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Defending the Orthodox Faith: The Teaching Ministry and Missionary Preaching of Bishop Grigorie Comșa¹

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Abstract

The pastoral and missionary activity of Bishop Grigorie Comșa in the Diocese of Arad represents a significant chapter in the history of interwar Romanian Orthodoxy. His work developed in a context marked by the expansion of newly established minority denominations, such as Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists, whose presence in Romania was still relatively recent, by intensified missionary activity, and by the need for a more effective pastoral response within the Romanian Orthodox Church. In this context, Bishop Comșa gave particular attention to the teaching ministry of the clergy, viewing preaching, catechesis, pastoral letters, and religious publications as instruments for strengthening Orthodox identity among both clergy and laity. A central feature of his activity was the close connection he established between liturgical life, doctrinal formation, and missionary responsibility. He encouraged priests to assume a stronger preaching ministry, to cultivate the religious education of the laity, and to engage especially in the spiritual

¹ This study capitalizes on the results of the research carried out within the doctoral thesis project *Valențe misionare în: opera omiletică a Episcopului Grigorie Comșa* (*Missionary Valences in the Homiletic Work of Bishop Grigorie Comșa*), currently being developed at the “Dumitru Stăniloae” Doctoral School, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest, under the coordination of Rev. Prof. Dr. Nicușor Beldiman.

formation of young people. His contribution also extended beyond the Diocese of Arad through his participation in the National Congresses of Missionary Priests, where he advocated a coordinated and vigorous missionary response within the life of the Church.

Keywords

Diocese of Arad, Grigorie Comșa, missionary preaching, Orthodox mission, catechesis, proselytism, Romanian Orthodox Church, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists.

I. Introduction

The missionary activity of the Orthodox clergy was already a matter of concern in the life and work of Bishop Grigorie Comșa even before he became a hierarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. As a celibate deacon, beginning in 1915 he served and preached at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Sibiu, showing a particular preference for apologetic and dogmatic sermons. Starting in 1920, while working at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts, he had the opportunity to become acquainted with the activity and statutes of the newly emerging Neo-Protestant movements, among which only two functioned legally at the time: the Baptists and the Seventh-day Adventists. This context explains the writing and publication of the work *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*², which may be regarded as a genuine manual both for clergy and for students of theology. The work was later expanded and republished in Arad in 1927³ and made available to the priests of the diocese.

In the same year, 1925, Deacon Gheorghe Comșa published in Caransebeș the work *Pentru neam și lege. Patruzeci cuvântări împotriva adventiștilor și baptiștilor*⁴, with a foreword signed by Fr. Prof. Ioan Mihălcescu, providing further evidence of his missionary concerns. Thus,

² Gheorghe COMȘA, *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*, Tipografia bisericească din Sfânta Mănăstire Cernica, 1925, p. 118.

³ Grigorie COMȘA, *Noua călăuză pentru cunoașterea și combaterea sectelor religioase*, Arad, 1927, p. 181.

⁴ Gheorghe COMȘA, *Pentru neam și lege. Patruzeci cuvântări împotriva adventiștilor și baptiștilor*, Editura Librăriei Diecezane, Caransebeș – P. Suru, București, 1923, p. 183.

having acquired a solid preparation in the field of Orthodox missionary work, from his very first year of episcopal ministry in Arad he engaged fully in this activity, so necessary in Banat, which represented a gateway for sectarian proselytism entering Romania.

Among his first initiatives, the young bishop drafted and published *Instrucțiuni cu privire la activitatea și propaganda misionară în Eparhia Aradului*. Through this work he set himself, as bishop, the goal of bringing back those who had strayed in faith to the bosom of the Church, thereby demonstrating a clear and systematic vision of the missionary activity he would carry out during his ten years of episcopal ministry.

II. The Teaching Ministry of the Priest Expressed through Missionary Preaching

The elevation of the Theological Institute of Arad to the rank of a Theological Academy in 1927 represented a strong signal regarding the necessity of a solid formation for the future priests of the diocese, who would be responsible for diminishing Neo-Protestant proselytism and for catechizing the faithful through preaching. In the previously cited work, *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*, besides a minimal bibliography intended for combating sects, the author included a subchapter entitled *Passages from Holy Scripture by Which the Orthodox Christian Can Immediately Respond to Heretics Who Attack Our Faith*⁵. In the same context the author also made the following optimistic observation: “Many priests prepare their villagers so that they may later become a kind of lay missionaries. It would be very beneficial if the villagers thus prepared were to attend, in turn, a course of one or two months in the diocesan center during the winter”⁶.

At the beginning of the second year of his episcopal ministry, Bishop Grigorie Comșa sent a Pastoral Letter to all the clergy of the diocese, reminding them of the importance and significance of the grace received through ordination:

⁵ Gheorghe COMȘA, *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*, pp. 108-118.

⁶ Gheorghe COMȘA, *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*, p. 100.

“Through consecration, through ordination, we are given the special gift of imparting and administering the Holy Mysteries. This is the principal task. It must be emphasized especially in our own days before those who withdraw from the guidance of the priests. I am thinking of sectarians and others who no longer wish to have anything to do with the priest. It is fitting to remind them of the testimonies of universal Church history and of the testimonies of the history of our Romanian Orthodox Church”⁷.

If in the first part of the hierarch’s message the pastoral work of the clergy is generally justified, having at its center the sanctifying ministry upon which the salvation of the faithful depends, in the second part they are urged to develop as strongly as possible the teaching ministry of enlightening the faithful through the content of the Orthodox faith:

“Teach the people, therefore, through Holy Scripture and through the testimonies of the Holy Tradition, to understand that without the ministry of the priests the soul cannot attain salvation. In this work I have wished to assist Your Reverences through the establishment of the Library of the Orthodox Christian. On the occasion of church consecrations and during canonical visitations, I have observed among our people an immense thirst for religious instruction. I have therefore ordered that these brochures should also reach the people by other means. We must pay the greatest attention to providing the people with religious books. Should anyone be surprised that there are peasants who read Baptist books? Be certain that if we give them Orthodox books, they will cast aside the heretical ones. Encourage everyone, therefore, to contribute to the increase of the fund for religious propagation. In this way our spiritual treasury will grow. Let us not forget that in the past we had a national ideal

⁷ “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi, Preoți și Diaconi din Eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, L (1926) 1, p. 1.

which today has been fulfilled. Now we must have the ideal of nourishing the soul with the divine food without which we cannot live”⁸.

The inspired pastoral tone of the Arad hierarch was meant to persuade the clergy to place greater emphasis on the teaching ministry, transmitting the content of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition to their parishioners, following the example of their archpastor and making it accessible through brochures and religious books.

For the religious edification of the faithful, Bishop Grigorie Comșa also recommended that priests read two books necessary for their ongoing formation, enabling them to catechize their parishioners effectively. The first was the *Catehismul Creștinului ortodox*, written by Antony, former Metropolitan of Kiev, in which the teaching of the faith is explained. The second belonged to His Eminence Archbishop Gurie of Bessarabia and dealt with *The Service of God of a Good Priest: Father John Sergiev of Kronstadt*⁹. If the priests themselves were to nourish their spiritual life through beneficial books, the hierarch suggested, they would then be able to nourish the faithful in a similar manner. The pastoral letter also paid special attention to young people, who needed to be more actively involved in the life of the Church and better catechized and guided by the priests:

“Only an organized youth, and not one left to itself, will be able to shape the society of tomorrow. Therefore I earnestly ask you to give all your attention to the establishment of the youth circle «St. George». The statutes of the circle are published within the Statutes of the Association of Clergy of the Orthodox Metropolis of Transylvania. We shall greatly appreciate the efforts of Your Brotherhoods in this regard. I announce already that when I come among the people I shall express the desire to visit the youth circle and to see how it functions. For this reason the Reverend

⁸ “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi, Preoți și Diaconi din Eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, L (1926) 1, p. 2.

⁹ “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi, Preoți și Diaconi din Eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, L (1926) 1, pp. 2-3.

priests are asked to establish these circles, requesting from the diocesan missionary any necessary clarification”¹⁰.

From the clear organizational directives addressed to the clergy, one may observe the remarkable missionary capacity and full commitment of Bishop Grigorie Comșa. He paid close attention both to mobilizing the clergy in pastoral work and to the formation of young people, a fact that led to notable missionary results throughout the entire diocese. It is worth noting that the hierarch’s initiative proved successful: the “St. George” Society was established in 169 parishes, while for the female students of the secondary schools in Arad and Timișoara the “St. Catherine” Society was founded. At the same time, the “Frăția Ortodoxă Română” was also organized in Arad, and the religious movement “Oastea Domnului” was supervised and guided by priests¹¹.

In the following year, Bishop Grigorie Comșa addressed a second pastoral letter to all the clergy of the diocese, outside the context of the great church feasts, with the purpose of further motivating the priests to proclaim the word of the Gospel, this mission having been entrusted by the Savior Jesus Christ to the Holy Apostles and later established through the canons of the Church. An additional reason for revitalizing preaching activity was the increase in the number of sectarians, which represented a challenge addressed to the priests to strive for the preservation of the faithful within the Orthodox Church through preaching, catechesis, and the strengthening of religiosity and morality within society.

The hierarch’s message, characterized by strong missionary overtones, reads as follows:

“The Apostle of the Nations, in his Second Epistle to Timothy (ch. IV, vv. 2–3), commands all those who are engaged in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ in the following manner:
«Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove,

¹⁰ “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi, Preoți și Diaconi din Eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, L (1926) 1, p. 3.

¹¹ See Miron ERDEI, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat în prima jumătate a secolului al XX-lea*, Editura Universității din Oradea, Oradea, 2001, p. 41.

rebuke, exhort with all patience and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires they will heap up teachers for themselves, having itching ears». The Church, from ancient times, has given force to this command through zealous preaching, but also through disciplinary means, through Apostolic Canon 58, which prescribes excommunication for a bishop or presbyter who does not fulfill this duty, or even deposition in cases of greater negligence. Likewise, Canon 19 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council states: «The leaders of the Churches ought every day, and especially on Sundays, to teach both the clergy and the people the words of piety». We do not know whether there have been, or will ever be again, times more pressing than those of today for the diligent proclamation of the Word of God.

We emphasized the necessity of preaching as intensively as possible among the Romanian people long before we received episcopal consecration; and since we have come to this highly responsible spiritual office, we continually reflect upon the shortcomings of preaching and upon the means of removing those shortcomings”¹².

From the text of the pastoral letter there emerges the missionary and pastoral imperative of proclaiming the Gospel “in season and out of season” by bishops and priests alike, any neglect of this duty being sanctioned by the canons of the Church. The example offered by the hierarch himself, including his zeal for preaching and writing sermons during the time when he served as a deacon in Sibiu and Bucharest, became a strong incentive for the clergy of Banat, all the more so since after the war the activity of sectarian groups had visibly intensified.

The volumes of sermons published by Bishop Grigorie Comșa were made available both to priests and to the faithful in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the saving teaching of the Orthodox Church. To this the bishop added another motivation of a pastoral nature:

¹² “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi și Preoți din eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LI (1927) 10, p. 1.

“Through these sermons we also wish to assist those of our priests who are less experienced in the work of preaching and to make their preaching ministry easier, thus sparing both ourselves and them from the severity of Apostolic Canon 58. And when we thus come to the assistance of our brother priests, we also wish the Reverend Protopresbyters to make known to them that we earnestly expect them to fulfill with even greater zeal their duty as ministers of the Divine Word, for this is demanded both by the salvation of the souls entrusted to their pastoral care and by the rigor of canonical discipline”¹³.

A noteworthy and less commonly encountered aspect in preaching practice is the exhortation of the Arad hierarch that priests should not preach only on Sundays and feast days:

“No priest should think that the ministry of the Word requires only great and select occasions. Even the seemingly insignificant occasions, such as the minor services found in the Euchologion, are very suitable opportunities for sowing the divine Word in the hearts of Christians, especially on the occasion of the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. Naturally, such preaching will not follow rhetorical rules, but will take the form of thoughtful conversations on small religious themes”¹⁴.

Thus the young hierarch succeeded in motivating the clergy even further to make frequent and wise use of occasional exhortations, complementing the regular sermon. The transition from pastoral care through frequent preaching to missionary activity through apologetic preaching therefore becomes neither difficult nor distant when there exists pastoral zeal and generous dedication to the mission of the Church.

¹³ “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi și Preoți din eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LI (1927) 10, p. 2.

¹⁴ “Scrisoarea Pastorală a P. Sf. Episcop Grigorie către Prea Cucernicii Protopopi și Preoți din eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LI (1927) 10, p. 2.

III. The Organization of Missionary Activity in the Diocese of Arad

A dynamic, combative, and consistent personality, Bishop Grigorie Comșa used as a necessary premise for missionary work a foundation that already existed within the Metropolis of Transylvania, namely the so-called “missions for the people”¹⁵. In the preface to his work bearing the same title, published in 1926, the hierarch describes the purpose of these missions, which differs from that of religious–pastoral circles or priestly conferences:

“The missions are called to bring the clergy closer to the people and the people closer to the clergy. Their role is to demonstrate that in our Church as well effective work is carried out for the people. The goodwill and spiritual purity of the leaders of the Church can accomplish beautiful works in this field (...) We also desire that our intellectuals participate in the missions together with the people”¹⁶.

The work opens with several reflections of the Arad hierarch concerning the relativity of our earthly life and the search for inner peace as preparation for attaining salvation:

“Man does not find complete fulfillment in this life; therefore most people prepare themselves for the life after bodily death. Here on earth we pass between good and evil deeds like a spring of water flowing among rocks and smooth places. We journey through life between virtues and sins as little birds slip among branches bearing red-golden fruit. Desires and passions invade our inner being, and whenever we allow them to rule us even

¹⁵ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, coll. *Biblioteca Creștinului Ortodox*, nr. 18, T.T.D., Arad, 1926, p. 22.

¹⁶ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor. O lămurire*, coll. *Biblioteca Creștinului Ortodox*, nr. 18, pp. 3-4.

slightly, we lose our peace. But whoever possesses even a small measure of virtue finds peace and consolation. The more virtue we possess, the more reconciled and at peace we become. Therefore salvation can be found only through the greatest virtue”¹⁷.

Within this missionary message one may discern a call to the renewal of moral and religious life, to the renunciation of evil thoughts and deeds that disturb inner peace, and to the cultivation of virtues. The missionary strategy developed through these missions for the people was relatively simple and easy to implement:

“Just as the apostles were sent by the Savior, so today it is necessary to send several priests (usually three) into a certain village, where they may hear confessions and administer Holy Communion to the people of that village and of the neighboring villages. The people gladly listen to the sermons of visiting priests and confess to them. Similar missions are also held among peoples of other confessions, so that every ten years a mission is held in each parish”¹⁸.

In the continuation of the pastoral message contained in this brochure, Bishop Grigorie Comșa explains the manner in which the priest should instruct the faithful about these missions, preparing beforehand the address he will deliver to the parishioners prior to the beginning of such a mission. In order to capture the attention and interest of the faithful, the priest must reveal to them the importance of caring for the soul in a historical context in which people are excessively preoccupied with material concerns:

“A more serious care for the soul is the most important calling of our days. Never has there been a greater need than now to care for the soul. Never have people clung more strongly to earthly things than today. Parents complain that their children do not

¹⁷ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, p. 6.

obey them, while children, once grown, complain that they did not have good parents. The modern man cares only for earthly matters, forgetting the soul. Yet this is not good. Circumstances will scarcely change unless we first desire to change our spiritual state as the Savior requires. The evil examples of today—murders, thefts, lies, robberies, hatred, the desire for revenge, immorality, and wastefulness—press heavily upon us (...) It is time to realize that each of us is responsible for the present condition. Awakening is urgently necessary”¹⁹.

After these warnings regarding the decline of religiosity and morality among the people, the priest is urged to impress upon his listeners the importance of attending such spiritual events, since they will have the opportunity to receive instruction and the grace of the Holy Mysteries:

“Yes, my beloved! On the occasion of the missions we listen to the Word of God, we partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we offer prayers for the sick (the Holy Unction), and perform other acts of the true and Orthodox faith of our Church. For this reason the missionary priests come—to strengthen the people in the faith, to guide them and sanctify them (...) Therefore prepare yourselves for the missions, remembering that you will be called to confess your sins to those priests. Consider that you are then obliged to reveal all your shortcomings and to turn back to God. Do not lose the opportunity to take part in the missions”²⁰.

In comparison with other Christian confessions, where such religious activities may last between three and ten days, Bishop Grigorie Comșa decided that the missions should take place over the course of two days:

“We take the case in which the mission begins on Saturday evening at Vespers and continues until after Vespers on Sunday. We choose this case so that the results of the beginning may determine a possible expansion of the program. We limit

¹⁹ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, pp. 6-7.

²⁰ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, pp. 8-9.

ourselves to this interval in order to conduct true missions in accordance with the character of the divine services and not to embrace too much material at once”²¹.

Besides the necessary integration of the missionary activity within the traditional liturgical schedule, so that the sermons would not be detached from the worship of the Church, the hierarch also indicated the most appropriate period of the year for organizing such missions, namely the months when villagers were no longer occupied with agricultural work, from November until March²².

The recommendations offered by the hierarch concerning the program of the two days of mission are precise and detailed, providing, as has already been observed, models of sermons for the priests who act as organizers. Following the model sermon through which the parish priest announces the event about two months in advance, the following is now the model sermon for welcoming the missionary priests before the Vespers service:

“Beloved Brother Priests, by coming today among us, Your Reverences show the great love you bear for the people who desire to follow Christ. You show the desire to assist me, the humble village priest, in the work of raising the spiritual life of the people. These people wish to have a soul as pure as possible (...) These Orthodox peasants understand that just as a blade of grass is bound to the earth, so must they bind their souls to the Romanian Orthodox Church. These peasants understand very well that their life cannot be separated from eternity and that only faith breaks the unjust barriers of a world driven by interests. We realize that these peasants, though unlearned in the knowledge of today’s world, are also created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore we must all give them the opportunity to rise toward God on the wings of faith, love, and Christian hope. We thank you, beloved brothers, for coming to our parish for this purpose”²³.

²¹ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, p. 13.

²² See Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, p. 13.

²³ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, pp. 14-15.

A strong missionary emphasis can be observed in this address proposed by the hierarchy for the parish priest to deliver. It expresses gratitude for the efforts of the missionary priests and indirectly encourages the villagers to show interest in the meaning of this spiritual and liturgical event. According to the same instructions, the local priest and one of the visiting missionary priests would serve the Vespers, after which the second missionary priest would deliver a sermon on the Sacrament of Repentance, aiming to make the faithful aware of its meaning and importance.

The outline of the sermon proposed by Bishop Grigorie Comșa for the missionary priest includes references to the foundations of the Sacrament of Repentance as well as to certain ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Seneca, who emphasized the imperative of self-knowledge and the acknowledgment of one's mistakes, which corresponds to an impartial judgment of one's actions. Christianity, however, goes much further, as the Arad hierarchy explains:

“The deep sorrow for the deeds we have committed and the decision not to sin again must also be confessed. By nature man is inclined to share with others his experiences and sorrows. Only in this way does the soul find peace. Thus confession is a natural impulse of the soul. Sincerity is a beautiful virtue and has great value in the moral world. To be sincere in confession before someone means first to examine oneself and then to struggle against temptations. Without a sincere recognition of what we are, we cannot correct ourselves. Every Christian must therefore examine himself as if he were his own enemy. Let us set aside self-love; let us not believe that greed is thrift, that idleness is rest, or that lying proves intelligence! No and again no! Rather let us believe that: 1) through prayer we can come to know ourselves better—divine grace will teach us to know ourselves; 2) we must take into account how often we have committed grave sins (...) All this self-examination and self-knowledge must be brought before the spiritual father for several reasons. Among others, because a person judges himself

rather partially, while the spiritual father is objective. Moreover, he has the divine right to hear and forgive the sins of people”²⁴.

In this passage it should be noted that the missionary exhortation urging the faithful to confess before the spiritual father is formulated by the hierarch in a persuasive tone, the content being argued on psychological, philosophical, and theological grounds. The call to the Sacrament of Confession is presented in an existential manner, with the purpose of convincing the faithful to respond positively and not miss this opportunity. It must also be emphasized that the hierarch sought indirectly to motivate priests even more strongly to engage wholeheartedly in this pastoral and missionary work intended to revitalize the religious life of the diocese. He himself served as the most eloquent model for the clergy through both the written and spoken word, through the organization of funds for religious propagation, and through the brochures distributed to the faithful.

As a result of delivering such a missionary sermon with conviction, it was expected that many of the faithful would confess after Vespers. Others could do so the following day, Sunday, during Matins, as recommended by the local hierarch. During the Divine Liturgy, the second missionary priest would preach on the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in order to prepare the faithful spiritually to receive it worthily. In this case as well, Bishop Grigorie Comșa provided missionary priests with a model sermon, possessing clear missionary characteristics, so that the large participation of the faithful at the Divine Liturgy might be used in the most fruitful way.

A portion of this address, liturgical–apologetic in character and with missionary significance, reads as follows:

“The life of the Savior is the proof of the greatest love. After completing His earthly activity and departing bodily from the world, He left us, as a fountain of love, the mystery of Holy Communion. For divine wisdom found a way for the Lord to remain among people with His whole being, although in the body He had ascended into heaven. Through this mystery the Savior

²⁴ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, pp. 17-18.

shows us a special love. The extent to which one can endure and sacrifice reveals the measure of love. People love out of pretense, out of interest, or sometimes for the sake of love itself, but the Savior loves truly and without reward, even knowing that He would be mocked through this very mystery. Yet He established the sacrament, showing boundless love also in this, that He descends upon the Holy Altar and goes through the hands of the priests to the sick in their homes and in hospitals, bringing blessing. Here then is true love. Here is the confirmation of the words: «I will not leave you orphans» (John 14, 18). And He has not left us, for through this mystery He is present with us. That He is present is not told to us by some ordinary man, but by the Lord Himself through the voice of the Holy Evangelist John (6, 54–56). Engrave well in your minds the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, for the Lord is present in Holy Communion”²⁵.

The missionary dimension of this discourse becomes evident through the direct affirmation that the Savior Christ instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist as an expression of His sacrificial love through which He brought about our salvation. Undoubtedly, the hierarch of Arad was also indirectly addressing Adventists and Baptists who, by abandoning the Sacrament of Repentance, had weakened the importance and meaning of the Eucharist, which they regarded merely as a repetition of the Last Supper.

At the end of his ten years of episcopal ministry, the balance of the pastoral and missionary activity carried out through these “missions for the people” proved to be remarkable and was appreciated by all the contemporaries of Bishop Grigorie Comșa.

IV. The First National Congress of Missionary Priests

As an official recognition of the remarkable pastoral–missionary work carried out in his diocese by Bishop Grigorie Comșa, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided that the first Congress of Missionary

²⁵ Grigorie COMȘA, *Misiuni pentru popor*, pp. 20-21.

Priests in Romania would take place in Arad between 25–28 October 1928. In the address delivered at the opening of the congress, the Arad hierarch warned of the danger posed by sectarian proselytism that was confronting the Romanian Orthodox Church. Alongside this danger, he also identified the harmful effects of religious indifferentism:

“There are many people who no longer wish to know God, who are not ashamed before their fellow men, who no longer take into account the law of their fathers or the secure conditions of a blessed future. The relationship between ruler and subject, parent and child has become distorted, and we often long for something from the past when we see that the sense of authority and respect is lacking (...) Unfortunately, many know nothing else than to throw mud. Pessimism combined with petty interests rolls like an avalanche over the body of the nation, producing disappointment and desolation”²⁶.

Faced with this rather somber description of Romanian society, Bishop Grigorie Comșa did not lose courage but sought to transmit a message of encouragement to all the missionary priests of Romania:

“Alongside this sad picture we also see inappropriate attacks directed against the clergy and the supreme leaders of the Church. We see systematic attacks and many other shortcomings that ought to awaken us. We must realize that the world is entitled to expect from us self-sacrifice and conscientiousness, and instead of campaigns against one another we must offer the world the true image of what labor and strength in the field of souls means (...) We are in a position to mobilize all our vitality as a missionary Church. A state of inertia is the fate of the weak.

²⁶ “Discursul Prea Sfinției Sale Dr. Grigorie Gh. Comșa, Episcopul Aradului, rostit la Congresul preoților misionari”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LII (1928) 45-46, pp. 1-2. This speech was published under the title *Biserica Misionară* in coll. *Biblioteca Creștinului Ortodox*, nr. 50, Arad, 1928.

May the good God preserve us from being told that we live in inertia (...) I have said these things so that we may better understand that both the state of rest represented by religious indifferentism and the hostile attitude toward the religious spirit must be corrected through the living forces of our holy Orthodox Church, around which all our attention must be concentrated, we who have gathered here in the name of Christ”²⁷.

His affirmation that the Romanian Orthodox Church is a missionary Church was fully supported by the expanding activity that was developing not only in Banat and Transylvania but also in the other historical Romanian provinces, to which the Arad hierarch referred in his opening address. Considering that he delivered this speech before missionary priests from across the entire country, it was all the more necessary that they fully assume their responsibility and commit themselves wholeheartedly to this activity, which was so important for the destiny and life of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

After presenting the internal and external causes that required the development of a successful pastoral mission, Bishop Grigorie Comșa brought to the attention of his listeners the message that Archbishop and Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan had indirectly addressed to the Romanian clergy from the rostrum of the Senate, declaring that

“we need whole persons, unbroken moral characters, reborn souls, purified consciences, who know how to interpret the purposes of life and possess the moral strength to translate them into deeds. His Eminence appealed to us, the clergy, to form such people through militant missionary work, helping people to understand that today God also speaks through us. This appeal springs from a knowledge of the realities of our spiritual life. How could we fail to heed the voice of the archpastor concerned for the fate of his Church?”²⁸

²⁷ “Discursul Prea Sfinției Sale Dr. Grigorie Gh. Comșa...”, p. 2.

²⁸ “Discursul Prea Sfinției Sale Dr. Grigorie Gh. Comșa...”, p. 3.

In order to illustrate a series of positive results in missionary activity, the Arad hierarch offered the following examples:

“A great number of new parishes and deaneries have been established. Pastoral conferences and priestly circles are in full activity. Cultural committees have been formed in parishes, organizing lectures on religious and moral themes (...) In the Diocese of Arad funds for the poor have been established in almost every parish, as well as at the diocesan center. In all dioceses parish libraries are being founded. In Arad, Chişinău, Oradea-Mare, Râmnic, Buzău, and Bucharest religious series of publications are being issued. In the Metropolis of Transylvania the youth societies ‘St. George’ have been established in most parishes”²⁹.

V. Conclusion of the Address and Subsequent Missionary Developments

In the final part of the address delivered at the opening of the congress, Bishop Grigorie Comşa makes a direct reference to the problem of sectarianism that was confronting the Romanian Orthodox Church:

“It remains to touch briefly upon the sectarian problem (...) I indicate only as guidance that there are two means for combating sectarians. First, the system of pastoral care for souls must be intensified so that every soul may feel drawn into the current of Christian life. Second, the truths of the faith must be known by the broad masses of the people. Those who have strayed will not be brought back by the police, but in the name of Christ. The vast field of individual pastoral care must be attempted more frequently. If the Savior had waited to be invited by Zacchaeus, He might never have entered his house. Therefore let us seek out the lost, like the Good Shepherd”³⁰.

²⁹ “Discursul Prea Sfinţiei Sale Dr. Grigorie Gh. Comşa...”, pp. 3-4.

³⁰ “Discursul Prea Sfinţiei Sale Dr. Grigorie Gh. Comşa...”, p. 4.

Bishop Grigorie Comșa of Arad, host and organizer of the National Congress of Missionary Priests, concluded his address with a moving and vibrant message, both mobilizing and encouraging:

“You are welcome in the name of the Orthodox Christian conscience, which must be deepened and clarified ever more. May the good God help us to set out together on the path of evangelization, one that will shake the public conscience of the country and bring increasingly to light the necessity of the salvation of souls and the struggle against sin. It is not because we have sectarians that we must begin a common struggle, but because a strong Christian offensive will form the Orthodox conscience—the only one capable of making us more truly fulfilled”³¹.

The theoretical and practical consequences of this first national missionary congress would become visible in the following years, its fruits being evaluated and measured at subsequent congresses held in Chișinău and Cernăuți. Until then, attention should be given to the assessment made by Bishop Grigorie Comșa after four years of episcopal ministry, published in a pastoral letter dated 1 July 1929. After a brief presentation of his pastoral, missionary, and charitable achievements in the Diocese of Arad, the hierarch outlined the following objectives that were to be fulfilled according to the projects assumed at his consecration as bishop:

“We shall strive to strengthen the consciousness of the faithful so that all may understand that we need cultural and parish houses, parish choirs and libraries, funds for the poor, and many other necessities. We possess an Orthodox consciousness, but for the younger generation it must be shaped according to the circumstances of today, so that no Orthodox Christian may yield to materialistic conceptions of life and no soul may fall into

³¹ “Discursul Prea Sfinției Sale Dr. Grigorie Gh. Comșa...”, p. 4.

sectarian error. Therefore we shall give catechesis a decisive importance. We shall encourage those who are capable to publish sound catechetical materials. We ourselves will endeavor to hold catechetical lessons with pupils from primary and secondary schools (...) Good catechesis will help us guide more effectively those entrusted to us, and the faithful will better understand the meaning of the sanctifying gifts of the Holy Mysteries. We shall also establish Sunday Schools so that the truth may be made ever clearer, namely that the vitality and stability of our church organization are founded upon the participation of all.”³²

One can observe first the close relationship between pastoral–missionary work and social–cultural activity, deepened and consolidated during the four years of episcopal ministry. The priority on the hierarch’s agenda was the formation of the Orthodox consciousness of the youth, who needed to be enlightened and instructed in the knowledge of the truth of faith. From this derives the necessity of organizing a solid catechetical program beginning with primary and secondary school levels, complemented by Sunday Schools whose activity would reinforce the religious instruction and catechesis offered in church.

In order to gain a broader national ecclesiastical perspective on Bishop Grigorie Comșa, it is useful to present and analyze a fragment from the address he delivered at the Second Congress of Missionary Priests, held in Chișinău between 25–28 October. The conference of the Arad hierarch was entitled *Sectele religioase ca primejdie pentru statele naționale* and within it he demonstrated the harmful effects of the sectarian phenomenon in Romanian society:

“The scholar seeks the truth. The most beautiful struggle is the struggle for religious truth. The conduct of those who only pretend to fight for religious truth is reprehensible. Sectarians debase the truth in order to create material advantages, and this is a sin. Our Church has created spiritual goods. The Romanian

³² Grigorie COMȘA, “Scrisoare Pastorală către P. C. Protopopi și Preoți și către toți credincioșii din Eparhia Aradului”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LIII (1929) 29, p. 2.

soul, with all its qualities, as well as the language we speak, are creations of the Church. Sectarians renounce these goods. Through their publications they have corrupted our language, and in the villages, instead of love, they have sown hatred among brothers. Sectarianism is a danger for national states. They do not revolt directly against the State, which has means of retaliation at its disposal, but against the Church, which they consider an appendage of the State”³³.

The argument developed by the Arad hierarch begins with the analogy between scientific truth and religious truth, the search for and discovery of the latter representing a noble and disinterested undertaking. Sectarians are accused of being guided by material interests in their evangelizing activity, while their struggle against the Orthodox faith and the Christian traditions of the Romanian people is, in essence, directed against the state itself. The most evident and harmful consequence at the social level is the sowing of discord among people on religious grounds. The style of the conference is clear and coherent; its content is presented in a systematic and concise manner, while the tone of expression is both engaging and persuasive.

Within the enthusiastic atmosphere of the Second National Congress of Missionary Priests of Romania held in Chișinău, Metropolitan Gurie of Bessarabia announced the founding of the journal *Misionarul*, intended to become a useful instrument in the work of priests and a source of religious knowledge for the faithful. On the same occasion, the Bishop of Arad received the appellation “the Missionary Bishop”, in recognition of his exceptional involvement in missionary activity through his spoken word, his writings, and his entire pastoral work carried out both at the diocesan and the national level.

In order to conclude the series of his participations in the National Missionary Congresses, mention should also be made of the paper entitled “Călăuza misionară”, which Bishop Grigorie Comșa presented at the Third Congress, held in Cernăuți between 27–30 September 1930. Starting from the observation that “*the Romanian Orthodox Church needs a single and*

³³ “Al II-lea Congres al misionarilor ortodocși din Țară”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LIII (1929) 53, 10 p. 5.

powerful defensive front against the stormy waves that strike it from all sides,” the hierarch continued:

“In our days there is a strongly felt need for every Orthodox Christian to prove through deeds and faith that he is one with the great Andrei Baron of Șaguna. Being firmly convinced that the Association of Missionary Priests of Romania is a formidable force for the defense and consolidation of our ancestral Orthodoxy, I greet this congress in the name of the Diocese of Arad. We feel that the times are difficult and demand that our hearts beat as one; we feel that we must all be as active as possible. We need unity of thought and action, for we have great things to accomplish. We must strengthen the Orthodox Church, which is despised not only by those who hate it, but also by people who claim to love it (...) If for 1900 years we have not needed strangers to our nation and faith to speak to us about Christ and His teaching, we do not need them now either. We ourselves must become the regenerators of early Christianity. Every moment lost may bring us great misfortune. Let us reserve our rest for after the struggle, not before it. We need courage, a united front, and solidarity in our work”³⁴.

This was a vibrant, mobilizing, and captivating address for the audience, similar to those delivered at previous congresses, in which Bishop Grigorie Comșa focused on two principal directions of action. The first concerned the proclamation, defense, and consolidation of Orthodox consciousness and spiritual life; the second involved the rejection and counteraction of sectarian proselytism, which was becoming increasingly aggressive and persuasive. The strongest missionary imperative emphasized was the unity of thought and action, to be expressed through the creation of a common front for missionary work at the national level.

The same stylistic, grammatical, and literary characteristics can be observed here as well, making the address convincing, engaging, and

³⁴ “Al III-lea Congres general al preoșilor misionari ortodocși din România”, in: *Biserica și Școala*, LIV (1930) 41, p. 6.

lively. The strength and concision of the arguments increase both the value of the discourse and its impact upon the listeners.

In concluding this study, it should also be mentioned that Bishop Grigorie Comșa, wishing to catechize the faithful of his diocese, published during 1929 in the journal *Biserica și Școala*, in three consecutive issues, a history of the sects present in our country, originally published in the work *Sectele religioase din România* (Bucharest, 1925, 47 pp.)³⁵. Moreover, during the episcopal ministry of Bishop Grigorie Comșa, the journal “Biserica și Școala” became a genuine platform of the Romanian Orthodox Church in its response to sectarian proselytism, the hierarch himself publishing numerous critical analyses concerning the activity of Baptists, Adventists, and other sectarian groups.

³⁵ Filip ALBU, *Opera omiletică a Episcopului Grigorie Comșa (1925-1935)*, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu” din Arad, Arad, 2011, p. 99.