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CATECHETICAL SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA

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Summary

Abbreviations.....	6
Introduction.....	7

I. Alexandria of Egypt, short geographical, historical and social

description.....	11
1. Position of Alexandria in the ancient world.....	11
2. Geographical location.....	14
2.1. Geographical coordinates	14
2.2. Intern space configuration.....	24
2.3. Cultural institutions in Alexandria.....	32
3. Hystoriographic references	44
3.1. Alexander the Great and the Alexandria foundation	44
3.2. The Egipt under the pharaos government	49
3.3. The roman conquest and the Christianity birth in Alexandria	53
4. Society of Alexandria.....	63

II. Educational background of Alexandria – a prolific environment for the

Christian education development.....	70
1. Education background in Alexandria	70
2. The education history of the alexandrian school - from general to specific.....	71
2.1. The greek roman education system - terminology and history	72
2.2. Incursion into the greek roman educational framework.....	84
3. Catechumenate in the first Christian centuries	94
3.1. Incursion in the catechumenate history	97
3.2. The catechumenate institution	103
3.3. Literary and theological manuscripts which served the catechumenate.....	112

III. The origins of the Catechetical School of Alexandria.....	120
1. The need of the christian education framework	120
1.1. General aspects on the origins of the Catechetical School of Alexandria	121
1.2. Aspects on the used terminology.....	124
2. Searching for the founder of the Catechetical School of Alexandria.....	127
2.1. Atenagora, a possible start in the history of the Catechetical School of Alexandria.....	127
2.1.1. Biographical data	127
2.1.2. Short description and analysis of the sources.....	128
2.2. Panten, the teacher from the alexandrian education origins	146
2.2.1. Biographical data	146
2.2.2. Short description and analysis of the sources	147
2.2.3. The Catechetical School of Alexandria under government of Panten	152
3. The allegorical method – the specific exegetical method of the Catechetical School of Alexandria.....	155
IV. Clement of Alexandria and Origen, famous officials of the Catechetical School of Alexandria.....	161
1. The climax of the catechetical school.....	161
2. Clement of Alexandria, the symbol of the christian pedagogical origins	164
2.1. Life, personality and creations of Clement from Alexandria.....	164
2.1.1. Biographical data.....	164
2.1.2. Creations of Clement from Alexandria	168
2.1.3. Educational framework of the christian school under Clement of Alexandria.....	175
2.1.4. To whom does the christian education system address?.....	177
2.1.5. The relation teacher-pupil in the educational system.....	181
2.1.5.1. The Teacher Jesus Christ in relation with the humanity.....	181

2.1.5.2. The christian school teacher in relation with the scholars.....	184
2.1.5.3. The heathen teacher in relation with his Scholars pupils.....	187
2.1.6. The scholar-teacher relation in the educational system.....	190
2.1.7. Aims of the alexandrian educational framework.....	192
2.1.8. Teaching- education process tools	199
3. Origen, the famous theologian and alexandrian teacher	203
3.1. Life, personality and literary work of Origen.....	203
3.1.1. Biographic data	203
3.1.2. Literary work of Origen.....	209
3.2. Educational framework in the christian school under Origen.....	213
3.2.1. To whom does the christian education system address?.....	214
3.2.2. The teacher - scholar relation in the educational system.....	218
3.2.2.1. The Teacher Jesus Christ in relation with the humanity	218
3.2.2.2. The christian school teacher in relation with the Scholars	220
3.2.2.3. The heathen teacher in relation with his scholars	223
3.2.3. The teacher - scholar relation in the educational system	224
3.2.4. Aims of the alexandrian educational framework	226
3.2.5. Teaching- education process tools	229

V. Decline periode and closing of the Catechetical School of Alexandria 232

1. Features of this periode.....	232
2. Active personalities of the catechetical school in the 3rd century.....	235
2.1. Heracles	235
2.2. Dionysus of Alexandria.....	239
2.3. Teognost	246
2.4. Pierius	249

3. Early arianism and its influence on the catechetical school organization.....	252
4. Personalities of the catechetical school from the 4th century	256
4.1. Peter the Great.....	256
4.2. Didymus the Blind.....	258
5. The alexandrian reality in the moment of the school closing.....	260
5.1. Transformations occurred in the alexandrian arianism.....	260
5.2. Hipatia	261
Conclusions.....	264
Annexes.....	267
References.....	282
I. Sources.....	282
II. Dictionaries/Encyclopaedia.....	288
III. Books.....	289
IV. Studies.....	294
Curriculum vitae	297

Keywords: Catechetical School of Alexandria, Panten, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Dionysus of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, educational framework, greek roman educational system, catechehumanate, christian education system, teacher-scholar relation and scholar-teacher, educational aims, educational tools.

Abstract

The Catechetical School of Alexandria is associated with the remarkable personalities from the theological field, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen and also with the early Christianity periode when the christian congregations were organizing training courses for those who wanted to become confessorist of the right faith. It is frequently mentioned beside other catechetical schools such as Caesarea in Palestine, Antioch or Jerusalem. The characteristic element between the alexandrian catechetic school and the others (mainly that from Antioch) which is the allegoric method.

Therefore, the topic is frequently mentioned in the literature based on different historical and theological aspects from the early christian centuries.

After a careful analyse, it can be stated that the association between the Catechetical School from Alexandria and the two teachers mentioned before, is so profoundly, that both aspects can be perfectly superposed in many scientific works. It seems that both, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, represent the Catechetical School of Alexandria itself. Looking from the greek-roman educational system (which represented the school foundation) point of view existing in that periode of time, this statement is not an error. It describes an authentical situation when the school was not an institution belonging to a social leadership when didactic staff were employed, but it was represented by the didactic staff itself who was organizing the teaching-learning lectures in his own home. Therefore, the school can be merged with the teachers, at least untill the local Church take it under its patronage/tutelage, this fact leading to the decreasing of the teacher authority to the increase of the alexandrian ecclesiarch authority detriment.

The superposition between the school and the teachers caused a real problem: in the romanian and foreign literature there are countless translations and manuscripts addressed to Clement of Alexandria and Origen which deal with historical, dogmatical, moral, liturgical and even pedagogical aspects related with the two personalities. Nevertheless, we found that there are no manuscripts to treat the Catechetical School of Alexandria as independent element¹.

Consequently, the aim of this work is that to offer the adequate attention to the Catechetical School of Alexandria. The present work is not only a space where the subject is first and foremost, but also a proof of the trial to prezent the school beyond of its personalities, to show how it was represented in the geographical, historical and social space, emphasizing the elements clear and pedagogical that were the basis of the structure of the educational environment.

According to Alain Le Boulluec statement „ *The expression «school of Alexandria» has two meanings in the patristic studies: it designates an organized educational system which involve the existance of διδασκαλείον (didaskaleion) on one side and, on the other side, a theological tradition defined by starting with the alexandrian doctors works and from their interventions at the big doctrines debates in the 4rd and 5th centuries...*”². Therefore, having a very well concept defined, we didn't lose sight of the fact that this school fulfil two edifying rols: the Catechetical School of Alexandria is first of all, an institution like school - place of teaching and learning about the right faith, and, in the second place, it is a strong framework for the theological trend development.

The lack of a literature meant to present the teaching-learning like educational framework for the christian education in the romanian space, was the motive force of choosing of the present work. Consequently, from the very beginning, the aim was to discover and to go deeply into the *Catechetical School of Alexandria* from a pedagogical point of vew, in a historical, geographical and social well defined background.

¹ Badea Mangâru, *Misiunea școlii creștine din Alexandria față cu sistemele filosofice*, B.O.R., 1915, nr. 11, pp. 911-930 and Nicoleta Marțian, *Despre școala creștină din Alexandria în secolele II-III*, Studia Universitatis Babeș-Boyai, Theologia Catholica, L2, 2005, pp. 75-110 *it counts between the few materials which treat the proper theme of the Catechetical School of Alexandria*;

² Alain Le Boulluec, *Alexandrie antique et chrétienne, Clement et Origène*, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris, 2006, p. 13;

Part I. Alexandria from Egypt, short geographical, historical and social description.

Talking about the educational environment, that can not be defined as a proper institution, I conceived a plan to outline and gradually analyse the elements that are the basis of the foundation and fonction of this catechetical-like space. Therefore, within the first part, I started from a broad background that meant to describe Alexandria (the home where this school has been born and developed) from geographical, historical and social point of view. The presentation of this general characteristics of the city is mandatory, because each aspect mentioned in a tacitly and subtly way influences very much the manner how the *Catechetical School of Alexandria* appeared and developed.

In cosequence, because we deal also with a concrete material framework addressed to the study but also with a concept based on the idea and attitudes of those who lived in the course of many centuries in this city, it was necessary to draw first the constituent lines of the space that harboured the so-called «school of Alexandria». Only knowing the main characteristics of the space, as well as the historical events that took place before and during the existance of this school, and especially knowing the people from the city, it can be fully understood the meaning of the alexandrian school. The Catechetical School of Alexandria can be understood only knowing the local geography, history and society. It is actually a theological and educational phenomenon where, the one who was carrying on the teaching of the christian studies through theological activities and specific educational greek roman teaching tools (a system where phylosphy plays a specific role, joining the faith and christian living) was in the center of attention.

Part II. Educational background of Alexandria – a prolific environment for the Christian education development. Limiting the working area, we have done a gradually transition to other defined aspects of the catechetical school formation. Therefore, in the second part of the manuscript I approached two subjects that emphasize the educational system existant in the first christian centuryies, on the one hand, and the training form applied in the first christian congregations to get new disciples, on the other hand.

Thus, we tried to catch the specific of the alexandrian educational background present in the early christian centuries. In this way, we started with the general presentation of the education history, we continued with the specific aspects of the alexandrian school history, we

discussed about the greek roman educational system, mainly about the terminology imposed by the subject itself, and we end with the so-called raid in the greek-roman educational space that allowed us to discover the ancient school perceived by those who are involved in the educational system: discipols, trainers, teachers.

Having knowledges about the educational system existent on that periode of time, we continued to do research on the educational environment with a moral-religious specific. It is about the catechumenate practiced in the early christian centuries. Therefore, we did one more time a raid in the history of catechumenate to discover different aspects related to the catechumenate institution, and to the literary and theological works that served this way of education with theological characteristic.

Part III. The origins of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Having very clear knowledges about the space, time, community and pedagogy applied in Alexandria untill the second century, we could go on to discuss about foundation of the Catechetical School from Alexandria. In this way, we limited our working aria to a single point meant to reveal how this school has been born.

It is very difficult to establish exactly *when* and *how* the *Catechetical School of Alexandria* came into being, because of the lack of the documents in this way. Nevertheless, to find the answer to these unknown aspects, the aim to find the founder or the first teacher who did catechesis in Alexandria in a background very similar of that known as greek-roman educational system in the early christian centuries, has been drawn.

In order to clarify the previous aspects, we tried to extend the disscussion on this topic. In this way, we specified from the very beginning that the literature presents two different positions: the large majority who spoke about this problem considers that Panten is the founder of the *Catechetical School of Alexandria*; the opposition represented by Bernard Pouderon rather support Athenagoras of Athens to be the founder³.

The first step to elucidate this problem was to present, by means of the sources, what are the informations we have about the life, personality and literary works of the two presumed founders of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Obviously, in the analysis process of the

³ Bernard Pouderon, *Athénagoras d'Athènes, Philosophe chrétien*, ed. Beauchesne, Paris, 1989 și de același autor *D'Athenes a Alexandrie, Etudes sur Athénagoras et les origines de la philosophie chrétienne*, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 1997;

sources, we considered especially the indications that can be useful in the research process of the sequence of those who worked in this school and of the manner how these carried on the catechetical activity. We tried to draw how this subject is presented in the literature, emphasizing the way how the researchers refer to the topic.

Prior to continue the research on the teachers and the christian education system in Alexandria, we tried to clarify at the end the question marks related on the founder of the *Catechetical School of Alexandria*.

Part IV. Clement of Alexandria and Origen, famous officials of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. In the fourth part I paid more attention to the famous alexandrian teachers, Clement and Origen, trying to clear up through their literary works, different aspects related to the way how they conceived and implement the catechetical educational system inside the governed school.

From the very well preserved literary works of the two teachers, we discovered the manner how the teaching-learning process of the christian morality has been done inside the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Also, we found details about the persons typology who participated at the lectures taught in the school and the relationship between teachers and scholars active in the educational process. Both, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, reveal in a very beautiful way, data about those to whom their manuscripts address, about the objectives followed by his school and even about the methods they considered to be the proper for the action optimization of the knowledges uptake and put into practice.

Speaking about a private school, the educational process is limited to a reasonable number of scholars, at the beginning. When the school becomes a church dependent part, it passes through a remarkable development process with impact on the teachers qualities, scholars and pedagogical act. This fact determines Origen to implement a strong reform to reorganize the activity inside the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Because of the high number of disciples and sciences, he could not cover all curriculum and decides to choose Heraclas as co-worker and to divide the audience in beginners and advanced scholars. For the superior level greek-roman educational system, the lectures organization and distribution of the low level courses to a closed disciple of the teacher is something extremely usual. In that's concern the Catechetical School of Alexandria, this fact is happening around 215 - 216 d. Hr. Since then, the alexandrian

catechetical educational system has two cycles: first, studies of the profane sciences which cumulated dialectics, ethics, physics, logic, mathematics, life sciences etc. and second, the christian cycle with the biblical exegesis and the christian philosophy⁴. Christian and non-Christian people, women and man, regardless the age, the ethnic and political affiliation and social level, could participate to this courses. The only request was that the participants to be strong motivated to acquire the right knowledges.

We don't have to overlook the fact that there was a procedure to group the scholars based on a very important pedagogical criterion. This aspect can still be found in the modern pedagogical system. Origen didn't reduce himself to only create two study levels into the Catechetical school, but he guided each scholar to the appropriate scientific studies based on their aptitudes. Some of them were guided to study the profane sciences next to the disciple, others were invited to study the Holy scriptures to an high exegetical and philosophical level. Regardless the cycle or the disciplines studied thoroughly in the catechumenate school, the exegesis of the scripture text was always first and foremost and considered a very important activity in the research process of the perfect education, the only one that can offer all answers and advices to find the truth by faith⁵.

Therefore, we approached the literary works of Clement of Alexandria and Origen from a pedagogical perspective, in this chapter. Thus, we didn't show the very well known aspects regarding the exegetic activity specific for the alexandrian school, but we tried to present the school from the historical and pedagogical side, in the way how it is revealed by the manuscripts written under the aegis of this educational framework. The Catechetical School of Alexandria can be known only through the research of the manner of the teaching and learning process of the christian morality. We pursued the few parameters important to any education system, such as: the persons aim by the educational system curriculum, participants to the teaching-learning act, goals, methods applied to reach the goals and the inter human relationships.

⁴ Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Istoria bisericească*, cartea a VI-a, trad.cit., XV, p. 239; informațiile acestea apar și la George Celsie, *Gândirea creștin-filosofică a lui origen în DE PRINCIPIIS și urmările ei până la jumătatea secolului al VI-lea*, Ed. Limes, Cluj, 2002, p. 28;

⁵ *Idem*, XVIII, p. 241;

Part V. Decline periode and closing of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. The last part present the activities of the teachers who continued the alexandrian catechetical tradition in the historical situation of that time.

The sucesors of Origen who governed the school were: Heracles, Dionysus of Alexandria, Teognost, Pierius, Peter the Great, Macarie, Didymus the Blind and Rhodon. Nevertheless, among them, only Dionysus and Didymus distinguish themself, and the others such as Serapion, Macarie and Rhodon are rarely mentioned in some historical sources. Unfortunately, we didn't find data about the didactic activity of this personalities. This lack of informations is because of both, deliberately lack of the manuscripts from Heracles and the loss or destroyed papers written by other authors, during history. Everything left were some short fragments maintained in the manuscripts of some authors and priests such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Saint Jerome, Saint Athanase, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Photios etc.

Analysing the content of these fragments, it was impossible to establish how were organized the teaching-learning activities in the Catechetical School of Alexandria after the two famous leaders, Clement and Origen. We could discover this school form historical point of view following the events which influenced the alexandrian society and the active personalities. Consequently, even the Catechetical School of Alexandria will not have the same magnificence under the rule of sucesors of Clement and Origen, the study of the history of the educational system from start to decline, has been done with great interest.

Conclusions. It has been proved that *The Catechetical School of Alexandria* was between the first christian education systems of high level. Even the foundation and decline periodes are lost during the history, its existence remains deep into our memory due to the activities carried on during the culminating point of the school development, by teachers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen who served the christian theology and pedagogy.

This study environment is the result of more spheres of influence that constitute the special ingredients involved in the birth and function of a catechetical school very different from others. *The Catechetical School of Alexandria* is an educational framework influenced by the geographical, urban and social environment in which it was born. The city of Alexandria, being the confluence point between worlds and cultures extremely different, offered to the catechetical school the excellent characteristic of variety. Therefore, this educational environment was both, a

meeting place for people from different social levels and a place where the greek-roman education and the initial form of catechumenate merged to create an environment where the christian and profane sciences could be taught. Also, the manner how this school is acting prove the influence of the socio-political events. Alexandria, the source of the alexandrian catechetical school, would not exist without Alexandre the Great, the pharaos dynasty or roman conquest. Without the early history of Christianity we could not speak about such an educational framework.

The Catechetical School of Alexandria represents the educational background addressed to all those who want to discover and study thoroughly the right learning. That's why many people from those who came into this school were souls who have searched for a long time the culture to help them to understand the mystery of this world. Women and men, Christians and pagans, reaches and poors, all together were passing the first training level based on the thoroughly study of the world sciences and then the graduation of the second level where philosophy and Holy Scriptures were studied.

There was special relationship between the teacher and his scholars, comparable to that between Liberator (the Universal Teacher) and the Church. That's why, the teacher from the catechetical school behaved more like a disciple in relation with his Teacher and like a guide to liberation, than an omniscient. The christian teacher was appreciating the good results and encouraging the disciples, but also reproved and admonished the scholars departed from the truth. Consequently, this relation was more complex and elevating than the relation between the pagan teachers and disciples based on an authoritative and vain attitude of the teacher who considered himself, many times, an excellent trainer with the right knowledge.

The objectives from the christian educational framework were very well defined. These followed finalities at both, world level closed related to the christian way of living, and at the next life level, the soul liberation being the main goal of the courses. Other objectives are the following such as: intellectual development, aquiring the christian knowledge, change of the human nature (character), knowing the Creator of all things, seen and unseen, to contemplate the worldly and divine things, aquiring the christian virtues, the wisdom, perfection, the faith, obedience and also the complete knowledge about the next existence.

These objectives ere achived through a very perseverent study. Learning and teaching were carried on by writing and oral means. The teached matter was very well structured and

based on knowledge from different fields, the most important being philosophy (bridge between the profane sciences and christian faith) and the Holy Scriptures (the only who possess the right faith together with the Holy Tradition). The most important skills aquired by the scholars at the end of the training at the Catechetical School of Alexandria, were the ability to work out (wrriting or oral) exercises of biblical exegesis and the possibility to concieve an argumentative text based on subjects concerning the main elements of the right faith study.

Unfortunately, an intern vision on the pedagogical activity carried in this school could be outlined only studing the manuscripts of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The decline periode which came after, put the history of this school into darkness.

Nevertheless, the research revealed the existence of a real, unique and independent school fascinating through its complexity. This *alexandrian christian educational phenomenon* served the Church of Jesus Christ in difficult periods of the history. Remarkable theologians, authors of valuable manuscripts very well preserved in the christian literary treasure and graduates were trained in this system. Although not all the graduates are mentioned in the history pages of the church, they served the Church and God, without doubt, preaching the knowledge in their homes and social environments. Consequently, this educational background trained/formed/ not only the pick of the theology and christian pedagogy, but also real confessioners who continued to preach the Jesus Christ learning, spread abroad by Apostles.