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Theological Aspects of the Missionary Strategy of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Romanian Society in the Process of Secularization

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Abstract

The theme of the Christian mission has been set and is set with acuity in the last time. This is because the essential duty of the Church in any place and time is that of bringing to the world the good news of salvation of all people through Jesus Christ's work. Nevertheless, the mission cannot be accomplished chaotically or by chance, but the Church is called to have a missionary strategy of her own in any place and time. In the recent years, among other things this strategy must take into account the phenomenon of secularization, which is becoming more and more evident in the contemporary world. Therefore, the Church should articulate her mission, considering this phenomenon, but at the same time, putting into work her entire theological and cultural “arsenal”. Orthodoxy is aware that its mission must take into account the Trinitarian, Christological and Pnevmatological coordinates of the mission. The Holy Liturgy contains an exceptional missionary potential and the Christian mission should use it.

Keywords

Mission, secularization, Liturgy, Romanian society

I. General considerations

In any historical epoch the Church goes through, she cannot ignore her primordial purpose, that of proclaiming the good news of people's salvation through Jesus Christ to the world. However, the missionary work of the Church must take into account each time the context that the proclamation of Jesus Christ's Gospel takes place in, and, in particular, the cultural, scientific, social, etc. aspect present when the Church is called to confess Jesus Christ and the salvation He brought for all people. Therefore, between the need to proclaim the Gospel of salvation and the context it takes place in, certain factors may emerge, and this will question the Christian mission, on the one hand. On the other hand, the Church should come up with specific answers regarding the proclamation of God's Word. To do mission in our time means to always resort to the very foundation of the Church and Christian identity, as well as to convert the spirit of the world to the exigencies of Jesus Christ's Gospel.

The mission of the Church depends on its very nature and constitutes its very reason for being. This can be explained by the fact that apostolicity is placed among the attributes of the Church confessed in the Niceo-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith.

“The missionary vocation of the Church depends on its apostolic character. The Christian Church is apostolic, i.e. she has historical continuity from the time of the Apostles, also because she possesses missionary institutions and services. Without these, she cannot be identified, because she has a messianic reference, as the Son was sent by the Father, and the Apostles by Christ (John 20, 21-23; Matt. 28, 18-20)”¹.

As the Lord's Apostles were sent by the Saviour to preach, so is His Church sent into the world to do the Apostle's work, that is, to proclaim the teaching, life and gifts of Jesus Christ's salvation to the world. Without the fundamental missionary dimension of the Church, we could not understand the rapid spread of Christianity in the first centuries, a work that was accomplished through the zeal, courage and dedication of the Lord's

¹ Valer BEL, *Misiune, parohie, pastorație. Coordonate pentru o strategie misionară*, Editura „Renașterea”, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 6

Apostles, of their disciples and of all the Christians who felt empowered to become heralds of the Gospel (I Peter 2, 9).

In fact, today and forever, the mission of the Church is based on the mission of God Himself; on the mutual movement of life and love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity; on the Son's sending to the world by the Father and also on the Holy Spirit's sending by the Father through the Son: on its concretization as Church and through the Church, where we partake of the Eucharistic Christ. Thus, every Christian becomes His witness and a confessor.

For the elaboration of any missionary strategy by the Churches in general and by the Orthodox Church in particular, three essential considerations should be taken into account:

1. The growing phenomenon of secularization is a real and permanent challenge for the Church. This complex phenomenon gives the contemporary man the impression that all the problems of his life can be solved only in a material and natural way and that today's man no longer needs to relate to the existence of God and to the salvation of Jesus Christ. Thus, this spirit of the world generates the illusion of self-sufficiency, which, in fact, empties of meaning the entire life of the man.

2. Given this reality, the Church must crystallize a missionary strategy, with a rich theological and spiritual content, to respond precisely to this emptiness of meaning and spiritual light of today's secularized man. This is where the theological foundations of the Christian mission find their place, which the Church must permanently place at the base of her mission, as sources of inspiration, content and perspective related to her mission into the world.

3. This missionary strategy must take into account the context in which it is carried out, the challenges of the world at its disposal and the importance of coming up with concrete answers to the questions of contemporary man.

II. Theological foundations of the Christian mission

The mission of the Church cannot be conceived without having a foundation and motivation, that is to say, without having a solid foundation, on which to support the whole missionary work, which is carried out by the Christ's

Church as a whole, but also by each of her components or by every of her members. Therefore, the theological foundations of the Church mission are a kind of foundation stones, which the whole work of the Church is supported on. They give her consistency, direction and purpose. Among these missionary theological foundations, we mention the following:

1. The Trinitarian basis of the mission. Understanding it as a movement of God the Father's love to the Son in the Holy Spirit

By this, the mission of the Church receives a divine foundation. The Christian mission is ultimately an application of the Trinitarian theology to the life, presence and mission of the Church in the world.

“The sending of the Apostles into the world by the Saviour is based on the fact that Christ Himself is sent into the world by the Father, in the Holy Spirit (John 20, 21-23). The significance of this scriptural statement is fully acknowledged, but the Trinitarian theology which is involved in the mission deserves more attention than it usually receives. The Trinitarian theology emphasizes that in His being, God is a life of intra-Trinitarian communion and that His involvement in history seeks the integration of humanity and creation into this communion with His own life in general. The implications of this notion for understanding the mission are very important: first and foremost, the mission does not aim at propagating or transmitting intellectual beliefs, doctrines, moral principles, etc., but the transmission of life and communion that exists in God”².

The starting point of the Christian mission resides in the Holy Trinity's very life of communion, in the movement of the Father's love to the Son, and of the Son to the Father, and in the light of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the Church is based on the fact that through the counsel of the Holy Trinity, the Son is sent by the Father into the world, through the work of the Holy Spirit, so that He may bring the eternal and saving love of the Holy Trinity to the whole humanity. So, the Father's sending of the Son and then

² Ion BRIA, *Mergi în pace! Perspective ortodoxe în misiune*, transl. Anca Simona Tuhuț, Editura „Reîntregirea” Alba Iulia 2015, p. 15.

of the Holy Spirit to the world (John 3,16), and then of the Apostles by the Saviour, represents a true paradigm of the Christian mission. The faith in the Holy Trinity is essential for the whole Church, for her inner life, but at the same time, it is important for the Christian mission as a whole.

“Faith in the Holy Trinity delimits the Christian teaching about God from other teachings and conceptions, in the sense that such a Deity is the only salvation, as the basis of the communion of life and love with us in eternity. The revelation of God as the Trinity highlights the fact that God is a life of communion in Himself and that through His work in the world, He draws humanity and creation in general into this communion of true life with Him”³.

Therefore, the revelation of the Trinity in history, as well as its presence and work in the Church and in the world, is a basis of utmost importance for the content and purpose of the Christian mission. No missionary strategy developed by the Church could ignore the Trinitarian dimension of the mission.

2. The Christological foundation of the Christian mission

I mentioned above that He who descends the Holy Trinity’s life of love into the world and does it through the Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ. He became the Messenger of the Most Holy Trinity’s love to the world. The mission of the Church understood from the etymological point of view as a reference means “participation” in sending the Son to the world by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father, through the Son. According to the expression of St. Irenaeus, these two are the two arms of the Father, which He works in the world through. St. John the Apostle says in this regard: “The life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the

³ See more at: Ion BRIA, *Go Forth in Peace. Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Compiled and edited by Ion Bria, WCC Mission Services, No. 7, Geneva 1986, p. 3; Valer BEL, *Misiune, parohie, pastorație...*, p. 16;

Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (I John 1, 2-3). Through Jesus Christ whom the Church proclaims, the believers are in fellowship with the life of love and communion of the Holy Trinity. Together with all mankind, Christ is the Face He assumed through Incarnation, who is turned to the Father and whom the sanctifying and saving grace may be poured from, over the world.

In some way, the divine-human person of Jesus Christ is at the centre of the Church mission, as the Person who connects with all people.

“He is the ‘partner’ and the creative and generating ‘source’ of dialogue with Him and between human beings. He is the Word of all things, and the Word is the image of the Father. The world has an ontological basis in God, because all things are related to the Word. They represent the diversity of the Word’s thinking”⁴.

3. The pneumatological foundation of the mission

Orthodoxy strongly affirms the work of the Holy Spirit not only in the Church, but also in the world. That is, we can speak of a cosmic dimension of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work. According to the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Spirit has been present in the world since creation, when “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1, 1) .

The Church glorifies the Holy Spirit along with the Father, the One who proceeds from and the Son, whom He was sent into the world through, and whom He rests into. He is called the Spirit of the Lord Who came down upon Jesus Christ at baptism and who anointed Him to preach the good news to the poor (Luke 4, 18-19). Orthodox theology affirms three essential theological-missionary theses regarding the Holy Spirit.

First, the Holy Spirit is inseparable from Jesus Christ; in other words, the work of the Holy Spirit is not separated from the work of Christ. The two, Christ and the Holy Spirit, complement each other’s work in a fully Trinitarian context.

Secondly, the work of the Holy Spirit as the Giver of life – so called in the prayer *Heavenly King*, and by which all are perfected, has a cosmic dimension of His work, and this is not limited to the Church space.

⁴ Ion BRIA, *Mergi în pace!...*, p. 16.

Thirdly, the change of the bread and wine gifts brought by the believers to the Holy Liturgy is accomplished through the Holy Spirit's work, more precisely, during the prayer of the Holy Spirit's invocation - the Epiclesis of the Church.

The Holy Spirit, descended into the world on the day of Pentecost, makes people open to the saving work of Jesus Christ. He is the Giver of new life, which the believers demand through their faith, prayer and participation to the Holy Spirit's work in the Church. Through this coming into the world of the Holy Spirit He brings forth the work of salvation performed by Jesus Christ through His Passions, Death, Resurrection and Ascension⁵. In other words, any missionary work of the Church bears the imprint of the Spirit, it is moved and animated by the Holy Spirit.

4. Pentecost as the beginning of the Church and the inauguration of the Christian mission

As I stated above, the Holy Spirit sent to the world by the Father on the day of Pentecost makes the perceptible beginning of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ in the Holy Spirit. Then the Apostles of the Lord began to preach the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, they became fearless defenders of the Word of life, and concrete witnesses and confessors of Christ the risen from the dead and ascended to Heaven.

Through the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles of the Lord were filled with grace and completely transformed into their being: first full of fear and disbelief, then becoming brave and fearless, first lacking mobilizing power, then full of power, first lacking kerygmatic initiative, then becoming full of zeal and involvement. This happened because the Holy Spirit transformed their being by His divine power, and they became chosen vessels of the work accomplished through them by the Lord exalted in glory to the right side of God the Father⁶.

⁵ See the complete studies: Dumitru STĂNILAOE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (TDO)*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (EIBMBOR), București, Ediția a doua, 1997, vol II, p. 129; Ion BRIA, *Mergi în pace! Perspective ortodoxe în misiune*, pp. 20-21; Ion BRIA, *Credința pe care o mărturisim*, EIBMBOR, București, 1987, p. 123; Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, transl. Pr. Vasile Răducă, Editura „Anastasia”, București, p. 197; Valer BEL, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, Cluj-Napoca 2004, pp. 71-73.

⁶ See also: Valer BEL, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, pp. 75 sq.

On the day of Pentecost, St. Peter the Apostle had an important role. He then uttered a glowing speech, highlighting the specificity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ's work for the salvation of people, and to whom the Apostles are witnesses. Following his sermon, three thousand souls were baptized, constituting the nucleus of the Christ's Church, first appeared in history (see the whole chapter II of the Acts of the Apostles). The fact that Christ's Church was founded at Pentecost, and at the same time the Christian mission began, means that the two realities: *the Church and the Christian mission* are inextricably linked to each other and that they are mutually conditioned and supported.

5. The ecclesial dimension of the Christian mission

The Christian mission is not only a personal and individual mission, but must also should be seen in an ecclesial context. When carrying out the missionary work, the Church fulfils Christ's command given to the Apostles after the Resurrection: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28, 19-20). This commandment of Christ must be understood as an imperative by the Church; it is not just a possibility that she received from the Saviour, but an obligation. St. Paul says in this regard: "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (I Cor. 9, 16). Therefore, the Church should never remain static. She must be constantly in mission, preaching, proclaiming and teaching the Good News to the whole world. The apostolic word is illustrative from this point of view: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1, 8).

Therefore, the Christian mission begins with the founding of the Church on the day of Pentecost. This means that the Church and the mission are inextricably linked to one another.

"For through the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, the Church is founded - the body of Christ in history - and the Apostles receive the upper power to be witnesses of Christ

throughout the world (cf. Acts 1, 8). The Church itself as ‘Body of Christ’ and ‘pillar and foundation of truth’ (cf. I Tim. 3, 15) is the true witness of Christ the crucified, risen and exalted in the history. She is the one who keeps and transmits the Gospel in its integrity and she is the place where communion with God - the Holy Trinity with the people - is accomplished and their growth ‘to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ (Eph. 4, 13)⁷.

In other words, the Christian mission starts in the Church and returns to the Church, in the sense that the Church is called to carry out the mission of the Gospel of salvation proclamation and of the Kingdom of God, and the fruits of the mission also return to the Church, through which she extends and is permanently consolidated.

6. Missionary impulses of the Holy Eucharistic Liturgy

At the centre of the Church life is the service of the Holy Eucharistic Liturgy, as a place of assembly for all believers in the unity of communion with Christ the crucified and risen from the dead.

“The Eucharistic liturgy is the full participation of the believers in salvation, giving birth to the incarnation of the divine Word, and thereby, transforming them into an entire cosmos. Through the mutual giving of Christ and His people and the sanctification of bread and wine, the ‘Christology’ of those who partake of, becomes the place where we live the fullness of salvation, the communion in the Holy Spirit, the heaven on earth”⁸.

In the Eucharistic Liturgy, those who partake “of the same Bread and of the same Cup” pray to the heavenly Father “to be united through the communion of the same Holy Spirit”, as the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great confesses. In the context of the Eucharistic partaking, the believers united by love confess in one thought, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the

⁷ Valer BEL, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, p. 77 sq. See also: Ion BRIA, *Mergi în pace!...*, pp. 27-28.

⁸ Ion BRIA, *Mergi în pace!...*, p. 36.

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Trinity one in essence and undivided. By partaking of the Eucharist, the believers become part of the Kingdom of Heaven, which becomes a reality present in the Church, pointing to its full revelation in the “unseen day” of the heavenly Kingdom, whose revelation will be brought about by the King Christ.

“The Eucharist becomes the most perfect way of entering the economy of salvation, it is the target and the ascent of the mission. As an institution, the Church reveals the Eucharistic communion as her only and authentic image, and as a transcendent icon of Christ”⁹.

Towards the end of the Holy Liturgy, the priest urges the faithful present at the service: “Let us depart in peace. In the name of the Lord!” This exhortation or sending of the faithful to the mission is part of the Liturgy structure. Partaking of the Lord’s Body and Blood and being initiated into the mysteries of faith by the word of Scripture read at the Liturgy and by sermon, Christians return to their homes and families, in the social context they live in, to pass on the gifts received at the Liturgy.

“The joy received on Sunday should not only be kept for them, but it should be shared every day of the week, anywhere, anytime and anyhow: blessing (places, people, objects, food), making the sign of the cross, reuniting the scattered and distant, giving hope and love to those who have nothing. They are called and anointed to become the witnesses and collaborators of Christ, the only hope of the world, as missionaries, preachers, confessors, martyrs”¹⁰.

The missionary valences of the Eucharistic Liturgy are obvious and profound, which means invigorating the Christian mission, transforming it into the daily concern of the believer, and preventing it from becoming a social activism.

⁹ See explicitly: Ion BRIA, *Mergi în pace!...*, p. 38 u.

¹⁰ Ion BRIA, *Liturghia după Liturghie. O tipologie a misiunii apostolice și mărturiei creștine astăzi*, Editura Athena, 1996, p. 66.

7. The Christian mission - anticipation and preparation for the Kingdom of God

Jesus Christ the Saviour came into the world to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 4, 17). His wonderful teaching, life and works illustrate this purpose of His coming into the world, that of proclaiming the coming Kingdom. He overcame the evil, the devil, sin and death, to make the reality of the Kingdom triumph. By establishing His Church, Christ opened the way for the people to partake of this Kingdom gifts, which becomes present on earth in the Church Liturgy. This begins with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The Liturgy places the Church in her own place, indicated by the Holy Scripture: it is the means and place of passage to the Kingdom of God. In the Eucharistic Liturgy the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven are wide opened, indicating that it expresses the final completion of creation and offers the opportunity to taste in advance the beauties of this Kingdom.

“Its signs are present in the world wherever the grace of God is manifested, and wherever human beings work for justice, love and peace. Reconciled through Holy Communion, the members of Christ’s Body are called to be servants of reconciliation between people and to confess the joy of the Resurrection”¹¹.

The Christian mission carried out by the members of the Church, who partake of the Eucharistic Lord, testifies the existence of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the people. They describe it and invite all their fellows to pre-taste the gifts of this Kingdom. By tasting the gifts of the Kingdom of God in this world, in fact they feel that this anticipatory pre-tasting is pointing to the fuller revelation of this Kingdom in the eschaton.

III. Conclusions

1. The existence of the Church in the world cannot be fully understood, unless we take into account the fact that the reason for her existence is that of being missionary. But what does it mean: Is the church missionary?

¹¹ Ion BRIA, *Liturghia după Liturghie...*, p. 149.

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To be missionary means that the Church is in a permanent and dynamic availability of sharing her conscience, faith and life to the world she exists in. In other words, there are some important reasons for which the Church has a missionary conscience and defines herself as missionary.

2. The Church received the mandate or commandment to be missionary from Jesus Christ Himself, the One Who was sent to the world by God the Father, to bring salvation to all people. So, the purpose for which God sent His Son into the world was the salvation of all people. The same is the purpose of the Church's mission into the world: the salvation of men. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you..." (John 20, 21). The Saviour was the Father's Messenger, to reveal to the people what God's will is for the world, people, life and death, salvation and eternal life.

3. The Church has a unique, high-priced treasure that must be communicated, shared, given and made known to all people. Then, they listen to it and if they wish to be saved, they receive it with joy and they value it, letting themselves be penetrated by the light of grace and faith of this treasure.

4. The Church is closely linked to the deep and legitimate aspirations of people who want to have a plenary life, to live in a world of justice, love and truth. However, these values, are dear to Jesus Christ's Church. She keeps them in her treasure of life, faith and wisdom and wishes to make them known to all people, on the one hand. But she also wants to raise her prophetic voice in the arena of society, by rebuking, directing and calling people to the permanent appropriation of these values, so they not only remain simple words spoken to everyone, but to be embedded each time, and to become a concrete fact of society.

5. Each time or historical era that the Church went through had a certain way of relating to society. Depending on the cultural, social, and spiritual status of the society, the Church has retained certain missionary typologies or missionary strategies, a certain way of transmitting the Christian faith to all those who wanted to know it and to acquire it on a personal level. The Church has not only used standard methods and means of communicating the teaching of faith and her discipline, but she has always been creative, imagining new forms of pastoral care and mission, to bring as many as possible to Christ, to the Church and to His salvation.

6. The time of Christ's Church today is a time of many accumulations from a scientific, cultural, philosophical, economic, technical and social

point of view. Not least, we must also note the profound change of people mentality, which can be noticed in the recent decades. In this context so complex, difficult and full of many contradictions of all kinds, the Church is called to bring her message of truth, love, communion and reconciliation.

7. In other news, we cannot overlook the fact that today's developed or less developed societies from the West and the East, are visibly marked by the increasing phenomenon of secularization. This phenomenon stands against the fundamental truths of Christianity, of the Church and of all that concerns a conscious and free human relationship with God. When the Church wants to transmit the Christian faith to today's generations, she cannot and should not ignore the increasingly secularized context she must work in a missionary way in.

8. In this context, the Church must adapt her missionary methods or strategies to this new context, that is, to renew her missionary typologies, to come up with new forms of sharing the saving faith, a renewal that will meet the spiritual needs of man today. In this way, the Church must find the most direct and efficient ways of addressing children after religion school hours, as well as young people from colleges and universities, young families, or other believers alike, to develop concrete missionary projects for them, for example: spiritual dialogues, thematic conferences, pilgrimages to monasteries and churches, pastoral visits to adult believers, organizing solidarity in parishes with the sick and alone etc. These are just some of the concrete ways of sharing the Christian faith and spirituality in a world emptied of spirituality and dramatically living the losing a luminous sense of existence.

9. In fact, by acting in this way, the Church lives her missionary conscience in a permanent dynamic and with a necessary and responsible pastoral revival, feeling deep within her the attitude of St. Ap. Paul, who became all things to all men to win them for Christ. The Church must think in this way of her missionary work conducted in the perspective of the Kingdom of God to which all are called, and should work with the hope that more and more will hear the call to salvation in Jesus Christ.