

Education, a Permanent Priority of the Church

From its very beginnings, the Church sought to develop an educational system capable of responding to the multiple challenges it had to face in the field of religion and morality: clarifying, systematizing and transmitting the teaching of faith, delimiting aspects of morality, establishing a canonical code, etc. “From a doctrinal, individualistic, universal, and missionary point of view, Christianity was a teaching religion, and therefore it had to have a religious education”¹. The Church’s eagerness to proclaim its values to the world generated a strong reaction from the supporters of pagan religions, a challenge that was answered not by an comfortable retreat from the world and transformation of the new faith into an esoteric realm, but by an apologetics that aimed to defend and promote Christian values.

In the first Christian century, the difficulty of conducting religious education came from the lack of educators and the insufficient spread of biblical texts necessary to deepen the teaching. Regarding this last aspect, we must mention the unequal distribution of the books that make up the biblical canon today: “In its flourishing beginnings, the New Testament Church lived totally without holy books, even without the Gospels: these were formed only during the first century, and were constituted in the canon, as were the apostolic epistles, much later”². The special charisms of the apostolic period, including speaking in tongues and the power to work miracles, helped overcome many difficulties in the spreading Christianity. Later, however, in order to receive Baptism, it was necessary for those who took this step to know the necessary, minimal and essential elements of the new religion. This is how the foundations of the Christian educational system are laid.

The first teachers of the Church were equally concerned with their own religious experience and the correct presentation of the doctrine,

¹ Teodor M. POPESCU, *Biserica și cultura*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 82.

² Sergiu BULGAKOFF, *Ortodoxia*, Sibiu, 1933, p. 26.

both of which having a decisive role in educational and missionary terms. These aspects are seen by St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher from an eschatological perspective, which explicitly projects religious education against the background of eternity: “Our task is to give everyone the opportunity to examine our lives and teachings, so that the punishment of those who despise us, of whom some would be wrongly blinded by passion, does not fall on us; and it is your duty, on hearing all this, to show yourselves to be, as reason demands, righteous judges”³. In addition, St. Gregory the Great speaks about the relationship between moral behavior and the ideas transmitted by the Christian teacher, thus reaffirming the value of learning from the experience of the one who is permanently seen as a model by his disciples: “Preachers must show the believers the way they must follow rather by their pure life than by words”⁴. The priority of the personal model of Christian missionaries, which was a decisive element in the success of promoting the new teaching among the heathen peoples, proved equally important after the generalization of Christianity in the sixth and seventh centuries.

The role of teachers in Christian religious education became increasingly important as new historical stages came. In the apostolic age there was a “triad” of servants of the Word: apostles, prophets, teachers (I Cor 12:28). If in the proper sense the apostolic and the prophetic activity ceased quite early, that of the *didascaloi* or teachers was maintained, and they became true professionals of doctrine, indispensable for church life. They continued their mission uninterruptedly and contributed through their experience, insights and efforts to the adaptation of the Christian message in the context of different historical epochs and to the permanent modernization of the theoretical models and institutional structures of Christian religious education. Socially, the activity of these teachers was a basic element in the subsequent development of a state-supported public education.

The need to train catechumens preparing for baptism, and later Christians, led to the establishment of an extensive educational-religious system, called catechesis. The development of such a program has

³ Sf. IUSTIN MARTIRUL ȘI FILOSOFUL, “Apologia întâi în favoarea creștinilor”, în: *Apologeti de limbă greacă*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997, p. 35.

⁴ *Cartea regulei pastorale*, Sibiu, Editura Centrului mitropolitan, 1987, p. 207.

Education, a Permanent Priority of the Church

contributed to the clarification and systematization of the sources of Christian teaching, to the identification of some principles and didactic methods, highlighted the need for a special training of educators. The catechetical action of the Church contributed, on the one hand, to a faster spread of the biblical text in all Christian communities and developing by the Holy Fathers of a set of apologetic and educational writings, and on the other hand, led to the organization of catechetical schools in which the educators and the intellectual elite of Christianity were trained.

Christian education has sought to provide a valid and permanent alternative to the value system extant in society. Father Professor Ilarion V. Felea considers that, even in the educational system supported by the state, the Christian religion and the education promoted by it have contributed to a new understanding of morality, art, philosophy. Christian religion and education have also succeeded in renewing a chaotic world, “by awakening personal responsibilities in all people, in all functions”⁵. The Christian instruction, having a holistic character, addresses the personality as a whole, but also the whole human existence:

“It thus contributes in a very special way to the development of the person’s cognitive potential, formulating the most complex and difficult problems of humanity (life, death, immortality). Especially during adolescence, its influence can be decisive for the construction of the educational ideal, offering relevant models”⁶.

Religious education can provide, at all ages, an essential support in the continuous definition and redefinition of one’s own ideals of religious and social life, which are in fact steps towards achieving the Christian ideal of personal existence.

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⁵ *Religia culturii*, Arad, Editura Episcopiei Ortodoxe Române, 1994, p. 16.

⁶ Elena DIMITRIU-TIRON, *Dimensiunile educației contemporane*, Iași, Editura Institutul European, 2005, p. 75.