

THE CONCEPT OF "MISSION" AND ITS SPECIFICS IN THE ORTHODOXY – AN APPROACH BASED ON THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE IN THE EUROPE OF XXI CENTURY

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Abstract

The christian mission represents the action of the Gospel proclamation in the world, by the Holy Apostles and their descendants. The Church's mission is the act of Christianization, of the world's evangelization, an apostolic work by which the kingdom of God embraces the time and space of the human history. It should be noted that in understanding the concept of mission in Christian and religious context of the contemporary society, it is necessary a biblical, theological, dogmatic, spiritual and historical review of the concept. The Panorthodox vision is the one that emphasizes missionary work of the Orthodox Churches. In this regard, this mission must represent the Orthodoxy in its canonical, liturgical and dogmatic unity and musn't bring any adjustments to this unity regardless of the space and time of its development. In this respect, we find an unity of the Orthodox missionary specificity in the diversity of its propagation space, of the attitudes and characteristic specificities of each nation that embraced the Orthodox Christian faith. For the Orthodoxy, mission was identified and continues to do so, with the tradition and the continuity of the Church in time, with the perpetual transmission of the faith from generation to generation. In this way, the objective of the Orthodox mission has been one expressed in an intensive manner, by keeping people in the Orthodox faith and identifying them with this faith over time. To the current geopolitical situation in Europe marked by the experience of migration, the counsciousness of the Christian missionarism developed and manifested in its various lines of propagation, needs to adress in a direct and democratic way.

Keywords: intensive mission, The Orthodox Church, Christianity, revelation, Enlightenment, the experience of migration.

Introduction

The action of preaching the Gospel of Christ, held by the Orthodox Church reached along its history numerous areas of development of the political-social and cultural-religious organization in the administrative-territorial spaces, in which has made its presence

felt. This activity of the Church kept and still keeps the name of „mission”. The term „mission” has caused and continues to do so, much more controversy and countless debates about its use, in which designates different actions of the Church during its history and activities. The semantics of this term has developed one by one many new directions of research, given by the reinterpretation of the concept of „mission” in the various cultural currents and geopolitical areas of propagation.

The necessity of explaining the concept of “mission – missionary – misionarism”, of its role in the Orthodox Church and of its development in the semantic cultural space, appears as a pressing need due to the fact that most often the definition, from the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language presents and develops only the “general” side of the term, disregarding its particularities.

This paper is intended as an objective and systematic statement by explaining and presenting the role of the “mission” concept in the Christian Orthodox Church’s terminology, of its evolution and development and last but not least of this term’s specifics in the Orthodoxy.

1. The specification of the concepts

By the etymological point of view, the term of *mission* comes from the Latin *mitto-ere*, its Greek correspondent being that of *apostoleo* which means *to send*. In the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language the word *missionary/missionaries* has its affiliation in the french *missionnaire* and designates a person (usually a monk or priest) sent – by a church's authority – to spread Christianity in the territories inhabited by the people with another dominant religion. The term was taken over by the Church and its meaning became wider by speaking about the mission even within the Christian Church.

Thus, the Orthodoxy has harnessed the intensive mission by highlighting the Church's role in the local community *where two or three are gathered in my name...* (Matthew 18:20) and its contribution in the development of religious and moral principles as standard behaviour. In this regard, the missionary activity represents a visible form of the Holy Trinity’s love towards man, updated in the

most efficient way by Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit and left as an inheritance to His Church for the man's salvation.

The Panorthodox vision is the one which underlines the Orthodox Churches missionary work. In this regard, the mission must represent the Orthodoxy in the canonical, liturgical and dogmatic unity and bring no adjustments to this unity regardless of time and space of its development and progress. We encounter, in this sense, a unity of the missionary-orthodox specific in the diversity of its propagation space, in the attitudes and specific characteristics of each nation that embraced the Christian Orthodox faith.

The Church and the Orthodox theology use with caution the missionary terminology outlined in the Western Christianity, given the fact that over the centuries, the term mission was and is associated with the idea and the practice of proselytism. Because of this, the Orthodox Church makes a clear distinction between *mission*, as sense of Church's Apostolic fundamental vocation to proclaim the Gospel and *missions* as evangelization activities of a confession or denomination in an unchristian space that often were related either to the colonization process or either to the political and cultural oppression¹.

The Christian mission represents the action of the Gospel proclamation in the world by the Apostles and their descendants. The Church's mission is the act of Christianization, of world evangelization, an apostolic work through which the Kingdom of God embraces the time and space of human history. It should be noted that in the understanding the concept of mission in Christian and religious context of contemporary society, it is necessary a biblical, theological, dogmatic, spiritual and historical analyze of the concept. This is due to the fact that nowadays Christianity is represented by the Church of the first millennium, which continues the apostolic and patristic tradition in the Orthodox Church and also by the historical confessions, by Roman-Catholic Church, by the protestant Churches, to which are added also Christian sects appeared in the Christian space of the Reformation².

¹ Ion Bria, *Martyria-Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1980, p. 3.

² Pr. Gheorghe Petraru, *Ortodoxie și Prozelitism*, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2000, p. 21.

For the Orthodoxy mission was identified and continues to do so with the Church's tradition and continuity in time, with the perpetual transmission of the faith from generation to generation. In this way, the objective the Orthodox mission was one expressed in an intensive manner by keeping people in the Orthodox faith and identifying them in time with it, and not in an extensive way, specific in the West through which they wanted to conquest and to establish new Christian boundaries.

For this reason, the Orthodox Church was considered for a long time as a „non-missionary Church” – sometimes being considered even an attractive place for mission „terra missionis” without taking into account the cultural-religious also political and social differences between the eastern and the western Europe, the fact that the missionary methodology was a different one, that the missionary imperative of the Orthodox Church is more evident, that preaching the Gospel and Divine Liturgy are directly interrelated, that the center of the missionary work is represented by the Eucharist and last but not least, that the Orthodoxy in its structure is a dynamic and missionary Church³.

The duty of the Church is to fulfill its mission properly, to preach, to call, by respecting the freedom and the human free will with which God has endowed him. The man is not saved by force, against his will, but he is free to choose which way he goes and also to choose the principles he uses⁴. God knows human nature and thinking, but although he foresees which judgment the man can take, God never predetermines this.

The Church's mission is based on Christ's mission and the understanding of this requires primarily a transposition into practice of the Trinitarian theology. In this regard, the Trinitarian theology is the one which show us that God Himself is the life in communion and that His commitment in the history, follows to attract humanity and in general the creation in communion with the very life of God. Thus, the Church's mission is not primarily intended on spreading or transmission of the intellectual convictions, of moral

³Idem, *Misiologie Ortodoxă, Revelația divină și Misiunea Bisericii*, Editura Pamfilus, Iași, 2002, p. 169.

⁴Pr. prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, EIBMBOR, București, 2002, p. 131.

teachings, but it focuses on the transmission of communion's life which exists in God. The missionary sending is actually the sending of the Holy Spirit: *And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter to be with you forever* (John 14:16), which aims to reveal God's life as a communion-life⁵.

The Church's mission is not limited only on preaching and fulfilling of a part of God's word, but on its entirety: „Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Thus, the sacred mission of the Christian religion represents the salvation and the fulfillment of this mission is closely linked with the assimilation and putting into practice of everyday life the Christian doctrine of divine revelation – God speaks. In this regard, a fundamental condition of the believer's salvation is the knowing of God and the appropriation through faith of religious truths revealed and handed down to us from generation to generation. When we talk about knowledge, about the recognition or the experience of God, we speak in terms of Christianity, namely how we discovered Him during our different development: a man comes to know and to reveal God because „God was the Lord and He revealed to us” (Psalm 117:27).

2. The divine Revelation – missionary Christian Orthodox basis

The term revelation requires an unique dissemination meaning, that it can be extremely problematic in trying to establish the significance of this concept, that goes beyond history, starting from a purely etymological establishing – in this case: *reveler/revelation* – discovery of a hidden thing, removing a veil to discover⁶. The concept of revelation has in the Christian theology a conceptual history which deserves reflection. Instead, the significance of nowadays – which widens the revelation to radical self-meditation of God in Jesus Christ – is relatively recent and is revealed in comparison to the thinking of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, its starting point. If we approach the concept of revelation to what it

⁵Ion Bria, *Confessing Christ Today. An Orthodox Consultation in „International Review of Mission”*, (1975), nr. 253, p. 77.

⁶Pr. Gheorghe Petraru, *Misiologie Ortodoxă, Revelația divină...*, p. 99.

represents nowadays, we will see it as a specific Christian expression as well as the Christian specific understanding of God. But choosing this face of the revelation concept we must not lose attention on the semantic spectrum which the concept accumulates along its history of use.

Thus, understood as radical self-meditation of God – the concept of *revelation* contains fundamental Christian understanding of God. The subject (the origin), the object (content) and the process (emergence of inter-personal relations between the subject and its receiver) of revelation are – in the Christian work about Holy Trinity – the same with the unique God, *Deus seipsum revelans*. But such understanding of revelation can not leave it in the background or destroy any linguistic explanation, neither the field of application within which they extensively talk about revelation and revelations; and that even more since it has developed by itself finding its explanations in a determined field.

Concluding the aforesaid it appears the idea that only God is the answer of our questions about the representation of the divine revelation. Regarding communicability – because the target point of God self-meditation is the society and the humanity and because God is thus manifested in them and for them – the revelation is based on the approaching perspective of the world, a concept of perception, and in this sense we can talk about an aesthetic concept. In order to be understood, the revelation must be perceptible and susceptible and last but not least, must be able to be experienced. Thus, any prematurely understanding can not be released in the linguistic process for one reason: their own understanding can not be isolated or uncommunicable⁷.

Treating the relationship between *revelation* and *revelations* is required particularly because a revelation, understood as a total and radical self-communication of God, it is unique and specific and therefore can not be multiplied or repeated. God reveals to us completely and therefore there is nothing left to be revealed.

To all this is added the concrete and specific connection between God's self-externalization and the spatial and temporal situation of Jesus Christ's existence. However, the problem often arises,

⁷ Hans Waldenfels, *Manuel de théologie fondamentale*, trad. from French by Claude Geffré, Les éditions du Cerf Publishing House, Paris, 1997, p. 250.

even in front of the Holy Scripture, of a multitude of revelations and several religions which present themselves as revealed religions. From here, result that the Christianity can not afford to eliminate this thing without carrying a discussion around the *revelations*. In order to have such an explanation, we can start from the fact that there is no religion that understands – competing with Christianity – the revelation as an openness and a communication from God himself, to the man, only if the latter agrees – by not infringing the free choice principle. In the other religions, God reveals the law, his desire for all and for each of us, the path to the concrete happiness, to salvation through words, dreams and signs; but nowhere God reveals intimate and hidden essence. It is true that the revelations are related to people who, by their behavior in life, seem to be, or are chosen by God: wise people, ascetics and saints, seers and prophets; none of those whom we know, however, were not perceived as the revelation of God in person or to acquire this quality as Jesus Christ has done.

If we look from the perspective according to which the current Christian understanding leaves the revelation without competition, then we can introduce effectively starting from a temporal distinction, the period before Christ and after Christ. Before Christ, history could not be described as a period of growing awareness of divine revelation, which is the embodiment of God in Jesus Christ understood as the highest figure of self-externalization and self-communication of God. The path that leads to Christ is a way of gathering and concentration. After the Son of Man, the process takes on a reverse. We stand on a road of mission and universalisation, the concrete becoming generic. We see it already in the theory of the Christian salvation, according to which everything that represents salvation, it actually represents the High Priest Christ. However, the reality of salvation must always be accessible to all and under any form. There is a tendency to customize. That does not mean that God is not known but rather we, the people, have to seek Him and to find Him in all the things⁸.

Christianity as Church is the revealed religion, the revelation embodying himself in a person – the divine human person of Christ – is called and presents Himself as the alive and absolute

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

Truth of the living man, as the image of God. This Truth is the one which encompasses in it all the truths from the history of humanity; the transcendence of truth which defines the philosophical platonic currents, the historicity of truth that characterizes the modern thinking and the inner truth, brought into light by various existentialist current⁹.

The revelation of God is presented in all its unreachable completeness, when we talk about God, about the unrestrained base, about self-meditation of the Lord Jesus-Christ, about the words and permanent self-externalization which is fulfilled through the gift of divine love. A conscious theology of the Spirit finds here also the road that leads from revelation to revelations, before and after Christ.

III. The Orthodox missionary work developed through the migration of the Romanian in the nineteenth century

If the Church was visibly established as a concrete historical community, in which is realized the people's communion with God through the Pentecost over the apostles, those representing the first cell of the Ecclesia – *hearing these, they were touched to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles: Brothers, what shall we do? And Peter said to them: Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Because for you is given the promise and for your children and for all by far, for any Lord our God will call* (Acts 2:37) – the other people share the salvation offered in Christ through the Church's missionary activity in which becomes permanent the sending of Christ into the world. The Church's mission acquires in this way a profound ecclesiological character and develops itself into the moral conscience of those who call themselves Orthodox Christians. Thus, the mission is presented as a criterion of the Church, a dimension of her being.

Mission presents itself as an essential characteristic of the Church's nature, the extension in time and space of Christ's work. The Church's apostolicity does not mean only the apostolic succession,

⁹René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, *Dictionnaire de theologie fondamentale*, Les éditions du Cerf Publishing House, Paris, 1992, p. 1134.

but also that it keeps untouched the apostolic spirit, so that the Gospel can be preached till the edges of the world.

The mission is seen as a manifestation of the Orthodox spirituality's ethos, whose two poles are the Resurrection and the Pentecost. The Scriptural exhortation from Matthew *by walking, teach all the nations* (Matthew 28:19) is the direct result of the Jesus Christ's Resurrection triumph. It should be noted that Romanian translation differs from the Greek text of the Gospel, where the meaning of the Romanian word *teaching* has the valence of exhortation to *make disciples*. Thus, the Greek text from Matthew might be translated through: *walking and do yourself disciples in all the nations*, version that pulls out further the missionary character of our Lord Jesus Christ Holy Gospel's preaching.

Christian mission appears as a saving call to the people and aims the unity of mankind in the same faith in the Holy Trinity, in the same baptism and the same Eucharist, gathering them in the unique Body of Christ and also its construction in the temple of the Holy Spirit, „through the transposition of the human existence in a liturgical-sacramental rhythm for the transformation and renewal of the world in anticipation of the active renewal in the last kingdom of God, as kingdom of the Holy Trinity”¹⁰. The axis around which the Orthodox community gravitates and also the source from which she has the spiritual strength for her mission is none other but the liturgical life, the Mass. The Orthodox contribution to the mission is determined by the theological and sacramental message and by the meaning of the Liturgy. Thus, the Divine Liturgy represents our gratitude for, and also on behalf of the created and restored world in Christ, the image of the kingdom and the world's transformation in the Church.

After 1990 in Romania were held free elections and the country switched to a new form of organization, a democratic one. The period that followed was called *transition*. A transition which in some socio-economic levels ended, in others is still in progress and in others is described as *agony*. In addition to this economic and social development of the country was held also a religious-cultural development, which again came in all spheres of civil

¹⁰ Valer Bel, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 349.

society's action and tried to answer as far as possible, to the new challenges of Western type that brought with them the beginning of the secularization process. The secularization was known only from *books*, it was not experienced by the R.O.C., to which the Communist Party had limited many responsibilities and duties, but nevertheless has *protected* her from the competition of the new movements and religious challenges, which in the West were already known.

The transition period has continued also in the third millennium, and part of the Romanian population was decided to find their happiness beyond the country. This explains how at the recent presidential elections in Romania, the vote of the Romanians in diaspora (between 8 and 12 million Romanian being abroad) has tipped the balance of power. Thus, we can speak about true *colonies* of Romanian people in Europe (Italy, Greece, Germany, Belgium, France, England and Spain – and lately there is an increase of the number of Romanian in the Nordic countries), groups of people that have engaged in what is called at European level the experience of migration.

At European level the XXI century is marked by a new wave of migration which engaged people from eastern Europe to the west, and also at the same time Europe is urged to accept and provide social and legal counseling for the newcomers from Africa, Asia Minor also Middle East.

In the followings, we will highlight just the aspects of Romanians migration in the west of the old continent and of the Christian *missionary work* promoted by them in the places where they live, missionary work that has developed only because the Romanians, although they are integrated more or less in the new states, they brought with them the traditions and the Orthodox Christian culture.

The new Romanian communities brought with them the desire for communion and prayer. So they organized and established parishes and along with them the Orthodox bishoprics in Europe. In this regard we can mention: the Romanian Orthodox Metropolis of the Western and Southern Europe, consisting of two bishoprics: at Rome, respectively Madrid and the Orthodox Metropolitan of Germany, Central and North Europe formed of the Archdiocese of Germany and the Diocese of Northern Europe from Stockholm.

The new bishoprics established respond not only to the needs of the Romanian Orthodox Christians, but also of the other Christians believers, who want to discover the orthodoxy and also to discover themselves in it. The Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Daniel, mentioned that in the West there is a real and dynamic Orthodoxy. Of course, it is not the majority, but we can not just talk about Orthodox Diaspora (Greek, Russian and Romanian), but it should be noted that there are also Orthodox of French, Swiss, German, Belgian and English origin. Thus this Orthodoxy, though small in terms of numbers, in relation to other religions is still very dynamic, because it has in front people who are interested in Orthodoxy and because it is motivated. In the West, Orthodoxy does not belong only to people who were born Orthodox or who have a cultural context, but to people who often fought with themselves to make this choice¹¹.

The Romanian Orthodox missionary action of the Church, develops in this regard also an extensive form of her work. Thus, R.O.C. becomes interested about the way in which the West Orthodoxy brings testifies of Christ's Church and also about the way it becomes receptive to the desire of young Orthodox, Romanian and not only, to discover and understand the Orthodoxy. Speaking about the waves of Syrian refugees and not only, Romania was not a point of interest for them. It does not represent a point of interest not even for a part of the population. How it could be for others? This is due to the high unemployment rate, to insufficient number of jobs, low wages – minimum wage does not exceed 200 euros – and especially to corruption. However, the European Union has distributed to Romanian a number of refugees who arrived in the country, and their interest is not to integrate but to go on to Western Europe.

Under these circumstances Romanians represent they also a challenge for the West, many of them integrating themselves in the host states new systems of government, respecting both the adoptive country rules, their citizens, as well as the other residents in what is intended to be a new era of globalization.

¹¹ † Daniel Ciubotea, The Metropolitan of Moldaw and Bucovine, *Dăriure și Dăinuire – raze și chipuri de lumină din istoria și spiritualitatea românilor*, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2005, pp. 386-387.

Conclusions

The orthodox concept of the mission depends largely on the understanding of the Church's nature. Specifically, the ecclesiology is the one which determines the missiology.

When a person says that the mission represents the function of the Church, the orthodox people are very suspicious because they are against such instrumental interpretations of the Church. Mission is not a profession but an ecclesiastical act, the Church representing the mission's scope and not vice versa¹². The development and dissemination of the Orthodox Church mission has always kept in mind the geo-political and cultural area in which it was held and also it had as a selective principle the divine Revelation after which it was guided. The church understood that revelation must not be adapted to the culture of the century, but the century culture must be lifted and metamorphosed, through the Church and its theology, up to the sharing of the Revelation's Truth, Jesus Christ. Thus the Church in its complexity has always kept in mind the century's culture, when it has done mission and used that century's culture in a selective manner, by the fact that it has brought its revealed message in the cultural area of a nation or in an encountered social context. In this regard, the Revelation is not the one that changes, but its mode of expression deepens and wears a people's culture coat namely in which it proclaims the word of the Christ's Gospel¹³.

The church remains the same until the end of time, but its mode of declaring and disseminating the revealed truth of faith, wears the coat of the cultures in which it is manifesting. For this reason, the Church is constantly updated, new, vibrant and dynamic, without being confused or diluted in the novelty of any area in which it was manifested. Thus, the Church is called to transfigure each historical context by carrying out its mission, becoming a stable part of the unstable world in which it develops.

¹² Ion Bria, *Martyria-Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox...*, p. 8.

¹³ Pr. prof. acad. Dumitru Popescu, *Hristos, Biserică, Misiune. Relevanța misiunii Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Dunării de Jos, Galați, 2011, p. 75.