



Adrian Ignat

## Mission and Ecumenism of the local Church

### Abstract

In this paper, we will underline the meaning of the local Church for mission and ecumenism. Without the involvement of clergy and laity, i.e., of the entire Church, there cannot be a real mission and a right ecumenical dialogue. The ecumenical spirit draws its power from a mutual respect of all Churches which are involved in a dialogue, from the fundamental understanding that one can always learn something from others, and stay at the same time stable in Orthodox faith and solidarity with others. That is why the local Church, carrying out its mission and ecumenism, can discern in real life matters of its believers and can help in the context of the contem-



Rev. Assist. Prof. Ph.D. Adrian Ignat, Assist. Prof. in Church History at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Education Sciences of the Valahia University of Târgoviște, Romania

porary challenges.

### Keywords

Mission, Ecumenism, Church, Priesthood, Laity

## 1 Introduction

Today, anywhere in the religious world, the concept of "ecumenism" becomes more popular. The word „ecumenism” has its roots in the Greek language (οικου and μενοσ, i.e. everywhere). Thus, a single word expressed the concepts of dialogue, respect, and mutual support, which are necessary between different Christian confessions and their members.

## 2 Some Aspects of the Ecumenical Movement

Borrowing from the very rich meanings of the word “ecumenism” Anglican and Protestant Churches in the second half of the nineteenth century began what was called the Ecumenical Movement. Initiatives and actions of the Ecumenical Movement have resulted in three international Christian Associations: Anglican and Eastern Churches Association, International Missionary Council, and the World Association for promoting twinning people through Churches. These three associations, through intensive structuring, reached to form two main groups: “*Life and Action*” and “*Faith and Organization*.”

Later these two groups will meet in 1948 in Amsterdam, becoming the World Council of Churches. Since then, more and more Churches and religious confessions continued to adhere to the World Council of Churches. During its meetings, working groups like “action and faith,” “mission and evangelization,” and

also the “dialogue with other religions” and education have been established.

At the General Assembly from New Delhi (1961), the Romanian Orthodox Church with other Orthodox Churches joined the Ecumenical Movement. It has established an active and fruitful dialogue with all other members, helping to enrich the action and thinking.

In parallel with the work on the doctrinal level, the contribution of the Romanian Orthodox Church was also felt on the current orientation of the World Council of the Churches on the problems of the contemporary world. Orthodox Church understood that the efforts for Christian unity could not be separated from the ministry of the Churches, for a better life in connection with God. According to Orthodox teachings, the responsibility for Christian unity is related to responding to the world. Therefore we pray in the Liturgy: *“for peace to everyone, for the welfare of the Holy Churches and the unity of all.”*

### **3 Local and Universal in the Mission of Church**

The Church is the union of all that exists, “and is intended to include everything that is: God and creation. In it, we can find the fulfillment of God's eternal plan: all-unity. In it is the eternal and the temporary are united, the last one - destined to be overwhelmed by eternity; uncreated and creature, the last one - destined to be overwhelmed by the uncreated; all spiritual and matter, the last one - destined to be spiritualized; heaven and earth, penetrated by heaven; no-spaciousness and spacious-

ness; I and you, me and us, us and you, united in the divine 'You' or in a direct relationship with Him"<sup>1</sup>.

This extension of the Church on the whole world connects the created with the uncreated, God with humankind, local with universal so that nobody and nothing can do the same. Thus, the local Church is intrinsically linked with the universal Church, the latter one is reflected on first, and the first is comprised of the latter one. There is no separation between local and universal because the Church can exist only in this form. „The Church is the communitarian extension of Christ, or the body of all people who are gathered in Christ, being the mystical body of Him, and Christ is always the living and active Head of this body, never separated from it”<sup>2</sup>.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul addressed through letters to local communities who were facing difficulties in understanding the revealed truth. The local church has played and plays a fundamental role in the understanding of the Christian faith. The local church is the place where all believers are reborn to Christianity, are working and leaving in Christ. Here they learn that Christ is present on every altar and during every Liturgy. Therefore, the local church is the foundation of all activities of the universal Church. „The developing, nourishing, and sustaining of Christian faith and practice is impossible apart from the life of a believing congregation”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane, Bucharest, 1997, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> Isidor Todoran și Arhid. Prof. Dr. Ioan Zăgrean, *Teologia Dogmatică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane, Bucharest, 1991, p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in the pluralist society*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999, p. 235.

Being through its foundation and existence a divine-human institution, with deep evangelical-missionary character, the Christian Church becomes present all over the world. The gospel message has won many adherents, who perpetuated what they received and learned: „*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28, 19). Therefore there is an intrinsic connection between mission and ecumenism. If the ecumenism is not made in the spirit of Christian mission, it loses its essence; if mission is not done in connection with ecumenism, it can be understood as proselytism.

The Church's mission is rooted in the mission of God. God's mission is Trinitarian. This mission is carried out on perichoresis of the three Persons of the Trinity. The Father sends the Son (John 20, 21-23) and the Holy Spirit (John 14, 26) in the world for the salvation of humankind. Saint Athanasius the Great classically formulated this: *God becomes human, so that human beings may become god (through participation)*. Therefore, the mission of the Church is based on the sending of the Son and the descending of the Holy Spirit in the world, willed and initiated by the Father, and on the explicit command of the risen Christ to His Apostles to preach the Gospel and to call to repentance and to baptize in name of the Holy Trinity (Mt. 28, 18-19)<sup>4</sup>.

Jesus Christ is the "Sent One" par excellence because he is the second person of the Holy Trinity, the incarnate Son of God "*whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world*" (John 10, 36). The reason for this sending of the Son is God's love to the world: "*because God is love*" (1 John 4, 8, 16) and "*in this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only*

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<sup>4</sup> Mihai Himcinschi, *Doctrina trinitară ca fundament misionar*, Reîntregirea Publishing, Alba Iulia, 2004, p. 139.

*Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (John 4, 9-10). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3, 16). Thus, "Jesus Christ is merciful mission of God in the world and for the world<sup>5</sup>."*

The mission is not something done "to" or "for" others but "with" others. We participate in a community of love to the mission with: a) the Triune God who empowers us, sends us and direct us; b) each other in the local-universal church; c) all to whom we are sent and all to whom we received.

In his book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch speaks about mission as "*church with others*<sup>6</sup>" the Church in solidarity with the world. Each local church is a primary agent in the Christian mission. Lesslie Newbigin said: „How it is possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on the cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it"<sup>7</sup>.

Orthodox Church says that the mission can be accomplished only by clergy and trained persons on theological schools, with the blessing of the local bishop. For this missionary work may be selected laity and clergy, but only with the recommendation of the church hierarchy. This cannot be considered a separation between clergy and laity, because together they are the body of Christ, the Church. On the other hand, it should be understood that not all laymen can do the mission without the support and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Andrew Purves Mark Achtemeier, *Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church*, Witherspoon Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Books, New York, 2000, p. 368.

<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in the pluralist society*, p. 227.

guidance of the clergy. During the Church history, sometimes laity without sufficient theological knowledge was involved in the mission. Unfortunately, they lose the right road of the Church, becoming heretics and causing significant problems and disputes that will perpetuate in the later time: „if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15, 14). Therefore, the Church has to preserve life and truths of faith undefiled.

Protestant Churches believe that the mission can be done by any member of the community. This is rooted in the doctrine of „universal priesthood". Speaking about that, Lesslie Newbigin argues: „I hope I have made clear my belief that it is the whole Church which is called to be – in Christ – a royal priesthood, that every member of the body is called to the exercise of this priesthood, and that this priesthood is to be exercised in the daily life and work of Christians in the secular business of the world"<sup>8</sup>. However, he argues that in this „universal priesthood" are needed ministers (clergy), that „will support and raise" all believers<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, the institution of priesthood is undeniable, and the pastors or clergy play a crucial role in the community and especially in the local mission and ecumenism.

In the book *The Faith-Sharing Congregation*, Roger Swanson and Shirley Clement argue that „the most effective evangelists of Christ are the church's laity"<sup>10</sup>. „The effectiveness of the laity in evangelism is partly due to the fact that there are far more lay men and women than clergy. Laity also has more access to people in family relationships, in the neighborhood, and the workplace. The truth is every study shows that when asked

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Swanson & Shirley Clement, *The Faith-Sharing Congregation*, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, 1999, p. 3.

who played the most significant role in their faith journey, people will occasionally list pastors and evangelists; more often they list laypersons: friends, relatives, and neighbors. Most frequently mentioned are mothers, grandparents, fathers, spouses, children, Sunday school teachers, and college roommates, in that order”<sup>11</sup>.

On the other side, these writers argue that the laity „*apply all they are preaching*”<sup>12</sup>. It is true that some of the new-Protestants won followers applying this way of preaching. However, this way led to the division of the Church, not to unity. Everyone understands the faith, the Church and the Scripture in own way. So, everything is relative, and everything depends on own understanding.

On the other side, each of us owes the faith to someone. Personally, I owe the Orthodox Christian faith to my parents, to my spiritual fathers - my godfathers, but also to the priest from my native community. That is why this aspect of the mission accomplished with the help of laymen cannot be neglected. However, the Gospel preaching and the mission of the Orthodox Church cannot be entrusted to the laypeople without the guidance of the ordained clergy.

The Romanian Orthodox Church manifested its ecumenical spirit, trying to combat the aggressive proselytism manifested by the different denominations. Romanian ecumenism has always been a bridge of open dialogue to any Church or denomination that has appreciated and respected the norms of the Christian mission. Each local Orthodox community looked at others as partners in dialogue, in a mutually constructive relationship. Thus, the priest was the spiritual mediator of social, ethnic, and religious tensions from communities. If at the local

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.



level is a mutual understanding and respect, it will be transmitted to the national level. It is essential to say that each local Orthodox community represents a local Church which invites to the dialogue.

Orthodox Church is willing to enter into dialogue with any Church or denomination only if it does not want to change our Orthodox believe and respect us as we respect it. That is why, seeing our Romanian-Orthodox hospitality, some have tried to attract us, using aggressive proselytism, to the other teachings and beliefs.

The ecumenical spirit draws its power from a mutual respect of all Churches which are involved in the dialogue, from the understanding that everyone can always learn something from others and remaining stable at the same time in Orthodox faith and being in solidarity with others. That is why the local Church, carrying out its mission and ecumenism, can discern in the life matters of its believers and can help to solve the challenges. Only active commitment to faith and sacrificial love will bring all to the Church.

#### **4 Relevant Aspects for the Missionary Dynamics of the Contemporary Parish**

We live in a secular society. We live in a society that moves away from God, secularizing itself. Is this the model we want? Is this the target to which we tend? To these questions, the Orthodox Church says bluntly: No!

We do not want the young generation to move away from God and the Church, to migrate to obscure sects and organizations that do nothing but satisfy certain bodily pleasures or that disturbs and distorts, even more, the contemporary man.

It is true that for modern man, the dictum developed by Protagoras in antiquity is found entirely in his thinking: “*Man is the measure of all things!*” If the emphasis in this simple affirmation falls on man, as it is good, then man becomes the center of all things, causing God to be ignored, marginalized or no longer in his creation. In this regard, Father Dumitru Popescu wrote in one of his articles: “*Modernity seeks to accustom the contemporary man to the idea that he lives in a world empty of the presence of God (...). At the level of man, the secularized culture militates for an individualistic conception that allows man to hold God’s place on earth and to be the absolute master of the world in which he lives.*”<sup>13</sup>

After that, we can ask: Is God important to man and his life? If so, then why does the man ignore or remove it from his existence - as do those who share Nietzsche’s ideas when they talk about “*God’s death*”?<sup>14</sup> If God is not important to man, then man is no longer human, he dehumanizes, for man is the image of God, which tends to be similar to his Creator. Then man will become nobody, in a dull existence, surrounded by all that is necessary for living in a modern society but lacking in the vital element of the connection between him and his Creator. He will tend to nothing, an essential thing for him, but which will eventually be understood as nothing.

However, in our analysis so far, we have done nothing but to observe its effect or rather the consequence of such action. What then is the cause, as identifying the cause, that we can take action against these effects? Is this progress, technical-scientific development, the evolution of the history of human

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<sup>13</sup> Dumitru Popescu, *Credință și modernitate*, in „Almanah Bisericesc” of Sfintei Arhiepiscopii a Bucureștilor, Bucharest, 1999, pp. 70, 71.

<sup>14</sup> See this idea also at Gheorghe Popa, *Teologie și demnitate umană. Studii de teologie morală contextuală*, Trinitas Publishing, Iași, 2003, p. 246.

thinking, that “contemporary fashion” guilty? Alternatively, maybe a twinned phenomenon with these, but which is often underestimated: the phenomenon of migration and lack of belonging to Someone and something determines to some extent this?

It is known that the parish is a canonical and spiritual unity in which church life unfolds in all its aspects. The guarantee of this unity is the centering of the parish members around a Church, an altar to which they glorify God, to whom Christ sacrifices and is present in the Holy Eucharist and receives grace, help, and blessing. Also, the priest, as a representative of the bishop’s parish, is the one who gives ecclesial and sovereign character to the parish unity. In other words, the real parochial life pulsates around the altar, and the icon of this life must be the shepherd, that is, the priest<sup>15</sup>.

Making a brief historical insight into the phenomena faced by the parish, it can be said that: “The parish followed throughout its history the vicissitudes of social events. Massive migrations, floating population, shifts to other centers have had a knock on the classical composition of the parish. Decentralization of the Eucharistic synaxis, led by a single bishop, gradually led to the formation of several smaller units. When the Christian population grew, the eparchial bishop had to appoint elders to perform liturgical functions in the scattered parishes. All of them gave them a pall-antimis as a guarantee of the canonical law of the bishop as well as an object of worship.”<sup>16</sup>

Going to the pastoral and ecclesial situation of today, we must note that the intensity of the Orthodox Christian faith in Roma-

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<sup>15</sup> Dumitru Colotelo, *Regenerarea pastorației urbane în Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, in „Almanah Bisericesc”, Arhiepiscopia Bucureștilor Publishing, 1991, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Metropolitan Nifon Mihăiță, Arhiepiscopul Târgoviștei, *Misiologie creștină*, ASA Publishing, Bucharest, 2002, p. 110.

nia has mostly depended on the viability of the rural parish, where faith has deep roots. Lucian Blaga said that “*eternity was born in the village.*” Unfortunately, the Christian heritage of the rural parish has been severely impoverished today due to the unfavorable influences of the Athenian communist regime and secularism.

There is a new morphology of the parish even in the villages where the outskirts of the towns have spread. Parishes in the cities had their own identity in the past and had high-quality ministers and preachers. Today’s urban parish has lost its identity and coherence by moving people from villages to cities, or from one city to another, due to urban systematization. Parishes in today’s large urban agglomerations, parishes with anonymous and dispersed Christians, no longer have the energy of gathering together a common cult.

Today’s inhabitants of major cities are mostly nominal citizens. Established by social and professional conventions, they are not part of body and soul in their neighborhood or city, and believers do not have a deep sense of belonging to a parish community. Many of them do not even know their priest, or, even worse, many priests do not know their believers. The pastoral-liturgical relations between the priest and the believers are entirely random, summative and impersonal. The most apparent sign of religious drama in cities is the “excellent” anonymity in which all human relationships, and especially missionary and pastoral, are taking place. We baptize anonymous children; we celebrate unknown young people, and we are burying dead people whose names and ages we read on the cross. In this situation, every believer chooses his church and priest according to the most unpredictable and subjective considerations.

This situation results in the fact that many believers are looking for a form of presence of the Church without a parish, which

leads to a deviation towards individualistic, non-liturgical piety unless it falls entirely into religious indifference.<sup>17</sup>

The area of proselytizing action of the para-ecclesiastic evangelical movements forms, especially, those urban spaces in which the traditional parish system was unbalanced. A vital contribution to this imbalance, of course, is the lack of churches, the construction of which was not possible during the communist regime, especially in the cities, while the cities grew enormously.

On the other hand, we must say that all Romanian Orthodox believers, who once lived in a restricted circle, confined to confessional homogeneous parishes and a generally stable population, were brought into contact with other people nationalities, believers of other religions and Christian confessions, unbelievers, religiously indifferent, and atheists. This was the occasion for discussions and controversies between them on religious and inter-confessional topics, to which our believers can only cope with their priests, who have to clarify and strengthen them in the Orthodox faith. Under these circumstances, today's priest can no longer remain at the cultural level of our clergy hundreds of years ago, for which it was enough to know how to write and read in the books of worship.<sup>18</sup>

In order to be able to cope with all new situations and to solve them honorably all the problems that lie to him in the sphere of religious life, the priest today must acquire a serious, thorough and multilateral, theological and secular culture and at the same time, and adapt pastoral methods to the current living

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<sup>17</sup> Valer Bel, *Misiune, parohie, pastorație. Coordonate pentru o strategie misionară*, Renașterea Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Gheorghe Zamfir, *Mijloace și metode pastorale în societatea contemporană. Problemele dintr-o parohie din mediul rural și problemele dintr-o parohie din mediul urban*, in vol. „Pastorație și misiune în Biserica Ortodoxă, Episcopiei Dunării de Jos Publishing, Galați, 2001, p. 171.

conditions. Keeping pace with time, in order not to be surpassed by the other cultural factors of our present-day life, the priest must continuously be aware of cultural information, increase and enrich his cultural horizon as much as possible, and knowledge in all areas of contemporary culture. Valer Bel wrote: "A pulpit that is silent from the lamentation of the priest or a priest who preaches something else than a must, a believer who does not love his mark, a priest who avoids the essential issues of the parish, a monk who walks on the roads and do not constantly pray in the monastery, all of them seriously damage the missionary activity of the Church"<sup>19</sup>.

Another phenomenon facing our Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, is the phenomenon of migrating young people to Western European countries in search of better-paid jobs and much better living.

On the one hand, this phenomenon is justified if we think that material impotence has caused these believers of our Church to migrate. On the other hand, we hope that those who emigrated here will find themselves in the Romanian Orthodox communities in the diaspora. The Romanian diaspora grew very much, and along with it, the Romanian parishes newly formed there. Unfortunately, as a result of such a massive migration, the older people and children, who suffer the longing of their children and their parents, remained in the country. Thus, some of the Romanian villages, even if they have large and beautiful houses, are inhabited only by a few older people. They take care of the goods with much toil in countries foreign to their children and think that at some point they will return home. Such a parochial community, lacking a large part of its members, cannot manifest itself fully, being in a constant expectation.

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<sup>19</sup> Valer Bel, *Misiune, parohie, pastorație. Coordonate pentru o strategie misionară*, p. 17.

Another consequence of migration is the dissolution of many Romanian families. When one of the husbands goes abroad, and the rest of the family stays at home, the whole family suffers: those at home await the support of the one left and miss them, and the one left suffers from the longing of those left in the country. Sometimes, material distances between husbands also produce spiritual distances, and this has serious consequences - family breakdown. Children are the ones who suffer the most, as a result of such family drama. Even if they are delighted with the gifts received from their parents abroad, children are best aware of the cost of such gifts.

The trauma of children left in the country without parents or children moved from Romania to other European countries, as required by the available jobs of their parents, is very high. Changing the country, the school, the circle of friends, the environment, puts their mark on their evolution. Adaptation to the requirements imposed by other education systems, other languages and cultures are done with much weight, with sacrifices in the life of the family and children concerned.

The parochial community formed in the Diaspora and the parochial community left at home must fulfill its purpose to mitigate the impact of human migration, creating the spiritual premises of communion and communication in the voice of our Romanian Orthodox Church. For most of these migrants, the parish community represents the only viable link with what their national and spiritual identity represents. That is why the Romanian Orthodox Church will seek to be with its pastors, whether they will remain at home or will migrate to different states of the world. "As the starting point and the arrival of the Divine Liturgy, the priest in solidarity and collaboration with the entire parish carries out a threefold activity: spiritual or pastoral feeding, Christian or missionary witnessing and ministration or

diaconal ministry. Only this way, the parish is a living confessing community in continuous building and renewal.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.