

## **Mission in an Orthodox Christian context: witnessing Christ as pastoral responsibility**

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### **1. Orthodoxy and mission in Eastern Europe**

Telling Orthodox believers ‘to do mission’ means little to them: they would only grasp ‘doing/fulfilling ecclesiastical tasks’. Because it is the church community (the ecclesiastical body) that tells them what tasks they must fulfil in order to acquire their own salvation and to help others to come to salvation. This implies the understanding that mission has never been well developed in the Orthodox church and that Orthodoxy has never been interested in mission and has always paid special attention to the salvific role of the church in her unity with the source of salvation – the Lord Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>. Thus the Orthodox church developed the so called ‘internal’ mission which in actual fact meant building the ecclesiastical body and strengthening each believer in their strict observing the ecclesiastical discipline (complete humbleness, prayer, worship, fasting, strict keeping to the teaching of the church, deeds of mercy, etc.) which would lead the believers on the path to salvation. It was only a recent trend that the Orthodox churches in some countries started their social activity, and missionary activity as part of the social one. Affirming that the decades of communism (and the five centuries of Ottoman yoke in some of the Orthodox countries) prevented the churches from fulfilling their social tasks seems not true because even in times of freedom and relative concordance between state and church they nevertheless did not pay much attention to social issues and to mission as well.

Only the changes in end-1980s made it possible for the Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe to see period of revival and growth. The first few years saw the churches struggling and claiming for their property to be given back by the state in order to restore (and build new) church buildings, monasteries and other ecclesiastical facilities. After this initial ‘revival’, the churches started restoring their teaching activity and social ministry while the worshipping ministry started earlier, immediately after the changes took place. In almost all so called ‘Orthodox’ countries in Eastern Europe (to mention some of them: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Georgia, etc.) the churches were filled with people and the Church as a whole grew rapidly. Then in the next several years the enthusiasm diminished and in the church remained mostly the believers who were strengthened in their faith and their Christian life. Property, to a large extent, was given back to the churches and this allowed them to undertake more seriously social issues, especially as the churches gathered power and resources.

But it was not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the churches in this part of Europe could focus on some social issues, and it was first of all the Russian Orthodox church (ROC) that

seriously and widely undertook social ministry. The other Orthodox churches only proclaimed social activity as a priority of their ministry in few lines in documents and in respective Holy Synod's decisions but they could not adopt regular and well-grounded and efficient way of social activity (though today good examples can be given in Ukraine, Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria). The period between 1990 and 2000 gave ROC enough strength and power to allow her undertake wide-spread social activity, the foundation of which was formulated in the 'Basics of the social conception of the Russian Orthodox church', adopted at a Holy Archbishops' Council in August 2000 and put into practice immediately after that<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the common social task and responsibilities, the document also defined what social activity in connection with the mission of the church could be undertaken and what ROC was expected to fulfil in the Russian society. In fact, some of this document's definitions came from earlier documents on mission which were developed within ROC.

## **2. Seeking revival of missionary activity**

It may sound strange to affirm that a new missionary movement of modern type can appear within the Orthodoxy but this is what happened in mid-90s of 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Russian Orthodox church undertook vast missionary activities on its territory. The Missionary Department of ROC was established in end-1995 and the Russian Orthodox church initiated a new stage in missionary practice and missionary theology. We should note that ROC first started practically with mission and only then tried to theologially formulate what Orthodox mission was. It appeared that the theology lying behind the practical mission fully corresponded with the teaching of the Holy Fathers and the modern Orthodox theological research in Orthodox mission. This means that the ROC's missionary activity confirmed again the true understanding of mission as interpreted and practiced in the Orthodox church for centuries, though it has never been called 'mission' but 'ecclesiastical discipline' and 'ecclesiastical tasks', and simply witnessing.

An earlier research on the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox church<sup>3</sup> showed that three important documents appeared to theologially define the missionary practice which already had been on stream in ROC: the Concept of 1995, the Report of 2004 and the Concept of 2005<sup>4</sup>. The last of the three documents summarised the experience ROC had acquired during the ten-year period of intensive missionary activity between 1995 and 2005 and formulated the ROC's vision on her mission for the period 2005-2010. The document appeared in April 2005 and was immediately spread to dioceses and churches to urge them to follow its definitions and at the same time to get feedback from the church leaders so that the document be improved and be in concordance with all

previous ROC's documents and decisions, first of all with the 'Basics of the social conception of the Russian Orthodox church'.

For about two years the church leaders at dioceses and at parishes have been considering and discussing the document. Only in April 2007 the final edition of Concept 2005 appeared and it was immediately spread to dioceses for practical implementation. Not that the missionary activity had stopped or was not carried out at full at that time but the document now required that its theological considerations be put into practice in each of the dioceses and in each of the parishes of the Russian Orthodox church. The ten-year period of ROC's mission between 1995 and 2005 showed missionary activity mainly carried out by clergy and seminary students from Belgorod region. It is true that the missionary activity embraced vast territories in Siberia and Russia's Far East, not only the 'European' ROC's dioceses, but nevertheless only a small number of believers and church leaders were involved in mission as fulfilled by the missionary department of the Russian church. This department undertook a wide discussion process where Concept 2005 was considered and hotly discussed in many diocesan centres and parishes: between April 2005 and end-2008, more than thirty presentations and discussions of Concept 2005 were carried out. This activity aimed not only at getting feedback but also at inspiring the believers to 'go and make disciples'. What is the meaning of 'going and making disciples' as understood by Concept 2005 and by the Russian Orthodox church as a whole? It is exactly as exposed in the gospel and nothing more. It is the meaning of mission which Christianity has been carrying out for centuries. It is really a meaning of 'forming and strengthening God's people'. Nevertheless, the specific circumstances of a Church, or a country, or a territory which 'sends-out' missionaries, always attributes specific meaning to the understanding of the Great Commission. And this is the case of the 'Russian' mission: it reflects a specific Russian Orthodox (widely based on all-Orthodox) approach to mission and to proclaiming the gospel.

### **3. Second missionary concept of mission**

The vast missionary activity of ROC in the period between 1995 and 2005 naturally ended with appearing another missionary document to summarise the experience gained during the ten years of mission and to point out the new challenges the Orthodox church faces in the new millennium. The new Concept on mission that appeared in April 2005 (and that defined the main goals of mission up to 2010) pointed three main areas of consideration when forming the theology of mission: the goals and tasks of mission today, the forms and methods of mission and the main directions of missionary service today.

a) Goals and tasks of mission.

Concept 2005 starts with a preamble which defines the ground of mission: 'the mission of the Orthodox church aims at salvation of every human being'. This foundation requires that 'missionaries deeply realise that their activity is of big importance for the church and humanity' and that 'every Orthodox believer is responsible before God, the church and his/her conscience as to proclaiming the Good News to every nation'. The conclusion to this affirmation is almost indispensable: 'all the faithful children of the Orthodox church should take the path of Orthodox Christian witnessing'. In this way the document's preamble does not define what mission is but clearly says how mission is understood from an Orthodox point of view.

In the first part of the document ('Goals and Tasks of the Modern Mission'), it is clearly defined what mission is: 'it is the fulfilment of the Great Commission of Christ: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature' (Mk. 16:15). Preaching the Gospel brings the ultimate goal of mission, 'theosis of the whole of creation'. Theosis, or divinisation, in Orthodox understanding means the path to salvation and the spiritual struggle to achieve salvation. It does not simply mean divinisation in itself (which is not possible for humans in this life). The ultimate goal of mission is closely connected with the purpose of mission.

'In the Orthodox understanding, the purpose of mission can be rightly grasped only if we consider the three important theological principles of being a Christian: soteriological, ecclesiastical and eschatological'.<sup>5</sup> Out of these notions, no right understanding of the Christian mission from an Orthodox perspective could be reached. Without understanding what the soteriological principle means in the lives of the believers, no possible idea could explain the ardent wish for salvation of the ordinary Orthodox faithful Christians in the churches. 'Without understanding the ecclesiastical structure of the Church – its hierarchical, sacramental and liturgical constitution'<sup>6</sup> – no proper comprehension of the sacrificial ministry and faithful life in the local churches and within the apostolic succession (ecclesiastical hierarchy) of the believers could be achieved. Without understanding the eschatological purpose of the believers' lives and of the Church as a whole, no sound understanding of the mission of Christ and the mission of the Church could be reached because the mission of the Church is 'to announce the eschaton – the salvation in Jesus Christ'.<sup>7</sup>

However, this ultimate goal should be more specifically defined by immediate goals of mission, and one of them is 'building up Eucharistic communities by the example of the one founded by Jesus Christ'. This goal can be achieved by fulfilling specific tasks of mission, and in the document seven important tasks are exposed to clearly define how the goals of mission could be achieved.

b) Forms and approaches to mission.

Four are the main forms of mission: informational and apologetic mission, mission of church upbringing (or in-church bringing) and external mission. Without going into much detail, we just need to mention that the direction of missionary activity starts with information and through apologetic witnessing comes to bringing people to Christ through catechisation and ecclesiastical discipline. Then the believers, being firmly rooted in the Orthodox faith and practice, can ‘go and make disciples’ in the external mission of the Church.

c) Main directions of missionary service.

Defining the main directions of mission gives the understanding of mission as interpreted by the Russian Orthodox church in her specific circumstances. Ten main directions are defined in Concept 2005:

- Missionary service of lay people
- Missionary commissioning
- Missionary parish
- Missionary worship and services
- Organisation of missionary schools
- Mobile mission
- Establishing missionary camps and stations
- Mission amongst young people
- Mission amongst the immigrants in Siberia and Russia’s Far East
- Characteristics and qualities of contemporary missionaries

They all were well explained and defined earlier<sup>8</sup>, and here we could only add that the directions of mission start with the lay people and commissioning and end with the ideal image of a missionary that the church needs to bring up and educate and prepare for effective missionary activities. Between them lies the internal organisation of a missionary church in the centre of which the missionary divine services occur, with the Holy liturgy in their core. Special attention is given to the immigrants coming mainly from China and Korea and settling intensively in the eastern regions of Russia which offers much consideration about the changing ethnic structure of society on these Russian territories. This part of the document also defines the main directions of missionary service of ROC in the near future: twenty specific ‘fields of missionary activity’ have been defined to encompass both the internal and the external mission of ROC, first of all carried out within Russia and its ‘territory of pastoral responsibility’.

There is a special paragraph in Concept 2005 about the spiritual security. Unlike any other type of security, it means missionary activity done in such a way that could secure stable and sustainable development of the Russian society in its movement towards higher spiritual levels of growth as understood in their Orthodox form and content. No illusions are cherished and the ROC’s understanding of spiritual security embraces only those ‘who have ears to hear’, while the other members of the society need to listen more attentively if they want to be saved. ROC’s intention is

that every Russian citizen be saved if they believe in Jesus Christ and rightly follow the church's rules of ecclesiastical discipline.

It is all too obvious that the main concern of mission, as defined in the ROC's missionary documents and in its practice of mission, is its internal mission, that is baptising, catechising (education) and living a Christ-like life. The internal Christian growth (both of the church as a whole and of each individual church member) takes place in the so called 'Eucharistic parishes' which lead the believers towards salvation, or more precisely, through theosis to salvation. Only when the Orthodox church and her members feel that their true spiritual struggle bears good fruit, can they 'go forth and make disciples of all nations'. It is often confirmed in Orthodox writings of the Holy Fathers that 'you must first heal yourself and only then heal the others'. Many believers in the Russian Orthodox church are convinced that if Christianity as a whole gets contaminated with unhealthy teaching and practices, this inevitably creates unhealthy churches which are not able to draw people to Christ and cannot bring people's souls to salvation. This is why spiritual health and security are immutable premise for a healthy and right growth in Christ – a path most efficiently offered by the Orthodox church, as ROC has claimed. In fact, the Holy Fathers often pointed the Eucharistic communion as the centre of the Christian life, and Orthodox researchers and clergy even point it as the foundation for missionary activity: the Eucharist is the mission of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

d) 'Theologies' of mission as understood by ROC.

If we follow the definitions of Concept 2005, we can find three main missionary 'visions' (theologies) of the ROC's missionary activity: the theology of catechisation, the Eucharistic theology and the theology of salvation<sup>10</sup>. The three visions give us the understanding that mission means catechisation, Eucharistic participation and a path to salvation.

We have already mentioned that the theological considerations came as a result of the practical missionary activity carried out by ROC between 1995 and 2005, the year when Concept 2005 appeared to conclude and summarise the practical experience in the field of mission. The new form of mission – the so called 'mobile mission' – enabled the missionaries to practically fulfil the Lord's command: 'go ...and preach the Gospel' by teaching, Eucharistic participation and salvific struggle in the believers' Christ-like life. What life is this? It is a life of acquiring the Holy Spirit within ourselves. 'We acquire the Holy Spirit through our celebration of the Eucharist and the reception of Holy Communion, through our participation in the sacraments, through our discipline of daily prayer, of deeds of love, and through the practice of fasting, all of which result in a Christ-like life'.<sup>11</sup>

Mobile mission was carried out in the form of missionary pilgrimages by train at distances of more than 15 thousand kilometres to Siberia and Russia's Far East, by so called car-temples (trailer-

truck-temples) where again dozens of distant areas of Russia were covered, and also by plane and by ships<sup>12</sup>. In addition, several missionary conventions and conferences were organised and carried out to discuss and summarise some practical issues of missiology, hundreds of missionaries were educated and spiritually prepared, dozens of missionary centres were opened, hundreds of missionary parishes were reorganised to meet the requirements of the Missionary department of ROC in carrying out effective mission among the Russian citizen. If we take into account the fact that this huge amount of activity was carried out mostly in the time span of four to five years (mainly between 2000 and 2005), we can imagine the vast scale of missionary enterprise undertaken by ROC and her missionaries on the 'territory of pastoral responsibility' of the church.

#### **4. Third missionary concept of mission**

The intensive missionary activity in the years between 1995 and the end of 2005<sup>13</sup> gave the Russian Orthodox church abundance of experience which had to be summarised and properly assessed. ROC felt she needed a break to enable her to evaluate the outcomes and to again theologially ground the practical application of mission as carried out in the last ten years. Concept 2005 (April 2005 version) was reconsidered, widely spread and hotly discussed in many of the Russia's diocesan centres and parishes. Huge amount of work was done by clergy and lay people to summarise the fruits of mission and of missionary research which finally resulted in issuing a new version of Concept 2005, the version of April 2007<sup>14</sup>.

The character and the spirit of the document remained the same as its predecessor, and the theological grounds of mission remained the same, as well. Nevertheless, the new assessment of the missionary activity led to restructuring the vision of mission as practiced and theoretically developed in publications and at missionary conferences and conventions. The new structure of theoretical definitions of mission in fact shows a considerable reassessment of the missionary activity and its theological foundation. In April 2005 Concept, we find the following path of theological reflection concerning mission: first, defining the goals and tasks of mission today, then, on this ground the appropriate forms and method of mission were proposed, and finally, the two were specifically reflected in the practical missionary ministry of clergy and lay people.

The approach of April 2007 Concept is different: first, the battle field, the area of missionary activity is clearly shown to give the Christians the understanding of what means and resources do we need to fulfil our missionary calling, then, the main goals, tasks and methods of mission are defined to be used in this spiritual battle, and finally, the practical implementation of the missionary tasks is presented to show the possible and the immediate forms of mission in practical terms.

The new vision more particularly lies in the following consideration.

a) Mission is clearly defined in the first sentences of the preamble: ‘mission is witnessing and preaching that aims to arouse faith in those who listen... and to proclaim the Good News to all the creation’, and ‘mission aims at sanctifying not only man but the whole world, too’<sup>15</sup>. This spiritual postulate was confirmed by the Holy Fathers and by modern theologians: ‘Christ has come to save the humanity, and through the people Christ saves and redeems the whole world, the whole creation’.<sup>16</sup>

This understanding of mission is practically supported by defining the tasks leading to achieving sanctification and salvation: ‘The Orthodox mission aims at teaching peoples to be enlightened in the truths of the faith, at educating people to enable them to live a Christ-like life, and mainly at passing on the experience of communion with God through a personal participation of the believers in the sacramental life of the Eucharistic community’<sup>17</sup>. Again, the path of ‘catechisation-Eucharistic participation-spiritual struggle for salvation’ is seen as the main direction of mission.

Mission is also defined in terms of ‘gospel and culture’: ‘The Orthodox understanding of mission sees it as an eschatological event where the Gospel will be proclaimed “unto the end of the world” [Mt. 28:20], and it is this eschatological perspective that gives us the right understanding of the relations between mission and national cultures... requiring from the missionaries to approach the world, to sanctify and renew it, to transform the way of life of people through accepting local cultures and ways of cultural expression, provided they do not contradict the Christian faith, thus transforming them into means of salvation’. Here comes this essential difference in understanding the issue of ‘gospel and culture’ as interpreted by the Orthodox church (and by other Christian traditions, as well): local cultures and ways of cultural expressions can be accepted and lived only if they do not contradict your faith and your life as a faithful Christian in a Eucharistic community. Only on this ground local cultures can be transformed into means of salvation. Missionaries need to constantly acquire the Holy Spirit, that is to be spiritual, in order to differentiate between holy and profane, between Christian and pagan, between right and wrong. Spirituality, as well as many other Christian postulates, seems to obtain new characteristics in some Christian denominations, and the Russian Orthodox church has always affirmed the true meaning of spirituality: ‘This is to be spiritual in the Orthodoxy: ‘being in Christ’. This means that we think, feel and wish what Christ thought, felt and wished. And this means that we should have ‘Christ’s mind’, ‘love of Christ’... if Christ wished that ‘all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim. 2:4), then we also must wish the same’.<sup>18</sup>

b) The first main part of April 2007 Concept gives us five characteristics of the missionary field of activity of ROC today which we need to know very well if we are to 'go and make disciples' on this field. Here are the main points of these characteristics:

- most of the Russian people traditionally belong to the Orthodox culture of this country and nevertheless they remain indifferent to the Orthodox church and the Orthodox culture as a whole and tend to neo-pagan practices or secular orientation.

- the country experiences a large scale expansion of non-traditional religious and non-religious worldviews, of destructive cults and totalitarian sects that powerfully influence modern Russian people; ROC needs to bring Russians back into the parish's fence in order to prevent them from perishing.

- the newcomers and the ones who still are not firmly rooted in the Orthodox faith need new approaches and new ways of pastoral work in order to come and to remain in the church; this requires that new missionary imperatives be developed in the area of pastoral care and spiritual guidance.

- big is the need in creating and developing new teaching materials to help people get acquainted with Christianity and bring them into the Orthodox church.

- Russian society needs unity and healthier spiritual-moral environment because the new challenges today lead the society to rejection of traditions and traditional moral values.

These new challenges erode the Russian society today, the ROC claims. Each challenge needs reciprocal response. Here are the challenges and the missionary tasks:

- Loss of cultural identity, and the task is: seeking ways of Christianisation of national cultures.

- Social-economic reforms and their consequences for the society, and the task is: protection of the people that the state does not protect.

- The advance of the sciences which question issues of morality and essential foundations of life in itself, and the task is: opposing and counteraction against the processes of substitution of science for ideology or occultism and the attempts of divinisation of science, especially in the field of humanities.

- The informational violence and its influence on people, and the task is: opposing the informational aggression of destructive cults and organisations against the Orthodox church, individuals, family and society.

- The plurality of religions and worldviews, and the task is: opposing the attempts of substitution of the absolute and the only Truth of Christ for a 'unified and universal' religion.

c) As we now know well the battle field, we need to define the main goals, tasks and methods of mission, and this is what April 2007 Concept presents. As in the earlier version of the Concept

2005, the ultimate goal of mission again is formulated thus: mission aims at fulfilment of God's primordial provision – theosis of man and of all creation. Unlike the April 2005 Concept, however, the immediate goal of mission is defined in terms of spreading the Orthodox faith (1), of bringing up people into church/in-church bringing of people (2) and of passing on the experience of communion with God (3), and all the three can only be accomplished through building Eucharistic communities to be spread 'unto the end of the world'. The immediate goal of mission is then achieved through fulfilment of eight primary tasks of mission, as exposed in the document.

Carrying out specific tasks needs organisation and responsibility. The document further defines the responsibilities of the missionary bishops (four main tasks of responsibility), the missionary priests (five tasks) and the missionary lay people (three tasks of responsibility).

The forms and the methods of mission are declared as follows:

- Mission of bringing up people to become active members of the church (or so called in-church bringing)

- Apologetic mission

- Informational mission

- External mission.

And, unlike April 2005 Concept, in the new one we find a fifth important form of mission:

- Mission of reconciliation.

The last one is connected with the task of reconciliation between generations, between political and other type of opponents, between former enemies, both peoples and territories, and between secular and religious culture. For the first time the new Concept defines several types of dialogue: 'dialogue of life', 'dialogue of social responsibilities', and 'mission of dialogue'<sup>19</sup>. It is worth noting that dialogue does not mean retreat but mutual understanding and tolerance.

The second main part of April 2007 Concept concludes with the characteristics and the qualities of the modern missionary where, unlike the previous version of the Concept 2005, the characteristics of the synodal missionary and the diocesan missionary have been defined. The missionary ministry of the former is closely related to the commissioning tasks the Holy Synod puts on a missionary, and of the latter it is closely connected with the commissioning tasks the local bishop puts on the missionaries and the missionary centres and organisations.

d) The practical issues of missionary ministry in Concept 2005 (April 2007 version) summarises the first two theoretical parts into a unified specific practice of mission as already found in the ROC's mission in the last ten to twelve years. Several are the forms of missionary activity which differ from what we found in April 2005 Concept.

1) The first one concerns the young people of Russia. In the new version, special attention is given to defining the type of young people which gives missionaries wider knowledge about the appropriate approaches and methods of work with them. The following types of young people have been identified:

- Youngsters who are church members but still do not take any active role in the life of a parish. The missionary task requires that new ways of individual work with them be found in order to put their potential in action and use it for the benefit of the church and the believers.

- New-believers, or neophytes, who need much catechisation and education. They need to be properly educated through their inclusion in various forms of catechisation, mainly through catechetical courses and Sunday schools for adults.

- Non-believers who positively consider the Orthodox church but who never thought of becoming her members. The most appropriate work with them would be fulfilling creative tasks or organising their rest and holidays in appropriate way and forms.

- Young people who have chosen to belong to other Christian traditions or to other traditional religions but who still keep positive attitude to the Orthodox church and would agree to a dialogue of reconciliation. Such youngsters could be included in activities of clubs of interest, for example on issues of ecological education, on issues of drug rehabilitation, etc.

- Non-believers who are disinterested in any relation to the Orthodox church or to any other type of religious life. These are the biggest number of young people in Russia and this makes the work with them most important. The missionary tasks lie in breaking those young people's false stereotypes and visions on the Christian church as a whole and on religious life more specifically, in forming in them new images of life and attitudes, and in preparing their mind and heart to accept the truths of the Christian faith.

- Young people who negatively relate to the church. Missionaries should seek dialogue with such youngsters only on the foundation of love and on relying on God's help to turn their hearts.

2) The second important difference concerns the definition of a missionary parish. Eight are the main characteristics of a missionary parish:

- the parish organises missionary activity on the territory of its own pastoral responsibility;

- parishioners should be educated in missiology and get experience in missionary work;

- it is recommended that parishioners get higher secular education;

- the parochial council should include members who are missionaries in spirit and who understand very well what mission is and how it needs to be fulfilled;

- ecclesiastical social activity (diakonia) is also one of the main features of a missionary parish;

- the parish should establish a body of missionary catechists who are to organise the teaching ministry of the parish;

- the divine services should be based on the missionary imperative of accessible worship and serving God;

- the parish should keep constant contact with the Missionary department of the Russian Orthodox church in order to regularly get methodological and other type of help and support.

3) The third issue of April 2007 Concept concerns the missionary ministry of lay people where, for the first time, the role of women in the field of mission has been clearly defined. The role of women in the Orthodox witnessing the truth has been equalled with that of men. Four are the main areas of missionary ministry of women:

- founding charitable organisations and bodies to serve those in need;

- missionary ministry in hospitals;

- missionary and teaching ministry in social homes, mainly children's homes, nursing homes and boarding schools;

- missionary ministry in prisons for women.

The last main part of Concept 2005 (April 2007 version) concludes with defining the most important areas of missionary work of ROC in the near future. Most of the affirmations concern the future of the Russian nation as a whole and the role of the believers in improving the spiritual climate in the country. One important affirmation seems quite significant in assessing the current situation in Russia (and possibly in the world as a whole): 'For the last 800 years, the Russian Orthodox church has never been exposed to the necessity of apostolic preaching on areas and territories where millions of people, through the violence of the atheistic communist regimes of the past decades, have lost their faith and tradition and have acquired other types of culture and history. Now we have faced the paradoxical situation where Russia needs a second Christianisation of the peoples living on the vast Russian territories'<sup>20</sup>.

## **5. Conclusion: personal observations**

It is not easy to speak in first person singular in a scholarly essay, especially when the essay reflects theological considerations. But my humble experience in doing mission within the context of the Russian Orthodox church makes me believe that even deep theological concerns can be shared and explained in order to find similarities between our experience and the experience of other missionaries and Christian theologians. The seven years of mission in Russia convinced me in a very practical way that doing mission is not an option but an imperative. Jesus Christ most often used imperatives when talking and preaching, He most often would say 'do this' and 'don't do that' and would not give any possibility of reconsidering His words. Obeying used to be one of the most honoured qualities in the past, especially in the Slavic countries where Slavic people were

considered to be quite a submissive race. It may be that today it is still honoured in some places but it is all too evident that humbleness and submission is not the first quality honoured by people today. Democracy and freedom (understood quite differently by different groups of people in a country or within a society) gave us the right not to be humble and not to submit to others. Today imperatives are almost avoided in society, only recommendations and offers are issued or outspoken.

Nowadays people agree that imperatives seem least acceptable in the area of religion and spiritual growth: love is the foundation of the Christian faith – love towards God and your neighbour. But is it as simple to love your neighbour (not to speak of your enemies)? It is not: love needs efforts, strength, sacrifice, and humbleness. Love needs submission, and often it needs imperatives to be obeyed and fulfilled. This is at least the experience the Russian Orthodox church has had in her history and present activity.

Schmemmann's affirmation that Eucharist is the mission of the Church, as cited above, has been practically and theologically developed by the Russian Orthodox church in her missionary activity and in missionary researches. Indeed, it is this most intimate and holy act of communion with God that makes believers wish the same intimate and holy communion for every human being. Communion means unity. As Fr Meyendorff affirms, the real unity of the Christians is not in ecumenical gatherings, and not in their common actions, and even not in the witnessing amongst non-believers – the unity is in the Eucharist: it is an eschatological celebration which shows the coming of the Kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

The Holy Scriptures' verses of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) tell us that teaching is the first imperative in mission: the original Greek text of the verses uses only 'teach' as an imperative form of the verb, all the other forms, translated as verbs in the modern texts, are participles (that is, literally we could translate them as 'by going [there]... teach all nations, baptising them...'). It is this understanding of mission that makes ROC's missionary activity put the main focus on teaching (catechising). This is why the three theological visions of mission require first education of people, then bringing them into the church and enabling them to fully participate in the Eucharistic life of the parish, which ultimately should lead them on the path of salvation. The example of ROC with her thousands of schools and teaching centres and Orthodox gymnasia gives us the understanding that teaching is the core of any missionary work.

But we know that teaching is not just telling people about Jesus and about the church as God's community of faithful followers of Christ: teaching needs to be appropriate and right. If it is inappropriate and wrong, teaching does more harm than not having taught at all.<sup>22</sup> Then, the right teaching is constantly multiplied and reaffirmed in the Holy Communion and in the Eucharistic life of the believers in a missionary parish. In this way the missionary parish should prepare true

missionaries to go and teach the others appropriately and rightly, too, by preparing them in their undertaking the path to salvation.

Observing the missionary activity of ROC, one wonders whether this local church is ready to do mission in the way she proclaimed in documents and showed in her missionary activity. ROC realises the need of reorganisation, of reassessment, and of transformation: the church needs people transformed in their life and thoughts to become able to discover mission in a new way and bring the Good News to people in most adequate and efficient way. 'We need to discover mission in a new way: we not only need to teach people but to transform ourselves and only then to teach the others... This is the way the Church will be transformed: if each of us discerns God and stays with Him'.<sup>23</sup> 'Staying with God' needs obeying to imperatives, and at the same time it needs love and love and love: towards God and neighbour, and towards all the creation, since the Orthodox affirmation of sanctification of nature through sanctification of man lies in the foundation of the Christian understanding of the salvific mission of Christ.

The missionary practice and the theology of mission of the Russian Orthodox church is still to be assessed by the other Orthodox churches and the other Christian traditions, and the other religions, too. It is still not fully assessed even within ROC and she needs to get responses and to agree theology and practice into one unified Concept capable to transform people's lives and nature's weakness. And my missionary experience tells me that the Russian Orthodox church could truly fulfil God's commandment of proclaiming His Good News to the whole creation only if she interacts with the world and cooperates with the other Christian churches. Still her teaching and ecclesiastical practice seems to remain quite secluded and inward, and she mainly aims to bring to the Orthodox church the people living within Russia. Russian Orthodox Christians' poor knowledge of the western Christian ways of living Christ-like life does not help them enter a true all-Christian dialogue and fellowship (and this was my first missionary task in Moscow: acquainting the Orthodox Christians with the western Christianity, more specifically with the Anglican church). At the same time the western Christians do not know much about the Orthodox church, either (and this was my second missionary task: acquainting the non-Orthodox Christians – mostly in UK – with the Orthodox church) and a closer cooperation between churches both in the west and the east of Europe is very much needed. When we look at the mission as done by the Russian church, it is too obvious that it is mostly grounded on the Orthodox doctrine and dogmatic teaching. We all are quite aware that the doctrines and the theology of the various Christian churches still divide the Christians (or more specifically, the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the believers in the "traditional" churches) in the world and this fact does not help us establish a true unity in Christ (and here came my third missionary task in Russia: seeking ways of reconciliation between the different Christian traditions and practices in the churches). Explaining and teaching an all-Christian attitude to

proclaiming the gospel (to mission) can be (and really is) a painful process, and the attempts of reconciling two contradicting Christian traditions can be not less painful. But this is what missionaries would always experience, as we think of whether we are prepared to ‘pay the price: weariness, threats, career, family, facing risks, antagonism, embarrassment’.<sup>24</sup> It is my deep conviction that the Russian Orthodox church has undertaken a truly Christian missionary activity and that her cooperation and agreement with the other Christian churches would make a difference in the world in this new challenging century.

Valentin Kozhuharov, London May 2009

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are opinions among Orthodox theologians that the Orthodox church did mission in the past and we acknowledge, too, that missionary efforts have been undertaken by Orthodox Christian missionaries since the early centuries of the Christian era until now (comp. James Stamooolis’s *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 1986, pp. 1, 19, where he widely considers all pros and cons to the issue of existence of Orthodox mission), but we also need to understand that Orthodox would usually do ‘mission’ within their own boundaries of Orthodox presence (either national or other local). The examples which are usually given (those of Sts Cyril and Methodius, the Russian missions of 18 and 19 centuries, the missions to Japan and China, etc.) represent dual missionary endeavours undertaken by the church and the emperor, the so called ceasaropapist approach to mission. A true Orthodox mission has only been the ‘internal mission’ of the church which has always been known as witnessing Christ but not as mission. Today, though we could give examples of church planting by Orthodox churches in various countries of Africa and Asia, this internal witnessing continues to be the main concern of the Orthodox churches and their missionaries.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Osnovy sotsialnoi kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi’. V: *Informatsionny bulletin Otdela Vneshnih Tserkovnyh Sviazei Moskovskoi Patriarchii* (‘Basics of the social conception of the Russian Orthodox Church’), in *Information Bulletin of the Department of External Ecclesiastical Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate*, Moscow, 8:2000, 3-121. English version of the document can only be found at the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox church at <http://www.mospat.ru/index.php?mid=90>, as of May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Valentin Kozhuharov. *Towards an Orthodox Christian Theology of Mission: An Interpretive Approach*. Vesta Publ. House, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Kontseptsia vozrozhdenia missionerskoi deyatel’nosti Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*. Moskovskii Patriarchate, Moskva, 6 oktiabria 1995 (*Concept of revival of the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church*). Moscow Patriarchate, Moscow, 6 October 1995.

*Doklad Vysokopreosviashennogo Ioanna, archiepiskopa Belgorodskogo i Starooskol’skogo, predsedatelia Missionerskogo Otdela Moskovskogo Patriarchata na Archiereiskom Sobore Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi 3-8 oktiabria 2004* (*Report of His Eminence Ioann, Archbishop of Belgorod and Sary Oskol diocese, Head of the Missionary Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, at the Archbishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, 3 to 8 October 2004*). Moscow Patriarchate, 2004.

*Kontseptsia missionerskoi deyatel’nosti Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi na 2005-2010 gody*. Moskovskii Patriarchate, Moskva, 2005 (*Concept of the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church for 2005 to 2010*). Moscow Patriarchate, Moscow, 2005.

None of the above documents have been translated into English and the quotations and excerpts are given according to the Russian texts as translated by the author of this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos. ‘The purpose and motive of mission from an Orthodox theological point of view’, *Poreftandes* 9, 1967, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, Fr. ‘The missionary imperative in the Orthodox tradition’, in Gerald H. Anderson (ed.). *The theology of the Christian mission*. McGraw-Hill: New York, 1961, 252.

<sup>7</sup> Schmemmann, ‘The missionary imperative’, 254.

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<sup>8</sup> Kozhuharov, *Towards an Orthodox Christian theology of mission*, 33-42. There is another one, in Bulgarian language: Valentin Kozhuharov. *Missionerskata deinost na Ruskata pravoslavna tsurkva dnes. (The Missionary Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church Today)*. Vesta Publ. House, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, 2008, 128-33.

<sup>9</sup> See Schmemmann, 'The missionary imperative', 254.

<sup>10</sup> Kozhuharov, *Towards an Orthodox Christian Theology of Mission*, 57-67, and Kozhuharov, *Missionerskata deinost... (The missionary activity...)*, 253-65.

<sup>11</sup> John Meyendorff. 'Theosis in the Eastern Christian Tradition', in L. Dupe and Don E. Saliers (eds). *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*. New York: Crossroad, 1989, 473.

<sup>12</sup> For example, four major missionary pilgrimages by train were carried out: the First pilgrimage took place between 19 and 30 October 2000 to Archangelsk region, the Second – in the period of 6 to 16 March 2001 to Karelia region, the Third (biggest ever) pilgrimage – between 7 August and 2 September 2001 to Eastern Siberia and Far East with 7 vast Russia's regions at a distance of more than 15 thousand kilometres, the Fourth – in the period of 17 to 25 December 2001 to Penzensk region, and other minor missionary pilgrimages carried out between 2002 and 2005. The car-temple (in fact, this is trailer truck and a temple built within) undertook several missionary travels between 2003 and 2005, the main of which were, the first in February and March 2003, then another one between 27 March and 13 April 2004 to the Russia's Kalmykia republic and the region of Adygeia. And the third form of mobile mission – the so called 'missionary camps and field stations' left hundreds of new-built churches and chapels on many Russia's territories on the East and hundreds of priests serving there. This type of mission converted to Orthodoxy thousands of people – both Russians and of other ethnic groups and language communities – and established hundreds of educational centres and schools to further spread the Gospel amongst the local peoples. In this way the three theological 'visions' – catechising, Eucharistic participation and salvific spiritual struggle – found their practical implementation within Russia as a result of the ROC's missionary activity.

<sup>13</sup> When the last of this first period of missionary pilgrimages, the mission of 7 to 17 October 2005 to the Far East Kamchatka region, took place.

<sup>14</sup> 'Kontseptsia missionerskoi deyatel'nosti Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi na 2005-2010 gody'. V: *Missionerskoe Obozrenie*, No 4. Belgorod, 2007, S. 4-19 ('Concept of the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church for 2005 to 2010'), in *Missionary Review*, Belgorod, April 2007, 4-19.

<sup>15</sup> Kontseptsia... (April 2007), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Schmemmann, 'The missionary imperative', 256.

<sup>17</sup> Kontseptsia... (April 2007), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Anastassios Yannoulatos. 'Orthodoxy and Mission', *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 8:3, 1964, 144.

<sup>19</sup> Kontseptsia... (April 2007), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Kontseptsia 2005 (April 2007), 6.

<sup>21</sup> John Meyendorff, Fr. 'The Orthodox Church and Mission: Past and Present Perspectives', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 16, 1972, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Defining what is right and what is wrong is a delicate issue, especially if this concerns doctrines and ideologies. In her teaching and ecclesiastical practice, the Russian Orthodox church has always referred to Christian tradition and to the teaching of the Holy Fathers. On 6 April 2006, a document was adopted at a World Russian People's Council: *Declaration on human rights and human dignity*. Then this declaration was further developed and took the form of Church's Teaching which was confirmed, adopted and sanctioned by an Archbishop's Council on 26 June 2008. The document, with the title *Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on human dignity, freedoms and rights*, was immediately implemented within the various ecclesiastical bodies, the Orthodox churches and the Orthodox educational establishments throughout the country. It defines the Orthodox understanding of the three foundational human qualities as opposed to the universal declaration of human rights of 1948. The document specifically considers such issues like family, gender and sexual orientation, technological advances, especially biotechnology and the moral and ethical issues deriving from its advance, freedom of conscience and freedom from conscience, good and evil in human history and today, truth and 'new truths', etc. All these are still to be assessed and fully comprehended but even now we can see the big abyss between the modern expressions of life and the traditional vision of a Christian church which claims to have remained true to the teaching of the Gospel and the early church.

<sup>23</sup> Antonii, mitropolit Surozhskii. 'Missionerstvo Tserkvi'. V: *Missionerstvo Tserkvi*. Sviato-Sergievskoe bratstvo, Moskva, 2005, S.16. (Antony, metropolitan of Surozh. 'Missionary activity of the Church'), in *Missionary activity of the Church*, St Sergius brotherhood, Moscow 2005, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Brown Alistair. *I believe in Mission*. Hodder&Stoughton, London, 1997, 50-57.