deeply ecclesiological.

Since the earliest centuries, Orthodox canonical tradition has developed clear yet non-rigid criteria for the reception of those of another confession. The canons of the Ecumenical and Local Councils, along with patristic commentary, established a nuanced typology of heterodox: heretics, schismatics, unbaptized non-Christians, and members of groups with distorted doctrine or defective sacramental practice. The Church's approach — from rebaptism to simple profession of faith — has always depended on the degree of deviation from orthodoxy and on the recognition or rejection of sacramental validity (Mititelu 2008, 322-336; Mititelu 2020, 7-18).

This Byzantine canonical and nomocanonical (Dură 2011, 25-48; Mititelu 2014, 25-80) inheritance was received, adapted, and expanded in the Slavic world through important canonical compilations, among which

the Kormciaia Kniga holds a prominent place. Compiled in the 13th century as a Slavonic adaptation of Photius's Nomocanon in 14 Titles, this collection became the normative basis for the canonical life of the Russian Orthodox Church and other Slavic Orthodox Churches. Unlike mere translations, the Kormciaia includes Slavic legal developments and ecclesiastical interpretations, granting it a distinct character that is both Byzantine in essence and Slavic in structure and application.

The issue of heterodox reception is treated in the Kormciaia Kniga with both doctrinal rigor and pastoral discernment. Drawing from canonical sources such as the Apostolic Canons, the Councils of Carthage, Laodicea, and Trullo, as well as the writings of the Holy Fathers — especially Basil the Great and Cyprian of Carthage — the collection offers detailed regulations regarding whether and how baptism, chrismation, or even exorcism should be administered to those outside the Church. The determining criteria often included the form of the sacrament, its theological content, and the personal disposition of the one seeking to enter communion.

One of the most significant aspects of the Kormciaia is its emphasis on episcopal discernment. The bishop is granted the authority not only to enforce canonical norms but also to interpret and apply them with wisdom and love, based on the particularities of each case. Thus, the collection does not rigidly impose uniform measures but acknowledges the principle of *ikonomia* (ikonomy) — pastoral leniency rooted in truth — as a canonical norm in its own right.

This flexibility was not arbitrary, nor was it doctrinally relativistic. Rather, it was grounded in the Church's understanding that canons exist to serve the salvation of souls, not to function as static legal rules. This view is reflected not only in the text of the Kormciaia but also in its application throughout the centuries in the Slavic and Romanian canonical traditions (Dură 1990, 58-79; Dură 1995, 229-262).

In the Romanian Lands, the Kormciaia Kniga was received through Slavonic translations and became one of the primary canonical sources for early Romanian church legislation. Its influence is visible in the printed *Pravilas* of the 17th century (Mititelu 2012, 15-98), such as the *Îndreptarea Legii* (1652) (*The Straightening of the Law*), which codified the reception of heterodox according to a similar balance of fidelity and flexibility. In this way, the Kormciaia left its mark not only on Slavic Orthodoxy but also on the broader Orthodox world, including Romanian canon law and pastoral practice.

In this article, we aim to examine in detail the canonical prescriptions concerning the reception of heterodox Christians as presented in the Kormciaia Kniga. We will compare these with other canonical collections — such as the *Pēdálion* (Rudder), the Nomocanon, and patristic texts — and with the interpretations of modern Orthodox canonists and theologians, including Ioan N. Floca, Ioan Milaş, Liviu Stan, Nicolae V. Dură, and Cătălina Mititelu. Our goal is not merely to reconstruct historical norms, but to evaluate their current relevance and offer insight into how the Church, faithful to its canonical and theological heritage, can respond today with both truth and love to those who sincerely seek communion through confession (Mititelu 2015, 10-18).

In a time marked by doctrinal confusion, religious relativism, and spiritual displacement, the Church's canonical tradition — illuminated by sources such as the Kormciaia Kniga — can offer a different path: one of truth lived in love, of discipline grounded in compassion, and of unity pursued not through coercion, but through genuine conversion.

Methods. This study employs a historical-canonical and theological-hermeneutical methodology, drawing from primary canonical sources and their patristic interpretations, as well as from modern canonical scholarship. The main corpus of analysis includes the Kormciaia Kniga, the Nomocanon in 14 Titles, the *Pēdálion* (Rudder), and relevant synodical canons (especially from the Councils of Carthage, Trullo, and Laodicea), supplemented by canonical commentaries from Fathers such as St. Basil the Great and St. Cyprian.

Through comparative analysis, the study identifies and interprets the provisions regarding the reception of heterodox believers, focusing on sacramental conditions, canonical distinctions, and pastoral principles. Emphasis is placed on the dynamic between *akribeia* (strictness) and *ikonomia* (iconomy), as well as on the bishop's role in applying these norms within the ecclesiastical context.

Modern scholarly interpretations by canonical jurists such as Ioan N. Floca, Ioan Mihaș, Liviu Stan, Nicolae V. Dură, and Cătălina Mititelu are used to evaluate the contemporary relevance and ecclesiological coherence of the *Kormciaia*'s provisions. The methodology follows a qualitative and contextual approach, prioritizing theological meaning over legal formalism and analyzing canonical texts in light of the Orthodox understanding of salvation (soteriology) and ecclesial unity.

Discussion. The canonical prescriptions of the *Kormciaia Kniga* concerning the reception of heterodox Christians reveal a well-structured framework that seeks to preserve both the truth of faith and the pastoral mission of the Church. Following the model of earlier canonical collections such as the *Nomocanon in 14 Titles* and the Byzantine *Pēdálion*, the *Kormciaia* continues the canonical line that distinguishes between various categories of heterodox and adapts their reception based on theological, sacramental, and pastoral criteria (Floca 1990, 45–51; Mihaș 1902, 122–130).

In the canonical tradition, the concept of *ikonomia* (iconomy) refers to the pastoral flexibility through which certain canonical rules may be relaxed, not arbitrarily, but out of love for the person and for their salvation. This principle is not a denial of the canons, but their wise and spiritual application in specific cases. In the *Kormciaia*, this is explicitly granted as a prerogative of the bishop, who must weigh the condition of the person, their previous confession, and the validity of the baptism received (Stan 1959, 56–58).

The ecclesiastical discipline regarding the reception of heterodox is not fixed once and for all. For instance, the *Canons of St. Basil the Great* differentiate among heretics, schismatics, and the unbaptized, assigning different canonical remedies to each (David Cummings, 2000). In harmony with this, the *Kormciaia* establishes that some converts may be received by confession of faith and Chrismation, while others must be baptized anew.

Another important canonical source reflected in the *Kormciaia* is the decision of the Council of Carthage (3rd–4th century), under the influence of St. Cyprian of Carthage, who advocated for the re-baptism of all heretics (*The Seven Ecumenical Councils* 1956, 201–223; Cyprian 1844, 73: 201–205). Nevertheless, the Byzantine synthesis — continued in the *Kormciaia* — introduces a more balanced view, accepting the validity of sacraments administered with correct form and intention, even if outside full ecclesial communion (*The Seven Ecumenical Councils* 1956, 201–223; Cyprian 1844, 73: 201–205).

This nuance is vital in understanding how Orthodoxy has responded over time to the question of the heterodox. The *Kormciaia* does not impose a rigid uniformity but articulates a pastoral model based on criteria such as: the doctrine professed, the sacramental praxis, and the degree of deviation from the Orthodox ethos.

In its canonical logic, the *Kormciaia* affirms that the bishop has the freedom and responsibility to choose between *akribeia* (strict observance) and *ikonomia* (iconomy), in accordance with the spiritual benefit of the person and the safeguarding of Church unity. This is not a subjective decision, but one informed by canon law, patristic tradition, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Mihaș 1902, 122–130; Floca 1990, I: 45–51).

In the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church, the reception of heterodox individuals is not only a sacramental and disciplinary matter, but also a profound expression of ecclesiological identity. The criteria by which the Church receives those outside its canonical boundaries are rooted in a rigorous understanding of the boundaries of grace, apostolic succession, and the visible unity of the Church. The Byzantine canonical commentaries — particularly those of Balsamon (12th c.) (Balsamon, 1966), Zonaras (12th c.) (Zonaras, 1966),

and Aristen (12th c.) (Aristenos, 1966) – consistently emphasized that the reception of heretics cannot be approached lightly, as it affects both the theological integrity of the sacraments and the visible communion of the Church (Dură 2014, 465-484; Dură 2004, 7-25).

According to Balsamon (12th c.), any economy (*ikonomia*) granted in matters of heterodox reception must never violate the canonical conscience (*syneidesis*) of the Church, nor obscure the distinction between truth and error. The same line of thought is followed by Zonaras (12th c.), who interprets Canon 1 of St. Basil the Great as affirming a fundamental difference between heresy and schism – a distinction that determines whether chrismation or baptism is necessary upon reception.

The canonical synthesis provided by Vlastares (1335) (Vlastares, 1966) in the *Syntagma Alphabetikon* reflects a mature understanding of patristic and conciliar texts, bringing together earlier canonical rulings and offering a framework that resists both extremes: on the one hand, a rigorist exclusivism that denies any grace outside canonical boundaries, and on the other, a relativistic inclusivism that disregards the need for true ecclesial unity.

This patristic-canonical balance is also evident in the writings of St. John of Damascus (8th c.) (John of Damascus 1984, 1–101), who, while recognizing the existence of Christian elements among the heterodox, does not minimize the need for repentance and full integration into the Church's sacramental and canonical life. In modern Orthodox theology, Vladimir Lossky (Lossky 1957, 121–135) and John Meyendorff (Meyendorff 1983, 195–210) have reaffirmed this perspective, stressing that sacramental economy is always bound to the fullness of ecclesial truth, not to abstract ecumenical diplomacy. According to Lossky, the Orthodox Church is not merely the most complete among Christian communities, but the one Church in which the fullness of the truth dwells.

The implications of these positions are significant. They reveal a deep canonical and theological awareness that the Church cannot compromise its ecclesiological identity in the name of false unity. Even when economy is applied, it must be an act of pastoral discernment and not an abandonment of canonical order.

The canonical regulation of heterodox reception in the Orthodox Church is not a fixed or ahistorical system, but one shaped by a complex synthesis of historical experience, conciliar decisions, and pastoral discernment. Over time, different local churches developed divergent practices based on their geopolitical, cultural, and theological contexts. Thus, the Eastern Church has sometimes accepted heretics through baptism, chrismation (Dură 1981, 39-57), or even confession of faith (Mititelu 2019, 313-341), depending on the severity of their separation from ecclesial communion and the nature of their previous sacraments (Ware, 1993; Ramet, 2005).

Historical records reveal that councils and hierarchs adapted these practices to contemporary needs. The Council of Constantinople (1484), for example, after the fall of Constantinople, required the baptism of Latin converts, reflecting both ecclesiological caution and reaction to the Union of Florence. Yet in other times, such as the 17th-century Russian Church under Patriarch Nikon, chrismation was considered sufficient for certain Western Christians (Stăniloae 1997, 23–45; Runciman 1977, 34).

The fluidity of these practices points to a dynamic canonical consciousness that must always balance fidelity to tradition with the pastoral imperative of salvation. Modern Orthodox canonists such as Grigorios Papathomas (Papathomas 2008, 112–120) and Liviu Stan (Stan 1959, 56–58) have highlighted this tension between *akribeia* and *ikonomia*, showing that canonical exactness is not rigidity, and pastoral leniency is not arbitrariness.

Equally important is the role played by theological anthropology in shaping canonical policy. The understanding of the human person as bearer of the *imago Dei*, even in conditions of schism or heresy, allows the Church to exercise a form of restorative justice – one aimed at healing and reintegration rather than exclusion.

The issues raised by the regulations concerning the reception of heterodox Christians, as found in the *Kormchaia Kniga*, do not belong only to the past, but continue to influence contemporary Orthodox reflection in pastoral, missionary, and even ecumenical contexts. In a world marked by mobility, inter-confessional contact, and theological dialogue (Dură 1984, 692-706), the Orthodox Church is challenged to reinterpret her Tradition in light of new realities, without betraying its dogmatic content. In this sense, the *Kormchaia Kniga*, though compiled in a medieval context, may offer essential criteria for discernment.

One of the fundamental principles of Orthodox canonical Tradition, reaffirmed by Vlasios Fidas (Fidas 2002, 88–94), is that "sacramental validity is not judged merely formally, but in relation to ecclesial communion and the preservation of truth." This statement emphasizes the importance of understanding the Church not as an isolated institution, but as the living Body of Christ, in which grace is present where the fullness of faith and unity with the Eucharistic bishop exist.

Within this framework, the heterodox are not merely "foreign to grace" but persons situated in an incomplete relationship with the Church, yet still oriented toward its fullness. This type of approach allows for a pastoral reevaluation of canonical norms in the spirit of those already found in the *Kormchaia*, without contradicting Orthodox Tradition.

On the canonical level, this tension between *akribeia* and *oikonomia* is also visible in current debates within local Orthodox Churches. For example, in the United States, the practice of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) or the Antiochian Church allows, in certain cases, for the reception of Catholics and Protestants through chrismation, with the blessing of the local bishop—a form of applied *ikonomia* in the diaspora context (Erickson 1996, 101–105). This practice is grounded not in dogmatic relativism, but in the local application of principles already established in collections like the *Kormchaia Kniga*, adapted to a new context.

Another important author who analyzes this dynamic is Georges Florovsky, who affirms that "the real problem of the Church is not how exclusive it must be, but how it can remain faithful to the Truth while also being open to the reality of human fallenness and broken communion" (Florovsky 1972, 55). This vision balances dogmatic fidelity with pastoral responsibility, reaffirming that canonical norms are not ends in themselves, but means of ecclesial restoration.

In the same spirit, theologians such as Oliver O'Donovan (O'Donovan 1996, 215–223) and Paul Valliere (Valliere 2000, 150–153) speak of an "ethic of reconciliation," in which canonical discipline becomes a vehicle for communion rather than a static barrier. In this framework, the regulations of the *Kormchaia Kniga*, if reread with contemporary eyes, can become sources of pastoral wisdom rather than merely juridical relics.

It is noteworthy, finally, that many of the *Kormchaia* norms concerning the reception of heterodox imply an organic vision of unity: not juridical, but spiritual-sacramental. This model may offer a significant contribution to current inter-Orthodox and inter-confessional dialogues, especially in light of recent tensions surrounding the recognition of sacraments outside Orthodoxy (e.g., the debates regarding the rebaptism of Catholics in Greece or Russia).

In a time when the Church is called to bear witness amid a fragmented world, canonical collections such as the *Kormchaia Kniga* can serve as living points of reference if embraced in the spirit of the Fathers and applied with spiritual discernment. It is not the letter of the text that saves, but the Spirit that gives life and this Spirit remains ever present wherever the Church acts with love, truth, and balance.

The canonical and ecclesiological considerations derived from the *Kormchaia Kniga* reveal that the Orthodox Church has always sought to uphold the integrity of the faith while also exercising pastoral discernment through the principle of *ikonomia*. The canonical heritage preserved in this collection demonstrates a dynamic tension between strict fidelity to doctrinal truth (*akribeia*) and merciful application of canonical rules (*ikonomia*), which remains relevant in the Church's approach to heterodox Christians.

The synthesis of patristic, synodal (Dură 1999, 10-102), and canonical sources (Dură, Mititelu 2014, 10-65) found in the *Kormchaia* provides not only a legal framework but also a theological vision of ecclesial unity, grounded in sacramental realism and spiritual discernment. Authors such as Zizioulas, Florovsky, Valliere, and O'Donovan illustrate the way in which Orthodox theology integrates canonical rigor with an ethic of reconciliation and openness to divine grace.

In the contemporary world, marked by pluralism and fragmentation, this canonical tradition offers a living witness to the Church's capacity to respond faithfully and creatively to new challenges. Rather than functioning as a closed legalistic system, Orthodox canon law—as exemplified by the *Kormchaia Kniga*—points to the Church's mission of healing, restoration, and communion, affirming that the goal of discipline is not exclusion but salvation.

Conclusion. The analysis of the provisions regarding the reception of heterodox Christians in the Orthodox Church, as formulated in the *Kormchaia Kniga*, reveals the complexity and depth of Eastern canonical thought. Far from being a mere legal compilation, this collection reflects a living synthesis between fidelity to the Patristic Tradition and the need for pastoral application adapted to the concrete realities of both the medieval and modern eras. Through the balance between *akribeia* and *ikonomia*, the *Kormchaia* proposes a model of ecclesial discernment that places not only the rule but also the person, seeking salvation, at the center.

The regulations concerning the validity of sacraments, the conditions for reception into the Church, and the bishop's authority to apply well-grounded *ikonomia* provide a coherent theological framework that remains valuable today. The Church, through her canons, is not reduced to a disciplinary institution, but remains a community of grace that responds to every person's calling with love, truth, and responsibility.

The historical importance of the *Kormchaia Kniga* is doubled by its influence in the Romanian space, where, through the Slavic and Romanian *pravilas*, its canonical-theological principles shaped ecclesial practice up to the modern era. Its reception in the normative documents of the Romanian principalities and in the thought of contemporary Orthodox theologians proves the perennial relevance of a tradition that does not remain trapped in the letter of the law but opens toward its fulfillment in Spirit and Truth.

In the current context of confessional pluralism, migration, and ecumenical challenges, the rereading of the *Kormchaia Kniga*'s provisions is not merely an academic endeavor but a pastoral necessity. The Orthodox Tradition, rooted in revealed truth and enlightened by salvific *ikonomia*, can offer living and balanced responses to the contemporary person who seeks communion with Christ.

Thus, the legacy of the *Kormchaia* remains an example of canonical wisdom, where doctrinal rigor and pastoral mercy do not exclude one another but embrace in a pedagogy of salvation. In this pedagogy, the Church is called to remain faithful to the Truth, yet always ready to receive the one who is lost, “not unto condemnation, but unto eternal life”.

In light of the foregoing, we may affirm that the regulations regarding the reception of heterodox Christians, as found in the *Kormchaia Kniga*, express not merely a juridical concern for ecclesiastical order but a profoundly theological vision of restoring lost communion. Orthodox ecclesiology does not operate by the logic of definitive exclusion but by the dynamic of return, reintegration, and transfiguration through grace. In this perspective, canons are not closed borders, but spiritually ordered gates through which the non-Orthodox person is invited, in freedom and repentance, to the fullness of life in Christ.

Through its subtle balance of *akribeia* and *ikonomia*, the *Kormchaia Kniga* expresses the Orthodox ethos of “truth with mercy” and “justice with discernment.” This balance is not the result of a theology of compromise, but the fruit of ecclesial wisdom drawn from the very life of the Church. Dogmatic truth is preserved with rigor, but its application is mediated by a spiritual pedagogy in which the bishop, as shepherd and judge, is called to serve not a dead rule, but the living salvation of the concrete person.

This deep, personalist, and soteriological dimension of canonical discipline remains relevant today in a world marked by dogmatic confusion, religious relativism, and spiritual disorientation. Orthodox Tradition, through the legacy of collections such as the *Kormchaia*, can bear witness to another path: that of truth lived in love, of discipline lived in mercy, of unity sought not through coercion, but through sincere conversion.

Faithful to the spirit of the Fathers, the Orthodox Church is called today to rediscover and harness these sources of canonical discernment in order to respond not only to juridical questions but above all to the contemporary human thirst for meaning and communion. The *Kormchaia Kniga* thus offers not merely an archive of norms but a model of thought and ministry, where canons become instruments of *ikonomia*, and *ikonomia*—the face of a living, humble, and salvific Church.

In the radiant tradition of the Orthodox Church, canon law has never been a mere legal scaffold but a spiritual roadmap—a pedagogy of salvation woven into the very fabric of ecclesial life. As the holy canons are not ends in themselves but luminous signposts on the path toward deification (*theosis*), their application must always reflect the spirit of the Incarnation: truth enfleshed in love, justice transfigured by mercy. The *Kormchaia Kniga*, in its majestic synthesis of doctrinal fidelity and pastoral wisdom, invites us to gaze beyond the letter of the law, into the living Tradition where Christ Himself is the fulfillment of every ordinance.

Following the wisdom of the Holy Fathers—of Basil the Great, whose canons breathed the spirit of pastoral discernment; of John Chrysostom, who taught that love is the highest law; and of Photios the Great, who shaped canonical thought with luminous clarity - we are reminded that the Church is not a tribunal but a spiritual hospital, where the physician is also a father, and the rule is administered not with cold precision but with trembling compassion.

Thus, the Orthodox Church, clothed in the beauty of holiness (*Psalms 96:9*), walks the royal path between rigor and mercy, guided not by human convenience but by the Holy Spirit, who vivifies the Body of Christ in every age. And it is this Spirit that speaks still today through the *Kormchaia Kniga* - not as a relic of the past, but as a voice echoing the eternal Word: “Come unto Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (*Matthew 11:28*).

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