

Doctoral Thesis Summary in English

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TITLE: ASPECTS OF THE SERVICE AND MISSION OF THE ORTHODOX
CHURCH IN THE CURRENT SOCIAL CONTEXT

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The work *Aspects of the Service and Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Current Social Context* is composed of four chapters which, in turn, are divided into several subchapters, preceded by an introduction, in which the motivations that underpinned its composition are set out, the objectives that we set out to achieve by carrying out this study, references to the vast sources that we encounter in almost all fields of humanistic research, and a brief presentation of the way in which it was carried out, as well as the ideas debated, so that, at the end of the work, we can synthesize the undertaking carried out in conclusions and reflections. Each chapter also contains conclusions that shed light on the way in which our research has explained its title.

The purpose of man's creation is to deify himself, to participate in the communion of the Holy Trinity, through love, to become " *partakers of the divine nature* " (II Peter 1:4) by grace. Through man, the whole of creation is united with God, fulfilling the purpose for which it exists. Man is the crown of creation, he is the <<connecting ring>> between the created and the Uncreated, and his vocation to be a priest of creation constitutes the basis of his mission to serve the world, to embrace it in his love and to offer it to God, the Creator of all.

Christian mission cannot be understood as an individual or group activity, disconnected from Christ, the Head of the Church. He is the Missionary par excellence, He sends His

servants on mission, He is permanently present in them and in the activity they carry out in the world, with a view to renewing the world and transforming it into the Kingdom of God.

The Christian Church, since the apostolic period, has understood its missionary work as part of its nature, of its reason for being, to fulfill, in Christ, the entrusted mission of bringing the whole world to God. The Church is the actualization and extension of the work of God Himself, which aims at the salvation of the world.

For Orthodox theology, the missionary work of the Church, in the current context of the world, constitutes an essential area from a social, cultural and historical point of view. Due to its rich experience of faith, which continues to widely influence the thinking of the world today, the Church represents a fundamental factor in the rapid changes that human society is going through at the present stage. In order to position itself as correctly as possible with respect to the needs of these general transformations, the Church constantly adjusts its work that it carries out in the world, in today's society, without renouncing the teachings of faith and, at the same time, seeks answers to the objectives and challenges that the world discovers in postmodernity.

In order to be as effective as possible in its mission, the Church has several **objectives** to achieve. One of its objectives, which we will pursue in this work, is represented by the exploration of how the ecclesiastical structure functions in its relationship with the secularized and globalized thinking of the world, which means that the theme of this work will be developed on several levels, such as: religious, cultural, social, etc., to show how the major problems – secularism, religious pluralism or the erosion of traditional values – that cause the transformations of the current world in which we live, can be approached from the perspective of the Church's social doctrine.

An equally significant objective of this research is to present how the Orthodox Church positions itself within the ecumenical dialogue, both interconfessional and towards other religious beliefs and ideas. The Church's vision regarding the answers that Christian traditions can offer, in the context of global conflicts and cultural exchanges, constitutes a necessary aspect of any religious debate in today's society.

The challenges generated by the rapid change of today's world, especially those addressed to younger generations and those in predominantly secularized areas, make the Church, through its uninterrupted activity, identify innovative solutions, through which to reconnect the technological world, from digital media, to the real world, as well as to sensitize the community to the spiritual needs of an increasingly fragmented world.

By treating the theme of the present study in which we have set out to create an X-ray of the Church's ministry and mission, in order to highlight the most significant responses that it offers to the contemporary world picture, we will explore, as we have shown here, the way in which the Church responds to modern challenges while preserving its identity, missionary authenticity and liturgical veracity, in order to keep alive, within the current Christian community, the eschatological perspective in a global context. The presentation of the Church's teachings, practices and social commitments, in relation to the challenges of the current world, sheds light on the future of Orthodoxy and the impact that it can have on today's world.

In the first chapter, called *The Social Service of the Church – an integral part of the mission*, we started by presenting the fundamental landmarks of the Christian mission, in which we showed that the mission is a real, concrete and necessary dimension of the Church, through which God expresses His care for the world, but especially for man, due to the fact that the Son of God accomplishes the salvation of the world by assuming human nature.

From this theological horizon, I have highlighted the perspectives of the social character of the social service of the Church and I have emphasized the purpose of this missionary work, in its empathetic dynamics, through which man discovers Christ in the image of his neighbor, which is why service, as a philanthropic and diaconal dimension, characterizes the very nature of the Church. It is, in fact, the highest spiritual level, in sacrificial love, to which man can be raised, if we look at it in the horizon of Revelation, which is why, in this context, I have exposed the scriptural arguments of diaconal work in the Christian theological space.

The last section of the first chapter, as a corollary of everything presented so far, but also as a foundation on which to build our work going forward, we have consolidated by exposing the theological meanings that Christian philanthropy entails in Orthodox teaching.

The second chapter, *The Christological Dimension of Ecclesial Mission and Service*, is a deepening of the teaching of the faith of the Orthodox Church regarding the relationship between the act of confession and the service of one's fellowmen, with reference to the extension of the liturgical space beyond the boundaries of the place of worship. It is an act that has as its supreme Model of realization Christ, whose divine work is characterized by the resizing of the prophetic works of the Old Testament, which prefigured the Sacrifice on the Cross, in which the Son of God is simultaneously and permanently the same: Christ - the Messiah, the Servant Who Sacrifices Himself.

As such, in our opinion, we considered it necessary to shed as much light as possible on the evangelical image of our Lord Jesus Christ as the supreme paradigm of the Christian

servant and missionary. Because the mission, in itself, is what every believer accomplishes, who tends towards the likeness of Christ's service, or in which Christ Himself serves, as this truth is highlighted by the Holy Apostle Paul, for whom Christ represents the fulfillment of divine justice, in His capacity as High Priest and Sacrifice and, above all, as the source of eternal life for all humanity.

The third chapter, *The Constitutive Elements of the Church's Diaconia and Philanthropy from a Missionary Perspective*, was dedicated to presenting the relationship between the aspects that make up this type of service. Thus, I highlighted both the diaconal and liturgical character of the service, from the perspective of the missionary concept, in the context of the phrase "liturgy after the Liturgy". This fact required the presentation of other missionary concepts from the Christian interconfessional spectrum, such as: *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *leitourgia* or *diaconia*, in order to extract as correctly as possible the constitutive message, full of nuances, of the ecclesial missionary reality.

The approach itself led to the presentation of the relationship between the "Liturgy of the Word" and the "Liturgy of Communion/Eucharist", which in a missionary context once again reveals the importance of the Church's diaconal work, as an expression of justice and social equity, but also as a philanthropic manifestation, by assuming the Church's teachings of faith, as it results from the picture of the New Testament, where it is presented to us as a paradigm of the local community and, more than that, as a constitutive element for the notion of human dignity.

Which naturally led us, we believe, to the creation of the fourth chapter, *The Missionary Service of the Church at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, in which we updated the development of the theme, by articulating it to the current social context.

In this sense, I have presented the secular characteristics of today's world, of which I have insisted on those that I considered to be essential in defining the work and service that the Church has to fulfill. I have therefore analyzed important aspects about secularization, consumerism, de-Christianization and desacralization, as social challenges that the Church assumes through her catechetical activities, offered as an antidote to the rebuilding of the dehumanized structure of the contemporary world.

We also presented the threats to the Church generated by the new paradigm of the world's social organization, threats that tend to assimilate missionary work with secular social ethics, and sometimes create, in the name of society's concern for man, a "humanitarianism without Christ" as an expression of ecclesiastical service.

Therefore, as a dynamic solution, I considered that this research must insist on the missionary idea, which the Church still timidly affirms, that serving the world in general, after the model of Christ, means preaching the theological and economic dimensions as expressions of the nature of the Church and, implicitly, of each Christian believer in particular, as an active member of the Body of Christ.

The conclusions represent a synthesis of what is presented in the work, highlighting each debated theme, in order to make a presentation that edifies the title of the work, as well as the fact that our entire missionary-type investigation, with valences in the essence of Christian Orthodox theology, constitutes, to the same extent, an apologetic enterprise, as well as a missionary work carried out for the purpose of transfiguring the human person, affected by postmodern thinking, through the preaching and living of the eternal teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, Christian diakonia is founded on divine Revelation, having its roots in the Gospel teaching that people's love for God and neighbor is a response to God's eternal love for His creation. The Church's servant mission comes from the example of the sacrifice of our Lord Himself, the High Priest, Who "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

The Christian mission has its foundation and starting point in the eternal communion of the divine persons, in the movement of God's love towards the Son in the Holy Spirit and, through Him, towards the whole world. Therefore, one of the fundamental principles of the Church's mission is the Trinitarian one, which means that the world becomes the Church in Christ, being contained in the love between the persons of the Holy Trinity. According to Orthodox thought, the world is led towards a transformation. The entire universe has been invited to enter the Church, to become the Church of Christ, in order to become the Kingdom of God.

The Church has the duty to bear witness both to those close to her (internal mission) and to those far away (external mission), and to show interest in the entire human being, both on a personal and social level, for the progress of the entire world. Nothing related to human existence is outside the interest of the Orthodox mission. The love of God is poured out, through the servant mission of the Church as the foundation of her existence, over all people, over all creation.

We believe that the image of man finding himself by finding others in the unity of the Church and in the communion of people, of man as creator of himself and as servant and priest of God's creation, of man who becomes richer as he gives more, is a viable image. It is

one that brings God and man together, which can shed a clearer and warmer light on other human concerns, such as those in the society in which we live.

Chapter II highlights that at the center of the Church's mission of service is always **Jesus Christ**, the incarnate Son of God. The mission of the Church is based on Christ. He is the supreme **Model** of service, the divine mission reached its peak, which is why he is the only Model to be followed and fulfilled. Without Christ there is no Church. Christology defines the heart of Christian service and mission. The Church has always connected Christology with ecclesiology, so that Christology has intersected with the history of Christian mission.

Since the Old Testament, Christ-Messiah is *Ebed Yahweh*, the Servant par excellence, the Servant of the Lord, Who took away all the sins of the world (Isaiah 53). The Old Testament prophetic mission is a prefiguration of the Christian mission of Christ.

The famous passage that refers to the mission of the Church in Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-20), is interpreted differently in certain theological circles. In the different branches of Protestantism there are reluctances, even denials, regarding the historicity of the command to preach, arguing that this commission is simply a creation of the early Church, and does not come from Christ Himself, an idea that does not stand, since there are many other biblical texts (for example: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" - John 20:21) that clearly show the Christian origin of this verse and of the idea itself of preaching.

In contemporary theology, much is said about *the Missio Dei*, understood as the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, an understanding that has been extended to the idea that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have sent the Church into the world. Most contemporary theologians have come to understand this phrase better and, consequently, to embrace it. As far as Orthodox theology is concerned, the mission of the Church is indeed based on *the Missio Dei*, the movement of the Father's love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit, and, through Him, for the whole world. This is why the main purpose of the Church's mission is not to propagate intellectual convictions or moral commandments, but to transmit the life of communion in God, or, in other words, to draw all people to communion with the Holy Trinity.

The high Christological character of Pauline theology regarding Christ as the Image of God the Father fully reflects the fact that humanity receives eternal life from God through Christ. The Apostle Paul shows that Christ is the Messiah because He is the One Who rose. *The resurrection of Christ* is the basis of the universality of His messianic and missionary

work with an eschatological character, Christ being everything: Righteousness and Head of His Church, High Priest and Sacrifice, the eternal Life of humanity.

The church plays a multifaceted role in society, its primary function being the spiritual and moral guidance of people. However, its influence extends beyond religious aspects, also presenting social and ethical dimensions.

The New Testament urges us to model our personal and community lives after the way Christ bent over the poor and marginalized, in such a way that if someone serves by sacrificing himself for his neighbor, he does not assume this care because it generates benefits for him, but because the person who needs help is made in the image of God. All Christians form the "people of God", each having, as a member of the Body of Christ - the Church, a mission to fulfill towards his neighbor.

A detailed analysis of the phrase "*liturgy after the Liturgy*" highlights the fact that by receiving the Holy Eucharist, which is the food of those who proclaim Christ, believers become actors of the mission, preaching Christ to others. In this way, for those who participate in the Liturgy, the Eucharist must not only remain an interior work of prayer, which gives birth to a pious inner state, but must also call and send the faithful into the world, for those who need the help of Christ. The sending of Christians as witnesses of the transforming love of God and His Kingdom has practical consequences, because *all life must be transformed into a Liturgy*.

Just as mission is an essential part of the Church, so diakonia is part of the very nature of the Church and, therefore, must be part of church life. Through her works, the Church bears witness to the Kingdom of God. However, it is not enough to just talk about the Kingdom of God, we must actively engage in its realization. Believers understand that "worship (*latreia/leitourgia*) is inextricably linked to witness (*martyria*), service (*diakonia*) and fellowship (*koinonia*)". These form a unified whole, the Church being the existential reality through which both the cosmos and man (therefore the integral creation) fulfill their eschatological meaning.

Therefore, *there can be no Church without diakonia*. The Church plays a significant role in the formation of social values and in the promotion of directions that give *meaning* to the world in general and to each person in particular. In Orthodox teaching, philanthropy has a fundamental theological and missionary value, because through its performance the divine love through which man is elevated to salvation is evident. Whether through personal charity or at the parish level, or through well-organized institutions, at the national level, for the care

of those in need and trouble, the Orthodox Church is a witness to the truth that every human person is an icon of Christ.

Chapter IV therefore deals with aspects of the Church's mission in contemporary society, at the beginning of the 21st century, also proposing solutions to various problems faced by both the Church itself and the world as a whole.

Founded on the revelation of God, Christian Orthodox ethics, unlike other ideologies, is not utopian. Because divine revelation, through its perennial principles, offers answers to the great turmoil of all kinds in today's postmodern society and, at the same time, offers solutions to the new challenges that arise and may arise from now on. The discourse of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world must become much more vocal, clearer, but also more applied to the way of life in the third millennium, because the Church has something to offer. She holds an inexhaustible treasure, which she is obliged to give to others, not to selfishly keep it only for herself. And this treasure is Christ, the Savior of the world and the Giver of eternal and happy life.

Orthodoxy must re-articulate itself with today's culture in order to shake history from the utopias it has created. Whether we are talking about secularization and consumerism, about the de-Christianization and desacralization of the world, about pluralism, post-postmodernism or other -isms, the Church's answer is always the same: Christ. It must tell, in its own way, the present and future man how to encounter Christ, from Whom to learn to embrace the world in which he lives, as it is, with all its problems. The Church is and remains a major global actor, innovator and agent of change, but a change towards Christ as the true God, with all the consequences that flow from this.

Nowadays, for many reasons, paradoxically perhaps, the religious phenomenon has become increasingly present in modern post-secular societies. Although it is generally rejected, the religious phenomenon (in our case, Christian theology) becomes a dialogue partner and an active presence in the public sphere. Pluralism has become a fundamental characteristic of postmodernity. A pluralism that urges post-secularization to facilitate the conditional reintroduction of the religious element into the public universe. For this, however, it is necessary to articulate the formative catechetical dimension of the Church, as an antidote to the dehumanization of contemporary man, and a social assistance of the Church, as a transposition of the confessional word into a deed with soteriological value, because *preaching means more than just saying words*. The development of education, the practices of philanthropy and solidarity, the idea of equality between people, the development of democratic values, and the promotion of human rights are just a few major examples through

which the missionary work of the Church, from our point of view, through a correct interpretation of God's will, has changed and will change the world forever.

Today's world is a world in constant movement, change, becoming, degradation, oscillation, fear, threat or uncertainty. The theoretical ideal is constantly confronted with the concrete, often fallen, but which awaits clear, correct answers and effectively applied in society and in the life of each one, respecting, of course, personal freedom, but praying for everyone. No matter how confused it may be, the world remains God's, and the Saints pray for the entire creation (Saint Isaac the Syrian, Saint Silouan the Athonite, etc.)

The Church's service to the world takes various forms: religious education, concrete assistance to the poor, support for diaspora communities, the effort to maintain peace, support for religious-moral and spiritual values among people, concern regarding euthanasia, contraception, terrorism, globalism, sterile nationalisms, extremism, war, human or organ trafficking, social inequalities, maintaining a purpose in life - the acquisition of eternal and happy life, the testimony of authentic Christians through a life worthy of the name Christian, etc., all of these and others represent problems-challenges of the current and future world and await solutions from Christianity as a whole.

The missionary work of the Church is, therefore, the work of all believers as long as it is based on the liturgical universe through which Christ manifests Himself as a real presence in the world. Therefore, the missionary work of the Church belongs to all Christians, and not just to some institutions or persons of the Church. Consequently, the missionary purpose of the Church must be the clear expression of the Church's teaching, reflected in all her works, as the unique image of Christ that all Christians bear to the same extent. The unity and uniqueness of the Church's missionary work results from her unique purpose of preaching Christ to all nations to the ends of the earth, by word and deed, in order to give everyone the divine light. Because the light of Christ is in itself missionary. And it is missionary because it gives itself continuously without ever diminishing. And it does not diminish because it springs from God, the One who impartially values everything in and from the world, so that the world in turn may illuminate God for all creation.

In the current social context, the Church means service and communion, with the aim of uniting people among themselves and, ultimately, all humanity, with God, in love. In achieving this future reality, the missionary role of the Church is represented by the relationship that it must build between its dogmatic-liturgical and spiritual aspect, and the horizon of missionary activities, as expressions of the Eucharistic community. In the liturgical context, the deacon is the ferment that gathers and binds the community of believers around

prayer and good deeds, which is why his role is to distribute the gifts of the community to those in communion. Through its involvement and dedication, the Church's diakonia means, in synthesis, mutual service between fellow humans. Diakonia as service to neighbor is the extension of the service of the entire human community, and the Model always remains Jesus Christ - the Son of God incarnate.

The more God's love envelops us, the more we contribute to the realization of divine communion. After sharing in the Holy Mysteries, the faithful pray for the whole world, as well as for all those who have fallen asleep with the hope of the Resurrection and eternal life, which shows that, in Orthodox liturgical geography, diakonia is a state of permanent prayer, an experience of the Kingdom that will be, which we already live in this world. The Eucharist is, therefore, the greatest experience of love that man experiences in his relationship with God, which is why It represents in fact a real missionary work, with a diaconal character, which the Christian Liturgy carries out in the most complete way, as an expression of the Body of Christ - the Church.

Pauline Christology, in which the Apostle to the Gentiles reveals to the world the Image of God through the incarnation of the Logos, fully highlights how the humanity of the world is a direct and total beneficiary of the eternal life of God, through its immortalization by Christ. Man, created in the image of God, acquires likeness to Him through the incarnation of the Son of God. There is therefore an *eikōn* that is reflected from the icon of Christ in the world, from which the world takes its divine existence.

The Church's teaching on the "*imago Dei*" or "*eikon tou Theou*" articulates, through the Church's missionary work, the knowledge of God with entering into communion with God, in love. Therefore, every time we refer to the "*imago Dei*" as the foundation of the Church's missionary service, we are in fact actively confessing and preaching the Christian teaching of the Incarnation.

The Orthodox Church has always considered it her duty to preach the Incarnate Word, because she confesses the act of incarnation as the perfect expression of the Church's philanthropy. Saint Basil the Great is remembered by the Church, to this day, as a perfect model of a philanthropist. Service to one's neighbor, as service to Christ Himself, also represents for the world today a model of Christian philanthropy worthy of imitation, because service to Christ as service to one's neighbor, to one's fellow men, does not mean only giving from what one has gathered, or caring for those who need help, but is a complex work, which begins with self-sacrifice, for the consolation and relief of the physical and spiritual suffering of the entire world. Service according to the model of service to Christ means the restoration

of the image of God in man, up to the restoration of the dignity that God bestowed upon him through His creative act.

The missionary service of the Church, therefore, in its essence, must be her sacrifice for the help and rehabilitation of the poor and suffering, the marginalized and forgotten, as an act of restoring human dignity. The missionary work of the Church is fully realized when each of her faithful participates in and fully assumes the Passion of Christ. It is about the holy celebration of the encounter in light between God and man, in which heaven and earth celebrate the restoration of human dignity, and not only a rescue of it from the slavery of the shadows of darkness.

Implementing a social doctrine of the Church, in the context of the contemporary world, means assuming the fight against all types of aggression and violence, fighting against all structures that generate social, but also spiritual poverty, and engaging in social activities that deal with the most serious suffering and injustices in society. An openness to dialogue is necessary, as well as a deepening and awareness of the causes that give rise to contemporary crises so that, as much as possible, the Church can become the engine that sets in motion the healing of humanity and the rediscovery of a meaning in life.

We thus understand that the missionary work, to which the Church must articulate Christ, at the beginning of the third millennium, although it is the result of challenges that the world has never encountered before, in its essence remains the same, that is, the Church must continue to preach *Christ as the Light of the world*, in order to remove from the world the darkness generated by ignorance, indolence and all the other existential problems of the world in which we live today, problems that never cease to take possession of the human soul. The permanent goal of Orthodox theology is *the transfiguration of creation*, worshipping it to its Creator, Who became man, out of love for people, so that the world may become transparent to the Spirit of Christ and attain eternal and happy life.

So, can the complex and profound theology of the Orthodox Church constitute an answer to the problems of today's society? The answer is categorically affirmative. We just need to rediscover the way of thinking of the Saints, to feel what we theoretically learn, to empathize with all people and to spread in society, through our way of being good Christians, the viable and true alternative of holiness, offering authentic **models** to a world in spiritual drift, but also a clear **goal**, namely eternal and happy life, in the love of the Most Holy Trinity.