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THE PRE-NICAEAN MISSION PARADIGM

- Abstract of Ph.D. Thesis -

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The first three centuries of the Christian Church are the period in which the numerical growth, the geographical expansion and the impact of Christ's Church, were extraordinary. Given the more than precarious conditions and the obstacles that stood against the development of the Church, we can state that surely this has been the golden age of Christianity.¹ More than once, different historians of the Church, as well as theologians, asked themselves, and their worries are familiar to us up to the present day, what was the secret of such a spectacular growth? Inevitably, we always get to the term mission, on which there were written a great amount of studies, papers, and books that have filled many library shelves, personal or theological ones and not only. Thus, different explanations and argumentations have been formulated regarding pre-Nicaean or Early Church mission.

The differences of opinion or perception regarding the mission of the Early Church are not influenced that much by the researchers' sources or by their different methodologies, as they are influenced by the purposes that the study started with. Most of the theologians began their studying of the mission of the Early Church being motivated by a stringent need of the contemporary Church for a revitalisation and a renewal of its own mission, at a given moment and space. This is why the studies have been particularly focused on those aspects that seemed and maybe were indeed relevant for the period of time in which those studies were written. Even so, nobody could be that critic with this aspect, because it is quite impossible to evaluate the mission of Early Church without inevitably reaching the following question: why would there not be a chance for repeating such a missionary success nowadays?

The noun *paradigm*, in general, and the meaning of paradigm for this particular paper, designates a sum of activities meant to accomplish a purpose, but it could also be understood as an example, a teaching, a model, a parable (these meanings result from the Latin noun *paradigma*, as well as from the neogreek παράδειγμα). Plato has given the *paradigm* noun a sense of meaning that describes a world of ideas, a prototype for the sensitive world that we are living in, a principle that distinguishes fundamental ties and oppositions between several dominant notions with command and control of thought, a case that serves as an example, a model, a prototype, an ideal situation, an ensemble of terms that belong to the same morpho-

¹Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976, p. 114.

syntactic and semantic class and could be a substitute for each other.² Paradigm is a widely accepted mental construction which provides a community or a society, for a long period of time, a base in order to create a self identity and thus to solve some problems and tasks. Paradigm is more than a consensus in a particular field of activity that could get close enough to the maturity status required by science, paradigm is something much more complex: even though it isn't outside of an organised framework, restrained by internal laws and theories and general methodological rules, the paradigm is a summum of events and experiences that are shared by a local community. The pre-Nicaean missionary paradigm understood as a realistic example of statements and solutions of life issues within the Early Church may be (and it is even desirable) a landmark in implementing missionary strategies for εκκλησια of all times and places. Such an original missionary paradigm, and also a *primary* paradigm, provides great solutions for a community of Christian mission act practitioners.

The pre-Nicaean missionary paradigm could be forgotten (naturally) due to this great distance of time, but the effort of updating it (this is also an act of mission, itself) has the scientific responsibility to highlight those elements of theoretical, instrumental and methodological nature, that are used by the protagonists of pre-Nicaean missionarism. (Our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Holy Apostles and apostolic disciples, church hierarchy, Latin and Greek Apologists and common Christians – that carried out a plenary assumed mission even though, for most of them, realizing that they were indeed missionaries didn't stand as a major priority.

David Bosch's theory of shifting missionary paradigms, that he highlighted in his book *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*³, was resumed with a few small modifications and variations by the Swiss theologian, Hans Küng. The Orthodox approach on Apocalyptic Paradigm or First Christians Paradigm teaches that the first century Church mission

² Plato, *The Myth of the cavei* (Republica, chapter VII), Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1986.

³ By taking the concept of "paradigm shifts" from physicist Th. Kuhn that says science does not progress to a cumulative manner, but through revolutions, David Bosch stated his theory on shifts of missionary paradigm in other writings, such as: *Die Heidenmission in der Künftsschau Jesu: Ein Untersuchung zur Eschatologie der Synoptischen Evangelien*, 1959, Zürich, *The Why and How of a True Biblical Foundation for Mission, Zending op Weg Naar de Toekomst: Essays aangeboden*, prof. Dr. J. Verkuyl, 1978, Kampen: Kok Publishers, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*, 1980, Atlanta: John Knox Press, *The Church as Alternative Community*, Potechefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1982, *How My Mind Has Changed: Mission and the Alternative Community*, Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, 1982, *Mission and Evangelism: Clarifying the Concept*, Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft, 1984, *Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission, Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, eds. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

has eminently been a Christocentric one, the Early Christianity mission had a profound revolutionary character (with socio-political implications), and through their mission, the first Christians didn't intend to portray an utopia, their vocation rather portrayed the hope that hasn't been yet fulfilled. As for the Hellenistic Paradigm of the patristic era, we know that according to Eastern Christianity the mission was similar to the activity of the Church. Early Christian belief was that the Church was the Kingdom of God on earth. Implicitly, if you belonged to the Church, you would belong to the Kingdom, too. The Church is the goal and the fulfillment of the Gospel, and not a tool or method for missionary work. In full agreement with the inspired text of Scripture, eastern patristic mission placed at the foundation of the mission God's love for man. Man's salvation was accomplished by the loving God. Therefore, if love is the foundation for the mission, then the purpose of mission is the life (John 3:16)

The importance of the thesis, through the theme it approaches, consists of the fact that it emphasizes the content and the meaning of pre-Nicaean missionary reason and action, in the perspective of observing its consistency from the first moments of Christianity up to the beginning of the 4th century.

The pre-Nicaean missionarism has manifested itself through the first thousand of years by the successive transition from the apostolic *kerygma* to the catechetical teaching and to the central place of Liturgy within the local Church's life; this situation has not changed even in the second millennium, even if it followed a stage of dogmatic and canonical substantiation, a necessary stage even for the changes that emerged into the societies' life, worldwide; yet, even at the beginning of this 3rd millenium, the unchanged missionary paradigm needs a new form of experssion for the same contents, so the contemporary and post-modern man could be able to discover how current the apostolic and patristic spirituality is. The missionary paradigm has its own well defined stages: 1. Preaching of the Gospel, 2. Conversion, 3. Baptism, 4. Incorporation into the Church, 5. The celebration of the Sacraments so that the new members may achieve a spiritual growth into the Church, the sacramental Body of Christ. **In this way, the missionary paradigm becomes an expression of what is essential and permanent.**

I will seek to achieve a synthesis of the missionary approach during the New Testament, apostolic and post-apostolic ages, and the manner and method of accomplishment of the mission at the beginnings of Christianity, based on New Testament and then based on the records of the apostolic, post-apostolic and pre-Nicaean fathers, watching the mode of transmission and storage

of the missionary paradigm of the New Testament in the subsequent periods of time up to the 4th century.

We will highlight that the ecclesial rules and laws and liturgical-moral of Christianity settled into canonical form by the ecumenical councils that followed the Early Church were derived, were established and enshrined forever from pre-Nicaean missionary paradigm. That's because pre-Nicaean missionary paradigm was real and effective even in the absence of this framework canon, as far as the pre-Nicaean period of time has prepared, with multiple aspects, the implementation of these internal ecclesiastical law. Pre-Nicaean missionary paradigm remains, without doubt, in this bi-millennial history of the Church of Christ, a unique testimony, unrepeatably, yet tangible, a real landmark for institutionalized Christian mission which followed. This unparalleled value that isn't given by anyone (subjectively and/or gratuitous), value that Early Church itself has won through assumed and plenary experienced sacrifice, will become a pure and decisive *filter* for selective purposes between a Christian mission that continues the pre-Nicaean one and a mission animated by obscure, prozelit and secularized interests.

The first part entitled *Apostolic missionary paradigm* has five chapters in its composition.

In the first chapter, I made a statement of the apostolic missionary paradigm, based on historical moment of founding the Church of Christ, through Pentecost – a moment that coincides with the beginning of the Christian mission. Pentecost is the concrete moment of foundation the Church, both visibly and invisibly. Christ's Church is a trinitarian and theandric structure, Christ is in the same time the foundation and its head. Missionary shimmers from the time of calling to apostolate of the group of the 12 Apostles that will have to be unique in the Church's history; that apostolic collegiality namely of *who wants to be first shall be your servant* (Matthew 20: 27), expressed during the *trial* mission and afterwards, would eventually stand during the Apostolic Synod, also during the pre-Nicaean period and especiallu during the Ecumenical Synods. The Pentecost upon the Apostles has the effect of turning those men who stood imprisoned for the fear of the Jews, into missionaries which by their action put the bases of churches and local.

In the second chapter, I will describe how the Apostles' work of preaching the Gospel is a continuation of the Lord's work. The apostolic preaching is also a part of the divine revelation,

because Apostles were intercessors and, implicitly, transmitters of it, as those who knew Jesus Christ directly and being formed by Him during those three and a half years of public activity. Therefore, the apostolic preaching and its contents remain unique in the history of the Church because it is based on those who would be the first Christian communities' soul. The apostles understood to be missionaries first in Jerusalem and later in other cities and the nations, highlighting several aspects of the unique mission in the history of Christianity that has undertaken the Apostle Paul, rightly called the *Apostle of the Gentiles*. The Gospel preaching of the Apostle Paul pursues an objective of a special scale: conversion of the Gentiles in faith in Christ. Both St. Paul and the other Apostles preached having a real and unprecedented missionary success: God's Word becomes active and efficient through their preaching and the receivers of the message are steeped in their soul and converted and are incorporated into the Body of Christ, through the Sacraments of initiation.

In the third chapter, I will succinctly analyse in an exegetical manner some scripturistic texts that are very important for the Baptism theology (John 3: 15, Matthew 28: 19-20, Mark 16: 16-17, John 20: 21, Romans 6: 14, Galathians 3: 26-28) and for the Chrismation theology (Acts 18: 17, II Corinthians 1: 22, I John 2: 20 and 27).

In the fourth chapter, I intend an exegetical approach on the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the mystery of supreme sacrifice on the Cross and also to shape it from the establishment and celebrating by the Lord Jesus Christ, continuing with the celebration of Eucharist by the Apostles and their successors in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in the apostolic era. Martyrdom and martyrdom willingness of the countless martyrs during the persecutions were possible mainly due to these martyrs consciousness of belonging to the kingdom of God, a consciousness with a strong eschatological character.

In the fifth chapter, I will follow the effects in terms of extending the mission of the Church by building the local Christian community. Once established these local churches, it will require a clarification in terms of dogmatic regarding the relation of local churches and the catholic Church.

In the second part of the paper, we will capture the apostolic continuity of the Church's missionary paradigm in the history of the first three centuries of Christianity. The great missionary commandment uttered by Lord Jesus Christ had to be translated into the missionary practice of the holy Apostles, disciples of the Apostles, and the Church hierarchy which is the

successor of the apostolic mission over the centuries. Holy Apostles and their successors evangelize and preach the Word of the Gospel of Christ, incorporate into the Body of Christ - the Church - new members through Baptism and Eucharist (in particular), but also by other sacraments (in general) and the faithful, as well, practicing their roles in the Church, but especially living their faith in a very applied manner, they become missionaries, too. Baptism has always been considered a primordial Sacrament of Christianity. Although, the doctrinal terminology was just beginning its crystallization, however, from the early decades after Christ, appeared deeply dogmatic terms (as of *rebirth* and *renewal*) on this baptismal act. Also, New Testament concepts introduced in the Church vocabulary by its' first great thinkers, such as St. Paul (*the Old Adam, the New Adam*), will be developed by other illustrious scholars such as St. Irenaeus of Lyon.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is undoubtedly the pinnacle of the faith and of the Church's witnessing and of its members, with necessity in and through Holy Liturgy. *The breaking of bread* was always perceived as the Sacrament of Jesus Christ's (crucified and risen) personal presence, into Church's life. The Eucharist is both bread on the path towards eternal life and foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

At the end of this paper, we will briefly address the turning point for the Church's missionary life, recorded at 313, through the promulgation of the Edict of Milan. We will specify the consequences it has had and still has in the past and present history of the Church of Christ.

KEYWORDS: mission, paradigm, Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, local Church, universal Church, apostolic kerygma, Liturgy.

THE PRE-NICAEAN MISSION PARADIGM

(summary)

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