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**TO A COMMON MISSIONARY TESTIMONY: POSSIBILITIES AND
LIMITS. A HOLY AND GREAT COUNCIL OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH,
POINT OF VIEW**

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***Abstract:** In the framework of the World Council of Churches and in the bilateral theological dialogues between diverse Churches and denominations, the question of a common missionary testimony is a quite often topic. Since 2016, when the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church was held, a new perspective showed up regarding the Orthodox point of view. The following study tries to underline the ecumenical perspective of how Churches and denominations may or may not work together in the spirit of missionary testimony into the world. The newest documents provided by the Orthodox Church may give some new hopes in this respect.*

*Keywords: mission, confessional, Orthodoxy, Church, testimony
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Introduction

Despite clear convergences, regarding the fundamentals of the faith, the theology of the different Churches and denominations, regarding the anthropology, salvation, the nature and function of the Church and the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, it determines, involuntarily, conflicting or even competitive missionary priorities.

1. Missionary Responsibility: Evangelisation or Proselytism?

The different missionary conceptions lead to the well-known problem of proselytism. Originally, the term “proselyte” had no negative connotation, but he designated the new, newly converted member of a young Church. It was taken from the Jewish tradition in which the proselyte was the one who converted to the Mosaic faith. Nowadays, the term is rather pejorative and refers to the activity by which Churches, denominations or persons who, in the name of faith, seek to change or rather to convert the faith of others, “by methods that are not part of the spirit of Christian love, which violates the dignity of the person and diminishes trust that the testimony of the Church of Christ in the world can have” (*Vers un temoignage commun*, 1997 p. 8). Thus the authentic testimony is excluded and it is emphasized, by various means, the “false belief” of the believer, who must come to the “true faith”. Proselytism is understood by most as “an act of evangelization, deeply illegitimate, a corruption of authentic testimony” (*Le defi du proselytisme*, 1995 p. 78).

The problem, however, consists in the appreciation of these terms. For example, who says what is legitimate and what is illegitimate? Where is the boundary between proclaiming the Gospel as a missionary activity and violating the territorial principle invoked by another Church? A report on proselytism from 1960 emphasizes the tension between the individual’s freedom and concern for the unity and integrity of the Church: what represents for some a legitimate act of evangelism, for others it means explicit proselytism. Therefore, the report mentions “on the one hand, the right and the burden of witnessing in complete freedom, and on the other, the obligation to seek the unity of the Church, as the Body of Christ. Between these two searches consists the tension” (Karkkainen, 2000 p. 379).

The differences of interpretation also appear with regard to the meaning of the term “testimony in complete freedom” and regarding the ecclesiological nature of the Body of Christ. For some, baptism is the quintessential sign of belonging to the Church and the act sufficient to be recognized as a Christian. Any attempt to evangelize an already baptized person is considered by some Churches a form of proselytizing. Others, on the contrary, argue that being baptized makes no sense unless you prove a true conversion to Christ. The rebaptism, practiced by many evangelical communities, means not recognizing the original baptism and questioning the very ecclesiology of the Church where the original baptism was performed (Karkkainen, 2000).

Here, indirectly, we find radically opposite definitions regarding ecclesiology. The two poles are represented by renowned missionaries. One insists on the urgency of evangelization, on the basis of a testimony in complete freedom, and the other on the need to preserve the unity of the Church and its territorial integrity. The first is the American missionary Donald McGavran, who had already drawn the attention of the World Council of Churches, before the General Assembly in Uppsala, to the existence of the two billion people who had not heard of Christ before (Mojzes, 1966). Secondly, Joanis Papadopolis evoked the reactions of Orthodox Churches, which were hit, especially in the years after the fall of communism, by a series of "sects", who came to evangelize on their territory (Witte & Mojsez, 1999).

For Mc Gavran and his school, called *Church Growth*, the priority of the Church and Christians is evangelization. Every enterprise in the missionary field is founded on a simple principle: "God wants His lost sheep to be found. Therefore, all energies, all missionary strategies, must be mobilized around this fundamental objective" (Kinnamon & Cope, 1967 p. 5). In the article titled *Letter on Evangelism*, Mc Gavran pleads for "no shortage of effort, in the service of the Christian mission" (Kinnamon & Cope, 1967 p.7). Faced with the huge need, represented by the worldwide mission, he proposed a massive mobilization of financial and human resources for the establishment of new missionary societies, in order to fulfill the "unfinished task of evangelization of the world". Even 20 years after the General Assembly in Uppsala, the theologian recalls that "three billion human beings (or even four) must come to faith in Jesus Christ, of whom they have not heard before" (Fung, 1985 p. 53).

The influence of his theology on the ensemble of evangelical movements is decisive. This has inspired the work of the Pattaya missionary assembly since 1980. His call for urgent evangelism is also determined by the fact that "all people are lost, for there is no way to heaven, only faith in Jesus Christ" (Osei Mensah, 1981 p.2). The rapprochement between faith and baptism underlines the fact that, regardless of the baptized or unbaptized status of any human being, the mission must do its duty, even if it means rebaptism (Thils, 1962).

These aspects, but also the idea that "no effort should be roundabout" were criticized not only by some outside the evangelical movement, but also by many, even from within it (Fung, 1986 p. 56). A first series of criticisms refer to the American identity of the theologian, which allowed him to have a unilateral perspective on the mission. Raymond Fung summarizes his fears with the following words: "Can the rich bring the Gospel? Can a Church or a people that holds a certain power over others really evangelize?" (Fung, 1986 p.70). Then, the mission presented by it is too individualistic and at the same time triumphalist.

But, from the perspective of the theme of the present study, perhaps the most well-founded criticism is that of lack of vision, regarding the ecumenical movement and the search for Christian unity. Basically, in his writings, he seems to disregard the already existing Churches in the so-called "mission territories". Speaking exclusively about "Christians who believe exclusively in the Bible" and "communities of faithful Christians",

it is understood that other Christian communities do not have these characteristics. His theological vision leaves little room for cooperation and common witness efforts, a fact determined, as it is shown, by the “grave error of the Churches, which deals more with structures, than with taking missionary initiatives” (Fung, 1985 p.76).

McGavran’s case illustrates the first pole of missionary thinking, regarding the relationship between mission and proselytism.

Orthodox mission is inseparable from its ecclesiology, because the mission is the expression of the Church itself, which cannot be reduced to the simple utterance of the word of Jesus Christ (Meyendorf & Leland, 1973). The Orthodox reflections on the mission, underline the centrality of the Liturgy, as an exceptional missionary event. The Eucharist is the center of the activity of the Church and the expression of faithfulness and the secret union between it and Christ the Lord. In this sense, the Church is already the testimony of the coming Kingdom and is a permanent invitation to all people “to gather in the name of the Lord and to live in Him” (Bria, 1986). Orthodox understand the mission as centered in the Eucharist. She is, first and foremost, a profoundly Trinitarian, oriented towards the work of personal salvation, which finds its peak in “theosis” (Stăniloae, 1987). Today’s Orthodox missionary theology is aware that the time of the mission, as a territorial evangelization, through conversion to Christ, has passed, its place now being taken by the question of “Christians by name only” or “Christians who are not Christians”, considering the rediscovery of faith as a priority.

In many such countries, due to the large number of believers, the Orthodox Churches were called “national”, having a strong ethnic component, materialized by the connection between religion, nation and culture, the latter being strongly impregnated by the foundations of the majority faith (Consultation Orthodoxe, 1974). In the face of this situation, it was very difficult for the representatives of the Orthodox Churches to accept the reality of the missions of the evangelists, who generally come from Western countries. They found a free way, after acquiring the freedom of some peoples, to present their own religious beliefs. Orthodox Churches reacted immediately, considering themselves the victims of aggressive proselytizing. Subsequently, after regaining the freedom of expression for the Greek Catholic Church, the representatives of this Church were accused of non-Christian practices, which questioned the bilateral orthodox-catholic theological dialogue itself (Șeuleanu & Dumitriu, p. 285-287). The Orthodox critics, voiced by the voice of Metropolitan Kiril, the current patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, since the conference in Salvador de Bahia (1996), is expressive in this regard (Duraisingh, 1998).

First, for many Orthodox, the multiple missions from the West represent an affront to the unity of the Church and its territorial integrity (Matthey, 1997 p. 76). This attitude directly addresses the problem of the unity of the Church and its concrete expression. Moreover, these missions ignore the existence of the local Church, as if the Gospel had not been preached in these countries (Matthey, 1997 p. 91). The evangelical missions produce a great disservice to the ecumenical movement, because they act individually

and not in dialogue with the local Church, present in these countries, since the formation of the respective peoples.

A second criticism concerns how these missions are organized. For the most part, they are insensitive to the cultural and ethnic tradition, a fact that recalls, rather, colonialist practices, old missionary models and shows ignorance again, in relation to people who have been professing Christianity for thousands of years. That is why people generally reject these movements, because they “disbelieve the message of the Gospel” (Matthey, 1997 p. 93). Evangelical “missionaries” are generally called “sectarians, who do nothing but export their own culture and conception to life” (Matthey, 1997 p. 97).

Another reason for rejecting these missions concerns some means used by those who evangelize. Thus, to be credible in presenting the message of the gospel, many missionaries use dishonest means, such as: favors or material offers. The accusations of this kind are indeed real, but the success of the evangelical mission is not only the use of such material or other means (Robeck, 1996). Therefore, Fung’s conception, already mentioned, that rich Churches, which evangelize poor countries, are not credible, is, from this perspective, well founded.

Of course, the Orthodox care for maintaining the unity of the Church is appreciated, but beyond all the well-founded criticisms, if the mentioned missions were somewhat successful, this happened because they filled a void, given the lack of an authentic faith, to the converted (Corneanu, 1975). Evangelicals exploit precisely this emptiness, relying on the personal approach of a person, on the direct discussion with, on salvation and on faith in general. The Metropolitan quoted above acknowledges, on the other hand, that there is a vast missionary field in the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church, but that, nevertheless, this mission is within the competence of this venerable Church (Duraisingh, 1998 p. 23).

In the study entitled *Sects (Christian). Counter-mission through proselytizing*, Father Ion Bria shows that from an Orthodox point of view,

God’s revelation and willingness to reconcile and recapitulate everything, the seen and unseen creation, in Himself was realized through the incarnation, resurrection and exaltation of the Savior. The revelation of Christ concerning His Church is historically materialized starting with the Pentecost. Therefore, the Christian is received into the one indivisible Church, becoming a member of the Body of Christ. The bishop, the priest, must ensure the participation of Christians in the life of the local Church, which takes the form of communion in doctrine, Sacrament, Liturgy, solidarity, prayer (Bria, 1996 p. 221).

*Therefore,
the Church does not understand by mission neither the controversial fight of other Churches that are engaged in preaching the Gospel, nor the dilution of the Gospel in syncretistic, nationalist or ethicist traditions. The Orthodox Church questions any mission that does*

not consider the personal, historical, chronological transmission of faith in Jesus Christ and the embodiment of the Gospel in the spiritual experience of a people from a certain place and time. (...) (Therefore, nn) the question that all Orthodox missionaries ask is this: where is the faith of Christ, where is the message of the Cross and the Resurrection? (Bria, 1996 p. 223).

In its essence, “proselytizing is a counter-testimony and a counter-mission because it does not seek the Christianity of those who are not Christians, but targets baptized Christians” (Bel, 2006). For these the proselytism rejects the Orthodox Church, “not only from a geographical or numerical difficulty, but from fundamental theological and dogmatic reasons” (Corneanu, 1990).

But, beyond these considerations, the different conception of Orthodox and Catholics, regarding the integrity of the institutional Church, as opposed to ecclesial relativism of evangelical movements, remains to be observed. Therefore, one would think that if these interlocutors cannot, at least for now, evangelize together, yet do so, in mutual respect, thus proving that they are on the way to finding an opportunity to give a common witness to the world (Best & Gassman, 1994, p. 7). The report of the fifth conference, organized by the commission *Faith and Order* (Some Important Documents, 1968), emphasizes that those who are engaged in debates on evangelism and proselytism are motivated by a particular concern for the individual salvation of believers (Report, 1975). In the document entitled *Towards a common testimony*, the possibility is admitted that, some people pass from one faith to another, “from a real belief”. In this case, churches must seriously ask themselves if they are not themselves responsible for some causes, which cause people to change their ecclesial membership (Vers un temoignage commun, 1997 p. 9). This invitation to self-criticism is actually an urge for an objective analysis, regarding the quality of the spiritual life of the believers within the traditional Churches (Best & Gassman, 1994 p. 12).

We have positioned above, two missionary theologies, one evangelical and one orthodox, but theological differences appear very well outlined and they are transposed, on practical ground, into different missionary strategies.

We could have chosen other cases to illustrate these differentiations, such as the situation in South America, where the majority Catholic Church claims the same things to evangelicals, especially Pentecostals. In the face of this situation, insurmountable at first sight, can anyone think of the possibility of a common testimony?

2. Social Commitment

“Faith without deeds is death” says the Apostle (James 2:20). Christ the Savior Himself warned His disciples: “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 7:21). True faith in Jesus Christ is always accompanied by a transposition of it into deeds. In a document inspired by the ecumenical movement

it states: “The gospel is an invitation to faith in Jesus Christ, and the proclamation of this faith must be translated into facts” (Maffei, 1996). To follow Christ implies a certain moral exigency and a permanent work in the midst of society.

The connection between practicing faith and the need for concern for society is widely acknowledged by the studied interlocutors. The question is whether, beyond belief and doctrine, the common commitment to the concrete problems of society, can lead to the construction of a common testimony. However, it must be pointed out from the outset that the prophetic dimension of the Churches is far from unanimous and can be both a source of division and a factor of unity (The Ecumenical Dialogue, 1996).

Into the year 1986, Metropolitan Dr. Antonie Plămădeală of Transylvania published a vast study entitled *The Servant Church*, in which, after referring to the grounds of ministry in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, he enumerates and develops some practical aspects of the service in the Eastern Orthodoxy (Chirilă & Valică & Băndoiu, 2005). But the most relevant part of our study is the fourth, in which the author compares the models of mission from the point of view of the World Council of Churches and from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church. Compared to these, the model of social service of Orthodoxy is “a less institutional one, in the sense that it did not elaborate a doctrine on the Church’s relations with the world, within the framework of a decision of any Ecumenical Synod or Pan-Orthodox Conferences, which has a normative character for its work in society” (Ică jr. & Marani, 2002 p.6). However, this does not mean that it does not have an attitude towards the world, based theologically and that it has no practice in serving the world. The Orthodox Church is one of ministry in its bent aspect: the service of God and the service of humans (Coman, 1978). The Christian community is realized as the *ecclesia* not only through confession of faith and worship, but also through service to the world” (Plămădeală, 1986 p. 8).

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in 2016 issued some important documents regarding the modern world temptations and the mission of the Orthodox Church in this context. Actually it is for the first time since the starting of the conciliar process towards the Holy and Great Church when the Orthodox Churches issued official documents concerning the main topics of the society. From this perspective,

the Church’s great responsibility is perceived in terms of overcoming hunger and all other forms of deprivation in the world. One such phenomenon in our time—whereby nations operate within a globalized economic system—points to the world’s serious identity crisis, for hunger not only threatens the divine gift of life of whole peoples, but also offends the lofty dignity and sacredness of the human person, while simultaneously offending God. Therefore, if concern over our own sustenance is a material issue, then concern over feeding our neighbor is a spiritual issue (James 2:14-18). Consequently, it is the mission of all Orthodox Churches to exhibit solidarity and administer assistance effectively to those in need” (Holy and Great Council, Mission..., 2016).

The fact is that in front of such concerns there is needs to cooperate with others in order to defeat the dangerous facts that threaten people believe and attack the very core of the Christian faith. It therefore believes that:

this dialogue should always be accompanied by witness to the world through acts expressing mutual understanding and love, which express the "ineffable joy" of the Gospel (1 Peter 1:8), surpassing every act of proselytism, unionism, or other provocative act of inter-confessional competition. In this spirit, the Orthodox Church deems is important for all Christians, inspired by common fundamental principles of the Gospel, to attempt to offer with eagerness and solidarity a response to the thorny problems of the contemporary world, based on the prototype of the new man in Christ (Holy and Great Council, The Relation..., 2016).

On this light, the "Christian philanthropy is a major and necessary component of the mission-pastoral strategy. The parish community must become a community of testimony and ministry. The priest must teach people to help themselves (...) and to initiate all philanthropic and social activities at parish level" (Bel, 2008). The actual patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Daniel once reiterated the need that all Christians must cooperate in a practical way for the need of the people and to give a common witness to the world through the good deeds, since the ecumenical movement is passing a winter period in its history (Daniel, 2008).

As a perspective for a common social ministry, as a testimony of all Christians,

the Orthodox Church today considers that ministry is of great importance also for inter-church dialogue and collaboration. In confronting the realities and social changes of the time, the Churches are required not only to move to areas neglected in the past, but also to work in a practical way in the interest of them and humanity (Plămădeală, 1986 p. 297).

From a Roman Catholic perspective, practical collaboration between Christians is a requirement and an opportunity for ecumenism: "This is a dynamic path, in the sense of Christian unity, because the unity of action can contribute to a unity of faith" (Unitatis redintegratio, 2007 paragraph 40). The possibilities of this action, as the social and cultural life offers a rich field for the collaboration between Christians. They are called to fight for the affirmation of human dignity, for the establishment of good, peace and justice in the world. Together, the work is not only based on the humanist imperative, but especially the evangelical one. That is why the Christian testimony regarding the problems of the world is important, as an expression of the common faith in Jesus Christ (Unitatis redintegratio, 2007 paragraph 74).

The question of the relationship between confession of faith and ethical exigency is also illustrated within the World Council of Churches, especially by the existence of its two components: *Life and Action* and *Faith and Order*. After several years of activity „in

parallel”, they concluded the need to deepen the relationship between the two missionary components: the search for doctrinal unity and the Church’s involvement in the concrete problems of society. The materialization of some of the theological discussions and approaches can be found in the *Costly Unity* volume (Best & Granberg, 1993).

The document evokes the “moral heresy” of some Churches, which, by sharing certain concepts, departed from the moral of Christian love and the meaning of the term *koinonia*. For the commitment to justice, peace and the protection of creation can be a form of *koinonia*, even among people who do not share the same faith in Christ. The document goes even further, claiming that ethical engagement can have a strong missionary effect (Birmelle, 2000 p. 359). The document attempts to highlight the ecclesiological implications of this perspective (Birmelle, 2000 p. 405). Thus, the problem of unity relates, to a large extent, to moral demands. But can this commitment be sufficient for the creation of genuine *koinonia*, in the sense of communion and life within the Trinity God? (Lossky, 1999 p. 260).

The criticism of the evangelicals, expressed at the General Assembly in Harare (1998), highlights some aspects of this difficulty. They show that the positions of the Churches, on ethical and moral issues, do not always lead to a closeness between Christians, but on the contrary, to a deepening of divisions. The letter of the evangelical participants, notes the lack of a “living and coherent” theology, for the foundations of the Assembly. They complain about the lack of scriptural references, the existence of conclusions that are far from reflecting biblical morality, regarding “sexual ethics and the conception of the Christian family”, the surrender to assaults of “moral relativism and individualism”, which are permissive values of the West (Lossky, 1999 p. 277). That is why, not always inclining to the problems of the contemporary world, it can create a *koinonia* by itself.

3. Conclusions

Nevertheless, the common commitment to the world’s social problems is urgent and useful. Beyond differences in faith and doctrine, Churches can find common ground for the struggle to bring about justice, peace and general human values. However, this common collaboration must be based on the Trinitarian faith and be firmly rooted in the Gospel. “In the eyes of the world, the joint action of Christians in society must have the value of a testimony given in the name of the Lord. It has the dimensions of a proclamation, because it reveals the Person, life and call to salvation of Jesus Christ” (Unitatis reintegratio, paragraph 43).

These days, since the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus is causing disease and even death. The Christian Churches and the denominations from all over the world must cooperate, together with all the representatives of the secular authorities and religious leaders to help people to get well and to eradicate this virus from the surface of the earth.

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