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**Priest Ioan Sabău from Hunedoara (1914-2009)**  
**– Paradigm of contextual pastorship –**

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## Abstract

The world today is in a process of de-Christianizing, which sometimes has the form of religious indifference, and other times it presents as disbelief or dishonesty manifested in passionate attacks against the Church. The world of our time is emancipated politically, socially, culturally. The modern man finds it harder to believe, searches, discusses, contradicts, arguments. That is why today there is a need of a complex priest, a priest who, from all viewpoints, is well armed with knowledge, with a spiritual life, so that he can become a “father”, a guide, a luminary, a person who offers solutions and answers to the faithful that he will come into contact with or will be placed into his care. The numerous and complicated problems which the contemporary society faces wait for the heroes of the supreme solutions. These “heroes” are the Orthodox priests, called to place into the centre of the whole life the supreme Christian ideal which, by its power of attraction, is the only one capable to guide the common moral conscience towards a complete spiritual victory.

People have soul and needs and spiritual sufferance and they always will have these, despite of the political, social, scientific or cultural regime of the world. Nobody knows and is able to solve people’s spiritual problems in the way that the divine psychotherapy of the Church can. In order to accomplish this mission, the Church is in a continuous search for pastoral models to offer to the generations of future ministrants of the altar. Such a pastoral model is represented by the person and activity of father Ioan Sabău (1914-2009), whose pastoral activity of seventy five years was very successful, father Ioan being dubbed “the patriarch of the people from Hunedoara”. Belonging to the inter-war period, father Ioan confessed until sacrifice the creed of his generation, its hopes regarding the orthodox faith and the Romanian nation. Since father Ioan’s creed, the values for which he fought are not subjected to time, they do not pass, father Ioan constitutes a pastoral model for all the priests from everlasting, and the research of his life and pastoral activity belongs to the preoccupation of the Romanian Orthodox Church to identify pastoral models that are worthy to be followed, which later on can be presented to the ministrants of the holy altars.

In order to understand better the life and activity of father Ioan Sabău, in the first chapter we presented briefly the political context in which he functioned, referring especially to the situation of the Orthodox Church during the communist regime.

The second chapter of the thesis was written with the intention to offer a unitary image of the life and work of father Ioan. To this respect, we compiled a biography of the father, which comprises the main stages of his life.

Also, the third chapter takes into account a familiarization with the pastoral itinerary of father Ioan, so that the various moments or aspects of his activity, presented within the thesis, to be better understood, integrated into the context of each parish in which he activated.

In the fourth chapter, which we named *The pastoral profile of Father Ioan Sabău*, we identified a series of intellectual, moral and pastoral qualities that remarked him both before his parishioners and before his fellow priests. The main sources used to this respect were the testimonies of those who knew him (priests and laics).

An intellectual quality that potentiated greatly the pastoral activity of father Ioan Sabău was his erudition. As an encyclopaedic spirit, richly gifted, father Ioan focused all the powers of his mind into the service of his calling and mission. His gifts were completed by an extensive culture and a rich experience of life.

The moral method he used for the saving work of the souls entrusted to him, his inner spring, his main attitude was the same that is at the basis of the whole work of salvation: *love*. Love for God and for people. For all those who are in need, father's love manifested through *kindness* and *humanness*. But the thing that gave value to all the virtues and deeds of father Ioan was the *humbleness* with which he covered it all. An authentic, true humbleness that had nothing fake in it. It was not humbleness resulted from a clever cultivation of appearance, on the contrary it was a state of deep peace, untroubled by the praises of the people, nor by their ravishments, it was the gold of humbleness gained in the fire of troubles through which he had passed. A humbleness that made him offer all his care and attention to the most troubled and upset of all people. It is only right to mention the *modesty* which characterized father Ioan's life, most of the times close to the limit of existence, his only treasure being his pure life, full of good deeds.

These virtues that father Ioan had, as well as the difficulties that he faced together with his parishioners determined a strong relationship between the shepherd and his flock. This strong relationship between father Ioan and his parishioners was blessed by God, Who gave him a special gift: when he was in prison, each time someone from Vinerea died, the father dreamt that person who came to take the Holy Eucharist.

Among the pastoral qualities that we identified in the person of father Ioan Sabău we mention that of *founder of churches*, who loved “the house of the Lord”. In each of the five parishes where he activated, father Ioan was concerned with the renovation and adornment of the church, so that in the seventy five years of priesthood the father built a church and restored seven others. In the centre of the pastoral activity of father Ioan Sabău from Vinerea there was, without a doubt, the building of the church of “Saint Nicholas”, a real cathedral, an impressive monument of architecture, which astonishes not only through its beauty and the balance between painting and sculpture, but also through the fact that such a grand church was built and consecrated in the midst of the communist regime.

This work to build churches must not be perceived only from a material point of view, because nothing of what was achieved materially would have been possible unless father Ioan had the pastoral art that engaged all the parishioners in this work. Father Ioan himself said about the church from Vinerea that the disunion based on families and political parties eroded like a gangrene the parish from Vinerea and not a single stone could be placed to build the church, until the spiritual communion was achieved.

The church was dedicated in 1957 and its consecration was sealed with the sacrifice of father Ioan, for he was arrested the day after, then judged and sentenced to eight years in prison, most of which he spent in the terrible prison from Aiud.

Of the moral qualities identified in the person of father Ioan Sabău we must mention his exemplary morality. Both during his detention and in the period right after his release, when he was under surveillance, father Ioan Sabău showed a behavior worthy of a true shepherd and ministrant of God. There are many people in a village and they gossip a lot, especially against the priest, but despite all these, those almost one thousand pages in the files regarding father Ioan from the C.N.S.A.S. archives constitute a praise in his honor. All the informants were forced to report the good morality shown by the father and the authority which he had because of this. Thus, the “guilt” of the father consists, from the perspective of an authentic pastoral ministry, of real virtues. Regarding the period of detention, the reports concerning father Ioan and the reasons for which he was punished with isolation more than once prove the fact that even in jail he continued his missionary and pastoral activity among the prisoners.

For father Ioan, *the love for his country and his nation* came right after the love for God. He often drew attention upon the fact that we must bear a clear and sincere memory to our

heroes, because when you want to destroy a nation you must first destroy its memory. That is why, he never missed from the commemorations of the heroes that sacrificed their lives for the national and Christian creed, giving vivid speeches or performing memorial services for them. This attitude led to great sufferance, because he was arrested and sentenced more than once. But the sufferance for his nation and for his country was a great honor for father Ioan who used to say: *"I sat in jail for God and for my nation"*.

Also in this chapter we identified two special charisms that father Ioan had: his *pastoral art*, which is that capacity to find his way to each soul, so that he gains more souls for God, for the Church, and the *gift of elocution*, a charism that manifested in father Ioan even from his youth, and that he cultivated through personal effort. Father Ioan listened and observed, with parental attention, all the problems, confessions and spiritual manifestations of his parishioners, and he extracted from all these very interesting material for his sermons. A sermon must address to the heart and it cannot penetrate into a heart that is not cared for and looked for by the priest. Father Ioan knew very well the hearts of his faithful and that is why the words he spoke within his sermons went right to their hearts. The capacity of expression and the profoundness of what he wanted to convey were acknowledged by those around him so everywhere he went everybody stepped aside to let him preach, even bishops.

Very useful for the identification of the pastoral methods of father Ioan Sabău were over 150 notebooks that belonged to him, most of them containing sermons that were to be presented in various circumstances, some of them elaborated for priestly conferences, as well as bibliographical notes on various themes regarding pastorship. Also, there were preserved from father Ioan a considerable amount of drafts for several letters he sent to hierarchs, or brother priests in which pastoral problems are discussed or some solutions were offered. Synthesizing his whole experience transmitted through these notebooks that belonged to father Ioan, one may say that those tens of thousands of pages comprise all the spiritual torments of a priest concerned with the salvation of the souls that were entrusted to him, all the effort of his being for his priestly mission. That is why we chose the following title for the chapter which comprises the description of these notebooks: *The heart of father Ioan*.

In the fifth chapter we presented *the pastoral springs of father Ioan Sabău*. Firstly we presented the common springs of his pastoral activity in general: *the Holy Scripture* (which father Ioan knew very well), *fasting, prayer* (referring especially to his piety for the Mother of

God). Then we presented *the sufferance of father Ioan*, which he assumed completely and which became the origin of his pastoration. Indeed, the sufferance assumed has a transforming power upon man and offers it a great influence upon neighbors, which sometimes is achieved without words. For father Ioan the sufferance from the period when he was imprisoned was a guide. He always stated that he was most impressed by faith and piety in the years of detention and he taught the young that the spiritual strengthening defeats the material poverty and make the mind more agile, more capable of faith and contemplation. The sufferance of father Ioan was not only that which he endured during detention. Not even when he was outside the jail he was not absolved by physical and moral sufferance, but this remained rather unknown to the others because father Ioan never complained about his torments, but struggled to comfort and support those around him. Sufferance for Christ is the most real, the most profound, purest and unperishable spiritual joy of a real priest. In all these there is hidden the mystery of his salvation. And the balance of the sufferance of a priest for Christ and for His Gospel is the best way to measure the sincerity and profoundness of the faith in Him.

Another important spring of the pastorate of father Ioan Sabău was the relationship with the monasteries, which he considered “the ideal icon of Christian life”. Considering that monasteries are the source of refreshment and vitalization of the Church, which offer its dynamism and may inspire and guide the therapy of the Christians’ spiritual life, father Ioan Sabău often organized pilgrimages to the monasteries nearby. The main purpose of these pilgrimages was the restoration of the inner energies and the “contamination” of the parishioners with purity and holiness.

In the sixth chapter we presented the main pastoral activities of father Ioan. As a shepherd of the souls, one of the priorities for pastoral activities was *the unity among Christians through love*, that is achieving that brotherhood and unity between Christians for which Christ prayed before His Holy Passions: “that all of them may be one” (John 17:21). To gather together and maintain a well-rounded flock is a thing which requires a great deal of effort, love and sacrifice. In order to achieve this unity, father Ioan was always among his parishioners, knew their problems and knew the powers and defects of each of them. He tried to bring closer especially those who were far from the Church. In order to strengthen brotherhood and communion between the parishioners he introduced common singing in each of the parishes where he activated. It is well known the fact that when a priest wants to stand between two people that are

fighting he must be prepared for the fate that our Lord and Savior had. The priest must pass through many moral crucifixions. Just as our Savior was not understood by all the people, so is the case of the priest. And father Ioan was not immune to such sufferance.

Another priority of the pastoral activity of father Ioan Sabău was *the fight against immorality and the regeneration of the humankind*. For father Ioan Sabău immorality was not only a pastoral problem to solve, but also a great spiritual pain. He suffered because today Christ is driven out of the world as He was once chased away from the region of the Gadarenes and through occupations that are far from piety, He is always told “*Leave our region!*” the main method that father Ioan used in his offensive against immorality was the sermon. Without offending anybody personally, he flailed powerfully all the vices and spiritual evilness, not only the most rude of them, but even the subtle ones, that sneak into our souls imperceptibly and consume from within the Christian life. The fight against immorality is the fight against sin and the sin is a thorn and weed hard to exterminate, because its roots are the pleasures and people can hardly be convinced to give up their pleasures. But this is an essential work of priesthood and presses with its burden on the priest’s conscience. But father Ioan had the thrill of this responsibility during the seventy five years of priesthood. Despite all the moral decadence and all the fall he saw around him, father Ioan remained an enthusiast until the end, and he strongly believed in the possibility to create a reminiscence through which the humankind can be saved. And it’s not only that, but he had high hopes that our Romanian nation has a special role in this work.

Another priority identified in the pastoral activity of father Ioan was *defending the homely holiness*. The reason which transformed this issue into a priority in the pastoral activity of father Ioan was the fact that life is created and supported within the family, society was created and is supported by forming families and the Christian religion itself originates from the cradle of a child, Baby Jesus and from the bosom of a mother, the Mother of God. Hence, the secret of the strength and victory of Christianity is the holiness of the homely life. Starting from the premise that the priest’s family is the first community in which the priest activates, in which he heals souls, forms strong believers and saves people, we compiled the first subchapter with the title *Pastoration within and through family*, in which we presented the manner in which the family of father Ioan took part to all his life and activity, to his successes but also to his sufferance and sacrifice. Father Ioan said about his mother: “*Everything I have as a priest I owe to my mother*”.

We may say about the presbytera Alexandra that she identified herself with father Ioan's mission and made her own sacrifices for the success of this mission. The link that gave strength and durability to this blessed family was prayer. Not even the daughter of father Ioan was excepted from sufferance and sacrifice, Miss Maria-Cecilia. When she was only a child, she felt painfully the arrest and imprisonment of her father, the spiritual torment of her mother and grandmother when they didn't know if father Ioan was still alive or not. As the daughter of an inmate, hence of "an enemy of the people", Miss Maria-Cecilia was always rejected, marginalized and ignored, and she was denied any acknowledgement of her merits and any promotion. Also, in this subchapter I illustrated using several examples the spiritual pedagogy of father Ioan in relation to his daughter and grandsons.

In the subchapter with the title *Pastoration for family* I illustrated using examples the manner in which father Ioan fought for the salvation of the holiness of family life. Father Ioan was preoccupied with the *pastoration of the young that were about to get married*, whom he tries to encourage that it is possible even in our times, to achieve a state of conjugal holiness, and with the *pastoration of women-mothers*, whom he urged to take their role seriously, to understand that defending Christ through family is an action that depends on them and that only through mothers who fear God the world can be re-Christianized. Father Ioan knew all the reasons which burden the soul of a mother and her fears when she gives birth to a new human being into this world. With a lot of love, he tried to plant into the mothers' hearts the fear for God which surpasses all the obstacles, to raise their spiritual strengths and their faith in God.

In all his pastoral activity, father Ioan Sabău was especially preoccupied with the fate of the youth, with their closeness to Church, because he considered that "*the youth represent the future and their problems are national problems*". For father Ioan, the present state of the youth was a great spiritual pain that he tried to comfort by attending all the meetings with young people when he had the occasion, during which he expressed tireless and with all his spiritual strength his hopes related to the new generation that was rising. In the chapter *Pastoration of the young* we presented the concrete methods through which, in all the parishes where he activated, father Ioan tried to bring the young to Church, by founding cultural societies for them (the Society "Saint George" for boys and Society "Anastasia Şaguna" for girls), catechizing children (although he was repeatedly forbidden to do so by the representatives of the communist regime), involving children in all sorts of activities in the church and giving them a task to fulfil so that



they could feel useful. During the Great Lent, father Ioan officiated the great Compline with children. Tens and sometimes hundreds of children's voices sang during the Compline the characteristic chants of this service. Father Ioan invested a great deal in this young people and especially in the young priests who had many children, because he considered these priests his allies for his fight and conquest of the youth.

The sixth chapter presents *the main pastoration methods of father Ioan Sabău*. The methods and means that father Ioan used were not new in themselves, but the clever manner in which he used them was impressive and especially the results, which were a consequence of the grace that worked powerfully in him. Speaking about the *Divine cult* as a means of pastoration used by father Ioan we presented his usual liturgical program and the manner in which he tried through this program to bring people to the Church, introducing common singing, officiating the *Holy Liturgy* not only on feast days and Sundays, but anytime there was a difficult situation (a problem or illness) in the life of the parish. Another method of pastoration that we mentioned was the *Holy Confession*. The qualities that made father Ioan a very demanded confessor were: his availability, his love for people, his patience and attention which he granted to each soul. Also, we presented the *Common Holy Unction initiated by father Ioan* during the Great Lent, as a spiritual offensive and as a means to respond to those suffering and in need and which proved to have a profound missionary character. This order remained as a spiritual inheritance from father Ioan Sabău and is continues until today in the parishes where he activated. Regarding the other methods used in pastoration (*Sermon and catechesis, Pastoral visits and Pilgrimages*), we tried, based on the testimonies that we received, to present the concrete and new manner in which father Ioan used them within pastoration.

In the last chapter, the eighth, with the title *Topicality of the pastoral model of Father Ioan Sabău – "Father of Fathers"*, we tried to prove the fact that in the area where he activated, father Ioan was a model of ministry for all the other priests, always frightened by the responsibility he had, always filled with the thrill of the fear of God, but also a spiritual father for many of them, a true "father of fathers". Father Ioan loved very much the hard working priests around him. He loved them because he loved their service, which was similar to his and because he loved the One Whom they serviced together. He loved them because he considered them brothers and bearers of the same dignity and of the same priestly mission. In the same time he was loved by the priests around him because they saw in him the incarnated ideal that they assumed when they

received the Holy Mystery of Ordination, they saw in him the priest par excellence. With his pastoral experience he enriched most of the priests that he met. Since he belonged to the inter-war generation father Ioan brought along among the young priests the creed of that generation, the hopes related to our faith and to our Romanian nation that he tried to inculcate to the young generation, formed in a closed world, darkened by the religious atheism of the communist regime. Together with other priests that had passed through the dark ages of communism, father Ioan was providential in the lives of many priests in order to make them understand how they must understand the times, to draw their essential lines of pastoration in the new times, preserving, in the same time, the creed and tradition for which they had suffered.

In the end of this final chapter we draw attention upon the fact that the pastoral model offered by father Ioan Sabău is very topical. What made father Ioan Sabău a model shepherd was not the fact that he had an exceptional laic and theological culture or the fact that he built and restored so many churches, not even the fact that he officiated and preached exceptionally in the church, but his great pastoral dignity was visible in the fact that he lived among his parishioners as *a man of God*, thus proving that it is possible to live an evangelical life on earth and that the things he preached within the church are real. Father Ioan's creed, the values that he stood up for are not subjected to time, they do not pass. That is why father Ioan remains an all-time pastoral model for the priests.

In conclusion, the person of father Ioan Sabău presented within this thesis knew all the torments that are inherent to the priestly vocation and ministry. His spiritual and pastoral experience from those seventy five years of priesthood constitute an extremely valuable thesaurus for the pastoral Theology. For methodological reasons we needed to present systematically his pastoral qualities as well as his pastoral strategies. But, besides the exigence of such a thesis, the sources of the pastoral methods used by father Ioan must be looked for in his priestly vocation. Father believed strongly in the priest's responsibility for the eternal destiny of the believers and this inspired his entire pastoral activity.

Father Ioan Sabău presented within this research knew all this inherent trouble of the priestly vocation and ministry. Reverend university professor Vasile Vlad, who knew father Ioan expressed this reality with the following words:

*Father Ioan believed in salvation as sense of existence. Since we exist to be redeemed, all the problems of our life subordinate and integrate into the need for salvation. That is why the*

*pastoral methods of father Ioan included saving a marriage, or removing people from the situation of fornication not because it led to a good social impression, or because it was not a communitarian good, but because salvation was endangered. When you approach a man taking into account his salvation, then you find biblical sources and patristic and liturgical ones and sources from the human wisdom and philosophy. All the culture converges towards the problem of salvation. If you do not take into account the issue of salvation, and you focus on elaborating an ecclesial, communitarian or other sort of system, then you need science: pastoral psychology, social psychology, sociology, methods and all these create a mechanism to organize society, history and that's it. But father Ioan never focused on such things, but on the salvation of those with whom he was entrusted, because he strongly believed in the priest's responsibility for the eternal destiny of the believers.*

To what was written above, we add the brief characterization made for father Ioan by one of the hierarchs of our Orthodox Church (His Eminence, Andrei Andreicuț, Metropolitan of Cluj, Maramureș and Sălaj) who knew him in many circumstances:

*Father Ioan Sabău in all his mission had a special devoutness that originated in a resolute and adamant personality; he was a strong and courageous man, he did not bend in front of the wind. In the last part of his life, when I met him, he was tireless and hard working in the field of God. Since he was close to Alba Iulia he never missed from the spiritual conferences and from all the manifestations organized by the Archdiocese from Alba Iulia to stimulate the spiritual life. And we loved to see him. He was a wonderful man!*

In Patericon there is a story about a spiritual father who had something to do in the city and because he wanted to run away from the people's praises, he decided to go at night in order not to be seen and praised. But God sent two angels with torches that lighted him, one on the right and one on the left, so instead of being hidden he was even greatly praised before the people. Father Ioan Sabău dedicated his life to the priestly ministry in the most natural way, with all his sincerity, in the purity of his heart. He never looked for appreciation, for being remarked or praised by the people. But *God needs people in the crossroads, He needs guiding marks for the salvation of many. That is why God raises from time to time such marks for history not to perish. These people live their natural way, but the angel carries their torch and shows them.*

During this research, it so happened that many times I received from those who knew father Ioan testimonies that can bring an aura of holiness to him. I prevented myself from

presenting them, on the one hand because this was not the purpose of my research, but to show a pastoral model worthy to be followed, and on the other hand because these experiences may have a subjective note for those “dilatatory to believe” the things about the special gifts that God gives to those who with tremble and love, service among people His holy priesthood. Many people say that they feel the presence of father Ioan into their lives, that they feel him protecting them. Many speak about wonderful things. Such miraculous happenings are a consequence of the spiritual relationship that consolidates between a true shepherd and his parishioners.

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I mentioned many times within this thesis the notebooks that belonged to father Ioan, which represent a valuable thesaurus for us to follow the entire trajectory of his pastoral ministry. In the first notebook, which bears the date of 19<sup>th</sup> of January 1936 on the first page, we found the discourse that father Ioan prepared for his investiture as priest in his first parish from Ceru Băcăinți. Deeply impressed by the thrill of the responsibility lying ahead, the young priest, age 21, told to his parishioners:

For the investiture:

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”

(John 14:18)

In the eighteenth year of widowhood of this parish, of cries of orphans without a dad, of sobs of flock without a shepherd, the Savior comes to fulfil the promise that He made when He said “I will not leave you as orphans”. I feel a joy that the words cannot express when I see myself raised from follower to leader, when I see myself armed with that divine power to forgive sins or not, when I see myself worthy of the dignity that Saint Apostle Paul assigns to those who work hard to preach and teach the others – but in the same time I feel a strong emotion, a spiritual commotion, a tremble for the responsibility entrusted to me. Ministrant at the altar of the Lord?!... It is a staggering calling!... To be the linking agent, the cord that ties the earth with the sky, to be the true way that leads to happiness, to be God’s representative on earth, to incarnate beauty, good and truth is not something you can easily accomplish. But if during the years of work in school I was guided by this target that stood ahead me – priesthood, today I cannot flea from this serious responsibility. I realize that before the Judge I will have to account for the flock entrusted to me, but I dare, with that courage that our Savior gave to His disciples saying to them: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”.

I want to be the good shepherd who knows his flock and gives his heart for his sheep – according to the example of our Savior – to be an example for the faithful in word, in deed, in love, in faith, in purity – I want to pay attention to myself and to the teaching I offer – just as Saint Apostle Paul commands us to be –, truth and justice will be my weapons, and I will fight with them with all my trust and courage, against injustice and lies. I will twit with justice and I will chide out of love.

I came here not thirsty of power or wealth, but wishful of good and justice; I did not bring treasures that the moths and vermin destroy, nor treasures or fame, but I did bring a big wide and amiable heart. I came here poor materially because our Savior said to His disciples when He sent them into the world: “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts – no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep”, but rich in the hope that I will be of use for my people. I bring the light that was earned through hard work, to illuminate your path. I bring the wings of my soul, underneath which I would like to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. You have to learn together with me to suffer and rejoice. The one who receives me receives the One who sent me. Follow me trustfully and I will follow Christ! If I receive peace, receive it together with me! I offer my life to the Church, do so equally! Write my words into your hearts! Carve them deeply, feel them! These are the words of your shepherd sent here to serve and teach. [...]

And now, You, Lord, the One who made me worthy of your gift and chose me to be the shepherd of your intelligent flock, be my help, my support and the one who corrects me so that I can seal with my deeds the things I said at your command so that I can preserve untouched the faith and traditions of our ancestors, and prevent me from blemishing Your Church and the things you settled for the salvation of our souls! Lord, send Your wisdom from the throne of Your glory to be with me and to work, so that I can say in the end as Saint Apostle Paul did that “I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith”, and let the faithful people under my guidance understand from my deeds that You did not leave them as orphans, but You came to them. Amen.

In the end of this research on the life and pastoral ministry of father Ioan Sabău, we may certainly say that the Lord received his prayer at that time, He added His grace to the efforts of the father so that everything he said and promised when he was invested as priest fulfilled completely and abundantly in his life and activity.