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Missionary aspects regarding the priest's activity in the diaspora – Iberian Peninsula

Abstract

The mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the diaspora in general and Spain in particular is a growing challenge nowadays. For this reason, the profile of the missionary priest must be defined by certain characteristics that are particularly important in the mission he carries out. In addition to preaching and catechesis, the priest's mission in parishes in the diaspora must be expressed through its liturgical dimension.



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Keywords

Diaspora, Mission, Orthodox Church, Romanian Orthodox Church

1 Defining elements of the missionary priest's profile

The mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church outside the country, in general, and in the Iberian Peninsula, in particular, depends to a large extent on the efforts made at the individual level, especially on the activities carried out by each priest in his parish. The priest is the vital factor contributing to the development of the Church's work in diaspora communities, and any negligence or lack of commitment to missionary mission jeopardizes the Church's purpose of guiding believers to salvation. The missionary profile of the priest is not only an option but an absolute necessity, without which the priest does not fully fulfill his role as servant and representative of God in a certain place (parish, mission, institution), aiming to combine the human dimension with the spiritual one¹.

In the diasporic context, the adjective "missionary" added to the term "priest" seems redundant and inappropriate because the term "priest" implicitly implies the missionary dimension, especially since in the diaspora, priests are sent to a certain region or area to find and support parishes, unlike the context in Romania, where parishes are already existing².

It is essential to emphasize that in the Iberian Peninsula and the Diaspora in general, the Orthodox Church Romanian and its priests do not seek conversions or proselytizing but turn to Orthodox Romanians present in the diaspora, offering them religious assistance for salvation. However, it is obvious that priests also carry out an external mission, not as a primary objective, but as a consequence of circumstances. In the Romanian Orthodox communities in the diaspora, people of

¹ † Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, translated by Eugenia VLAD, Christiana Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, pp. 43-44.

² The expression missionary priest is used today to refer to that category of priests who, not yet having a parish office, are appointed priests (missionaries) in a particular deanery or institution, in order to compensate, in case of need, for the lack of other priests in parishes or certain ecclesiastical needs.

other confessions join, either by marriage or on their initiative, and this requires an appropriate approach. Many of these people become Orthodox through family ties, voluntarily choosing this path. In this context, priests' mission in the diaspora occurs about. Both priests' mission in the diaspora occurs internally and on the outside.

From the moment of his ordination, the priest receives a missionary purpose, being sent to a parish to spread the message of the Gospel of justice and world to illustrate the work of the Church throughout the world to illustrate the work of the Church throughout the world concretely. As a "messenger of Christ" (John 20:21), the priest has the responsibility to preach the gospel, transmit the teachings of the Church, celebrate the sacraments, conduct religious services, and guide believers in the way of salvation (Matthew 28:19). Through the priest, the connection of believers with the Church and with Christ, her Head, is maintained³.

The Orthodox priest fulfills at the same time a role of God's messenger to men and representative of men before God. This mission takes place in two distinct directions, thus giving the role of the priest an essential significance: through ordination and formation, the priest becomes the unaltered bearer of the teaching of the Gospel and the performance of holy rites, ensuring the connection with authentic spirituality; At the same time, through his activity, the priest contributes to the salvation of believers, giving them guidance in spiritual life. This mission can only be characterized as a missionary assignment, an ordinary profession, profession, or purely material activity. The priest must live this mission as a permanent concern for the salvation of those he serves⁴.

³ Fr. Prof. Dr. Valer BEL, *Mission, Parish, Pastoral Care*, Coordonates for a missionary strategie, Renașterea Press, Cluj Napoca, 2006, pp. 27-28.

⁴ Fr. Lect. Dr. Dan SANDU, "Theology and the practice of mission in the Church today. A comparative treatment", in: *Annals of the Scientific University «Al. I. Cuza» Iași*, VIII, University Publishing House, Iași,

In the diaspora and the parishes of the country of origin, the priest has the vocation to fulfill his missionary mission through a comprehensive approach to church life, covering multiple aspects: liturgical, dogmatic, moral, cultural, and social. In the diasporic context, with its distinct specificity, the priest is called to fulfill his mission in a way that adapts and updates him on Western (missionary) challenges. Next, I will address some directions related to the priest's mission in the Romanian Orthodox diaspora in Spain and Portugal.

2 Forms of preaching the truth of faith: catechesis

The first direction focuses on transmitting the divine word. Although the sermon after the Divine Liturgy is present in every parish in the Diocese, overcoming church boundaries in this direction is necessary. Therefore, to be more involved in this mission. In this context, the catechesis role is vital and must be a constant component in parishes in the Orthodox diaspora Romanian. The Diocese of Spain and Portugal has always considered the catechization of the faithful in the Iberian Peninsula a priority, as many Orthodox abroad may not manifest their faith authentically due to the pressures of modern life and relativism or lack of solid knowledge of the faith. In many cases, the concept of salvation is not a priority for them, not because of distrust or refusal, but because of everyday challenges such as intense working hours, long distances, etc. The diocese intervenes in this context through pastoral-missionary strategies, offering parish priests clear missions to revitalize

2003, p. 48, see also Jooris A. VERCAAMEN, "The mission of the Christian faith in a secularized and multicultural world. An approach from an old-catholic perspective", in: *Annals of the Scientific University «Al. I. Cuza» Iași*, VII, translation Pr. Lect. Dr. Dan SANDU, University Publishing House, Iași, 2002, p. 133 and Prof. Dr. † Nifon MIHĂIȚĂ, *Christian Missiology*, Asa Press, București, 2005, pp.71-73.

spiritual life in the regions and communities in which they operate. Since its establishment in 2008, the Diocese has encouraged and implemented catechization programs in parishes, on emphasizing the Holy Mysteries (Baptism, Eucharist, and Marriage). Diocesan circulars (102/2008, 041 and 250/2013, 034/2015, 657/2018) are sent early every year to maintain sustainable catechetical activity. Parishes in the diocese conduct various types of catechesis, including pre-baptismal, premarital, and post-baptismal Lentpost-baptismal, and Lent; there is a diocesan catechization program carried out in most parishes. Each priest organize catechization or re-catechization programs to help believers better understand the mysteries of salvation. According to the Apostle Paul, faith comes from hearing (Romans 10:17), but to allow this, words and messages must be received with clarity and understanding.

Theological and ecclesiastical terms can be complicated for most believers and especially young people to understand, so adapting language and explaining notions is essential. Linguistic mutations can also complicate communication, as many in the diaspora mix Romanian with Spanish or Portuguese. This linguistic mixture can affect the understanding of religious texts and generate an insensitivity to liturgies and services, often perceived as codified. To facilitate communication, many parishes have begun to offer prayers and liturgical texts in both languages and involve Spanish members in their activities to help children born in Spain or from mixed families to better integrate into the Orthodox community.

3 The significance of the priest's mission expressed in the liturgical dimension

Another important direction refers to the sacramental and liturgical dimension of the priest's mission in the parish. Currently, limiting liturgical services to only Sunday Mass and a

few major feasts is not enough to maintain a flourishing parish life. Although many believers work during the week, the need to provide liturgical services during the week is vital to the spiritual life of the parish. A parish must not be absent from community life during Mondays to Fridays; It is unacceptable for the church to be closed and for the priest to be absent without at least a minimum schedule throughout the week.

In the reality of the diaspora, many parish priests are forced to have an additional job, which occupies most of their time during the week. However, there are numerous cases where priests have managed to balance between the three aspects of their lives: time, religious service, and extra work. In these cases, priests establish a schedule of liturgical services in the evening, after the end of working hours, or organize services during the week when important feasts are celebrated. The spiritual vitality of a parish is directly related to the frequency of religious services that take place there. Prayer strengthens the members of the community and their spiritual bond with the parish priest, who is responsible for praying for all members of the parish and the whole world.

The priest is not only a church official delegated to serve only on weekends but primarily a minister who must always be present in the life of the parish and community. Therefore, he must give the parish an initial liturgical orientation: "The believer professes the faith and keeps it pure only as a member of a community of worship"⁵.

The constant service of the Divine Liturgy is essential for maintaining the practical and spiritual unity of the community. Without the Divine Liturgy, the parish cannot exist in the real sense of the word, nor salvation or authentic spiritual life. In the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Spain and Portugal, there is an increased interest in liturgical services, and efforts are directed towards increasing the frequency of services, especially the Holy

⁵ Fr. Prof. Dr. Valer BEL, *Mission, Parish, Pastoral Care*, p. 30.

Liturgy. The gathering of believers around the Holy Table is a fundamental objective for any parish and Local Church. In the diaspora, there are a significant number of young people who participate in the Divine Liturgy⁶, especially on Sundays, and many of them bring with them their children, who become the next generation of believers. This adds a positive dimension to the parish, with more children attending communion on Sundays, thus helping to prepare the next generation of believers.

In addition to the Divine Liturgy, the diaspora priest makes a considerable effort to preach the importance of the Holy Mysteries and their impact on individuals in the twenty-first century. The sacrament of Holy Confession is always brought to the attention of parishioners, and they are constantly encouraged to confess. However, the approach does not stop here, but also involves the priest leaving the sphere of the church, into the world and into society, to proclaim the word of faith to those who, for various good reasons, cannot reach or cannot attend church.

Within the Diocese of Spain and Portugal, each priest has spiritual responsibility for the hospitals in his parish and constantly officiates services there, confessing to the sick and those on the verge of death, or offering the Sacrament of Holy Unction for the suffering, often in collaboration with other priests in the area. There are also many people who are involved in activities that limit their mobility and do not allow them to attend religious services or leave the area of their home or locality. In Spain, there are many who care for the elderly and sick with special needs 7 days a week and are unable to leave the location, and such cases are quite common.

⁶ See Christos YANNARAS, *Abecedary of Faith*, translated by Prof. Dr. Constantin COMAN, Byzantine Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 156.

In these situations, the priest pays special attention, going to these places to visit, confess and share those who cannot reach the church. Thus, the practice of the Holy Mysteries and the officiating of services extend in the diaspora on a much wider area than in a regular parish in the country, exceeding the boundaries of the worship space. The Church, through her sacramental aspect (Mysteries), facilitates the reception of divine grace, the spiritual regeneration of the individual and his support within the Christian faith. This ongoing process of renewal in Christ remains an eternal aspiration of man, for he reveals that:

"He has, wants and can give him a steadfast life, beyond the flow and changes produced by time, a profound, beautiful, intense, incorruptible life, a life that, having these dimensions, could rightly be called eternal. If man feels that this life benefits him and if he loves it, he seeks it more. He participates in it through prayer, receives it through sharing, and creates premises on which he bases his bodily and psychic existence, according to this life through asceticism, cultivates it and makes it bear fruit through virtues and love."⁷

The criteria regarding the priest's activity in the sacramental or graceful context are in full harmony with those referring to his moral conduct⁸. The priest must demonstrate exceptional morality and avoid involvement in compromising actions or contrary to his high priestly mission. In a parish, the priest's priority must be liturgical service and the desire to develop a more intense liturgical life. The sacred sacraments, liturgical rites and all ecclesiastical worship are the vital force that nourishes the whole body of the Church; through them, the grace

⁷ Pannayiotis NELLAS, "The Church—A Place to Be Reborn", in: *Credința Ortodoxă*, 2000, 2, p. 14.

⁸ Fr. Univ. Prof. Dr. Ilie MOLDOVAN, *Missionary Orthodoxy, pillar of light in the contemporary world*, Metropoly of Oltenia Press, Craiova, 2009, p. 159.

of the Holy Spirit pulsates and a close bond is maintained between the various components of the parish community. Therefore, worship activities and liturgical program are of fundamental importance, giving the parish its meaning as an integral part of the Body of Christ – the Church:

"Church worship is the continuity, the prolongation of Christ's saving work and the one who embodies the mystery of the divine economy. Christ is Ecclesiastes who gathers us all the taking of food from communion and relationship with God. He took food only for himself [...] he wanted to realize life not as a relationship or communion, but as individual survival, autonomous existence. At the Holy Eucharist Supper, the Church achieves an approach to life totally contrary to that of the first people. He takes food not within the framework of the individual claim of life, but in order to realize life as a relation to God and communion with Him (...) into one body, into His body, and His faithful who are churched and always present in the assembly of believers are living participants in His glory, recipients of His glory. Church worship is also pneumocentric because the Holy Spirit is present in the liturgical act [...]. True Orthodox worship is the prayerful work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer [...]"⁹.

The dedicated commitment of the priest in ministry and active participation in the liturgical life of the parish constitute the guarantee of a compelling mission, conferring a dynamic that stimulates all other aspects of parish life and the projects initiated to develop and fruition in an even more vibrant ecclesiastical work. In the context of the diaspora, where people feel a burning need for grace and aspire to be in communion with Christ, it becomes essential and highly favorable to develop the

⁹ Fr. Gheorghios METALLINOS, *The Role and Work of Orthodoxy Today*, Egumenița Press, Galați, 2014, p. 62.

intensification of prayer and the amplification of liturgical activities as a natural reaction.

4 The relationship between parish, society and institutional relations

Involvement in the social sphere is significant for the priest in the diaspora. The diversity of the faithful's needs is significant, and without the support provided by the parish and the priest, many fail to integrate into Spanish society or are unable to do so properly. In addition to the responsibilities already mentioned, the parish priest in the diaspora also assumes this responsibility to get positively involved in the social and philanthropic activities of the community.

First, the priest is personally involved in establishing and maintaining relations with local authorities, institutions, and the Roman Catholic Church. This interaction is gradually evolving into effective collaboration also on social issues. More than 50 parishes in Spain have established charitable partnerships with Caritas Social Centres¹⁰, Food Bank, Red Cross, Blue Cross, and other similar organizations and centers.

Through these partnerships, many families in the parish benefit from various aids. In addition, at the parish priest's initiative, various activities and projects are carried out with beneficial impact both on believers and on society. That is why many of the parishes are recognized as institutions of public utility, a status that is difficult to obtain in Spain. Through blood donation campaigns, started at the diocesan level in 2015¹¹, volunteer projects in centers for the elderly, and various prevention

¹⁰ Official website: <<https://www.caritas.es/>>, accessed February 21, 2023.

¹¹ See Andrea POP, "Donate from the heart! – Blood donation campaign in the Diocese of Spain and Portugal", in: *Occidentul Românesc*, V, June 2015, 52, p. 8.

initiatives (such as drugs and abortion), carried out in collaboration with local and national institutions such as city halls, Social Centers and the Spanish National Police, parishes make a significant contribution to the common good of society¹². Thus, they emphasize in diasporas that they are not mere groups confined in a building but are living entities of the Church with a meaningful impact and a significant contribution to the life of the community.

In addition, the parish priest is responsible for ensuring adequate information within the parish regarding the process of obtaining certain documents necessary for Romanians in Spain. In this regard, many parishes regularly organize events such as Travelling Consulates, where important documents are facilitated. Through the parish priest, many believers receive support in finding a job or, in the case of those facing unemployment, receive financial assistance or are helped to return to Romania¹³. Also, the parish priest pays special attention to unfortunate

situations that may occur in the lives of his faithful, such as accidents or deaths, initiating financial collections to support the families involved, or repatriating the deceased. This attention also extends to the social needs of believers. The Church, through its parish priests, engages in collaboration with the Health Centers and hospitals of Spain, organizing informative campaigns on the dangers and diseases common in the area¹⁴. These conclusive actions reflect a deep connection of the parish

¹² Tudorel RUSU, "IPS Teofan, present at the funeral of the student who passed away in the road accident in Spain", in: Ziarul Lumina, 29 March 2016.

¹³ Fr. Vasile POP, "Information campaign in Torrent Parish", 18 January 2016.

¹⁴ Jean-Nicolas BAZIN, Jérôme COTTIN, *Virtual Christianity: potential and challenge for the churches*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2004, p. 103, see also Thomas M. BEAUDOIN, *Proclaiming the gospel in a wired world*, Princeton Theological Seminary Press, Princeton, 2001, pp. 115-116.

priest and, implicitly, of the entire parish with the reality that Orthodox Romanians live in the Iberian Peninsula. Without a deep understanding of the real situation on the ground, any mission attempt risks failure. Therefore, the priest's involvement in social aspects is crucial for a comprehensive approach at the parish level. This involves knowing all the factors that impact the community at the local level.

The parish's activities in the local social plan generate a feeling of admiration from local authorities and other institutions. This, in turn, leads to a series of benefits for the parish: an improved image in the local community, a closer and more open relationship with the authorities, the possibility to temporarily or concessional obtain spaces for religious activities, but also the potential for various collaborations and joint projects that bring added value both to the Romanian community and to society.

5 Communication and dynamism

Communication and dynamism play an essential role in the priest's success in his mission in the diaspora. To achieve effective and prompt results, the priest must be open to new methods of communication that facilitate dialogue and interaction. The long distances in the diaspora represent a challenge, and modern technologies (internet, social networks, applications, telephone) become an effective tool for the priest. Most priests recognize the Internet and online communication's value in dealing with their faithful. In the diaspora, the Internet has become an even more helpful tool than in the country, allowing priests to keep in touch with those at a distance and quickly inform the faithful about the events and liturgical program of the parish.

The parish's most widely used and effective online tools include the parish's Facebook page and website. The efficiency of these means of online communication considerably exceeds that of traditional methods, providing accessibility and rapid

transmission of information. Effective time management is crucial for achieving results in the shortest possible time. Today, the priest is called to extend his mission to the online environment and bring his mission to the virtual space, but this must be done with responsibility and attention. In any online activity, we must recognize that virtual mission is an extension of the Church's mission, an expression of her contemporary dynamism, and must integrate perfectly into the mission of the physical and traditional Church, having a complementary role. It is crucial to remember that the ultimate goal of an online mission is not the virtual environment itself but the physical church as a place of worship and real communion with others and God. The separation of the two planes, virtual and real, can lead to pastoral failure and a distorted understanding of the role of the Church in the lives of believers and online.

Another defining attribute of the priest's mission in the diaspora, which contributes significantly to the dynamics of the parish, is its dynamism. From the very beginning of the exercise of his ministry, the priest is in a continuous search. Initially, the search focuses on identifying Orthodox members in the area and the respective community. Then, the priest draws up a plan for establishing and shaping the parish, consistently seeking a space of service that becomes visible and occupies a special place in the conscience of the faithful, transforming it into a true church. With the conclusion of these initial stages, the search for the priest does not stop since it remains necessary to gather new believers constantly.

The priest must be present in the community, looking in various places and institutions for people who can become parish members. Passive waiting in the place of worship is not recommended, as it often does not contribute to the development of the mission but can have adverse consequences for the parish. Instead, it can limit the number of parish members and induce a resentment that is hard to overcome.

6 The role of the priest in the relationship between authorities and parish

Parish priests in the diaspora maintain constant communication with parish members, often dispersed over a large geographical area, covering several localities. Through interaction with members of the local Romanian community, the priest becomes familiar with their needs and the context in which they live, which makes the encounter between the priest and the local authorities inevitable and desirable. As a representative of the parish and voice of the Romanian community, in collaboration with associations and other Romanian institutions, the parish priest has the role of facilitating certain links with local authorities (especially the police and the mayor's office), in order to promote mutual understanding, thus contributing to the integration of the parish in the local context and strengthening its image.

As a rule, good relations between the parish or the Romanian community and the Spanish authorities are the result of a positive perception of Romanians in that locality. Although the Romanian Embassy and consular offices have their role in assisting Romanians in the diaspora and facilitating various interactions with the authorities, it is the parish priest who is actively involved with the local authorities regarding parish issues. The parish's activities and mission success depend on effective collaboration with local institutions and authorities, both Spanish and Portuguese. For example, to organize major events or request spaces, logistics, or medical assistance on the occasion of large events, such as the dedication, the Resurrection service, bishops' liturgies, and others, it is necessary to work closely with the city hall and the local police. The parish priest has a crucial role in ensuring these collaborations and solving all the aspects required for carrying out parish activities and successful integration into the local community.

Priests are in a privileged position to understand the realities and difficulties faced by Romanians in the parish or locality

where they carry out their ministry. This is because they face the same challenges and problems¹⁵. For this reason, to develop positive and constructive relationships, it is essential to work closely with local authorities and involve priests and believers in various projects impacting society. These projects may be of public benefit and may involve interactions or collaborations between the parish and local authorities, such as blood donation campaigns, anti-drug actions, or charitable initiatives.

As ambassadors of the Orthodox faith in the diaspora, parish priests and parish representatives must adopt exemplary moral conduct that inspires trust in the relationship with the authorities. This approach can be crucial in establishing and maintaining fruitful collaborations with local authorities for future projects. Priests experienced in interacting with authorities, due to the long tradition of the parish or skills developed in dialogue, can play an essential role in providing guidance and advice to other younger priests.

Through inter-parish collaboration, new ideas and innovative missionary projects can emerge, contributing to the good of Romanian communities and even to the benefit of society through initiatives with an impact on public utility. Priests occupy a central position in addressing the problems of contemporary man¹⁶, being involved in the turmoil of their believers' daily lives and in the face of their spiritual, social, and cultural concerns, to which they respond with empathy and responsibility.

¹⁵ † His Grace Timothy LAURAN, "Priests know best the life of Romanians here. Moreover, they themselves have the same problems", in: *Noi în Spania*, 28 April 2016, 507, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶ † His Eminence Joseph Pop, "Mission and communion. The Life of the Church in the Diaspora", interview offered for Trinitas TV on July 7, 2015.

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