

FOUNDATION OF MISSION: AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

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The overall approach of the Orthodox Church to mission is the result of her theology. The importance of theology, nevertheless, does not necessarily mean surrender to a “theology from above”. As St. Maximos the Confessor has stated: “a theology without action is a theology of the Devil.” There are **three** distinctive characteristics of the Orthodox theology which determine our understanding of mission: **a.** the *pneumatological* emphasis on her understanding of the Holy Trinity, **b.** her teaching of *theosis* and **c.** the concept of mission as *a Liturgy after the liturgy*.

The Orthodox Church, without setting aside her conviction that she is “the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”, and her task to witness to the whole Gospel to the whole world; without forgetting that her Lord Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6); she humbly believes that although she is the authentic bearer of the apostolic tradition she is not but a simple servant in the “mission” of God.

a. On the basis of “the economy of the Holy Spirit”, side by side with the “economy of Christ/the Word” the Orthodox believe that God uses not only the Church, but many other powers of the world for God’s mission for the salvation of humankind and for the salvation of the entire creation. After all, the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of Truth,” leads us to the “whole truth” (Jn 16:13) and “blows wherever He/She wills” (Jn 3:8), thus embracing the whole of cosmos. With the contribution, therefore, of Pneumatology (in fact with a dynamic interpretation of Christology

through Pneumatology) the theological vision becomes wider, and the missionary task transcends to new previously unimaginable areas of action: the emphasis is no longer placed on mere proselytistic activities, but on full scale conversion of both the Christian evangelizers, and those to whom the witness is rendered. In this way a total transformation occurs and the implementation of God's Rule becomes a reality, since according to the Biblical *magna carta* (Mt 25), God judges humanity with criteria other than the conventional religious ones. With the "Economy of the Spirit" the narrow boundaries of the Church are widened, and the cultural (and religious) superiority syndromes give their place to a "common witness", a humble "inter-faith dialogue", a radical social engagement, especially in world economy, which is immoral and unchristian.

Defining the *mission dei* on the basis of Jn 21 the Orthodox believe that God in God's own self is a life of communion and that God's involvement in history (and consequently our missionary task) aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God's very life. This ultimate expression of *koinonia* and love is transferred as a *witness/martyria* to the whole world not as dogmas or ethical commands, but as a communion of love. This and only this is the ultimate foundation for mission.

b. This is also reinforced by the unique Orthodox anthropology, expressed in such terms as theosis or deification. The human nature in the Orthodox tradition is not a closed, autonomous entity (as it was believed in the post-Augustinian western Christianity, which was trapped by the static dichotomy of "nature"- "grace"), but a dynamic reality, determined in its very existence by its relationship to God.

Determined by a vision of how to “know” God, to “participate” in His life, and of course to be “saved” neither by an extrinsic action of God (irresistible grace), nor through the rational cognition of propositional truths, but by “becoming God”, this soteriological notion is much more inclusive to non-Christians than the old conventional exclusivist mission theology of the last 100 years.

Together with the relational understanding of the “social” (*Cappadocian*) Trinity, the Orthodox permanent task of *theosis* is nothing but a true interpretation of the biblical expressions of life “*in Christ*” and “*in communion of the Holy Spirit*”. This “pneumatological and deification understanding of mission” has nothing to do with syncretism.

c. Mission is conceived by the Orthodox as a response to the call of the Triune God for a common journey and a participation in the love of God. Hence the importance it gives to *martyrdom* and especially to the doxological praise of God in Liturgy, which is not only a springboard of mission (this is what the Orthodox call Liturgy *after* the liturgy, and this morning this was also correctly expressed as a Liturgy *before the liturgy*), but a proleptic manifestation of God’s Kingdom and an offering and thanksgiving for the entire world regardless of religious convictions.