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PHD THESIS SUMMARY

**E-CHURCH? REQUIREMENTS OF THE ORTHODOX
MISSION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT**

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Keywords

Mission, missionary principles, internet, digital environment, missionary requirements, digital evangelism, digital dependence, virtual community, deontological code, missionary practice guide

Introduction

Preliminary

The Church learned to speak the different languages of the world, fulfilling Christ's command to preach the gospel to every nation (Matthew 28: 19-20). And in contemporary times the Church of Christ fulfills its missionary call to share with the world the Good News of God's love for man and His invitation to communion addressed to him. It's just that a new "language" has emerged, a new missionary realm, a virtual and digital world created with the help of computers in which modern man is increasingly seeking fulfillment and satisfaction of certain needs. The use of the new information and communication environment of the Internet is skyrocketing and brings back to the news the challenge for the Church to learn this new "language" that believers today speak.

The premise from which the missionary reporting of Orthodoxy to the virtual environment starts is that like all other "worlds" or "environments" and it needs Christianity. The loving message of faith is universal. But the spread of the Christian message in the new virtual environment should not be a chaotic one, but guided by Christian pastoral principles adapted to the context offered by the new technology and which give a certain coherence and concertation to the Christian mission. Due to the increasing complexity of human life, it is increasingly necessary that the entire missionary activity of the Church be coordinated, logical, structured in such a way that all aspects of the spiritual life of the parish are taken into account and nothing left neglected. A good priest will consider that in his missionary work he will cover all aspects of the life of the work entrusted to him for shepherding. And believers who frequently use digital communication technology need to be greeted in the virtual world by the message of faith.

The coherent structuring of missionary activity on the Internet must start from encouraging Christian studies about the psychology of presence and networking in this virtual environment and about the concrete implications for users that this technological innovation has. This new technological and social product, the Internet, also contributes to technological expansion and has effects on socio-economic structures, acting extremely strongly in the heart of a society, both at institutional and organizational level. It is fundamentally different from other media in that it develops a new type of communities and socio-human organizations,

providing the main support for the global expansion of the "network-type" form of organization. The new social organization, developed especially at the virtual level, has increasingly visible effects in the sphere of political, economic decisions, competition on various markets, marketing and the global economic market. More and more today, economic markets, via the Internet, are virtualizing themselves both in terms of transactional and in terms of socio-human relations. In fact, there is no aspect of human life that the internet today does not shape in one form or another.

If we take a look at what happens in a minute on the internet we will see that in the 60 seconds of online, a million people log in to Facebook, on the search engine offered by Google there are 3.8 million searches, on YouTube 4.5 million videos are watched and 347,222 users run pages on Instagram. Extremely much activity that permanently increases in intensity. The question to which the Church must answer is how many of these users, in this minute, have read a blog or watched a video telling them more about our Savior Jesus Christ.

The conclusion to be reached by those who are responsible for the mission of the Church is that to such a lively activity in online the Church must respond with viable methods of digital mission. Just a few years ago there were only a few options to share valuable information. These options were newspapers, radio and television. Today, through the new information technology, we have blogs, downloadable podcasts, e-books, videos, graphics, small online groups, photos, articles, infographics, newsletters, vlogs, instruction guides, electronic magazines and the list goes on. This means that the Church or its missionary service should not remain in the same way of sharing the gospel with the world.

State of play of studies on the topic addressed

Orthodox missionary theology is primarily responsible for deepening the research on the implications of new information technologies both on man and on the process of transmitting the truths of faith in the virtual digital environment. Unfortunately, no consistent steps have been taken in this direction, perhaps due to the novelty of the theme and the vertiginous evolution of new technologies. But as this technology is rapidly seizing more and more aspects of human life, theology must investigate the implications of its use for man and his spiritual life. From a missionary perspective, an effective, spiritually healthy and coherent approach to the work of the Church in the new digital world must be found. Unfortunately, a

complex and complete treatment from the perspective of Orthodox missiology in this direction has not yet been achieved. As a result, a careful treatment of this topic is also required in Romanian Orthodox theology. It is worth noting that, as will be seen in the bibliographic sources used, Western and overseas theology have taken some significant steps in researching the implications and benefits of using the virtual environment of the Internet in pastorate and mission. The experience of their research will be useful, but it is desirable to apply the missionary paradigm specific to the Orthodox Church on the benefits and challenges brought by the new virtual environment to the work in the world of the ecclesial community.

Methodology of the work and assumptions to be verified

The research strategy was achieved by intertwining and using several methods, a natural approach in treating a transdisciplinary topic. Analytical and synthetic methods were used to analyze the defining elements of the Orthodox mission or to correlate information from different fields (theology, psychology, sociology, etc.) in order to discover the strengths or weaknesses of this new technology. To these were added methods specific to theology such as the exegetic-hermeneutical method aimed at interpreting, in a missionary perspective, the revealed text or the ascetic-mystical, historical and theological-speculative methods. For the practical part drawn up in the last chapter, simulation and practical methods were mainly used.

The main approach of the work was to discover those positive valences of the new technology that can facilitate missionary activity on the Internet, but also the possible anthropological, sociological, religious challenges, etc. that the new technology brings to the attention of theology. It was also intended to provide several guidelines to help the digital missionary and a guide to practical activities that can be undertaken to make missionary work more effective in this context.

The hypothesis from which this research starts is that the Internet can offer extraordinary opportunities to the missionary work of the Church to the extent that this new technology is used both with professionalism and competence, as well as with discernment and clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the Orthodox mission.

The professional use of the Internet in missionary work requires the knowledge, by those who work in this sense, of the values and principles by which this work of the Church is

guided and then their observance and application in the concrete. It is then necessary to know the tools that the new technology offers and how it can be used as efficiently as possible. Intertwining the word with the image and the sound; the potentiality to multiply information very much and quickly; the active involvement, volens nolens, of all believers in missionary work; the prospect of organizing "virtual ecclesial communities" that will continue and complement communion in the physical environment; there may be only a few aspects that the well-trained and knowledgeable missionary can use to make missionary work more effective. Moreover, a missionary deontology of the work of the Church in the virtual space is necessary. Well-defined and assumed rules and responsibilities have not yet been drawn up by the Church for those who work in the new digital world and therefore, together with a series of concrete guidelines, have constituted a practical core of the work. The ideal perspective would be that in which theological schools offer future ministers a module of preparation on this topic and thus the work of the Church in the virtual world will no longer be a disorganized one, at random and with little chance of success.

Regarding the use with discernment, it was noted the existence of limitations or even negative effects of new information technologies. Specialists have noted the impairment of the physical health of those who surf several hours a day in the digital environment, but also the appearance of negative psychological consequences. Theologians will object to the possibility of making the cultic life of the Church fully present in the virtual environment, and some will notice new ideologies that falsely sacralize the new technology by projecting on it visions and misconceptions. These are just some of the problems raised by the use of new digital technologies and which require discernment and balance in their use.

Motivation and purpose of choosing the theme

Working in an educational environment and always seeking the improvement of the teaching act, I have come to understand that there is no moment of interaction with a student, even if it is, for example, only a meeting in the hallways of the school or on the street, which does not have an intrinsic educational value. Every moment I interact with a student I educate him. I share every moment something about myself, about my beliefs. In fact, each person lives in a permanent interaction with his fellows, realizing within this inter-relationation a wonderful work: each one transmits to the other a certain "spirit". In other words, we are all,

in relation to others, "missionaries". We all bear witness to others. But, what spirit of life we share and how consciously assumed, depends on each of us. Christians are called to give the good testimony of the life-making Spirit who renewed their life afterwards of the Savior Jesus Christ. Every Christian is called by God to a fellowship of eternal and happy life with Him and, at the same time, is sent to bear witness to the world of the good he has done to God, thus understanding that he can gain his salvation by serving at the "altar" of the souls of his fellows. To the awareness of this call of each of us, in every moment of life, is added the context of the spread of information technology that has penetrated into almost all aspects of human life. Young people, the most active users of the new information technology, demand that the new digital environment be impregnated also by the presence of the Christian message shared with them in this context as well. They were inspired and motivated to choose such a theme. Therefore, given the reality that every Christian by the way he lives his life fulfills a profound missionary act, I believe that the Church must guide in the authentic spirit of faith how, both at the individual level and at that of the ecclesiastical communities, the Christian missionary act takes place in the new virtual space of information technology.

Timeliness and necessity of the theme

The need for such a research approach is also closely linked to the above. The necessity and universality of the missionary work of the Church are also strong arguments for conscientiously addressing the theme.

Certainly the Church is and should be present everywhere where its believers are. It approaches this new informational and communicational environment with realism and trust. But he must be a means, not an end in itself. If it wisely complements missionary work in the physical world this new digital technology can become a truly beneficial creation.

Perspectives, projections, proposals

Due to the increasing complexity of human life, it is increasingly necessary that the entire missionary activity of the Church be coordinated, logical, structured in such a way that all aspects of the spiritual life of the parish are taken into account and nothing left neglected. A good priest will consider that in his missionary work he will cover all aspects of the life of

the work entrusted to him for shepherding. And believers who frequently use digital communication technology need to be greeted in the virtual world by the message of faith.

The process of coherent structuring of internet pastorate must start from encouraging Christian studies about the psychology of presence and networking in this virtual environment and about the concrete implications for users that this technological innovation has. An important aspect is that such studies should also lead to the creation of a set of guides with explanations and recommendations for those who do mission on the Internet (priests, volunteers, catechesis, etc.) but also useful for parents, for children and for every Christian who surfs the Internet.

The clergy, together with all those who use the virtual environment and its social networks in order to achieve the goal of the Church's mission, must ensure that the new communication technology is used responsibly and taking into account the priority of the concern to protect the Church and those with whom the Church also interacts in this new virtual environment. The hierarchy is required to be concerned for the development and then exercise of personal responsibility by all the missionaries of the Church in the virtual environment. Disregarding the importance of educating the personal responsibility of the Orthodox missionary in the virtual world can bring many disadvantages to the Church and even jeopardize its mission in this regard.

Although we have tried to present some fundamental ideas of a possible code of ethics with reference to the misadistic work of the Orthodox Church in the new and challenging virtual environment created by information technology, the systematization of such a representative code and assumed by the Church, can only be a contribution from as many theologians, representatives of the ecclesial community as possible and, in special, on behalf of the hierarchical decision-making forums. Being a set of rules that regulate missionary work in its entirety, a work that basically belongs to the Church and not just to an individual or group who is concretely involved on behalf of the Church in missionary activity, only it, the Church as "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15) can formulate and apply such a code. At the core of such a code can only be the beliefs, values and principles that the Church is guided and promoted by. Therefore, an individual approach like this one from now on, can not be nearly exhaustive but only a starting point to develop, refine, update an official document assumed and applied by the ecclesial community.

It is necessary for the Church to create and assume such a code because it is also the one who must apply it through its missionaries and bears the responsibility of missionary work in front of the One who sent it to the world, the Savior Jesus Christ. A well-thought-out and applied code of ethics by the missionary workers of the Church can also regulate the relationship of the community of believers with those outside it, civil society. Thus, misunderstandings, incidents can be avoided, and transparency in missionary work that the guidelines of a code of ethics provide also helps to effectively evaluate and coordinate the work of the one who is doing mission on behalf of the Church.

Such organizational principles for the missionary activity are required to be accepted by the Holy Synod for their implementation by the church administrative forums and applied in concreteness by priests, lay people, volunteers and all those who work within the ecclesial communities acting in the virtual media environment or on the social media platforms offered by the Internet. Regulations of this kind are not designed and enforced to control but to protect all the missionaries of the Church. Insofar as there are no guidelines of this nature, spiritual problems, distortions of the Church's message or even legal problems may arise.

Synthetic presentation of the thesis chapters

Chapter I

Presenting the structure of the work, in its first chapter was highlighted a synthesis of the missionary paradigm of the Church followed by a diagnosis of the changes that the life of the church community goes through at this beginning of the millennium. Naturally, the distinctive features of Orthodox theology determine the Church's attitude toward the mission. Summarizing the theological reference writings, we have identified and presented some fundamental Orthodox missionary principles. Thus, references have been made to its triadological, christological, pneumatologic, ecclesiological, liturgical, or eschatological character. From the perspective of Orthodox missionary theology, it is important that the connection between these aspects is not broken because only together they form the image of complete, authentic Orthodox missionary work. I emphasized that the Orthodox Church

cannot lose its missionary identity even in the new missionary context offered by the virtual world.

Believers understand the Church differently and integration into its life. Some are more active and much more involved in her work, but a large part of those who cross the threshold of the holy places at the great feasts or at important events in their lives, are still far from living an active Christian way of life, with understanding and especially constant. The crisis of life within the Church is matched by strong changes in social life. For example, the social freedom gained in the Romanian environment after '89 has slowly turned into a mentality that misunderstands this important value of life. Some tend to think that to be free means to do anything and anytime as the voice of their own will dictates to them by challenging any authority.

A complex phenomenon of mutations on all levels of human life occurs. Aspects of social, anthropological, technological, religious mutations were presented. There are mutations in mentalities, in the way people spend their free time or in the way in which the education of new generations is perceived and carried out. New technological tools are also integrated into every aspect of human life, this process being crowned with the increasing use of technological tools that create the virtual environment of the Internet. On top of these all overlaps the mission of the Church whose paradigm inspired by the Divine Revelation must know the sensitive process of finding the optimal way to share with the divine message, correct and complete, but also accessible at the same time, to the millions who access the Internet.

Chapter II

In a second large part of the work, some historical and technical generalities regarding this new technology were highlighted. The presentation of how this new technology was born and how it works by creating a "copy" of the world in which we live, was followed by highlighting some religious aspects relevant to the mission of the Church. For example, we have shown the parallel between bits and logos that some extremist supporters of the Internet are doing at the ideological level, who say that the real world could be re-created in the virtual one, even surpassing the real one in perfection. Just as the real world is created by God through the reasons of the existing ones (logos), man also creates a virtual world with the help of bits. This also led to highlighting the reality of the false sacredness of the new technology.

Aspects regarding its way of functioning have, from the perspective of some specialists, relevance for Christian anthropology, for the way in which man understands himself, the way in which his senses work or the way in which the management of his own identity is carried out in this new virtual space. Finally, we are not talking about using an object like any other, but about a technological tool like a brain from which the human person expects a high level of interactivity. From here are born important spiritual implications in the use of new technology. Decorporation, anonymity in communication, the effect of "filtered light", the asynchronicity of information, "network" thinking (created by the use of hypertext) are just some of the specifications of this technology that brings major changes in the lives of Internet users.

The chapter ended with a series of assertions about the future of the Internet, which by connecting more and more smart objects is developing towards an increasingly full transposition of human life into the new digital environment.

Chapter III

In this chapter, certain requirements of the Orthodox mission were analyzed from the perspective of their correlation with the new technology. It is necessary both to seek the advantages of using the Internet in the mission of the Church and to the possible dangers that produce "jamming" in transmitting the authentic message taught by it. Information in the virtual environment is extremely easily accessible, easy to process (multiplication, truncation, etc.), subject to serious security problems, accessible as a production cost, etc. Here are just a few realities that suggest the need for a wise approach to missionary activities in the virtual world. A multitude of parish, personal or, more recently, blogs have spread on the internet that spread information that does not have a certification of authenticity from the Church.

An unsuspecting person cannot tell whether the information he is reading is in the spirit of divine Revelation or not, and this, because, it can easily be about personal opinions and not about the authentic teaching of the Church, or it can be subjectively, tendentially rendered information. Above all, by providing information and supporting interest, the new technology makes possible an initial encounter with the Christian message, especially among young people who are increasingly turning to the world of cyberspace as a window into the world. Therefore, very practical ways must be found to help those who make contact with the

Church first through the Internet and then move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of the Christian community.

The Internet can provide strong support for evangelism and catechization. There are already countless sources of information on the internet about the Church, its history and tradition, its doctrine and involvement in every area of life and from all corners of the world. So it is clear that although the internet can never replace that profound experience of God that only the living, liturgical and sacramental life of the Church can offer, it can certainly become a unique supplement and support both in preparing for the meeting with Christ in the community and in supporting the new believer in the journey of faith that begins afterwards.

In recent years, the use of Internet technology in order to achieve or integrate into a group is increasing. Sites that create an online community that those who are eager can easily join have become very popular. But virtual communities are something else entirely different than what an authentic parish community entails. The "virtual parish" can sometimes be a support in the real community, but it cannot become a substitute for it. What a church community involves, what defines a virtual community, and where the two modes of communion might meet was an aspect analyzed in a subchapter of the thesis and that requires in-depth research.

With the issue of authentic and living integration into the Community of the Church, a series of ideologies built around the promises of a spiritual nature that the virtual world promises must also be remembered. Not a few specialists see the Internet as an eminently spiritual space and having a strong religious charge. For example, philosophers and leading technicians in the field support the possibility of "downloading" the human mind or personality into the virtual world. And others, due to the phenomenon of decoration that internet surfing entails, are trying to teach a new kind of spirituality. To such ideologies the Church must provide answers so as not to leave its believers deprived of guidance and protection of the soul.

Chapter IV

In the last part, the work goes towards an innovative aspect in the missionary activity of the Church in the virtual environment, trying to propose some clear principles, in the spirit of the values of the Christian faith, to guide the work of the Orthodox missionary in the virtual world. First of all, a code of ethics is absolutely necessary because the lack of unitary and

authentic regulations leads to disturbances, slippages and mistakes in missionary activity in the virtual world. The local church communities have not yet assumed such a code and theological schools are not yet paying much attention to the missionary work that the Church is doing on the internet. Soon there are also glicades of a legislative nature that can bring blockages to the mission online.

The practical part was completed with a small guide of missionary activities that can be carried out in the virtual environment. The proposals are by no means exhaustive, on the contrary, the rapid changes of software and gadgets are constantly opening up new opportunities to benefit from the new technology in favor of the mission. From the organization of a parish site to the creation of thematic parish groups or live broadcasts, we have exhibited several activities that are accessible to the Orthodox missionary and that have certain advantages in sharing the message of faith with internet users.

The complexity of the aspects involved in this new technology in people's lives makes this work just a beginning and a challenge for even more in-depth studies on the implications and benefits of new technology on the lives of Christians and missionary work in the virtual environment.

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