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**MISSIONARY SERVICE AT LOWER DANUBE
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Sumary of Doctoral Thesis

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

I. THE “LOWER DANUBE” DIOCESE: HISTORICAL COORDINATES, THE TITLE AND THE MISSIONARY AREA. THE FIRST BISHOP

II. DIOCESE OF „LOWER DANUBE” IN TIME OF BISHOP MELCHISEDEC ȘTEFĂNESCU. MISSIONARIES ASPECTS: 1864-1879

- 2.1. Appointment and installation of Melchisedec Stefanescu in Ismail
- 2.2. The Bishopric and cathedral
- 2.3. Dividing the deaneries. State of churches and clergy
- 2.4. The bishop's parteners
- 2.5. Moving Diocesan center in Galati
- 2.6. Diocesan Seminary
- 2.7. Missionary aspects: 1864-1879
 - 2.7.1. Direct knowledge of church life and strengthening the romanian element - prerequisites for effective mission
 - 2.7.2 . Preparing clerical staff . Young people studying abroad. The mission of the diocesan seminary
 - 2.7.3. Aspects of ministry among orthodox
 - 2.7.4. Measures for prevententing the sectarian proselytizm, lipovenian and Catholic proselytizm. Ordinances for passing to Orthodoxy

III. THE MISSIONARY BISHOP PIMEN GEORGESCU

- 3.1. Biographical sketch of Bishop Pimen Georgescu
- 3.2. Religious context and confessional situation in 1902
- 3.3. Specifically missionary issues
- 3.4. Ways and means of asserting missionary service
- 3.5. Missionary work on the Lower Danube during Bishop Pimen Georgescu (1902-1909)

- 3.5.1. Hierarchical visits
- 3.5.2. Pioneering activity in the Bishopric of Lower Danube: general pastoral conferences and deanery conferences
- 3.5.3. Care for the "enlightenment" of the people by enhancing administrative and educational activities, and participation in actions to support public education
- 3.5.4. Mission and politics
- 3.5.5. Using statistics in missionary activities
- 3.5.6. Mission through diocesan church schools
- 3.5.7. Mission through philanthropic cultural Society "Solidaritatea"
- 3.5.8. A unique outreach ministry: religious and moral training program of romanian soldiers

IV . TEMPORARY CHURCH ADMINISTRATION IN CADRILATERAL DURING BISHOP VARTOLOOMEU STĂNESCU BĂCĂOANUL

- 4.1. Cadrilaterul: name , history, administrative organization, romanian presence, geographic location, statistics.
- 4.2. Biographical sketch of Archbishop Bartholomeu Stanescu
- 4.3. Religious situation in Bulgaria and Cadrilater in the last half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century
- 4.4 . Church administrative apparatus. Administrative problems and solutions
- 4.5. Missionary, pastoral and organizational issues. Solutions adopted
 - 4.5.1. Bulgarian Schism
 - 4.5.2. "Nationalization" of churches and schools
 - 4.5.3. Promoting a balanced local ecumenism to strengthen Christian unity and for the brotherhood of territorial nationalities
- 4.6. Methods and means used by the temporary church administration in Cadrilater

V. MISSIONARY MODEL AT THE PARISH LEVEL: THE MERITORIOUS WORK OF PRIEST LUDOVIC COSMA

- 5.1. Biography
- 5.2. Missionary and cultural activity in the cultural house "Saint Constatine, the Emperor, and his mother Saint Helen
- 5.3. Mission and fights with heterodox in parish

VI. MISSION OF ARCHBISHOP ANTIM NICA. NEW GUIDELINES

- 6.1 *In servitium Ecclesiae*. Biography of Antim Nica
- 6.2. 1947 to 1950. Political, social and religious context.
- 6.3. 1947 to 1950. Missions problems and achievements
 - 6.3.1. The diocesan missionary
 - 6.3.2. Pastoral and missionary circles studies
 - 6.3.3. Hierarchical ceremonies and canonical visits
 - 6.3.4. Priests conferences with cultural and missionary characters
- 6.4 . Missionary work as a holder in the Lower Danube. 1973-1994
 - 6.4.1. Appointment and installation of Bishop Antim Nica. Elevation to the rank of archbishop diocese
 - 6.4.2 .The status of „Lower Danube” Diocese. Missionary challenges.
 - 6.4.3. Establishing the post of dean and missionary guide. Missionary circles and missionary training sessions
 - 6.4.4 . The missionary plan of a priest
 - 6.4.5 . Fighting sectarian proselytizim and similar actions of stylists and members of the Association " Army of God"
 - 6.4.6 . Vespers with mission program and exercises of omofon singing

VII. A MISSIONARY UNIQUE EVENT: THE ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE TO THE MONASTERY BUCIUMENI IN GALATI COUNTY

- 7.1 . Program in the day of Saint Trinity and the number of participants. Invited pilgrims
- 7.2. Impact of annual pilgrimage to the Monastery Buciumeni. Testimonies of participants

CONCLUSIONS

APPENDIX

REFERENCES

A SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

In our research, we tried to emphasize the missionary work of the Church in Lower Danube area, in a century marked by important changes of the Romanian society under the influence of the events that quickly evolved in Europe's history.

Christian mission in this area has been continuous, smooth, but has adapted to the realities of everyday life and to historical conditions, both local and national. However, the clergy and the believers engaged in serving the Church in this area continued preaching the Gospel and strengthening the faith and unity of the nation, a necessary component for effective ministry.

The presence of different populations has always been characteristic for Lower Danube area, embedding its character to the local ethos. It was therefore necessary that those responsible for the Christian mission in Lower Danube to give an appropriate response to the challenges resulting from this cultural and ethnic kaleidoscope.

In my thesis, I have tried to notice which were the solutions adopted by the hierarchy of Lower Danube area- and by their suffragan priests - to fulfill the desire of *preaching the Gospel to all nations*. Of course, in the twentieth century we will not encounter mass conversion to Orthodox Christianity, this time the mission of the Church being that of catechization of the masses of believers, and that of scumbling - or even eliminating - the moral and social shortcomings, that will haunt Romanian society throughout the historical period under discussion.

The aim of our research has not been that of offering a complete monography recording the missionary efforts made in Lower Danube and in Dobrogea in the twentieth century, nor an analysis or a thorough evaluation of those. In general, the missionary and pastoral work in a diocese differs broadly from the one that takes place in a different administrative territory of the same national Orthodox Church. We intend, however, to bring into focus only those missionary events, methods and means who built the foundation of missionary work in Lower Danube, whether they have revolutionized the methodological level activity of the Church in this land, or that these can become today true paradigms for an effective mission. During the presentation of these points we will try to highlight the impact that these new methods and

pastoral techniques had upon the ecclesiastical life, using documents and materials that we have been able to investigate.

Throughout the presentation, we will pursue the continuity or discontinuity of some projects- knowing that in religious life the rule and constancy or steadiness are essential - but we will also highlight the novelty of solutions in this area, especially since it has contributed, not once, to the dynamic life of the Church. We also present the impact of initiatives, which had as starting point the pastoral-missionary activities undertaken in the Lower Danube Diocese. To these are added the Danube diocesan suggestions that led to their adoption as decisions of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Romanian Church, calling for statutes elaborated by this ecclesiastical forum. Some initiatives belonging to the Lower Danube clergy have become solutions for culturalization, nationally accepted, such as the case of Ludovic Cosma priest, whose cultural center led to the establishment of similar institutions around the Orthodox Romanian Church, which meant the fulfillment of the wish of Spiru Haret Minister - people's cultural development, a necessary activity even today, given that Romanian school - highly oriented towards theory - no longer deals with the Romanian tradition or educating the masses that have left the statal educational system. Meaning, the practice of learning or lifelong learning is unfamiliar to us, knowing that these contribute significantly to the elimination of self-sufficiency and complacency. This form of education is required as it orientates man to knowledge and thus to understanding the world in which he lives.

It must be said that the mission of the Lower Danube was held in difficult conditions, constantly requiring bishops genius here; whether was all about the unfortunate mix of state affairs of the Church - as it happened during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza until the events of December 1989, whether it was about the need for peaceful romanization of Dobrogea, of southern Bessarabia or of Quadrilateral (New Dobrogea). To these, we can add the communist oppression exercised during the period from 1947 to 1989. These realities have dictated, not once, rather special mission methods.

The area of the Lower Danube Diocese has always been a challenge for the mission. Located in a border area and in the path of military strategic roads - at the Danube mouths – it experienced in the XIX and XX centuries - if we were to refer only to the relatively recent history - turmoil and multiple territorial fragmentation. Nor should we forget that the Lower Danube Diocese was composed of four cities - Bolgrad, Ismail, Galati and Braila - three of which were ports at Danube and Black Sea, and two of them - Galati and Ismail – were the largest transit centers from West to East and vice versa. However, that fact should not be neglected at all. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two major ports will be part of its

canonical territory - Constanta and Tulcea. Add to this the fact that between 1913-1940, except for the period of 1914-1916, New Dobrogea Quadrilateral – a territory situated today in northeastern Bulgaria, acquired by Romania after the *Peace Treaty in Bucharest* in 28 July/10 August 1913 - was canonically integrated into the Lower Danube Diocese.

I recorded these facts to emphasize that the holding hierarchy in Ismail - the first headquarters of the diocese - and in Galati were faced with two major problems: cultural and ethnic mosaic characteristic to large commercial clusters and lack of religious homogeneity, a composite structure that is unfavorable to an effective mission. Hierarchs and priests engaged in Church ministry have failed - not once - to overcome these obstacles, but also to align - through tact, patience and determination - different practical approaches related to everyday life, creating an ecumenical model available even today.

The area of Lower Danube has always been a priority for the Romanian state. The area has been and is very important because it is a gateway to our country. Therefore, a collaboration with the Church succeeded in different periods, something that once again I assert, we will highlight in our paper. We want to remind current politicians that if Romania has withstood communist ideological and moral desertification, this is due to the synergies, which have paid off. Not once the Orthodox Romanian Church has offered itself to be "used" in the work of nationalization and re-nationalization - peacefully – of the new territories received as parts of Romania: Southern Bessarabia (1856), Dobrogea (1878), New Dobrogea Quadrilateral (1913). This was another aspect of missionary activity carried out within the Diocese of Lower Danube. We believe it is important to present it because - although today it is not a very poignant issue to regain territories lost by Romania – the nationalization model promoted by the Romanian government in collaboration with the Church is a shining moment, to be reminded of current generations of young people in order to understand the way of life that must be a model and aspiration for them.

Lower Danube area was and is very important for the European opening, which has always been manifested in our ancient Church, this opening being facilitated by the geographical position of the region. Assertion possibilities of the area in the European context have been used by the Danubian hierarchs for development of the mission.

Also important for the European and global opening of the diocese was the presence and ministry of Antim Nica Archbishop at Galati - the most prominent holder of the chair in the twentieth century – to whom the Orthodox Romanian Church owes - just as Anthony Plămădeală Metropolitan highlighted – *a profile of targeted ecumenism*, and reintegration of our Church in the Ecumenical Council of Churches in 1961. All these achievements show close association between the Orthodox Romanian Church and Christian Churches in the

country and abroad, which will feed into the new orientation that Patriarch Justinian (1948-1977) had given to the Church.

Studying the sources on the subject in question, I noticed that the paper can be variously structured. I ordered its content - as much as I could - observing the work of bishops and priests on the principle of chronological presentation, as it is easier to outline the course of missionary service at Lower Danube, but also to notice the implementation of principles by the founding bishop, Melchizedek Stefanescu. I also considered important to present in a few pages the biography of the personalities in the twentieth century - less known nationally - to whose work we will refer to, observing their cultural and missionary formation, as the knowledge gained in the study - and experience as ministers of the Church - have influenced the cultural, missionary and pastoral work at Lower Danube.

I must mention that I paid attention to the presentation of the territorial composition - from the beginning, but also during the twentieth century – of the diocese of which I am a spiritual son. Therefore, the structure of the paper is as follows: in the *first chapter* I will deal with the founding of the Lower Danube Diocese, the appointment of Bishop Melchizedek as its hierarch, and the territories in which the hierarchs developed their mission. In the *second chapter*, I present the mission undertaken during Melchizedek Stefanescu Bishop, work belonging – as a mean of approach – to the twentieth century, the personality and concepts of this bright bishop going beyond the historical background in which he lived. This presentation will give us the opportunity to observe the guidelines of missionary service registered at Lower Danube, service that has not ceased to influence religious activity in the area to this day.

The *third chapter* will be dedicated to the work of Pimen Georgescu Bishop, who affirmed a renewing ministry regarding the care shown to the formation and ministry of the clergy. His name is also associated to the re-establishment of Theological Seminary, which – even today – carries its activity in Galati. The most important achievement of this worthy bishop, however, was the establishment of a priestly society, with beneficial consequences to this day, activity which will we given a wider space in our research.

The *fourth chapter* will be dedicated to the mission carried out in New Dobrogea-Quadrilateral during Bartholomew Stănescu-Băcăoanu Archbishop, whose ministry - although he was the leader of this mission for a short period (1913-1914) - is a model for interethnic and interreligious dialogue in our country, but also a more dynamic ferment to crystallize a missionary concept that has always characterized the dialogue between beliefs and religions of our Orthodox Romanian Church, this being critical for the ministry in the Diocese of Lower Danube, in particular.

In the *fifth chapter* we will deal with the exceptional activity of Cosma Louis Priest, servant at Saint Constantin and Elena Church in Galati, as an implementation model of the principles promoted by the Diocesan Center at the parochial level.

The *sixth chapter* contains important data of missionary and pastoral ministry backed up by Nica Antim Archbishop in Galati, referring to the two phases (1947-1950, 1973-1994), when he was the head of the Lower Danube Diocese. It will be an offering of gratitude dedicated to the man who culturally and missionarily trained my father.

In the *last chapter* of our work, I present the initiative of the current holder in Galati - Archbishop Dr. Cassian Craciun – the pilgrimage to the Buciumeni Monastery (Galati county), a work with major missionary impact in the diocese, with great resonance among youth and high school students who will be the next generation of active believers of the Church.

In *conclusions* I will outline the highlights of missionary work carried out in Lower Danube over a century, but also the timeliness of most of the principles promoted by ministers from these lands full of history. This work of the ministry has already history. One filled with offerings for the proclamation of the Gospel and defense of the true faith. We will point out the initiatives presences taken in Lower Danube in conciliar decisions and Orthodox Romanian Church statutes, while confirming their validity.

Finally, we are talking about a hundred years of achievements in the mission of the Church field, which we believe they will provide a basis for compiling a complete monography for this area, one that enjoyed the presence and work of many nationally and internationally recognized personalities.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of a century of achievements in the difficult field of Orthodox Christian mission in Lower Danube and Dobrogea helps us get an insight on the guidelines that the worthy bishops and priests in the area have approached in the activity they have carried out. The results obtained over a hundred years have not been spectacular in the sense of an impressive number of people converting to Christianity, as the Apostles have done in the first century of the Christian era. But we have seen that all missionary contributions acted decisively to raise the cultural level of the clergy of Lower Danube, or in a very delicate

approach of the romanization of the territories that became part of Romania, in various periods. Missionary service in Lower Danube and in Dobrogea has been characterized by balance and maturity, the diocese benefiting from the presence of important ministers who were able to devote themselves to the service of Christ and His Church. We wanted to present these images of hierarchs and priests, and their meritorious activity and working methods and means of achieving as exemplary for the current generation of bishops and priests of the ancient Church.

From the very beginning, I noticed that the founder of the Lower Danube Diocese - Melchizedek Stefanescu Bishop – joined in his missionary activity the national aspect and that of the unity of faith in a territory characterized by confessions, but also by ethnic and religious diversity, trying tactfully and patiently to help unify the missionary area of the diocese. His working methods had built on. Thus Bessarabia - during his tenure - has been preserved from religious conflicts, but also from social and cultural roughness, which could also create conflicts; the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity in Lower Danube Diocese was used constructively by the visionary bishop.

Melchizedek Stefanescu Bishop has the role of being the first bishop who managed the integration of some territories of ancient church in the communion of Orthodox Romanian Church in the United Principalities, his work activity becoming paradigmatic for the hierarchs of Lower Danube, who followed his example concerning Dobrogea (1878) and the Quadrilateral (1913). Furthermore, he managed to outline the first manifestations of a Christian and social apostolate - so present today in church life, meant to serve a spiritual renaissance of Romanian communities who lived its life - for centuries - with believers of other religions, ethnicities and confessions. However, this does not mean anything other than superior capitalization of well known Dobrogea cohabitation or what has been called as "open model of tolerance" - ethnic and religious - in Dobrogea.

Involved in the affairs of the diocese, as in those of the whole Church, an outstanding personality of his time, Melchizedek Archbishop was able to guide the Church's mission so that it can respond to the immediate needs of the believers. From him we have inherited as a missionary method the depth study of the sectarian and schismatic phenomenon, and the adequacy of pastoral ministry of our Church to local realities and specific needs of each local community. We should not forget that today there are about fifteen nationalities in Dobrogea, but also in southern Ukraine that belonged to Bessarabia.

Also, Melchizedek Bishop can be regarded as a pioneer in the Christian mission in the modern history in that he succeeded to provide a viable and adaptable model. From the election of officers and to the personal care to future priests, from organizing various

activities in the diocese and to the development of relations with the state authorities, Melchizedek Archbishop has shown that nothing can stand in the way of fruitful work of the Church, if those involved in this ministry are seeking to work responsibly for the gift that was shared by the Spirit of Christ.

We do not forget to mention the fact that one of the methods employed by Melchizedek Bishop in his mission in Lower Danube was the enlightenment of the clergy, and providing pastoral and missionary information in the form of papers; these were new means of training the clergy used in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period in which a missionary and cultural orientation of the priests involved in the work of the Church was important. After the secularization undertaken by Alexandru Ioan Cuza, political interference in the life of the Church was more than visible. In this context it was a growing need for clergy culturalization and accountability - basically an awareness that many servants lacked- towards the ministry of the Gospel of Christ. In fact, Melchizedek Archbishop is the first bishop who pointed out that theology - as the ministry of the Church - must be missionary.

From this starting point, pastoral and missionary ministry of all bishops in Lower Danube has shown fruitful and balanced; all strove to follow the missionary model of Melchisedec bishop, nurturing it and developing it, but never deviating from thereof. In southern Romania, things could not work otherwise. Populations of different ethnicities, religions and cultures from here could not have been involved in the work of the Church other than through the fulfilled working method, with welfare, patience and persuasion. It is a difficult area – that from Lower Danube and Dobrogea, not to mention the south Dobrogea counties (the Quadrilateral) - who required and requires still a zealous approach of the religious activity, but with some flexibility. In the absence of such ministries, conflicts can easily burst out.

As a distinctive note concerning the mission at Lower Danube, I have to add that the diocese has benefited from the work of visionary hierarchs - it is true that not all proved such a spirit in the same way - who have influenced the whole activity here. Besides Melchizedek Bishop, we recall Bartholomew Stanescu Bacauanul Hierarch - considered to be the best leader in missionary service in the Quadrilateral counties, and in Christian apostolate; besides him, we have to mention the mission's organization master - Antim Nica Archbishop – who shortly succeeded to revitalize the work of the Lower Danube. And this in a period of great turmoil, characterized by virulent sectarian and schismatic attacks, additional to the communist-atheist ones.

The twentieth century was marked by great social turmoil, and by the two world wars which left their mark on both the mindset of Europeans - hence of the Romanians - and on the

working methods of the Church of Christ with a population marked by the horrors of war. No less important is the fact that - at the beginning of the twentieth century - Orthodox Romanian Church has experienced a turbulent period due to political instability and political interference in internal affairs. Not to mention the communist period, when secular power exerted an unbearable pressure on the Church. To this is added the current promoted by some materialistic philosophers such as Feuerbach (1804-1872), predicting the "annihilation of religion" by the atheist humanism. One of the goals of our research was to see how the hierarchy and the priests of Lower Danube and Dobrogea succeeded to provide useful answers to different challenges and to develop effective pastoral methods.

Whether it was about the conferences, society twinning, creating entities involved in mission or about kits of measures aimed to leverage the pastoral-missionary activity, the clergy of Lower Danube had done his duty towards the community of believers. For this reason, the events of December 1989 have found the diocese in full activity, of course, as much as it was possible in the conditions of that time.

Another feature of missionary-pastoral ministry in Lower Danube was that reflected by the maturity of implemented projects and their sustainability. Without such well made plans and without a staff implementing those projects, they could not withstand time. The settlements founded, the periodicals, and the edited volumes in Galati, had they not been suppressed by the communist government, they were present today in this diocese. All the initiatives that we have introduced have been the result of research and assessments of the believers' needs and thus succeeded to provide an effective response required for optimal Christian living. Also, the initiatives that had become works needed to be sustained through specific forms, priests stimulation being crucial in developing diocesan and parochial projects.

As a whole, the mission of Lower Danube and Dobrogea does not differ as a principle from the entire work of the Orthodox Church. Forms and means of asserting, however, were different. It is known that the purposes of the Church are always the same, but the ways for their fulfillment can always be upgraded. Hierarchs and priests from Lower Danube have not exceeded the normal framework of the Church, but they organized it in such a manner as to meet the specific realities of each era and each area of the diocese.

From the study of a century of mission conducted without interruption at Lower Danube, we also keep in mind the originality of providential judgment that helped the activity in this area: the foundation of "Solidarity" priestly Society, the establishment of priestly conferences - both in 1902. But also the ingenious organization of conferences for *poporanism*, under the guidance of Louis Cosmas priest, and the unprecedented mission organization by the experienced Antim Nica Archbishop.

Many of the initiatives and achievements from Lower Danube mission were taken from general pastoral-missionary plans developed by the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Romanian Church. Sometimes, however, they have influenced the decision of the Holy Synod themselves and have become the norm to be followed in the ancient Church. The efficiency proved in the pastoral and missionary field convinced many members of the Holy Synod of their realism and opportunities.

We believe that responsible rethinking of programs and attitudes presented in the study which was the subject of our research, and of guiding principles regarding the clergy involved in the mission of Lower Danube can contribute to reposition the mission of the Church in its natural framework. Especially that such targets have been sought assiduously – and that to the praise of servants and believers - after 1990. We affirm the need to establish programs in small - but well organized and sustained constantly - at a central ecclesiastical level and to all diocesan centers, monasteries, deaneries and parishes, through which the Church can offer, in return of the many sacrifices already made by believers and members of sacramental hierarchy, spiritual food suitable for the specific problems of place and time. But to impose a closer Church presence related to Romanian people's lives, in relation to which it has always committed defender of its spiritual values.

This goal was followed by the bishops and priests of Lower Danube throughout the twentieth century, using appropriate methods and means adapted to the times. I tried to present them with the belief that they can serve as a model today to the servants employed in preaching the Gospel, as proved by the adoption of some of them as a method of ministry across the Orthodox Romanian Church.

Keywords: Diocese of Lower Danube; christian mission; twentieth century; „Solidarity“ Society; Cadrilater; Orthodox Romanian Church; bishop.

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