

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH
AT THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN MILLENNIA:
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN ROMANIA

Your Beatitude,
Beloved Brother and Head of the Orthodox Church in Poland,
Your Excellency,
Distinguished Personalities of the academic life,

On the one hand, I owe my presence here to my beloved brother in the service of the Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Metropolitan Sawa and, on the other hand, to the invitation lived from the part of the Roman-Catholic Church in Poland, through His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Glemp and His Excellency Archbishop Joseph Życiński of Lublin and Grand Chancellor of this famous University.

The opportunity offered to us by the direct contact with the Orthodox Church in Poland, the encounters with high representatives of the Catholic Church in this country and with the Polish political authorities gave me the possibility to know "face to face" the Polish people, with its joys endeavours, in an European context which brings hope, but which is still full of antagonisms difficulties at the same time.

The granting of the *Doctor honoris causa* title of the University of Lublin constitutes a special feature of this presence of mine in Poland. I consider this title, which honours me, as recognition of the ecumenical spirit that characterises the Christian life in Romania, with the essential contribution of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which I temporarily and humbly lead. I would like to express my gratitude for the granting of this title towards all those who, in a way or another, have contributed to this event and especially to the Senate of the Catholic University of Lublin.

My speech today is not intended to be an academic one, since I have never been a university professor; nevertheless, I always bowed my head with the greatest respect and appreciation for those who have this academic position. I would rather express just a few thoughts about the mission of the Church today, as they come out of the experience of someone who is towards the end of a terrestrial life lived in the service of the Church of Christ in Romania, an experience that lasted for more than seven decades, from the blessed moment when I became a monk in a remote skete in Moldavia to the time when I was called to bear the cross as Head of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

In taking up various responsibilities in the Church, I understood that the witness about the life in Christ, the confession of Christ is not a choice to be made by the one who is baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity, but the fundamental element

of Christian identity. Mission is a constitutive part of the being of the Church. A Church that is not a confessing one cannot exist as such. All the members of the Church, those who belong to the sacramental priesthood, together with laity are and must be confessors, since mission is a gift, a vocation and an imperative of the entire ecclesial body.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth by excellence works in and through the members of the Church and transforms them in bearers of Christ, in living witness to the love of God the Father towards the world. The experience of the life in Christ gives to them the courage to confess: "For cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20), as Sts Peter and John say when they were asked to keep silence before the Sanhedrin. "Yet, when I preach the Gospel, I not boast – says St Apostle Paul – for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

To live in Christ and to preach to the world about "how good and wonderful the Lord is" – is indeed the imperative on which the missionary effort of the of the Orthodox Church was founded throughout centuries.

There were times in which the missionary vocation of the Church has been fully expressed. Genies of holiness and confessors of faith have enlightened the Church. The difficult times, external constrains and the weakness of the clergy has lead, sometimes, in the course of years to a lessening of the intensity with which Christ, the One Who died and has Risen was expressed in life and in preaching.

The Romanian Orthodox Church had, in its history, as part of the history of the Universal Orthodoxy, moments of strong expression of its mission, and also times characterised by a less powerful manifestation of this mission.

The years following the Second World War have found the Orthodox Church of Romania in a period when it tried to find its own place in the new context. A short time elapsed from some of the most important events in the life of our country: Moldavia united with Wallachia (1859); the independence of the country from the Ottoman Empire was achieved (1877); Transylvania, Banat, Bukovina and Bessarabia united with the Mother Land (1918); the elevation of the Romanian Orthodox Church at the rank of Patriarchate (1925). If we add to this the life in a Europe that has passed through two world wars and which has deeply affected Romania too, we could understand the essential lines of the life of the Romanians during the period of 1945-1948. The Romanian Orthodox Church, as the Church of the majority of the Romanians encountered, of course, in its mission both the positive elements of the last part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, and also the turmoil of the same periods in the history of Europe.

In the second part of the year 1944, the soviet troops invaded the whole country and through their direct involvement, the communists became the rulers of the country, beginning with 1948. Consequently, they tried to reshape, according to their own principles, all parts of the society.

The year 1948 is also the year when a new Head of the Romanian Orthodox Church was elected, namely Patriarch Justinian Marina who held this position until he has fallen asleep into the Lord in 1977.

Patriarch Justinian was faced with two possibilities. One would have been the choice of entering into catacombs, through a direct confrontation with the atheistic communist power, while waiting for the liberation coming from the Americans and Western Europe. The second choice meant the need for finding concrete ways in order to continue, in a visible manner, the mission of the Church in a hostile political context.

The sister Orthodox Church in Russia had already most tragically experienced the direct confrontation with the atheistic totalitarianism. The Golgotha of the Church in Russia and the disappearance, for about thirty years, almost entirely, of any visible missionary expression in the life of this Church was well known in Romania of those years. Patriarch Justinian knew very well this context. He had, also, the intuition that the Western Europeans will not hurry to rescue from communism that part of Europe that was surrendered to the soviet power. It was quite often that he was confessing this conviction to those close to him.

Taking into account all these, Patriarch Justinian has engaged the Romanian Orthodox Church in a long missionary process, which needed certain formal corrections in the new context in which the life of the Romanian society was unfolding, in order to preserve untouched the fidelity "in spirit and truth" towards the Gospel of Christ.

The path of Patriarch Justinian, which was followed in the same spirit both by the brothers into episcopate in his time and also by Patriarch Iustin Moiseescu (1977-1986) and myself was not at all an easy one. Vigilance ought to be at its highest all the time. Traps were laid everywhere. Everything was lived under the cross, while looking forward to better and more just times, times of the Resurrection.

The clergy and the faithful lived, on the one hand, the tragedy of seeing many of them being put in prisons for their faith, or being deprived of their belonging and properties. They were also saddened by seeing that dioceses and theological schools were closed down, that the religious education in schools or army was stopped, that monasteries were shut down.

On the other hand, churches remained opened for worship, many monasteries continued their life of prayer and fasting, two faculties of theology and six theological seminaries were still functioning, theological magazines and books were published, although in an insufficient number of copies.

Important number of new churches built in villages, as well as the restoration of certain monasteries of great historical and spiritual value compensated to some extent the sadness of the demolition of tens of churches in towns and cities, especially after 1977.

The atheistic propaganda comprised mass media, school manuals, and cultural manifestations. In parallel, however, the Holy Liturgy was celebrated in churches in villages and towns of Romania, every Sunday and feast days. An unbaptised child, a young couple without the blessing of the Church, at the beginning of marriage or a dead person buried without a service performed by a priest were extremely rare cases.

Coming back to the mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the very difficult moments were not absent. From the blocking of the activity of Patriarch Justinian by the authorities, in certain periods of his leadership, to the unexpected disappearance from his entourage of very close collaborators – just to mention two aspects of those very hard times – the atheistic and damaging pressure could be noticed everywhere.

There were also moments of weakness from the part of certain responsible people of the Church. The lack of courage of some of them in special situations or an opportunist attitude of others brought about criticisms. While recognising this, the hierarchs of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church made an official statement, in January 4th, 1990, just a few days from the downfall of communism: “[...] beloved spiritual children, we ask for forgiveness from God and from His Church, of which we all are members for all our public statements and for our pastoral letters whereby we were forced to tell you that we enjoy full religious freedom, while a great pressure and various limitations were put upon us, as well as our fearfulness to oppose the dictatorship and the way in which we were forced to praise the dictator”

One needs to mention also something about the relationships between the Romanian Orthodox Church and other Churches and religious communities. Apart from the Greek Catholic Church, which is a special case, the other Christian and non-Christian communities from Romania of the years 1948-1989 were, with unessential differences, treated in the same manner, having to deal with the same tribulations and rejoicing at times as the majority Orthodox Church. Both the joy, as little as it was, and the repeated difficulties were experienced together with the others. The ecumenical encounters constituted a platform of real mutual understanding, in spite of certain political aspects, which have their rather limited impact on these meetings. Moments of mutual support in concrete action or cases of ecumenical brotherhood as it was lived in prisons, where the members belonging to certain Churches, both clergy and lay people were quite a few.

Now, after almost 11 years from the moment when the communist regime in Romania was done away with, one could unmistakably say that the missionary vision of Patriarch Justinian, which his brothers in the episcopate from the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church was correct. As far as the worthiness or the unworthiness with which the priests and the hierarchs of the Church, as humble recipients of the divine grace, have done their missionary service, it is left only to Christ to

judge, He Who is the only One that knows and searches “hearts and minds” (Rev 2:23).

The period of freedom, which Romania enjoys at present together with the entire central and eastern parts of Europe, presents its advantages and risks. From the moment of gaining its full autonomy in taking missionary decisions, continuing with the construction of new churches and monasteries and finishing with the presence of the word of the Holy Gospel in schools, army, prisons or in the mass-media, the Romanian Orthodox Church is trying to become once again an essential factor in the spiritual rebirth of the Romanian contemporary society. At the same time, the secularisation that penetrates more and more the nations of Europe and the proselytise tendency as manifested by certain religious communities, either Christian or not-Christian, create major obstacle in the normal unfolding of the mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church today.

Once unchained from the many restrictions and tribulations, the Orthodox Church of Romania affirms, together with the whole of the Orthodox Church that, while facing the problems with which the Romanian society and humankind in general are confronted with today, its essential mission has been, is and will always be that of preaching the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The fundamental witness of the Church to the world is that Christ is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, through His terrestrial life among human beings, through His sacrifice, death and Resurrection the perspective of an authentic life in this world and of eternity in the Kingdom of God is open to us.

The vocation of the Church *par excellence*, its specific contribution, which cannot be replaced in the life of humanity is that of offering the Incarnated Christ – the Logos to the human beings who are seeking a sense to their existence. It is only afterwards, as a consequence, that the Church participates in the effort to offer a better living to the poor, to fight for justice and peace, to contribute to the economic, scientific, cultural progress.

The voice of many could be heard in Romania today, who ask for a more-forceful presence of the Church in the public life. However, the Church will never cease to affirm that its fundamental work is that of sanctifying the human being and the whole of creation. We are fully convinced that, by bringing the human being closer to God, that person will acquire the inner peace and will sanctify many others around him. It is then from this sanctifying work that care for fellow human beings will come out and for the life of the community.

The Church does not abandon the history in its concrete manifestation; neither does the Church neglect the human being in its natural needs. The Church looks at them though in the perspective of eternity, by asking the human beings to rediscover the natural hierarchy of the human concerns. “Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33) – says Christ.

In a world which is tempted by auto-transcendence, by human auto-deification, by the desperate seeking of sense in the human autonomy and in auto-sufficiency, once it reaches the limit, the nothingness, the darkness of the tomb, the Church comes and encourages us through the liturgical words: "Let us lift up our hearts!"

The Christian Churches are called to coagulate the energies, which are often wasted in unproductive conflicts among themselves, and to help the human being of the third Christian millennium to lift up his eyes to the heavens, in order to discover or rediscover his real status, namely that of a human being that was created in the image of God – and with the aim of arriving at His likeness.

It is in this missionary effort that the Romanian Orthodox Church is prepared to participate in humbleness.

This Church, both clergy and lay people, assures you, through the voice of its temporarily Head, of all the respect and expresses its thanks to you for the honour of granting to us the title of *Doctor honoris causa*.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Amen.

Teoctist

Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church