

**THE MISSION OF CHRIST – OUR MISSION. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL  
BASIS OF CHRISTIAN MISSION  
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## KEYWORDS

christology, mission, redemption, reiteration, ministry, liturgy, church

## ABSTRACT

Jesus Christ, the incarnated Son of God, is the measure of all things in heaven and on earth. If we consider Him God, He is a perfect God. If we think of Him as Man, He is the perfect Man. We have in Him the Creator of all things (*John* 1:3) and the revelation of the “thought of God” for man and the world (*Colossians* 1:16)<sup>1</sup>. “Christ is forever actual and anticipates actuality continuously”<sup>2</sup>.

For this reason, the Mystery of Jesus Christ, of His Person and Work, must be discovered in its richness and interpreted, as it is humanly possible, for all the generations to come. The world has always looked for solutions for the different problems which upset it, and “the solutions to which it stops [...], after excruciating searches and experiences, the humankind today, have been long indicated in an undeveloped form in the mystery of the person and work of Jesus Christ”<sup>3</sup>. Thus the purpose of His mission is precisely to offer the solution: *the complete and eternal communication with God in the Kingdom of heaven as the final sense of the existence*.

The central place of Christ in the life and mission of the Church is obvious. Mission is the participation to the sending of the Son: “As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you” (*John* 20:21). Thus, the missionary call of the Church has its profound fundament in the universality of the salvation in Jesus Christ and targets to eternalize His sending into the world. Mission is a synergetic work; it is an act of God’s economy, it is a work of His will, in which, according to this economy and will, “God’s work is united with that of man, in a manner characteristic to each of them”<sup>4</sup> and the sending of Christ is eternalized in the Holy Spirit. That is why mission does

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<sup>1</sup> Arhim. SOFRONIE, *Din Viață și din Duh*, trans. Ierom. Rafail (Noica), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Ed. Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2014, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, Editura Basilica of the Romanian Patriarchate, București, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Pr. D. STANILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea...*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Pr. Valer BEL, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, Ed. Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 136.

not belong exclusively to Christ, but to us as well “to the extent in which we have become one body with Christ”<sup>5</sup>. These statements justify the theme I have developed in the present thesis.

The importance of the thesis, through the theme it approaches, consists of the fact that it *brings to light the Christological fundamentals of mission*, providing an adequate missionary theology for an efficient missionary practice. In the history of Christianity there have been numerous moments when mission was not accomplished in the spirit of the Gospel. This was due to the fact that the missionary practice was not based on a missionary theology expressed correctly or it did not care for its theological fundament. To avoid such situations, the missionary practice must be anchored in theology, and theology, as reflection and systematic discourse, must offer “strength and clarity to the mission of the Church”<sup>6</sup>.

Emphasizing the Christological fundament of mission through the systematization and thoroughness of the main aspects related to the Person and work of Christ is absolutely necessary since the Christian mission is ontologically linked to the mission of Christ. The mission of the Church results from the mission of Christ as a participation to His mission (*John 20:21*). The necessity to approach this theme in a PhD thesis consists of the fact that through the definition and systematization of the Christological fundamentals of mission, we create a theological basis which may contribute to the improvement of the contemporary missionary practice.

*Theoretical approaches of the theme.* The theme approached in this thesis is not an absolute novelty because Christology is the central element of the Christian thinking and living even from the beginning of Christianity. The Christological discourse developed along the history of the Church both through the refutation of heresies after which the Christological dogmas were formulated, and through the thinking of the Holy Fathers which was not determined only by apologetic purposes but also by the preoccupation for the spiritual life of the community.

Both in the Romanian theology and in the specialized literature from abroad there are numerous works that speak about Christology. Indeed, most of these works or monographies speak about Christology from a dogmatic point of view, but many of them direct the subject towards a practical applicability. For example, all the Christological works of father Dumitru

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<sup>5</sup> † ANASTASIE (YANOULATOS), Archbishop of Tirana and Albania, „Scopul și motivul misiunii (Dintr-o perspectivă teologică)”, in *Misiune pe urmele lui Hristos. Studii teologice și omilii*, traducere de Diac. Ștefan L. TOMA, Ed. Andreiana, Sibiu, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> † DANIEL, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Știința mântuirii. Vocația mistică și misionară a teologiei*, Editura Basilica of the Romanian Patriarchate, București, 2014, p. 176.

Stăniloae, including the chapter on Christology from the Orthodox Dogmatic Theology<sup>7</sup>, target the Christian life and spirituality. His intention “is not to share with his readers a theoretical, timeless knowledge about Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnated for the salvation of man, but to illuminate, as much as he could, the Mystery of the Person and His redeeming work, according to the spirit of their times. In other words, to help them enter, through reading and spiritual reflection, into a closer relationship with Christ the Lord, which contains the final and redeeming answers to all the questions, problems and expectations of the concrete and actual human person and existence”<sup>8</sup>.

In the Romanian theological discourse, the first time that the problem of the centrality of Christ was raised in the Orthodox theology, spirituality and mission was at the Orthodox consultation with the theme “Confessing Christ today” of the Commission on Mission and Evangelism within the World Council of Churches, held at Cernica Monastery on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1974. Here there were developed four documents that approach the theme of Christology from a missionary point of view, emphasizing the fact that the mission of the Church is not just a simple problem of external organization, but a natural consequence of living the life in Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit<sup>9</sup>.

Father Ion Bria took many of the ideas presented within this consultation and used them in the document *Go Forth in Peace*<sup>10</sup>, published by the World Council of Churches. This document represents a synthesis of the Orthodox theology and missionary practice, whose actuality consists of the fact that it presents briefly both the theological ideas and the concrete forms of the Christian mission from the point of view of the Orthodox Church. Also, in most of the works by father Ion Bria we find the theme of Christology approached from a missionary perspective either as chapters<sup>11</sup> in his books or as papers<sup>12</sup> dedicated entirely to this subject.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Pr. Dumitru STANILOAE, , *Hristos lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1993; Pr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului*, Editura Basilica of the Romanian Patriarchate, București, 2013; Pr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, ediția a III-a, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> † DANIEL, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, „Cuvânt înainte” in Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea...*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Pr. Dumitru POPESCU, Pr. Dumitru RADU, „Consultația ortodoxă de la mănăstirea Cernica (4-8 iunie 1974)”, in *BOR*, 5-6/1974, pp.609-623.

<sup>10</sup> See especially the first chapter of this work. *Go Forth in Peace. Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Compiled and edited by Ion BRIA, WCC Mission Series no. 7, Geneva, 1986, pp. 3-9.

<sup>11</sup> Pr. Ion BRIA, „Iisus Hristos - Dumnezeu Mântuitorul. Hristologia”, in *Studii Teologice*, an. XLIII, 1991. nr. 2, p. 3-52; Pr. I. BRIA, „Iisus Hristos, Dumnezeu adevărat și om adevărat”, in *Ortodoxia* XXV (1973), nr. 2, pp. 218-

Father prof. univ. PhD. Valer Bel is the first Romanian Orthodox theologian who presents systematically the mission of the Son in his work *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, speaking about this subject in a separate chapter called “Jesus Christ the Son of God sent into the world for its salvation and life. *Missio Filii*” („Iisus Hristos Fiul lui Dumnezeu trimis în lume pentru mântuirea și viața lumii. *Missio Filii*”)<sup>13</sup>. This chapter presents the essential moments in the sending of the Son, emphasizing the main paradigmatic aspects of the sending for the Christian mission. It is important to mention regarding this chapter that it presents the mission of the Son within the larger frame of the mission of God – *missio Dei* – and then, in perspective within the mission of the Church.

From the works of these authors we may conclude that in the Romanian missionary theology there is a preoccupation for the definition of Christology as the fundament of the mission of the Church.

In the Western environment, the theme of the sending of the Son as fundament for the Christian mission begins to take shape after the Missionary Conference from Willingen (1952), when the close relationship between *missio Dei* and the mission of the incarnated Son of God was acknowledged. Although the works of the conference took place under the theme “The Missionary Obligation of the Church”, the final press release had the title “Mission under the Cross”, thus showing that mission is a work of God in Trinity and it is achieved in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ which culminates in the Cross and Resurrection.

This manner of approaching the mission of the Son was embraced by the Protestant Churches<sup>14</sup>, by the Roman-Catholic Church and by the Orthodox Churches. The Roman-Catholic Church in the “Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*)” of the Second Vatican Council, considers the mission of the Son as a doctrinarian principle for the mission of the Church<sup>15</sup>.

Hence, both in the Orthodox theology and in the Catholic and Protestant theology, the Christian mission is founded on a Christological basis. But, because, at least in the Romanian

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252; Pr. I BRIA, *Destinul Ortodoxiei*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1989, pp.194-226.

<sup>12</sup> Pr. Ion BRIA, *Iisus Hristos*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Pr. Valer BEL, *Misiunea Bisericii...*, pp. 57-80.

<sup>14</sup> Tormond ENGELSVIKEN, *Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of the theological concept in European Churches and Missiology*, în *IRM*, vol. XCII, nr. 367, p. 481-497.

<sup>15</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 3, in *Conciliul Vatican II. Constituții, decrete, declarații*, revised edition, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice, București, 1999, pp. 288-289.



environment, there isn't yet a thesis that presents all the aspects concerning this theme, it being presented only in chapter of some works of missiology, it is necessary to present it in a PhD thesis, which is achieved through the present work.

*The objectives of the thesis.* The intention of the thesis is to show that the Christian mission, which results from the mission of Jesus Christ is based on the communion of life and love of the Holy Trinity, it is the work that God uses to fulfil His economy for the world.

Since the mission of Christ is to achieve God's eternal plan for the world, the thesis wishes to emphasize the fact that mission targets the recapitulation of the whole creation in Christ through the Holy Spirit, so that God's eternal plan regarding man and the world to be fulfilled completely, and God may all in all (*1 Corinthians 15:28*).

Also, Jesus Christ, the incarnated Son of God, being the Messenger, the Missionary par excellence, another objective is to show that every mission must have as basis, model and content the mission of Christ.

Jesus Christ fulfilled His mission through the triple service that He continues within the Church through the Church's participation to it. The thesis aims to prove that the triple service of the Church is achieved through all its members and thus, the responsibility and the missionary obligation falls on everybody.

Because most often, the missionary awareness of the orthodox is poor or even lacking, the thesis wishes to focus on the cultivation of the awareness of an ecclesial affiliation and on the missionary responsibility as missionary imperative, also emphasizing contemporary means through which the mission of Christ is achieved through our mission today.

By achieving these objectives, the thesis *will contribute to the development and enrichment of the missionary theology* by offering a serious theological fundament focused on the development of the Christological aspects of mission in order to be valued in the improvement of the missionary practice.

*The structure and the content of the thesis.* The thesis is structured in five chapters corresponding to the research objectives, as follows:

*Chapter I* places the mission of the Son within the larger context of the Trinitarian theology. God is in Himself life of communion and wishes to draw the whole creation to this communion. Thus, the fundament of mission is the very internal life of the Holy Trinity, the movement of love of the Father towards the Son in the Holy Spirit and towards the whole

creation. That is why mission may be expressed through the concept of *missio Dei* and a good understanding of mission also imposes a fixation of the Trinitarian theology. The *missio Dei* doctrine is best expressed through the teaching of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon on the two hands of God – Christ and the Holy Spirit. From here one may see that God has a concrete work in history, a work that is achieved through the Son and through the Holy Spirit. According to our faith, the divine Logos is present both in the ontological symphony of things from the creation and in the revelation of the Old Testament. Through His work within the creation and in the revelation of the Old Testament, different aspects of the mission of Christ and of His Church are anticipated and His sending into the world is also prepared. The Trinitarian economy culminates in the sending of the Son for the salvation and completion of the world. That is why theology states that the economy has a Trinitarian character and a Christological dimension. Thus, mission must be understood as a part of the achievement of the economy of salvation and of the completion which, on the one hand depends on the will of the Holy Trinity and on the other hand is fulfilled through the sending of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, being eternalized through the mission of the Church.

*Chapter II* approaches the theological theme of the sending of the Son and, in order to introduce this subject, I will focus first on the concept of “sending” expressed through the word family of the verb *ἀποστέλλω*. This approach will be followed by the analysis of the most important references from the New Testament, especially from the four Gospels, in which the evangelists or our Savior Jesus Christ speak about His mission.

The reason for the sending of the Son is the love of God, hence it belongs to the internal life of the Holy Trinity (*John* 13:16; *I John* 4:10). Sent into the world, as Gift and supreme Word, the hypostasis of Christ also becomes bearer of the created nature, restoring the creation in Himself for it to become a new gift with respect to the dialogue of man with God and with his fellows, a dialogue which guides him on the path of complete communion.

The purpose of the sending of the Son is approached from the perspective of the eternal plan of God for the world, a plan which corresponds with the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ (*John* 3:17). But, salvation must not be seen only in negative terms, as redemption from the slavery of sin, of the devil and of death, but in a wider sense, as the Holy Fathers conceive it, as deification. This thing, although it was man’s vocation from the very beginning, may be achieved only in and through Christ, the new Adam, the perfect Head and the Hypostasis

of humanity, Who recapitulates in Himself the whole creature (*Ephesians* 1:10). From the perspective of mission, two important things may be deduced from here: on the one hand, the mission of the Church which is participation to the mission of Christ has cosmic dimensions, targeting the whole nature; on the other hand, mission means the recapitulation of the creation in Christ through Church, for the latter to participate to the eternal glory of God.

Any authentic mission must have as fundament, model and content the mission of Christ. That is why, *chapter III* will present chronologically the main moments which define His mission. At the beginning of the public mission there are two such moments: the Baptism and the Temptation. The event of the Baptism comprises the main coordinates of His mission that will reveal during the public activity of the Savior, culminating with His Sacrifice and Resurrection. That is why, often, when He spoke about His Passions, Christ compared them to His Baptism. Through the Theophany from the Baptism, the mission of Christ is revealed as being focused on the salvation of man whom He places into communion with the Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, His mission is a revelation of the Trinitarian God as sense of the existence. Through His victory over the three temptations, Christ strengthens from within the human nature and saves it from the domination of the evil. The answers that Jesus gives to the evil define the true character of His Messianic mission; they show His perspective on His own mission and His fidelity to the will of the Father Who sent Him. The Church receives Jesus here as power and model in the struggle against the temptations that occur in its mission.

The greatest part of the mission of Jesus Christ is consecrated to the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. Through His preaching, Jesus calls to repentance through faith which is a radical turn through conversion and adherence to His Person. The central theme of His preaching is the Kingdom of God, which He announces by word, He presents it in parables, He finds it on His Person, he certifies it through the miracles He performs and reveals it as the supreme purpose of the life of man (*Matthew* 6:33).

In the centre of the mission of Jesus, we find man and his salvation, the Savior having a loving attitude towards man and revealing, through this, the merciful love of God towards people. Through Jesus Christ, God came into maximum proximity with people, becoming accessible directly to them. Jesus' life among people is completely natural, but His attention is directed towards the unwanted, the suffering and the discriminated with which he behaves with great simplicity. Christ the Lord does not neglect some of the women whom He liberates from

the burden of sin, He protects them and welcomes them into the circle of His disciples. This attitude is nothing else but a parable in action through which Jesus communicates the manner in which one should understand God and His Kingdom. To restore the communions amongst people, Jesus forgives the sins and asks for unconditional love and forgiveness. His love and compassion are also shown through the miracles He performs, thorough healings, exorcisms and resurrections from the dead.

His attitude towards the Law and towards Israel is comprised in the sentence: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (*Matthew* 5:17). He is aware that His mission in initial stages was directed towards Israel, a people who received the Messianic promises. However, Christ has this opening towards the nations, His mission revealing in its universal dimension after His resurrection.

Jesus Christ took care of the eternalizing and extension of His mission in order for it to be efficient at all times and places until the end of ages. To this respect, he chose twelve Apostles whom He introduced into the mysteries of the Kingdom of God and whom He sent to preach the Gospel to all creation (*Mark* 16:16). He also entrusted them with the mysteries God has revealed (*I Corinthians* 4:1) giving them the power to forgive sins, to baptize, to perform the Eucharist and the other Mysteries. The Apostles are pillars of the Church but they also invested their descendants with a part of the apostolic services so that the mission of Christ is accomplished until the end of all ages. From the mission of the Son results the mission of those sent by Him as participation to the mission of Christ (*John* 13:8).

The apogee of the mission of Jesus Christ is represented by the Passions, His sacrifice on the Cross, His Death, Resurrection and His Ascension. Obeying His Father to death on the Cross and accepting death willingly out of love for God and for the people, He erased the sins of the people and gave them back the true life as a new relationship with God. He entered as sacrifice to the father for that He may be able, by drawing us into His sacrifice, to introduce us as well to the Father. After He died with His body on the Cross, he descended to hell with His soul and announced salvation to those who were there (*I Peter* 3:18-19; 4:6; *Ephesians* 4:9), indicating its universality, the Sacrifice on the Cross being the mysterious power of the Christian mission.

The Son fulfills His mission started with the incarnation in the act of Resurrection. The Resurrected Christ presents us with the perspective and the hope of the resurrection of everyone. In the light of the Resurrection, Jesus sends His disciples to preach (*Matthew* 28:19). The

essential coordinates of their mission and, implicitly, of the Christian mission, according to the great missionary commandment, are: the preaching of the word, the sacramental incorporation into the Body of the Church and the persistence in faith and in the Christian life.

Sent into the world, Christ fulfilled His mission through the triple service: as prophet (teacher), as bishop and as emperor. In *chapter IV* I wish to present the teaching on the triple service of Christ, arguing it biblically and synthesizing it theologically, according to the patristic and theological teaching of the Church. Essentially, in this chapter I will prove that there is an indissoluble relationship between the Person and the work of Jesus Christ, and the salvation of people is possible only through the participation to the personal communion with Christ in the Church. He continues, after His Ascension, His redeeming work through the triple service in the Church, until the end of all ages. The Church participates to the triple service and thus the triple mission of Christ is eternalized into the triple mission of the Church.

In *chapter V* I will present the manner in which the Church participates to the triple mission of Jesus Christ. Hence, the Church updates the priestly service Christ through the participation to the cult and prayer, through the achieving of the communion into the mysterious Body of Christ, through the service of reconciliation and peace into the world. The teaching service is updated through the preaching of the Gospel, through the guarding and transmission of the apostolic Tradition and through the Christian confession within the family, society and world. The royal service becomes actual within the Church through the victory over the temptations and sins, through the leading and organization of the religious community and of the Christian deaconship within society and, also, through the proclamation of the Kingdom in different regions of the world.

All these three services of the Church are achieved concretely through its members, priests and faithful. The missionary responsibility falls on everyone based on the universal priesthood, through the graceful state of all the Christians, received through the Mysteries of Christian initiation: Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist. Priesthood, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ and granted through the Mystery of Ordination, through apostolic succession, has its characteristic missionary functions, but which do not exclude the participation of the laics to the mission of the Church.

In the last part of this chapter, I will sketch a few coordinates of the Christian triple mission into the contemporary world, taking into account the situation and the context in which

the Church performs its mission today. Thus, I wish to emphasize firstly the cultivation of the awareness of ecclesial affiliation and of the missionary responsibility which I will put into relationship with the Holy Liturgy and the Eucharist in which the most profound communion between men and God and their fellows is achieved. Thus, the cult becomes a space and an environment for the missionary formation. From the Eucharistic liturgy understood as actualization and participation to the supreme Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the social-philanthropic mission of the Church must inspire and feed the power of its love as Liturgy after the Liturgy.

In order to actualize the teaching mission of Christ, all the Christians have the obligation today to know the word of God. For this, the Church must offer them access and possibility to come into close contact with Him, to know Him and to progress in this knowledge. To this respect, the Church uses all the means of communication thus having new chances for mission. Great attention must be paid to mission within the family, and institution which is exposed nowadays to many dangers. We cannot ignore neither the catechetical responsibility nor the necessity of the class of Religion which are missionary acts through which faith is transmitted. Nevertheless, mission through the dialogue between theology, science and philosophy is of real importance for the society today because it opens the perspective of a common search for the meaning of the existence.

In order to actualize the royal mission I will choose a stringent aspect for our world today: mission or the missionary responsibility towards creation. The royal vocation of man does not mean ruling by domination but by responsabilization.

I will try to centre all these themes of great importance for our mission within the mission of Christ, emphasizing the fact that only through a direct reference to His Person and work, they can attain the estimated efficiency.