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Biblical-Theological Values in the Thought and Work of St. Cyril of Alexandria

Vasile-Doru FER

Vasile-Doru FER

“Episcop Dr. Vasile Coman” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Oradea, Romania
E-mail: doru_fer@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study aims to address, first of all, the context and the way in which Christian teaching spread in the city of Alexandria of Egypt, and this from the simple reasoning that is based on the command of the Savior to “...*teach all nations...*” (Matt 28,19), a command reiterated before His Ascension into Heaven: “... *and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1, 8).

The value of these commandments was such that the spread of Christianity also took place on the territory of Africa, more specifically in the city of Alexandria, through the missionary preaching of St Mark the Evangelist, an activity which was carried forward by many outstanding representatives of patristic literature, among whom we recall St Cyril, the twenty-fourth bishop to be enthroned on the archiepiscopal throne of St Mark the Apostle, i.e. of the city of Alexandria.

In fact, if we recall the biography and the work of the illustrious Alexandrian hierarch, we will see that it oscillates between the defence of the right faith and its confession, the theological values exposed in his works as well as the life dedicated to the Church and to the service of Christ, in which he suffered, fought and triumphed as a true “hostage” of Christ, will help us to shape his perspective, his priorities and his deep theological thinking.

Keywords

Saint Cyril of Alexandria, biblical values, apology, confession, teaching elements

I. Introduction

In the introductory part of this study I intend to make a retrospective and reflective analysis of the historical, cultural and religious context of the founding of the Church of Alexandria, the propagation of Christianity here through St. Mark the Evangelist, and the relevance of biblical-theological thought in the work and concerns of St. Cyril of Alexandria.

In this scholarly endeavour, I will take as my starting point the research as well as previous conclusions that have been made and reached by certain biblical scholars, historians and patrologists who have emphasized both exegetical-patristic and modern teaching.

The objectives and research directions I will focus on in the first part of the study will take into account the key perception and concrete understanding of the historical, cultural and religious context of the foundation and spread of Christianity in the Church of Alexandria of Egypt as well as the concerns and biblical-theological thought of the great Alexandrian hierarchy.

The topicality of the subject, the research methods used and the scientific contribution that such a study can make, involves a biblical, doctrinal, apologetic and historical approach in which the opinions of the Holy Fathers will constitute the superior argument.

II. The historical, cultural and religious context of the preaching of Christian teaching in the city of Alexandria

Remaining faithful to the express commandments received, by which they are sent to preach the Gospel to all nations (Matt 28,19 and Acts 1,8), on the day after the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church - Ἐκκλησία opened itself to the Gentiles¹.

This fact is highlighted for the most part by documents attested since the early period of the Church and confirmed by the learned historian and

¹ Sofron VLAD, "Principii misionare și sociale în Epistolele Sfântului Apostol Pavel", in: *Studii Teologice*, VII (1955) 5-6, p. 287.

writer Luke or from the sources which originate with the Holy Apostle Paul as a result of his travels and missionary activity.

In an anamnesis of the immediate mission of the Holy Apostles we see that the first generation of apostles did not use specific itineraries among the nations of the Diaspora to carry out complementary missionary projects, but each apostle, after Pentecost, pursued successive objectives step by step in different contexts².

As it is obvious from the Lucan expositions described in the book of Acts, the propagation of Christian teaching followed a straight line graphic representation beginning in Jerusalem, then reaching Antioch, the capital of the Hellenized East, then Cyprus, where the three great cultures of the time intersected: Semitic, Greek and Roman, then reaching the ancient Greek cities of Asia and Europe, culminating in Rome³, and from there spreading to the territory of Africa, more precisely to the city of Alexandria.

The city of Alexandria was founded, according to some historians, in 332 or 337 BC by Alexander the Great, taking its name from him, becoming the first ancient port in Egypt, a cosmopolitan city, the capital of the country and one of the largest cultural centers of the Mediterranean Sea, focused on the famous library, which also brought it fame⁴.

Thanks to Alexander the Great (who, according to Plutarch, in a dream, sketched the outlines of Alexandria⁵), its development began to take off and it became known as *Alexandria ad Aegyptum* (Alexandria in Egypt) or *Alexandria apud Aegyptum* (i.e. “outside Egypt”), and later became *Iskanderia*⁶.

Alexandria became even more popular when Ptolemy, the son of Lagos, founded the dynasty of the Lagidians (or Ptolemies), settled there and named the city the capital of Egypt. Under the first two Ptolemies,

² Mikeal C. PARSONS, *Luke – Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 3.

³ Nicolae ACHIMESCU, “Strategia misionară a Apostolilor în lumea păgână”, <https://ziarullumina.ro>, published on 18 November 2007 and accessed on 04.05.2023, 14:30.

⁴ A. F. WALLS, “Alexandria”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS (ed.), *Dicționar Biblic*, Editura Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 1995, p. 25.

⁵ PLUTARH, *Vieți paralele: Alexandru și Cezar*, traducere, introducere și note de N.I. Barbu, Editura Științifică, București, 1971, pp. 29-41.

⁶ G. POSENER, *Enciclopedia civilizației și artei egiptene*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1974, pp. 14-16.

the city was enriched with magnificent gardens and monuments and took on the appearance it would retain until the end of antiquity. For almost a millennium, until the Arab conquest in 641, Alexandria remained the intellectual and spiritual capital of part of the Mediterranean world, having been the political capital of Hellenistic Egypt for the last three centuries BC. The Library of Alexandria was the largest library of antiquity, with over 900,000 scrolls⁷.

The School of Alexandria was one of the centres that offered the most favourable conditions for study, playing a leading role in the field of sciences and mathematics, recalling Euclid, Ptolemy and Panten, important men who lived and left their mark on Alexandria⁸.

Since the founding of Alexandria and the Greek occupation, Egypt has become a province of Hellenism. Apart from the Greek community there was also a considerable Jewish community (cf. Acts 6,9; 18,24), and its administration, even if it retained some aspects of the old Pharaonic administration, was strongly influenced by Greek conceptions, the official language becoming Greek, even if the Old Egyptian, in the demotic form, was still spoken in rural environments.

Shaping the environment in which Christian teaching was spread, it is stated that Hellenism is most often regarded as the main factor that facilitated the extension of Christianity⁹. Therefore, the picture and typology of the propagation of the Gospel of Christ in the city of Alexandria cannot be used in its entirety, but some of its extent should be marked by the relevance of its elements to the missionary appreciation of the work of St. Mark the Evangelist.

As regards the spread of Christ's teaching into the territory of Africa, more precisely into the city of Alexandria, we know from the sources of the time that after preaching the Gospel in Rome, St Mark reached the territory of Africa, more precisely the city of Alexandria¹⁰.

⁷ Ana GRAMA, "O xilogravură cu scene din Alexandria în muzee sibiene (1905-1977). Rectificări și restituire", in: *Studii și comunicări - Arheologie-Istorie Muzeul Brukenthal*, Sibiu, 1977, pp. 311-317.

⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru CĂLUGĂR, *Catehetica*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 43.

⁹ Eckhard J. SCHNABEL, *Early Christian Mission*, volume two: *Paul & The Early Church*, Downers Grove Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004, p. 1499.

¹⁰ L.W. BARNARD, "Saint Mark and Alexandria", in: *Harvard Theological Review*, Published online by Cambridge University Press, volume 57, pp. 145-150.

From the narrative summaries describing the missionary activity of St. Mark the Evangelist, we find out that in 64 AD. Nero burns Rome to the ground blaming the Christians, and in this unfavourable context, Mark leaves Rome for Alexandria in Egypt where he preaches the Gospel of Christ and succeeds in founding an admirable Christian community¹¹ with the help of the local Ananias, whom he also baptises. Following this example, many Alexandrians received Christian baptism.

Christian tradition records that, while serving Mass, St Mark was seized by the refractory pagan locals, bound with a rope, then beaten and dragged through the city. On the way to prison the Saint said the same to his Teacher: “Into Your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit!”¹².

The pagan accusers wanted to burn his body, but immediately a heavy rain started. Prevented from doing so, the people who had accused him fled in fear, and the Christians were able to take the relics of St. Mark.

Thus, Saint Mark the Evangelist, commemorated in the Orthodox Church on 25 April each year¹³, is the founder and patron of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, one of the five ancient patriarchates of the Church, a member of the “Pentarchy”. At present it ranks the second place in the diptych after the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

III. Saint Cyril - the great teacher of Alexandria

Biographical sketches

Saint Cyril is unquestionably one of the most outstanding representatives of patristic literature in the first five Christian centuries. He is the twenty-fourth bishop to be enthroned on the archiepiscopal throne of St Mark, succeeding his uncle Theophilus (385-412).

¹¹ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Istoria Bisericească*, Cartea a doua, XXIV, in: *Scrieri*, Partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 13, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune ală Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, p. 82.

¹² Dumitru BONDALICI, *Enciclopedia marilor personalități din Vechiul și Noul Testament*, Editura Diecezană, Caransebeș, 2005, p. 474.

¹³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar enciclopedic de cunoștințe religioase*, Editura Diecezană, Caransebeș, 2001, p. 278.

A powerful personality, a good theologian, a prolific writer, perhaps the strongest theological mind gifted by God to face the doctrinal challenges of his time¹⁴. He would dominate church politics from the beginning of the 5th century, distinguishing himself by his decisive theological contribution to the formulation, defence and promotion of Christological dogma, exerting a major influence on Eastern Christology¹⁵.

The brief information that has been preserved about his biography is from his contemporary sources, i.e. his own writings, with the exception of a few minor details in the Paschal Letters.

He was born about 370/375 at Theodosiou in Lower Egypt, of righteous parents of good birth, the nephew of a sister of Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria. Concerned with his own education, he made a name for himself in the philosophical sciences, but also in performing good deeds. He was well versed in the study of Greek and Latin and at the same time deepened his spiritual training in the nitric desert, meditating deeply on the divine Scriptures¹⁶.

His uncle Theophilus, noting his qualities, appointed him to the ranks of the Church's clergy, ordained him archdeacon, and upon his death he was enthroned on the patriarchal throne of Alexandria.

Saint Cyril also benefited from the spiritual-moral help of his uncle, Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria, who with him participated in the Synod of 403, known as the *Synod of Oak*, where, unfortunately, Saint John Chrysostom was deposed from the hierarchical throne¹⁷.

As Patriarch of Alexandria, he has gone down in history as a personality involved in defining the dogmas of the ancient Church. His impulsive temperament, coupled with the severity of his monastic life, led him to intervene in most of the problems facing the Church. He seems to have

¹⁴ Sorin ȘELARU, Viorel COMAN, George GHERGA, *Hotărârile dogmatice ale celor șapte Sinoade Ecumenice*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Basilica, București, 2018, p. 136.

¹⁵ Conf. univ. dr. Marius TELEA, "Logosul divin - Trup și suflet deplin în viziunea Sfântului Chiril al Alexandriei", in: *Orizonturi Teologice*, nr. 3, 2001, p. 149.

¹⁶ Arhid. Prof. Dr. Constantin VOICU, *Patrologie*, Editura Basilica, București, 2009, p. 61.

¹⁷ S. ȘELARU, V. COMAN, G. GHERGA, *Hotărârile dogmatice ale celor șapte Sinoade Ecumenice*, p. 136.

inherited some of his uncle's prejudices. The most eloquent proof of this is his grudge against the holy hierarch John Chrysostom, whose name was not reintroduced into the diptychs of the Church of Alexandria until 417¹⁸.

The struggle against the remnants of paganism and the defence of orthodoxy against it would make the leader of the Alexandrian Church appear as the most prominent figure in the dogmatic disputes of the 5th century¹⁹. Adolf von Hamack once wrote that Cyril "stated his faith in what was essentially a polemical form only"²⁰.

Following the spread of the Nestorian heresy, a local synod was held in Rome, where Nestorius' teaching was condemned and St Cyril's teaching accepted. After 32 years of pastoral ministry dedicated to the faith and the progress of the Church, on 27 June 444, St Cyril moved to eternal life with God, whom he sought to make known to all people. The Orthodox Church honours him every year on 9 June and 18 January, together with St Athanasius the Great.

IV. Biblical-theological concerns

The theological works of the Most Holy Father Cyril are full of divine wisdom indicating important and interesting aspects of the Orthodox faith of a biblical, doctrinal (excelling in the field of Christology), exegetical, apologetic, homiletical and epistolary nature. His part in the Christological controversies of the fifth century has assured Cyril of Alexandria a prominent place in histories of Christian thought²¹.

The most important works of St. Cyril are mostly found in the Greek Patrology collection, no less than 10 volumes, volumes 68-77, the first

¹⁸ Arhid. Prof. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicu DUMITRAȘCU, *Patrologie*, Editura Agnos, Sibiu, 2013, p. 160.

¹⁹ C. VOICU, N. DUMITRAȘCU, *Patrologie*, p. 160.

²⁰ Adolf VON HARNACK, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2, Tübingen, 1931, p. 349.

²¹ Robert L. WILKEN, "Cyril of Alexandria, Biblical Exegete", in: Charles KANNENGISSER (ed.), *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis. The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, Brill Leiden, Boston, 2006, p. 840

seven volumes are all exegetical²². Later these volumes were also translated in the collection Church Fathers and Writers, thanks to the contribution and consistent translation of Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae.

The first writing we will refer to is *On Worship and Worship in Spirit and Truth - Περί τῆς ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ προσκυνήσεως καὶ λατρείας* in which the author emphasizes the removal of the power of the letter of the law, but not of its spirit. The law and the prophets have not been abolished, but only fulfilled²³, in accordance with the short but concise statement of the Saviour: “Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I have not come to destroy, but to fulfil...” (Matt 5,17). This argument offered to the hearers, that he did not come to spoil the Law, but came to complete its contents, has as its starting point the false fulfilment of the Law by the Pharisees and scribes. The real meaning of this verse is linked to the aorist infinitive πληρῶσαι, which derives from the verb πληρόω and has a dual meaning: that of fulfilling, that is, to make a prophecy come true, and that of *perfecting, completing, filling in what is missing*.

This work is written before the controversy with Nestorius, and focuses mainly on the interpretation of the Old Testament sacrifices as foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ. At the same time, St Cyril focuses on the idea that Christianity is the fulfillment and transformation of Judaism into a new way of life. This new way of life is in Christ, and it is inward, spiritual, characterized by worship in spirit and truth²⁴.

Glaphira to the books of Moses - Γλαφύρα is another biblical work where we have highlighted the fact that in all the books of Moses the Savior Christ is imagined, namely an allegorical interpretation of the books of Moses in preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ. The Saviour Jesus Christ is portrayed in the image of types or characters from the five books of the Pentateuch, especially from Acts and Revelation, as: Adam, Abraham, Melchisedek, Isaac and Jacob and in the form of acts and

²² R. WILKEN, “Cyril of Alexandria, Biblical Exegete”, p. 840

²³ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Περί τῆς ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ προσκυνήσεως καὶ λατρείας (Despre închinarea și despre adorarea în Duh și Adevăr)*, III, PG 68, 273.

²⁴ Robert WILKEN, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971, pp. 84-85.

sacrifices such as the Passover lamb and the bronze serpent. The work is of great and subtle richness of thought about Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who on the one hand is God and on the other hand is man, that is, about the wonderful union between the all-powerful Godhead and humble humanity, united with Him and in Him. Christ has all humility in Himself, but it is voluntary and free, not imposed by any law. At the same time, the author also focused on the interpretation of the Old Testament sacrifices as shadows of Christ's sacrifice and of our spiritual sacrifices²⁵.

Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament is Cyril's most important exegetical work and includes analyses of several biblical texts, such as the Commentary on the Book of Isaiah, which is in five volumes, the Books of the Twelve Minor Prophets, excerpts from the books of Kings, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Jeremiah, Baruch, Ezekiel and Daniel. The exegesis he applies to these Old Testament books is based on allegorical interpretation, thus seeking to demonstrate that the Old Law is the prefiguration and preparation of the New Law²⁶.

The most significant *Commentaries on the New Testament* are: *Commentaries on the Holy Gospel of John*, a work in 12 volumes, two of which are lost. It was written before the Third Ecumenical Council and is one of the most extensive commentaries in which the author expounds in various progressive phases the dogmatic and polemical problems against heresy. His interpretation of the scriptural texts is based on literary interpretation.

Also, in the analysis and exegetical interpretations that he relates, he addresses issues concerning the consubstantiality and equality of the Son with the Father, as well as the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Specifically, with this commentary St. Cyril wants to demonstrate the deity of the Saviour, of the Incarnate Word, defending the deity of Christ incarnate as man against the heresies of Nestorius and Arian. As for the Cyrillic commentary on the verse, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*" (John 1, 14),

²⁵ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Glafire la cărțile lui Moise*, vol. II, tom I, Editura Basilica, 2021, pp. 56-59.

²⁶ Alexander KERRIGAN, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, Interpreter of the Old Testament*, coll. *Analecta Biblica*, vol. 2, Pontificio Instituto Biblico, Rome, 1952.

the Holy Father emphasizes, “And he did not say that the Word came in the flesh, but that he became flesh, so that it might not be understood that he came as to the Prophets or to others of the Saints, by relationship, but that he himself truly became flesh, that is, man...”²⁷. On the testimony and explanations given by the holy Alexandrian hierarch the teaching of the Church on the Person of Jesus Christ as the Son of God will be built.

The Godhead of Christ is highlighted in a special way by

“characterizing it as life, as light, as power through Himself. He is in this sense, the Absolute, and there must be such an existence through Himself, therefore without beginning, without end and boundless or perfect and of supreme height in what He is”²⁸. The Godhead has everything through Himself or through nature”.

We see therefore that the Godhead as absolute existence is the fundamental theme in the meaning of St. Cyril’s thought throughout this work.

Also from St. Cyril we have a *Commentary on the Holy Gospel of Luke* in the Syriac language, a commentary which is preserved almost in its entirety and in which the author gives a broad interpretation of the events related to the childhood of the Saviour. The saintly author also emphasizes human value and dignity, pushing the value of material goods into the background. Fragmentary *Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew and on the Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians and Hebrews* have been preserved.

As far as doctrinal matters are concerned, St. Cyril was especially concerned with the dogma of the Trinity and the Incarnation. It is through him that patristic Christological thought reaches its full depth and originality²⁹. His teachings of a Christological nature are embodied in

²⁷ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, in : *Scrieri, partea a patra*, transl. intr. and notes Pr. D. Stăniloae, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 41, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 5.

²⁸ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, p. 6.

²⁹ Pr. Prof. Ioan G. COMAN, “Momente și aspecte ale hristologiei precalcedoniene și calcedoniene”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XVII (1965) 1, p.44.

his writings: *The Thesaurus on the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity - Η βίβλος τῶν θησαυρῶν περὶ τῆς ἁγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου Τριάδος*, a work which defends by means of 35 theses the traditional teaching on the Holy Trinity, against the Arians and especially against Eunomius³⁰. Insisting on this most important writing, we underline the use throughout of the term *deofiance* in relation to the Persons of the Holy Trinity. The Alexandrian hierarch also maintains that the Saviour Christ bore the very passions that held the human soul in bondage, and thereby freed humanity from them: "By His own death, the Saviour destroyed death. Death would not have been defeated if He Himself had not died. This for every one of the passions of the body..."³¹.

He also exposes the objections of the heretics and then responds to them, combating them with logical and natural arguments, while pointing out how to penetrate the ineffable mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. In the presentation of the Cyrillian Christology we meet the "Athanasian λόγος-σάρξ Christology in its purest form"³².

Another important work of doctrinal character is *Seven Dialogues on the Holy Trinity - Περὶ ἁγίας τε καὶ ὁμοουσίου Τριάδος*, which are in fact seven conversations between the author and a certain priest named Hermia. In these conversations the Alexandrian hierarch expounds the same doctrine as in the earlier work, only in a more synthetic form.

Of particular importance are also the works on the teaching of the Incarnation, these writings being directed against Nestorianism, written from 428-430. We recall the work *Against the Blasphemies of Nestorius*, in which Cyril addresses and combats the erroneous aspects of Nestorius' exegesis of the biblical account of the Person of Christ³³.

³⁰ Arhid. Prof.univ.dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. univ.dr. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie*, vol. II, Editura Basilica, București, 2015, p. 150.

³¹ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Tezaurul despre Treimea Sfântă și de o ființă*, cap. 24, PG 75, 397 C.

³² Aloys GRILLMEIER, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to the Council of Chalcedon (451)*, transl. John Bowden, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1975, p. 415.

³³ R. WILKEN, "Cyril of Alexandria, Biblical Exegete", p. 864.

The doctrinal problems that arose during his time were also addressed in his writings *On the Right Faith and to the Emperor*, a work consisting of three memoirs addressed to the Emperor and his empresses, wife and sisters. A more extensive exposition of these dogmatic-polemical aspects is also found in the work *Dialogue on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten*. He also wrote apologetic works, expressing his thoughts in the theological treatise entitled *Against Julian the Apostate*, published most probably between 433 and 441, in which he combats the works of the atheist emperor Julian the Apostate. Emperor Julian produced an extensive work in which he attacked Christian teaching, which spread rapidly and caused confusion among Christians. The erroneous precepts propagated by Julian remained for a long time uncorroborated, which is why Saint Cyril had to take a stand, arguing that Christian teaching is not a decadent Judaism mixed with pagan influences or reminiscences, but a teaching superior to other religions³⁴.

A series of *Homilies* have also survived, as well as 20 pastorals, mostly in fragments, the most representative of which are those in which he combats the teaching of Nestorius. Among the homilies we mention the 29 Easter homilies with a practical-moral content, as well as the six homilies that were delivered at Ephesus on the occasion of the Third Ecumenical Council. Worthy of mention is the homily on the *Blessed Virgin* and the one on the *Departure of the Soul and the Second Coming*, in which the Holy Father exhorts us to “open our minds to awakening, to put to sleep the thoughts of sin, to acquire unrestrained prayer, a watchful mind, a sober mind, a clear conscience...” not fearing the common death, but the perisher of men’s souls. For death is primarily not that which separates the soul from the body, but that which separates the soul from God³⁵.

³⁴ C. VOICU, L. COLDA, *Patrologie*, p.150.

³⁵ Sfântul CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, “Omilia XIV-a - Despre ieșirea sufletului și despre a doua venire”, translated from ancient Greek into Romanian by Laura Enache, in: *Teologie și Viață*, nr. 9-12, 2018, p. 180.

V. Elements of doctrinal teaching

St. Cyril of Alexandria expressed his doctrinal convictions especially on the occasion of the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy, playing the same role in this controversy that St. Athanasius played in the Arian one.

As for the development of doctrinal teachings during the period of his activity, it must be noted that unfortunately the situation was precipitated in 428 when Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, spread the heresy that in the Person of the Saviour Jesus Christ there are two distinct persons (one human and the other divine), by concluding that the Virgin Mary could not be called the *Mother of God* - Θεοτόκος, Nestorius' refusal to call the Virgin Mary the *Mother of God* - Θεοτόκος, led indirectly to the denial of the deity of Christ³⁶. These erroneous statements of Nestorius stirred up deep disturbances, wounding the piety of Christians and causing a real ecumenical scandal³⁷.

After much wrangling and even dispute, it was established that the term Θεοτόκος is more than an honorific title, it is a key word for Christology. This word concentrates in it an entire theology of the Incarnation. For St. Cyril, the name Θεοτόκος was a natural consequence of what we would later enunciate in theology: *the communication of appropriations (ἀντιδοσις τῶν ιδιωμάτων) in the unique Hypostasis of Jesus Christ*. "The eternal hypostasis of the Son of God is born in time from the Virgin Mary, communicating and imbuing the human being with whom He unites Himself with divine attributes and receiving from it human attributes, apart from sin"³⁸. This union of the divine and human natures in a single subject was called by St. Cyril *hypostatic (ἔνωσις) or after hypostasis (καθ' ὑπόστασιν) union*. In this way, He who was born of the Virgin is God

³⁶ Sfântul IOAN CASIAN, *Scrieri alese*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 57, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1990, p.784.

³⁷ A. GRILLMEIER, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol I: *From the Apostolic Age to Calcedon (451)*, 2nd edition, Atlanta, 1974, p. 447.

³⁸ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, transl. intr. and notes Pr. D. Stăniloae, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 80, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1983, pp. 60-61.

the Man, and she who gave birth to Jesus Christ could rightly be called the *Birth of God* - Θεοτόκος³⁹.

The Trinitarian controversies of his time led him to address issues of Christological terminology. In his personal desire to define these revealed truths, St Cyril speaks of the reality of the coexistence of the two natures, divine and human, in the one hypostasis of Jesus Christ. In expounding his Christological conception, the Alexandrian hierarch uses the terms *οὐσία*, *φύσις ὑπόστασις* and *πρόσωπον*⁴⁰.

Another important element of doctrinal teaching is that concerning the *Holy Spirit*. St. Cyril points out that “as the Son is the perfect image of the Father, as One Who received Him and has the Father, so He who received the image of the Son, that is, the Spirit, has the Son and the Father, Who is in Him”⁴¹.

Another doctrinal teaching on which the holy Alexandrian hierarch insisted was that related to the Holy Eucharist. Nestorius’ erroneous teaching sought to compromise the Holy Eucharist; he could not understand how the Body of Christ is life-giving. The identity between the Eucharistic Body and the historical Body meant for Nestorius the same common nature, uncorrupted by the Logos⁴². Saint Cyril states that “the Holy Eucharist, by becoming the Body of the Logos, is the giver of life, just as the Lord Himself calls His Body the Bread of Life, the divine Eucharist intercedes for us in the most intimate union with Him”⁴³.

We cannot disregard the famous *Anathematisms* of St. Cyril, which are nothing more than 12 stable points of view that the Saint held dear. By these anathematisms he actually wanted to guard from sins against the Holy Spirit all those who would try to defile the truth of faith. They

³⁹ Sfântul GRIGORIE TEOLOGUL, “Epistola 101, 16”, in : *Letters théologiques*, introd. texte critique et notes par Paul Gallay, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes*, nr. 208, Cerf, Paris, 2013, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Viorel IONIȚĂ “Hristologia Sfântului Chiril al Alexandriei în perspectiva dialogului cu Bisericile nealcedoniene”, in : *Ortodoxia*, XXIII (1971) 2, p. 195.

⁴¹ Constantin VOICU, *Patrologie*, Editura Basilica, București, 2009, p. 73.

⁴² Ion CARAZA, “Doctrina euharistică a Sfântului Chiril al Alexandriei”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XX (1968) 7-8, p. 529.

⁴³ Bernard LAMBERT, *Le problème oecuménique*, Paris, 1962, p. 82.

concentrate the strengths of the faith with the fervent desire to be preserved unaltered throughout the ages⁴⁴.

Therefore, in this last sub-point of the present study, I wanted to highlight some of the most important elements of teaching that characterize the holy Alexandrian hierarch, aspects that led Anastasius Sinaitte to call him "*the Seal of the Fathers*". This appellation was rightly bestowed on him with the intention of defining his place in the history of Christian thought, and is also expressed in the troparion composed in honour of St. Cyril of Alexandria.

“O Teacher of Orthodoxy, Teacher of the right honor of God and of purity and Light of the world, the adornment of the monks inspired by God, Saint Hierarch Cyril, wise man, with your teachings You have enlightened all. Pray to Christ God for the salvation of our souls”.

Troparion of St. Cyril of Alexandria⁴⁵.

VI. Conclusions

In my personal desire to provide an overview of the historical, cultural and religious context of the founding of the Church of Alexandria, the propagation of Christianity here through St. Mark the Evangelist, and the biblical and theological insights in the thought and work of St. Cyril of Alexandria, I will conclude by stating some milestones that are intended to more easily identify the basic structure of the study.

1. From the narrative summaries describing the missionary activity of St. Mark the Evangelist, we learn that the propagation of Christ's teaching in the territory of Africa, more precisely in the city of Alexandria, was done through John Mark;

⁴⁴ Olimp CĂCIULĂ, “Anatematismele Sfântului Chiril al Alexandriei”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română.*, LV (1937) 3-4, pp. 129-154.

⁴⁵ ****Mineiul pe luna Iunie*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2001, p. 308.

2. Analyzing the biography and the profound theological work of St. Cyril of Alexandria, we see that his life was a constant struggle, a perpetual struggle to propagate the truth and to reject the erroneous teachings that threatened the faith in Christ;

3. The biographical elements presented reveal that St. Cyril of Alexandria is one of the most important representatives of the patristic literature of the first five Christian centuries, his theological writings being charged with an intense and profound divine wisdom;

4. The theological works that came out of the pen of the holy hierarch attest to a profound biblical, doctrinal and apologetic character, demonstrating great authority and issuing clear directions of Christian tradition and faith;

5. Looking back at all the activities of the holy Alexandrian hierarch, we can firmly affirm that he remains in the history of the Church as the landmark who defined, determined, formulated and crystallized the dogmas of the Orthodox Church everywhere.