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***“CHRIST COMMUNICATED TO THE CHILDREN” –
REVIVAL OF THE PAROCHIAL CATECHIZATION:
CONTEXT, CONTENT, DIDACTIC STRATEGIES***

DOCTORAL THESIS

ABSTRACT

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Key words: catechization, religious education, revitalization of the parochial catechesis, instruments, catechization methods and strategies, catechetical program.

The doctoral thesis “*Christ Communicated to the Children*” – *Revival of the Parochial Catechization: Context, Content, Didactic Strategies* may be included in the field of research characteristic to Practical Theology, in Catechetics.

The area of research for this thesis includes the category of modern means of collective or group catechization¹, their correlation with the process of revival of the parochial catechesis within the Romanian Orthodox Church, retrieval of a catechetical function severely affected during the Communist regime in the Orthodox space, spread of the catechization to other categories of age and improvement of the catechization through the use of recent data in the field of educational sciences.

Our approach targets, on the one hand a series of aspects linked to the need for catechization, to the necessity to make the Orthodox teaching accessible in the contemporary context of various challenges, in order to contribute to the moral-religious formation, to the spiritual growth and aging of those that are catechized, and on the other hand, it targets the strategy for the (re)organization of the parochial catechesis within the Romanian Patriarchate, reflected in the decisions of the Holy Synod, in the reports on catechetical activity presented at the national congresses “Christ Communicated to the Children” and in the preoccupations and initiatives of the eparchies to develop the catechetical activity locally.

The argument of the research is given by the “urgent need to offer the children and the young the Word of God in an attractive form that opens their hearts to a set of authentic values, in a secular world filled with pseudo-values, marked by the void created within the Romanian society during the Communist regime and after that. The importance and impact of the project have an effect over the generation that is now growing and that becomes responsible for the future of the country”².

The effort of our research is directed towards supporting the idea of revival of the parochial catechesis, of reactivation of the didactic component in the context of ministry and of its

¹ Nicușor Beldiman, *Repere ale educației religioasă-morale în literatura omiletică și catehetică românească din secolul al XX-lea*, Ed. Universității din București, București, 2017, pp. 339-342.

² „Al doilea Congres Național «Hristos Împărtășit Copiilor»”, *Comunicate de presă*, 31 august 2009, <http://www.comunicatedepresa.ro/world-vision-romania/al-doilea-congres-national-hristos-impartasit-copiilor/>; accessed: 29th May 2018.

harmonization in the contemporary social-cultural context in order to give an appropriate answer to the nowadays requests and exigence. Even though the catechetical program “Christ Communicated to the Children” has as a main objective the catechization of the children and of the young, through it the Church manifests its teaching activity on the adults as well, especially on the parents of the children. From a practical point of view, we cannot separate the religious life of a person from its daily life, filled with preoccupations, with the need to communicate, with questions and expectations. We see major transformation in the contemporary society, both within and outside it. Today we see that the internal structure of man himself has changed³. In this context, of multiple torments, of spiritual and existential confusion, the Church finds itself in the situation where it needs to find new strategies for catechization and for an efficient, constructive dialogue with all its believers, no matter the age, time or place.

“Being part of the collective educational technology, promoted by many contemporary psycho-pedagogical orientations, *group catechesis*, besides the fact that it offers an appropriate frame for a moral-spiritual development of the personality and for the stimulation of creativity, it is also a remarkable means of teaching the truths of faith and of spiritual formation both of the child and of the other persons. But there is a need for a new catechetical vision, Christocentric and pneumatic, which targets not just a simple theological information, but a spiritualization of the child”⁴.

This type of approach is proposed by the catechetical program “Christ Communicated to the Children”, which aims to end with the unification with Christ and a growth in Christ. Present at the 8th National Congress “Christ Communicated to the Children” (2015), His Eminence, Daniel Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, stated that:

“«Christ Communicated to the Children» is not only the Holy Eucharist, but «Christ Communicated to the Children» is Christ from the Gospel. The Holy Eucharist was instituted at the end of the preaching activity of our Savior and at the end of His pastoral activity when He took care of the ill and cured them, and He fed the hungry. Hence, the Holy Eucharist is the conclusion of Christ’s presence in the most concentrated and sensitive form, but Christ is also present in the Holy Gospel, in all the prayers of the Holy Liturgy, that is

³ Gheorghios D. Metallinos, *Parohia – Hristos în mijlocul nostru*, trad. Ioan I. Ică jr, ediția a II-a, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2004, p. 59.

⁴ Eugen Jurca, *Experiența duhovnicească și cultivarea puterilor sufletești*, ediția a II-a, Ed. Marineasa, Timișoara, 2006, pp. 189-190.

why we say “Christ in our midst”, before we commune. «Christ Communicated to the Children» means Christ’s love communicated to the children”⁵.

The stage of research illustrates a relatively short period of 10 years that went by since the initiation and national implementation of the project “Christ Communicated to the Children”. As we all know, in the Romanian Orthodox Church the project was approved in 2006 and developed especially in the Mitropoly of Moldavia and Bukovina, and since 2008 this project expanded nationally, thus being created a true catechetical structure. Although the catechetical project is part of the modern means of catechization, using the results of the most recent research in the neighboring departments (pedagogy, psychology, sociology and communication sciences), proposing a new method of catechization, structured on three components: discovery, interaction, application, until now it hasn’t been the subject of a thorough research. Even from the beginning of the program “Christ Communicated to the Children” the academic collaboration (university level) with professors of Catechetic and Homiletics would become concrete through actions consisting in the evaluation of the project, support and promotion of the project among the students, being included among the courses of catechetical formation of the students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. In the last years this subject was approached by some thesis for bachelor’s degree and master, and even in some theses for the 1st grade in priesthood or teaching. In these cases the research meant only general presentations of the project and its local application. Therewith, we observe a small number of studies written on this theme in Romanian, as well as internationally, where the program is applied. We cannot say the same thing about the numerous articles and news from the laic and religious press, both local and national, which contributed to the mediatization of the deployment of the project and its activities. In this case, the large number of articles allowed us to observe an impulse on the catechetical activity with the children and young together with the development of the catechetical project.

Taking all these into account, a thorough research was necessary, one that would allow a systematic analysis (theoretical and practical) and a structural presentation of the project in its fundament, chronological development (diachronic perspective), identification of the legal frame that the project was based on, the use of biblical content, valorization of modern strategies of catechization, application and continuation and further development.

⁵ „Patriarhul României la Congresul Național «Hristos împărtășit copiilor»”, *Basilica*, 23 septembrie 2015, <http://basilica.ro/patriarhul-romaniei-la-congresul-national-hristos-impartasit-copiilor/>; accessed: 12th April 2018.

The limits of the research are given by the lack of solid bibliographical sources (studies) on this subject. In this case, besides the observations in the field, we used reports, articles and information that accompanied the catechetical program during the 10 years of national implementation. Another difficulty was represented by the documentation regarding the development of the project in other countries. The disproportioned presentation of the situation of the project in the countries we referred to is the consequence of a restricted access that we had to the documents that illustrated the situation of the implementation of the project in general, respectively the stage of the application and its continuity. A lot of internal documents (assessments and reports) from the World Vision organization were very helpful. To these we may add the lack of continuity of the persons that were part of the implementing team. Their frequent change did not facilitate an efficient and unceasing dialogue in our effort of communication.

Because we wanted to offer a complete image of the fundamental aspects of the project, another fact that falls into the limits of our research is the predominantly expository character used in certain chapters of the thesis, such as the one that presents the legal frame, for example. Also, in order to emphasize the impact and the diversity of the activities carried on under the aegis of the catechetical program (formation courses, camps and creation contests etc.) expressed quantitatively, we chose a statistic form of presentation.

The research endeavour started with the natural determination of the inheritance of the past and with the observation of the undissimulated daily reality. After a half of century of atheistic obscurantism and religious ignorance, the catechetical work of the Church had become a major urgency. This is the context in which the catechetical program “Christ Communicated to the Children” occurred, as an essential element for the revival of the parochial catechesis. Through this, the Church would expand its educational activity on both coordinates (the class of Religion and the class of catechization), that were in a relationship of complementarity. The basic principles of the Christian education give value and fundament to the new catechetical program, which generated a whole catechetical network nationally and locally (aspects rendered in ch. 1). After a comparative exposition of the development of the biblical curriculum in several countries (ch. 2), we presented progressively the legal frame of implementation, which gives an impulse of organization to the parochial catechesis within the Romanian Patriarchate (ch. 3). The research revealed the fact that the biblical fundament of the catechetical discourse and the instruments

rendered available (ch. 4) are the ones to assure a formation in Christ, on one condition: that they are corroborated with the modern methods of catechization and with the spirituality of the catechet. We considered appropriate to complete the theoretical marks (theological and psychopedagogical) with several practical aspects, in order to illustrate the applicability of the results of the catechetical activity within the daily life of our fellows. Our brief contribution to the shaping of practical strategies for the development of the catechetical activities is accompanied by a beneficial receptivity of the new acquisitions in the field of educational sciences (ch. 5). Our opinion is that, from a methodological point of view, a theoretical fundament is valuable when supported and argued practically. Starting from these ideas, chapter 6 exemplifies the effective manner of implementation of the project in several parishes around the country. Thus, we tried to identify other strategies, models of good practice that belong to the direction of the revival of parochial catechesis. Furthermore, for a better shaping of the contemporary catechetical dimension we established and emphasized correlations that belong to the interference with other catechetical programs (*Choose School!* and *The Path of Salvation*). This is a form of expansion, of harmonization and optimization of the educative-missionary work of the Church (ch. 7).

In his message to the participants to the 5th National Congress “Christ Communicated to the Children”, that took place between the 11th and 13th of September 2012 at Caraiman Monastery, His Eminence Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church underlined the importance of the catechetical project “Christ Communicated to the Children” in the contemporary context, taking into account the preaching mission of the Church, no matter the time and the place. Hence, we consider appropriate to configure several conclusions starting from the following consideration which synthesizes in a very suggestive manner the whole significance that we emphasized within the thesis:

“The project «Christ Communicated to the Children» showed through its results obtained in time that it is a viable project which continues to fruit in the noble mission of bringing the Word of God, through catechetical programs, closer to the hearts of the children and young in the families, parishes and communities from Romania and diaspora. Facing the challenges of the contemporary world, the Church cannot remain indifferent, because its mission consists precisely in preaching the Gospel of Christ into the world and of the manner of living according to it. The educational-formative activity of the Church was established by Jesus Christ Himself and by His Disciples, for people to become aware of His will and to fulfil it through a continuous spiritual growth: «Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ» (2 Peter 3:18). Our Church fulfils this missionary work in various ways. Thus, through the educational-formative

endeavour within the *classes of Religion* the Church comes to help the students by promoting the knowledge of God, man, the universe, Christian values, such as: friendship, love, peace, justice, reconciliation, responsibility, solidarity and cooperation between fellows, as basic principles of the Christian faith. Religious education accomplished through the Church within the school represents a chance that is offered to each student to fathom and know the Word of God: «So that they may have the full richness of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ» (Colossians 2:2). In complementarity with the religious educational system within school, *our Church has implemented since 2006 a program named: «Christ Communicated to the Children»*. The program is destined to all the children and young with ages between 6 and 17 years old with the confessed hope of opening their mind and heart to the values of the Christian faith. Through this project, the implementation team put together a set of instruments and methods that are necessary to the catechization process that was made available at the disposal of priests and laics for the spiritual shaping and growth of the children according to the pattern of the image of Christ. We consider that the systematic study of the Word of God revealed in the Holy Scripture and in the Holy Tradition, is fundamental for the moral-spiritual revival of the children and young, according to the advice of Saint Paul to his disciple Timothy: «From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus» (2 Timothy 3:15)⁶.

Having these reasons to guide us, we can shape the essential aspects of the endeavour of our research and the conclusions associated with it, as follows:

A) The didactic dimension of the Church was established by our Lord Jesus Christ and by His Disciples in order to achieve eternal life: “Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent” (John 17:3). This dimension is as old as the Church itself. It is undisputable and cannot be detached from the existence of the Church. From the very beginning, even from the early Church, catechesis was not only a transmission of knowledge, but it also concerned the integration of the aspirants for Baptism within the liturgical life through prayer, fasting, exorcisms, conscience exam etc.⁷.

B) One the Communist regime was installed, the didactic work of the Church was eliminated from the state schools and from all the other public institutions (hospitals, army, jails, asylums, orphanages), while the catechesis of the Church was limited strictly to the ecclesial space.

⁶ Daniel Ciobotea, „Misiunea Bisericii în educarea religios-morală a copiilor și tinerilor”, Message of His Eminence Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church addressed to the participants to the 5th National Congress “Christ Communicated to the Children”, *Ziarul Lumina*, ediția de Banat, anul III, nr. 210 (2316), 12 septembrie 2012, p. 4.

⁷ Vasile Gordon, *Introducere în catehetica ortodoxă*, Ed. Sophia, București, 2004, p. 11.

C) After the fall of communism reintroducing the class of Religion into the Romanian public schools would become an organized form of religious education. With very few exceptions, for a long time, the class of Religion was the only organized catechetical presence in our country. Even so, the recent history confirmed its limits: until the first students graduated from theology with studies in psycho-pedagogy necessary for teaching Religious education, the lessons of Religion were given by professors (especially priests) that did not have an appropriate didactic formation. In many cases, the class of Religion was just another sermon extended to 40-50 minutes. To these deficiencies we may add the lack of textbooks (some grades don't have a textbook yet) and the school curriculum from the period inter-wars, structured on curricular documents, focused on a content belonging to theology (symbolical concepts, abstract, that are not adapted to the age of the students) which enhanced a reproductive type of learning⁸.

D) The contemporary state of society is characterized by many profound changes: secularization, accelerated technological development, social-cultural dynamism, cultural, religious and ideological pluralism, social mobility, diversification of the specializations, new forms of communication and manipulation, globalization, moral relativism, communism, proselytism, superficiality, ignorance, syncretism and religious indifference. All these, through the long-term effects they can generate on the children and young, on then generations that are now growing, represent good enough reasons for an ample catechetical movement within the Patriarchate.

E) The process of revival of the parochial catechesis, developed in an organized manner, and also the process of reactivation of the didactic component of the priesthood started together with the implementation of the catechetical program "Christ Communicated to the Children". Through this program, parishes were urged and supported to restart structurally the catechetical activity with the children and young forming catechetical groups depending on the age. The priests and catechets were offered a set of catechetical instruments (biblical curriculum, a guide for students and catechets, preparation courses, activating methods, application strategies) necessary to the development of a catechesis according to the contemporary requests and exigencies. A major contribution to the optimization of the parochial catechetical discourse was represented by the project *Choose School!*. For a good harmonization/development of the

⁸ Gheorghe Holbea *et al*, *Apostolat educațional. Ora de religie – cunoaștere și devenire spirituală*, Ed. Basilica, București, 2010, p. 53.

catechetical field, two offices were founded for the catechization of the young, one central and one eparchial. The new catechetical structure would expand at the level of archpriestship or missionary group. This initiative generated the foundation of eparchial departments for the young, departments of mission, diagnosis and prognosis, new organizations for the young were founded besides the ones that already existed. (e.g. ATOR – Association of the Romanian Orthodox Young). We must also mention the cultural-catechetical centres that appeared, through which several activities and catechetical programs were developed locally and regionally (creation camps, meetings of the Orthodox young – ITO, philanthropy, volunteering etc.), in some cases through partnerships signed with schools and other institutions.

“We witness the reformation of a dynamic and active pastoral-catechumenal line within the Romanian Orthodox Church. Only a bad person doesn’t see the efforts and results in major projects such as “Christ Communicated to the Children” or Choose School!, not to mention the hundreds of initiatives of the parochial communities regarding the catechization and guidance of the young and children”⁹.

F) Although important steps were made, the catechetical endeavour recorded until now is not enough, it requires implication and constant support. There are still a lot of deficiencies that need to be solved not postponed. They are linked either to the organizational structure, to the catechetical guides, to the training of the catechets or to the existence of reduced material resources or to the necessity of a constant assessment of the catechetical activity.

There are eparchies in which the catechetical structure is not very well defined. There is no one assigned clearly for the reorganization of the parochial catechesis. In some cases, this responsibility was delegated to another person (especially a counselor, who has many other duties to fulfil). The success of the whole catechetical endeavour depends of the choice of persons with catechetical vocation in the catechetical structure and, of course, on the direct implication of the hierarch. The results are proportional with the level of assuming the catechetical work by the persons we have already mentioned.

We remind the fact that based on the first biblical curriculum the team managed to publish only two catechetical guides (9-10 years of age, 11-12 years of age). These guides can no longer support a development of the catechetical project “Christ Communicated to the Children”. They

⁹ Constantin Necula, „Cu bucurie pe moarte călcând ... ”, prefață la Răzvan-Florin Ciule, *Cateheza copiilor și implicarea tinerilor în Biserică prin metode active*, Ed. Astra Museum, Ed. Techno Media, Sibiu, 2013, p. 7.

gave an impulse to the catechetical activity but now no longer offer continuity to the program. In this situation, it is urgent to write and publish guides according to the new biblical curriculum, followed by formation courses of the catechets on how to use them, in order to implement the project.

Notable results were there where the theological training of the priests was accompanied by the psycho-pedagogical training, even more so if the priests had a little experience as teachers. That is why, in all truthfulness we support the psycho-pedagogical training of all the future ministrants and we recommend that the exam for priesthood capacity to be preceded by courses of psycho-pedagogy¹⁰. These are useful instruments that cannot lack when serving to the young. In order to preach the Gospel of Christ it is necessary to speak to the young on their language, to relate permanently to the age peculiarities, to take into account the stages of their psychological development and their capacity to assimilate and internalize information. According to the model of the Three Holy Hierarchs, who valorized the profane knowledge of their time in favor to the work of the Church, we are also called today to improve our service with the knowledge and use of the research in the field of educational sciences (psychology, pedagogy, sociology, communication sciences). It is an invitation to an efficient dialogue between theology and science.

An essential element for the harmonization of the catechetical endeavour is represented by the permanent assessment of the educational activity within the Church. It is necessary to make a reflexive self-assessment, but also a critical one, in order to observe clearly the breakdowns, deficiencies and even failures recorded.

“The new conception of the assessment starts from the premise that this is a circular, active, dynamic process for the improvement of the educative activity and not for the definitive ratification of some acquisitions. During the assessment the stress will fall not on the «achievements» of the students, but on the formative and self-formative processes that are activated. These are more important because they guarantee responsible behaviours in the present or in the future. Regarding the assessment methods, the classical ones (oral, written, practical) must be combined with the complementary ones, that become more relevant in the new context (systematic observation of behaviours, project, portfolio, personal or group investigation, scientific paper etc.). [...].

¹⁰ And in this case, our proposal is not something new, but a valorization of a Romanian tradition, forgotten or neglected. In the time of Metropolitan Andrei Şaguna, many of the candidates to priesthood attended the didactic training, worked as teachers for a while and then they were ordained.

Even though there are no grades within catechesis, the catechet has the duty to support, to strengthen any positive acquisition of the catechumen through stimulation, praises, symbolic or material recompense, using obviously verbal expressions, prominence before the group, rewards with books, religious objects etc. if it is true that the final target of catechesis is salvation, then such a «behaviour» (incomplete until the last moment) cannot be assessed (humanly speaking). All there is to assess are the steps taken on this way by the catechumen, which cannot be separated from those of the catechet. In fact, the catechumen's assessment is also an assessment of the catechet in this walk together towards the eternal kingdom, the heavenly kingdom. And the final Judge, who transcends both of them, will rejoice in every step they take towards Him"¹¹.

The catechetical endeavour in itself is not enough to have the guarantee of a success on all levels. The use of several consecrated instruments in the process of evaluation will offer us an unaltered image of the moment to which we relate and will allow us to sketch a catechetical strategy for short term, medium and long term, in agreement with the new challenges, a strategy based on true theological and psycho-pedagogical marks.

G) The catechetical project *Christ Communicated to the Children* proves the preoccupation of our Church for the educative-missionary work of the new generation. It is an impulse to reorganize the parochial catechesis and an invitation to involve in the endeavour of raising the children and young in the love of Christ. The program has become an important part of the life of the Church for it renewed the fundamental catechetical function of the priests and gave them a way to support the moral and spiritual development of the children, the next Christian generation. Therewith, it opens the way to other categories of age and to other types of catechesis and themes. We are thinking of a reflection on a cycle of catechesis: matrimonial, baptismal, liturgical, sacramental, biblical, school for parents.

In the end of our brief presentation, we may consider our effort as an incursion through the process of revival of the catechesis and of understanding the mission of catechization. We are convinced of the limits of this project, and we believe that the family "Christ Communicated to the Children" that formed together with its implementation and consolidated in time through the activities that it developed, through the ten national meetings and especially through the implementation of the project "Choose School!", has the power to intensify the catechetical work, as a permanent necessity in the priestly mission so that the project has results in as many parishes as possible.

¹¹ Constantin Cucoş, „Educația religioasă și catehizarea. Diferențe, particularități, continuități (III)”, *Ziarul Lumina*, anul IV, nr. 257 (1158), 4 noiembrie 2008, p. 4.

We consider that our thesis, similar to the catechetical program “Christ Communicated to the Children” is an endeavour of implication into the effort to bring up children and young in the love of Christ and a support argued theoretically and practically, for the organization of the parochial catechesis. We believe that our approach will be useful to the students from seminaries and theology faculties, to priests, Religion professors and to other laics that are actively involved in the educational work of the Church to know the contemporary stages of development of the parochial catechesis and, more importantly, to get acquainted to a set of instruments necessary to the development of an efficient catechesis (up-to-date biblical curriculum, active-participative methods, practical strategies of implementation).