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The Christian *Martyria* inside a Postmodern Society

Abstract

The missionary context, at the beginning of the millennium, is exciting for the Church. Missionary challenges are turning towards the need for Orthodox confession in contemporary society, towards the synod unity specific to the Eastern Church, towards intensifying the Church's presence in the social life, and, not least, towards reconsidering the position the Orthodox Church has in the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

Church's testimony in the context of contemporary society is the most solid evidence that Orthodoxy was never isolated from a confessional self-sufficiency. The doctrine, the spirituality and the liturgical dimension of the Orthodox cult must be confessed in order to be more



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easily understood and acquired by those who wish for a Christian life, in Spirit and Truth.

The European area, which already includes countries with a predominantly Orthodox population, brings Eastern spirituality to dialogue on various topics: tradition, culture, science and technology, ecology, ecumenism, etc. The Church cannot remain indifferent to these requests. Moreover, religious pluralism, syncretism and inter-confessionals, are not able to give acceptable answers to the increasing secularization. Hence, the presence of the confessing Church in the European missionary space is a spiritual and immediate necessity.

The social space is increasingly arid in terms of spirituality. The third millennium man sees its mentality modelled according to the materialistic consumerism patterns, to the humanistic desacralisation and to a non-personal globalization.

In response, the Church offers that organic correlation and mutual integration of *life in Christ* with society and culture—or its *way of being*, aware of the truth of faithfulness and of the ability to save the man. These can be fulfilled through a diligent and effective evangelization. The gospel of Christ makes known and possible the universalism of the whole world's salvation. The lack of this belief generates religious fanaticism, extremist fundamentalist movements, and intolerance.

The antidote for all human divisions, Church's unity is acknowledged as participation in *the new life*. The Church, as a unit, is the Body of Christ where we all are united regardless of place or time. In it, we live in advance the kingdom to come. Moreover, we see the Church as *the visible expression of this Kingdom*.

Church's missionary success will depend on how it will spiritually manage the relationship with society, with the youth, intellectuals, the *media*, generally on its involvement in a sincere, effectively and constructively *dialogue* aiming to show the contemporary human the reason for its existence in the world.

Keywords

Mission, Church, testimony, martyrdom, sacrifice, society, ecumenism

1 Introduction

We regretfully observe that postmodern society leaves less and less space for the ecclesial discourse. Under the terror of secularism, religion tends to retire from the public space into the private space of each individual.

Through its missionary work, The Church requires an increased involvement in its testimony - *martyria*, a missionary aspect that is directly and immediately following the evangelization. Without testimony, evangelization remains just a moral, interesting, sometimes appealing teaching, but empty in its palpable content. Without a martyr or testimonial vocation, the Christian identity of the human being, inside The Church, dissolves inside the community, without consideration for the individual human being that is personal and communion in the same time. Its completeness takes place only inside the ecclesial and liturgical space. Without a testimonial identity, we are all easily manipulated by the postmodern society. Coming from the past, the missionary testimony has as main aim the correction of the present, decontamination from sin. This may be the best explanation for the fact that The Romanian Orthodox Church, based on apostolic tradition, presents throughout its history vocation for martyrdom with a dynamism that sometimes is over the understanding capacity of the contemporary people.

2 Testimony and Mission

During the Romanian communist regime, 1948 – 1949, the problem of religious testimony as mission was completely absent, at least theoretically. As missionary aspect, *martyria* inherits an important scriptural tradition and, as Christian testimony, also the tradition of The New Testament. At His Resurrection, Our Saviour calls His apostles as witnesses: *But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth* (Acts 1, 8).

The Holy Apostles, following the Pentecost, in The Whit Day, were the first to give public testimony their belief in Resurrection and the fact that they witnessed it: *This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses* (Acts 2, 32). To Peter's testimony, another testimony is given in front of The Beautiful Gate of Jerusalem Temple: *And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses* (Acts 3, 15). The missionary discourse of St Peter in front of Synedrion has as central issue The Resurrection and the fact that the apostles are also witnesses:

And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said unto them: Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard (Acts, 4, 18-20). Along the testimonies in Acts, the testimony of Saint John is based, inside his First Epistle General, on seen realities, as a complete act of faith for the addressees: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have*

fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ (1John 1-3).

These are the main *martiriae christianae* in the New Testament époque. They are oral in the beginning, later are written in The New Testament. "The testimony as transmission of faith ends at the death of the last apostle"¹.

The Christian testimony, rooted in the apostles' testimonies, is based on the missionary response of The Church given to the new context of globalization and diaspora strengthening, which is in a continuous dynamic process. Diaspora represents a pillar of multiculturalism and multiple religiosities for the contemporary society. The contact between the many spiritual aspects and socio – cultural manifestations of our believers and other religions' believers creates, at least on short term, effects only in the conditions of a direct and immediate testimony. Globalization offers pseudo models for living a life, some of them being dangerous for the new generation.

The equilibrant conservatism of testimony is the only one capable of bringing normality back. The Christian testimony is not a barrier in front of changing the world, but insists on the fact that renewal/change and spiritual dimension may not exist outside the divine-human Persona of Jesus Christ. The world is continuously changing. We might say yesterday: *the world is changed*, but we may say today: *the world is the change!* The past represent the ecclesial present for the missionary testimony. The change is imperative, a permanent characteristic of social and ecclesial life, it is the connotation of the contemporary history. But this change must consider two important aspects: first – the original and ecclesial experience of Jesus from Nazareth becoming The Saviour through the mystery of death and Resurrection; second – there is only one way to Eternity, in spite all the lost directions of the contemporary society. The eschatological chances of the *flock*

¹ Giovanni Nervo, *Testimonianza e bene comune*, Messaggero di Sant Antonio Editrice, Padova 2013, p. 14.

with one shepherd (John 10, 16) are minimal if Christianity through missionary testimony fails to express itself to the whole world in a common language.

Does today's Church lack the power of the original testimony? Is martyrria completely missing inside the contemporary ecclesial environment? Is The Church allowed to remain passive in front of so rapidly changing world? These are a few possible questions for the contemporary missionary.

The hegemony of Church in the social samplings is based on testimony. The believers are not anymore trusted in a secular world when there are discrepancies between the apostolic and the contemporary life style. Maybe The Church lost its hegemony inside the postmodern society, but did not lose its public voice. Postmodernism does not deny the role of the church, instead offers a different perspective upon sacrality. According to humanism as ideology, the people remain the measurement of all things. We may say we assist to a modern nestorianism.² "The human problems are not to be solved in well-known fights when humans are the essence of the problem. There may be amelioration in institutions and living conditions, but the problems are not solved, because people do not heal. The only doctor is Christ".³

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² We may call a modern nestorianism the Reform from the 16th century, creating tensions between the priest and the prophet, institution and charisma, Church and sacrament, individual and mystic. More upon this problem are discussed by ierom. Alexander Golitzin, *Simeon Noul Teolog: viața, epoca, gândirea*, in: vol. *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog, Discursuri teologice și etice*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu 1998, p. 420.

³ Teoclit Dionisiatul, *Dialoguri la Athos*, trad. pr. prof. Ioan I. Ică, Editura Deisis, Alba Iulia 1994, p. 173.

public voice. Postmodernism does not deny the role of the church, instead offers a different perspective upon sacrality.

We cannot imagine a lifestyle that is more global, politic, and subjective than the one that exists nowadays due to the *deconstruction* of science, metaphysics, theology and art inside a society we call *postmodern*. Scientific discoveries hide the danger of pantheism that transforms the man into a slave of irrational laws of nature; a scholastic theology – *teodidacticism* hides inside the theology lacking spirituality; pure human rational speculation hides inside the lack of spirituality and forgets God inside each particle, God inside a human body that is destined to eternal life through Resurrection. Resurrection is based on The Holy Word that breaks and disconcerts the results of decay.

The Orthodox Christians throughout the world are living in a new world, which is social, political, economic, pluralist and postmodern, born from the liberal and modern democracy practiced in Occident, substituting the religious moral with the social ethics. The idea of postmodern ethics is promoted instead the idea of postmodern morality. “Multiple moral problems regarding the relations inside a couple, the sexuality and the family, known for their insufficient institutional establishment, for their flexibility, mutability and fragility; or the multitude of traditions, some surviving the unfair conditions, some reinvented or invented...without the hope of establishing a hierarchy of values and norms..., it would spare the people the ingrate duty of establishing their own options”.⁴ Although often used, the theological language, martyrria as theological term, it must be recovered as sense and fully used because it concerns the mystery of our ecclesial identity, in spite any positivist or materialist mentality of a secular society

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Etica postmodernă*, trad. Doina Lică, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara 2000, p. 5.

bearing a heavy handicap: a controlled elimination of the continuity of the ecclesial being inside the history of humanity⁵. Inside a society that is dedicated to instant success and rapid profit, the testimony about a dead and resurrected Christ for our sins is always emotive: *But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness* (I Cor. 1, 23). It is emotive because it brings a new life style, a life into Christ, His Church and The Holy Mysteries. This testimony affronts contemporaneity, while the believers of The Church live the paradox of two intersected plans, two distinctive, but complimentary worlds.

The Epistle to Diognet is the document that explains *the strategy of social martyrria of The Church of The Holy Fathers* in the Aristotle époque, the multi secular sad consistencies of superficial conversions, left to subsist in profound pagan societies that confer to The Church a negative aspect. "To concise formulate the problem: what the soul is to the body, the Christians are to the world. The soul spreads inside all body parts like Christians in the villages of the world. The soul lives into the body but is not from it; the Christians live into the world, but they are not from it. Invisible soul is closed inside visible body; also Christians are seen because they live into the world, but their faith in God remains invisible. The body hates the soul and bears war against him not for harm, but because it stops it from pleasures; the world hates the Christians not for harm, but because they are against its pleasures. The soul loves the body, although the body hates the soul; Christians are slaves into the prison of the world, but they sustain it. Immortal soul lives in mortal tent, Christians live amidst impurity, but waiting the pureness of Heaven. Martyred by poor food and drink, the soul becomes brighter; punished regularly for their faith, the

⁵ Non per nulla *i testimoni per eccellenza sono i martiri*, vol. *Mi sarete testimoni. L'origine e i modi della testimonianza cristiana*, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, Bologna 2002, p. 10.

Christians are outnumbered. Their army is so big in God's will that they are not allowed to leave it".⁶

As mission, the efficacy of the Christian testimony is translated into *a living memory of The Church*. Through testimony, the persuasive capacity of the evangelic message becomes evocative and concrete power of faith. Such an approach, received from God through Jesus Christ, aims to redefine the testimony in the context of the mission and for the contemporary people to gain The Truth and the complete quality of Christian.

Although the main meaning of the Christian mission is to spread the Evangelize, this may not be disassociated from the testimony. The testimony, own experience of the evangelical reality, proclaims and notify the clarity of Christ's language for the social environment. "Forgive me, brothers – St. Ignatie Teofor confessed – do not try to stop me from living into Christ, unwilling to die; don't give to the world the one that wants to belong to God and don't deceive him through flesh. Let me receive the clean Light; I will be a man once there. Allow me to imitate the sufferings of my beloved God".⁷

The missionary testimony of the Christians living inside a secular society has four effects for the human ontology:

- a. Irradiates – it has the power of dispersion among the people listening: *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good*

⁶ *Epistola către Diognet*, trad. pr. D. Fecioru, colecția Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești (named here, P. S. B.). vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (named here, EIBMBOR), București 1979, p. 341.

⁷ Sfântul Ignatiu al Antiohiei, *Epistola către Romani*, trad. pr. Ioan Mihălcescu, vol. *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, tom I, București 1927, p. 170-171.

- works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5, 14-16);*
- b. Pollens – it has the power to seed into the soul of the people: *Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men (Matthew 5, 13);*
 - c. Ferments – it determines the whole to receive the qualities of the parts: *The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened. (Matthew 13, 33);*
 - d. Scents – it has the capacity to fill with grace the entire world: *Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish (II Cor. 2, 15).*

The four effects of the missionary testimony for the spiritual level of the human beings is owed to the strong connection with the evangelization, whose consequence the testimony is. Faith comes from listening, and this is owed to the listening of God's Word, The Scripture. (Rom. 10, 17). The quality of the public testimony of The Church is linked to the quality of the evangelization, the spiritual aspect of those destined to evangelize. We sustain this idea with a practical argument: the testimony/*martyria* comes into the missionary language, without a doubt, after it is born from the message of faith generated by the content of The Gospel. It is an interpersonal relation between the evangelist, the teacher and the one that confesses/ the prentice, as one fully knowing the holy joy, willing to confess to others. (Luke 15, 6; 32) „The origin of this interpersonal relation between the confessor and the evangelist favours the”.⁸

⁸ Juan Esquerda Bifet, *Dizionario dell'evangelizzazione*, Editrice Domenicana Italiana, Napoli 2005, p. 861.

The authenticity and the radical aspect of the testimony are given by the one that spreads a teaching from his own life experience, as a concrete example to be followed. This kind of person is the martyr. The Christic testimony is always accompanied by miracles inside the missionary space: And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. (Mark 16, 20).

3 Five Aspects of The Missionary Testimony

Although martyrdom is a sign, a miracle, a mystery, the executions from the time of persecutions were public and accompanied by public miracles. The episodes of martyrdom confer to the Christian literature much sensibility. We intend to analyse a biblical text from Acts, the Saint Stephen martyria (Acts 7, 56) together with a text written around the II-III century, the Saint Perpetua's martyria and Saint Felicitas' martyria: "Because the crowd asked for their presence among them so the stabbing of the sword be more visible, the martyrs willingly got on their feet and moved where the crowd wanted them to be. They kissed each other in front of the people so they all receive the kiss of peace (...) the others received the beheading unmoved and silently".⁹ The messages become very sensitive for the contemporary people and their soteriological value is given by the martyrs' deeds, not by the words that may be emptied and delusional. The missionary value of the martyrdom is a bridge between doubt and conviction and from conviction to public testimony. "The men of the third millennium were raised up in a time of pragmatism and

⁹ *Actele martirice, Martiriul Sfințelor Perpetua și Felicitas*, trad. pr. prof. Ioan Rămureanu, P. S. B., vol. 1, EIBMBOR, București 1979, p. 124-125.

positivism and prefers the testimonies of masters and not the abstract Truth".¹⁰

For this type of perception, *martyria* becomes *the fifth gospel*, considered to be the first aspect of testimony. Life into the graceful dynamism creates a tension that aspires to the Life Spring. A man transforms into a living gospel, the fifth gospel when lead by the grace and represents the living proof of Christ in the history of human kind. The testimony of a holy life is an embodied book, an evangelical message through one own life. Our society is in imperative need for this type of living a life. "The Gospel is absent when not lived".¹¹ As mission, The Gospel is rewritten for each Christian in a permanent quotidian sense; it is an evergreen sprout of The Church, the growth *unto a perfect man* (Ephes. 4, 13). An autonomous anthropology ignoring the transcendental values does nothing else than confusing the entire general human consciousness and the social life in all its aspects.

The second aspects of the missionary is *martyria* as Christ representation. The portrayed representations of the Christian anthropology is, without a doubt, the most powerful testimony in today's society. The Christic person is a model for all contemporaries and, when a martyr, the power of example becomes *pleroma* to any type of anthropology. The witness is a living representation of the dead and resurrected Saviour, spread The Light and receive from Jesus Christ sense and harmony, essentials for the human intelligence not to seed chaos and ugliness. As icon, the martyr/ witness leaves a mark into the world, situated into another dimension that unveils God. It is a palpable example of the transfiguration of everyday life and also an antinomy example throughout history. Heaven is God living inside us through grace. The man is light and

¹⁰ Ferdinando Castelli, *La lettura come testimonianza*, in vol. *Mi sarete testimoni. L'origine e i modi della testimonianza cristiana*, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, Bologna 2002, p. 88.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

mystery only in communion with The Holy Trinity into Resurrected Jesus Christ. God created the man as a house to live in. "The humans search their own light and mystery into God and continuously grow into them through communion and loving reflexion of God, because communion is light and virtual mystery, meant to forever grow into God".¹²

The priest is the supreme Christian testimony. As a third aspect of martyria for the contemporary world, the priest is, or, at least, should be, the clearest missionary proof in the opaque world of secularism. The power of testimony, through the priest, is a fire that do not destroys, but resurrect. Today's world loses its Christianity because it lacks concrete models for a Christian life. The priest must dare, under a simple humble form, first to confess: *I am a priest*. The priest is not an intermediary between individuals and God, as Luther stated, but a witness, together with The Church, and a doer for The Holy Mysteries. "Against the duty of feed His ship (John 21, 16), the priest is not a master and an authority, but a bearer of liturgical grace, that requires activation into pastoral ministration for the growth of Christ flock. To be a priest in an activated grace into a concrete fundamental ministration for the subsistence of The Church... the parish sees its priest as a father and a minister".¹³

The martyrdom – the supreme testimony. If three aspects are possible to be accomplished during the life: the testimony of a holy life (as *the fifth gospel*), the christological anthropology as icon of confession and the priest as its embodiment, the last aspect, the martyrdom, reflects the death for Christ, the end of terrestrial life for the resurrection into the eternal life. Inside this conjunction, testimony is not easy, although a new type of martyrdom, without blood, a sacrifice for and in the name of the

¹² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, Editura Anastasia, București 1993, p. 196.

¹³ Gheorghios D. Metallinos, *Parohia. Hristos în mijlocul nostru*, trad. pr. prof. Ioan I. Ică, Editura Deisis, Sibiu 2004, p. 20 și 22.

world is discussed nowadays. "In reality, the horizon of the Christian testimony always contains the possibility of martyrdom".¹⁴ Assuming an unfair suffering from the social environment represents for a Christian a form of martyrdom without the blood sacrifice. This type of martyrdom is also considered to be the endless compassion and suffering instead others that live their life away from Jesus Christ.

Luke's words: *and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.* (Acts 1, 8), refers to the quality of witnesses/ martyrs of the apostles for Jesus Christ's life, death and Resurrection, with a direct influence on our life and death for the resurrection *for the dead and the life of the age to come* (Creed). There is no missionary accomplishment without assuming as stages the life the death and the resurrection. „In other words, you should confess something about My Life and My Death: through your life and your death”.¹⁵

Conclusions

The aim of theology is the missionary fulfilment of The Church into the world. It wants not to conquer the world, but to change it according to the Christian principles, to prepare the human being to become an ecclesial being, a proper environment for the Holy Trinity to live through The Son of God and the work of The Holy Spirit into the world.

The mission of The Church embodies the testimony of a life in communion and love into The Holy Spirit. The beginning of *martyria* coincides with the mission of the Holy Apostles empowered by Jesus Christ and is followed by the Pentecost.

¹⁴ Ferdinando Castelli, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹⁵ Î. P. S. Anastasie, Arhiepiscopul Tiranei și al întregii Albanii, *Misiune pe urmele lui Hristos*, trad. diac. Dr. Ștefan L. Toma, Editura Andreiana, Sibiu 2013, p. 163.

Missionary in its being, The Church is also a condition of the mission, because it is the only one capable of fulfilling the mission. The Church, through its missionary testimony, is an instrument, an aim and a fulfilment.

There is no missionary testimony outside The Church. It incorporates all the religionized beings into The Holy Being of Jesus Christ, baptized and communicated into The Holy Mysteries.

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