

BOOK REVIEWS

†Dr. Irineu POPA, Mitropolitul Olteniei, *Biserica în actualitate sau actualitatea Bisericii (The Church in the Present or the Actuality of the Church)*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2018, 552 p.

In the Centenary Year, an exceptional book was published at the prestigious Romanian Academy Publishing House, signed by His Eminence, Dr. Irineu Popa, Metropolitan of Oltenia. He is an honorary member of the Romanian Academy with a solid theological formation acquired in prestigious institutions in the West and a dogmatic theologian with an integrative and unitary vision on theology. In this work His Excellency Dr. Irineu offers an exceptional ecclesiological synthesis and an accomplishment full of erudition of the three syntheses which he gave to the Orthodox theology over time: the triadological - *La Personne et la communion des personnes dans la theologie de Saint Basile le Grand* (Paris, 1991), *Le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité dans la communion des Personnes* (Craiova, 2003) - the Christological - *Iisus Hristos este același, ieri și azi și în veac*, Craiova 2010; *Iconomia plinirii vremilor în Iisus Hristos*, Craiova, 2014 and the Christological-eschatological one – *Așteptând pe Cel ce este și Cel ce vine Atotțiitorul*, Craiova, 2017.

He is familiar with the pre-Nicean theology, that of the Cappadocians and of saints Maximus the Confessor, Simeon the New Theologist and Gregory Palamas, the Philokalic Fathers, as well as with the theological syntheses of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. After a century of inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian debates on ecclesiology, in the context of the expansion of sciences, biotechnologies and secular religions, indifference and a secularized and globalized society, His Eminence Irineu reminds us the topicality of the Church with theological strength and argumentation and that *the Church is present* in any historical period. He invites us to a theological exercise of *spiritual reason and sense* of what the Church is and especially who the Church is and her vocation and mission in history. From the perspective of nature and mission, the

Church not only uncovers the mystery of the Kingdom in the personal-community dimension of those who are a part of her, but she also remains *in the present* through the Trinity's work and presence full of grace, being the corner stone of creation - man and the cosmos and of the history of mankind. While assuming and expressing the biblical and patristic vision of the Church, as well as the various specific contributions of the neo-patristic synthesis, the core of the ecclesiological thinking of the erudite hierarch revolves around the theological-mystagogical thinking of Saint Maximus the Confessor. Through its extension and implications, the synthesis of St. Maximus that is Christologically, anthropologically and cosmologically articulated, assumes and exceeds both the theological principles of the dogma of Chalcedon and the Origenic-Evagrian and Areopagitic theology on ecclesiology. The ecclesiological balance of Saint Maximus that is theologically, liturgically and sacramentally centred on the Person of Christ, makes the Church a liturgical centre of creation in order to transfigure man and the cosmos. This fully transpires from the content of this ecclesiological treaty, the entire creation seen as man and cosmos - being called to become a Church.

The title is an inspired word game and it captures an entire issue that the author carries and deepens within the theological ideas he puts in motion in the seven chapters. The book *Biserica în actualitate sau actualitatea Bisericii* expresses a threefold theological purpose: a) to provide a synthesis of Orthodox ecclesiological teachings; b) to guide all our fathers and brothers to a more intense experience of the Church teaching; c) to provide an opportunity for reflection on God's will regarding the unity of the Church and its mission in the world. This threefold purpose of the work reveals a unitary view of the author on the theme, a unity between theology-experience and testimony, as well as a clear preoccupation of the theological renewal and ecclesial experience of Christians.

The theme of the *Church* is theologically anchored in the Trinity and in Christ, according to the testimony of Scripture and Tradition. It is evaluated and expressed diachronically and synchronously, from the perspective of the Revelation and of the dogmatic, experimental and spiritual Tradition of Orthodoxy. The central premise of addressing the theme is its importance because ecclesiology "constitutes the point of convergence and harmony of contemporary theological thought". There is also the author's desire to present a current synthesis on this theme by overcoming the unilateral

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accents: ecclesiological Christomonism, ecclesiological pneumatomonism, institution or event, divine or human, historical or eschatological, hierarchy or people, authority or freedom, local or universal, ontology or personalism. In this sense, from the beginning, the Trinity is said to be the “source” of the life and existence of the Church, a dynamic, personal, communitarian, working, supportive, and deifying presence in the Church. The author emphasizes the perichoretic relationship between Christ and the Spirit showing that we cannot speak of the Mysterious Body of the Lord without the presence and work of the Holy Spirit within him as life.

His Eminence identifies the first bases of ecclesiology in the Holy Scriptures and this is remarkable for a dogmatist. The interpretation of ecclesiological biblical texts is carried out in the context of Church Tradition, a methodological reality expressing the unity between biblical exegesis and current dogmatic thinking. Moreover, this approach expresses the functional unity of the salvation economy accomplished in Christ, the Logos made man, a unity between the Prophets-Apostles-Fathers which scholastic and modern theology often either fragmented or ignored. By accomplishing such a unitary-integrative and paradoxical methodology, the content of the theological investigations that the author expresses bears the mark of a living, experimental, liturgical-sacramental theology, an overcoming of the abstractism and dissolutions of medieval scholasticism, and a reconfiguration of the ecclesiological issues in the biblical, patristic, liturgical-sacramental and missionary spirit. The erudite bishop expresses the doctrine, spirituality and worship of the Church in a theological organicity, centred in the Liturgy by deepening the teaching about the Church, while affirming the inside and operable unity between Church, Scripture and Tradition. We believe that all these methodological exercises are related to the restoration of the present theology in the patristic spirit, and to therapeutics of the current theological-dogmatic discourse.

In this paper, Metropolitan Irineu captures the richness of the theological and experimental meanings that ecclesiology involves. From this perspective, he does not analyze ecclesiology separate from other dogmatic and missionary aspects, but in congruence, convergence and interdependence with them. For example, in ecclesiology, all the essential aspects of Dogmatics are gathered like a deep cloud of meanings, from triadology, christology, pneumatology, anthropology, cosmology to soteriology, sacramental theology and eschatology. Thus, in this paper the

professor of Dogmatics seeks not only an exposition of ecclesiology in its various classical aspects but also a theological, missionary, ecumenical and even apologetic identification of its implications in the history of the world, in the present society, and especially in the current consciousness of the Christians.

The expression of ideas is characterized by a dynamic and logic perichoresis of unity in distinction. Through the theological expressions, the author seeks to emphasize the strength of the concrete, communal, living, and practical ecclesiology present in the collective and particular consciousness of Christians and at the same time in a constant confessional, spiritual state, present in the complex agenda of the current world. The theological ideas of the author do not follow any plan of the world and of the history understood autonomously, but follow God's *oeconomy* to the world and man fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Ecclesiology is deepened in relation to the *oeconomy* of salvation achieved in Christ, that the Church already experiences the Mystery of the Kingdom in the Holy Spirit through. The ecclesiology of Metropolitan Irineu not only transcends the defensive and uncorrelated aspects of the Dogmatics textbooks of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, but also provides the fundamental milestones of a personal-community experience centred on the communion of the Trinity, in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. The Church's actuality consists in the inexhaustible power she has in Christ and the Holy Spirit to inspire the world, to heal and perfect the creation - man and the cosmos – and to keep the whole creation in a realism of communion and union without confusion with the eternal God.

Very concretely, the hierarch expresses the theme of *authority in the Church* in correspondence with the freedom it explains in direct connection with the Person of Christ as authority derived from the interior of humility and ministry. In this perspective, he maintains the balance between subjective and objective, avoiding unilateral traps that have generated theological consequences in the history of Christianity. Focusing on the issue of the relationship between clergy and lay people in the paradoxical perspective of the Trinitarian life, Metropolitan Irineu responds to another delicate theme that has led to discussions and interpretations with major consequences for Christian life. Authority is the gift of the Trinity, on the lines of love and freedom of responsibility and sacrifice. Such an understanding of authority in the Church goes beyond the exteriorism

of any law in the postmodern context of deconstruction of any authority from institutional and state authority to objectively-revealing one. It also goes beyond the exacerbated individualism that is specific to the consumer society and invites the present man to the therapeutic awareness of his personal encounter with God in communion, on the coordinates of freedom, responsibility, self-giving and love inside the community.

The author kaleidoscopically presents the main ecclesiological “theories” of the twentieth century, from the eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicholas Afanasiev and the ecclesiology of the communion of Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas to the implications of the concept of “openness” of Father Dumitru Stăniloae and the implications of the relationship between ethnicity and universality, so present in the context of the globalization of the world and the new Christian configuration of Europe and the diaspora. The Erudite hierarch begins this chapter on ethnicity and universality with a remark which synthesizes the entire theological issue: *if the basis of the Church’s existence is the Most Holy Trinity, it means that the Church can be organized according to the territorial and ethnic principle and therefore the Church is local and universal*. The conclusion is overwhelming, in line with the new challenges and events within Orthodoxy: “Even if some autocephalous Orthodox Churches emphasize ethnical tendencies, we have to keep the unity of Lord’s Mysterious Body and the authority of the patriarch of Constantinople as the first among the equal. Of course, the Ecumenical Patriarchate must extend its synodality if it does not want its honorific «primacy» to be challenged. It must be emphasized that primacy is a divine gift, but also a work to be done with difficulty”(p. 460).

In the theological analysis of Metropolitan Irineu, there are also aspects of the so-called Eucharistic ecclesiology, a theory that marked the Orthodox ecclesiology of the twentieth century, generating both a renewed spirit and many debates and criticisms until today. After a detailed presentation of the various theological and practical aspects of the Eucharistic ecclesiology and of the various positions that the theologians of the 20th century have expressed, the author draws his theological position following the theological balance of Father Dumitru Stăniloae and noting the implications of this theory for the personal-community and liturgical-spiritual life of Christians. After these theological reflections of crucial and current importance for the functionality, vocation and purpose of the Church in history, cosmos and human life, the author presents the complex

ecclesiological problem of inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian encounters based on the art of dialogue. Stressing the importance of inter-Christian dialogue with theological clarity, by assuming a hermeneutics we can more appropriately understand the new religious and ecclesial realities of Europe through, Metropolitan Irineu draws an Orthodox position vis-à-vis the Second Vatican Council and its implications on an ecclesiological level. The Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church of Crete in 2016 is approached in a theological, methodological and practical perspective. The author makes a significant contribution to the understanding of its premises and purpose, and of some syntagms that have led to debates, in the context of the necessity of synodal functionality at the level of Orthodoxy and of various disputes made by centrifugal groups within the Orthodox Churches that are not initiated theologically.

Being the result of a rigorous dogmatic thinking and a nuanced, contextualized and open dialogical argumentation, the work *Biserica în actualitate sau actualitatea Bisericii* is a culmination of the ecclesiological treatises in Romanian theology and a veritable guide in the patristic, modern and actual ecclesiological thinking. The practical, missionary, and apologetic conclusions of the research are as many answers to controversial issues as directions the new generations of theologians can build new interpretative depths of the revelation on, about the nature, mission, and healing power of the Church through Christ in the Holy Spirit. In the context of a world characterized as post-Christian, post-ecclesial and post-human in which the foundations of modernity are placed under the mark of interrogation, and the objectivity of Revelation is replaced by subjectivism and hyperindividualism, with the horizon of immanent gnosis and religions, ideologically pulverized in thousands systems and conceptions, generating colossal mutations of a social, economic, cultural and religious nature, His Eminence Irineu reminds us of the Mystery of the Church, the icon of the kingdom and the *topos* of our perfection in Christ.

The book *Biserica în actualitate sau actualitatea Bisericii* is the ultimate contribution of the theological tetralogy that Metropolitan Irineu offers to the present theology, the unity of these impressive works being centred on the Person of Christ, the Logos made man, whom the love and work of the Holy Trinity is revealed to the whole creation through. By these contributions of major importance to the theology, mission, apology and Church life, the Eminence Irineu remains one of the most prolific

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and well-known present dogmatist theologians. His work is shaped as an impressive theological synthesis of biblical-patristic inspiration from the beginning of the 21st century.

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