

Was Soloviev Catholicus?

Received September 7, 2023

Revised September 19, 2023

Accepted September 20, 2023

Keywords

Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev,
Catholicism, Christian
spirituality

The reunification of the Catholic and the Orthodox churches was one of the major objectives in the life and work of the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev. It inspired virtually all of his writings, and also marked deeply his own religious discernment with regards to the universality of the Christian body – the church. This text surveys the question of Soloviev’s ecclesial affiliation both on the level of his theological ideas on the status of the relation between Catholicism and Orthodoxy and in the sphere of the steps in his personal history concerning his membership in either of Christian denominations. As the study points out, Soloviev’s ecclesial affiliation needs to be interpreted in inclusive rather than exclusive terms.

1 Introduction

Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev (1853–1900), one of the great intellectual figures and the founder of the modern religious philosophy in the 19th-century Russia, was a passionate advocate of the ecclesial reconciliation between Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodoxy [1]. In his work *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle* Soloviev presented a powerful apologetic of Rome as the center of the universal Church, and for many years he maintained lively contacts with Catholic leaders in European countries, especially in France and in Croatia. Based on his Catholic sympathies and his zeal for the restoration of ecclesial unity, Soloviev was already during his lifetime accused in Russia of transferring into the Roman Catholic Church. After his death, this has become a point of ongoing controversy, in which scholars representing the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church have claimed Soloviev as a full member of their respective ecclesial bodies [2]. The question that still lacks a complete answer is: *fuítne Soloviev Catholicus* [3] – “was Soloviev a Catholic”?



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2 Soloviev's Catholic Convictions

In 1883, Soloviev exchanged a series of letters with the Croatian Catholic bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer (1815–1905), a leading intellectual figure of Catholic Slavs in the Balkan part of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy and promoter of Catholic-Orthodox reunion. In one of the letters to bishop Strossmayer written as a memorandum on the position of Russian Orthodox believers in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, Soloviev explained at length his ecclesial standpoint. According to Soloviev (1966, 380–386), the Russian Orthodox Church in the area of dogmatic teaching preserved faithfully the doctrine of the first seven ecumenical councils.

Although Russian Orthodoxy did not embrace the more recent dogmatic developments of the Catholic Church, it had added nothing contrary to Catholic doctrine (Lichner 2019, 49). Any heterodox or heretical propositions opposed to the Catholic Church and its teaching made supposedly by the Russian Orthodox Church were “never confirmed by any higher authority.” Hence, Soloviev held that these were no more than opinions by private individuals comparable to the conflicting unofficial teachings of theological schools over the long history of the Catholic Church.

It was from this ecclesiological standpoint that Soloviev wrote his profession of Catholic faith that was published in the introduction of his work *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle* (2003, 30):

As a member of the true and venerable Eastern or Greco-Russian Orthodox Church which does not speak through anti-canonical synod nor through the employees of the secular power, but through the utterance of her great Fathers and Doctors, I recognize as supreme judge in matters of religion him who has been recognized as such by St. Irenaeus, St. Dionysius the Great, St. Athanasius the Great, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril, St. Flavian, the Blessed Theodoret, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Theodore of the Studium, St. Ignatius, etc. – namely, the Apostle Peter, who lives in his successors and who has not heard in vain our Lord's words: 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church;' 'Strengthen thy brethren;' 'Feed My sheep, feed My lambs.'

Soloviev presented this statement under a personal conviction of the fundamental unity of faith between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. He was convinced that their schism did not impair the doctrine, sacraments, and the moral teachings of the Orthodox Church; and, that their

corporate reunion was indeed possible. Hence, while Soloviev defended in his 1886 treatise on *Dogmatic Development* the new Catholic developments of doctrine as the legitimate part of the Christian doctrine, he did not consider these new developments an *essential* obstacle for the unity between the Catholic and the Orthodox Church. As Soloviev elaborated (1966, 352):

The true essence of the Church does not depend on greater or lesser progress in the 'definition' and 'formulation' of dogmatic 'details,' but depends on the presence of apostolic succession, on the orthodox faith in Christ as perfect God and perfect man, and finally on the plenitude of the sacraments.

In sum, Soloviev held that one was able to practice the Catholic faith in its fullness within the bounds of the Russian Orthodox Church, praying for the restoration of the full and visible unity with the Catholic Church that had been lost due to the schism of the 11th century.

In this regard, Soloviev defended his position in a polemical article of 1886 published in Croatia [4]:

My personal views on Catholicism can be of no value, but the fact that such views are tolerated by the Eastern Church and that I have not been excommunicated by this Church is important to a certain degree. If an Anglican, for example, spoke publicly in this manner about Catholicism, he certainly could not remain a member of the Anglican Church. A nightingale does not create a spring. But if this nightingale withstands the climate of the north without dying from cold, it is certain that winter has passed, that one can have more confidence in the sky, and that no one should stay indoors any longer.

As Sergei M. Soloviev emphasized in his biography (2000, 304), Soloviev repeatedly refuted suggestions that he formally entered the Roman Catholic Church; he saw such suggestions stemming from a narrow notion of Catholic unity as uniformity with the Latin-rite Catholic Church. He believed that becoming a member of the Roman Catholic Church was not imperative for him as a member of the Russian Orthodox Church; moreover, such a step would have practically terminated his ecumenical work on account of the prevalent anti-Roman bias and suppressive state control over religious matters in Russia.

3 Soloviev's Catholic Profession and Last Rites

Living as a Russian Orthodox believer publicly professing Catholic views in tsarist Russia was a severe test for Soloviev's conviction about the fundamental unity of faith shared by the communions. He was a target of much calumny in the press, while his own attempts at response by publishing his religious views were barred by the official censorship. On account of his frank criticism of the Orthodox Church, Soloviev regularly faced the threat of criminal prosecution by the Russian government. Soloviev confronted the Russian Orthodox Church neither on the points of doctrine, nor sacramental worship; his challenge concerned strictly the Orthodox hierarchy on account of its alliance with the civil government.

Soloviev presented this challenge most forcefully in *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle*, where he claimed that the Russian Orthodox Church preserved the apostolic succession and the validity of the sacraments “despite the absence of any lawful Church government.” As he further elaborated (2003, 51): “All our bishops are nominated in a manner absolutely forbidden and condemned by the third canon of the seventh Ecumenical Council, a canon which in the eyes of our own Church can never have been abrogated (for lack of subsequent ecumenical councils).”

Soloviev's alienation from the Russian Orthodox hierarchy reached its zenith when he was denied the sacraments in Orthodox churches, apparently on the basis of a directive by the Orthodox authorities. Information about the existence of such a directive was provided by Nikolai Tolstoi, a former Russian Orthodox priest who under the influence of Soloviev's religious philosophy became a Catholic. As Soloviev's nephew commented in his biography (2000, 434), “This fact exerted a strong influence on Soloviev's psychology and definitely placed him in *statu belli* with the Greco-Russian Church.”

In February 1896, Soloviev made a Catholic profession of faith to the same Fr. Tolstoi, and received the sacraments from Fr. Tolstoi at a celebration of the Eastern Catholic rite liturgy. An account of this event was published by Nikolai Tolstoi in 1910 in the French magazine *L'Universe* and the Russian magazine *Russkoe slovo*. The event was later confirmed by two eyewitnesses, Princess Elena Vasil'evna Dolgorukova and Dmitry Sergeevich Novsky. Tolstoi had to flee Russia soon after the event to escape imprisonment. Soloviev, on his part, did not subsequently avail himself of the opportunity to attend sacramental worship with any of the Western rite Catholic communities in Russia. As Gregory

Glazov has suggested (1997, 133), Soloviev “suffered his ostracism in the Orthodox Church as a martyrdom to his cause of liberating Orthodoxy through unification with Rome.” Evidently, he only received the sacraments again with the last rites on his deathbed from a Russian Orthodox priest, whom he explicitly requested to visit, rather than from a Catholic priest of foreign nationality.

In regard to the controversy regarding Soloviev's ecclesial affiliation, Catholic authors have considered his profession of Catholic faith before Fr. Tolstoi as evidence of Soloviev's formal entrance into the Catholic Church; Orthodox writers have emphasized Soloviev's explicit wish to be administered last rites by the Russian Orthodox priest. Catholic writers have insisted that according to Catholic sacramental discipline, Soloviev, as a Catholic, was allowed to receive the last rites from an Orthodox priest due to the circumstances of his imminent death. Orthodox writers have argued that in death Soloviev repented his former Catholic profession of faith. This supposition was based on the testimony by Rev. S. A. Beliaev, the priest who administered the last rites to Soloviev, who in reaction to Tolstoi's testimony on Soloviev's reception into the Catholic Church published an account about Soloviev's last confession in *Moskovskie vedomosti* (Ru. *Moscow News*) in 1910, under the pseudonym N. Kolosov. According to Beliaev, Soloviev admitted that he was wrong on “a dogmatic issue” – not specified explicitly – in the controversy with an Orthodox priest who several years ago had withheld the sacraments from him (Mastiliak 2003, 124).

It can only be guessed what constituted the “dogmatic issue” that Soloviev disowned when receiving the last rites. As the account of the events in Soloviev's biography suggests (2000, 510–522), this issue most likely involved Soloviev's conviction that he maintained his membership in the Orthodox Church even after his formal submission to Rome. At any case, suggestions that Soloviev might have repented any of his Catholic tenets at the end of his life – or his profession of the Catholic faith to Fr. Tolstoi – seem to omit the meaning of Soloviev's martyrdom-testimony in abstaining from sacraments in the final years of his life, as well as the total orientation of his religious work, his legacy, and his mind of a poet and philosopher of universal unity.

4 Was Soloviev a Catholic?

After collecting all pieces of information regarding Soloviev's attitude to the Catholic and the Orthodox churches in the final years of his life and his decisions in receiving sacraments, one can conclude the following: an interpretation of his ecclesial standpoint should undervalue neither Soloviev's Catholic profession of faith in 1896 nor his decision to receive the last rites from the Orthodox priest. The detailed account of both events in the biography by Soloviev's nephew supports the view that Soloviev carefully considered his steps in both situations. His premonition of approaching death intensified his quest for an inner reconciliation of his personal relationship to the Catholic and the Orthodox churches. The end of his life can be seen as a manifestation of this last achievement of reconciliation, hence Soloviev's final statement, indeed, his religious testament, about the ecclesial question in his last work *Three Conversations*. Here the desired end of ecumenical reconciliation is in this work only accomplished by a handful of the Catholic, Orthodox and protestant believers in the face of an apocalyptic catastrophe at the end of times.

Both sides in the argument on Soloviev's ecclesial affiliation are thus partially true. The claim by Russian authors that Soloviev never left the Orthodox communion is valid, insofar as to the end of his life, Soloviev maintained his conviction about the Catholicity of the Orthodox Church. His profession of the Catholic faith followed by reception of the sacraments from an Eastern-rite Catholic priest was apparently the result of Soloviev's attempt to practice his Catholic faith at a time when he was barred from receiving the sacraments by the official Orthodox leadership which he had defied. In this instance, Soloviev simply decided to ignore and circumvent the Orthodox clergy by receiving sacraments from a validly ordained Russian priest who had been accepted into the Catholic Church. According to Mastiliak (2003, 141–142), Soloviev was at the time even involved in discussions led by Catholic-oriented Orthodox priests and believers in Russia about the possibility of erecting a hierarchy of Russian Catholic clergy within the Russian Orthodox Church; these proposals bore no result, however.

The Catholic authors, e.g., Glazov (1997, 129) are also right when pointing out that Soloviev's profession of the Catholic faith can be recognized as making him objectively – canonically – a full member of the Catholic Church. This constitutes a fact even if Soloviev's submission to Rome involved no abjuration of Orthodoxy on his part, and he personally believed in having maintained his place in the Orthodox Church as an Eastern-rite or Russian Catholic. It is likewise true that according to the Catholic discipline, the reception of last rites by the Orthodox priest would not impair the status of a member of the Catholic Church.

Soloviev's ecclesial position was shaped by his ecumenical work. He defined himself as a Catholic, a member of the universal Church, via the Russian Orthodox Church. This is apparently the content of what might be called his religious testament – the act of his Catholic profession of faith in conjunction with his reception of last rites from an Orthodox priest. If, in fact, the “dogmatic issue” that had cost Soloviev the sacraments in the Orthodox Church was based upon his conviction to remain eligible for receiving the Orthodox sacraments after his formal profession of Catholicism – as general speculation has granted, then his admission of being wrong during his last confession would contain a touch of irony. By having allowed as much as that he had erred about the possibility of intercommunion in the Orthodox Church, Soloviev surely did not retract anything from his Catholic beliefs. Rather, he merely indirectly confirmed that he was indeed a Catholic, which – as he was sure – was not to be an obstacle for receiving sacraments in the extraordinary circumstances of imminent death.

Soloviev's “religious testament” should be interpreted in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. It affirmed *both* the Catholic *and* the Orthodox Church in its fundamental unity of the Church universal. One then might agree with Ján Komorovský (2004, 462) that, in a sense, Soloviev succeeded in bridging the Catholic and the Orthodox churches in himself.

Acknowledgement

The study is a partial outcome of the projects VEGA no. 2/0015/22 *Reception of Biblical Family Terminology and Motives in Slavic Cultural Ambience* and APVV-20-0130 *Biblical Text and its Terminological Discourses in Modern Colloquial Language: The Example of the Pauline Letters*.

Notes

- [1] The name Владимир Сергеевич Соловьёв is variously transcribed from the Russian Cyrillic into the Roman alphabet. For all Russian names and words, this study uses the modified Library of Congress transliteration system (ALA-LC) with omission of diacritical marks and ligatures common in academic studies. The ALA-LC system is used with two exceptions: first, in the case of Soloviev, “i” is substituted for the apostrophe indicating the Russian soft “ь.” This usage respects the transcription of Soloviev’s name in his original French publications and has remained its most prevalent form in international literature; accordingly, “Soloviev” (rather than “Solov’ev”) is used consistently in the main body of the text. Second, in Russian names and surnames, the suffix “-ий” is transliterated as “-y” in accord with popular English usage (thus “Dimitry” rather than “Dimitrii”; “Lossky” rather than “Losskii”). However, in the footnote references of the translations of works by Soloviev and other Russian authors, the different choices of transcription by publishers are retained. This explains occasional discrepancies in spelling of Russian names between the footnotes and the main text.
- [2] Among Orthodox theologians, Soloviev’s entrance into the Catholic Church was denied by Nikolai Berdiaev (1992, 244) and Sergei L. Frank (1974, 23). Other Russian Orthodox writers as Mochul’sky (1951, 169) and Strémooukhoff (1980, 259) considered it unlikely. Among Catholic authors, Soloviev’s conversion was maintained by his nephew Sergei Soloviev (2000, 436–444), Michel D’Herbigny (2007, 26), Mastiliak (2003, 111–142), and Heinrich Falk (1949, 435).
- [3] These words come from the Latin title of the doctoral dissertation *Fuitne Vladimirus Soloviev catholicus: Inquisitione in eus vitam et personam* (La. *Was Vladimir Soloviev a Catholic or not: A Study of His Life and Personality*) at the Papal Oriental Institute in Rome by the Eastern-rite Catholic priest Ján Mastiliak in 1941. The dissertation was published in a Slovak translation in the posthumous anthology of Mastiliak’s writings (2003) *Etika Božieho kráľovstva* (Sl. “The Ethics of God’s Kingdom”).
- [4] The text is quoted as an appendix in Strémooukhoff (1980, 337). The reference to *nightingale* (Ru. “Solovei”) is a play on words in the original Russian as it sounds similar to Soloviev.

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