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**THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE  
PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTEXT  
OF TODAY’S CHRISTIAN FAMILY**

**- Abstract of Ph.D. Thesis -**

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## Abstract

### **The necessity and actuality of the theme. The current state of the research**

The necessity of this approach to the mission of the Church, viewed from an Orthodox point of view, is determined, first of all, by the values widely promoted in the present society.

In today's postmodern and secular society, par excellence, the mission of the Church must be a testimony of faith.

Even though there are several theologically broader approaches to the Orthodox Christian mission in general, a systematic study of the psychosocial context has not been written yet.

The works that within their content express the coordinates and essential aspects of the mission of the Orthodox Church are:

- the works of Father Ion Bria, *The Faith We Confess*, The Publishing House of the Bible and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 1987; *The Destiny of Orthodoxy*, The Publishing House of the Bible and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 1989; *Liturgy after the Liturgy. A typology of the apostolic mission and Christian testimony today*, Athena Publishing House, 1996; *Go Forth in Peace. Orthodox Perspectives on Mission* (compiled and edited by Ion Bria), World Council of Churches, 1986; the work of Father Valer Bel, *The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World*, in two volumes (*Theological Premises and Exigencies*), Cluj University Press, 2002 and 2004; as well as the volume signed by His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel, published in English under the title *Confessing the Truth in Love. Orthodox Perceptions of Life, Mission and Unity*, Basilica Publishing House, 2008.

The mission of the Church is based on the very communion of the people with the Most Holy Trinity and on their loving and providential intervention in and towards the world. The Christian mission is realized or embodied by sending Christ and the Holy Ghost into the world for the world to be saved<sup>1</sup>.

From an Orthodox perspective, the Christian mission is a disinterested participation in the act of "sending" the Son into the world by the Father and the Holy Ghost in order to make

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<sup>1</sup> Father Valer Bel, *Missio Dei*, vol. *Church Mission in Sacred Scripture and in History*, coordinated by Father Ioan Chirilă, Publishing House Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p.11.

known the love of the Holy Trinity to the man, and to make him live on earth the divine life of communion with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, manifested in the Church. The implications of this understanding on the mission are fundamental to its deployment: the mission is not primarily aimed at propagating or conveying intellectual beliefs, doctrines, culture, or commands, but translating into humanity the life of communion that exists in God.

The Son of God incarnate has come into the world, fulfilling the Father's will to achieve the salvation of men, that is, as the Father's messenger into the world (*John* 10:36). The Son is the first Apostle, the heavenly Apostle.

The apostle means *sent* and indicates in the New Testament "some people chosen and sent on a mission with special mandate and gifts"<sup>2</sup> received from the Very "*Apostle and the High Priest of Our Confession*" (*Hebrews* 3:1), therefore "the Apostles were the first among the persons in charge of particular ministries"<sup>3</sup>, this also marks their exceptional position of messengers of the *Heavenly Apostle*.

In a biblically-dogmatic sense, sending the Son (and the Holy Spirit) as an expression of God's love for man, aims to bring man and the world back to the "*beginning state*". The sending of the Son into the world, materialized visibly in the Incarnation, "returns to man his original destiny: to bring the creation of man in the image of God to full likeness, a process that accomplishes the likeness of God or the deification"<sup>4</sup>. Also, the Son is sent into the world to draw everybody to the Father, and to make them partakers of communion with God in the theandric nature of Christ. The Word of God incarnate is the Savior of the world and the great Apostle of the Father, and at the same time the Archetype and Telos of human existence.

The recipient of the mission of the Son and of the preaching of the Apostles is the world, thus "through their sending, their deeds and their words, and by their very existence in the world, the messengers of the Son represent the Son and by representing the Son they represent the Father in his presence and work in the world"<sup>5</sup>.

Through the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Church of Christ is founded, but the work of the Spirit extends to the Apostles by the power that it pours upon them at Pentecost. These, after their final sending into the world by Christ, are sealed by the Holy Spirit. That is why the

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<sup>2</sup> Father V. Bel, *Missio Dei*, p. 80: "The Apostle is the sent one, and the work that the messenger must perform is the mission".

<sup>3</sup> Nikolai Afanasiev, *Church of the Holy Spirit*, vol. I, translation by Elena Derevici, Publishing House Patmos, Cluj Napoca, 2008, p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Father Andrew Louth, *John Damascene - tradition and originality in Byzantine theology*, translation by Father Ioan Ica senior and Deacon Ioan I. Ică junior, Publishing House Deisis, Sibiu, 2010, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Grob, *Envoi*, in *Dictionnaire oecumenique de misiologie*, Publishing House Du Cerf, Paris, 2003, p. 109.

mission of the Apostolic Church is closely tied to the sending of the Son and of the Spirit into the world by the Father.

The missionary vocation of the Church is related to its apostolic character, thus "the Church is sent from her birthday to preaching throughout the world: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts of the Apostles 1: 8), this fact is also expressed by the Apostle Peter: "And we are witnesses of everything he did ... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God ... "(Acts of the Apostles 10: 39-42)<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, the mission of the Apostolic Church continues the mission of the Son and the Spirit sent into the world by the Father, and also identifies itself by its savior calling with the mission of the Twelve. If we were to divide the mission into segments, it would be structured as follows:

- the mission of the Son, Who sends the Apostles to preach into the world;
- the mission of the Holy Spirit, Who establishes the Church;
- the final sending of the Apostles on a mission;
- the mission of the Apostolic Church, continued by the followers of the apostles (bishops, priests, deacons).

"The exigencies of the Church's mission in the present period include: preaching - the preaching of the Holy Gospel (i.e., the "proclamation" of the divine word), the unalterable transmission and preservation of the true teachings and faith, the intact transmission and defense of Tradition, the Gospel inculturation, "the social apostolate", "the Christian philanthropy"<sup>7</sup>.

Today, just like in the past, Christian mission means sending into the world for the universalization of the Gospel and the integration of men into the Kingdom of heaven. Church must become aware of and fully affirm its missionary vocation. The missionary call of the Church relates to its apostolic character and is an essential dimension and component of it. The church must be in a continuous state of mission. It cannot stop being a missionary church even for a moment<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Farther Valer Bel, *Missio Dei*, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Father Valer Bel, *The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World [Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană]*, Publishing House Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Father Valer Bel, *The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World...*, p. 7.

"Certainly secularization requires a clear response and a firm action on the part of the Church. The mission of the Church in a secularized world is not easy. Even if the world seems autonomous, emancipated, it absolutely needs the work of the Church and its guidance: "In a postmodern, secularized society, the Church must find its right place, neither a dominant place, as in the time of the Spanish inquisition, nor a marginal one, far from the culture and community life, as it was imposed in the Soviet society. The Church must be without fear and without an unjustified pride in a face-to-face position with this alien society because this society has an immense need for faith and for the believers of the Church, as the Church is the heart of the world, even if the world has come to ignore his heart!"<sup>9</sup>

A serious and known by all phenomenon which scourges modern society is that for many Christian faith is impractical, many are called Christians only on the basis that they were baptized Christians; otherwise, there is no other relation with the Church. Secularization moves the center of gravity of human existence from God to man, that is, from theocentrism to anthropocentrism. The Church, through its ministers, must prove a great deal of capacity for sacrifice in today's world. To preach the Gospel "to the ends of the world" means to rise in line with the Church's mission and to assume all of its burdens.

By sending the Holy Apostles into the world, the Savior commanded them: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you! (Matthew 28: 19-20). This divine command encompasses the main aspects of the mission of the Apostles and of the later priests, i.e. the ministry of the word (Acts 6: 4) (the preaching of the Holy Gospel), the liturgical ministry (the holy work) and pastoral ministry (the guidance of the faithful). These three ministries are naturally added to the ministry of one's neighbor (Christian diaconry).

The Church must respond to the challenges of contemporary society. It is expected to act, to respond to these needs, and to present its position. Obviously, the problem is very delicate and it is very difficult for the Church to present an official point of view. That is why the Church must show much stewardship and righteous judgment in profoundly considering the problem. The Church must discover the spiritual meaning of globalization, fight against the general chaos, against hatred, injustice, division, against sin.

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<sup>9</sup> Olivier Clement, *Life in the Heart of Death [Viața din inima morții]*, Publishing House Pandora, București, 2001, p. 52.

Today's world is a great challenge to the mission of the Church, in the same way that the Gospel is a challenge to the contemporary world, therefore, in order for the mission to be a prolific one and to call for salvation, the Church must first observe the social, political, economic and cultural reality of Christians in the third millennium.

The mission of the Church in contemporary society must be relieved of its obsolete and locked into sophisticated strategies' forms and constantly seek, as an immediate result, the spiritual rebirth of the desecrated contemporary society, and instill a need for meaning and reference to God.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The paper is divided into six chapters, five theoretical and a practical one, in chapter I, "Theological coordinates of the Orthodox Christian mission", we have developed the issue of missionary theology and the mission of the Church as a whole. Orthodox misiology refers to the mission (divine work) as the expression of the work of salvation and perfection of the world. This is denoted by the verb ἀποστέλλω ("I send") and its derived forms. The notion of sending, according to biblical language, signifies a specific and continuous work of God. It sends the Holy Apostles to make Him known and to work in His name for the salvation of men<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the sending of the Son of God into the world for the salvation and fulfillment of life appears to be a characteristic of the Christology of Orthodoxy. "All this activity of revelation, as well as the very reference of Jesus, is for the salvation of the Almighty. Whoever believes in the Son of God (*John* 9:35) or in the Son of One Born of the Father to be God's eschatological Messenger, that one has eternal life (*John* 3:15-36, 5, 24, etc.), for the Son is "The God of Truth and eternal life" (*John* 5:20)<sup>11</sup> and a condition of the apostolicity of the Church: "... the Church is primarily apostolic because it was founded by Christ and because its foundation is the Holy Apostles"<sup>12</sup>.

Through the four subchapters, respectively, *The mystery of man and his fulfillment through Christ*, *The command of the Great Dispatch. Mission and apostolic service*, *Missionary Apostolic Church*, *Aspects of the mission: evangelism, witness, diaconry, pastoral care* we wanted to address this issue in its complexity.

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Grob, Envoi, in *Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie. Cent mots pour la mission*, Publishing House du Cerf Paris, Labor et Fides, Genève, CLE, Yaoundé, 2003, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Father Valer Bel, *Christology. The Person of Jesus Christ, [Hristologia. Persoana lui Iisus Hristos]*, Course for Students of Orthodoxy Theology in Cluj-Napoca, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Anastasios Yannoulalos, *Rediscovering Our Apostolic Identity in the 21st Century*, în *SVTQ*, vol. 48, nr. 1, 2004, p. 3.



In the second chapter, titled “*Church and mission in a secularized world*”, we have shown that secularization is not a categorical rejection of religion, but a reduction in its sphere of incidence and action in favor of other human activities that claim their own autonomy of religion. Secularization is essentially the process of banishing the sacred from the profane, or erecting a barrier to definitively separate them, with the intention of promoting the profane in its pure and autonomous essence. In its multiseular history, the term secularization has taken two meanings. When it was introduced, during the preliminary negotiations of the Peace of Westfalia (1648), it had a refined legal sense. It meant the transfer of properties (monasteries, schools, lands, institutions, etc.) from the rule and use of the Church to the rule and use of the state for profane purposes. In the twentieth century, from the legal field, the term went into the philosophical and theological one, assuming a broader meaning, but also less precise. In the first subchapter we have developed the problem of the secularization of the contemporary world: individualism, rationalism, atheistic ideologies, pre-Christian pantheism, information society, as it is found in these ideologies. In subchapter 2 we have tackled the issue of globalization and autonomy of contemporary society as challenges to the mission of the Church. Globalization is the concept used to describe a multi causal process that results in events taking place in a part of the globe, that have a wider repercussion on societies and problems in other parts of the globe. In the third subchapter we have tackled the complex issue of the actuality of the post-paschal missionary mandate, the Church being the communion of God with men, as much as can be done in history, and the world being the work of God’s love destined for communion and deification in His Kingdom, between the Church and the world, there is no ontological, dualism is only ethical<sup>13</sup>. The entire creation is destined to be transfigured through the Church into the Kingdom of God. The Church is located within the world through its foundation, mission and purpose<sup>14</sup>. The fourth subchapter of this chapter “*Confessional community church. Its dialogue with science, culture, society*” emphasizes the role of the Church in its dialogue with science, society and culture.

In Chapter III, “Contemporary psychosocial context of the mission of the church. Dangers and challenges”, we have considered important to tackle the theme of *dynamic missionary, parish organization and its ecclesiological orientation* as in the Orthodox space, the smallest unit of church life is the parish. As the Eucharistic (synaxis) gathering of the

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<sup>13</sup> Father Valer Bel, *The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World 2. Exigencies, [Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană 2. Exigențe]*, Publishing House Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p 119

<sup>14</sup> Father Dumitru Popescu, *Jesus Christ Pantocrator [Iisus Hristos Pantocrator]*, The Publishing House of the Bible and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, București 2005, p. 412.

believers, any parish appears - of course in close connection with the bishopric it belongs to organically - as a "Catholic Church" at a specific place and time. The believer lives the mystery of the Church in the life and practice of his parish, in which by consecration and struggle he becomes one with Christ and his brethren in Christ, continuously realizing his existence in Christ, his ecclesiality. Therefore, the discourse about the parish and its life is essentially a discourse about the Church itself and about its presence in the world<sup>15</sup>. "*Philanthropy - the social side of the Church's mission*" is another sub-topic addressed in subchapter 2 of this chapter. This revolutionary concept has stimulated enthusiasm for charity, which has resulted in the creation of many philanthropic institutions. Thus, it is very likely that this "new commandment" of Christian love was the one that contributed to the spread of Christianity in the ancient world. In subchapter 3, "*Controversial bioethical and moral issues*", we have analyzed terms such as biotechnology, bio-politics, bio-piracy, bio-colonialism, bio-imperialism, bio-industry, bio-confusion, etc., which are widely circulated in publications and predominate in our discussions, the coupling of biotechnology and computer science, cyber-biotechnology and bioinformatics place human life at the forefront of social interest. This new reality, making the future a greater problem than in the present, has led to the birth of bioethics, which is more an imperative necessity than science. By means of "*The Church Mission in contemporary Romanian society*" we can say that the joy of fraternal communion favors or inspires more co-working in the pastoral and missionary activity of the Church.

In Chapter IV, "*Religion, religious sentiment and Christian moral values*", we have emphasized the role of religion and religious sentiment. In human life, Religion consists of the relationship between man and God, and this relationship contains as essential elements: the existence of a spiritual and transcendent God as an object of religion, of a free human soul as its subject, a specific religious sentiment and its own internal manifestation and the cult as an external manifestation. These immanent elements must also be permanent whenever and wherever it comes to religion. The lack of any of them also entails the inexistence of religion, or a misunderstanding of it.

The answer to the very controversial issue of the origin of religion depends on their existence or inexistence<sup>16</sup>. "*The affective dimension of religiosity (faith)*" emphasizes aspects of faith as a universal phenomenon. There is no man who does not have faith, or who has not

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<sup>15</sup> Gheorghios D. Metallinos, *Parish - Christ in the midst of us, [Parohia - Hristos în mijlocul nostru]*, translation by Father Ioan I. Ică, Publishing House Deisis, Sibiu, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Robert A Segal, *Theories of Religion*. In Hinnells, John R. *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. London; New York: Routledge, 2005 pp. 49-60.

committed any act of faith. Thus, faith is inherent to the human soul. *Moral values in religion* are another aspect dealt with in this paper. Between religion and morality there is a close connection without, however, being confused with each other. The relationship between them is a reciprocity ratio, i.e. one conditions the other. Religion produces morals, and as religion is, the same is morals. *The religious commandments - the tradition and actuality and the theological, educational and cultural mission of the Church* are two other important themes of the paper.

In Chapter V, "*Psychosocial aspects of the Family in the current context*", addresses the issue of family and its importance during the Old and New Testament, the family between tradition and modernity, as well as the relationship between the mission of the Church and the Christian family.

In the practical part of the paper we have proposed as a general objective to highlight the intensity of the religious sentiment in the Christian families and to identify the moral values of the participants in the study. We have also wanted to highlight a statistical relationship between religious sentiment and moral values, as well as highlighting differences between participants by gender, environment, residence, number of family members, and age, in terms of religious sentiment and Church involvement in the formation of the moral profile of the Christian family. To this end, we have used three questionnaires, a validated one to measure the religious sentiment, *The religious sentiment assessment questionnaire (C.E.S.R.)*\* and two other questionnaires that we have built up and validated in this paper and which we have used in studying the perception of Christians on the role of the Orthodox Church, namely *The moral values questionnaire (C.V.M.)* and *The questionnaire on measuring the perception of believers on the Church's role. (C. P. R. B.)*. Also, as an objective, we have aimed at achieving the moral profile of the Christian family and the roles of the missionary Church as perceived by the participants in the study. The originality of the paper consists in building tools to investigate the perception of believers about the role of the Church and the moral values that govern their family life and the realization of a moral profile of the Christian family.

**Keywords:** *church mission, Christian family, moral values, religious sentiment, mission, misiology, philanthropy*

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\* The questionnaire was drawn up by Lupu Mihăiță and Calcan Bogdănel, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology, 2003.