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Theological Understanding of Mission (Variations on a theme)

The theological understanding of Mission is necessary not solely for theologians and the clergy but is decisively important to the entire Church. Every Christian must learn and realize that Missionary activity does not constitute a supplement or a branch of our ecclesiastical activities but is a fundamental expression of our faith. In addition, the faithful Christian must realize that Mission does not mean leaving our geographical or social environment toward other, unknown, and exotic countries, but the firm orientation toward the centre of Christian experience, as well as the essence of our Christian faith, hope, love and Christian expectations, so that we can understand the mystery of salvation in Christ in its global and eschatological perspective.

In order for us to maintain the missionary vision alive, and its related comprehension vibrant, it is necessary for us to ponder again and again the theological concepts in relation to Mission. Here, we shall li1nit ourselves to only three fundamental theological points.

**I**

**1. The Trinitarian Dimension**

The content of our faith and the centre of our life is God - as the Holy Trinity, as Love. The starting point of the understanding of Christian Mission is precisely in the mystery of the Triune God. God, being love, extends His love to the entire human race, to the entire creation. The starting point of any Apostolic activity remains the risen Lord's promise and command in their Triune perspective “As the Father has sent me I am sending you … Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:21-22) The Father's love is expressed by the Mission of the Son: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." John 3:16) The Son, subsequently, gives the command of mission to His disciples, "...for the scattered children of God, to bring them together..." (John 11:52) to His Kingdom. All human beings, who have been created in the image of God, are called to return to the freedom of love, to partake in the life-of-love of the Holy Trinity. The glory of God, which radiates over, and gives life to creation, must transform everything, "to be exalted over the entire earth and the heavens."

The Son's mission constitutes the starting point and defines more specifically Christian Mission. The work of Christ is not simply an announcement but a f act, the definitive fact of world history, which opens the way for the *eschaton,* the final completion of the evolution of the cosmos. It concerns the reception of human nature, and its re-creation within the life-of-love of the Holy Trinity. This reception, which is made in love, this continuous conveying of the life-of-love, this re-creation of everything in the light of God's glory, continues in time and space through the Church's Mission activity.

Decisive for Orthodox Mission remains the conjunction *"as" (kathos)* in John 20:21. It is in my footsteps that you all ought to be following, and my example you should be emulating, emphasizes Christ. The Christological doctrine defines the way of the Triune God's Mission which is being continued by the faithful. What is essential in Mission is not that which one announces but that which one lives, that which one is him/herself. The heart of Mission is "being in Christ." And, Man "becomes" only by remaining in Christ. Only this kind of human being bears fruit: “… If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

The Holy Spirit participates from the beginning in the Son's Mission. The Incarnation is made complete, as we confess in our Creed, “…of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary." The Holy Spirit works together with what is best in the human race: the All-Holy Virgin who, unreservedly and happily submits to the Will of God the Father, for the realization of the Son's mission.

The Spirit, in the appearance of a dove, seals the start of the Son's public ministry. Furthermore, in the appearance of fiery flames and violent wind, the Spirit constitutes the Church, transforming the fearful disciples into heroic Apostles, full of divine illumination, knowledge and power. The Spirit creates the Church, transforming individuals into a community of persons - an open society with global responsibilities. The Spirit ceaselessly gives life to the Church and to each of the Church's members, transforming them into living cells of the mystical body of Christ, enabling it to partake in His continuing mission for the salvation of the entire cosmos.

The energies of the Triune God are always personal: from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Trinitarian faith and thought is at the core of our thoughts and actions.

Mission, like everything else in the Orthodox life, is done "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." It is partaking of the life of the Holy Trinity, an essential expression of Orthodox self-awareness -- a loud shout through action - for the completion of the Will of God on earth, "on earth as it is in heaven." The Trinitarian faith must always be present in the core of our missionary thoughts and actions.

**2. The Ecclesiastical Dimension.**

The development of an Orthodox missionary conscience contributes to the deeper understanding of orthodox ecclesiology. The reverse is also true: a deeper understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology strengthens Orthodox missionary conscience. During an era when there existed so many defining terms for various religious communities and groups, the first Christians, in order to define their own self-awareness, choose the term "ecclesia" which declared the assembly of the entire demos (city-state). In the new reality, in the new eschatological *city* which was built on the cross and the vacant tomb of the risen Lord, God is the one who issues the assembly call, and the entire world is the demos. This is about the catholic *"Ecclesia* of God." When that new community, which was called to assembly by the Triune God, was choosing "ecclesia" as its self-defining term - especially in an era when emperors and kings ruled – it was underlining all of its members' responsible participation for its life, direction and evolution.

We belong to the "catholic Church" which embraces everything, all Orthodox Mission, whether domestic or foreign, is by nature ecclesiastic. It cannot be thought of as an individual or group activity while being cut off from the Body of Christ. Whoever serves *in* the Church, it is the Church he or she serves, it is the Church he or she represents; it is the Church life he or she transplants. No one is saved on his or her own; no one offers by his or her own self the salvation which is in Christ. A person is saved in the Church, acts within the Church, and, whatever such a person disseminates does so in the name of the Church.

**3**. **Global eschatological perspective.**

Taking part in mission, we participate in a divine plan which is in progress and has global dimensions. We are already moving toward the *eschata.* With the descent of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the Church, with His pouring out and into the world, with His continuous presence in the world, a new movement of re-creation of the cosmos was inaugurated a movement which exalts humanity and transforms the universe. Mission constitutes a prerequisite for the advent of the Kingdom: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world …and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14) However, the final Judgment is also a global event: “All the nations will be gathered before Him ..." (Matthew 25:32) Everything, in the eschatological epoch, pertains to the entire oecumene. At the same time, surprise and the shattering of commonly accepted things remain a fundamental element of the Judgment. Those who "did good" as well as those who "practiced evil" had never predicted that the criterion and the basis for the decision of the Judge would be Christ's identifying of himself with the humble and persecuted of the earth: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40) Our support toward the poor and the afflicted of the entire earth is essentially a union with the Lord who was afflicted for us. This aspect makes eschatology ceaselessly revolutionary, missionary, and relevant.

Not only troubled humanity but also the entire creation takes part in the Christian Mission for the restoration which was realized by the redeeming work of Christ and finds again its purpose (since creation contains within it the human race), glorifying God. According to orthodox thought, the entire world is led toward transformation. The entire universe has been called to enter the Church, to become Christ's Church, so that subsequently, at the end of the ages, it may become God's heavenly Kingdom. The Church is the centre of the entire cosmos, the space in which its destiny is decisively determined. Everything the Church possesses, She possesses it for the benefit of the entire cosmos. She radiates it and offers it, transforming everything. The entire cosmos - not only humanity but also the entire universe, takes part in the restoration which has been completed by the redeeming work of Christ, and rediscovers its destiny while glorifying God.

There is a concept, mainly developed by the Greek Fathers, according to which the person, in its (the person's) exaltation toward the personal God, has the obligation to include with it the entire world. Defined through this concept is the special respect not only to each human person but to the whole of creation. Everything is to be brought under Him (Ephesians 1:10). All things "in heaven and on earth" will find their purpose which is Christ. It is in this mystery of God that we are participating when we are working in a missionary capacity. This vision liberates us from any closed, individualistic piety and gives to Mission a global, eschatological perspective.

**II**

**What about the internal problems of the Church?**

And what will happen with "the internal problems of our Church," those which we detect all around us, in our country, and generally in the traditionally Christian countries, in Europe as well as in America? We shall limit ourselves to two clarifications, explaining synoptically how we conceive Global Orthodox Mission in our times.

1. We do not claim a romantically conceived "external Mission" but we refer to the Church's self-awareness, universality, and fullness. To the various objections and arguments regarding the priorities of each particular local Church, the best and final answer is the last commandment of the Lord, that which He left behind before his departure from the earth, as it was conveyed to us by St Luke (Acts 1:18). "... and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The commandment covers the local and the global. In reality, there is no dilemma, there are no correlative conjunctions "either...or". Both are necessary, "both this and that," both internal and external Mission.

We do not have the right to confine ourselves to our internal problems. We are obligated to extend our vision and our interest toward the global community which is being born in our times. No one is more realistic than those who carefully observe the human problems and challenges - the human destiny - and who are working for freedom, dignity, and the search for truth, with a global perspective in their thought and love. The Church in its entirety is obligated to spread the Gospel to the entire world, to those who are near and those who are far, and to manifest interest in the entire humanity, in every expression of human life.

It is time for us to learn to function within the framework of our local Church while maintaining a global and eschatological perspective.

1. Each and every local Church community, as long as it participates in the catholicity of the Church, is obligated to participate in the pain and struggles of the whole Church, in all the longitudes and latitudes of the earth. Of course, a particular local Church presents its own characteristics; and it is with these special characteristics that she is called to glorify God and to give her witness. At the "'same time, however, it is a necessity and a duty of every province and congregation to experience the global as well as the local aspect of the Church.

In order to be authentically "catholic," every local Church, is obligated to work and pray for the more deprived countries, for the regions where people are hungry for the word of God, where Christian presence is very little detectable or altogether non-existent. There are still millions of people who are waiting to hear the Gospel.

Emphasizing that every country is a place for Mission, we are correct to include also our own home country. Nevertheless, the thought that there is no longer any need for "external Mission," that the local Church is responsible only for its own jurisdiction, is very dangerous. Whenever a diocese or a congregation is absorbed exclusively by its own interests, spiritual withering follows. Those who become confined into, themselves isolate themselves and lose themselves. This has to do with a spiritual law which is valid for the life of the individual, of the community, but also for the larger or smaller groups, whether they are nation or ethnic groups or anything else.

The care and the exercise of Mission is an internal necessity for the faithful and the Church. If we ref use it, we are not merely ref using a responsibility but our very own self, our identity.

With Mission, the love of the Triune God is ceaselessly extended by mobilizing the love of His own people, and has as its scope the transformation of the entire world.

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As far as the future is concerned, I believe that we must avoid both the euphoria of over - optimism and unwarranted disappointment. Our responsibility for the development of the modem world is all the clearer, and rapprochement and collaboration among Christians more imperative. God has opened new horizons for the common action of Christians, such as the issues of world peace, justice, and the sustainment of the creation.

Supported by the profound assurance of the faith in Him Who is, indeed, the “Όντως Ων”, the True Being, by the truth and love which He revealed to us in their plenitude, vve Christians dare to hope. And in this new phase of global history, in the midst of pressing problems, we proclaim with boldness: “There is hope" in our efforts for unity. There is hope in the common battle for peace and justice; when we insist together on the obligation of solidarity between people and peoples; when we intensify our common efforts for unfailing respect for the creation. In the end, through the power of the crucified and risen Lord Christ, to Whom has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18), truth, justice and love will prevail. Let us not be troubled over the future. The future belongs to Christ. He is the One, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8). And He is coming again; from the future!