

REDISCOVERING THE CHRISTIAN IDENTITY WITHIN THE ORTHODOX CULT*

DRD. ANDREI GORBĂNESCU**

Abstract: Man is supreme creation of God, called to reach the likeness of His Creator. Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism man receives the garment of light of divine grace and the seal of Christian identity. Through Christian identity, man is a confessor of the death and Resurrection of Christ. The church is the theandric institution in which man has a personal encounter with Savior Christ. The Holy Sacraments are invisible works through which the invisible divine grace is shared with men. Each Holy Sacrament is a renewal and strengthening of the Christian identity that man has since Baptism.

Keywords: identity, mission, Orthodoxy, confession

THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CULT AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR PRESERVING AND AFFIRMING THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The Christian cult is the living dialogue of man with God through which an exchange of gifts between the Creator and His creature takes place. Generally cult stands for: „any form or religious act meant to relate man with God expressing on one hand the honoring or respect towards his God and on the other mediating the sanctifying of man or the sharing of God’s charisma”¹.

God pours His rich grace upon the entire creation and man is being filled through the Church space with all the humanity of Christ. From a point of view of its functions, the cult is that thing which helps man to get back on his track to the Kingdom of God. The goal of the Orthodox cult is to bring man closer to God through His descent and the elevation of man towards infinity. The 4th century meant a new stage in the life of the Church due to the freedom granted to Christianity, a turning point in the history of the Christian cult. From the point of view of the role of the Christian Orthodox cult within the Orthodox Church one has to stress that: “the fundamental and characteristic expression of its life and missi-

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** Doctorand, Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă „Andrei Șaguna”, Sibiu, email: andreigorbanescu@yahoo.com

¹ Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica generală. Noțiuni de artă bisericească, arhitectură și pictură creștină*, ediția a III-a, îngrijită de Pr. Eugen Drăgoi, Editura Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, Galați, 2002, p. 41.

on”². For the entire Orthodoxy the cult represents: “the expression of the living faith of the Church and at the same time the mystic event where the Word of God meets the answer of humanity”³. The Word of God is always present and augurs well for the salvation of mankind. The soteriological journey of each man and every people is a way to affirm the faith and inner feelings.

Rediscovering the Christian identity within the Orthodox cult is a process of integrating and rediscovering the Christian dignity. In order for this to become possible man has to become aware of what to truly be a Christian means. To truly be a Christian means love and self sacrifice until death. In the Epistle to Diognetus, Chapter V the traits of a true Christian are presented:

“They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life.(...) they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour”⁴.

The Christian identity has to be experienced and witnessed regardless of the social framework or context. To truly be a Christian presupposes a total dedication to God, every deed, gesture of ours has to be related to God. The Christian identity is acquired through the means of the Holy Mystery of the Baptism as a first defining step of the Christian life but this is defined in a real theological school of love, dedication and humbleness which is the Christian Orthodox cult.

A distinctive feature of the Christian Orthodox cult is that the prayers or the dialog of man with God takes place the most times communally - in the name of a unitary ego. This form of unity is specific to Orthodoxy and grants it a well deserved status of witness of a Christian identity grounded on love and dedication. Cultic celebration presupposes a communion whose Leader is Christ the Saviour in an invisible fashion.

The entire divine cult of the Orthodox Church is an anamnesis of the central events in the history of Christianity. The communion to which all the members of the Church are called is an essential condition of rediscovering the Christian identity. The liturgical texts stress the importance of the profession of the Orthodox Christian Faith And give us with a mouth and a heart to glorify and to hymn the Your most honorable and most honest Name.

The Orthodox Church has to cultivate and maintain the liturgical and sacramental work as a central part in the missionary work. The mission of the Church is related to the believers, cult and their possibility to integrate within the limits imposed by Christianity. The relationship between the Orthodox Christian cult and the mission of the Church is very important. Cult: „It is the goal of the mission because in

² Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol I, ediția a II a, E.I.B.M.B.OR, București, 1996, p. 47.

³ Olivier CLEMENT, *Biserica Ortodoxă*, trad. Alin Ionescu, Editura Teora, București, 2000, p. 109.

⁴ *** , *Epistola către Diognet*, în *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, E.I.B.M.B.O.R, București, 1979, p. 340.

the mission our objective is to bring peoples to participate in the incandescent joy of the glory of God. The goal of the mission is the joy of mankind in the glory of God”⁵.

The Romanian people has always been linked to the Church and it has always lived its life according to the liturgical time. The ethnogenesis of the Romanian people is:

„the work of inaugurating the Kingdom of God on the ancestral land, which is prepared by the announcement of the Gospel of Resurrection and is realized sacramentally by the Initiation Mysteries, Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist which are going to be followed by the Mystery of the Marriage as a crowning of those before, if we think of what the ethnic reality itself is meant to signify”⁶.

The most beautiful modality of witnessing and strengthening the Orthodox Christian identity within the ancestral Church is the Divine Liturgy which is performed in the churches of the eparchy and not only there with the tricolour flag flying as a proof of the struggle for existence.

In this holy service the greatest Mystery of the love of God towards humankind is performed: “the union of God with people through His Incarnation, through His godly teachings, through passion, death, burial and Resurrection - the mystery of renewal and godliness of mankind”⁷. The prayers and communion which appear in the Holy Liturgy cross the sky and makes man a part of the eternity’s feast to which we are called every Sunday.

The Christian identity is fundamental in an active participation to the cult of the Church and Eucharistic union which offer the spiritual immortality. The Holy Liturgy has a special importance for every human being. This is like a shield and a response to countless disappointments and oppressions in society. This is a treasure of God’s eternal love and source of unity between humans and with God.

The services of the Orthodox Church, every one of them puts us in a living relationship to Jesus Christ, with the entire triumphant Church and unites us in our thoughts by means of prayer. This union is refreshed through participation in any Holy Liturgy in which we have to participate as Christians.

THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE COUNTIES OF HARGHITA AND COVASNA

The Orthodox Christianity is the fulcrum and spiritual strengthening point in the regions of Covasna and Harghita, an area in the heart of Romania which in history had its share of hardship and oppression. The situation of Orthodox Romanians in these counties presents real interest for the proposed academic research and a

⁵ John PIPER, *Let the Nations be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pp. 35-36.

⁶ Pr. Ilie MOLDOVAN, *În Hristos și în Biserică, Iubirea Euharistică generatoare de viață și destin românesc*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2018, p. 63.

⁷ SFÂNTUL IOAN DE KRONSTADT, *Liturghia - cerul pe pământ. Cugetări mistice despre Biserică și cultul divin ortodox*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2002, p. 168.

supplementary reason to stress the importance of the Orthodox Christian identity and confession.

The distinctive note of the region of Covasna and Harghita is highlighted by the demographic and social status of the Romanians who are here a minority, disadvantaged and most of the times marginalized by the ethnic majority. Regarding this we find out the following:

„The paradox which the Romanians experience in Covasna and Harghita is in fact a real drama although they are a part in the Romanian people, and the territory where they live is a piece of Romania, they are not seen by the Hungarian autocrats in the regional, town and county administrations as an integral and legal part in the taking of decisions and tackling of the problems of the communities in which they live”⁸.

The situation of the Romanians in this territory is a difficult one and suffers from the oppression of the society.

In the current context the situation of the minority Romanians in the counties of Covasna and Harghita is a difficult one and presupposes a different approach according to the case and considering the problems encountered. The Orthodoxy is the fundamental axis around which the Romanian nation has been preserved.⁹ The Orthodox Christianity has been experienced and confessed in this area under the domination of barriers and oppression and by their situation as a minority. The eparchy of Covasna and Harghita administers a multi-confessional region in which Orthodoxy is in minority.

The wish to unify and glorify God of the Romanians who are a minority in the above mentioned counties led them to militate for the establishment of the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita, their wish became reality in the year 1994. The establishment of this eparchy was for the Orthodox Church a glimmer of hope and a reason to strengthen the faith.

The Christian identity is closely linked the national and cultural identity, these were the beliefs which dominated the hearts glowing with the love for God of Romanians in the intra-carpathian arch. The Orthodox cult is the one which unites the Romanians here and gives them the courage to confess and truly live the divine service and the evangelical message. His Eminence Father Ioan said that: „*The great battles were not on the battlegrounds but in the conscience of a man and of a nation*”¹⁰. The conscience of a man is educated within the Church. The House of God is the cradle where man

⁸ Ioan LĂCĂTUȘU, *Structuri entice și confesionale în județele Covasna și Harghita*, Editura Universității Petru Maior, Târgu Mureș, 2008, pp. 97-90.

⁹ Ioan LĂCĂTUȘU, Erich-Mihail BROANĂR, *Repere identitare românești din județele Covasna și Harghita*, Ediția a II a, Editura Eurocarpatica, Sfântul Gheorghe, 2019, p. 173.

¹⁰ IPS IOAN, Mitropolitul Banatului, *Cultura -candela neamului*, în volumul *Slujire și mărturisire Episcopia Ortodoxă a Covasnei și Harghitei- un sfert de veac de misiune și slujire pastorală*, volum coordonat de Prea Sfințitul Andrei, Episcopul Covasnei și Harghitei, Ediția îngrijită de Pr.Dr. Laurențiu-Gabriel Penciu și Dr. Ioan Lăcătușu, Editura Grai Românesc, Miercurea Ciuc, 2020, pp. 31-32.

goes in in order to rest his soul and sharpen his spiritual senses and in order to keep his conscience awake.

The Orthodox Romanians in the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita have always been guided by the love towards the fatherland and the Church, these have been the paths on which they have overcome the times. From a point of view of the history of the Orthodox Church the region of Transylvania has always been put to test and oppressed by the times. The Orthodox christianity has been the unifying and stability factor of the Romanians in this region. The Romanians have always been united in the name of faith and in the porch of the Church: „they have experienced Christianity itself as their own unity and the Romanian Christianity has felt as an actual unity within the Romanian people”¹¹.

A special role in the development of the Orthodox Christian identity in this region belonged to the hierarchs who were the spiritual fathers of people and priests here. The portrait of the hierarchs who preached the evangelical word in the Mountainous Eparchy are models of authentic Romanian spirits and love for their people. The first Bishop of the Eparchy, IPS Ioan Selejean, is a model of the monk who loves his people and fatherland. His personality was a light which crossed the darkness of the obstacles create by the ethnic majority. The authentic Romanian language of His Eminence Ioan was an additional reason for drawing the faithful to the services of the Church in order to feel from the sermon of the hierarch the beauty of the Orthodoxy and the love for the country trully embraced.

Considered by many as a teacher of the Romanian tongue IPS Ioan was the one who took the appearance of an: „artist of the word, a painter and a creator of images which coat the religious notions and the surrounding realities in poetic words”¹². His mission lasts in time through the places of worship built as proof of the Orthodox Christian identity in this region, the cultural institution related to Orthodoxy and not last the ministers of the holy altars who received from his hand the grace of the Holy Spirit in order to confess with time and without time the Romanian Orthodoxy in the Mountainous Eparchy.

During the reign of His Eminence Ioan approximately 140 Churches, 4 military chapels, 2 school chapels were built, 67 parish houses were repaired, 58 churches were painted and repainted. These actions were meant to develop the capacity of the people to love each other and to experience the Orthodox cult through the contribution of everyone to the embellishment of the Orthodox heritage in this area.

The mission of the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita continues towards perfection through the missionary pastoral and spiritual activity of His Eminence Father Andrei, worthy successor in the superior position in those regions. The diplomacy and pasto-

¹¹ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Liturghia și unitatea religioasă a poporului român*, în *Reflecții despre Spiritualitatea poporului român*, Editura Basilica, București, 2018, p. 324.

¹² Prof. Dr. Lumița CORNEA, *Înaltpreasfințitul Ioan și graiul românesc*, în vol *Slujire și mărturisire* Episcopia Covasnei și Harghitei un sfert de veac de misiune și slujire pastorală, Ediția îngrijită de Pr. Dr. Laurențiu Penciu și Prof. Dr. Ioan Lăcătușu, Editura Grai Românesc, Miercurea Ciuc, 2020, p.126.

ral finesse of the hierarch are at present the only guides through which the clergy and the lay people keep the living memory of the predecessors and bear in their souls the Orthodox prayer. With the words of the Holy Hierarch Andrei Șaguna in mind *Be at peace, get along together well, don't squabble*, the mission of the present day's hierarch emerges around peace and love towards God and fellowmen.

The most beautiful way to confess and strengthen the Orthodox Christian identity in the ancestral Church is the Holy Liturgy which is performed in the churches of the eparchy and not only there with the tricolour flag flown as a proof of the fight and struggle for existence.

The mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita is not exactly an easy one and requires much patience and love towards God and fellowmen in order to teach people to live Orthodoxy and the love for nation in a dignified way. The liturgical manifestations have a very important role in this. The services of the Church are adorned with the beautiful Romanian language which gives eternity but also by the homilies of the clergy have the power to change mentalities and build up souls.

The confession of the Christian faith is a proof of love to God but also to the country. The Orthodox Christianity experienced and confessed by the people has many forms:

„The liturgy, the holy days, fasting, which are contained by the old and unchanged teachings of the Holy Fathers, is the Christianity celebrated and experienced by the people, is the Christianity which penetrated the entire being of people, shaped its life, gave it a rhythm and placed it in a spiritual horizon, enlightened it with a meaning”¹³.

The confession of Orthodox Christian faith by means of religious chants has been most of the time associated with elements of folk singing, and this gave it a sacred beauty and purity. The Holy Mystery of Eucharist is the one which transfigures mankind and the entire creation. The simple and authentic Romanian unites with God within the cult and an inner change takes place on any encounter with the Creator. Herein the Father Stăniloae said: „At the liturgy the Romanian peasant learnt to see the world with different eyes, to see it bathed in godly shining, full of the mystery of the divine presence of Tabor light”¹⁴.

The holiday clothes of the authentic Romanian was the white clean attire, especially prepared for the participation in the Holy Liturgy. The purity of the clothes of the man who comes to the divine service symbolizes the pristine clothes of the Baptism, the attire of his Christian identity which he received as a sign of the infinite love of God to man.

¹³ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Liturghia și unitatea religioasă...*, p. 329.

¹⁴ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Liturghia și unitatea religioasă...*, p. 336.

THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CULT IN A MULTICONFESSIOAL EPARCHY

The Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita is an island of Orthodoxy in a sea of confessions. This has the role to support the Romanians in this region and offer them moral and spiritual support. The social, economic and political pressure are obstacles to the development of the Orthodox identity in this region. The Romanians, who are a minority here, have to resist the pressure of the majority in order to experience their faith. The mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church in this region is difficult.

A peculiarity through which the Church contributes to the strengthening and re-discovering of the Christian identity is linked to the *liturgical language*. This notion refers to the journey of the message of the Church to the heart of man. The Church has the mission to preach the Gospel to all the peoples with the words of the Saviour and in an intelligible manner for everybody. The Romanian language is a fundamental element and integral part of the cultural and national identity. The national language is a way to reveal the divine message.

One of the problems of the Romanians in this region from the point of view of the tackled subject is the frequency and intensity of the participation in worship. As a consequence of the discussions with the representatives of the Orthodox clergy I admit that the Romanians in this region are close to the Church and try to be within the Church like a real family. Another category of believers are those who have mixed families. The problem of the mixed families is linked to the ethnic identity. In the areas where the majority of the population is Hungarian, the Romanian families are assimilated and lose the deep ethnic Romanian element.

The frequency of the participation in worship according to the received information varies but most of the time it decreases because of the assimilation by the ethnic majority. As regards the crisis of the Romanian identity I quote the following:

„The loss of the identity belongs to the phenomenon of identity crisis. As a consequence the loss of the ethnic identity manifests itself - as an intermediate phase - through the crisis of ethnic identity, in the sense that the individual for example declares himself as a Romanian, but does not know the Romanian language anymore and knows only the close Romanian relatives”¹⁵.

The frequency of the participation to the divine services varies and is characteristic for each individual area.

Another important thing worthy to be highlighted in this context is linked to the restraints and pressures which block the participation in worship. As regards this one has to stress that in the case of the clergy in this eparchy, the salaries are paid entirely by the state. Considering that the central and regional authorities belong to the ethnic majority in the above mentioned region, the mission of the Orthodox Church is made difficult. The collaboration of the local hierarch with the regional authorities is a diplomatic one and fully aware of the mission which he has.

¹⁵ Ioan LĂCĂTUȘU, *Structuri etnice...*, p. 41.

The people in this region have the responsibility to confess their Romanian ethnic orientation and their Orthodoxy. The constraints which hinder the participation in worship are linked most times to the economic and administrative matters. The economic problems are related to the money that the Eparchy needs in order to renovate, remake the paintings at the old churches or to the concession of land for the building of Orthodox churches. These action must be approved by the central regional authorities, and that means a close collaboration between the Eparchy Centrum and the authorities.

The participation in worship in the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita involves in my opinion more than in other parts of Romania. I say this because the wish of the Orthodox Romanians to build a church of their own, the wish to embellish all these and to have a spiritual leader presupposes a participation outside the walls of the church in the construction of the confessing Church in a cult of brotherly love.

Rediscovering the identity through the Orthodox Christian cult in the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita presupposes beyond the things mentioned above also the involvement of the clergy who is directly responsible for this. The priests in this region trully confess and live the Orthodoxy but also the Romanianism.

From the reports of the eparchial gatherings of the years 2017, 2018 to be found in the magazine *Grai românesc* we have the following statistic

Nr crt	YEAR 2017	STATISTICAL VALUE
1	Parishes	125
2	Total number of priests	105
3	Military priests	4
4	Hospital priests	3
5	Parish priests	88
6	Missionary priests	6
7	Retired priests	6
8	Deacons	3
9	Hieromonks	3 ordained
10	Hierodeacon	2 ordained

Nr crt	YEAR 2018	STATISTICAL VALUE
1	Parishes	125
2	Total number of priests	105
3	Military priests	4

4	Hospital priests	4
5	Parish priests	87
6	Missionary priests	3
7	Retired priests	12
8	Deacons	4

The above tables indicate that from a church administration point of view the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita gives spiritual support to all the Orthodox parishes in the region. The monastery life is also an important factor in the modalities of manifestation of the cult. The monasteries in the eparchy are those which contribute to preserving the prayer spirit but also to the embellishment of the churches. There are monasteries in which the iconostase, icons, priest clothes are made - Izvorul Mureşului

The Christian Orthodox identity is preserved in the Eparchy of Covasna and Harghita through each Orthodox Romanian who preserves the Romanian traditions and customs. The mission of the Church in this region is not at all easy but is a confession symbol in time and outside it of the values of the Romanian Orthodoxy.