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The Last Stone: A Biblical Contextual Study of the *Pericope Adulterae*

Mihai CIUREA*

ABSTRACT. This article examines the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11) through a combined textual-historical and theological-exegetical approach. Rather than attempting to resolve the longstanding debate concerning the passage's original place in the Gospel tradition, the study investigates how the pericope has been transmitted, received, and interpreted within Christian tradition. After surveying major manuscript witnesses and patristic references, the article offers a narrative and theological reading of the passage in its canonical Johannine location. Particular attention is given to the themes of judgment, mercy, repentance, and moral responsibility. The analysis argues that the narrative redirects attention from the legal status of the accused woman to the moral condition of her accusers, thereby framing divine justice in relation to self-examination and repentance. The narrative also highlights the role of a marginalized figure who becomes the recipient of divine mercy and transformation. The study concludes that the *Pericope Adulterae* functions as an important locus theologicus for reflecting on the relationship between justice and mercy in Christian thought and ecclesial practice, offering a paradigm of ethical discernment that retains profound resonance within both historical and contemporary theological discourse.

Keywords: *Pericope Adulterae*, Women, Adultery, Torah, Repentance, Forgiveness

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Introduction

In the Gospel of John (7:53–8:11), the encounter between Jesus Christ and the accusers of the woman caught in adultery (*Pericope Adulterae*) is narrated as taking place during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Lord neither judged nor condemned her. Rather, writing twice with His finger on the ground (vv. 6.8), He pronounced a striking and unsettling statement: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (*Jn* 8:7b). Although this episode is among the most widely known passages in the Gospel tradition, it is absent from several early Greek manuscripts[1] and from certain patristic commentaries. Nevertheless, in critical editions of the *New Testament*, out of respect for its antiquity and long-standing reception, the passage has been retained in the Johannine text at the traditional location[2]. However, it is typically enclosed in square brackets[3]. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that "the absence of the account of the woman caught in adultery may simply reflect a manuscript tradition that ultimately (may) trace back to those original copies from which the pericope was absent."[4]

Two fourth-century witnesses allude to an episode concerning a sinful woman forgiven by Jesus Christ, whom the majority of exegetes identify with the woman caught in adultery. She was brought into the Temple and set before the Savior by the scribes and Pharisees to be judged and subsequently stoned. The first of these appears in a Syriac work (later translated into Latin as the *Didascalia Apostolorum 7.2.23*), dating from the late third to early fourth century (ca. 300–330 CE)[5], which refers the *muliere adultera* in a section instructing bishops on how to deal with sinners: "For you do not obey our Savior and our God, to do as even He did with her who had sinned, whom the elders placed before Him, and leaving the judgement in His hands, and departed. But He, the

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1 *Cf.* Pr. Sabin VERZAN, "Importanța manuscriselor pe papirus pentru studiul Evangheliei după Ioan," *Mitropolia Olteniei* 7-8 (1960), 447.

2 Regarding the passage as a later addition to the Gospel of John, see Yan MA, "A Text-Critical Analysis of John 7:53–8:11 with a Focus on Its Stylistic Discontinuity," *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 55 (2024): 163–196.

3 See: *The Pericope on the Adulteress in Contemporary Research*, LNTS 551, eds. David Alan BLACK and Jacob N. CERONE (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

4 J. K. ELLIOTT, "The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus. By Chris Keith, pp. xvi + 320. (New Testament Tools and Studies, 38.) Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009. ISBN 9004173941. €114," *JTS* 61 (2010), 295.

5 Cf. R. Hugh CONNOLLY, *Introduction to Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), xviii.

searcher of hearts, asked her and said to her: 'Have the elders condemned you, my daughter?' She says to him: 'Nay, Lord'. And He said unto her: 'Go, neither do I condemn you'."[6] This constitutes the earliest known reference to the pericope[7]. The second reference appears in the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (*Ecclesiastical History 3.39.17*), who reports that Papias of Hierapolis (ca. 135 CE) mentioned an episode involving a woman accused of "many sins" who was forgiven by Jesus, which was found in the so-called Gospel according to the Hebrews. However, no extant copy of that text contains the pericope or anything similar[8]. Referring to this episode—which may correspond to the present pericope—the bishop seeks to encourage indulgence on the part of Christian community leaders toward sinners: "The same writer [...] has expounded another story about a woman who was accused of many sins, which the Gospel according to the Hebrews contains."[9]

Apart from the important testimony of Didymus the Blind, explicit references to the pericope are largely absent from extant Greek patristic literature until the twelfth century, namely Euthymius Zigabenus[10]. Therefore, in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes (223.6–13)*, Didymus says: "We find, therefore, in certain gospels... A woman, it says, was condemned by the Jews for a sin and was being sent to be stoned in the place where that was customary to happen. The saviour, it says, when he saw her and observed that they were ready to stone her, said to those who were about to cast stones, 'He who has not sinned, let him take a stone and cast it. If anyone is conscious in himself not to have sinned, let him take up a stone and smite her.' And no one dared. Since they knew in themselves and perceived that they themselves were guilty

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6 Arthur VOOBUS, *Introduction to The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac I: Chapter I–X*, CSCO 402 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1979), 89.

7 The *Apostolic Constitutions (II)*, a fourth-century Christian work that draws extensively on the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Didache of the Apostles*, likewise includes a similar reference to the episode of the sinful woman. Both texts, which preserve valuable information concerning the organization and life of Christian communities of that period, as well as Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline, cite the passage with authority, even though they do not clearly specify the source from which it was read or heard – Dieter LUHRMANN, "Die Geschichte von einer Sünderin und andere apokryphe Jesusüberlieferungen bei Dydimus von Alexandrien," *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1990): 310-311.

8 Cf. A. F. J. KLIJN, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition,* Vigilae Christianae Supplements 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1992): 117-119.

9 EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *The Ecclesiastical History*, with an English Translation by Kirshopp Lake (London: William Heinemann, 1926), 299.

10 See: *Commentarius in Quattuor Evangelia: Expositio in Joannem*, PG 129:1281-1502.

in some things, they did not dare to strike her"[11]. On the other hand, in the Western tradition, the situation is somewhat different. Most early translations, including the Vulgate, include the pericope, and Saints Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome affirm its authenticity and comment on it. Thanks to their commentaries, a *terminus ad quem* can be established at the beginning of 380 CE[12]. Attempting to account for the absence of the pericope in some manuscripts, Augustine explains that it was removed by certain less faithful individuals, or even by some opponents of the orthodox faith, because they feared it might give wives an excuse to sin, expecting to be forgiven as the woman in the *Pericope Adulterae* was. Moreover, the *Syriac Chronicle 8.7*, attributed to Zacharias the Rhetor, bishop of Mytilene (ca. 569 CE), contains a remark concerning the episode of the sinful woman, which confirms a Johannine placement and the possible omission in some manuscripts: "Now there was inserted in the Gospel of the holy Moro the bishop, in the eightyninth canon, a chapter which is related only by John in his Gospel, and is not found in other manuscripts."[13] Alongside the commentaries of the Western Fathers, this testimony confirms that the only explicit placement of the pericope until the tenth century CE is *Jn* 7:53–8:11, and also that numerous Christians from the fourth to sixth centuries were familiar with its text, even though some manuscripts included it and others did not[14].

Another issue raised by the pericope concerns its sometimes-fluctuating placement, which is unique in *New Testament* literature, even though the evidence suggests that it first entered the canonical tradition in the Gospel according to John, at its "resting place" (*sie ihre Ruhestätte*)[15], that is, at the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8—a location unanimously confirmed by its extrabiblical citations. Modern scholarship has identified at least twelve different manuscript locations of the passage within the canonical Gospels[16]. It

[11] Bart D. EHRMAN, *Didymus the Blind and the Text of the Gospels*, SBLNTGF 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 145. See also, *Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, NTTS 33 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 199.

[12] Chris KEITH, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John and the Literacy of Jesus*, NTTND 38, eds. Barth D. Ehrman and Eldon J. Epp (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009): 204-205.

[13] See: ZACHARIAS RHETOR, *Syriac Chronicle*, trans by F.J. Hamilton and E.W. Brooks (London: Methuen & Co., 1899).

[14] Chris KEITH, *The Pericope Adulterae...*, 133.

[15] Theo K. HECKEL, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium*, WUNT 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 136.

[16] See my study here: Mihai CIUREA, "The Biblical Text of the Manuscript: General Overview," *Studies on the Greek Tetraevangelion from the Museum of Oltenia in Craiova (12th Century)*, bilingual edition, trans. by Alina Reşceanu (Craiova: Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, 2020): 90-95.

appears that many of the later alternative placements are due to the influence of lectionary instructions, which moved it to different locations for liturgical reasons[17].

The textual status of the *Pericope Adulterae* remains one of the most debated issues in New Testament scholarship. While questions concerning its authenticity and original location continue to attract scholarly attention[18], the present study does not seek to resolve these issues definitively. Instead, it examines how the passage functions within the Christian tradition while acknowledging the complexity of its textual transmission and the ongoing textual-critical debate. Methodologically, the study proceeds in three stages. First, it surveys significant manuscript and patristic evidence in order to outline the history of the pericope's transmission and reception. These historical observations provide the contextual framework for the analysis rather than constituting the primary object of investigation. Second, it offers a narrative analysis of the text in its canonical Johannine location (*Jn* 7:53–8:11), employing literary and theological exegesis with particular attention to characterization, dialogue, narrative tension, and the interaction between Jesus, the accusers, and the woman accused of adultery. Third, it explores the theological significance of the passage, focusing on the themes of judgment, mercy, repentance, and moral responsibility. By intentionally distinguishing between questions of textual history and theological interpretation, this interdisciplinary approach allows the *Pericope Adulterae* to be examined not primarily as a textual problem to be solved[19], but as a passage whose reception and theological significance warrant careful consideration within the broader Christian tradition. On this basis, the study argues that the pericope continues to function as a *locus theologicus* for ecclesial discernment. The originality of this study lies in its integration of textual reception history with a narrative-theological reading focused on the relationship between judgment, mercy, and moral accountability.

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[17] Of all these factors, the most significant was its exclusion from the portion of text read at the Feast of Pentecost in the standard use of the Greek lectionaries – Cf. T. van LOPIK, "Once Again: Floating Words, Their Significance for Textual Criticism," *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 286–291.

[18] See Tommy WASSERMAN, Jennifer KNUST, "The Pericope of the Adulteress (John 7:53–8:11): A New Chapter in Its Textual Transmission," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 85 (2020): 22–55.

[19] The diversity of methodologies employed in scholarship on the *Pericope Adulterae* (textual criticism, literary criticism, reception history, social-scientific approaches, and theological interpretation) has contributed to divergent conclusions – See Chris KEITH, "Recent and Previous Research on the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7.53–8.11)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 6.3 (2008): 377–404.

"You shall not commit adultery!"

This is not the first instance in the Gospels where Jesus is confronted with a question regarding "adultery" (cf. *Mt* 5:27–32; 19:7–9). In this particular context, however, the discussion no longer takes place on an abstract level. A new element complicates the debate—one that we may readily imagine as highly tense: a woman caught in the very act of adultery. She is brought before Jesus as a "test case" of fidelity to the Mosaic Law, which prescribed the death of both protagonists (*i.e.*, the man and the woman) involved in any form of adultery (cf. *Lv* 20:10–16). Even though she faces death, the adulterous woman is nothing more than a pretext in the ongoing dispute between the Lord and His adversaries, largely deprived of agency. She is abruptly thrust into the center of the public square by her accusers and, unlike other women in the *New Testament*, shows no initiative in repenting before the Lord[20].

Every detail of the scene suggests a severe confrontation. Jesus is in the Temple of Jerusalem, the spiritual center of Judaism. Seated in the posture of a Rabbi, He teaches "all the people" (*Jn* 8:2). The openness of the setting and the fervor of the crowd testify to the power and authority (*exousia*) of His word, which proves superior to the teaching of the Pharisees and the Scribes (cf. *Mt* 7:29), thereby exasperating them, as was often the case. The discovery of the sinful woman fits perfectly into their diabolical plan to discredit the Teacher from Nazareth (cf. *Mk* 10:17) before those who were captivated by His words and, ultimately, to bring about His downfall. The arrival of the group abruptly interrupts Jesus' teaching in the midst of the crowd. The situation appears favorable to the accusers and inescapable for Jesus (cf. *Jn* 20:16): if Jesus absolves the woman, He violates the Torah and may be accused accordingly; if He confirms her condemnation, His proverbial mercy and love may be called into question. The dramatic tension assumes a conflict between Jesus and His opponents concerning the interpretation of the Law: within the logic of the narrative, Jesus is portrayed as resisting an interpretation of the Law that would reduce justice to the mere execution of punishment. The evangelist presents the accusers as seeking to test Jesus and challenge His authority. Their confidence is all the greater because they deliberately present the legal prescription in its archaic form—death by stoning (cf. *Dt* 17:5), a severe form of capital punishment: "They said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

[20] *Cf.* D. A. CARSON, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 335–37. See also Craig S. KEENER, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 735–50.

Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. What then do You say?'" (*Jn* 8:4–5). The legal background of the episode is more complex than the narrative itself suggests[21]. Although the Mosaic Law prescribes severe penalties for adultery (*Lv* 20:10; *Dt* 22:22), scholars continue to debate the practical implementation of such penalties in first-century Judea. Likewise, the extent of Jewish judicial authority under Roman administration remains disputed. For this reason, the reference to stoning should be understood not only as a legal question but also as a narrative device that intensifies the confrontation between Jesus and His accusers[22].

"He stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground!"

The woman who is triumphantly brought before the Savior finds herself in an utterly unfortunate position, having been caught in *flagrante delicto*. She is, in effect, already condemned, and Jesus is consulted merely for a formal opinion: "But what do You say?" (*Jn* 8:5c). The accusers seek to achieve two objectives simultaneously. The woman herself matters little to them; yet if through her they might succeed in having Jesus stoned, the outcome would be ideal[23]. The Lord, however, initially responds with an unexpected gesture: "Jesus stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground" (*Jn* 8:6b).

This is the only instance in the New Testament in which Jesus Christ—who proclaimed the Word predominantly through oral teaching—is said to write something. This enigmatic sign has, unsurprisingly, stirred the imagination of many. Patristic, medieval, and modern commentators have proposed different symbolic readings of the gesture[24], yet none can be demonstrated directly from

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[21] J. DERRETT, M. DUNCAN, "Law in the New Testament: The Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery," *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–64): 1–26.

[22] N. T. WRIGHT, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 206–41.

[23] As previously noted, acts of sacrilege among the Jews were punished by stoning. Jesus Himself refers to this particular form of death prescribed by the Mosaic Law when He speaks, both historically and prophetically, of the prophets who were stoned in Jerusalem (cf. *Mt* 23:37; *Jn* 10:32). Crucifixion, by contrast, was a form of execution specific to the Roman Empire.

[24] Numerous hypotheses have been proposed regarding what Jesus might have written on the ground: the sins of the accusers, the ineffable Name of God (*i.e.*, the Tetragrammaton YHWH), the Decalogue or part of it, and so forth. Others suggest that Christ was doing nothing more than pointing with His finger toward the center of the earth, thus indicating *Sheol*, the place where, according to Jewish tradition, souls descend after death. Nevertheless, the text itself does not specify what Jesus wrote.

the text itself. Consequently, all subsequent interpretations remain conjectural and should be regarded as theological or symbolic readings rather than demonstrable historical conclusions.

It is often assumed that the silences of the Gospel narratives are meaningful and suggestive. Accordingly, the primary concern should not be what the Lord writes. The sacred author does not elaborate on this detail, nor do the Pharisees and Scribes, nor the woman herself. The meaning of this writing lies entirely in the very act of writing (performed twice; cf. *Jn* 8:6, 8). From this singular attitude indeed radiate multiple layers of significance. In its most common interpretation, the act carries a ritual implication, akin to the custom of washing one's hands as a sign of exoneration, withdrawal, or rejection of the judgment underway (cf. *Mt* 27:24). In this regard, reference has sometimes been made to an anticipation of the trial of Christ the Savior, to His silence before Pontius Pilate, and to His acceptance of the Cross[25].

On the other hand, writing generally implies the transmission of a message. Jesus' gesture may therefore be understood as a deliberate suspension of the controversy (the solitude of His inner prayer, as He so often did[26]) rather than an immediate response to the accusation. By stooping down and writing on the ground, He temporarily withdraws from the dispute and refuses to engage on the terms proposed by His opponents. The evangelist offers no explanation of what was written, leaving the significance of the gesture open to interpretation. For this reason, the emphasis should not be placed on the content of the writing itself, but on its narrative function. The action interrupts the escalating confrontation, creates a moment of reflection, and prepares the reader for the decisive response that follows[27].

This gesture may be understood as a symbolic act charged with profound theological meaning. By writing on the ground, the Johannine Jesus appears to confer a divine mark upon creation itself. The earth maintains a mysterious and constitutive relationship with the human being: humanity is formed from the dust of the ground and animated by the divine breath, yet through the Fall forfeits immortality and returns to the earth from which it was fashioned. Christ Himself, the incarnate Word, will dwell within the earth before ultimately overcoming death through the Resurrection. Consequently, Jesus' act of tracing words upon the dust should be seen as a gesture with deep symbolic resonance,

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25 See: Gilles BECQUET, *Lecture d'évangiles pour les dimanches et fêtes des temps principaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973): 201-203.

26 Cf. *Mt* 14:23; 26:36–39; *Mk* 1:35; 6:46; *Lk* 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 22:41; *Jn* 17, etc.

27 France QUERE, *Les femmes de l'évangile* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982): 21-22.

one that exceeds the limits of human comprehension. It may be interpreted as an implicit reminder of the fragility and transience of human existence, perpetually overshadowed by the reality of death. Addressed to the Pharisees—whose zeal was directed toward the woman's destruction—this gesture recalls the precarious condition of humanity, ever vulnerable to dissolution and return to dust[28].

"Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone!"

The Pharisees and Scribes pressed their case, confident of success, but Jesus suddenly rose and uttered perhaps the most famous words of His Gospel: "*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her!* Again, He stooped down and wrote on the ground" (*Jn* 8:7b–8). The statement constitutes a striking reversal of the accusers' expectations. Despite His gentleness and immeasurable mercy, Jesus now pronounces a firm directive. In the eyes of His enemies, He responds like a strict rabbi, turning the situation against them. He defeats them with their own weapons, unwaveringly reiterating the terms of the Old Covenant. The book of *Deuteronomy* prescribed that the first witnesses should begin the stoning, to be followed by the people. Paradoxically, the narrative reorients the criteria of judgment: virtue replaces testimony; the process becomes interiorized; the judge must first examine himself. For this reason, the Church Fathers would later teach that one must condemn sin but not despise the sinner, emphasizing mercy and repentance.

The passage appears to place particular emphasis on the dangers of hypocrisy and self-righteousness and confronts readers with the universality of human sinfulness, since we are not as righteous as we imagine[29]. Within the wider context of Jesus' teaching, moral responsibility extends beyond external actions to include thoughts, intentions, and desires (cf. *Mt* 5:27–30). If we despise the notorious sinner nearby, who nonetheless sheds the sincerest tears of repentance at the Lord's feet, and consider ourselves superior, we have no right even to compare ourselves with him (cf. *Lk* 7:36–50). Moreover, this woman did not sin alone. Why did her accusers not bring her accomplice,

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[28] Natalia MANOILESCU DINU, *Iisus Hristos Mântuitorul în lumina Sfintelor Evanghelii* (Bucuresti: Editura Bizantină, 2004), 343.

[29] In the Fifth Prayer of the Holy Unction, it is said, moreover, that "all our righteousness is before You as a filthy garment." – *Molitfelnic* (Bucuresti: Editura Institutului Biblic si de Misiune Ortodoxa, 2019), 159.

for according to the Law, the man caught in flagrante with her was also to be stoned? No word is mentioned of his absence. The absence of the male participant has frequently been noted by commentators and contributes to the asymmetrical character of the accusation. A striking cowardice, often overlooked, which speaks clearly of shared responsibility and equality in the one Body of Christ (cf. *1 Cor* 12:13; *Gal* 3:28; *Col* 3:11).

Following Jesus' challenge, the previously united group of accusers gradually disperses. The episode emphasizes the universality of human sinfulness and the impossibility of claiming absolute moral innocence.[30] The stoning, which according to the Law would have been just, is now invested by Christ with another function beyond execution: it must also reflect the holiness of the accuser. This alone is sufficient to interrupt the entire "chain of human weakness." The assembly breaks up and disperses: "And when they heard it, being convicted by their conscience, they went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last; and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst" (*Jn* 8:9). As we have seen, the Lord reverses perspective and reveals, to the guilty, the hierarchy of sin as existential failure rather than a measure of virtue, which is organically linked to agape love (cf. *1 Cor* 13)[31].

Beginning with the elders and likely ending with the youngest, all depart, having unconsciously shifted from accusers to the accused, struggling with the humiliation of defeat with difficulty[32]. This sinful woman, whom they had just dragged forcefully before Jesus and humiliated, now, resigned and humble, standing the entire time with bowed head, assumes, by the will of God, the unexpected role of both witness and judge. The text effectively reverses the accusation and places the accusers under scrutiny. The stratagem intended to ensnare Jesus had been so subtly foiled. And the Lord, again concerned with writing (cf. *Jn* 8:8), tempers, through His apparent absence, the shame of their scattering.

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[30] As suggested by the etymology of the name Michael (Hebrew *Mikha'el* = "Who is like God?"), or as beautifully expressed in the Cherubic Hymn of the Divine Orthodox Liturgy: "None of those bound by passions and carnal pleasures is worthy (*Oudeis axios...*) to come, to draw near, or to serve You, King of Glory; for to serve You is a great and awe-inspiring thing even for the heavenly powers" – *Liturghier* (Bucuresti: Editura Institutului Biblic si de Misiune Ortodoxa, 2012), 160.

[31] See my recent study: pr. lect. univ. dr. Mihai CIUREA, "Imnul iubirii din 1 Corinteni 13 sau despre dragostea (*agape*) care nu cade niciodată," *Mitropolia Olteniei* 5-8 (2025): 46-63.

[32] Some interpreters have suggested that the departure of the elders first may reflect their greater social experience and awareness of the implications of Jesus' response.

It is, however, difficult to determine with certainty what motivated the withdrawal of the Pharisees and Scribes. One possible explanation is that the force of Jesus' response lies not only in the reference to personal sinfulness but also in the practical implication of His command: *"Let him cast the first stone!"* The episode may suggest that the challenge was no longer merely theoretical. Those who had invoked the Law were now confronted with the responsibility of personally carrying out its penalty. In this respect, Jesus transforms a legal discussion into a question of individual moral accountability. Rather than pronouncing judgment Himself, He places the burden of judgment upon the accusers. Another factor that may have contributed to their withdrawal concerns the broader legal context of the period. Although the extent of Jewish authority in capital cases under Roman administration remains debated, several scholars have noted the complexities surrounding the implementation of such penalties. From this perspective, the command to cast the first stone may have exposed tensions between legal prescription and practical execution[33]. The text itself does not specify the precise reasons for the accusers' departure, yet it portrays them as unwilling to assume the role that their accusation required.

The episode therefore shifts attention from the guilt of the woman to the responsibility of those who seek to judge her. The accusers gradually withdraw from the scene, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. Their departure functions as an implicit acknowledgment that the attempted accusation has failed, thereby preparing the way for the final exchange between Jesus and the woman. Moreover, their withdrawal gives the appearance—entirely unusual for them—of mercy and forgiveness. Their departure may be interpreted as an implicit renunciation of the punishment they had sought to impose. In this way, the episode prepares the reader for Jesus' final response to the woman. The narrative depicts the accusers gradually withdrawing after Jesus' challenge, leaving the woman alone with Him. Their departure vindicates the woman, which is why the Lord later tells her: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (*Jn* 8:11b).

As for the woman caught in adultery, throughout this entire ordeal, she did not move. Between the tablets of the Law and the stones of stoning, she remained frozen. She remains exposed to the imminent possibility of punishment.

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[33] Thus, any attempt by them to carry out such a punishment themselves would have placed them in direct conflict with imperial law and rendered them culpable before the authorities. This is precisely what they would do with Jesus Christ, whom they brought to trial in the praetorium, before the procurator Pontius Pilate (cf. *Mt* 27:2; *Mk* 15:1; *Lk* 23:1; *Jn* 18:28-29; *Acts* 13:28; *1 Tm* 6:13).

And when death seemed imminent, she hears from the Lord a word of forgiveness, coupled with the command not to sin again. When Jesus asks her, "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?" she replies, *"No one, Lord!"*. Her response has often been interpreted by Christian commentators as suggestive of openness to Jesus' authority, although the narrative does not explicitly describe her interior disposition. The exchange prepares the reader for the declaration of forgiveness that follows and juxtaposes human helplessness and divine deliverance (cf. *1 Tm* 2:4). At this point, the episode shifts from confrontation to restoration and concludes with forgiveness and also an exhortation to abandon sin, a combination that many interpreters have associated with themes of repentance and restoration.

Conclusion

The *Pericope Adulterae* (*Jn* 7:53–8:11) occupies a distinctive place within the Christian tradition because of the convergence of two factors: its complex textual history and its enduring theological influence. The manuscript and patristic evidence surveyed in this study demonstrates that, although the passage circulated unevenly in the earliest stages of transmission and was absent from several important witnesses, it was nevertheless widely known and received within diverse Christian communities. Its preservation in the canonical tradition and its extensive reception among later Christian authors attest to its enduring significance for the life of the Church. The narrative itself presents a carefully constructed confrontation in which the legal accusation brought against the woman becomes secondary to the deeper moral and spiritual condition of all those involved. Rather than engaging primarily with the procedural aspects of the case, the evangelist directs attention toward the universal reality of human sinfulness and the necessity of personal accountability before God. Jesus neither denies the seriousness of sin nor dismisses the ethical demands of the Law. Instead, He reorients the discussion from external judgment to self-examination, exposing the inadequacy of a purely punitive approach divorced from awareness of one's own moral condition. Within this framework, the episode explores a dynamic relationship between justice and mercy. The woman is neither condemned nor declared innocent; she is confronted with the reality of her actions and simultaneously offered the possibility of renewal. Likewise, the accusers are not publicly humiliated or explicitly condemned. They are invited to recognize their own vulnerability to sin and to abandon a form

of judgment that neglects self-scrutiny. The narrative thus portrays compassion not as the suspension of moral truth but as the context in which acknowledgment of truth may open the possibility of moral transformation.

From a theological perspective, the *Pericope Adulterae* may therefore be understood as a significant locus for reflection on repentance, forgiveness, and communal discernment. Its enduring value lies not in providing a solution to every historical or textual question surrounding its transmission, but in its capacity to illuminate a fundamental dimension of the Christian message: the inseparable relationship between divine justice and divine mercy. In this respect, the passage continues to offer an important resource for theological reflection and ecclesial practice, reminding readers that authentic judgment begins with the recognition of one's own need for grace.

At the same time, the episode illustrates how legal, moral, and theological concerns converge within a single narrative framework. By shifting attention from the offense itself to the disposition of those who seek to judge it, the pericope challenges any interpretation of justice that is detached from self-examination and moral responsibility. The passage neither relativizes sin nor abolishes the demands of the Law; rather, it situates both within a broader horizon shaped by repentance, accountability, and the possibility of transformation. For this reason, the Pericope Adulterae continues to occupy an important place in contemporary biblical scholarship and theological reflection, serving as a paradigmatic text for exploring the relationship between judgment, mercy, and the restoration of the human person.

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The Formation of Romanian Orthodox Missionary Preaching: Theological Education, Episcopal Leadership, and Ecclesial Identity in Banat and Transylvania in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT. Romanian Orthodox missionary preaching in Banat and Transylvania during the first half of the twentieth century took shape through the interaction of theological education, episcopal guidance, and the ecclesiastical and national challenges of the period. The theological schools of Arad, Caransebeș, Sibiu, Oradea, and Cluj trained clergy through homiletics, catechesis, liturgical practice, student societies, and ecclesiastical periodicals. Their activity was linked to the pastoral initiatives of Orthodox hierarchs, who promoted preaching as a means of doctrinal clarification, moral formation, and community consolidation. In a region marked by the Great Union of 1918, the Vienna Award, the Second World War, and intense interconfessional relations, missionary preaching became a central instrument of Romanian Orthodox self-understanding and pastoral action. Particular attention is given to the Orthodox response to Evangelical Protestant movements, described in Romanian ecclesiastical and historiographical usage as "Neo-Protestant" groups, and to the way bishops, professors, and students shaped a culture of the pulpit. The 2025 centenary of Grigorie Comșa's accession to the episcopal see of Arad provides a timely occasion for reassessing the connection between theological formation, ecclesial identity, national consciousness, and pastoral responsibility. The article interprets preaching as a form of ecclesial formation, cultural leadership, and communal consolidation.

Keywords: Banat; ecclesial identity; Evangelical Protestant movements; interconfessional relations; missionary preaching; Orthodox episcopate; Orthodox homiletics; Romanian Orthodox Church; theological education; Transylvania.

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1. Introduction

The history of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Banat and Transylvania during the first half of the twentieth century, including the development of missionary preaching, may be divided into four specific stages. The first covered the years 1900–1918, a period in which ecclesiastical life unfolded, in the words of the future Patriarch Miron Cristea, "in a country under foreign rule"[1]; the second, between 1918 and 1940, was characterized by the freedom and sovereignty gained through the act of Union of December 1, 1918; the third, between 1940 and 1945, was marked, for Transylvania, by the Vienna Award of 1940 and, for the whole of Romania, by the Second World War; the fourth, between 1945 and 1950, was the period in which, with the establishment of the totalitarian regime, religious freedoms were restricted[2].

The dynamics of interconfessional relations in Banat and Transylvania during the first half of the twentieth century had a significant impact on the way in which the Orthodox Church structured and formulated its missionary sermons. This period witnessed an adaptation of missionary messages and strategies, as the Church sought to respond effectively to interconfessional challenges and to preserve the integrity of Orthodox communities. The presence of certain Evangelical Protestant movements and the intensification of confessional competition led the Orthodox Church to develop a distinct missionary approach. In Romanian ecclesiastical and historiographical usage, these movements are commonly referred to as "Neo-Protestant" groups, especially Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Pentecostals.

Romanian Orthodox hierarchs paid close attention to the establishment of theological schools in their dioceses, and for this reason Orthodox clergy were trained to respond directly and effectively to the doctrinal differences that arose in relation to these religious movements, using solid theological arguments in their sermons and demonstrating a sound knowledge of Holy Scripture. This led to a greater emphasis on theological education among the clergy, who were thus better prepared to answer the questions of the faithful[3]. Missionary sermons

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1 Elie Miron Cristea, *Pastorale și cuvântări ale unui episcop român în țară sub stăpânire străină* [Pastoral letters and addresses of a Romanian bishop in a country under foreign rule], vol. 2 (Bucharest, 1923), 306 pp.

2 Mircea Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române. Compendiu* [History of the Romanian Orthodox Church: A compendium], 3rd rev. ed. (Bucharest: BASILICA, 2013), 483–510

3 See Miron Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania, în prima jumătate a sec. al XX-lea* [Preaching in the Romanian Orthodox Church in Transylvania in the first half of the twentieth century], 2nd ed. (Oradea: Editura Cogito, 2010), 356.

became an essential instrument for communicating Orthodox teachings and for responding to competing confessional influences and to the religious diversification of the age. Particular emphasis was placed on doctrinal clarity and on the relevance of the messages within the interconfessional context, with the aim of attracting and preserving the faithful within the Orthodox Church.

Major events such as the Union of 1918, the Vienna Award, and the Second World War had profound repercussions on ecclesiastical life in Banat and Transylvania. These events not only reshaped borders and political structures, but also influenced the way in which the Church fulfilled its spiritual and social role. The Union of 1918 was a turning point for the Romanian Orthodox Church, offering it the opportunity to extend its influence into the newly united territories. This event led to administrative and ecclesiastical unification and to the revitalization of spiritual life. Sermons and ecclesiastical activities began to reflect national sentiment more strongly and to contribute to the consolidation of national identity within the context of the new state reality. "In this socio-political and cultural context, the Romanian Orthodox Church developed a prolific homiletic activity with major implications for the preservation of the ecclesial and national consciousness of the Romanian people."[4]

The year 2025 marks the centenary of Grigorie Comșa's accession to the episcopal see of Arad, an anniversary that gives renewed relevance to the analysis of the ecclesiastical, educational, and missionary context in which his preaching activity took shape. Against this background, the role of theological schools and of Banat and Transylvanian hierarchs in the formation and orientation of Orthodox missionary preaching during the first half of the twentieth century acquires particular significance. In this region, missionary preaching appears as more than a pastoral reaction to confessional competition; it was the expression of an institutional culture shaped by theological academies, episcopal supervision, student societies, ecclesiastical periodicals, and national-ecclesial mobilization. Pastoral letters, diocesan publications, homiletic manuals, histories of theological schools, and Romanian ecclesiastical historiography make it possible to reconstruct the institutional and pastoral framework within which this culture of the pulpit developed.

This article therefore asks how Romanian Orthodox missionary preaching in Banat and Transylvania was formed during the first half of the twentieth century, and how theological education, episcopal leadership, ecclesiastical

[4] Filip Albu, *Opera omiletică a Episcopului Grigorie Comșa al Aradului* [The homiletic work of Bishop Grigorie Comșa of Arad], doctoral thesis in theology (Arad: Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu" din Arad, 2010), 45.

publications, and pastoral responses to interconfessional competition contributed to the shaping of a distinct culture of the pulpit. More specifically, it examines three related questions: first, what role did the theological schools and academies of Arad, Caransebeș, Sibiu, Oradea, and Cluj play in the homiletic and missionary preparation of future clergy? Second, how did Orthodox hierarchs understand preaching as an instrument of doctrinal clarification, moral formation, and communal consolidation? Third, how did political events and confessional encounters influence the themes and functions of missionary preaching?

Methodologically, the study combines ecclesiastical-historical analysis with a contextual reading of homiletic and pastoral sources. It draws on histories of theological education, diocesan periodicals, pastoral letters, episcopal addresses, homiletic manuals, theological yearbooks, and Romanian ecclesiastical historiography. The article does not attempt to offer an exhaustive textual analysis of all sermons produced in the period under discussion. Rather, it reconstructs the institutional and pastoral framework within which missionary preaching was cultivated, practiced, and understood as a form of ecclesial formation and cultural leadership.

2. Theological Schools and Episcopal Leadership in Banat

The theological schools of Banat and Transylvania constituted the principal institutional framework in which future priests and theology professors received homiletic, catechetical, and missionary formation. Under episcopal guidance, these institutions shaped generations of clergy who linked Orthodox religious consciousness with Romanian national identity.

2.1. The Arad Theological-Pedagogical Institute and the Formation of Homiletic Culture

The first of these schools in Banat was the Theological-Pedagogical Institute of Arad, which dated back to 1823 in the form of a clerical school, united with the normal school, initially with a two-year duration and, from 1825 onward, with a three-year duration[5]. Among the theological disciplines taught there, beginning in 1834, were Ecclesiastical Rhetoric — Homiletics — and Oratorical Style — Practical Homiletics. Transformed into an Institute through the union of the two sections in 1876, it was led from 1901 by Roman

[5] Mircea Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* [History of the Romanian Orthodox Church], vol. 3 (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1981), 249.

Ciorogariu, professor of homiletics and future bishop of Oradea from 1917. This certainly explains the fact that, "in addition to the other disciplines studied, the young theologians of Arad received solid homiletic training, being offered the opportunity to overcome their emotions and display their oratorical qualities already during their studies, by delivering sermons on various occasions."[6]

The cultural and religious contribution of this Institute, later transformed into an Academy in 1927, abusively abolished in 1948 and re-established after 1990 as a Faculty of Theology[7], was also made possible through the founding of the "Reading Society of the Romanian Theologians of Arad" in 1867, as well as through the appearance of the literary-ecclesiastical publication *Speranța* in 1869, later transformed into *Lumina* in 1871[8].

The promotion of Romanian culture and Orthodox theology entered a new stage with the accession to the leadership of the Diocese of Arad of a former graduate of the Theological Institute, Bishop Ioan Papp (1903–1925). Among his many pastoral-missionary activities, mention must first be made of his concern regarding the expansion of Evangelical Protestant missionary activity, a phenomenon perceived by the Orthodox hierarchy as an important pastoral challenge. This major concern is reflected extensively in the pastoral letters sent to priests before the beginning of the First World War, in which he urged them to beware of "false prophets," "foreign to our language and faith,"[9] who sought to attract Orthodox believers to their erroneous teachings. Faced with this pastoral challenge, Bishop Papp considered it necessary that, under his leadership, the clergy of the diocese should intensify their catechetical and preaching activity in order to consolidate Orthodox identity.[10]

The second major concern may be considered the full involvement of Bishop Ioan Papp in the struggle to promote education in the Romanian language through confessional schools, important institutions of Romanian cultural formation, thus continuing the work of educating children which had been successfully carried out by his predecessor, Bishop Ioan Meţianu. In this context, we shall mention the important role of the diocesan bulletin of the Diocese of Arad, *Biserica și Școala* [*The Church and the School*], published at the initiative of Bishop Ioan Meţianu on January 30, 1877, which established itself as a true platform for the

6 Miron Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat în prima jumătate a sec. al XX-lea* [Preaching in the Romanian Orthodox Church in Banat in the first half of the twentieth century], 2nd ed. (Oradea: Editura Universității din Oradea, 2010), 7–9.

7 The Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Arad celebrated its bicentenary in 2022.

8 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 7.

9 Ioan I. Papp, "Pastorală de Paști" [Easter pastoral letter], *Biserica și Școala*, no. 13 (1904): 103.

10 See P. Chirica, "Sectele religioase" [Religious sects], *Biserica și Școala* 48, no. 49 (1924): 1–2

defense of Romanian cultural and ecclesiastical institutions in Banat and Transylvania. A direct relationship may, moreover, be established between the pastoral-missionary work of the one who would later become metropolitan in Sibiu and his achievements as bishop in Arad, materialized in "the organization and guidance of hundreds of Romanian confessional primary schools."[11]

In turn, Bishop Ioan Papp took care of education in the Romanian language, a conclusive example being the Orthodox Civil School for Girls in Arad, which he founded and provided with the necessary resources. This cultural and social achievement of the bishop was accomplished in a difficult context, since "the Hungarian government was conducting the fiercest campaign to abolish the autonomy of the Romanian Orthodox Church and to seize the confessional schools."[12] Even after the achievement of the Great Union, the bishop did not cease to advise the faithful of his diocese to send their children to school, so that they might learn a trade and also receive a religious and moral education.

A substantial missionary component is found in Bishop Ioan Papp's pastoral letters from the wartime period and from the years immediately following it. The former reflect the Church's care for the soldiers at the front as well as for their families, who had to be helped and protected, while the latter contain assessments of the destruction suffered by many churches and of the persecutions endured by priests and teachers at the hands of foreign rule[13]. These pastoral letters never fail to combat social evils and passions of every kind, which weigh upon Christian morality and lead some people away from the Church and toward religious indifferentism.

In continuity with these pastoral and missionary concerns, Grigorie Comșa's episcopate in Arad between 1925 and 1935 acquired particular importance for the revival of theological education and for the development of missionary preaching. His contribution to the renewal of the Arad theological school, understood as a source of ecclesiastical culture and clerical formation, supported a broader revitalization of church life in the diocese. The centenary of his accession to the episcopal see of Arad, marked in 2025, offers a relevant chronological point of reference for reassessing the relationship between homiletic formation, pastoral leadership, and Orthodox missionary activity in interwar Banat. In the address delivered at his installation as Bishop of Arad, Comșa reminded the priests that "if we do not teach the people, neither shall

11 Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români* [Dictionary of Romanian theologians], 3rd ed. (Sibiu: Editura Andreiana, 2014), 381.
12 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat,* 24–25.
13 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 31–33.

we have the happiness of seeing the results of the pulpit, among which the most important must be: the confession of sins before the priest and deeds worthy of repentance."[14] This recognition of the central role of preaching in the priestly mission would be reiterated throughout his episcopal ministry, alongside his sustained concern for theological education and high-quality homiletic formation.

Certainly, the foremost place in the preaching activity of the Arad hierarch was occupied by missionary preaching, also called apologetic preaching in homiletic treatises[15], usually delivered on the occasion of canonical visits and church consecrations. In his very first year of missionary activity, he "made 65 canonical visits and participated in countless religious gatherings, bringing the light of the Gospel of Christ into the vast Diocese of Arad through the sermons he delivered and through his books and brochures distributed in every parish."[16]

The apologetic dimension of missionary preaching is evident in the fact that, in addition to responding to proselytizing initiatives by Evangelical Protestant groups, this thematic preaching aimed to prepare the faithful for encounters with competing religious discourses, through a better knowledge of Orthodox faith and spirituality. Here too must be included the nationalist component, namely the defense of national existence, of the Romanian language and culture, which constitutes the context and specificity of ecclesiastical preaching. His patriotic sentiment, affirmed throughout his entire episcopal ministry, became evident on the occasion of his pastoral visits to Romanian parishes in Yugoslavia and in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, when he evoked before the Romanian diaspora, as we would say today, glorious pages from the past of the nation and of the Romanian Orthodox Church.[17] Bishop Grigorie Comșa was, moreover, among the first Transylvanian hierarchs to draw attention to the fact that, after the reunification of Romania, a powerful propaganda campaign had been launched against the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Church that had preserved the unity of the Romanian soul throughout a troubled history.[18]

It must be mentioned that in Arad, Roman Ciorogariu was succeeded by two professors of homiletics, both doctors of theology, Romul Nestor and Simion

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[14] Grigorie Comșa, "Cuvântarea la instalarea în scaunul episcopal al Episcopiei Aradului" [Address at the installation in the episcopal see of the Diocese of Arad] (Arad: Tiparul Tipografiei Diecezane, 1925), 18.

[15] Vasile Gordon, ed., Adrian Ivan, and Nicușor Beldiman, *Omiletica* [Homiletics] (Bucharest: BASILICA, 2015), 391.

[16] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 61.

[17] See *Biserica și Școala* 52, nos. 47–48 (1928): 1–7.

[18] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 63–64.

Şiclovan, who trained future clergy with great professionalism and enthusiasm, preparing them to excel in the art of preaching and catechizing the faithful. This explains the fact that "in parallel with missionary activity, the students carried out a rich homiletic activity, delivering a series of sermons in the chapel of the penitentiary and of the hospital in Arad, (...) the final-year students being scheduled to preach on every feast day."[19]

The successor of Bishop Grigorie Comşa in the leadership of the Diocese of Arad, Bishop Andrei Magieru, who had been the first rector of the Theological Academy of Oradea, founded in 1923, was interested from the very beginning in "the improvement of theological education, with the aim of forming a generation of priests capable of confronting the problems of the time. In this regard, he placed particular emphasis on the solid homiletic training of priests."[20]

During the nine years in which he served as hierarch-vicar in the Diocese of Oradea, alongside the venerable Bishop Roman Ciorogariu, he visited numerous parishes, observed the level of the priests' training and the frequency with which they preached, corrected the shortcomings he noticed, and urged them to deliver well-prepared sermons. Having thus acquired extensive pastoral-missionary experience, Bishop Andrei Magieru also wished to have, in the Diocese of Arad, conscientious priests who would work with great zeal and self-sacrifice in their parishes.[21] To this end, in 1938, through a circular order, he reminded priests of their duty to preach on every Sunday and national feast day: "Likewise, no national celebration shall remain without an address in church. We shall proceed by disciplinary means, for negligence and incapacity, against those priests whose pulpits shall remain silent from now on."[22]

The ever-increasing pastoral-missionary demands required the full involvement of the clergy in strengthening Orthodox teaching in the context of confessional competition and in affirming and consolidating the national ideal, which was to be affected at the beginning of the Second World War. A conclusive example is provided by the content of a special Pastoral Letter addressed to the clergy and the faithful, in which Bishop Andrei Magieru urged the defense of the homeland in the context of the approaching war: "We do not covet a single patch

[19] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 12.
[20] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 79.
[21] "Cuvântarea la instalare a PS Episcop Andrei" [Address at the installation of His Grace Bishop Andrei], *Biserica şi Şcoala* 60, nos. 6–7 (1936): 4.
[22] Quoted in Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 100.

of foreign land, but we would remain sealed with shame by history if we did not know how to defend the country that God has given us."[23]

This learned hierarch, a living conscience of the Orthodox Church, followed in the line of his illustrious predecessor, Bishop Grigorie Comșa, expressed concern regarding the effects of Evangelical Protestant missionary activity on the cohesion of Orthodox communities, making the following observations: "With what ease our people have been divided into religious sects, which preach hatred toward those who have remained faithful to the ancestral Church. This was the first fragmentation of our soul. Judging today, after the passage of time, those apostles of hatred by their fruits, who can still say that Christ the Lord was the One who sent them among our people?"[24]

Like his predecessor in the episcopal see of Arad, Andrei Magieru paid great attention to missionary activity, first in the Diocese of Oradea and later in that of Arad, "delivering impressive missionary sermons within religious circles,"[25] or on other occasions, for example to former Greek Catholics who had returned to Orthodoxy, and during the war by encouraging wounded Romanian soldiers in hospitals. The Arad case shows that missionary preaching developed at the intersection of theological instruction, episcopal supervision, and the defense of Romanian confessional education. Homiletic formation was therefore inseparable from the broader pastoral task of preserving Orthodox identity in a competitive religious environment.

2.2. The Caransebeș Theological-Pedagogical Institute and Missionary Formation

The second theological school in Banat was the Theological-Pedagogical Institute of Caransebeș, established when Ioan Popasu, the first bishop of the Diocese of Caransebeș, transferred the Romanian section of the Clerical School from Vârșeț, in accordance with the decision of the Sibiu Synod of 1865. From 1874, a pedagogical section was also included, as already existed in Sibiu and Arad, and from 1896 the length of study was extended to four years. Through the efforts of this hierarch, numerous elementary, or popular, schools were founded in the diocese, together with a printing house in which a series of works were printed, as well as the diocesan bulletin, entitled *Foaia diecezană*, which represented

[23] Andrei Magieru, *Pastorală* [Pastoral letter], 1939, quoted in Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 83.
[24] Quoted in Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 94.
[25] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 94.

a platform of Romanian Orthodoxy in this diocese, keeping alive in the hearts of clergy and faithful the ideal of union with Romania.[26]

With the inherent difficulties of any beginning, this Institute, where competent teaching staff taught, followed an ascending course under the next worthy hierarchs, Nicolae Popea and Miron Cristea, the future patriarch of Romania, who knew how to invigorate the teaching activity of the theological school and ecclesiastical life in general. The scholar-hierarchs of this diocese, true models for theology students, also distinguished themselves through their cultural contributions, some of them becoming members of the Romanian Academy. They instilled in the future clergy of the diocese love for the nation and for the Orthodox faith, as well as a sense of pastoral responsibility.

Bishop Nicolae Popea, a distinguished scholar and member of the Romanian Academy, had been, in his youth, the secretary of Metropolitan Andrei Şaguna and a professor at the Theological-Pedagogical Institute of Sibiu, learning from his mentor the art of ecclesiastical leadership. Thus, in 1889, when he was elected bishop of Caransebeş, he led the diocese with great wisdom and devotion. He showed special care for the Theological-Pedagogical Institute of Caransebeş, erecting a new building in 1891, and concerned himself with sending young men to study, with confessional schools, and with improving the material condition of the diocese[27]. Shepherding the diocese until 1908, he was the hierarch who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, prepared and intensified the awakening of the Romanians and their preparation for the making of the Great Union, through the strong affirmation of their national and religious identity with their brothers in Romania.

After assuming leadership of the diocese, Bishop Miron Cristea urged the young theology students, in the address delivered at the opening of the 1913 school year, to acquire solid knowledge, because in order to guide the faithful whom they would shepherd, "love, faith, persevering work, and patience are needed."[28] On the cultural level, Bishop Miron Cristea "defended the Romanian confessional schools of Banat against the attempts of the Budapest Government to abolish them,"[29] successfully continuing the struggle of his predecessors to defend the national identity of the Romanians in a very difficult historical context.

The professors of homiletics at the beginning of the twentieth century at this theological Institute, which was transformed into a Theological Academy in 1927 — Moise Ienciu, Dimitrie Cioloca, and Archpriest Andrei Ghidiu — strove to

[26] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 505.
[27] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 505–6.
[28] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 19.
[29] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 190.

train the students thoroughly, so that they would be capable of using preaching and catechesis to preserve Orthodox identity in the context of the missionary activity of Evangelical Protestant groups. The special contribution of the cultural society "Ioan Popasu" of the Theological Institute, founded in 1868, must also be noted; through it, during the First World War, theology students carried out extensive missionary work by collecting funds for disabled soldiers and for war orphans.

The first bishop of the Diocese of Caransebeș after the achievement of the reunification of the Romanian nation, Iosif Traian Bădescu, paid special attention to the activity of the Theological Institute and, after many efforts, succeeded in 1927 in transforming this Institute into a Theological Academy, with a four-year bachelor's degree cycle. During that period of spiritual and cultural effervescence, theology students organized, within the "Ioan Popasu" society, artistic programs, commemorations of hierarchs from Banat or Transylvania, and study trips throughout Romania. In this context, mention must be made of the existence of a "Missionary Association" of fourth-year students, which organized missions in the villages around the city of Caransebeș, with the participation of several professors who preached, while the students offered artistic programs to the locals, with a strong impact upon them.[30]

The next bishop of Caransebeș, Vasile Lăzărescu (1934–1941), who later became bishop and archbishop of Timișoara and metropolitan of Banat, already had rich academic teaching experience, begun in Sibiu and continued in Oradea[31], as professor of Dogmatics and Moral Theology, which explains his substantial and fruitful involvement in the life of the Theological Academy of Banat. In addition to the administrative resources that would ensure the proper development of student life, he strove to fill the vacant teaching positions, to grant numerous scholarships to outstanding students, and to ask theology professors to publish more and more studies and articles; in a word, to promote and intensify the cultural and spiritual life of the theology students, priests, and faithful of his diocese.

Both in Caransebeș and in Timișoara, he was concerned with the cultural life of the two dioceses, carefully guiding and supervising the diocesan bulletins *Foaia diecezană* in Caransebeș and *Biserica Bănățeană* in Timișoara, the homiletic journal *Duh și Adevăr*, and the journals *Mitropolia Banatului* and *Calendarul Eparhial*. Through these publications, he intensified ecclesiastical life and theological culture,

[30] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 20–21.
[31] Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 332–33.

encouraging professors and students to publish studies and articles, sermons, and ecclesiastical addresses. All these positive actions and remarkable achievements prepared priests and theologians to withstand the difficulties that were to arise after the establishment of the totalitarian regime in Romania.[32]

Fully aware of the approach of difficult times for the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bishop Vasile Lăzărescu consistently sought to ensure that theology students received a solid education within the Academy, accompanied by thorough spiritual formation, so that, as priests, they might become fully involved in the pastoral-missionary work of the parishes, offering the faithful examples of authentic Christian life and strengthening them in the Orthodox faith.[33]

The last bishop of the Diocese of Caransebeș, Veniamin Nistor, an illustrious Romanian scholar who shepherded the diocese between 1941 and 1949, followed in the line of his predecessors, protecting and developing ecclesiastical life and giving special attention to the Theological Academy and to the monasteries. His activity as a military priest during the First World War made him deeply sensitive to the sufferings of Romanian soldiers wounded on the battlefield, whom he constantly strengthened spiritually and encouraged, as a true shepherd of souls. Before becoming bishop, he published in many journals; therefore, once he came to the helm of the Diocese of Caransebeș, a new journal entitled *Altarul Banatului* appeared at his initiative, beginning in 1944, in which the professors of the Theological Academy published studies, in parallel with the old *Foaia Diecezană*, which continued to appear.[34]

In the pastoral letters published during the war, Bishop Veniamin Nistor urged the faithful of the diocese to remain attached to the Orthodox tradition, in the context of the intensified missionary activity of certain Evangelical Protestant groups. He expressed the same view in his Easter Pastoral Letter of 1945, warning the faithful to remain within the bosom of the Church and to beware of the proselytism of false apostles, who proclaim "another Gospel, according to human tradition" (Colossians 2:8). Another eloquent example is the New Year Pastoral Letter of 1948, through which he urged them to preserve the good values of our Christian nation and to listen to the priests, so as to remain connected to the pastoral and liturgical life of the parish.

The missionary-apologetic dimension is, moreover, very present in all his occasional sermons and addresses, from those delivered on the occasion of his election, investiture, and ordination, to those given during his countless

[32] Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 333.
[33] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 22.
[34] Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 458.

canonical visits and church consecrations.[35] The Caransebeș experience confirms the same pattern: theological schools did not merely transmit doctrinal knowledge, but created practical missionary networks through student societies, diocesan periodicals, public preaching, and charitable initiatives. In this case too, episcopal leadership transformed theological education into a wider pastoral instrument, capable of linking doctrinal formation, ecclesiastical culture, and national responsibility.

3. Theological Schools and Episcopal Leadership in Transylvania

National and social issues were central to the pastoral-missionary work of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Transylvania and Banat, because here "the Church was the sole leader of the Romanian people under foreign rule, and it was natural that all the efforts of the hierarchs and of the more learned priests should first be directed toward these issues and only afterward toward theological ones."[36] Nevertheless, theological literature and the ecclesiastical press developed progressively, as we have observed, thanks to the sustained activity of the hierarchs and theology professors.

The national-ecclesiastical context was very similar in the two Romanian provinces, Banat and Transylvania, before the achievement of the Great Union, having many points in common, such as: similar developments of the theological schools, which began as sections of pedagogy and theology at the beginning of the nineteenth century, continued by becoming, through their union, diocesan theological-pedagogical institutes, and later, in the first half of the twentieth century, were transformed into Theological Academies with a four-year duration; scholar-hierarchs who successively led two dioceses, some of whom had previously been professors of theology; cultural societies established to support the promotion of theological education and student life; large-scale missionary activities, with the direct involvement of hierarchs, theology professors, and theology students; and the development of theological publishing through journals and diocesan bulletins. The spiritual and cultural life of the Romanians in the two provinces, even under the difficult conditions of that era, underwent substantial development, as national spirit and Orthodox faith asserted themselves ever more strongly through the contributions of the hierarchs and clergy, with the main objective of achieving union with Romania.[37]

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[35] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 164–68.
[36] Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, vol. 3, 287.
[37] Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române. Compendiu*, 472–74.

3.1. The "Andreian" Seminary of Sibiu and the Şagunian Homiletic Legacy

The first and oldest theological school in Transylvania was the "Andreian" Seminary in Sibiu, originating in 1804 in the form of courses for future teachers and future candidates for ordination. Through the effort and skill of the future Metropolitan Andrei Şaguna, the six-month courses were extended to one year in 1846, then to two years of study in 1854, and, from 1861, to three years, in the form of a pedagogical-theological seminary institute.[38]

Metropolitan Andrei Şaguna's institutional vision was also materialized, as is known, in the cultural field through "the organization of Romanian Orthodox primary and secondary education in Transylvania, placed under the guidance of the Church,"[39] through the founding of the newspaper *Telegraful Român* in 1853, and through the establishment of the ASTRA Association in 1861. "The exhortations in the cultural and educational sphere bore fruit, for the Şagunian ideal, which did not prove to be a utopia, was constant, as he so often preached from the pulpit: the elevation of the people through culture and Christian education, toward the attainment of social and national rights."[40]

The hierarch who led the Theological-Pedagogical Institute of Sibiu at the beginning of the twentieth century was Metropolitan Ioan Meţianu, who had previously led the Diocese of Arad and who continued the ecclesiastical policy of Saint Metropolitan Andrei Şaguna. Among his remarkable achievements we mention: "the guidance of the construction works of the metropolitan cathedral in Sibiu (1902–1906), of a new building for the Theological-Pedagogical Institute, of the activity of this Institute and of the nearly 800 confessional primary schools in the Archdiocese of Sibiu; the establishment of various foundations for the support of Romanian pupils and students or for other cultural and philanthropic purposes."[41]

Through his efforts, the Institute's courses were extended to four years in 1907, and the number of professors, as well as their specialized training, increased exponentially. Among the professors of homiletics, a discipline illustrated in the nineteenth century by the famous Zaharia Boiu, the following stand out: Dr. Vasile

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[38] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania, în prima jumătate a sec. al XX-lea*, 28–29.

[39] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 630.

[40] Nicuşor Beldiman, *Predica în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Muntenia în secolul al XX-lea. Analiză şi evaluare* [Preaching in the Romanian Orthodox Church in Wallachia in the twentieth century: Analysis and evaluation] (Giurgiu: Editura Episcopiei Giurgiului, 2013), 41.

[41] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 381.

Stan, who later became vicar of the Archdiocese of Sibiu and then bishop of Maramureș in 1938, and Dr. Silviu Dragomir. At the beginning of the twentieth century, George Aramă's *Homiletics* (Bucharest, 1913) was used as a textbook.[42]

Although Metropolitan Ioan Meţianu was advanced in age when he assumed leadership in Sibiu, he undertook several canonical visits to parishes and consecrated churches, regularly delivering missionary sermons that had a special impact upon his listeners. With regard to his missionary activity, mention must also be made of his permanent concern for the confessional schools, which he visited frequently and which, through his pastoral care, came to benefit from libraries established through his efforts. He is also responsible for the introduction of priestly conferences, which also aimed at the homiletic and catechetical improvement of the clergy in a decisive era for raising the religious and cultural level of the Romanians in Transylvania[43]. His initiatives and efforts to keep alive the national consciousness and the sense of belonging to the Romanian Orthodox Church among the faithful of his diocese at the beginning of the twentieth century had beneficial results, especially in the difficult context of the growing pressures exerted by the Budapest government to restrict the religious rights of the Romanians. All his pastoral-administrative actions were directed toward missionary work, since, in addition to all the previously mentioned difficulties, one must also take into account the intensification of Evangelical Protestant missionary activity, with visible pastoral effects in some parishes.

Similarly to the two Theological Institutes in Banat, the students of the Sibiu Institute carried out, under the guidance of their professors, numerous cultural-missionary activities, such as cultural and artistic programs in which, alongside poems or carols, occasional addresses were delivered, some of which were published in *Telegraful Român*. From a missionary point of view, the participation of the theology students' choir in countless church consecrations must be emphasized, the musical concerts performed being received by the faithful with particular joy. During that period, while he was in Sibiu as secretary of *Telegraful Român* and deacon at the metropolitan cathedral, the future bishop of Arad, Grigorie Comșa, noted in this newspaper that the "Andrei Șaguna" Reading Society, which every year organized cultural gatherings on the anniversary of the great Șaguna's death, had great merit in the sound preparation of the future missionaries of Romanianism.[44]

[42] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 30.
[43] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 71.
[44] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 32.

A decisive stage in the activity of this theological school came after the achievement of the Great Union, more precisely after 1921, when the newly elected metropolitan of Transylvania, Nicolae Bălan, raised the old Theological Institute of Sibiu to the rank of academy, under the name "Andreian Theological Academy," with the right to issue bachelor's degrees in 1943, later becoming a University-Level Theological Institute in 1948[45]. Aware of the imperative of thoroughly educating and training future priests, Metropolitan Bălan asked theology professors "to raise the level of the students' training, and the students to raise their work to the level of the new requirements."[46]

With regard to the development of missionary preaching, which increased simultaneously in all the dioceses of Transylvania and Banat after the First World War, the metropolitan of Sibiu distinguished himself through numerous substantial and persuasive addresses of an apologetic-missionary character, delivered on the occasion of canonical visits and church consecrations, as well as during visits made to schools and high schools in Transylvanian towns. During the Second World War, the metropolitan's missionary activity stands out in liberated Bessarabia and in military hospitals, where he was accompanied by other hierarchs and numerous clergy.[47]

Another desideratum of Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan was fulfilled by sending the best-prepared students, with scholarships, to universities in the West; they later became eminent professors of the theological academy or high-ranking hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Among the teaching staff who taught Homiletics were Gheorghe Secaș, Spiridon Cândea, and Dumitru Călugăr, and, for one academic year, 1938–1939, Professor Liviu Stan, later professor of Ecclesiastical Law.[48]

Last but not least, inspired by the exceptional pastoral-missionary work of their metropolitan, the Sibiu students of the interwar period voluntarily engaged in a series of missionary projects, such as collecting funds for the needy and offering donations for the renovation of churches and monasteries. These actions were also stimulated by the activity of the professors of homiletics, through whom they discovered the classical models of pastoral ministry represented by the great Hierarchs of Orthodoxy.[49]

[45] Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 50.
[46] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 33.
[47] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 110–16.
[48] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 34–35.
[49] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 38.

3.2. The Oradea Theological Academy and Practical Missionary Training

The second theological school in Transylvania, in chronological order, was that of the Diocese of Oradea. It was founded in 1923 through the persistent efforts of Bishop Roman Ciorogariu, who had previously led the Theological-Pedagogical Institute of Arad, first as a Theological Institute and then as a four-year Theological Academy. His teaching experience in Arad helped Bishop Roman organize the new institution of theological education impeccably, combining theoretical knowledge with practical skills. Thus, the theology students "were scheduled to preach and sing at the 'Sunday School' in Oradea, so that they might become accustomed to the art of oratory and missionary work, both so necessary in pastoral activity. In order to increase their theological knowledge, a series of conferences were organized within religious, catechetical, and pastoral circles."[50]

Missionary preaching was cultivated and promoted by Bishop Roman, even though, due to his age and health, he carried out only a small number of church consecrations and canonical visits. He was deeply concerned with strengthening the preaching activity of the priests in his diocese, asking the clergy to catechize pupils and to preach at services held outside churches, seeking to provide a catechetical and pastoral response to the missionary activity of Evangelical Protestant groups. Mention must be made of his initiative, materialized in the appearance of the sermon collection entitled *Biblioteca amvonului* [*The Library of the Pulpit*], the establishment of *Biblioteca bunului creştin* [*The Library of the Good Christian*], and the editing of the *Calendarul diecezan* [*Diocesan Calendar*], all of which had the declared purpose of raising the theological and cultural level of priests and parishioners.[51]

A novel decision for academic theological education in Transylvania, taken by the Diocesan Council of Oradea, was the admission in 1929 of a female baccalaureate graduate as a student, on the grounds that young women theologians would become collaborators of priests in the religious education of the people. Later, all theological faculties and academies in the country would also admit girls, who would become religion teachers until 1948, a situation that would resume after 1990.

The first rector of this academy was the professor of New Testament and hierarch-vicar of the Diocese of Oradea, Andrei Magieru, who became bishop of Arad in 1935.[52] As in the other institutions of theological education in

[50] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 42.
[51] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 152–53.
[52] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 351.

Banat and Transylvania, the theology students of Oradea were also involved in missionary activities, especially through preaching. One such example was the "organization of 'missionary vespers' at the church in the city center, in which theology students participated with chants, conferences, and sermons."[53] Along the same lines were the catechism classes held by theology students in primary schools during religion lessons, which enjoyed highly favorable results. Similarly to the other academies, the students of Oradea founded the "Academic Society for Collective Self-Education and Extracurricular Activity, Athanasius the Great," under whose auspices they organized cultural-religious and missionary activities. A special impulse was given to theological education through the organization of the first congress of theology professors from Transylvania, held on April 19–20, 1935, focused on evaluating the methods of training the future clergy.[54]

The Theological Academy of Oradea entered a higher stage of development beginning in 1936, through the appointment as bishop of the Sibiu professor Nicolae Popovici, who had a rich teaching and scholarly activity at the Theological Academy of Sibiu.[55] He was consistently concerned with the training of students, personally attending the examinations conducted by professors, and with increasing the number of books in the academy's library. The missionary and catechetical activity of the students increased considerably, as did homiletic practice, the professors of homiletics being Priest Petre Procopovici and Priest Dimitrie Bodea.

With regard to Bishop Nicolae Popovici's missionary preaching, it must be emphasized that it was characterized by breadth, deep theology, and a distinguished homiletic style. He delivered addresses not only at church consecrations, but also at the consecration of bells and roadside crosses, using every occasion to strengthen his flock in faith and moral life. A special place is occupied by his missionary preaching in Bessarabia and on the front, also occasioned by the reconsecration of churches. Later, he would undertake pastoral missions on the western front as well, encouraging officers and soldiers and praying for the wounded or the sick.[56]

Following the Vienna Award in 1940, the Academy of Oradea had to be moved to Arad and Caransebeș for one year, then reunited in Timișoara through the goodwill of Bishop Vasile Lăzărescu, a former professor of theology at the Academy of Oradea.[57] There, the professors from Oradea continued their teaching

[53] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 43.
[54] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 44–45.
[55] Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 531.
[56] See Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 179–89.
[57] Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 332–33. On the sufferings of the Church in Transylvania, see Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române. Compendiu*, 494–96.

activity during the difficult period of the war, publishing numerous studies and articles in the two Timişoara journals *Biserica Bănăţeană* and *Duh şi Adevăr*, while the students had the opportunity to preach in the city's churches and to catechize in primary schools.

Through its 28 classes of priests, the Theological Academy of Oradea made a major contribution to the training of clergy in the diocese, thanks to exceptional hierarchs and professors of high academic standing. Its re-establishment as a Faculty of Orthodox Theology within the University of Oradea reconnected the thread of academic formation for the priests of this diocese.

3.3. The Cluj Theological Academy and the Expansion of Missionary Outreach

The third theological school in Transylvania was the Theological Academy of Cluj, founded as a Theological Institute in 1924 and transformed into a four-year academy in 1925. The initiative for its establishment belonged to Bishop Nicolae Ivan, after his election in 1921 as bishop of the revived Diocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj.[58] Contemporaneous institutional sources confirm this orientation: the Academy's 1930 yearbook presents the school as an institution of higher religious and moral culture, founded through Bishop Nicolae Ivan's efforts in order to prepare future preachers of the Gospel for one of the most exposed regions of the country and to provide the eparchy with learned priests capable of serving its pastoral, religious, and national needs.[59] Recent studies devoted specifically to the history of Orthodox theological education in Cluj allow a more precise understanding of the institutional context in which this academy emerged. Iuliu-Marius Morariu has shown that the foundation of the Cluj theological school was not an isolated administrative act, but the result of repeated initiatives undertaken by Nicolae Ivan both before and after his installation as bishop. As early as 1919 and again in 1921, Ivan raised the question of establishing a theological institution for the new eparchy, while in 1924 he returned to this project from the position of diocesan hierarch. The establishment of the institute was supported by the Eparchial Consistory and by negotiations with the Ministry of Cults, the Ministry of Public Instruction, and the University of Cluj. In this sense, the Theological Institute of Cluj, opened in 1924 and raised in 1925 to the rank of Theological Academy with a four-year curriculum, must be understood as

[58] Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 320.

[59] *Academia Teologică Ortodoxă Română, Cluj. Anuarul (1924–1930)* (Cluj: Tiparul Tipografiei Eparhiei Ortodoxe Române, 1930), 3, 7.

part of the broader ecclesiastical and cultural consolidation of the revived Diocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj.[60]

From the first year of the academy's existence, the theological society "Orthodox Faith" was established, consisting of two sections: a literary section for internal activity and a second section, devoted to missionary outreach and music, for external activity. Under its auspices, the students, accompanied by theology professors, visited numerous parishes, delivering sermons during Vespers and then presenting cultural and artistic programs. Under the guidance of the professor of homiletics, Andrei Buzdug, fourth-year students preached every Saturday and Sunday in Saint Nicholas Church in Cluj, and within the homiletics seminar they were scheduled to deliver a cycle of sermons in the Heroes' Chapel in the city. All these preaching and missionary activities were extensively reflected in the journal *Renașterea*, which is still published today in Cluj.[61] The activity of the student society also confirms that homiletic formation in Cluj was closely connected with practical missionary training. According to Morariu, the "Orthodox Faith" Academic Society was founded shortly after the opening of the institute, on October 24, 1924, and functioned as a framework for cultural, literary, and ecclesiastical initiatives. Its existence placed the Cluj academy in continuity with similar student societies attached to other Romanian theological schools, where extracurricular activity was understood as an extension of clerical formation. For the future priests trained in Cluj, preaching, public speaking, parish visits, cultural programs, and participation in ecclesiastical publications formed a single pedagogical environment, in which theological learning was gradually translated into missionary practice. [62] The Academy's curriculum confirms the same connection between theological instruction and missionary practice. Homiletics was taught both theoretically and practically, "missionary guidance" was included among the subjects studied by third-year students, and fourth-year students were required to complete catechetical and homiletic exercises. The yearbook also records that, under the guidance of their professors, students undertook missionary visits to villages and towns of the eparchy, where they participated in liturgical services, delivered conferences and edifying sermons, offered concerts, and involved the theologians' choir.

[60] Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Învățământul teologic universitar în Eparhia Clujului în perioada interbelică," *Acta Mvsei Porolissensis* 34 (2012): 259–65; "Istoria facultății," Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca, accessed June 28, 2026, https://ot.ubbcluj.ro/istoric/

[61] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 53.

[62] Morariu, "Învățământul teologic universitar," 263–64.

Preaching was therefore integrated into a wider program of pastoral-apologetic formation, in which classroom instruction, parish mission, ecclesiastical music, and public religious culture functioned together.[63]

A specific feature of this theological academy was, at the initiative of Bishop Nicolae Ivan, the permission granted to students to attend courses at the Faculty of Letters or at other faculties in Cluj "in order to listen to the lectures of distinguished professors." Likewise, the bishop organized the teaching of special courses for theology students by professors from the Agricultural Academy, in order to offer future priests an orientation toward occupations compatible with the priesthood.[64] Here one can observe Bishop Ivan's extremely broad vision of priestly pastoral ministry, which would later be confirmed by the worthiness of the priests in rural areas, who would become models for their parishioners not only from a religious and moral point of view, but also as leading householders.

Missionary preaching was constantly in the attention and concerns of Bishop Nicolae Ivan, being prompted by the countless church consecrations and solemn dedications. Also belonging to the missionary sphere was the founding of the first monastery in the diocese, "Saint Anne" at Rohia, as well as the fact that missionary sermons were most often accompanied by donations from the high hierarch. As a crowning point of his entire pastoral-missionary activity, it is mentioned that

"his most generous and impressive gesture was the offering of his entire movable and immovable fortune to the diocese, by testamentary disposition, which stipulated that the entire remaining patrimony should constitute the 'Bishop Nicolae Ivan Foundation.' From its income, one third was to be given as scholarships for eminent students at the Theological Academy of Cluj, another third for helping Orthodox pupils in the diocese who attended schools of all levels, and the final third for the maintenance of the cathedral."[65]

In 1936, a new stage opened in the development of the Theological Academy of Cluj, owing to the installation of the new bishop, Nicolae Colan, an eminent professor and rector of the Theological Academy of Sibiu until that time. A prominent personality of ecclesiastical, theological, and cultural life in Transylvania, Bishop Nicolae Colan revitalized both the teaching activity of the academy and the spiritual and missionary preparation of the theology students. Other foundations of his were a School of Church Singers and an Orthodox high

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[63] *Academia Teologică Ortodoxă Română, Cluj. Anuarul (1924–1930)*, 26–27, 31–32, 34–35, 40–41.

[64] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 54.

[65] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 211.

school in Cluj, some of whose graduates later chose to be admitted to the academy.[66] This development continued the institutional direction established under Bishop Nicolae Ivan. Morariu emphasizes that Ivan's achievement lay not only in founding a school for the preparation of future clergy, but also in integrating theological education into the wider academic and cultural life of Cluj. The presence of professors connected with both theological and university milieus, the concern for a solid curriculum, and the effort to secure ecclesiastical control over priestly formation reveal the academy's double function: it served the pastoral needs of the diocese and contributed to the consolidation of Orthodox presence within the intellectual life of interwar Cluj. Under Nicolae Colan, this legacy acquired renewed importance, especially in the difficult context of the late interwar period and the Second World War. [67]

A special chapter in his pastoral activity was missionary preaching, connected, as in the case of the other Transylvanian hierarchs, with church consecrations and canonical visits. The exceptional quality of these addresses, due to his high theological training, was noted by all his contemporaries. It must be mentioned that his pastoral-missionary activity took place under extremely difficult conditions, since "he remained the only hierarch in occupied Transylvania, but continued with the same apostolic zeal to descend into the midst of his flock."[68]

The concrete measures taken to strengthen preaching activity in churches were few in number, but ten practical pieces of advice for priests have remained from him, concerning the content, form, and manner of delivering sermons, which were published in the Cluj journal *Renaşterea*, nos. 27–28, in 1940.[69]

The high hierarch of Cluj, who later returned to Sibiu as metropolitan after the abolition of the Theological Institute of Cluj in 1952, was successfully assisted in Cluj by the new rector of the Academy, Professor Liviu Munteanu, who became deeply involved, with great self-sacrifice, in the theological and spiritual formation of the students. Under his wise leadership, "the internal and external activity of the students was maintained during this period as well, as they carried out extensive religious propaganda and acquired solid homiletic training."[70] During the difficult period of the war, the theology students acted as true missionaries, some of them being enlisted in the army, many sacrificing themselves for country and faith.

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66 Păcurariu, *Dicţionarul Teologilor Români*, 153–54.
67 Morariu, "Învăţământul teologic universitar," 264–65.
68 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 229.
69 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 233.
70 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 55.

In 1948, the Theological Academy of Cluj was transformed into the Romanian Orthodox Theological Institute, with the same priest-professor Liviu Munteanu as rector, a man of vast theological culture and prodigious academic activity.[71] Through his direct involvement, the theology students became good preachers, and not only through words, but also through deeds. One such example was "their participation in the funeral of a Greek-Catholic theology student from Blaj, impressing those present through this sign of brotherhood among clergy. A gesture worthy of all praise was the effort made to print the Bible for the blind."[72]

In place of the Theological Institute, abusively abolished by the communist regime in 1952, an Orthodox Theological Seminary was established in 1955, which carried forward the tradition of theological education, even at this intermediate level. The return to university level took place, as throughout Transylvania and Banat, after 1990; in 1992–1993 the institute was integrated into Babeş-Bolyai University as the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Cluj-Napoca. Today, the faculty continues the institutional tradition inaugurated in 1924, offering undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs within the university framework.[73] More recent accounts of the faculty's development emphasize the continuity between theological education, liturgical formation, homiletic practice, and pastoral-missionary responsibility: the daily spiritual program includes short homiletic meditations, sermons delivered by students under the guidance of the professor of Homiletics and Catechetics, and catechetical activities connected with the liturgical life of the faculty and the metropolitan cathedral.[74] The Transylvanian academies broadened this model by connecting homiletic formation with cultural leadership, social education, and the pastoral management of interconfessional relations. In Sibiu, Oradea, and Cluj, missionary preaching was shaped not only through classroom instruction, but also through student societies, episcopal initiatives, ecclesiastical publications, parish missions, and public acts of religious and national solidarity.

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71 Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români*, 432.

72 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 56–57.

73 Cosmin Trif, "Învățământul teologic universitar ortodox în Cluj-Napoca, din 1924 până azi," *Radio Renașterea*, accessed June 28, 2026, https://radiorenasterea.ro/invatamantul-teologic-universitar-orthodox-in-cluj-napoca-din-1924-pana-azi/; "Istoria facultății," Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca, accessed June 28, 2026, https://ot.ubbcluj.ro/istoric/.

74 Teofil Tia, "O facultate teologică «world-class», de reper internațional – Învățământul teologic ortodox universitar clujean în primul deceniu al păstoririi Înaltpreasfințitului Părinte Arhiepiscop și Mitropolit Andrei," in *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca* 25 (2021–2022): 226–260, esp. 229–230.

4. The Army Diocese

Although not confined to Banat and Transylvania, the Army Diocese is relevant to this study because its first hierarchs emerged from the same Transylvanian theological and ecclesiastical milieu and extended this homiletic culture into the military sphere. The institutionalization of missionary preaching was not limited to diocesan and academic settings. The Army Diocese extended the same homiletic and pastoral logic into the military sphere, where preaching combined religious instruction, moral encouragement, and patriotic mobilization. Between 1921 and 1948, the bishops of the Army and the military priests under their guidance contributed to the development of a specific form of missionary preaching addressed to officers and soldiers.

The first two bishops, Justinian Teculescu and Ioan Stroia, were originally from Transylvania, had theological studies in Sibiu, and organized the Romanian military clergy during the interwar period. On the occasion of visits made to various garrisons, the two hierarchs delivered occasional addresses of a missionary character to Romanian officers and soldiers, speaking to them about faith in God and love for nation and country. Bishop Ioan Stroia "was the first military hierarch to consecrate military churches and chapels, occasions on which he delivered countless addresses with great resonance in the souls of his listeners."[75]

The third and last bishop of the Army, Partenie Ciopron, doctor of theology at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cernăuți, was originally from Moldavia and led the military clergy during the campaigns of the Second World War. In addition to founding the military journal *Arma cuvântului* [*The Weapon of the Word*] and the *Calendarul ostașului* [*The Soldier's Calendar*], he drew up "a unified plan of activity for all active priests of the army and in all areas of military pastoral ministry."[76]

Bishop Partenie accompanied the Romanian army throughout the military campaign through numerous visits by which he encouraged the soldiers and military priests, as well as through the pastoral letters sent on the great feasts, pastoral-missionary actions with a powerful spiritual and patriotic impact.

In 1948, the communist regime abolished the Army Diocese, depriving officers and soldiers of the beneficial presence of the Orthodox Church among them. Since 1994, religious assistance has been resumed in the Romanian Army, with positions for military priests being filled by competition and coordinated

[75] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 242.
[76] Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 245–46.

by one of the patriarchal vicar-bishops. The Army Diocese thus extended the culture of missionary preaching beyond parish and academic contexts, adapting it to the moral and patriotic needs of military life.

5. Missionary Themes and Homiletic Functions

On the basis of the institutional and pastoral material examined above, several recurring missionary themes and homiletic functions may be identified. First, missionary preaching had a doctrinal and apologetic function, seeking to clarify Orthodox teaching in relation to Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Greek-Catholic, and secularizing influences. Second, it had a moral and catechetical function, urging the faithful toward repentance, sacramental life, family responsibility, parish participation, and resistance to religious indifference. Third, it had an ecclesial function, strengthening the bond between clergy, faithful, parish, school, and diocese. Fourth, it had a national and cultural function, especially in relation to the Great Union, the defense of Romanian confessional schools, the Vienna Award, the Second World War, and the pastoral care of Romanian communities outside the country. These functions show that missionary preaching operated as a pastoral mechanism through which Orthodox identity, religious instruction, and communal solidarity were continuously reinforced.

6. Conclusion

Missionary preaching in Banat and Transylvania during the first half of the twentieth century emerged from a dense institutional network composed of theological academies, episcopal initiatives, student societies, diocesan publications, and pastoral responses to political and confessional change. The theological schools and academies, together with the hierarchs who guided the destinies of the dioceses in these two Romanian provinces, occupied a central position within this network. Although the historical periods differed — before and after the Great Union of 1918, during the interwar period, and during the Second World War — the pastoral and educational activity of the metropolitans and bishops, together with the consistent development of theological education, favored the flourishing of ecclesiastical life in Banat and Transylvania.

One of the causes underlying this positive evolution of ecclesiastical life was certainly the theological, preaching, and cultural legacy of Saint Metropolitan

Andrei Şaguna.[77] His example as a distinguished and devoted shepherd of souls, with sustained concerns for the promotion of preaching by all priests in the diocese — whom he urged through his pastoral letters to catechize the faithful people — was taken up by all the hierarchs of Transylvania and Banat who followed him. The circulars addressed to archpriests and priests contained appeals to the clergy not to deprive the faithful of spiritual nourishment on Sundays and feast days, as is evident from the following example: "I request the whole of my beloved priesthood to strive to compose and deliver ecclesiastical addresses, that is, to teach and enlighten our parishioners."[78] In order to encourage priests in their preaching and catechetical activity, the great Transylvanian metropolitan asked them to send him their ecclesiastical addresses so that they might be printed and published.

Another challenge taken into account by Saint Andrei Şaguna was the intense preaching activity of the other Christian confessions in Transylvania and Banat, which he wished to counteract; Orthodox believers could resist proselytizing actions only through a thorough knowledge of the right faith. This also explains the fact that "preaching activity was more cultivated in Transylvania, owing to the proximity of the Protestant Churches, in which, as is known, liturgical simplifications left preaching in the central place, creating a true missionary competition materialized through the delivery of well-composed sermons, which were published in the journals of the time and in volumes of sermons."[79]

Through all the ecclesiastical reforms he carried out, among which the religious and moral education of the Romanians was cultivated and promoted with great diligence, he sought "through sermons to instruct the people in accordance with the virtues of the Christian faith (...) In this regard, a priority was the establishment of hundreds of schools, the convincing of parents to send their children to study, a salutary effort for raising the nation from the darkness of ignorance."[80] On this solid foundation appeared and were formed the hierarchs, clergy, and theology professors who succeeded, often under adverse conditions, in training entire generations of priests capable of responding to Protestant confessional influences and, later, Evangelical Protestant confessional influences, in order to explain through sermons the truths of Orthodox faith and

[77] Mircea Păcurariu, *O viaţă închinată Bisericii şi neamului. Sfântul Ierarh Andrei Şaguna* [A life dedicated to the Church and the nation: Saint Hierarch Andrei Şaguna] (Sibiu: Editura Andreiana, 2012), chaps. 7–8, 210–378.

[78] Păcurariu, *O viaţă închinată Bisericii şi neamului*, 346.

[79] Beldiman, *Predica în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Muntenia în secolul al XX-lea*, 46.

[80] Beldiman, *Predica în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Muntenia în secolul al XX-lea*, 41.

morality, to shape the souls of Orthodox believers, and to make them defenders of Orthodox and Romanian values.

Also as part of the Şagunian tradition, it must be mentioned that all the Transylvanian hierarchs were concerned with printing books of sermons for priests, containing interpretations of the Sunday and feast-day Gospels, as well as catechisms or books of instruction, so that their sermons would be biblically and patristically grounded, with examples from the lives of the saints and illustrated by stories of moral character.[81] The pastoral letters addressed to the clergy on the great ecclesiastical feasts or on special occasions, as well as the addresses delivered on the occasion of the consecration of churches, are considered by specialists to have a pronounced missionary character, because they contained exhortations, advice, and requests for the defense of the Orthodox faith, the catechizing of believers, and a pastoral response to the proselytizing activity of other confessions. Along the same missionary line may also be placed the pastoral letter signed by Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan and the other four Transylvanian and Banat bishops in 1936, through which they expressed an attitude of rejection and condemnation of the totalitarianism spreading from the East.[82]

In this ecclesiastical-national context, the Romanian Orthodox Church in Banat and Transylvania

> "paid special attention also to the theory of preaching, publishing in the pages of ecclesiastical journals, alongside pastoral letters, sermons, and occasional addresses of the hierarchs and clergy, a series of articles and studies, systematically offering homiletic guidance for fruitful preaching. The professors of the theological academies carried out a rich scholarly activity by publishing specialized works, many of them containing didactic and practical references for the improvement of preaching activity."[83]

Father Professor Miron Erdei of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Oradea, to whom the preceding observations belong, offers numerous examples of these specialized works in his two books devoted to the history of preaching in Transylvania and Banat.[84] "Thanks to these concerns, ecclesiastical preaching recorded visible progress, both in content and in form, without

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81 Păcurariu, *O viaţă închinată Bisericii şi neamului*, 354.

82 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 168.

83 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 337.

84 Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Banat*, 196–205; Erdei, *Propovăduirea în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Transilvania*, 337–57.

distancing itself from Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, but rather updating them, thus preserving Romanian preaching within the bimillennial channel of Christian tradition."[85]

Romanian Orthodox missionary preaching in this period should therefore be understood as a form of ecclesial formation, cultural leadership, and communal consolidation. Its development was fully connected with the evolution of ecclesiastical life as a whole, while the preaching activity of Orthodox hierarchs and priests contributed to the defense of Orthodox faith and morality, to the cultivation of national consciousness and linguistic unity, and to the cultural and social advancement of Romanians in these provinces. The missionary-apologetic character of this preaching reveals an ascending trajectory in which theological education, episcopal leadership, and pastoral responsibility converged.

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"Matthew 1-2 as Infancy Narrative: History, Theology and Midrashic Interpretation"

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to analyze chapters 1 – 2 of the Gospel of Matthew, focusing on the historical and theological dimensions of the accounts of Jesus' "childhood". The text argues that these pericopes function as a Christological "prologue", in which the genealogy and childhood epiphanies underscore Jesus' messianic identity as the "son of David" and the "son of Abraham." It is argued that the material reflects a "historical-artistic-midrashic" literary-theological composition: historical elements are theologized through the reuse and reinterpretation of Old Testament motifs (Moses, the Exodus, the prophets).

The historical-critical method, which has characterized biblical research in the past, has in recent times been joined by a synchronic reading of the Gospel texts, which is better suited to narrative texts, such as the accounts of the Savior's childhood. We will use the synchronic method, but without excluding the diachronic reading, which is fundamental for texts laden with theological meaning, such as those about the childhood of Jesus.

The first two chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew are closely linked to the ancient Scriptures and the religious literature of Israel, yet at the same time they refer specifically to the events that took place at the "fullness of time", particularly to the Paschal event, and anticipate the mystery of the Cross and the rejection of the Lord's Messenger. In other words, the Paschal event is already contained in the initial texts and woven "like a watermark" into the narrative of the Gospel according to Matthew.

Keywords: Midrash, Christology, Genealogy, Historicity, Epiphany

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Introduction

Because the history of our salvation has known the wonderful moment —the only new one under the sun[1]— of the Incarnation of the Lord, difficult to accept and understand for Greek philosophy and for Jewish theology, that is, the coming of God in the flesh: "the mystery of the ages hidden and unknown by angels", "the great mystery of Christianity" (Col 1: 26; Eph 3: 9; Rm 16: 25), I have considered it appropriate to approach in this study the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" in the version of Saint Matthew —which presents us with the Messiah as a child— and to try to discover and present to readers the theological richness of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. My invitation to them, from the very beginning, is to go beyond the shell of the two chapters and try to unravel the underlying meanings that the Evangelist Matthew has hidden in his text.

The designation of the first two chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as the "Gospel of Jesus "childhood"[2] is relatively recent. This name was born with the emergence of a new method of interpreting the biblical text: the well-known "Formgeschichte Methode".[3] This method of interpreting the revealed text states that from the monolith of the Gospel tradition, prior to the appearance of the first New Testament writings, materials (longer or shorter) began to emerge that had as their object the Passion and Resurrection of Christ the Savior, then materials containing "that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1: 1) and, finally, materials that referred to the years of His early childhood. The organization and ordering of these materials led to the formation of the New Testament Gospels. Along with the material that presents the Savior's Passion and His Resurrection, the material that presents His childhood appears much more homogeneous than the rest of the Gospel, but also different or different from the rest of the Gospel of which it belongs, although it presents us with the same character and the same work of salvation.

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1 "Behold, I am doing a new thing, he is giving buds; Don't you see him?" (Is 43: 19).

2 Two of the four Gospels (those after Matthew and Luke) begin with stories about the conception and birth of Christ the Savior. Both stories consist of two chapters, although the Lucanian story (Lk 1-2) is twice as long as the Matthew story. The first two chapters of the two Gospels have been called the "Gospels of the Infancy," although this term is not entirely accurate. And precisely because of the lack of perfect accuracy of these names, we prefer to put "of childhood" in quotation marks. Cf. Vasile Mihoc, „Cuvânt înainte,", to Alexandru Moldovan, "*Evanghelia «copilăriei» lui Iisus; Luca 1-2. Exegeză și Teologie*", (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2011), 11.

3 Ortensio da Spinetoli, "*Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*" (Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2018), 15.

This finding has led exegetes and commentators to ask questions about the origin of these materials: "Are there pre-existing texts that were later added to the Gospel, or were they part of it from the very beginning?"; "If they are pre-existing materials, then who is their author?"; "In what environment did they appear?"; "In what language were they written?". These are some questions that exegetes have asked themselves, but they have not yet found pertinent and viable answers. Since the Gospel material on the Savior's childhood has only recently begun to attract scholars' attention, the solutions they propose to the questions raised can be neither definitive nor exhaustive.

If we look at the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, we will see that the Gospel plot begins with the presentation of the Forerunner of the Lord, a fact also confirmed by the brief discourse of the St. Apostle Peter in Acts 1: 22[4]. Even the Gospel of Matthew could have begun very well without the first two chapters, and thus its presumptive beginning (Mt 3: 1-12) would have strikingly resembled the beginning of the Gospel of Mark.

The Book of Acts unequivocally confirms that early Christian preaching (the apostolic kerygma) focused on the essential, on what Jesus "did", that is, on His Passion and Resurrection. It was only in a second phase of Christian preaching that questions began to arise concerning His origin and identity, even though the Passion, but especially His Resurrection, fully revealed the mystery of His Person and mission.

We do not know who was the first to ask questions about Jesus' origin and the deep identity of His Person. We do not know the environment of origin —or what exegetes call *Sitz im Leben*— of the Gospel of "childhood". It is quite possible that the current compositions (Mt 1-2 and Lk 1-2) have gathered and preserved older traditions, or even direct eyewitness testimony, even if this is not easy to demonstrate. The exegetes have identified and outlined the profile of circles of possible witnesses of the events related in the Gospel of "childhood", among them, a privileged place occupying the "brothers of the Lord", mentioned in the text of Acts 1: 14, a circle which, in the person of James "the brother of the Lord"[5], dominated the Jerusalem Christian community. In the ancient Church,

[4] St. Apostle Peter speaks of the need to replace Judas Iscariot with another disciple of the Lord who was with the Savior "from the baptism of John until the day that [the Lord] ascended from us" (Acts 1: 21-22).

[5] James, the one called "the brother of the Lord" (Gal 1: 19), is different from James the apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of John, and different than James of Alphaeus. He was also called "James the Little" (Mk 15: 40) and was the son of Cleopas and Mary (Jn 19: 25). The Judeo-Christian historian Hegesippus, a former bishop in the Holy Land, records the tradition according to which Cleopas was the brother of the righteous Joseph, the fiancé of the Blessed Virgin. Hegesippus' information was

Jesus' "brothers" were a well-recognized group (cf. 1 Cor 9: 5 – ESV) and enjoyed a special position in the Church for a long time, as relatives of her Founder[6]. Even though a long time has elapsed between the event of the Lord's birth and the New Testament texts that relate it, we can assume that the Gospel material comes from well-informed sources. Anyway, the language of this evangelical material makes us think of Judeo-Christian circles[7].

The most debated issue was that of the literary genre adopted by the Evangelist Matthew in his presentation. The precise establishment of the literary genre, according to the exegetes, represents the surest way to understand the text in question. In short, the literary genre is the relationship that exists between truth and the way it is expressed. Without knowledge of the language used, any text and any book, not only the biblical books, remain misunderstood or, even worse, can be misinterpreted. Determining the literary genre of the text helps to determine the strength of the discourse, the point of view from which the author of the text looks or speaks, the degree of veracity he has, and the role that his imagination and freedom of expression have in his work. The divine message is not to be confused with the word of man, with the erudition of the hagiographer, or with his literary art. Scripture and the divine message do not coincide perfectly, for the language and the message it conveys are not the same thing. The divine meaning remains profound, and for this reason, the exegete and biblical commentator— as well as the reader of the text— are invited not to stop at its surface. The temptation to stop at the surface, at the first layer, at appearances, is the most damaging temptation to which the exegete is exposed. He risks considering culture, literary artifices, and even the defects of the human author of the biblical text as a divine proposal[8].

The determination of the literary genre and the language used by the hagiographer is indispensable for the exegete in understanding the book's content and its theological significance. What the hagiographer has tried to convey to

taken up by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his work "Church History" III, XI, 1. Therefore, Mary of Cleopas was the sister-in-law of the Mother of God, which explains the name "brother" (i.e. cousin) of the Lord given to James. This explanation covers, in fact, the whole problem of the "Lord's brethren. *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură,* "Introducere la Epistolele Sobornicești" (București: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2018), 1510.

6 Craig Stephen Evans, "*The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*", (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 315. Apud Ioan Sorin Bora, "Ce spun Sfinții Părinți despre «Frații» și «Surorile» Domnului (Mt 13, 55)? ", în "*Studii Teologice*" 3 (2017), 191–210.

7 The French exegetes A. Robert and A. Feuillet proposed the hypothesis of an Aramaic or Hebrew original, although the proposal has not been accepted by all exegetes and biblical commentators. Cf. *Introduction à la Bible*, (Paris: Cerf, 1959), 194-195.

8 Ortensio da Spinetoli, "*Bibbia, parola umana e divina*" (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1968), 45-50.

his recipients by means of words cannot be identified by means of grammar or philology alone or deduced from the context. The exegete must go back in his mind to those distant times and, with the help of history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, identify the literary genre (or genres) the hagiographer used in his writing. To express their ideas and concepts, ancient authors used literary genres specific to their time. "What were these genders?" is another question that the biblical scholar must answer. He cannot do this *a priori*, but only after a careful study of the literature of the Ancient East.

Recent commentaries and studies of biblical theology show that the life and teaching of the Savior Jesus Christ were not preserved in writing in the Gospel only to preserve the memory of the "Christ event". They were preached (preached) in such a way as to give the Church the basis or foundation of the faith. For this reason, the exegete, by scrutinizing the testimonies of the Evangelists very carefully, will be able to present to us competently and pertinently the perennial theological value of the Gospels.

Jesus is not just any character in history, He is the "Saviour" of the world (Jn 4: 42; 1 Jn 4: 14); knowing Him, accepting and fulfilling His commandments, does not mean a vain and sterile erudition, an experiment or a test (such as sports), but represents the way to access to the "life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10: 10), to salvation. The Savior Christ is "the Prophet par excellence", He is "the fulfillment of the Law and of the Prophets", He is the Prophet "one who is to come" (Mt 11: 3 – ESV) and the "Lawgiver" of the last times, the One Who has shown man a new way of relating to God and his fellow men[9]. These references or notes of a preparatory nature are indispensable for a correct approach to the study of the Holy Gospels —and especially the study of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood"— material that has a very special character in the content of the Gospel and among the writings of the New Testament.

Modern biblical research proposes a radical renewal of theological study. The times we live in impose or demand this. Time (someone said) is the best critic in this regard. Time will reveal "with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw" (1 Cor 3: 12 – ESV). From the confrontation of ideas, sincere and honest, from the different proposals of interpretation, what has no consistency will fall, and the thought of the Lord enclosed in the "sealed book" of divine Revelation will be more clearly outlined. There is no error that does not contain a small part of truth, just as there is no truth whose formulation does not have gaps, obscure sides, or imprecisions. Inspired writing, even so, is full of difficulties,

9 Ortensio da Spinetoli, "*Matteo. Il vangelo della chiesa*", (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1998), 15.

because it is a divine-human work; It is not a book that fell from the sky and was not written because of an automatic dictation from above. No exegete can immediately and infallibly follow the most suitable path for a correct interpretation, but only after repeated attempts, assumptions, and hypotheses.

To stop at the first hypothesis hinders the natural path of biblical research. Biblical exegesis is an art and not just a theology; biblical exegesis is also a given, a gift of God: "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Lk 24: 45 – ESV) or "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God" (Mt 13: 11; Mk 4: 11; Lk 8: 10 – ESV). If hypotheses, suppositions and speculations are not allowed to the theologian, they are indispensable to the exegete in his attempt to discover the intentions of the hagiographer. The theologian has safer methods of research, but even he must carefully check the extent to which the traditional interpretation renders the intentions of Christ the Savior and translates His message or preaching into words.

The exegete does not question the truth revealed and expressed through a dogma or historical fact, but the literary fact itself (the biblical text or pericope). The theologian works on Revelation as a whole, a revelation contained in several sources or documents. The exegete, even if he recognizes the rule of faith and the Tradition of the Church, limits himself to the text he analyses, which is limited, partial, and conditional. Serious exegetical research is within the reach of those who know the classical languages and the cultural environment of the ancient world well, and who know how to approach the biblical text as inspired "in the Spirit" in which it was written. There are no "special charisms" that can take the place of this preparation! We must look carefully at the structure that the hagiographer (evangelist) has imprinted on his work and the methods he has resorted to identify his theological goal. If we consider these things, the structure of his work, his biblical erudition, and his apologetic concern, then we will better understand his theological intentions and intuit the ultimate purpose of his work.

Matthew 1-2: Literary Structure and Genre

The text of Matthew 1-2 reveals before the biblical researcher features that do not fit a "historical" work in the narrow sense of the word: frequent angelic apparitions, a star that follows an unnatural path on the celestial vault of the night, a conception and a birth that respects the dignity of the woman, showing her to be Virgin and Mother at the same time, the miraculous is everywhere. All

this appears to the modern reader as things that go beyond the natural and the normal, much closer to the legend than to the historical fact. It is difficult for the human mind and reason to accept such facts. He is not even asked to do so! Such a judgment reflects, first, a general skepticism before the mystery, the miraculous, or the supernatural, a skepticism that does not resist rationalist criticism either, just as the faith to which it has taken its place has not. Second, this skepticism fully reflects the observations of the critical analysis to which the biblical texts have been subjected[10].

The studies on the text of Matthew 1-2 are more recent than those on the parallel text of Luke 1-2, but these, equally, have led to solutions different from those of rationalist criticism, but also to the obstacles of excessive conservatism[11]. The first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew consist of two main sections of different lengths. The first section contains the genealogy of the Savior and is distinguished from the other successive narratives (Mt 1: 18-25; 2: 1-12; 2: 13-23). The latter are of the same kind, and in their composition, there are themes and words that appear, almost exclusively, only in the pericope of Matthew 1: 18 - 2: 23[12].

The literary genre of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew can be summarized in the trinomial: "historical-artistic-midrashic". It should be noted that the terms "history" and "historical literary genre" do not correspond or are not identical. This means that the facts presented by the author of the text are not grounded in rigor and historical precision. The biblical author does not present us with the "outline of events" (i.e., a precise or exact chronological account of what happened). His concern is theological: he theologizes the event he recounts. Within his story, polemical and apologetic tones and nuances can be glimpsed, as well as parenetic concerns. The text he proposes does not want to be a "document of the past", but "a testimony of the present". If for a historian the facts (as they happened) are important, for an apologist or for a catechist, for a pastor of souls, pathos, imagination, and persuasion matter more than the coherence and logic of the facts he relates. The evangelist's main concern was not to seek objective and precise details about the events he relates, but to find

[10] For exegetes and commentators who have a religious faith, Sacred Scripture is open to modern methods of study, and this does not imply diminishing the conviction that Scripture is "the word of God", nor denying that Scripture is an inspired work. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, "*La nascita del Messia secondo Matteo e Luca*" (Assisi, Cittadella Editrice, 2002), 18. The original title: "*The Birth of the Messiah*" (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

[11] Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 22.

[12] Ulrich Luz, "*Vangelo di Matteo*" (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 2006), 139. The original title: "Das Evangelium nach Matthäus" (2002).

the most appropriate ones to attract and hold the readers' attention to his theological message, or to stimulate their reflection[13] and faith.

In the pericope of Matthew 1: 18 – 2: 23, it is surprising that the story of Jesus' birth is missing, even though it is announced in Matthew 1: 18-25 and implied in Matthew 2: 1. The narrative cycle is not complete: it seems that the readers of the Gospel know more than the author told them. This fact indicates that the hagiographer did not seek to give them a complete account of the Savior's childhood but rather pursued a precise theological goal that the interpreter and exegete must identify[14].

It is very likely that the stories in the pericope of Matthew 1: 18 – 2: 23 circulated orally before St. Matthew wrote them down in his Gospel and belong to a typology already found in the pages of the Old Testament: the announcement of miraculous births, the persecution of the one who is born, are themes encountered in the case of famous personalities of the history of the biblical people. We can easily see that Matthew and Luke were inspired by Old Testament theological episodes and motifs. St. Matthew does so explicitly[15], quoting such texts and introducing them into his story with the help of the fulfillment quotations and formulae: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:.." (Mt 1: 22; 2: 5-6; 2: 15; 2: 17; 2: 23).

The similarities between the story of St. Matthew and the Haggadic account of Moses' childhood are obvious. The analysis of the literary motifs presents in the two episodes attracted the attention of commentators and exegetes. Some commentators have looked for similarities to legends about the birth of pagan heroes[16]. It is true that the text of St. Matthew is difficult, but it cannot be compared with the texts of other religions. However, modern exegesis refuses to consider the Matthew text as belonging to the legendary genre. Modern theories —says Willoughby C. Allen— tell us that "the story of St. Matthew cannot be a literary fiction, based exclusively on legendary motifs and folkloric analogies. Taking into account the features of the author of the first Gospel, it is almost certain that he was convinced that he was telling real facts and not pious legends [...] Some descriptive details could be taken from the pages of the Old

13 Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 24.

14 Ulrich Luz, *Vangelo di Matteo,* 139.

15 Constantin Preda, "*Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*" (Bucureşti: EIBMBOR, 2006), 221.

16 The motif or theme of the "virginal birth" in the myth of Castor and Pollux (the twin brothers in Greek mythology), the legend of Hercules, the legend of Romulus and Remus, or the legend of the "star" in the case of the birth of Alexander the Great and in the case of Octavian Augustus, are not sufficient to compare them with the biblical story of St. Matthew. Cf. Salvador Muñoz-Iglesias, "Los evangelios de la infancia e la infancia de los héroes", *Estudios Bíblicos* 16 (1957), 5–36.

Testament (with which St. Matthew and his readers were familiar) or even from popular literary stories of other cultures and religions, but these were used to embellish the story, with a view to its subsequent transmission in the preaching of the Church."[17]

Perhaps the first impression when reading the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew is that you are in front of a legendary story, says Pierre Bonnard in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. There is, however, in the Matthew story, an unparalleled historical verisimilitude in almost every detail. There is nothing suspicious in St. Matthew's account; we are no longer in a time when a slight reference to the supernatural casts suspicion on the entire pericope."[18] For his part, J. Schmid states that the story of St. Matthew "unfolds entirely within the limits of historical verisimilitude and differs from the fantastic and mythological elements".[19] We have in Matthew 1-2 "a free way of telling history, weaving picturesque details into the story to bring out even more the theological message of the facts told."[20] The historical basis of the Matthew story, the central themes of the Gospel of "childhood", the names of the characters (Jesus, the Righteous Joseph, the Blessed Virgin, King Herod), the Davidic lineage of the Savior are not "fabrications" of the Evangelist.

Xavier Léon-Dufour states that the use of a particular literary form (or literary genre) is not enough to deny the historicity of the narrative. Those who argue and affirm the contrary must prove to us that the account is historically impossible, or that it was entirely invented by its author. However, the studies published so far have not brought this demonstration[21]. Elio Peretto distinguishes between "the realities to which the evangelist wishes to draw the attention of his readers and the literary way he uses to do so. Saint Matthew has his own way of interpreting the facts he relates, and a story that is also theological does not exclude their objectivity."[22]

The second term of the trinomial is the "artistic" one. The Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus' "childhood" is not a biography (in the sense we give to the word today). Therefore, the evangelist did not follow a precise chronology

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17 Willoughby C. Allen, "*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew,* în *International Critical Commentary*" (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 14.

18 Pierre Bonnard, "*L'Évangile selon saint Matthieu*", (Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1963), 23–24.

19 Joseph Schmid, "*L'Evangelo secondo Matteo*", (Brescia: Morcelliana Editrice, 1957), 70–73. The original title: "Das Evangelium nach Matthäus" (Regensburg, 1956).

20 Salvador Muñoz-Iglesias, "*El género literario del Evangelio de la Infancia en San Mateo*", in "*Estudios Biblicos*" 17 (1958), 272.

21 Xavier Léon-Dufour, "*Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*" (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 348.

22 Elio Peretto, "*Ricerche su Mt 1–2*" (Roma: Editrice Marianum, 1970), 78.

in his account. The red thread of his story is harder to identify. For example, it is not clear whether St. Matthew intended to present us with a diptych or a triptych, a plot or a theological and apologetic treatise. The hypotheses put forward are multiple. The simplest view considers the first two chapters of the Gospel to be a kind of "overture," a "prologue," or a "posthumous introduction" to the whole Gospel, but the solutions are much more complex[23].

The first part of the Gospel (Matthew 1: 1 – 4: 17) was called by the exegetes: "Jesus, the Messiah according to the Scriptures". This first part can be considered, as we have seen, a true "Prologue" of the Gospel of Matthew, like the much better-known one of the Gospel of John. This "overture" presents us with the person of the Saviour and His destiny (the purpose of His incarnation), beginning with His origin: "Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1: 1) and culminating with the beginning of His public activity (Mt 4: 17). If the Johannine "Prologue" is, from a literary point of view, a Christological hymn, the Matthew Prologue is a story that wants to present to us the identity of the Savior and His mission in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Genealogy of the Savior shows us His connection to the heavenly Father and to men (humanity). Presenting the genealogy of the Savior (Mt 1: 1-17), St. Matthew tells us that Jesus represents the "culmination" of the history of salvation; He is "Immanuel" (Is 7: 14; Mt 1: 18-25), He is the "Lord" to whom all nations look (Mt 2: 1-12); He is the "Only-begotten Son", who retraces or relives the history of his people, Israel (Mt 2: 13-23).[24]

Therefore, the first part of the Gospel of Matthew (1: 1 – 4: 17) speaks of the identity of the Savior; Of course, the entire Gospel speaks to us about this, but in the "overture" of the Gospel of St. Matthew, this stands out. We have eleven texts in the Gospel of Matthew that affirm that the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Christ, and of these, five are in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" (Mt 1-2), which clearly attest to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah according to the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the "overture" that St. Matthew offers to his readers to help them understand the story of Jesus of Nazareth. The Messiah Christ can only be understood from the Holy Scriptures, which speak of Him. The first part of the Gospel ends with the formula: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ..." (Mt 4: 17 – ESV), which highlights not only the peak or narrative climax of the "overture", but also constitutes the beginning of the public activity of Christ the Savior in Galilee.

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[23] Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*, 364.

[24] Massimo Grilli, "*Vangeli sinottici e Atti degli apostoli*", (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2016), 174–175.

A structure based on the theological content of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew allows us to divide the following: 1) the origin of Jesus (ch. 1); 2) the manifestation of Jesus (ch. 2). The first chapter, on the divine-human origin of Christ the Savior, can be subdivided into two parts: a. The human origin (Mt 1:1-17) and b. The divine origin (Mt 1: 18-25): the key word of the first chapter being "genesis" (a word that translates as "birth", "origin") is found in verses 1 and 18 and forms an inclusion that delimits the literary unity of the first chapter, offering us a narrative diptych about the two natures or the two natures of the Savior (divine and human). The Evangelist Matthew points his readers to the beginning of a new creation in Jesus Christ. In the second chapter, St. Matthew describes the messianic epiphany of Jesus, which reveals itself, not to the Jews, but to strangers (the Magi of the East), while it remains hidden from the Jews and, at least suspiciously, from their political leader[25].

A bipartite division is also proposed by K. Stendhal[26]. According to this exegete, the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" is built on a double question: "*Quis et unde?*" The first chapter of the Gospel introduces us to the Person (identity) of the Messiah, the "Son of David" (*Quis* = who is Jesus?) and the "Son of God" (*Where* = where does Jesus come from?). He is at the same time a "Bethlehemite", a descendant of the prophetic king David, and a "Nazarene", called by God to live and grow "in wisdom and in age" (Lk 2: 52 – ESV) in a modest (almost unknown) city in Galilee[27]. For A. Voegtle, too, the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" represents a "prologue" in two stanzas, which correspond to the first and second chapters. The first stanza indicates to the reader the messianic nature of Christ the Savior, based on His wonderful origin, while the second stanza demonstrates this with the wonderful events of His early childhood[28].

The structural parts of the first chapter are clearly indicated by St. Matthew by the title in verse 1: "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham", by the genealogy of Jesus, which is more than a simple reproduction taken from a register, by the commentary that the evangelist Matthew makes on this genealogy (v. 17) and

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25 Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 217-218.

26 Krister Stendhal, "*Quis et unde? An Analysis of Mt. 1-2*", in Walther Eltester (ed.) "*Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche*", Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias (*Beihefte zur Zeitschrift fur die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*) (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960), 94-105. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 27.

27 Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 27.

28 Anton Vögtle, "*Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheisgeschichte*", in "*Biblische Zeitschrift*" 8 (1964), 258–260. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 27-28.

by the appendix attached to the genealogy (v. 16): "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ", an appendix which, according to the exegetes, represents the "critical point" or "nerve point" of the Savior's genealogy.

The scene of the birth of Christ the Savior, which marks the transition to the second chapter, is not an episode but an explanation and additional proof for the summary proposed by the evangelist in verse 17. Indeed, the scene of the Savior's birth does not end with a scriptural quotation (as St. Matthew has accustomed us), but with a repetition of the title stated in verse 1: "And Joseph did not know her, but Mary gave birth to her only begotten Son, to whom she named Jesus" (v. 25 – ESV). "The book of the genealogy (births = γενέσεως) of Jesus Christ" we have at the beginning of the chapter (v. 1), "Now the birth (ἡ γένεσις) of Jesus Christ took place in this way" (v. 18a), the Evangelist repeats at the beginning of the story of the Savior's birth and concludes: "she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." (v. 25). In this way, Chapter 1 is, from a thematic and structural point of view, concluded or closed[29].

The second chapter presents the "demonstration" of the statement in the first chapter through four scenes (episodes) from early childhood. Each episode of the four is constructed with the help of a prophecy (2: 5) or concluded with the help of a scriptural quotation (2: 15, 18, 23). The few events, from the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem to His return to Nazareth, demonstrate that He is "the Messiah promised by the Lord through His prophets." But this fact remains, however, a secondary aspect of the Matthew account. Jesus relives the experiences of His people (Israel): the saving flight into Egypt and the Exodus. The similarities between Jesus and the Patriarch Jacob/Israel present the former to us as the true "Israel", the true "Son of God", a truth already formulated by the Evangelist in the first chapter. In doing so, the Evangelist Matthew intentionally seeks to correlate the beginning of the history of Christ the Savior with the history of Israel[30].

For the evangelist Matthew, Christ the Savior is a full-fledged member of the people of Israel; he is not "a child of haste," as some opponents of early Christianity blasphemed to discredit the gospel message. This is the meaning of the pericope in Matthew 1: 18-24, which recounts the proclamation the angel of the Lord makes to the righteous Joseph (Mt 1: 19). We see in this case the apologetic concern of St. Matthew, a concern that shines through in his story. The fact that in the second chapter we see the Magi of the East (the pagans)

[29] Anton Vögtle, "*Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheisgeschichte*", 255.
[30] Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 220.

worshipping the newborn Child (Mt 2:11) shows us that the Evangelist wanted to present to us not only the "founder" of the New Israel or of the new people of God, but also that his intention was to show us that this new people of the Lord includes within himself and the pagans[31].

The last term of the trinomial is the Jewish midrash, a word that comes from the verb "darash", which translates as "to seek", "to investigate", "to study", or "to explain". Even if the meaning of this term is somewhat known, the midrash retains its valences and meanings that are completely unknown. The noun "midrash" indicates a form of exegesis. In a general or improper sense, the midrash indicates any free commentary on the texts of Scripture, and in a technical sense, it indicates an edifying reworking of Scripture. Addison G. Wright called it "a reading within a reading."[32] The Book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirah mentions a so-called "Beth hammidrash" (house of study and exegesis), one of the schools in which traditions were born about the important characters in the history of Israel (Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Moses) and about the most important events of this history: the Exodus and the feast of the Passover[33].

The Jewish Midrash was considered a literary genre consisting of reflections on Scripture, interpreting and updating past events and teachings to fit the present situation in which Israelite believers found themselves. The midrash, in turn, is differentiated into the "halakah midrash" (or moral), if the biblical interpretation aims to update moral norms, and the "midrash haggadah" (or historical-narrative), if the updating reflection concerns characters and stories of facts contained in Scripture, but amplified on the basis of the oral traditions it enriches[34]. In addition to the official commentaries on Scripture (classical exegesis of the synagogue or the various rabbinical schools), subjective embellishments circulated within Israelite communities that exaggerated the details of the ancestors' experiences in the biblical narrative. The Midrash appears —the exegetes believe— also in the New Testament, and in a very special way in the Gospel of the Savior's "childhood", both as a literary genre and as an approach to some episodes within it.

The five episodes of the story of Matthew 1-2 refer to a precise biblical model: the Pentateuch of Moses[35]. The author's "midrashic" tendency is already

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31 Anton Vögtle, "*Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheisgeschichte*", 256.

32 Addison G. Wright, "*The Literary Genre Midrash*", in "*The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*" 28 (1966), 137.

33 Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 32.

34 Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 221.

35 The division of the Gospel of Matthew into five parts is old (dating back to 1918) and is attributed to the American exegete Benjamin Bacon. This "classical" division formed the basis for understanding St. Matthew's theology. Benjamin Bacon, followed by George D. Kilpatrick, presents

observed in the Savior's genealogy. The list of names that appears in chapter 1 of the Gospel of Matthew is a form very often used in the Old Testament and in Jewish texts. The division of this list into "three" groups of "fourteen" names, contrary to that adopted by Saint Luke in his genealogy (Lk 3: 23-38), has a precise theological purpose. The number 14 is symbolic[36]. The number 14 resembles the letters that make up the name of the prophetic king-David (D = 4, W = 6, D = 4 = 14). Both numbers (7 and 14) are repeated three and six times, respectively, in the genealogical list, highlighting the symbolism of the number 6 (the six days preceding the beginning of the Messianic era).

An apocryphal writing (well-known at the time St. Matthew was writing) —called "The Book of Enoch"— divides history into 10 weeks of years[37]. The rabbis, speculating on these numbers, assigned three weeks to the period before Abraham and seven weeks to the period following the patriarch Abraham (the Israelite period), the last of the seven to be "of the Messiah". In the synthesis of three times fourteen (3 x 14) that St. Matthew made to the genealogical list of the Savior, he encompassed the 6 weeks of Israelite history, stopping at the threshold of Christian history (the seventh week).[38] Given that the ancient Hebrews were very attentive to the symbolism of numbers and to calculations, even these details can help in understanding the theological message of St. Matthew.

Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew as a "new Moses" and as the "giver of a New Law" (*nova lex*), and the Gospel of Matthew was seen as a kind of "replica" or "copy" of the Pentateuch of Moses. This understanding and presentation of the Gospel of Matthew made history, but it also allowed or facilitated confusing and uncertain interpretations. Indeed, we have in the Gospel of Matthew five sermons separated by a stereotyped formula which, with slight differences, highlight the end of the five sermons of Christ the Savior, known by these titles: "*The Sermon on the Mount*" (Mt 5: 1-7, 29); "*The missionary discourse*" (Mt 9: 35-11, 1); "*Discourse in parables or parables*" (Mt 13: 1-53); "*The Church Discourse*" (Mt 18: 1-19, 1) and "*The Eschatological Discourse*" (Mt 24: 1 – 26: 1). The stereotypical formula is as follows: "And when Jesus finished these words..." and appears in Matthew 7:28; 11, 1; 13, 53; 19, 1 and 26, 1 – ESV. Based on these literary clues, the Gospel of Matthew, just like the Hebrew Torah (the Pentateuch of Moses), would consist of five parts (books), each with a narrative section and a discursive section. Cf. Massimo Grilli, *I Vangeli sinottici e Atti degli apostoli*, 171. See also George D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 107-108.

[36] The number 14 consists of 7 x 2. The number 7, in turn, is loaded with symbolism: it is the number of perfection or fullness. The number 7 seems to be the "key number" of the Gospel according to Matthew: the Gospel itself has 7 parts, 7 are the requests of the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6: 9-13), 7 are the parables about the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt chapter 13), 7 are the "woe" addressed to the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23.

[37] Hence, this work is also called "The Apocalypse of the 10 Weeks".

[38] Chaim Kaplan, "The Generation Schemes in Matthew 1: 1-17; Luke 3: 24s", "*Bibliotheca Sacra*" 87 (1930), 465–471.

The announcement of the birth of the Savior, which in St. Matthew, unlike St. Luke, is made by the angel of the Lord to the righteous Joseph, refers to similar episodes in the Old Testament[39]. Comparing the Matthew text with those texts will help us to clarify the literary genre of the pericope Mt 1: 18-25, which could be defined as a "Christological midrash".[40] Xavier Léon-Dufour identified the elements that make up the scheme of the wonderful news: the appearance of the angel (1: 20), the disturbance of the human subject (1: 20), the message of the angel (1: 20-21), the objection of the human subject (1: 21), the sign given by the angel to the human subject, and the indication of the name of the one who is born (1: 21).[41]

Another Old Testament literary (and theological) motif that appears in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" is the "dream". The Lord spoke to His elect, repeatedly, in/through a dream; he does it even now in the case of the righteous Joseph, the fiancé of the Blessed Virgin. The dreams of righteous Joseph remind us of the dreams of the righteous Joseph in the Book of Genesis. Sofia Cavalletti says that the dreams of the biblical patriarchs "are rather words and not visions or visions. These people of God are brought into a state between wakefulness and sleep, during which they receive a message from God. Eve was created from Adam's rib, in such a state; Patriarch Abraham is promised in his sleep (Gen 15: 12), and the patriarch Jacob finds out his future in his sleep (Gen 28: 10 ff.). In these cases, sleep is the most appropriate means by which God makes His will known; sleep and dreaming are "the ineffable vehicle of the voice of God."[42]

The arrival in Jerusalem of the Magi from the East who were looking for "the One who was born King of the Jews" seems to evoke the visit that the Queen of Sheba made to King Solomon to admire his wisdom (1 Kgs 10: 12). And she was an illustrious representative of paganism, she came from the East and brought with her "gifts" (not tribute) and was impressed and conquered, Like the Magi, by the Jewish monarch[43]. The veiled allusions of Matthew's painting

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39 Gen 17-18; Ex 3-4; 1 Kgs 1-2.

40 The angel of the Lord appears to Hagar, the servant of the patriarch Abraham (Gen 16: 7-12); he appears to Abraham (Gen 17: 15-22; 18: 4-14; he appears to Gideon (Jdg. chap. 6). The purpose of these stories is to highlight the future mission of the child whose birth is announced. This future mission is expressed by the indication of the name, as is the case in the text of Matthew 1: 18-25. Cf. J. Ponthot, "L'Evangile de l'Enfance selon S. Matthieu: Doctrinal Perspectives of Mt 1–2, "*Revue Diocésaine de Tournai*" 19 (1964), 628.

41 Xavier Léon-Dufour, "*l'Annonciation à Joseph*", in "*Études d'Évangile*" (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 76–78.

42 Sofia Cavalletti, "*I sogni di Giuseppe*", in "*Bibbia e Oriente*" 2 (1960), 149–151.

43 Edgar J. Bruns, "*The Magi Episode in Mt 2*", in "*The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*", 23 (1961), 32-39.

refer to the wonderful event of the Exodus. The scene in which King Herod summons "all the chief priests and scribes of the people" (Mt 2: 4 – ESV) evokes the meeting that the king of Egypt had with the Magi and his astrologers (Exd 7: 11). King Herod's insane command to kill the Messiah (Mt 2: 13), and then the order to kill the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings (Mt 2: 16-18) evoke, first, Pharaoh's order against Moses (Exd 2: 15) and against the children of Israel (Exd 1: 15-17). Herod "seeks" (gr. ζετεῖν), and Pharaoh "when he heard of this deed, he sought (gr. ἐζήτεν) to kill Moses" (Exd 2: 15).

The relationship between Matthew 2: 20-21 and Exodus 4: 19-20 confirms this parallelism. Joseph "rose and took the Child and His Mother by night and departed (ἀνεχώρησεν) to Egypt" (Mt 2: 14 – ESV). Beyond that, Moses "fled (ἀνεχώρησεν) from Pharaoh and settled in the land/land of Midian" (Is 2: 15 – ESV). In the midrashic texts on the Exodus, these details about Moses' childhood appear even closer to St. Matthew's account of the Savior's childhood. In the Jerusalem Fair, it is said that Pharaoh dreamed of a scale that had on one plate "the whole land of Egypt", and on the other plate a ring that weighed heavier than the whole land of Egypt. Pharaoh immediately summoned all the Magi, Jannes and Jambres, "the chiefs of the Magi", who explained to Pharaoh that "a son will be born in the community of the children of Israel, and that child will destroy Egypt".[44]

The Jewish historian Joseph Flavius, in his well-known work "Jewish Antiquities" speaks of "a scribe of holy things (the scribes were skilled in predicting what was to happen) announced to the king that at that time a child would be born of Jewish blood who, left to grow up, would remove the Egyptians from the reign, making the Israelites stronger; His virtue will be unsurpassed and his memory will endure forever. Frightened by the scribe's prediction, the king commanded that all the boys brought into the world by the tribe of Israelites should henceforth be thrown into the river and killed."[45]

According to the interpretation proposed by the Magi Jannes and Jambres (in *the Jerusalem Fair*), a court eunuch (in *Sefer ha-Zikronoth*), a prince (in *the Chronicle of Moses*) or a scribe of the holy place (in *Jewish Antiquities*), summoned or accidentally come before the king, the birth of a child who "will destroy Egypt" is announced (in *the Jerusalem* Fair), or which would have brought misfortune upon Egypt (in *the Chronicle of Moses*). The one who will be born "is the one who will destroy Egypt" and "the one who will humiliate the Egyptians

[44] Renée Bloch, "*Quelques aspects de la figure de Moïse dans la tradition rabbinique*", in "*Cahiers sioniens*" 8 (1954), 224.

[45] Flavius Josepus, *Antichităţi iudaice, Cartea a II-a, IX, 2*. Traducere şi note de Ion Acsan (Bucureşti: Editura Hasefer, 2000), 100.

and exalt his fellow Jews" (in *Jewish Antiquities*). This news filled the king and his people with fear and terror (as happened in the case of Herod and Jerusalem, in Mt 2: 3). The king of Egypt, "frightened by this announcement," ordered the killing of the male children of the Jews (in *Jewish Antiquities*), but the deliverer miraculously escaped this persecution. The disturbance of Herod the Great and the inhabitants of Jerusalem over the birth of the "King of the Jews" can be explained in the light of these extra-biblical references[46].

St. Matthew, being a Jew and writing to Judeo-Christians, certainly conformed to rabbinic techniques and appealed to Old Testament models; but while the rabbinic midrash was the centre of interest in the Torah, in the Gospels the focal point is the Christ event. However, there is a reversal of perspective. While in the rabbinic interpretation Scripture was the measure of the event, the Savior Jesus Christ became, for St. Matthew, the measure of Scripture. We no longer start from Scripture to apply it to the current life of the people, but from the life of Christ the Savior, to see in it the fulfillment or perfection of the word[47]. In any case, the sapiential character of Matei's writing is obvious. Therefore, more than the search for historiographical accuracy or the singularity of detail, it is important to receive the theological message, sometimes clothed in symbolic and dramatic imagery, in accordance with the literary technique common in the Jewish environment[48].

The most surprising detail in the episode of the worship of the Magi is the star that appeared to them in the East and led them first to Jerusalem, then to the place of the Lord's birth. The appearance of a star in the vault of the night sky is a common motif in biblical and extra-biblical literature[49].

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[46] Judah David Eisenstein, "*Hagadah shel Pesah*" (New-York, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1928), 355. in Renée Bloch, «Quelques aspects de la figure de Moïse», 224. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 38-39.

[47] René Laurentin, "*I Vangeli dell'infanzia di Cristo. La verità del Natale al di là dei miti*" (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni Paoline,1986), 66. The original title: "Les Évangiles de l'Enfance du Christ. Vérité de Noël au-delà des mythes. Exégèse et sémiotique, historicité et théologie" (Paris: Desclée, 1984[2]). Raymond E. Brown, "*The Birth of the Messiah According to Matthew and Luke* (Assisi, 1981). The original title: "*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*" (New-York: Doubleday, 1977).

[48] Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 222.

[49] In the old mentality, the birth of an important character was accompanied (in the biographical reconstruction of that person) by the appearance of a sign in the sky. On the occasion of the birth of Alexander Severus, a "stella magnitudinis" was seen in the sky; for Mithriades, the great king of the Parthians, a star shone in the sky for 70 days, and at the death of Julius Caesar a star shone in the sky for a week. Cf. Suetonius, "*Viețile celor doisprezece Cezari*", (București: Gramar, 2005), 88.

In our case, St. Matthew most likely had in mind the text of Numbers 24: 17. Like the pagan prophet Balaam (Num 23: 7), the Magi also come from the East (Mt 2: 1-2). The connection between the Matthew text and the Numbers text has been observed since antiquity by St. Irenaeus[50], Origen[51], Ignatius Theophorus[52], and St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher[53]. Jean Daniélou directs our attention to Genesis 37: 9 and to the "star" of Joseph, who, in a dream, announces his future greatness. This Old Testament text has been interpreted messianically, in relation to Christ. The disciple of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Hippolytus the Roman, in his work entitled "The Blessings of Isaac and James," comments on Joseph's dreams. "He (Joseph) saw the Word of God in anticipation."[54]

This detail of St. Matthew's account also has resonances in rabbinic traditions: in the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Simon B. Jochai, we read that "when Moses was born, his house was filled with light like that of a star, like the light of the sun or like the light of the moon."[55] Much more obvious similarities in this regard are found in two accounts of Abraham's birth: "Sefer ha-Yashar" and "Ma'asé Abraham."

The murder of the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings (Mt 2: 16-18) has resonances with the story of Moses' childhood and the grand event of the Exodus, but St. Matthew associates this event with the prophetic text of Jeremiah 31: 15. That text, while "justifying" the mourning that struck the biblical people, casts on the event the sinister shadows of exile and, at the same time, the joy of repatriation and restoration.

These stories centered on or oriented on/towards the event of the Exodus were reread and reinterpreted annually on the Passover feast and were even known at the popular level. M. Daube and C. H. Cave consider that the "bridge" of these Jewish traditions in the popular environment and in Christian circles was the celebration of the Passover feast. On this occasion, not only were these events recounted, but also other pious stories that served to edify the listeners. Therefore, the Jewish Passover meal (*Seder* or *Pesach Haggadah*) was the source of these midrashim, or at least those we have evoked earlier. Like any

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50 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies, III, 9, 2*, in "Sources chrétiennes", vol. 100 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965), 34.

51 Origen, *Împotriva lui Celsus 1, 59*, în *PSB* 9, (Bucureşti: EIBMBOR, 1983), 83.

52 Sf. Ignatie Teoforul, *Epistola către Efeseni XIX, 2*, în "*Scrierile Părinţilor Apostolici*" (Bucureşti: EIBMBOR, 1995), 196.

53 Sf. Iustin Martirul şi Filosoful, *Dialogul cu iudeul Trifon*, *CVI*, în *PSB 2,* (Bucureşti: EIBMBOR, 1980), 218.

54 Jean Daniélou, "*La teologia del giudeo-cristianesimo*", (Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniano, 1980), 308. The original tile: "*Théologie du judéo-christianisme. Histoire des doctrines chrétiennes avant Nicée*, I", Desclée & Co.,Tournai, 1958.

55 Renée Bloch, "*Qualques aspects de la figure de Moïse dans la tradition rabbinique*", 206.

liturgical text, the Hebrew *Seder* was susceptible to appropriate developments and additions. On the other hand, it was not difficult to evoke, during the commemoration of the Passover, the biblical episodes from the lives of Moses and Jacob/Israel, which occurred at the beginning and end of Israel's Egyptian period[56].

In this light, the cry of Rachel (considered the mother of the biblical people) and the prophetic text of Jeremiah take on new meanings: Rachel weeps, being the mother of Jacob/Israel, the persecuted father of the biblical people, not for the children of Bethlehem, but for her "children". Joachim Gnilka considers that for the Evangelist Matthew, Rachel's cry refers to the unbelieving destiny of Israel, and the killing of the children of the Jews becomes an anticipation or a prefiguration of the future judgment on Jerusalem[57]. D. Daube considers that the παῖδας in Matthew 2: 16 embraces, at the same time, both boys and girls, that is, all the children of Bethlehem, as verse 18 seems to suggest (gr. τὲκνα). In the prophetic text of Jeremiah, we have υἱοί (in the Septuagint), the same word in Jeremiah 31: 15, and "banim" (in the Masoretic text). From a philological point of view, D. Daube's assumption is quite unclear, because in Matthew 21: 28 and 22: 24 the meaning of the word τὲκνα does not refer to both sexes, but only to the male sex. However, the connection of the text of Matthew 2: 13-18 with the midrashic texts is obvious[58].

The last episode of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" in St. Matthew's version is the Holy Family's settlement in Nazareth (Mt 2: 22-23). The reader of the Gospel is surprised by the formulation of the reason for his return, which the angel gives to Joseph: "Arise, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who sought to take the Child's soul have died" (Mt 2: 20). The plural used in the text "they died" does not correspond to the situation just described in verse 13, according to which Herod alone sought to suppress the life of the Infant Jesus. Some exegetes have noted that the text of Matthew is an almost literal reproduction of Exodus 4: 19b (in the Septuagint), where God commands Moses to flee from Pharaoh's threats. This literary contact could confirm the influence of the Mosaic narrative cycle (*Moses' Haggadah*) on the evangelical tradition composed by St. Matthew[59].

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[56] Roger Le Déaut, "*Liturgie juive et Nouveau Testament: le témoignage des versions araméennes*" (Roma, Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1965), 7–16.

[57] Joachim Gnilka, "*The Gospel of Matthew*" (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1990), 94. The original title: "*The Gospel of Matthew*" (Freiburg: Herder, 1974).

[58] David Daube, "*The Earliest Structure of the Gospels*", in "*New Testament Studies*" 5 (1959), 184.

[59] Rinaldo Fabris, "*Matteo: traduzione e commento*" (Roma: Edizioni Borla, 1982), 69; see Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 311–312.

However, the Infant Jesus cannot settle in Judea, which, for St. Matthew, symbolizes unbelieving Israel and is opaque to the message of Christ, but must head for Galilee, a region with a mixed population, inhabited by many pagans. Christ the Savior will begin His mission and His public activity here in Galilee, shining the light of salvation amid a people who "dwelt in darkness" (Mt 4: 16).[60]

The choice of Nazareth as a homeland was not accidental. The Evangelist reproduces in his text a final prophetic reference that put the exegetes in difficulty, since nowhere in the prophetic pages do we find the reference "that he shall be called a Nazarene" (Mt 2: 23). Nazareth is part of a divine plan, summarized in the title by which Jesus is designated as a "Nazarene". I think that St. Matthew also pushes the note a little, because he expresses himself slightly evasively, speaking, generically, of "prophets", and not of a specific "prophet", as he had accustomed us until now in the previous quotations.

It is possible that St. Matthew made a reference to the vow of the Nazirite (evoked in the case of Samson, in the Book of Judges 13: 5-7, but also in other cases), but also to the word "nēzer" in Isaiah 11: 1-3[61]. As we have seen, verse 23 perplexed all exegetes. Blessed Jerome in his commentary on the book of the Prophet Isaiah, written around 390 A.D. Commenting on this verse, he states: "In connection with what all scholars seek and do not find, that is, where (in the prophets) it is written, 'Nazorah shall be called' (Mt 2: 23), the Jewish scholars are of the opinion that this quotation is taken from the text of Isaiah 11: 1[62]. The same is done by K. Stendhal[63].

And yet, Alfred Loisy and Stanislas Lyonnet consider that the text of Matthew 2: 23 must be related to the text of Judges 13: 3-7[64]. The words that the angel of the Lord addresses to Manoe's wife are similar to the words of Matthew 1: 21 and 2: 23: "for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines " (Jdg 13: 5).

Certainly, the messianic interpretation of the name "nazoreu" is easily forced; it is based on the phonetic affinity of this name with the word "nēṭer" (which translates as "shoot" or "branch"). Of course, the term "Nazarene" in Matthew 2: 23 and Mark 1: 24; 10, 47; 14, 67; 16: 6, is not the same as the term

60 Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 312.
61 Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 44.
62 Blessed Hieronymus, "*In Isaiah* 11:1", in PL 24: 144–148. Apud Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 314.
63 Krister Stendhal, "*The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*" (Uppsala, 1964), 103.
64 Matthew Black, "*The Scrolls and Christian Origins*" (London: Nelson, 1961), 83.

"Nazir", but we are talking about two terms that, phonetically, are very similar. The Evangelist Matthew most likely wanted to highlight an aspect of the person and mission of Christ the Savior. In the Septuagint, the term "nazir" is identified with the Greek term ἅγιος (*holy*), which is used quite often in place of the other. We can say that "Jesus of Nazareth" evokes in the mind of Saint Matthew both the institution of the Naziriate and the figure of one of the most famous consecrated figures in the Jewish tradition.

E. Schweizer considers that Jesus was first designated as a "Nazarite" and as a "(consecrated) Saint of God" and that the translation of the term into Greek evoked Jesus' relationship with the city of Nazareth, a fact that suggested the formation of the adjective "Nazorean", a word translated by us as "Nazarene". This hypothesis seems to be supported by the text of Mark 1: 24, in which the two designations given to Christ the Savior appear together: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God."[65]

For modern exegesis, the Jewish midrash is in no way synonymous with legend or myth. More than a free composition, the midrash is a personal reconstruction of the Gospel deeds, aided by and attentive to the biblical, canonical, and extra-canonical tradition. St. Matthew recounts the Nativity of the Lord by looking to the history of the people of Israel and finding in past events the prefiguration or anticipation of the new. Caught up in this theological endeavour, he loses sight (we believe intentionally) of the real details of the events he relates or replaces them with other features of the events that he has in his mind or before his eyes.

If the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew represent a midrashic story, this means that they do not represent an "exact reconstruction" or a simple collection of information related to the Savior's childhood, but a "meditation" or "theological reflection" of the events of the beginning of the earthly life of Christ the Savior in the light, reflected or direct, of biblical history.

The references to the past of the biblical people are not a display of the hagiographer's erudition, but a necessary tactical device designed to make known, enrich, and deepen the significance of facts which, at least on the surface, do not exclude the common dimensions of an anecdote. In this hypostasis, the holy

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[65] Eduard Schweizer, "*Er wird Nazoräer beissen (zu Mc 1, 24; Mt 2, 23)* ", in Walther Eltester, "*Judentum – Urchristentum – Kirche*" (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 26; Berlin, 1960), 90–93; pe aceeaşi linie de interpretare, vezi James A. Sanders, "Nazoraios in Matthew 2, 23", in "*Journal of Biblical Literature*" 84 (1965), 169–172. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 45.

author is more of an exegete than a historian, because his main concern is that the narrated episode is better linked to pre-existing models than to historical reality (which he does not exclude).

The old texts and traditions, connected with and in contact with the new events that took place on the scene of the history of salvation, acquire a new understanding and are enriched with a new content, and the new events that have taken place, connected with the old shadows and prefiguration's, real or apparent, acquire the proportions of the entire preparatory phase of salvation. Understood in this way, the Jewish midrash can be linked to the edifying, homiletic, catechetical, theological, and folkloric exegesis of the ancient Jewish writers, the Holy Fathers of the Church, and later with that of the medieval biblical commentators[66].

Alfred Loisy's assertion that the text of Matthew 1-2 "is composed according to the model of rabbinic commentaries on the Old Testament"[67] does not sound today, after more than a century of exegesis, as a denial or a challenge to the historicity of the facts related in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood". The Jewish Midrash is not a genre that contrasts with the dignity of the holy book and does not compromise the reality of the facts it recounts. The term "midrash" means "study", "reflection," or "exegesis" and is used in a generic sense.

Its differences depend on the type of commentary or the nature of the books chosen. In addition to devotional or parenetic readings (*Haggadoth*) of the sacred text, we have biblical updates (*Pesharìm*) and legal commentaries (*Halakoth*). In Matthew 1-2, we find, at the same time, the edifying story (*haggadah*) and the actualization (*pesher*) or the updated or Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, or, if you like, the rereading of the Old Testament in the light of Christ[68].

This brief presentation of the substance of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew might surprise some biblical scholars[69], raising questions about them, but it cannot be dismissed a priori.

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66 Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 46.

67 Alfred Loisy, "*Les Évangiles synoptiques*" (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1971), 331.

68 Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 47.

69 Not all exegetes and commentators agree on the presence of the Jewish midrash in Matthew 1-2. These authors prefer to speak of "a mere scriptural illustration of the acts of the New Testament". Addison G. Wright, in his work "*The Literary Genre - Midrash*", denies the midrashic elaboration of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood", "because," he says, "we do not find in the two chapters of the Gospel the technical procedure of the genre in question." We do not start with the Old Testament episodes to arrive at a theological re-elaboration, but rather with the person of Christ.

Charles Perrot, along the lines of Addison Wright, has the same opinion: "We are not in the presence of the Jewish midrash, neither the exegetical nor the homiletic one carefully elaborated in the Jewish synagogues, but we are before narrative traditions of a popular character in which Scripture is, in a certain way, rewritten for the better edification of the people."[70]

The midrashic literary genre used in Matthew 1-2 is recognized today by many exegetes and commentators. Renee Bloch states that "The Gospel of Matthew makes use of a little bit of all the procedures of the Jewish midrash. We can cite, in this regard, as an example, the text of Numbers 24:17, whose echo is heard in Matthew 2:1-12, or the text of Hosea 11:1, which resonates with the text of Matthew 2:13-15, but also the text of Jeremiah 31:15, whose echo is heard in Matthew 2:16-18[71].

René Laurentin, in his work "*Structure et Théologie de Luc I-II*" (p. 93-100), offers an "Excursion" on the midrashic literary genre, applicable to both versions of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood". R. Laurentin agrees with Renee Bloch's statement. Xavier Léon-Dufour asks rhetorically: "Can we consider the stories in Matthew 1-2 a midrash?" and answers: "Without a doubt! Moreover, these stories belong to this edifying and parenthetical genre, closely linked to biblical history."[72] Regarding the affinity between the childhood of the great Moses and the childhood of Christ the Savior, as proposed by the authors quoted above, Xavier Léon-Dufour clarifies his own point of view by saying: "Without fear of being wrong, we can affirm that the midrash about the childhood of Moses had a clear influence on the Matthew story[73].

Jewish exegesis played an intermediate role between the two Testaments. Many traditions, which have not been preserved in the pages of Scripture, owe their origin to the synagogue readings, places where the interpretations of the teachers of the Law reflected the different tastes of the listeners. The Old Testament was not simply handed down to posterity but was accompanied by its interpretation[74]. The authors of the New Testament took over a Scripture that had already been commented on, developed, illustrated, embellished, and, we could say, "mythologized".[75]

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[70] Charles Perrot, "*Les récits d'enfance dans la Haggada antérieure au IIe siècle de notre ère*", in "*Recherches de Science Religieuse*" 55 (1967), 304–305.

[71] Renée Bloch, *Midrash*, in "*Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*" *V* (Paris, 1957), 1263–1281.

[72] Xavier Léon-Dufour, "*Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*", 344.

[73] Xavier Léon-Dufour, "*Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*", 347.

[74] Roger Le Déaut, "*Tradition juive et exégèse chrétiennes*", in "*Jalones de la Historia de la Salvación en el Antiguo y Nuevo Testamento*", in "Proceedings of the 26th Spanish Bible Week, II" (Madrid, 1969), 7–33.

[75] Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 50.

Historical Values of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" in Matthew's Approach

In the previous pages, we have spoken of the literary genre used by St. Matthew in the account of the first two chapters of his Gospel, but I have not specified which are the elements that belong to his inventive freedom or his literary-theological genius and which of them belong to historical reality. The answer to this question is not simple or easy at all. We need to draw a line of demarcation between the different layers of the writing of the first two chapters of the Gospel. From the beginning, we will say that any attempt in this regard (which has already been made, or which will be made in the future) will remain at the stage of mere hypothesis. Rudolf Bultmann and his disciples considered the accounts in Matthew 1-2 to be mere "legends": pious legends with no historical foundation, but only a religious or edifying one. Legend and historical narration, though distinct, are often conflated in the art of storytelling in Antiquity. We cannot distinguish them from each other. Within Western theology, the traditional interpretation no longer has many followers[76].

As for the Davidic lineage of Christ the Savior, the Matthew genealogy of Jesus is incomplete, imprecise, and approximate. Biblical genealogies are a legal and literary expedient rather than an archival element. Secondly, the Matthew genealogy differs from that which St. Luke gives us (ch. 3); he flies over some reigns (three between King Jehoram and King Uzziah); confuses the name of Ammon with that of Amos, King Asa, and Asaph; it covers the post-exilic period that lasted about 538 years with 15 kings; affirms that Jeconiah, contrary to historical truth, had brothers (Mt 1: 11); assigns each group of the three 14 names, whereas in reality the first and third groups contain only 13 names; makes Zerubbabel a Davidic descendant, although no biblical text explicitly states this[77].

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[76] Rudolf Bultmann, "*The History of the Synoptic Tradition*" (Göttingen, 1931), 260. Evaluation of this theme, see the clarifications given by Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Matteo: Il Vangelo della Chiesa* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1998), 28–61.

[77] The difficulties related to the historicity of the Savior's genealogy in the version of St. Matthew were highlighted by Alfred Loisy, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Loisy believes that the issue of the Savior's Davidic lineage arose during the anti-Jewish polemic. Jesus' family could not possess noble titles. The first Christian apologists said that the family tree of the righteous Joseph was burned by King Herod the Great, who, wishing to hide his own past and his modest lineage, ordered the archives to be destroyed: "Herod, who was not at all interested in the Jewish nation, but who was embarrassed by his modest origin (Herod was not a Jew), he ordered the registers of these genealogies to be burned, imagining that in this way he would increase the fame of the nation by the fact that no one could henceforth ascend the fame of the nation through public

The Savior's Galilean provenance led Christian apologists to inquire about His birthplace and lineage, and the usual answer to the question, "Where did He come from?" was, "He came down from heaven!"

These statements indicate that the author's historical mindset differs from our modern mindset regarding this fact, but this is not enough to call into question the substantial value of the document (genealogy). If the Savior Jesus Christ was a historical figure, we cannot believe that the evangelist Matthew would have put Him on an imaginary pedestal by inventing His genealogy! No matter how many question marks the genealogical list of St. Matthew may raise, it cannot be said that we have before our eyes a simple literary expedient.

On the other hand, the belonging of Christ the Savior to the family of King David is an indisputable truth, often repeated in the pages of the Old and New Testaments and in Holy Tradition, and is not based on a simple literary artifice.

After the genealogical preamble, the Evangelist Matthew concretely introduces us to the wonderful event of the Savior's Birth. Perhaps in this case too, an important role was played by the dramatization or romanticization of the event, but not so much that it can be said that the entire story is a "literary fiction" or "an invented story". The miraculous birth of the Messiah is clearly emphasized (Mt 1: 16; 1: 18), and the context in which it is recounted is as real as possible: Joseph's crisis and the Lord's intervention through his angel. St. Matthew is concerned about this event, which he mentions several times (Mt 1: 16, 18, 20, 23, 25) and for which he brings all the evidence at his disposal: the experience of the righteous Joseph, the prophetic text of Isaiah 7: 14 – ESV, and the dates of tradition (Mt 1: 25).

The historical content of the second chapter is even more problematic. Certainly, the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is the richest in romanticized details. The unexpected appearance of the Magi in Jerusalem and then in Bethlehem, the unusual movement of the star on the celestial vault of night, the dreams of Joseph, and the apparitions of the angel make this chapter a narrative rather than a historical one. Alfred Loisy states that "a historian could not easily recognize himself in the midst of these events".[78] The coming of the Magi to Jerusalem illustrates in advance the "pilgrimage of the peoples to Mount

registers to the patriarchs or to the relatives of proselytes or foreigners with whom they had become acquainted" Cf. Eusebiu de Cezareea, "*Istoria Bisericească*", *Cartea Întâia*, *VII, 13*, în *PSB* 13, (București: EIBMBOR, 1987), 50.

78 Alfred Loisy, "*Les Évangiles synoptiques*" (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1971), 389.

Zion"[79], the conversion of the pagan world to the Christian faith, which was already taking place at the time when Saint Matthew was writing his Gospel. The gifts that the Magi bring to the Child (Is 60: 6) emphasize their submission to the King of Israel, who, in the biblical tradition, is Jehovah and, for Saint Matthew, is the Messiah Christ[80].

Of course, we can still believe that the coming of the Magi to Jerusalem represents a real fact that happened then, at the birth of the Savior, and not just an anticipation of an event that will happen only later, but this fact is too unlikely. It is surprising that the Messiah was recognized at His birth by prominent representatives of paganism and rejected and persecuted by His countrymen. On the other hand, it is surprising that such an important and wonderful event had no echo in the historical sources contemporary to the New Testament. Historical and literary models existed, and they could have inspired St. Matthew in the elaboration of the episode of the worship of the Magi. For example, at the inauguration of the city of Caesarea, nobles from all over the Near East came to Palestine. The historian Suetonius says that a large delegation of King Tiridates of Armenia arrived in Rome on Nero's coronation[81]. It is well known in Jewish history the visit to the city of Jerusalem of Queen Helena of Adiabene (sometime between 40-50 AD), then, in the biblical tradition, the famous visit that the queen of Sheba made to Jerusalem to King Solomon (1 Kgs 10: 1-13).

It is possible that Saint Matthew influenced this painting, the setting, the details, the shades, or the colors a little. Before the first conversions to the Christian faith, St. Matthew appealed to his literary talent and to historical-literary reminiscences to give this biblical episode its due importance. The current composition of the text, in which the faith and piety of some pagans are in obvious contrast with the unbelief of the Jewish authorities and in which the tension is suspended until the guests from the East fall on their knees before the Child, responds to an apologetic and pastoral intention, more than historical[82].

The Savior's flight to Egypt, due to the persecution of Herod, has echoes in biblical and extra-biblical stories (Moses, Romulus, and Sargon), but this does not mean that it was not a real historical fact. In the case of Herod, the Great, an excessively suspicious and suspicious king, a quick spiller of innocent blood, the

[79] See the following texts: Is 2: 1-5; 60: 1-22; Ps 71: 9-11.
[80] Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 58-59.
[81] Suetonius, *Viețile celor doisprezece Cezari*, 230.
[82] Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 60.

persecution of the newborn Child is as real as possible[83]. It is possible, however, to see in the attitude of the insane king an anticipation of future persecutions that will befall, first on the Messiah, then on Christians, a fact that was already happening at the time when St. Matthew was writing his Gospel. Even if the environment in which Herod moved was made up more of superstition than of legitimate belief, the word "Messiah" could have a magical resonance; nevertheless, his gesture remains unspeakable and absurd.

The last episode of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood": his return from Egypt and his settlement in Nazareth did not create any problems of a historical nature. It is the point on which the Holy Evangelists Matthew and Luke agree, and, together with them, the entire evangelical tradition holds that Jesus is known as a "Nazarene" and a "Galilean".

The Theological Message of the Gospel of Jesus' "Childhood"

The last point on which we will dwell in this study is the content or theological message of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood." Clearly and clearly, St. Matthew wanted to present to his readers (then and today) the person of the Savior Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, and His connections with the history of salvation and its characters. His coming into the world was welcomed by the representatives of paganism and rejected by "His own" (Jn 1: 11 – ESV). As King of the Jews, he was crucified on the Cross (Jn 19: 19), becoming, in fact and by right, the "King of the pagans" who had come to worship Him. For this reason, the Matthew account is a work, with its own thesis and demonstration.

The development of this work was gradual: the author argues that it is based on historical facts (the first layer), scriptural references (the second layer), and, finally, the rabbinic traditions of the time (the third layer). It is an explicit and clear theology. The content of the first two chapters of the Gospel is Christological: Jesus is "Son of David", "Son of Abraham", "Immanuel", "Savior", "King or King of the Jews", and "The Nazarene". These Christological titles already highlight His saving mission or work.

Among its titles, the Davidic lineage stands out, and the genealogy St. Matthew offers attests to Jesus' belonging to the lineage of King David. Christ the Savior is the rightful heir of the promise that the Lord God made to His ancestor, King David.

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[83] King Herod's cruelty remained proverbial: he killed his family, some of his children, exterminated groups of subjects, especially his opponents. Cf. Flavius Josepus, *Antichităţi iudaice,* 15-17.

The episode of the Magi's worship is linked to what St. Matthew told us in the first chapter of his Gospel. The story in the second chapter affirms Jesus' messianic status as clearly and obviously as possible. The messianic status of Jesus is questioned by the religious authorities of Israel and confirmed by the prophecy of Micah 5: 1, and accepted by prominent representatives of paganism.

The Savior's Davidic lineage emphasizes His messiahship, and the Abrahamite lineage emphasizes His ties to the people of Israel and to all humanity. Being the last of Abraham's family, Christ the Savior is the descendant who carries within Himself the promises of His distant ancestor. For this reason, Christ the Savior is the "true Israel", the Only begotten Son of the heavenly Father, the subject of divine goodwill (Mt 3: 17).

The first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew present us with the Person of the Savior, but also give a glimpse of His future mission. The Messiah will restore the throne of His father, David, and will be the heir to the promises that the Lord God made to the patriarch Abraham. The Messiah Christ has a precise mission for Israel and for all nations.

The little city of David—Bethlehem—stands in stark contrast to the holy city of Jerusalem. The believers (those who have adhered to the Christian faith)—as always—will see all the forces of power (secular and religious) united against them, but these forces will not win. Religious power and authority, instead of putting themselves at the service of God's plan, will submit to political power. This is on the side of the insane king, as are all the organs of power.

The work of the Messiah is threatened from the very beginning, but His star rises high in the sky of history, attracting the attention of distant peoples. The persecution of Herod, the murder of the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings, and the rejection of the Messiah by the political and religious leaders show clearly what dangers and difficulties His work (mission) will face. The shadows may fall upon the Messiah, but God's plan will not be thwarted. If Herod's gesture caused tears and pain in Bethlehem and evoked the weeping of Rachel (the mother of the biblical people) on the occasion of the Babylonian exile (Jer 31: 15), the words that the prophet of the Lord continues to utter herald the end of the period of sorrow: "Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for you will have payment for your work (your trouble), says the Lord, they (the Jews) will also return from the enemy's land" (Jer 31: 16 – ESV).

If the evangelist Matthew also considered the second part of Jeremiah's prophecy, then he looked not only at the affliction of his people but also saw "in the Spirit" and its restoration. In fact, Jeremiah's prophecy is part of a larger

discourse by the prophet, in which optimism prevails over pessimism. Rachel "weeps" for her children and does not want to comfort herself, but the prophet urges his contemporaries to look to the future with confidence, because the people's trouble will turn into joy! It seems to St. Matthew that the coming of Christ represents the moment seen only "in the Spirit" by the prophet Jeremiah: the time of suffering is about to end, and every form of slavery (especially spiritual and moral) is about to end.

The Evangelist Matthew concludes the Gospel of the Savior's "childhood" with a (vague) reference to the figure of a great liberator from Israel's distant past: Samson. Settling in Nazareth, Jesus begins His vocation as a Nazarite (or consecrated to the Lord).

Concluding considerations

The theology St. Matthew expounds in the first two chapters of his Gospel is polemical. The author of the Gospel does not present us with any "savior", but the Savior of Jews and pagans, the Savior of sinners. The summoning of the Magi to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem, is in manifest opposition to the stubbornness and unbelief of the Jewish authorities. The chief priests and scribes of the people know how to pronounce theoretically on the place of the Lord's birth, but they do not move to seek Him and to adore Him. And they do not do this even in the wake of the pagans or in imitation of their gesture. On the contrary, while the Magi come from far away to worship the Child, they plot against His life. This episode serves as a prophecy of the turnaround that will occur during the Savior's preaching. Today, the Jews do not bother to take an interest in the identity of the Child born in the manger of Bethlehem; tomorrow, the same Jews will refuse to discover and recognize it in His wonderful deeds. And in the future, it will also be the pagans who will believe instead of the Jews (Mt 27: 54).

Along with pagans, sinners have a privileged place in the theology of St. Matthew. In Jesus' genealogy, there were common sinners: Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba (women of loose morals), along with the Moabite Ruth (a stranger to the Jewish lineage), taking the place of Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, or other illustrious figures in Judaism.

Major personalities and events in the history of Israel take on new and complete meanings in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood": Moses and the event of the Exodus, the period of the charismatic Judges, the brilliance of the kingdom and wisdom of Solomon, the Babylonian exile, and the hope of restoration. All

this is related to the "Christ event" and, precisely for this reason, the evangelist Matthew wanted to present us with the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" in this light.

In the years of His early childhood, Jesus accomplished nothing of the vast "program" that St. Matthew I attributes, but the Evangelist anticipated—through his writing—the news of salvation, giving impetus to the history of salvation (the theological-apologetic intention) and explicitly reaffirming the insufficiency of the Old Testament economy through an open condemnation of Jewish opposition to the Christian faith.

This multifaceted vision of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" helps us better understand the content of this Gospel material, rather than dwelling on the surface of the biblical text, and to strive to discern the evangelist's hidden theological allusions and intentions. If St. Luke prepared for the readers of his Gospel "a small biblical gallery" in which he exposed seven paintings to their eyes, St. Matthew sketched "an apologetic and theological diptych" in which he presents the first moments of the life of Christ the Savior, which are, at the same time, an "overture" of the life of the Church.

Future exegetical research will further highlight the theological content contained in the first two chapters of the Gospel of St. Matthew, but this does not prevent us from believing that the path taken so far is the right one.

One important thing must always be kept in mind: the mystery of the Lord's Incarnation is unfathomable to us; Greek philosophy and Jewish theology could not accept or accept it. Beyond our research, the faithful are left with the feeling of wonder or wonder that will always accompany this wonderful event in the history of salvation, the only new one under the sun: "Behold, I am doing," says the Lord, "a new thing, it gives buds; Don't you see him?" (Is 43: 19 – ESV).

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The Spiritual Meaning of the Holy Eucharist: The Real Presence of Jesus Christ

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ABSTRACT. The present study highlights the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist in Orthodox theology, emphasizing its character as the Mystery of real communion between the human person and God. It analyzes the meaning of the term "spiritual" in relation to the pneumatization of humanity and of creation through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Beginning from the exegesis of chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, the study shows that the teaching of the Savior Christ concerning the Bread of Life expresses the reality of communion with His true Body and Blood, and not a merely symbolic interpretation. The Eucharist is presented in its dimensions as Mystery, Sacrifice, and communion, together with the role of the epiclesis in the transformation of the Eucharistic gifts. The study also underlines the contribution of patristic theology, especially that of Saints Dumitru Stăniloae, John of Damascus, and Nicholas Cabasilas, in explaining the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At the same time, it examines the differences between the Orthodox understanding and Western or Protestant interpretations of Eucharistic transformation. The conclusion affirms that the Holy Eucharist represents the center of liturgical life and the full means of human deification through real participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Keywords: Holy Eucharist, real presence, spiritual meaning, transformation of the gifts, ecclesial communion

Summary

The study addresses the question of the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist, insisting on the fact that it represents the central Mystery of the Church's life and the crown of all the other Sacraments. It begins from the need to clarify the term "spiritual," showing that in Orthodox theology it does not designate

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merely an interior or symbolic dimension, but the reality of pneumatization through the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the spiritual character of the Eucharist is manifested both in the sanctification of the human person and in the transfiguration of creation through the bread and wine offered for transformation.

A central point of the study is the exegetical analysis of chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, where it is shown that the Savior's statements concerning the eating of His Body and the drinking of His Blood cannot be reduced to an allegorical or symbolic interpretation, but express the reality of the ontological communion between Christ and the believer. In this context, scriptural and patristic arguments are invoked in support of the real character of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

In the final part, the study deepens the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, emphasizing the role of the epiclesis and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of the gifts. Orthodox theological positions are analyzed in relation to Catholic and Protestant interpretations, while the Eastern tradition's preference for the term "transformation" rather than the scholastic notion of "transubstantiation" is underlined. The conclusion reaffirms that the Eucharist constitutes the center of Christian existence and the means through which the human person truly participates in divine life and in his deification.

Introduction

As the Mystery of the perfection of earthly life, the Holy Eucharist constitutes the crowning of all the other Sacraments and of the entire effort of the human person toward deification. In the Holy Eucharist, a mystical union is realized between the believer and the Savior Christ, a union which entails the human capacity to offer one's entire existence to God so that it may be directly spiritualized by Him.

In this sense, the Tradition of the Church has expressed from the beginning a meaning that exceeds the limits of human reason: the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist. Certainly, this idea has been constantly renewed by theologians of every age. Saint Dumitru Stăniloae the Confessor states that, within this surpassing of human reason, the Holy Eucharist impresses within us the state of resurrection necessary to overcome the death through which human beings must pass, since it

is union in the fullest degree with the One who conquered death[1]. Father Mihail Pomazanski shows that, in the person who communes worthily, or at least with a certain preparation, the Holy Eucharist brings forth spiritual fruits: the communicant is united with God in the most intimate manner (John 6:56)[2], the soul and body are nourished, and the believer receives help for strengthening, increasing, and perfecting the spiritual life (John 6:57). It becomes a pledge of the future resurrection and of blessed eternal life (John 6:58), while he also draws attention to the condemnation incurred by the one who communes without preparation (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:29)[3].

1. Clarifying the Meaning of the Term "Spiritual"

Although it may seem surprising, there are many persons who either accept the idea of a spiritual meaning without having a clear vision of the implications of the term "spiritual", or consider that the expression has no proper place within Eucharistic teaching, being used without a clear direction. In this regard, terminological clarification and hermeneutics are necessary in order to preserve the primordial meaning of the word "spiritual" when it is used in all theological subjects, including the teaching on the Holy Eucharist.

According to an academic dictionary[4], the Romanian term "duhovnicesc" is an adjective formed from the noun "duhovnic" and the suffix "-esc", and its primary meaning, according to the cited source, refers to an action or deed belonging to the spiritual father, while its secondary meaning concerns a teaching of the soul or a spiritual teaching. Another source[5] retains as a secondary meaning of the word duhovnicesc the sense of an action "which refers to the inner life of the human person; psychic; spiritual". If secular sources consider the primary meaning of this term to refer to the action of the spiritual father, Orthodox theology is responsible for emphasizing the depth of the word's inner rationale and for bringing to the forefront the fact that nothing can become spiritual unless it is

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1 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă,* vol. 3, 2nd ed., Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Bucharest, 1997, 61.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in English are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, accessed through BibleGateway.com portal:

3 Mihail Pomazanski, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, trans. Florin Caragiu, Sophia, Bucharest, 2009, 229.

4 Academia Română, Institutul de Lingvistică, *Micul Dicţionar Academic*, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucharest, 2010, 236.

5 *Noul Dicţionar Explicativ al Limbii Române*, Litera International, Bucharest, 2002, 138.

pneumatized, unless it receives the grace of the Holy Spirit, unless it is touched by the uncreated divine energies. Thus, it may be stated that "any gesture, experience, or thing that concerns Christian life in the Holy Spirit, and anything that reveals the spiritual foundation of phenomena and their structural anchoring in God, belongs to spirituality. Spirituality means being able to see God through all things that belong to the world and that thus become transparent to Him"[6].

In the West, the term "spirituality", derived from "spiritus, spiritualis", is used predominantly and may serve as a synonym for "spiritual", although it does not succeed in encompassing the full meaning of the term consecrated in the Eastern Christian space. In its general sense, spirituality includes everything related to the spirit, namely thought, knowledge, expression, and so forth; thus, one may speak in a general way of the spirituality of a period, a people, a group, or a person. In its religious sense, spirituality refers to the living bond between the human person and God, to the relationship between the human spirit and the divine spiritual reality.

According to the new Dictionary of Orthodox Theology, the term spirituality is defined as the "conscious and free living of the grace of God by the human person and the Holy Trinity is the basis of Orthodox spirituality" [7]. With regard to the human person, his spiritualization is synonymous with the spiritualization or pneumatization of his whole being, beginning with Baptism and continuing during life through the other Holy Sacraments; with regard to created nature, however, its spiritualization is manifested through the real and personal presence of the Holy Trinity within it.

In theological writings, one encounters various forms of expression of Christian spirituality which, in general, convey the same central idea: life lived in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and thus also the spiritual life. Therefore, the Eucharist, as the mystery of communion with the deified humanity of Christ and the fullest communion with Him in the unity of the Church, reveals its meaning only in and through the Holy Spirit, who works spiritual adoption in believers[8].

Consequently, it becomes clear that everything we consider "spiritual" stands in close relation to the Holy Spirit. Saint Dumitru Stăniloae states that the Holy Spirit radiates into the world through the incarnate Son, as the love of God for human beings and of human beings for God. The Holy Spirit raises

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[6] "Duhovnicie," *Știință și Religie*, accessed October 17, 2019, http://www.science-et-religion.fr/ro/dictio/48-duhovnicie.

[7] Ștefan Buchiu and Ioan Tulcan, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2019, 885.

[8] †Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Teologie și spiritualitate*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2009, 66.

creation into the plane of inter-Trinitarian love and deification, so that the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Eucharist does not have only the purpose of externally changing the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, but of introducing divine life into creation[9].

To understand the spiritual meaning not only of the Holy Eucharist, but also of created realities more generally, means to enter, through them and through the matter offered by created things, into relation with the living meanings and the uncreated energies of God. If the human person is spiritualized through the Holy Sacraments, it is readily understood that the Eucharist is the full means of his pneumatization; for this reason, the other Sacraments stand in relation to the Holy Eucharist and lead the human person toward it. The spiritual character of the Holy Eucharist unfolds in two directions: first, the human person is sanctified through the real presence of the Savior Christ within him; second, nature, through its representative elements in the Eucharistic Mystery, bread and wine, is spiritualized through the mediation of the grace of the Holy Spirit, invoked by the ministers of the Church in the name of the Holy Trinity not only during the Eucharistic epiclesis, but throughout the entire Divine Liturgy.

1.1. Chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John: The First Exposition of the Spiritual Meaning of the Eucharist

The text of chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John is an essential exegetical point for the teaching on the Holy Eucharist, both for the Orthodox Church and for the other confessions, which throughout time have sought to relate themselves as much as possible to this passage, often diverting its spiritual meaning in order to ground their own teachings. In this regard, an Orthodox presentation of this passage is necessary.

After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand men, the people again ask for bodily bread, but Jesus directs their attention toward a higher food: whoever eats it will no longer hunger, but will have eternal life (v. 28). When He says that "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (v. 33), hermeneutical investigation draws attention to the fact that in Greek the noun "artos", "bread", is masculine, while the pronoun rendered in Romanian by "that" is in fact masculine and should be translated as "He", thus creating an ambiguity which Christ clarifies by saying: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will

[9] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica şi mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe,* Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2002, 49.

never be thirsty" (v. 35). Even more clearly, He says: "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life [...]. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (vv. 47-51).

The final words cannot be understood allegorically, because in Holy Scripture the expression "to eat someone's flesh", when interpreted allegorically, means to cause harm to someone (Job 19:22; Ezekiel 39:17; James 5:3), and in the present case the passages cannot be understood in this way. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the Jews asked one another, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (v. 52), which proves that the proper understanding of Christ's words is literal.

The Savior did not tell the Jews that they had misunderstood Him, but very clearly and with great force affirmed the same meaning: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. (vv. 53-56).

Moreover, even the disciples considered that "this is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" Yet Christ assures them that they have understood precisely what He is referring to, saying: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (v. 63), while also knowing that some of the disciples did not believe because of the difficulty of receiving this teaching (cf. v. 64).

Christ's words concerning His Body and Blood confirm that whoever communes of them will have eternal life, will be raised for the Kingdom of Glory on the Day of Judgment, and will enter into the most intimate communion with Christ. Therefore, from a careful examination of the biblical accounts concerning the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist, it is clear that at the Mystical Supper the Eucharistic bread and wine were changed into the Body and Blood of Christ; consequently, in the Eucharist there can be no question of a merely symbolic or spiritual communion. Saint John of Damascus states: „The bread and wine are by no means an image of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, God forbid, but the very Body and Blood of Christ united with the divinity ... not as though the body received by the Christian descended from heaven: the bread and wine are

changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord"[10]. In chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, the Savior Christ offers the spiritual interpretation of the Mystery that He will institute at the Mystical Supper, emphasizing the reality of the transformation of the Eucharistic elements into His own Body and His own Blood.

1.2. The Spiritual Meaning Given by the Eucharist as Mystery, Sacrifice, and Recapitulation

The Eucharist is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Before the sanctification of the gifts, the celebrating priest commemorates in the prayer said silently the great works of God, glorifies Him, and thanks Him for calling the human person from non-being, for His great and manifold providence after the fall, and for the economy of His salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, all the faithful present in the church during these holy moments, glorifying God, pray to Him: "We praise You, we bless You, we give thanks to You, O Lord..."[11].

This pure thanksgiving within the Eucharist arises from true knowledge, from the fullness of the soul that has come to know God, through which the integral knowledge of the world is also restored, a knowledge fragmented by the fall of the human person from God and reduced to mere knowledge about the world[12]. Through thanksgiving and blessing, Christ placed the bread in close relation with God the Father; therefore, it was filled with the divine Spirit, who is also the Spirit radiating from Christ. Sanctification carries this process further, because sanctification is one with sacrifice, and through it transformation is accomplished[13].

In the Eucharist, Christ offers Himself to the Father as man, not in a juridical sense, but by thereby opening for us the way to the Father. He places Himself at our disposal in the Eucharist so that, together with Himself, He may offer us also to the Father, because we can enter before the Father only in a state of pure sacrifice, a state acquired only from the pure sacrificial state of Christ,

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[10] Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica,* trans. Dumitru FECIORU, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucharest, 2005, 197.

[11] Pomazanski, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă,* 233.

[12] Alexandre Schmemann, *Euharistia, Taina Împărăţiei,* trans. Boris RĂDULEANU, Anastasia, Bucharest, 181.

[13] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate şi comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, 2nd ed., Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2004, 446.

who continuously offers Himself to the Father in order to give us the power to offer ourselves together with Him[14].

The Holy Mystery of the Eucharist is also a mystery that unifies Christians in the Body of Christ: it incorporates into Christ those who have been baptized and anointed with Holy Chrism, and it enables those already incorporated into Christ to grow in Him, with the help of the Holy Spirit. It unifies in the Church of Christ all those who gather to celebrate it with their priest, ordained by their bishop. The Eucharist unifies the faithful because Christ gathers them in order to offer them, together with Himself, to the Father as a sacrifice, and because all commune of Christ.

In this sense, the liturgical anaphora is praise and a manifestation of the community's will to serve God, together with all rational creation and the angelic hosts, for all that God has done, and above all for what He has done through His Son for human beings, for the Eucharist which He instituted as a means of His union with them. The Lamb, which is the community's incomplete sacrifice until the transformation, becomes not only Christ's sacrifice for the community, but also the community's full sacrifice, Christ's sacrifice being impressed upon the sacrifice of the community. Within the anaphora, we offer to Christ the bread and wine, just as they were offered to Him by the disciples at the Mystical Supper, so that He may transform them into His Body and Blood. In this way, we offer material bread so that heavenly Bread may be given to us[15].

Holy Scripture offers clear indications of the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist, beginning with the writings of the Old Testament, in Malachi 1:10-11, where it is said that God will no longer receive sacrifices from the Jews, but that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice will be offered. The words of institution of the Eucharist state that the Body is broken for many and that the Blood is of the New Law or New Covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. The verbs in the present tense show that this is a present sacrifice through which the Lord anticipated, in an unbloody manner, the Sacrifice of the Cross. Likewise, Saint Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:16-21, opposing the Eucharistic Sacrifice to pagan sacrifices, shows that the former brings real communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord, while the latter brings communion with demons.

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[14] Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 3:73.

[15] Dumitru Stăniloae, „Teologia Euharistiei" *Ortodoxia* no.3 (1969), Editura Institutul Biblic şi de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucharest, 206.

If true worship of God means submission, obedience, and the fulfillment of all things, when could we submit ourselves to God more concretely than when we become His members? To whom could the head command more properly than to its own members? This is precisely what the Eucharist accomplishes, more fully than any other Sacrament: it makes us members of Christ[16].

In this sense, the Eucharistic Sacrifice is not a new sacrifice distinct from that of the Cross, but the same sacrifice, continually present, yet unbloody, under the form of bread and wine. It is offered for all who participate in it directly or indirectly, through commemorations and particles, so that they may partake of its fruits.

Saint Dumitru Stăniloae distinguishes between the moment of transformation, in which the sacrificial aspect is emphasized, and the moment of communion, in which the sacramental aspect is distinguished in relation to the community. The moment of transformation actualizes Christ's sacrifice for the community, corresponding to the fact that He sacrificed Himself on Golgotha for all humanity, whereas the moment of Communion corresponds to the necessity that the human person decide personally to appropriate Christ's sacrifice. The Lamb that is transformed represents the spirit of the community as a whole, and each member of the Church benefits from this new ascent of the community in Christ; yet the human person must decide, through a distinct act of his own will, to make full use of Christ's sacrifice through personal union with Him[17].

Thus, it may be said that the bread and wine are also considered an unbloody and rational sacrifice because, invisibly, they contain within themselves our rational body, organically united with our blood in a whole into which they will naturally be changed; on the other hand, they are considered the Body and Blood of Christ, into which they will be changed mystically, without His repeating the shedding of His blood[18].

From what has been presented above, and from the moments preceding the transformation of the Eucharistic elements into the Body and Blood of the Lord, it may be maintained that, from the very beginning of the Proskomedia, everything that gravitates around the Holy Eucharist acquires a spiritual meaning, an understanding that surpasses a purely rational reception and has at its epicenter the grace of the Holy Spirit.

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16 Nicolae Cabasila, *Despre viața în Hristos,* trans. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucharest, 2014, 129.

17 Stăniloae, "Teologia Euharistiei", 356.

18 Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune,* 364.

Christ became the Head of the Church through His sufferings and was sanctified and glorified through them (John, 17), by laying aside the consequences of sin present in the human nature He assumed representatively. Christ saves human beings because He incorporates them into Himself and gradually assimilates them to His risen humanity. The Christ-Church communion is founded upon the Church's participation in the suffering and resurrection of Christ and exists within it; this means that the Church is the sacramental Body of the Lord and recapitulates all the states through which Christ passed in order to deify the nature of those contained within it.

Christ chose to give Himself to us under the sign of the supper in order to nourish us, not in the sense of sustaining bodily life, but by giving Himself, the incarnate Word, to our "religious personality" in order to communicate His eternal life to us and to introduce us into communion with the Father: "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (John 6:57)[19].

Christ's remembrance of us is realized within us through our remembrance of Christ, and it constitutes the essence of our faith, through which the new Life is given to us. To believe in Christ also means to keep Him in mind and to remember Him. From the beginning, the faith of Christians was memory and remembrance; yet remembrance has been restored in its life-giving fullness, because, unlike the memory of fallen nature, which "illusorily revives the past", the new remembrance is the joyful recognition of the Risen One as present and at hand; not only does it recognize Him, but it also meets Him and lives communion with Him in a real and living way[20].

Communion with Christ is received by the Christian who discovers himself in and through the Eucharist, by which a dynamic communion with Christ is obtained and lived. Through this communion, the believer is transfigured and becomes a true Christ-bearer, because the one who is in communion does not take part in a simple commemorative banquet, but reaches union with Christ and with the other Christian brethren. Therefore, the full communion with Christ realized in the Eucharist is also the full communion of the faithful with one another, who together form the extension of the Body of Christ; in this way the Eucharist becomes the Mystery of unity[21].

Father Alexandre Schmemann considers the understanding of the Eucharist as the Mystery of remembrance to be a reduction or limitation when it is

[19] Valer Bel, "Biserică și Euharistie," *Studii Teologice*, no. 3–4 (1982): 237.
[20] Schmemann, *Euharistia*, 132.
[21] Bel, "Biserică și Euharistie," 239.

understood merely as a reference to what Christ instituted at the Mystical Supper, namely the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. In such an approach, remembrance is attributed the power of transformation, the active power of the Mystery, so that the Mystery of remembrance becomes the cause of this work, while the cause of remembrance is the institution of the Eucharist at the Mystical Supper. This limitation is clearly seen in Catholic theology, which considers that the transformation takes place at the moment when the words of institution are pronounced, the epiclesis being abandoned[22].

The bond with Christ is our true life, because we come to be His members and His sons, partaking of His Blood and of His Spirit, binding our life to God more closely than we could by our own efforts alone, indeed more closely than what we possess ontologically within ourselves, since Christ is more intimately related to us than even our bodily parents are[23].

The remembrance in the Eucharist is the gathering into a single whole of the entire experience of salvation, of the full reality given to us in the Church and constituting our life. Every celebration of the Eucharist is a gathering, a restoration of the fullness of our remembrance, and a "re-cognition" of the world. In the Liturgy entrusted to us to celebrate until His coming, we do not repeat or merely prefigure; rather, we ascend into the mystery of salvation and of the new life accomplished once for all, yet given to us for eternity. In this heavenly, eternal Eucharist, above the world, Christ does not descend to us; rather, we ascend to Him[24].

The Eucharist unifies in the same Christ those who celebrate it and commune of it everywhere through priests ordained by bishops who are in communion; therefore, through it the unity of the Church is perfected and preserved.

2. The Real Presence of Christ as a Necessity of the Spiritual Dimension

Christ is really present in the Eucharist in order to make us partakers of all that has been accomplished in His Body, of their continuation in Him until today and unto the ages of ages, communicating them to us now in actuality according to the measure in which we can receive them in this age, while this

22 Schmemann, *Euharistia*, 199.
23 Cabasila, *Despre viața în Hristos*, 145.
24 Schmemann, *Euharistia*, 225.

present communication invisibly contains all that we will be able to receive in the age to come. In the Eucharist, all our salvation is concentrated so that we may appropriate it personally. The Eucharist, by uniting us with Christ, makes us like Him, impressing upon us also the state capable of sacrifice, the power of the resurrection, and eternal glory[25].

The Eucharist is, par excellence, the Mystery of Christians' communion with Christ, because in it Christians no longer commune only of the grace of Christ, but of His very Body, which becomes within them the source of all divine energies as a risen Body. Through this, communion between human beings and God is realized, a communion that may weaken over time; for this reason, we must commune frequently of Christ. Communion with Christ means communion in His mode of existence. We cannot become partakers of eternal life until we are ontologically united with its source, the Savior Christ[26].

For the purpose of determining its spiritual meaning, we may affirm that the transfigured Body of Christ is present in the Eucharist not only as power, but substantially, in a way not perceived by our senses. This occurs because the bread and wine are changed according to substance, even though not according to their appearances, in a manner not perceived by our senses[27].

Saint Dumitru Stăniloae stated:

"Even before His death, Christ bears within Himself the intense feeling of sacrifice for us. Through this intense feeling of sacrifice and through the Spirit within Him, He transfigures in depth His Body and, through it, the ontological foundation of the bread, leaving it bread only on the surface, because of the organic connection it has with the entire cosmos before the end. Yet this deep transfiguration of the bread anticipates the age to come, when bodies spiritualized by the Body of Christ will place their seal upon all spiritualized things, and through all things they will be seen as bodies united with Christ as the source of the power of resurrection and transfiguration of all. The Eucharist contains within itself an eschatological and universal openness, and the transfiguring power of Christ comes from His sacrifice. Whoever sacrifices himself out of love overwhelms all things through love"[28].

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[25] Stăniloae, "Teologia Euharistiei", 344.
[26] Gheorghe Sava, "Sfânta Euharistie ca Jertfă și Taină în fața obiecțiunilor sectare", *Ortodoxia* 38, no. 2 (1986): 85.
[27] Dumitru Stăniloae, "Dumnezeiasca Euharistie în cele trei confesiuni," *Ortodoxia* 5 (1953): 68.
[28] Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*, 442.

According to Orthodox teaching, the transformation of the elements takes place only after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, who also accomplishes it. This does not mean that Christ is reinserted into matter; rather, matter is changed into the heavenly reality of the Body and Blood of Christ. In this regard, Saint John of Damascus clarifies the matter, saying:

> "The bread itself and the wine itself are changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. And if you ask how this happens, it is enough for you to hear that it is through the Holy Spirit, just as the Lord took for Himself and in Himself a body from the Holy Theotokos; for the word of God is true, active, and almighty, but the manner cannot be investigated. It is not without interest to say this also: just as, in a natural way, bread through eating, and wine and water through drinking, are changed into the body and blood of the one who eats and drinks, so also the bread of offering, the wine, and the water, through the invocation and coming of the Holy Spirit, are changed in a manner above nature into the Body and Blood of Christ, and they are no longer two, but one and the same. The bread and wine are not an icon of the Body and Blood of Christ—may it not be so—but the very deified Body of the Lord".[29]

The sanctified Gifts are not merely signs that remind the faithful of redemption, as Zwingli teaches; nor is Christ present in them only through His work and power, according to Calvin; nor, finally, is He present only in the sense of "penetration," as the Lutherans confess. Rather, the Gifts sanctified in the Mystery are changed or "transubstantiated" into the true Body and true Blood of Christ, as the Savior said: "My Flesh is true food, and My Blood is true drink" (John 6:55). Orthodox theology does not deny the term "transubstantiation," but prefers the term "transformation," thereby avoiding dependence on philosophical categories[30].

The human inability to see Christ physically in the Eucharist is due to the solidarity of our body with the present non-transparency of matter, with its current state of incomplete illumination by the Spirit of Christ, which is propagated from His transfigured Body. Although the forms of bread and wine secretly belong to the Body and Blood, they remain untransfigured and prevent us from seeing His Body and Blood; they will remain so until the transfiguration of the cosmos, when we will have direct communion with Christ. Moreover, if the transformation were to take place in a perceptible way, Christianity would be merely a magical cult and not a religion of faith, hope, and love[31].

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[29] Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, 232.
[30] Pomazanski, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 230.
[31] Stăniloae, "Teologia Euharistiei," 346.

The Lord is present in the Eucharist from the moment of transformation onward, under the forms of bread and wine, substantially united with them. The words of institution show that He was present in them before the words were pronounced, and this fact is also confirmed by the practice of the ancient Church, which carefully preserved the transformed Gifts in the church and sent them to the sick and to those in prison for Communion. The same permanence of the Body and Blood of the Lord under the forms of the sanctified bread and wine is also shown by the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. All these confirm that, from the beginning of the Christian era, the conviction existed that Christ is permanently present in the Eucharistic elements after their transformation.

Therefore, the Holy Eucharist is the perfection of the other Sacraments and helps to fulfill what is not possible in the other Sacraments, causing the grace received through them to shine more powerfully, even though it is darkened by the shadow of the earth. Only Communion can bring back to life those who have died because of sins, since the fallen human person cannot rise from that state by human powers alone, just as human wickedness cannot be expiated through human worthiness[32].

Father Stăniloae testified that Christ's presence with His Body and Blood under the forms of bread and wine is a presence in which Christ exists in the most intensified manner as Person, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, because He gives us not only a work through His Body, but His very Body, sacrificed and risen, since this is what is now required. In this way, through the radiation of His Holy Spirit, He intensifies to the utmost His efficacy upon the matter of bread and wine, in order to offer Himself through their forms, in an act of supreme love and overwhelming transformation, with His own Body and Blood as sacrifice to the Father and, at the same time, to the faithful, so that they too may offer themselves, together with Him and through His power, to the Father and to one another[33].

Therefore, the dogma of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist helps us understand several important aspects for receiving its spiritual meaning. First, by communing of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we also commune of His divinity, because the Savior's divinity remains inseparable from His humanity in His Person. Second, however many places the Eucharist may be celebrated in at the same time, in all these places there is one and the same Body and Blood of the Lord, and therefore the same whole Christ. Moreover, the bread and wine changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord remain Body and Blood as long as

32 Cabasila, *Despre viața în Hristos*, 117.
33 Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*, 175.

these elements are preserved, and not only at the moment when Christians commune of them. For this reason, the reverence due to them must be very great. The conscience of every believer must impress upon him the proper reverence when entering the church, with the constant awareness that on the Holy Table there always rests the Body and Blood of the Savior; in other words, Christ is always present in the church[34].

Conclusion

The spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist cannot be reduced to an interior, metaphorical, or merely symbolic understanding of Christian worship. In the Orthodox theological perspective, the term "spiritual" does not indicate a departure from the material or visible dimension of the sacrament, but rather its transfiguration through the grace and work of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is spiritual precisely because it is pneumatological: through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine are not merely blessed as signs of a past event, but are truly transformed into the Body and Blood of the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ. Thus, the spiritual character of the Eucharist does not weaken the reality of Christ's presence, but confirms and deepens it. The Eucharist is not less real because it is spiritual; on the contrary, it is spiritual because it communicates the most profound reality of divine life to humanity.

This understanding is especially important in relation to the discourse of the Bread of Life in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. Christ's words concerning the eating of His Body and the drinking of His Blood cannot be adequately interpreted as a simple allegory or as a purely moral exhortation. The insistence with which the Lord speaks of His Body as true food and His Blood as true drink reveals the concrete and salvific realism of Eucharistic communion. The Eucharist is therefore the sacramental fulfillment of Christ's promise that those who partake of Him will have life in themselves and will be raised up on the last day. Its spiritual meaning lies precisely in this union between the believer and Christ, a union that is not psychological, imaginative, or symbolic, but real, personal, ecclesial, and ontological.

At the same time, the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist is inseparable from its sacrificial dimension. The Eucharist is the unbloody actualization of the one sacrifice of Christ, not as a repetition of Golgotha, but as the sacramental

[34] Isidor Todoran and Ioan Zăgrean, *Teologia Dogmatică*, 3rd ed. (Bucharest: Renașterea, 2000), 314.

participation of the Church in the same saving offering. In the Eucharist, Christ offers Himself to the Father and, at the same time, gathers the faithful into His own state of self-giving love. The believer does not remain a passive recipient of a sacred object, but is called to enter into the sacrificial movement of Christ Himself. By receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, the Christian is formed according to the pattern of Christ's own obedience, humility, love, and offering. Therefore, Eucharistic communion has a deeply ascetical and transformative meaning: it calls the communicant to become what he receives, namely a living member of the Body of Christ.

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the indispensable foundation of this spiritual meaning. If the Eucharistic gifts were only symbolic reminders of Christ, they could inspire memory, devotion, or moral imitation, but they could not communicate the divine life itself. Orthodox theology insists that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become the true Body and Blood of Christ, while the manner of this transformation remains a mystery that transcends rational explanation. This mystery must not be approached through a merely philosophical curiosity, but through faith, reverence, and liturgical participation. The Eucharistic presence of Christ is not accessible as an object of empirical observation, because it belongs to the order of sacramental reality, in which visible matter becomes transparent to divine grace.

Moreover, the spiritual meaning of the Eucharist extends beyond the individual communicant and reveals the mystery of the Church herself. Those who partake of the one Bread and the one Cup are united not only with Christ, but also with one another in Him. The Eucharist is therefore the sacrament of ecclesial communion, the place where the Church manifests herself most fully as the Body of Christ. The faithful do not gather merely around a shared religious memory or around a common moral ideal, but around the living Christ, who gives Himself as food and drink for the life of the world. In this sense, the Eucharist creates, sustains, and renews the unity of the Church. It is both the source and the summit of ecclesial life, because in it the Church receives the very life of her Head.

In conclusion, the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist is the mystery of real communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit, within the life of the Church, for the deification of the human person and the transfiguration of creation. The Eucharist is spiritual not because it is less bodily, less material, or less concrete, but because it is the place where the material is filled with the divine, where the faithful are united with the glorified humanity of Christ, and where the Church becomes ever more deeply what she is: the Body of Christ. To

partake of the Eucharist is to enter into the mystery of Christ's life, sacrifice, resurrection, and eternal communion with the Father. Therefore, any reduction of the Eucharist to symbol, memorial, religious meal, or moral inspiration diminishes its true spiritual meaning. In the Orthodox understanding, the Holy Eucharist remains the supreme sacrament of divine-human communion, the living center of the Church, and the fullest means by which the human person is sanctified, renewed, and led toward theosis.

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The Night of Churches: Tool for Creative Mission or Just a Cultural Event? A Case Study from Latvia

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ABSTRACT. Since 2014, The Night of Churches (*Baznīcu nakts*) has been celebrated annually across Latvia, inviting visitors to experience churches through art, music, and creative expression. By engaging multiple senses rather than relying solely on verbal proclamation, the event offers a distinctive form of Christian witness in the public sphere.

In 2025, 197 churches participated, making it one of Latvia's most visible church initiatives. While many participants describe the event as inspiring and spiritually meaningful, others question whether it continues to serve a missional purpose or has become a cultural event primarily.

This paper examines The Night of Churches as a case study of creative mission in a post-secular Central and Eastern European context. Using a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, it combines document analysis, theological reflection, and interpretive analysis of participant experience. Founding documents, promotional materials, and public reflections are analyzed through missiological perspectives, including holistic mission, public theology, and the theology of creativity rooted in the *imago Dei* and Trinitarian relationality.

The paper argues that The Night of Churches demonstrates both the potential and the ambiguity of creativity in mission. While it creates meaningful encounters between church and society, it also risks being perceived primarily as cultural entertainment rather than Christian witness.

Keywords: imago Dei, creative mission, missiology, Night of Churches, Latvia, art and mission, public theology, holistic mission, embodied witness.

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Introduction: Creativity and Mission in Public Space

In the field of missiology, Christian mission is too often confined to words that express doctrines. Mission, however, implies relationships - within the Trinity, among people, and between God and His creation. God, as a Creator, is creative; we, as His creatures, can also experience and explore this creativity. Therefore, we are all called into creativity.

One such creative expression of mission is The Night of Churches (*Baznīcu nakts* in Latvian, further in text NoC), which is a public and creative phenomenon in Latvia since 2012. It began as a creative mission project; however, in recent years, in some churches, it has become a purely cultural event, with the church building used solely as a concert hall, and the event is contested in some congregations. Therefore, the research problem for this paper is as follows: Is the NoC an expression of creative Christian mission or primarily a cultural event?

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on NoC in Latvia as an example of creative mission in a post-secular Central and Eastern European context. The study draws on document analysis, examining founding texts and media coverage of the Night of Churches to identify its articulated aims, values, and theological language. It also draws on theological reflection, interpreting the event through missiological frameworks such as holistic mission and mission as creativity, drawing on Trinitarian and incarnational perspectives. It also employs interpretative analysis of experience as reported in a survey of 88 representatives from 197 churches, as well as in a survey of 7 students of Luther Academy who participated in a "Church Planting and Administration course" in which the discussion of the NoC was raised.

The study provides contextual background on the NoC and a theoretical framework of mission as creative and relational praxis. It justifies a qualitative case study approach, providing the analysis and discussion, and it enables broader applications in Central and Eastern Europe, as we share the common post-socialist, post-Christian and by extension also post-secular context.

1. Contextual Background: The Night of Churches in Latvia

The Night of Churches in Latvia has been organized since 2014. The idea and tradition of NoC, however, originated in Germany, where several "*Lange Kirchennächte*" had already taken place in various German cities before 2005. In Austria, it is a nationwide event in which, since 2008, all dioceses have participated

in NoC, or "*Lange Nacht der Kirchen*" in German. In 2010, it began in the Czech Republic; in 2011, Slovakia joined; and in 2013, some churches in Estonia joined. In the same year as Estonia, the ideas of the NoC were spread to Latvia, but it was decided to postpone the participation till 2014, when Riga became the European Capital of Culture. NoC has also been launched in Hungary, Switzerland, and other parts of Europe. Since 2014, this event has been held in Latvia each year.[1]

Even though this event occurs in various places across Europe and the founding rationale is similar, I will focus on the case of Latvia, as I have the founding documents available. The founding rationale is as follows: "Night of Churches is a cultural event that takes place in Christian churches and invites people to learn about the cultural and spiritual heritage of the church and to engage in dialogue with its values." Its stated mission is: "to promote the cultural growth of the Latvian people. To introduce people to the cultural and spiritual values in the heritage of Latvian Christian congregations and churches. To strengthen the spiritual well-being, intellectual growth, cultural, and national self-confidence of society." Therefore, it is possible to see that the emphasis is on culture, on a cultural event, but at the same time on a higher goal: spiritual heritage and spiritual values.[2]

In Latvia, the values of NoC include hospitality, Christian spirituality, cultural heritage, and creativity. That also includes strengthening ecumenism, dialogue, freedom, and artistic expression in various ways, while keeping the sacred space of a church in mind.[3] This event offers unchurched people the opportunity to enter this space, enjoy the cultural event, and become more aware of their spiritual heritage.

To understand the growth and scope, see the chart 1 below (author's compilation from the available sources at NoC website – baznicunakts.lv/2025/ and other posts there).

[1] "Die Lange Nacht der Kirchen in Europa", 29.05.25. Lange Nacht der Kirchen, accessed January 3, 2026, https://www.langenachtderkirchen.at/ueber-die-lange-nacht/in-europa/.

[2] Jurģis Klotiņš et al., "Kultūras notikuma "Baznīcu nakts" nolikums", Baznīcu nakts fonda valde, February 9, 2016, 1.

[3] Klotiņš et al., "Kultūras notikuma "Baznīcu nakts" nolikums", 2.

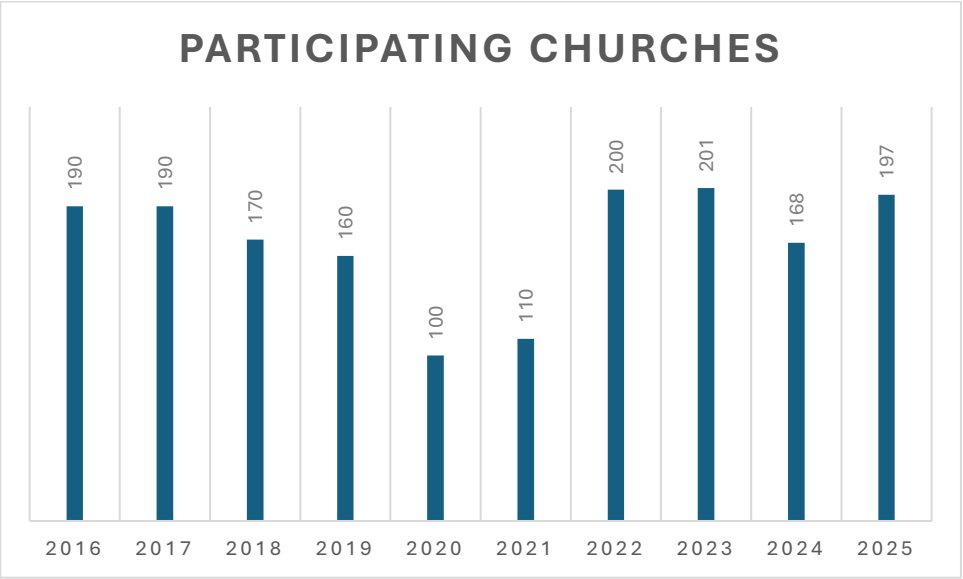

Chart 1

These numbers show consistent participation, with lower numbers during the Covid-19 pandemic and its restrictions.

Overall, the public reception of the event was very positive. There have been mentions on the national TV and radio networks over the years. In Latvian society, it has become an annual cultural event and has its place. In recent years, however, there have also been some critiques from Christian circles. In the paper, further details will be provided, but the main concern is that the NoC in some places has become just a purely cultural event and it has lost its Christian and missional facet. Therefore, the question about creativity as a mission will be discussed further.

Latvia has had Christian influence since the 13th century, initially with the majority Roman Catholic, and some Russian Orthodox churches on the eastern side. In the 16th century, cities in the Latvian territory adopted the Lutheran Reformation, but after the territory became part of the Russian Empire in the 18th century, Russian Orthodoxy began to play a more dominant role. This enabled the construction of numerous church buildings over the centuries. During the two World Wars and the Soviet occupation in the 20th century, many church buildings suffered destruction. To this day, Latvia has 13th-century church buildings and many buildings from the following centuries.

Overall, to understand the background of NoC, it allows Latvian society to experience architectural and historical inheritance. Is it, however, the only reason for the general public to go to church? Or to experience Christian mission in the form of art and Christian music?

2. Theoretical Framework: Mission as Creative and Relational Praxis

2.1. Theological Foundations of Mission as Creative and Relational Praxis

This study understands mission as creative and relational praxis grounded in the nature of God and humanity's participation in God's redemptive activity within the world.[4] The concept draws together three interconnected theological themes: the Trinitarian character of mission, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and humanity's vocation to participate in the ongoing development of creation.

Christian mission originates not in the activity of the Church but in the being and action of the Triune God. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals God as inherently relational and missionary. Divine life is not self-enclosed but characterized by movement toward creation.[5] Within this framework, the Father is understood as the initiating source of mission, the One who sends and engages the world.[6] Mission is therefore not a secondary function of God but an expression of God's very nature. The Son embodies and reveals the divine purpose in history.[7] Furthermore, God's authority over all creation is entrusted to the Son, confirming His central role not only in salvation history but also in the original act of creation and its ultimate fulfillment.[8] The Spirit animates, renews, and sustains creation.[9] Consequently, mission is participation in the dynamic movement of

[4] Michael Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions. Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

[5] Allen Yeh, "Asian Perspective on Twenty-First-Century Pluralism," in *The Gospel and Pluralism Today: Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin in the 21st Century*, ed. Scott W. Sunquist and Amos Young (IVP Academic, 2015), 229.

[6] Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission. Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Baker Academic, 2013), 187.

[7] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology*, Rev. edition (Orbis Books, 1999), 29.

[8] Craig Ott et al., *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, Encountering Mission edition (Baker Academic, 2010), 58.

[9] Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission. Participation in Suffering and Glory*, 187, 249–50.

God toward the world rather than an activity independently initiated by the Church.[10]

This Trinitarian understanding is closely related to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possess capacities that reflect the Creator's own relational and creative nature. Although sin has distorted the divine image, it has not eradicated it. Human beings remain capable of creativity, relationships, moral responsibility, and cultural development. These capacities are not merely anthropological features but theological realities that point toward humanity's vocation within God's purposes.[11]

Human creativity therefore possesses profound theological significance. The capacity to imagine, design, build, organize, and create reflects humanity's participation in the creative work of God. Throughout history, human achievements in art, architecture, science, technology, and social organization have demonstrated this creative potential.[12] Such achievements should not be understood merely as secular accomplishments detached from God's purposes. Rather, they reveal the continuing presence of divine gifts within humanity and the ongoing possibility of human participation in the cultivation and development of creation.

The biblical mandate to cultivate and govern the earth provides an important framework for understanding this participation. Often described as the cultural mandate, this vocation entrusts humanity with responsibility for the development of creation. Creation is not presented as a static and completed reality but as a dynamic project in which human beings are invited to participate. Human history thus becomes the arena in which the possibilities embedded within creation are progressively realized. Creative activity, cultural production, scientific discovery, and social organization can therefore be interpreted as expressions of humanity's God-given responsibility to cultivate the world.[13]

This understanding is reinforced by theological perspectives that view creation as the beginning of a historical process rather than a finished product. Humanity was created with the capacity for growth and development toward deeper fellowship with God. Human creativity and cultural development consequently belong to God's original intention for creation.[14] The unfolding of culture is not external to divine purposes but forms part of humanity's participation in God's ongoing work.

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[10] Johanness Raimers un Dainis Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei: Sociāli nozīmīgas draudzes celšanas teoloģiskie pamati* (Parakletos, 2025), 181–82.

[11] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193.

[12] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

[13] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

[14] Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited*, 29.

The relationship between creation and redemption is particularly significant within this perspective. Early Christian theology frequently emphasized that humanity was created according to the pattern of Christ, the incarnate Word. The incarnation is therefore not merely God's response to sin but is connected to God's original intention for humanity. Christ reveals both the true image of God and the ultimate destiny of human existence.[15] Participation in Christ consequently involves the restoration and fulfillment of humanity's creative and relational vocation.

Humanity's position within creation further illuminates this vocation. Human beings may be understood as a microcosm of creation, uniting material and spiritual realities through the combination of earthly existence and divine breath. This unique position grants humanity a mediating role within creation. Human beings are called to direct creation toward its intended relationship with God and to contribute to the flourishing of the created order. When humanity fulfills this vocation, creation flourishes; when humanity fails, the effects extend beyond individuals to social, cultural, and ecological realities.[16]

Importantly, this creative vocation is not restricted to believers. Because the image of God remains present in all people, creativity, wisdom, and cultural capacity can be found throughout humanity. Every culture bears traces of the divine image, even where these traces are distorted by sin. Cultural traditions, artistic expressions, social structures, and collective aspirations often reveal humanity's continuing search for meaning, justice, beauty, and transcendence. Such realities provide important points of contact for Christian mission.

Mission, therefore, should not begin with the assumption that God is absent from culture. Rather, mission involves discerning signs of God's activity already present within human communities.[17] The Church participates in a mission that precedes it because God is already at work within the world through the sustaining presence of the Spirit. The task of mission is not to create God's presence but to recognize, interpret, and participate in what God is already doing.

Consequently, mission as creative and relational praxis involves collaboration rather than domination. The Church is called to engage human creativity, cultural resources, and social aspirations as potential partners in God's redemptive purposes. Instead of positioning itself against culture, the Church seeks to enter into dialogue with culture, discerning both its distortions and its possibilities. Human creativity becomes one of the primary arenas through which God's mission unfolds in history.

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[15] Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited*, 29.
[16] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.
[17] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei,* 194.

2.2. Holistic mission and public theology

The theological foundations outlined above find practical expression through holistic mission and public theology. If mission arises from God's engagement with the whole of creation, then mission cannot be limited to verbal proclamation alone. While proclamation remains an essential dimension of Christian witness, it forms only one aspect of a broader participation in God's redemptive activity.

Holistic mission emphasizes the integration of word and deed, proclamation and service, evangelization and social engagement. The Gospel addresses the entirety of human existence and therefore cannot be reduced to exclusively spiritual concerns. Human beings exist within social, cultural, economic, and political relationships that shape their lives and opportunities.[18] Consequently, Christian mission must engage these realities as part of its witness to the Kingdom of God.

A central concept within this framework is *martyria*, or total witness. Christian witness involves more than communicating doctrinal truths. It encompasses the totality of a person's life and character. Witness becomes credible when proclamation is embodied in visible patterns of living. The Gospel is communicated not only through speech but also through relationships, practices, decisions, and communal life. Words and deeds function together as complementary dimensions of a single testimony.[19]

Closely related to witness is the practice of *diakonia*, or service. Service reflects the character of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. Acts of compassion, mercy, justice, healing, and solidarity are therefore not supplementary activities that accompany mission. They are integral expressions of mission itself. Through service, the Church participates in God's restoring activity within society and demonstrates the practical implications of the Gospel.[20]

This understanding expands the mission beyond individual conversion to include social transformation. The Kingdom of God concerns not only personal spirituality but also the conditions under which human beings live together. Mission therefore includes participation in efforts that promote justice, peace, dignity, reconciliation, and human flourishing. Educational initiatives, healthcare ministries, poverty alleviation, community development, advocacy for justice, and economic empowerment may all be understood as dimensions of missional engagement.[21]

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[18] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181–82.
[19] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 180.
[20] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181.
[21] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181–82.

Public theology provides an important framework for understanding this social dimension of mission. The Church exists within society and cannot avoid engagement with public realities. Mission takes place within concrete cultural, economic, and political contexts rather than in isolation from them. Consequently, faithful witness requires active participation in the public sphere.

The example of the Apostle Paul illustrates this pattern. Paul's ministry extended beyond religious settings into marketplaces, civic spaces, and centers of public discourse.[22] Christian mission similarly involves entering the everyday spaces where people live, work, and interact. The marketplace, the university, the arts, the media, and civic institutions all become areas for missional engagement.

Such engagement requires a fundamentally dialogical posture. The Church participates in public life not as an isolated institution speaking from above society but as a relational community that listens, learns, and collaborates. Dialogue does not imply theological relativism. Rather, it reflects confidence that truth can be communicated through relationships characterized by respect, humility, and mutual engagement. This dialogical approach encourages cooperation with individuals and groups who seek the common good, even where religious commitments differ. Mission thus becomes relational rather than confrontational. Shared efforts toward justice, peace, reconciliation, and social well-being can become contexts in which deeper theological conversations emerge.[23]

At the same time, public engagement necessarily includes a political dimension. The proclamation of God's Kingdom carries implications for questions of power, justice, and social organization. The Church cannot remain indifferent to structures that produce exclusion, oppression, or inequality. Faithful witness requires attention to concrete social realities and a willingness to address situations in which human dignity is threatened. This political dimension should not be understood primarily in partisan terms. Rather, it reflects the conviction that the Gospel has public consequences.[24] The Church's responsibility is to bear witness to God's purposes within society, advocating for justice and reconciliation while embodying alternative patterns of communal life.

For this reason, the Church functions as a visible sign of the Kingdom of God. Through its communal practices, it demonstrates possibilities for social relationships grounded in reconciliation, solidarity, mutual responsibility, and hope. The Church becomes a contrast society, not through withdrawal from the world but through faithful participation within it. Its life offers a concrete example of how human relationships may be transformed by the values of God's Kingdom.

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[22] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.
[23] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181–82.
[24] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 182, 188–89.

The mission as creative and relational praxis therefore finds public expression through integrated witness. Proclamation and service belong together. Evangelization and social engagement are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of participation in God's mission. The Church bears witness to the Gospel both by announcing God's redemptive purposes and by embodying them within the public life of society.

2.3. Art, Embodiment, and the Sensory Dimensions of Mission

The creative and relational character of mission becomes particularly visible through art, embodiment, and sensory experience. Human beings encounter reality not only through intellectual reflection but also through imagination, emotion, bodily presence, and aesthetic perception. A holistic understanding of mission must therefore account for these dimensions of human existence.

Because creativity belongs to the *imago Dei*, artistic expression possesses theological significance.[25] Art is more than decoration or entertainment; it constitutes a distinctive mode of human participation in creation. Through artistic practices, individuals interpret reality, express meaning, imagine alternatives, and communicate experiences that transcend purely conceptual language. Art therefore provides unique possibilities for theological communication and missional engagement.[26]

The universality of artistic expression further supports its missional significance. Throughout human history, cultures have produced music, visual art, poetry, dance, architecture, and narrative traditions that express fundamental human concerns. These creative forms reveal humanity's search for beauty, meaning, identity, and transcendence. Mission can engage these expressions as sites where questions of ultimate significance are already being explored.

Art consequently functions as an important bridge between faith and culture. Rather than rejecting cultural creativity, mission seeks to discern how artistic forms may become vehicles for theological reflection and communication.[27] This approach echoes the apostolic practice of engaging existing cultural resources in order to communicate the Gospel within particular contexts.

The sensory dimensions of worship provide a particularly significant example. Christian faith is communicated not only through propositions but also through symbols, images, sounds, gestures, and spatial practices. Worship engages the whole person, including imagination, emotion, memory, and bodily

[25] Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 31, 68.
[26] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193.
[27] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

perception. Through music, visual symbolism, ritual action, and aesthetic experience, theological truth becomes tangible and accessible.[28]

The use of culturally meaningful artistic forms is therefore not merely a matter of stylistic preference. It reflects the incarnational logic of mission. Just as God communicates through concrete historical realities, so Christian communities communicate faith through forms that resonate within particular cultural contexts. Artistic expression enables theological meaning to be embodied in ways that connect with lived experience.

The significance of embodiment extends beyond artistic communication. Human beings encounter others through bodily presence and relational interaction. Mission is therefore not simply the transmission of information but participation in relationships. Faith is communicated through visible practices, shared experiences, and embodied forms of life. This embodied understanding is evident in the concept of witness. Christian testimony is communicated through habits, relationships, gestures, and patterns of conduct. The body itself becomes a medium of theological communication. How believers live, serve, welcome, forgive, and relate to others shapes the credibility of their proclamation.[29]

Embodiment is equally important in understanding public witness as a form of living worship. Christian discipleship involves offering one's entire life in service to God. Everyday activities—including work, care, hospitality, and civic engagement—become expressions of faithful participation in God's mission. The distinction between worship and mission becomes increasingly permeable because both involve embodied responses to God's presence and activity. Hospitality illustrates this principle particularly well. Hospitality is not merely an abstract value but a material practice involving time, space, resources, and relationships. Through acts of welcome and generosity, the love of God becomes visible and tangible. Hospitality communicates belonging and reconciliation in ways that transcend verbal explanation.[30]

Similarly, dialogue involves more than intellectual exchange. Genuine dialogue requires shared presence, mutual listening, and participation in common life. Relational mission emerges through encounters in which people learn from one another, cooperate toward shared goals, and recognize the dignity of one another's experiences.[31] Such practices demonstrate that Christian mission is fundamentally relational in character.

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[28] Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 248.
[29] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 180.
[30] Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 68.
[31] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

Attention to embodiment also requires sensitivity to human diversity and accessibility. Mission seeks communication that genuinely reaches people within their particular contexts and capacities. Effective witness, therefore, involves attentiveness to how individuals perceive, experience, and participate in communal life. Sensory, artistic, and relational forms of communication become important means of fostering inclusion and participation.

Taken together, art, embodiment, and sensory experience reveal dimensions of mission that cannot be captured through verbal proclamation alone. They demonstrate that mission is lived, performed, perceived, and experienced as well as spoken. Through creative expression, embodied practices, and relational presence, the Church participates in God's mission in ways that engage the whole person and the whole community.

In summary, mission as creative and relational praxis may be understood through three interrelated dimensions. First, it is grounded theologically in the Trinitarian nature of God, the *imago Dei*, and humanity's vocation to participate in creation. Second, it is expressed publicly through a holistic mission that integrates proclamation, service, social engagement, and dialogue. Third, it is embodied aesthetically and relationally through art, sensory experience, hospitality, and everyday practices. Together, these dimensions provide a coherent framework for understanding mission as participation in God's ongoing creative and redemptive work within the world.

3. Methodology: Qualitative and Interdisciplinary Case Study

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the NoC in Latvia as an example of creative mission within a post-secular Central and Eastern European context. A qualitative case study is appropriate because the research seeks to explore meanings, theological interpretations, and lived experiences rather than to measure quantitative outcomes. The aim is not generalization in a statistical sense, but in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon situated within its specific historical, cultural, and ecclesial setting.

The study draws on document analysis, examining founding texts and media coverage of the NoC to identify its articulated aims, values, and theological language. In addition, it incorporates theological reflection, interpreting the event through missiological frameworks such as holistic mission and mission as creative praxis, informed by Trinitarian and incarnational perspectives. Furthermore, the research includes an interpretive analysis of reported experiences, based on survey responses from 88 representatives of 197 participating churches and from

seven students of Luther Academy who engaged with the NoC in the context of a "Church Planting and Administration" course. Through this multi-layered qualitative approach, the study seeks to understand how NoC functions as an expression of creative and relational mission in practice.

The sources of this study also include the "Regulations of the cultural event "Night of Churches" from 2016, a practical handbook for organizing churches (2016), public news information from the organizers (2025), and the above-mentioned survey.

4. Analysis: The Night of Churches as Creative Mission

4.1. Art, Space and Sensory Experience

During the NoC event, churches in Latvia are presented not only as religious sites but as transformed cultural and spiritual spaces designed to engage visitors through art, atmosphere, and a variety of sensory experiences.

4.1.1. Churches as transformed spaces.

The event traditionally takes place from 18:00 to 24:00, a timeframe that naturally alters the perception of the church space as it transitions from day to night.[32] Several aspects of creativity are employed, including a welcoming atmosphere, sacred versus secular fluidity, and thematic redesign.

Churches are instructed to move away from "classic" or aggressive evangelism methods to create a space where guests feel free and unburdened. The goal is to let people experience the "mood" of the church undisturbed.[33] The space is intentionally organized to host diverse activities simultaneously, such as guided tours, concerts, and quiet meditation areas. Some churches even use their gardens or church towers as extensions of the sacred space.[34] Guidelines suggest using background music, incense, and "candle altars" to make the space feel open and attractive. Physical changes can include setting up exhibition stands for Bibles or historic vestments or creating "prayer corners" where guests can leave written petitions.[35]

[32] Klotiņš et al., "Kultūras notikuma "Baznīcu nakts" nolikums", 1.
[33] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2.
[34] Jurģis Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei" (2016), 10.
[35] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 10,16.

4.1.2. Role of music, light, and visual arts.

These elements serve as a "language" to express the Christian message and the beauty of creation. Music is a core component, ranging from sacred organ and choral music to popular spiritual songs and worship music. Taizé chants are specifically recommended for their simplicity and ability to touch the heart. Unique musical experiences mentioned include the use of the hurdy-gurdy (ratu lira) and experimental spiritual music.[36]

Light plays a crucial role in creating a meditative atmosphere. After sunset, churches are encouraged to use candlelight to foster a sense of peace and spiritual contemplation. Creative lighting includes torches in the garden, candle paths in decorated glass jars, and even sand cinema performances.[37]

The event highlights the artistic and architectural heritage of the buildings. This includes tours of sacred art, icon exhibitions, and photographic presentations of congregational history. Creativity (Jaunrade) is a core value, encouraging new artistic expressions such as theater, film, and even photographic frames that highlight the best views of the church tower.[38]

The survey of participants found that the organizers successfully implemented their planned programs, including music (concerts and choirs). There was an emphasis on hospitality, as the founding documents explained.

4.1.3. Embodied and sensory engagement.

NoC encourages visitors to interact with the environment using all their senses, moving beyond passive observation – movement, touch, physicality, creation, taste, fellowship, and inner sensory experience.

Visitors participate in guided tours through hidden parts of the building, such as climbing church towers for a panoramic view or taking "culture-historical walks" through church cemeteries.[39] Some programs include creative workshops, such as origami flower-making or drawing sessions for children and adults, allowing for a tactile connection to the event.[40] Sharing a meal or a drink is used to facilitate conversation and human connection. Many churches provide free tea, snacks, pancakes, or soup to their guests.[41]

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[36] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11.
[37] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 13.
[38] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1–2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 12.
[39] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 9.
[40] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 10.
[41] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11; Mārcis Romancēvičs, "Ziņas. Pateicība par dalību", Baznīcu nakts, May 20, 2025, https://baznicunakts.lv/2025/pateiciba-par-2025-gada-atverto-baznicu-dienas-un-baznicu-nakts-notikumu/, accessed May 25, 2026.

The "meditative guideline" emphasizes silence and prayer as a sensory experience of God's presence. Visitors can light their own prayer candles or pick "word slips" featuring Bible verses to take home, creating a lasting personal connection to the night.[42]

The survey acknowledged that excursions and guided tours were highly effective in engaging visitors, as was storytelling about the church.

4.2. Public Encounter and Relationality

Based on the sources, the NoC event in Latvia is framed as a significant exercise in public encounter and relationality, moving the church from a closed institution to an open participant in society.

4.2.1. Church - society interaction

The event is designed to bridge the gap between sacred spaces and the broader public through several layers of interaction, for example, as a "meeting" place, as a cultural and spiritual lighthouse, and as a possibility for community integration.

The sources define the night as a "meeting", inviting guests to rediscover the church and encouraging congregations to rediscover their role in the local community.[43] The church is viewed as a "spiritual lighthouse" for the people in its vicinity. Its mission is to contribute to the cultural growth, spiritual well-being, and intellectual development of the Latvian people.[44]

Interaction is not limited to the church building, however. It involves cooperation with local municipalities, tourism information centers, and regional media to integrate the event into the local social fabric.[45]

4.2.2. Hospitality, openness, and accessibility

Hospitality is explicitly listed among the event's four core values. In the context of the event, hospitality includes ecumenism, respect, dialogue, and freedom. This entails respecting diverse Christian traditions while welcoming everyone, regardless of background.[46] In practice, it means that as a minimum, participating churches must ensure their doors are open and that there are congregation members available to meet and greet guests. A welcoming atmosphere

[42] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 13,22.
[43] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1.
[44] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 4.
[45] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 5; Romancēvičs, "Ziņas. Pateicība par dalību".
[46] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1–2.

is created by having people at the entrance to greet visitors, ensuring they feel "expected".[47]

The event strives for physical and informational accessibility. Churches are encouraged to provide clear signage (e.g., directions from public transport), create suggested travel routes, and use a wide array of communication channels, from social media to physical flyers, to reach those who do not regularly attend church.[48]

The survey reveals that visitors experienced this practical openness and accessibility, as the churches were physically open. Visitors included individuals who were not regular church members, members of the local community, and new visitors from other parts of Latvia.

4.2.3. Mission without immediate conversional intent

One of the most distinctive aspects of NoC is its philosophy of non-intrusive mission, which prioritizes visitors' freedom over immediate proselytization. The emphasis is on avoiding "classic" evangelism, respecting freedom, prioritizing dialogue over monologue, and offering guidance on the "spiritual path".

The guidelines specifically instruct congregations to avoid "classic evangelization methods" that might be perceived as pushy, such as asking "Do you read the Bible?" or stating "You must come to church".[49] The focus is on allowing guests to experience the atmosphere of the church undisturbed. The sources suggest that it is preferable to wait for guests to ask questions rather than imposing a message.[50] In some of the congregations and among the Luther Academy students, this principle raises questions of validity of the event as a mission. As the theological framework described, though, it is important to celebrate creativity and give meeting points.

Instead of a sales pitch for faith, the emphasis is on simple sincerity and kindness. Recommended phrases include "It's nice that you came" or "We look forward to seeing you again," which leave a positive emotional memory.[51] While the long-term goal is to encourage a spiritual journey toward personal faith, the immediate objective of the night is to provide a hospitable space where that journey can begin at the individual's own pace. Mission is understood as "sharing the gifts we have received" rather than as a demand for conversion.[52]

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[47] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[48] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 15.
[49] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[50] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[51] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[52] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 4–5.

The survey reveals that the organizers mostly avoided the "Classic" evangelism and respected the freedom of visitors. The survey also reveals, though, the tensions for this approach which are discussed further.

4.3. Tensions and Critiques

While the sources do not explicitly use the word "critique," they proactively address several tensions and risks involved in opening sacred spaces for a large-scale public event, focusing on maintaining a balance between culture, mission, and practice.

4.3.1. Risk of culturalization

The sources acknowledge that NoC is positioned as a cultural event, which risks its being perceived solely as a secular or aesthetic experience. To lessen this, the organizers emphasize the balance of values, give guidelines of music standards, and encourage atmospheric integrity.

Organizers are instructed to align all activities with four core values: hospitality, Christian spirituality, cultural heritage, and creativity.[53] There is a clear tension regarding the type of music permitted. While popular spiritual music is allowed, the guidelines warn against "too much noise and drums" to preserve the church's meditative character. All music must be "suitable for a church".[54] Even without a formal program, churches are encouraged to use background music, candles, and incense to keep the space a spiritual environment rather than just a museum.[55]

4.3.2. Loss of explicit Gospel reference?

To ensure the Christian message is not lost in the cultural festivities, the sources implement specific "anchors". There are some mandatory initiatives and an emphasis on art as a language. Every participating church across Latvia is required to lead a collective Lord's Prayer at 21:00, serving as a unified spiritual focal point.[56] However, here a question can be asked, whether this really expresses the Christian message or is just a tradition.

Visual arts and tours are not meant to be purely historical; they are described as a "language" intended to express the Christian message and the

[53] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1.
[54] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11.
[55] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 16.
[56] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 5.

sacred meaning of the heritage.[57] To ensure guests take a piece of the Gospel home, congregations are encouraged to provide free Bibles and "word slips" containing specific Scripture verses for various life situations.[58]

4.3.3. Who defines "mission" in public events?

The definition of mission is established through a hierarchy of authority and tradition. The "Night of Churches Foundation" (*Baznīcu nakts fonds*) defines the official mission: to promote the cultural growth and spiritual well-being of the Latvian people.[59] The event's character is defined by the "traditional denominations" (Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, Orthodox, Methodist, and Adventist), whose historical and social contributions have shaped the Latvian identity.[60]

The organizers ultimately root the mission in the Great Commission, particularly from the Gospel of Mark 16:15 and the example of Nicodemus seeking Jesus at night, framing the event as a tool for "spiritual awakening".[61]

4.3.4. Purpose: to apply theory to practice.

The sources serve as a manual for translating theological concepts into practical ministry. The theological value of hospitality is practiced through smiling greeters at the door, offering free tea and snacks, and creating "prayer corners".[62] Beyond the theory of ecumenism, the bylaws require different denominations to cooperate and respect each other's unique traditions while remaining within their own confessional boundaries.[63]

The organizers also emphasize the power of simplicity, thereby encouraging more churches to participate. A recurring practical instruction is to avoid "saturated" or over-complicated programs. Instead, the guidelines emphasize "simplicity and sincerity" as the most effective way to reach the public.[64]

The survey reveals several concerns regarding mission during the NoC. Mission appears primarily framed as an invitation and a visibility rather than an explicit proclamation. Several responses highlight that "non-Christians entered the church," that visitors could "discuss questions of faith," and that people were invited to attend Sunday worship afterwards. This suggests that evangelism is

[57] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11.
[58] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7–8.
[59] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1.
[60] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1–2.
[61] Nodibinājums "Baznīcu nakts fonds," "Baznīcu nakts 2016. gada 10. jūnijā visā Latvijā," 2016.
[62] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[63] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[64] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 9.

perceived less as direct preaching and more as creating access points and relational contact. The concern implicit here is not about aggressive proclamation but about whether contact leads to deeper integration into congregational life.

There is a recurring emphasis on opening the church building as a symbolic and practical act. The language of "opening doors" and the use of shared branding (logo, posters) show awareness of the public presence. However, the data do not strongly reflect structured follow-up strategies. The missional question that quietly emerges is: does visibility translate into discipleship, or does the event remain a one-night encounter?

Interestingly, multiple respondents explicitly state that they "did not see challenges." While this may signal satisfaction, it may also indicate limited critical reflection on evangelistic effectiveness. The absence of articulated tensions (e.g., theological compromise, superficial engagement, resource strain) could suggest either smooth implementation or a lack of evaluative missiological criteria.

There are, however, also hints of a developing evangelistic self-understanding. Phrases such as "opportunity to remind people about God" and hopes "to develop in this area" show that some participants view the event as formative for the congregation's missionary identity. The concern here is developmental: congregations may be in an early stage of articulating how creative public events relate to sustained evangelism.

In summary, the NoC reveals several tensions between culture and mission. As a public cultural event, it risks being perceived primarily as heritage rather than Christian witness; therefore, organizers establish theological anchors such as shared prayer, sacred atmosphere, Scriptural materials, and clearly defined core values to safeguard its spiritual focus. Mission is institutionally framed through denominational tradition and biblical mandate, and theology is translated into practice through hospitality, ecumenical cooperation, and programmatic simplicity. Survey data indicate that mission is often understood as an invitation embodied through presence and visibility rather than through explicit verbal proclamation, raising questions about follow-up and discipleship. While few challenges are explicitly named, this may reflect limited critical evaluation, even as some congregations show growing awareness of their developing missionary identity.

5. Discussion: Creativity, Mission and Ambiguity

Analysis of the open-ended responses reveals that participating churches primarily defined success in terms of active organization, visible hospitality, and visitor engagement. Many respondents emphasized successfully implementing

concerts, guided tours, and structured programs, as well as attracting visitors beyond regular congregants. The event was experienced as an opportunity for openness and public presence. In contrast, reported shortcomings were largely strategic rather than fundamental. Churches identified the need for earlier planning, stronger communication, greater involvement of congregation members, and more diversified programming. Overall, the findings suggest that while creative and public-facing practices were effectively implemented, there remains a desire for deeper relational participation and improved organizational intentionality.

Conclusion: Called into Creativity Today

This study has examined the NoC as an example of mission understood as creative and relational praxis within a post-secular Central and Eastern European context, using Latvia as a case study. The analysis demonstrates that creativity, public presence, and embodied practices are not secondary or decorative dimensions of mission, but integral expressions of it. The event reveals how proclamation, service, art, hospitality, and dialogue can function together as a holistic form of witness. At the same time, tensions emerge regarding culturalization, the clarity of Gospel articulation, and the transition from visibility to sustained discipleship.

The findings reaffirm creativity as a legitimate and theologically grounded form of mission. Rooted in the *imago Dei* and participation in God's creative work, human artistic and organizational ingenuity can serve as a meaningful medium of theological communication. When anchored in Trinitarian and incarnational perspectives, creativity becomes not a compromise with culture but a mode of engaging it faithfully. The NoC illustrates that opening sacred spaces, employing culturally resonant forms, and fostering embodied encounters can function as authentic expressions of *missio Dei*.

For local churches and mission organizations, this implies that creative public initiatives should not be viewed as peripheral or merely strategic tools, but as genuine sites of theological action. However, such initiatives require intentional reflection on follow-up, discipleship pathways, and the integration of proclamation and service. For theological education, the findings suggest the need to equip future leaders not only in doctrinal clarity but also in cultural engagement, aesthetic literacy, and public theology. Mission formation should include reflection on embodiment, creativity, and dialogue in plural societies.

Further research could explore the long-term missional impact of creative public events, particularly their influence on congregational transformation and sustained faith engagement among participants. Comparative studies across

different cultural contexts would also deepen understanding of how creative mission functions within diverse ecclesial and social settings. Additionally, empirical research on discipleship outcomes and follow-up practices would help assess the relationship between event-based visibility and lasting ecclesial integration.

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Metacognitive Architectures of Self-Control: Functional Convergences between Nepsis and Sati in Emotional Regulation

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the metacognitive architectures of self-control by comparing Eastern Christian watchfulness (nepsis) with Early Buddhist mindfulness (sati). Within the framework of Emotional Intelligence, the study identifies functional convergences in establishing a "cognitive hiatus" between stimulus and response. It analyzes protocols like the Buddhist "two arrows" metaphor and the Evagrian taxonomy of thoughts as sophisticated tools for somatic and mental stabilization. While both systems employ similar attentional monitoring, they diverge ontologically: Buddhism pursues the deconstruction of the ego, whereas Philokalic spirituality seeks the restoration of the person through Divine Grace. The research proposes a "Transfigured Emotional Intelligence," where ancient asceticism provides a teleological depth to secular self-regulation. This synthesis transforms affect management into a pedagogy of sanctification, offering a robust anthropological response to contemporary psychological fragmentation.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Metacognition, Nepsis, Sati, Self-Control.

Introduction

In contemporary psychological discourse, emotional regulation and self-control are predominantly conceptualized through cognitive-behavioral paradigms, neurobiological feedback loops, and secularized mindfulness frameworks. While these approaches have successfully operationalized self-regulation into measurable

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skills, they frequently isolate cognitive mechanics from their deeper anthropological and teleological roots. Consequently, emotional management is often reduced to a utilitarian tool for stress reduction or social adaptation, obscuring the profound metacognitive and ontological frameworks developed within ancient contemplative traditions. To address this conceptual limitation, contemporary research increasingly turns toward historical contemplative practices, seeking to understand how traditional traditions mapped, monitored, and transformed the internal landscape of human affectivity.

This study investigates the structural and functional mechanisms of self-control by constructing a comparative dialogue between two major contemplative architectures: the Hesychast/Philokalic tradition of the Christian East and Early Theravāda Buddhism. At the core of both traditions lies the recognition that the unrefined human condition is defined by a state of "spiritual somnolence"[1] or cognitive dispersion, wherein emotional reactivity functions automatically and unchecked. To counteract this vulnerability, both systems deploy sophisticated metacognitive tools designed to create an intentional "hiatus" between external or internal stimuli and the subject's volitional response.

In the Philokalic framework, this mechanism is embodied in the practice of *νῆψις* (nepsis or watchfulness), a vigilant attention that initiates a reflexive "return to self" (*venirea în sine*) and monitors the "gates of the heart"[2] against disruptive thoughts (*λογισμοί*). In Early Buddhism, a functionally convergent instrument is found in *sati* (mindfulness), an attentional platform that intercepts experience at the primary level of sensation (*vedanā*), preventing automatic mental elaboration and the escalation of secondary suffering. While modern paradigms of Emotional Intelligence (EI)—such as the four-branch model proposed by Mayer and Salovey—emphasize emotional perception, appraisal, and regulation as autonomous intrapsychic competencies, both *νῆψις* and *sati* demonstrate that true self-mastery relies on higher-order metacognitive awareness.

However, despite these striking procedural convergences, the two traditions diverge fundamentally in their underlying anthropological and teleological assumptions. Where Early Buddhism utilizes *sati* to achieve the phenomenological deconstruction of the ego (*anattā*) and the cessation of mental conditioning (*nirodha*), the Philokalic tradition employs watchfulness to restore the hypostatic integrity of the human person (*ὑπόστασις*) in a synergetic communion with Divine Grace (*χάρις*).

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[1] Ātāpī Sutta, „Keen", Itivuttaka 34, în Minor Discourses, trad. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, accesat 23 mai 2026, https://suttacentral.net/iti34/en/sujato.

[2] Sfântul Calist Patriarhul, „Capete care au lipsit", în *Filocalia*, vol. VIII, trad. Dumitru Stăniloae (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2013), 306–307.

To systematically analyze these convergences and divergences, this paper is structured into three main analytical sections. The first section examines the architecture of *νῆψις*, detailing the metacognitive "return to self," the deconstruction of *φιλαυτία* (ego-centric self-love), and the embodied, somatic support of ascetic practice.

The second section analyzes the architecture of *sati*, focusing on somatic stabilization, the clinical deconstruction of suffering via the "two arrows" metaphor (*Sallathasutta*), metacognitive labeling, and the step-by-step procedural interventions outlined in the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*.

The third one synthesizes these findings by mapping the functional convergences and ontological divergences between both traditions, ultimately proposing the concept of "Transfigured Emotional Intelligence"—a framework that integrates extra-psychological resources and Divine Grace into contemporary models of affective regulation.

By bridging ancient ascetic precision with modern cognitive science and emotional intelligence frameworks, this study aims to demonstrate that emotional self-control is neither a passive state nor a mere psychological strategy, but a rigorous pedagogy of transformation that restores human agency and ontological depth.

1. The Architecture of Watchfulness: *Νῆψις* and the Metacognitive "Return to Self"

Within the framework of Philokalic spirituality, the process of internal transformation is fundamentally predicated upon an active response to the complexities of human affectivity. This transformation is not merely an external behavioral adjustment, but a profound reorientation of the heart and mind—a metacognitive shift through sorrow: "Every sin is committed for the sake of pleasure, and all forgiveness comes through suffering and sorrow."[3] that facilitates a deeper communion with the Divine. In this context, the primary method of spiritual coping is the practice of νῆψις, which functions as the foundational threshold for any authentic psychological and spiritual change.

1.1. The "Return to Self" as a Cognitive Hiatus

The quintessential moment of this architecture is the "return to self" (Lk 15:17), a state emblematically illustrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The scriptural notation suggests that conversion begins with a reflexive observation: the

[3] Sfântul Talasie Libianul. Despre dragoste, înfrânare şi petrecerea cea după minte. Suta întâi. În *Filocalia*, vol. IV. Bucureşti: Editura IBMBOR, 2010, 25.

subject stops the outward dispersal of the intellect and redirects attention toward their own internal state. This "return" is not a simple psychological introspection, but a metacognitive awakening that allows the individual to recognize the rupture from their original communion.

This spiritual awakening often necessitates a confrontation with the polarities of the inner life. As Saint Isaac the Syrian observes, the knowledge of the Divine glory is preceded by a direct encounter with the "malice of the enemy"[4] and the depths of one's own limitations. In this therapeutic anthropology, suffering and the "lack of meaning" serve as catalysts for a "crisis of consciousness."[5] The individual recognizes the internal void and, simultaneously, the urgent need for a spiritual restoration. This rupture, provoked by the experience of evil and somatic distress, creates the necessary framework for a proactive pursuit of the Good.

1.2. Deconstructing Φιλαυτία: From Ego-centrism to Discernment

A significant obstacle in this architecture of self-control is the capture of the mind by sensory representations. Saint Maximus the Confessor warns that an excessive focus on "the knowledge of things seen only through the senses" deepens the subject's "ignorance of God"6. Therefore, the "return to self" involves a rigorous "metacognitive monitoring" of desires and ego-centric attachments. The primary target of this intervention is φιλαυţια (negative self-love), which Maximus defines as the root of affective alienation.

The liberation from this state requires a deliberate renunciation of "the pursuit of pleasure and the fear of pain," a process that elevates the soul toward the "knowledge of the Creator"[7]. This reorientation is profoundly practical: Saint Thalassios the Libyan notes that "every sin is committed for the sake of pleasure," while healing and forgiveness are facilitated through the "voluntary acceptance of suffering" and the "salvific sorrow" that opens the heart to grace.[8] In this sense, repentance (μετάνοια) is not a moralistic punishment, but a "pedagogical exercise" of the will, where the practitioner learns to decouple the impulse of pleasure from the volitional act.

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4 Sfântul Isaac Sirul. Cuvinte despre nevoință. Cuvântul LXXXV. În *Filocalia*, vol. X. București: Editura IBMBOR, 2015, 516–517.

5 Wong, P. T. P., Reker, G. T. Aging as an Individual Process: Toward a Theory of Personal Meaning. În Birren, J. E., Bengtson, V. L. (eds*.). Emergent Theories of Aging*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1988, 222.

6 Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul. Răspunsuri către Talasie. În Filocalia, vol. III. București: Editura IBMBOR, 2009, 33–34.

7 Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul. Răspunsuri către Talasie, 39.

8 Sfântul Talasie Libianul. Despre dragoste, înfrânare și petrecerea cea după minte. Suta întâi, 25.

1.3. Perseverance and the Somatic Support of Metacognition

The architecture of νῆψις requires a sustained rhythm of life, often described in ascetic literature as a "continual struggle." Saint Peter of Damascus encourages this "perseverance in the face of fall," emphasizing that the act of "rising again" after every failure is, in itself, a form of spiritual coping that generates "self-condemnation" and humility.[9] This process is not purely intellectual; it involves the "somatic engagement" of the whole person.

Saint Philotheos of Sinai argues that "bodily toils" (ostenelile trupești) are not to be discarded, as they serve as the "ground from which spiritual joy and the experience of the good spring forth."[10] The body, often perceived as a burden, is transfigured into a "support for the soul" in its quest for illumination. As Abba Philemon sharply notes, spiritual clarity is not granted to those "sleeping and lying on their backs," but is the fruit of "great toil and pain of heart".[11] This synergy between human effort (ἄσκησις) and Divine grace (χάρις) ensures that the "return to self" is not a transient emotion, but an ontological restoration of the "divine image" within the person.

Functionally, the Philokalic integration of somatic toils (ostenelile trupești) and metacognitive watchfulness anticipates modern embodied cognition theories. Rather than treating the body as an autonomous source of affective disruption, the ascetic model utilizes physical posture and respiratory regulation as physiological anchors that reduce autonomic arousal, enabling the executive functions of the intellect to regain sovereign control over emotional impulses.

2. The Architecture of Mindfulness: *Sati* and the Metacognitive Monitoring of Experience

If the Philokalic tradition emphasizes the "return to self" as an ontological reorientation, the Early Buddhist discourses (Suttas) provide a complementary "functional map" of attentional control. The central instrument of this therapeutics is sati (mindfulness), defined as the capacity to observe experience with a lucid presence, without compulsive identification.

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[9] Sfântul Petru Damaschin. Cartea întâi. Mare bine este pocăința adevărată. În *Filocalia*, vol. V. București: Editura IBMBOR, 2011, 171.

[10] Sfântul Filotei Sinaitul. Capete despre trezvie. În *Filocalia*, vol. IV. București: Editura IBMBOR, 2010, 133.

[11] Avva Filimon. Cuvânt foarte folositor. În *Filocalia*, vol. IV. București: Editura IBMBOR, 2010, 204.

2.1. Sati as a Functional Platform for Self-Regulation

In the Buddhist canonical texts, sati represents the mechanism through which the individual becomes aware of the "arising of sensations, emotions, and thoughts" before they crystallize into "automatic reactions." Functionally, mindfulness is the premise of all control: one cannot intervene upon a reaction unless it is "recognized in the moment of its appearance." This antrenament of consciousness facilitates a shift from the "internalized impulse" ("I am angry") to a "metacognitive observation" ("anger is present")[12].

2.2. Somatic Stabilization: The Body as an "Early Warning System"

The architecture of sati begins with the "mindfulness of the body" (kāyagatāsati) and the "mindfulness of breathing"[13] (ānāpānassati). The breath functions as a "point of anchor" in the immediate experience, reducing the mind's tendency to oscillate between "rumination on the past" and "anxious anticipation of the future."[14] From a psychological perspective, orienting attention toward the breath diminishes the "escalation of reactivity," offering a "metacognitive hiatus" between the stimulus and the response.

Furthermore, the body serves as an "early indicator"[15] of affective arousal. Emotions are invariably accompanied by "somatic modifications"[16]—muscular tension, respiratory acceleration, or abdominal constriction. By cultivating a "somatic awareness," the practitioner can detect these signals before they transform into "behavioral reactions."[17] The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* emphasizes that this practice is "very fruitful and beneficial"[18], leading to the "calming of the bodily process"[19]. The body is thus reframed as an "observable process,"[20] not a "fixed identity," a shift that reduces the ground on which "anxiety, shame, or defensive reactions"[21] develop.

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[12] Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „The Greater Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation", Dīgha Nikāya 22, în Long Discourses, trad. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, accesat 12 februarie 2026, https://suttacentral.net/dn22/en/sujato.

[13] Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „The Greater Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation", Dīgha Nikāya 22.

[14] Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „The Greater Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation", Dīgha Nikāya 22.

[15] Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „The Greater Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation", Dīgha Nikāya 22.

[16] Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „The Greater Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation", Dīgha Nikāya 22.

[17] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6, în Linked Discourses: A Refreshing Translation, trad. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, accesat 15 februarie 2026, https://suttacentral.net/sn36.6/en/sujato.

[18] Ānāpānassati Sutta, "Mindfulness of Breathing", Majjhima Nikāya 118, în Middle Discourses, trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/mn118/en/sujato?lang=en, accessed 12.02.2026.

[19] Ānāpānassati Sutta, „Mindfulness of Breathing", Majjhima Nikāya 118.

[20] Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „Mindfulness Meditation", Majjhima Nikāya 10, in Long Discourses, trad. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, accesat 12 februarie 2026, https://suttacentral.net/dn22/en/sujato.

[21] Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, „Mindfulness Meditation", Majjhima Nikāya 10.

2.3. The Dialectic of the "Two Arrows": Deconstructing the Mechanism of Suffering Escalation

The architecture of sati (mindfulness) reaches its clinical peak in the deconstruction of how suffering is not merely experienced, but actively "produced" through mental elaboration. While the observation of vedanā (sensations) introduces a cognitive hiatus between stimulus and reaction, the early Buddhist discourses, specifically the *Sallathasutta* (SN 36.6), provide a more granular distinction between levels of experience. This text establishes a fundamental differentiation between "primary pain,"[22] which is inextricably linked to the somatic and existential condition, and "secondary suffering,"[23] which is a psychological construct born from resistance, dramatization, and identification.

This "metacognitive anatomy of pain" is vividly expressed through the metaphor of the two arrows:

> When an uninstructed ordinary person experiences a painful physical feeling, they sorrow, wail, and lament; they beat their breast and become confused. They experience two feelings: a physical one and a mental one. It is as if a person were struck by an arrow, and then struck by a second arrow. That person feels the pain of two arrows.[24]

In this framework, the first arrow represents the inevitable discomforts of human existence—illness, loss, failure, or somatic distress. The "second arrow," however, is the mental reaction: the internal revolt, resentment, and fear that amplify the initial sensation. From the perspective of self-control, the "second arrow" is the true locus of therapeutic intervention. The "uninstructed person" falls into a recursive loop: they resist the painful sensation, which reinforces a "latent tendency toward aversion,"[25] and subsequently seek refuge in "sensual pleasures" as a desperate escape, thereby strengthening the "latent tendency toward desire."[26]

In contrast, the "noble disciple" practices an advanced form of emotional regulation. When struck by the first arrow, they do not launch the second. They experience the sensation (vedanā) as a bare fact, without the added layer of "mental sorrow" or "confusion".[27] This decoupling is achieved by feeling the sensation "dispassionately". This does not imply a state of anesthesia, but a transfigured relationship with the experience: the pain remains present, but it

[22] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.
[23] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.
[24] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.
[25] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.
[26] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.
[27] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.

no longer constrains behavior or dictates the subject's identity. As the discourse concludes, this is the "great difference in skill between the wise person and the ordinary person."[28]

2.4. Metacognitive Labeling: From Identification to Objective Observation

If the deconstruction of the "two arrows" explains *what* must be stopped, the practice of "labeling" provides the *how*. After stabilizing attention in the body, the practitioner moves toward the explicit recognition of mental states. This marks the formal emergence of metacognition: the mind no longer simply "thinks" or "feels," but becomes aware of the process of thinking and feeling itself.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, this is formulated as a systematic, operational recognition: when the mind is affected by desire, the practitioner knows, "there is desire in me"; when it is free from desire, they know, "there is no desire in me"[29]. This simple linguistic labeling performs a radical psychological shift: the mental state is no longer confused with the "Self." Instead of saying "I am angry," the subject notes "anger is present." This shift from identification to observation is the cornerstone of self-mastery, allowing the practitioner to monitor the "gates of the soul" and intervene before an impulse becomes a compulsive act.

A profound illustration of this "fine-tuning" of the mind is found in the account "About Soṇa"[30]. Soṇa, despite his intense effort, fails to achieve internal freedom because his energy is imbalanced, leading to agitation. Buddha uses the analogy of a musical instrument:

> When the strings of the lute were too tight, was it pleasant to play?/ No, sir./ When they were too loose?/ No, sir./ But when they were properly tuned?/ Then it was pleasant to play.[31]

The pedagogical conclusion is direct: "when energy is too forced, it leads to agitation; when it is too weak, it leads to laziness."[32] By "labeling" his own internal state and recognizing the "pattern of the situation,"[33] Soṇa achieves a "stability of faculties." This result is functionally identical to the Philokalic

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28 Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.

29 Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, "The Greater Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation", Dīgha Nikāya 22, in Long Discourses, trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/dn22/en/sujato?lang=en, accessed 12.02.2026

30 Sona Sutta, „With Sona", Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55., Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55, în Numbered Discourses: A Refreshing Translation, trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/an6.55/en/sujato?lang=en, accessed 16.02.2026

31 Sona Sutta, „With Sona", Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55.

32 Sona Sutta, „With Sona", Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55.

33 Sona Sutta, „With Sona", Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55.

ἀπάθεια: even when attractive or repulsive forms enter the field of vision, they "do not overwhelm the mind."[34] The mind remains "unstained, stable, and unshakable," observing the "cessation of things" rather than being swept away by their appearance.[35]

2.5. Procedural Interventions: The Mūlapariyāya Sutta as a Clinical Guide for Thought Control

The transition from the passive observation of mental states to active volitional intervention is detailed with clinical precision in the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, a discourse that serves as a fundamental manual for "stopping thoughts"[36]. This text does not propose a vague state of tranquility, but rather a structured competence applied to mental processes when they exceed the boundaries of equilibrium. The intervention is specifically addressed to the "monk dedicated to the higher mind"[37] (adhicitta), suggesting that these five techniques constitute an advanced metacognitive toolkit for the mastery of internal dynamics.

The first method proposed is the deliberate substitution of the mental object. If a practitioner identifies that a specific subject gives rise to "unskillful thoughts" related to desire, hatred, or delusion, they are encouraged to consciously redirect the intellect toward a "skillful" (kusala) subject. The discourse employs a technical analogy to describe this maneuver: as a skilled carpenter might use a "fine peg to knock out a coarse one," the practitioner uses a refined thought to displace a disruptive one.[38] This is not an act of suppression, but a strategic replacement that deactivates the automatism of the passionate impulse.

If the intrusive thoughts persist, the second method involves a rational evaluation of consequences. The practitioner is urged to examine the "disadvantages" of these thoughts, recognizing them as "unskillful, condemnable, and resulting in suffering." This process generates a form of "metacognitive disgust," illustrated by the striking image of a "young person, fond of ornaments," who would feel "horror and repulsion" if the "corpse of a snake or a dog" were hung around their neck. By analytically linking the thought to its inevitable painful outcome, the mind naturally withdraws its consent.

The third intervention is a minimalist maneuver of deliberate disengagement. If the thoughts continue to arise despite the evaluation of their negative impact,

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34 Sona Sutta, „With Sona", Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55.

35 Sona Sutta, „With Sona", Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.55.

36 Mūlapariyāya Sutta, "How to Stop Thinking", Majjhima Nikāya 20, în Middle Discourses, trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/mn20/en/sujato?lang=en, accessed 17.02.2026

37 Mūlapariyāya Sutta, "How to Stop Thinking, Majjhima Nikāya 20.

38 Mūlapariyāya Sutta, "How to Stop Thinking", Majjhima Nikāya 20.

the practitioner should "try to forget and ignore them"[39]. The text likens this to a person with "clear eyes" who, encountering "undesired images," simply "closes their eyes or looks away." In contemporary terms, this represents a "cognitive decoupling"—a refusal to provide the attentional energy necessary for the thought to persist, without entering into an active conflict with it.

The fourth method targets the mechanics of thought-formation through a process of deceleration. If the previous steps fail, the practitioner focuses on "stopping the formation of thoughts" by analyzing their underlying momentum. The analogy provided is that of a person moving rapidly who decides to slow down, then to stand, then to sit, and finally to lie down. This technique describes a fine-tuning of the internal state, bringing the mind from a "hurried" or agitated condition toward increasingly subtle layers of stillness, until the very impulse to generate thought is weakened.

The fifth and final method, reserved for instances where all other interventions prove insufficient, is an energetic volitional suppression. With "clenched teeth and the tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth," the practitioner should "crush and defeat the mind with the mind". This "strenuous effort," compared to a "strong man grasping a weaker one by the head or neck," represents the last line of defense in the management of self-control.[40]

The culmination of this procedural hierarchy is the attainment of a state where the practitioner is "master of the paths of thought". Such an individual can "think what they want to think and not think what they do not want to think." By cutting the "thirst" and "throwing off the chains," the practitioner effectively terminates the "mass of suffering".[41] Within the context of our comparative study, these five methods provide a functional equivalent to the ascetic strategies of the *Philokalia*, offering a systematic path from the "second arrow" of reactive suffering to the stable sovereignty of a transfigured intellect.

The procedural hierarchy of the Mūlapariyāya Sutta operates as an early cognitive-behavioral protocol. By grading interventions from subtle attentional substitution to active suppression, the text offers an empirical taxonomy of cognitive reappraisal. This demonstrates that early contemplative systems did not rely on passive exposure alone, but implemented precise, step-by-step algorithms to disrupt the automated neural pathways of habitual reactivity.

[39] Mūlapariyāya Sutta, "How to Stop Thinking", Majjhima Nikāya 20.
[40] Mūlapariyāya Sutta, "How to Stop Thinking, Majjhima Nikāya 20.
[41] Mūlapariyāya Sutta, "How to Stop Thinking", Majjhima Nikāya 20.

3. Functional Convergences and Ontological Divergences: Towards a Transfigured Emotional Intelligence

The dialogue between the Philokalic tradition and Early Buddhism (Theravāda) reveals a profound structural alignment in the management of self-control. Both systems operate on the anthropological postulate that the unrefined human state is one of "spiritual somnolence" or chronic dispersal. From the perspective of Emotional Intelligence (EI), this state is equivalent to a deficit in self-awareness, where affective flows dictate behavior without being subjected to a critical instance.

3.1. Metacognitive Monitoring: Νῆψις and Sati as Exercises in Awareness

The first step toward emotional and spiritual maturity in both traditions is the activation of a monitoring function, conceptualized in modern psychology as metacognition. In the Philokalic horizon, this awakening is described as a "return to self" (venirea în sine), an act illustrated by the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:17). This is not merely an analytical introspection but a radical confrontation with one's own ontological collapse. Saint Isaac the Syrian emphasizes that this awareness is necessarily accompanied by a perception of spiritual polarities: one cannot truly know the glory of God without having tasted the bitterness of the "Gehenna" of passions.[42]

In parallel, Early Buddhism proposes sati (mindfulness) as a methodology for intercepting experience at the level of sensory contact. The canonical formula— "when feeling a pleasant sensation, one knows: I feel a pleasant sensation"[43]—illustrates an exercise in pure metacognition. This mental labeling functions as a procedure to deactivate automatic identification with the affect. A crucial tool here is the metaphor of the "two arrows," which distinguishes between primary pain (the somatic event) and added mental suffering (the emotional reaction).[44]

While both traditions validate the first principle of EI—the accuracy of internal perception—the Christian model adds a qualitative dimension: νῆψις (watchfulness) serves to restore the integrity of the person (ὑπόστασις),

[42] Sfântul Isaac Sirul. Cuvinte despre nevoință. În *Filocalia*, vol. X. București: Editura IBMBOR, 2017, 196.

[43] Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, "Mindfulness Meditation", Majjhima Nikāya 10, în Middle Discourses, trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/mn10/en/sujato?lang=en, accessed 12.02.2026

[44] Sallatha Sutta, „The Arrow", Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.6.

whereas sati aims for de-identification from a self considered illusory (anattā). In the Philokalia, the mind does not observe itself to dissolve into neutrality, but to purify the "bait" of alien thoughts, becoming capable of dialogue with God.[45]

3.2. Mapping the Stimuli: Taxonomy of Λογισμοί and the Vedanā Mechanism

Effective emotional intelligence depends on the precision of identifying the triggering stimulus. Buddhism localizes the "ignition point" of reactivity at the level of vedanā (sensation). According to the principle of dependent origination, any sensory contact produces a sensation (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral). If left unobserved, this sensation transforms into "thirst" (taṇhā) and, ultimately, into stable attachment (upādāna). Thus, conscious intervention at the level of vedanā functions as a mechanism of early self-regulation.[46]

Mirroring this, the Evagrian system proposes a hierarchical taxonomy of the eight primary thoughts (λογισμοί). These range from corporeal passions (γαστριμαργία, πορνεία, φιλαργυρία) to soulish disturbances (ὀργή, λύπη, ἀκηδία), culminating in insidious forms of self-centeredness (κενοδοξία, ὑπερηφανία). This gradation provides surgical precision in identifying the "gates" through which affective stimuli destabilize the person.

Evagrius introduces an exceptional analytical method: "unweaving" the thought. This involves decomposing a mental representation into its constitutive components: the real object, its mental image, and the unstructured affective reaction.[47] Both traditions anticipate modern cognitive psychology by identifying the cognitive origin of emotions and the role of appraisal in triggering affective responses.

3.3. Grace as an Extra-Psychological Resource: Transfiguring "Warm Intelligences"

A distinctive element of the Christian ascetic model is the recognition of the limits of human autonomy. While EI is often defined as an ability optimized through personal effort, Philokalic anthropology introduces the variable of Grace. This re-frames emotional maturity as a participation in uncreated Divine energies.

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[45] Evagrie Ponticul. Capete despre deosebirea patimilor şi a gândurilor. În *Filocalia*, vol. I. Bucureşti: Editura IBMBOR, 2008.

[46] Paṭiccasamuppādasutta, "Analysis", Saṁyutta Nikāya 12.2, în Linked Discourses, trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/sn12.2/en/sujato?lang=en, accessed 12.02.2026

[47] Evagrie Ponticul. Capete despre deosebirea patimilor şi a gândurilor. În *Filocalia*, vol. I. Bucureşti: Editura IBMBOR, 2008, 68.

In this point, Salovey and Mayer's "warm intelligences"—mental processes focused on self-relevant information—are transfigured. In the Philokalic tradition, they become "burning intelligences" through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Stillness (isihia) is not just the result of cognitive reappraisal, but the presence of the "joyful fire" of Grace in the heart.

Table 1. The Pnevmatic Dimension of Emotional Intelligence

EI Characteristic	Psychological/ Autonomous Model	Philokalic Model (Transfigured EI)
Source of Stability	Cognitive self-regulation and homeostasis.	Hypostatic presence of the Holy Spirit in man.
Nature of Progress	Skill accumulation and technical training.	Synergy; "cleansing through the remedies of commandments".
Quality of Peace	Absence of disturbances (ataraxia).	"Joyful fire"; Gracious joy.
Human Limit	Confidence in the mind's potential.	Humble recognition of the limits of autonomy.

The introduction of Grace as an extra-psychological resource offers a resolution to the dilemma of human autonomy. The transfigured emotional intelligence represents the meeting point between ascetic rigor and Divine love. This synthesis transforms "emotion management" into a pedagogy of sanctification, where the final goal is the restoration of the Divine image and the capacity to love with an intensity that transcends natural limits.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that the management of self-control is not merely a modern psychological requirement for social adaptation, but a profound ontological endeavor rooted in the metacognitive architectures of ancient contemplative traditions. By mapping the functional convergences between Philokalic *νῆψις* (watchfulness) and Early Buddhist *sati* (mindfulness), this research articulates a universal cognitive mechanism: the deliberate creation of a "hiatus" between stimulus and response that allows the subject to transition from reactive somnolence to reflexive sovereignty.

First, at the functional level, both traditions construct advanced protocols for somatic and mental stabilization. The deconstruction of the "second arrow" of suffering in the *Sallathasutta* and the Evagrian taxonomy of *λογισμοί* operate as

sophisticated cognitive reappraisal tools. They decouple bare sensory input from secondary psychological elaboration, effectively preventing affective escalation before it manifests in disruptive behavior.

Second, despite these structural convergences, the study highlights a fundamental ontological divergence. While Early Buddhism utilizes *sati* to achieve the phenomenological deconstruction of the ego (*anattā*) and the cessation of conditioning (*nirodha*), the Philokalic model employs watchfulness to restore the hypostatic integrity of the human person (*ὑπόστασις*). In the Christian horizon, the mind does not observe internal states to dissolve into neutral awareness, but to purify the heart for transfigured communion with the Divine.

Third, the introduction of "Transfigured Emotional Intelligence" provides a theoretical bridge between secular self-regulation and theological anthropology. By integrating Divine Grace (*χάρις*) as an extra-psychological resource, the traditional four-branch model of Emotional Intelligence is elevated from an autonomous skill to a synergetic process. In this framework, self-control is no longer an exercise of isolated willpower, but a "burning intelligence" sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, this research offers a robust anthropological alternative to contemporary psychological fragmentation. By reclaiming the inner laboratory of the soul through the technical precision of metacognition and the teleological depth of spiritual life, emotional management is transformed into a pedagogy of sanctification—restoring human dignity and agency in an increasingly automated world.

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Islam in Europe. Integration Models, Empirical Evidence, and the Question of a European Islam

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ABSTRACT. Since the mid-twentieth century the presence of Muslim communities in Western and Northern Europe has grown mainly through labor immigration, family reunification and, since 2014, asylum migration, alongside older Muslim communities long established in South-Eastern Europe. European states addressed this growth through three successive integration models, the guest-worker model, the minority-rights model and the assimilationist model, none of which produced a stable settlement, and the European Union now frames integration as a reciprocal process in which both the newcomer and the receiving society are expected to adapt. This article asks how far that framing is supported by recent evidence in education, employment, housing and social belonging, drawing on current Pew Research Center, European Commission and European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights data rather than the decade-old projections that still dominate much of the literature on this subject. It finds that structural disadvantage has proved durable, and in several respects has worsened over the past decade, even as subjective indicators of belonging and institutional trust among European Muslims have remained comparatively stable. The article closes with a religious-studies and Orthodox theological reflection on what this durable, internally diverse European Islam implies for Christian engagement with religious pluralism.

Keywords: Islam, Europe, integration models, religious pluralism, Muslim minorities, discrimination, Christian – Muslim relations, Orthodox theology

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1. Introduction

Islam's presence in Europe is not new, but the scale, visibility and political salience of Muslim communities in Western and Northern Europe have grown substantially since the 1950s, driven first by labor migration and family reunification and, since 2014, by refugee movements from Syria and other conflict zones. Demographic analysis places the Muslim share of the population of the European Union, Norway and Switzerland combined at roughly 5 percent by the mid-2010s, with national shares considerably higher in France, Sweden, Belgium and Germany.[1] Successive European policies for integrating these communities, the guest-worker model of the 1960s and 1970s, the minority-rights model that followed it, and the assimilationist turn of the 2000s, each responded to a different diagnosis of the challenge posed by a growing Muslim presence, and each has been judged, by policymakers and scholars alike, only partially successful.[2]

This article asks a narrower question than is customary in the wider literature on "Islam in Europe": how far do the empirical outcomes of the past decade, in education, employment, housing and social belonging, correspond to the European Union's current description of integration as a two-way, dynamic process, and what does the persistence of gaps between newcomer and host populations imply for Christian, and specifically Orthodox, theological engagement with a religiously plural Europe? The method is a literature-based analytical review: it draws together recent demographic projections, European Union policy documents, and empirical survey data, chiefly from the Pew Research Center and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and tests the three historical integration models against this evidence before offering a religious-studies and theological reading of the findings, informed by recent Orthodox reflection on interreligious dialogue. Because the vocabulary used to describe the growth of Islam in Europe is itself often contested, and because expressions such as "Islamization" carry polemical connotations that outrun what the evidence supports, this article avoids that vocabulary and refers instead, more neutrally, to the growth, settlement and integration of Muslim communities.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the historical background needed to understand why European states distinguish between long-established and immigrant-origin Muslim communities. Section 3 reviews current demographic estimates and projections. Section 4 sets out the theoretical framework of integration

[1] Pew Research Center, *Europe's Growing Muslim Population*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, November 29, 2017, pp. 5, 31.

[2] European Commission, *Communication from the Commission on the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027*, COM (2020) 758 final, Brussels, November 24, 2020, p. 1.

models and situates it within the wider study of religious pluralism in Europe. Sections 5 to 7 examine, in turn, the empirical evidence on education and the labor market, on housing and public safety, and on belonging, cohesion and media representation. Section 8 offers a theological reflection on these findings from an Orthodox Christian perspective, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Historical Background

The presence of Islam in Europe has two distinct historical layers, and the distinction between them continues to shape how Muslim communities relate to the states in which they live today.[3]

The first layer is medieval and early modern. Arab-Berber forces reached Sicily, then part of the Byzantine Empire, in 652 AD, and completed a more lasting conquest of the island in the tenth century; the resulting Emirate of Sicily lasted until 1072. In the early eighth century, Arab-Berber armies took most of the Iberian Peninsula, which as Al-Andalus remained under Muslim rule until the fall of Granada in 1492 and became, in that period, one of the principal centers of philosophy and the natural sciences in the medieval world. From the fourteenth century the Ottoman Empire advanced into the Balkans, subjugating Thrace and Macedonia after the battle of the Maritsa in 1371, taking Sofia in 1382 and Athens in 1460, and overcoming Serbian resistance by 1499; Ottoman expansion in Europe continued into the seventeenth century. Further east, the conversion of the Golden Horde to Islam in the fourteenth century established Muslim communities in what is now Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, some of which survive to this day. Historians of this period generally agree that contact with Islamic civilization, chiefly through Al-Andalus and Sicily, transmitted Greek philosophy and science, together with Muslim advances in algebra, astronomy, medicine and technology, into a Latin Christian world that had largely lost direct access to them. W. Montgomery Watt concluded that this exchange did not merely add to Europe's stock of knowledge but helped Europe "form a new image of itself."[4]

The second, and demographically dominant, layer begins after the Second World War, when Britain, France, Belgium and, from the early 1960s, West Germany recruited labor from their former colonies and from Mediterranean countries, above all Turkey, to rebuild their economies. Workers were later joined by family members under reunification schemes, and from the 1990s

[3] Watt, W. Montgomery, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972.

[4] Watt, W. Montgomery, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* …, p. 110.

onward by refugees fleeing conflicts in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and, more recently, Syria. Patterns of origin still mark national Muslim populations: Turkish immigration dominates in Germany; Moroccan and Turkish communities are largest in Belgium and the Netherlands; British Muslims are predominantly of South Asian, and especially Pakistani and Bangladeshi, origin.

This history produces a useful, if imperfect, distinction between two groups of European states. In one group, chiefly in South-Eastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and parts of the Baltic region, Muslim communities descend from populations converted or settled centuries ago and are generally recognized as an established part of national culture and identity. In the other group, concentrated in Western and Northern Europe (France, Germany, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries), Muslim communities are of comparatively recent immigrant origin, and it is here that questions of integration, identity and belonging have been most contested, and where most of the research literature, including this article, is concentrated.

3. Demography

Estimating the size of Europe's Muslim population is difficult, because European states differ in whether and how they record religious affiliation, because survey and census methods vary, and because irregular migration is by definition hard to measure. The Pew Research Center, whose projections remain the most widely cited in this field, has tried to work around these obstacles by pooling upward of 2,500 separate national records, ranging from official censuses to smaller-scale population surveys, into a single standardized estimation model.[5]

Pew's most recent detailed analysis, covering the European Union together with Norway and Switzerland, puts the number of Muslims living in that combined territory at approximately 25.8 million by mid-2016, up from an estimated 19.5 million six years earlier; proportionally, this is a move from under four percent of the total population to just under five percent, with the 2014-2016 arrival of asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan accounting for a substantial part of the increase.[6] Extending this forward, Pew's central migration scenario puts the Muslim share of the same population somewhere between roughly a tenth and a seventh by mid-century; even under a scenario in which migration into Europe stopped altogether, something Pew itself treats as an improbable hypothetical rather than a realistic policy option, the share would still climb to

[5] Pew Research Center, *"Europe's Growing Muslim Population" …*, p. 38.
[6] Pew Research Center, *"Europe's Growing Muslim Population" …*, p. 5.

around seven percent by 2050, since Muslim Europeans are, on the whole, younger and have somewhat higher fertility than the non-Muslim population.[7] These updated figures supersede the widely cited but now outdated 2011 Pew projection of an eight-percent Muslim share of Europe by 2030, a figure still reproduced in much of the surrounding literature despite resting on data collected before the 2014 migration surge.

Two points of caution follow. First, national variation is considerable: France and Sweden have Muslim population shares several times the EU average, while most Central, Eastern and Baltic states remain well below it, so continent-wide averages conceal sharply different local realities. Second, the demographic literature's own extreme projections, at both ends, those minimizing the Muslim presence in Europe and those forecasting a continent-wide religious transformation within decades, are not supported by the peer-reviewed demographic evidence reviewed here and should be treated as rhetorical rather than empirical claims.

4. Theoretical Framework: Integration Models and Religious Pluralism

European states have historically approached the integration of Muslim, and other immigrant-origin, populations through three successive and largely sequential models.

The guest-worker model, dominant from the 1950s to the 1970s, treated labor migration as temporary: workers were expected to return home once their labor was no longer needed, so states invested little in language provision, civic education or pathways to citizenship. When large-scale return did not occur, chiefly because family reunification and a better standard of living than in the country of origin made settlement rational even amid the unemployment that followed the decline of heavy industry, this model left a first generation with a weak institutional foothold in societies where they had, in practice, settled permanently.

The minority-rights model that followed, associated above all with the Netherlands and Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, recognized immigrant communities as distinct groups entitled to public support for their own institutions, media and, in some cases, schools, on the assumption that recognition would itself produce a stable, cohesive plural society. Critics argue that this model risked institutionalizing separateness rather than overcoming it.

[7] Pew Research Center, *"Europe's Growing Muslim Population" …*, p. 5.

The assimilationist model that gained ground from the early 2000s, partly in reaction to the perceived failures of the minority model and partly in response to domestic security concerns after 2001 and the subsequent attacks in Madrid and London, placed the burden of adaptation almost entirely on the newcomer, expecting rapid linguistic and cultural conformity to a presumed national norm. This model has in turn been criticized, both for underestimating the structural barriers discussed in Sections 5 and 6 below and for treating national culture as more homogeneous than it is.

None of the three models, on the European Commission's own retrospective assessment, produced a stable, low-conflict settlement.[8] The Union's current framework, set out in the 2020 Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, discards all three in favor of a reciprocal conception, holding that the receiving society is obliged to open up employment, schooling, health care and housing just as newcomers are expected to adjust to it, and it widens the target group beyond recent arrivals to include their children born and raised inside the EU.[9]

A useful theoretical parallel, developed independently of EU policy, is Alastair Ager and Alison Strang's conceptual framework for understanding integration, built from fieldwork with refugees resettled in the United Kingdom rather than from EU policy drafting. Their model groups the outcomes that matter for integration into a handful of clusters: concrete, measurable results in areas such as jobs, schooling, health care and housing; the legal footing that citizenship and rights provide; the everyday ties that people build both inside their own community and with others around them; and a set of underlying conditions, among them fluency in the local language, familiarity with local norms, and a basic feeling of physical and legal security, that make the other clusters possible in the first place.[10] This vocabulary is more precise and more empirically grounded than "guest-worker," "minority" or "assimilation" models allow, and it organizes the empirical review that follows in Sections 5 to 7: measurable outcomes first (education, employment, housing, in Sections 5 and 6), and everyday belonging second (Section 7).

The turn toward a two-way integration paradigm also bears on how the presence of Islam in Europe should be understood theologically, not only sociologically. If integration is genuinely two-way, the encounter between European Christianity, and in the countries this journal serves, Orthodox Christianity in particular, and a growing Muslim population is not simply a matter of social

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[8] European Commission, *Handbook on Integration for Policy-Makers and Practitioners*, 3rd ed., Brussels: European Commission, April 2010.

[9] European Commission, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 …*, p1.

[10] Ager, Alastair, Strang, Alison, "*Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework*," Journal of Refugee Studies 21, no. 2 (2008), p. 166.

policy but a question of how a historically Christian civilization understands religious pluralism within its own borders. Section 8 returns to this question once the empirical evidence has been reviewed.

5. Empirical Evidence I: Education and the Labor Market

Two decades of European research converge on a consistent, if uneven, picture of disadvantage among Muslim and immigrant-origin populations in education and employment, a picture recent data confirm has not been resolved and has, on some measures, worsened.

In education, earlier research identified a persistent attainment gap between Muslim pupils, particularly of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Turkish background, and their non-Muslim peers in secondary and higher education across Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, even after controlling for socio-economic background.[11] Early childhood provision matters disproportionately for later outcomes: the influential Effective Provision of Pre-school Education study in England found that high-quality pre-school attendance narrowed, though did not close, later attainment gaps for disadvantaged and minority-background children.[12] A cross-national review of second-generation outcomes across Western Europe found unemployment and occupational-attainment gaps that varied considerably by country and by immigrant-origin group, with Turkish-origin populations in Germany faring notably worse than comparable populations in France, pointing to the importance of national institutional context rather than religion or ethnicity alone.[13]

Labor market outcomes show a similar pattern. Research using large administrative datasets found substantial and persistent employment gaps for ethnic and religious minorities across the EU-15, only partly explained by differences in qualifications.[14] British research using longitudinal data found ethnic minority unemployment consistently above that of the native-born population across the 2000s business cycle, with Muslim women facing the

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[11] Modood, Tariq, "*Ethnicity, Muslims and Higher Education Entry in Britain*", Teaching in Higher Education 11, no. 2 (2006), pp. 247-250.

[12] Sylva, Kathy et al., *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*, London: Department for Education and Skills, 2004.

[13] Heath, Anthony, Rothon, Catherine, Kilpi, Elina, "*The Second Generation in Western Europe: Education, Unemployment, and Occupational Attainment*", Annual Review of Sociology 34 (2008), pp. 211-235.

[14] Zimmermann, Klaus F. et al., *Study on the Social and Labor Market Integration of Ethnic Minorities*, IZA Research Report No. 16, Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2008.

largest gap of any group studied.[15] A parallel study for the UK Department for Work and Pensions found that employment disadvantage for ethnic minorities was persistent rather than transitional, meaning it did not diminish steadily with length of residence as a simple assimilation model would predict.[16]

The most recent large-scale evidence, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' 2024 survey of nearly 10,000 Muslims across thirteen EU member states, indicates that these older findings describe a durable pattern rather than a historical episode now resolved. Roughly 33 percent, or two respondents in five, said the job they currently held called for less education or training than they actually possessed, and reports of discrimination encountered specifically while job-hunting were markedly more common than they had been when the Agency ran a comparable survey back in 2016.[17] The same survey found that, on average, Muslim respondents were financially worse off than the general population and lived in more crowded housing, a finding discussed further in Section 6.[18]

Two interpretive points follow from setting the older and newer evidence side by side. First, the persistence of broadly similar disadvantage across roughly two decades of EU anti-discrimination legislation suggests that labor market outcomes are shaped less by whichever integration model was in force at a given time than by structural discrimination that none of the three models addressed directly. Second, where change has occurred, it has in several respects been for the worse: overqualification and reported hiring discrimination both increased between the FRA's 2016 and 2022 survey waves, a period that included the aftermath of the 2015-2016 refugee movement and a broader rise in anti-Muslim sentiment documented independently by the same Agency.[19] This counsels against any narrative, optimistic or pessimistic, that treats integration as moving steadily in one direction; the evidence instead supports a picture of uneven and, in places, regressing progress, consistent with Ager and Strang's observation that measurable, structural outcomes and the more every day, relational sense of belonging do not necessarily rise or fall together.

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15 Clarke, Kenneth, Drinkwater, Stephen, *Ethnic Minorities in the Labor Market: Dynamics and Diversity*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007.

16 Berthoud, Richard, Blekesaune, Morten, *Persistent Employment Disadvantage*, DWP Research Report No. 416, Norwich: Department for Work and Pensions, 2007.

17 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Muslim in the EU: Experiences of Muslims*, Vienna: FRA, 2024.

18 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Muslim in the EU: Experiences of Muslims …*

19 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Muslim in the EU: Experiences of Muslims …*

6. Empirical Evidence II: Housing and Public Safety

Residential settlement patterns among Muslim and immigrant-origin populations in Western Europe show consistent, moderate concentration in specific urban districts, a pattern shaped as much by housing-market discrimination and the location of affordable housing stock as by voluntary preference. Dutch research into housing allocation found ethnic minority households, including households of Turkish and Moroccan origin, disproportionately concentrated in lower-quality social housing, a pattern the authors attributed to allocation practices and constrained choice rather than to a simple preference for co-ethnic neighborhoods.[20] Fieldwork in two deprived Amsterdam neighborhoods similarly found that residents, across ethnic and religious lines, valued every day, low-intensity contact with neighbors of different backgrounds considerably more than formal integration programming, suggesting that residential mixing itself, where it occurs, can support cohesion even without dedicated interventions.[21] Comparable settlement research in Germany found geographically concentrated, though not strictly segregated, patterns of settlement for the country's largest immigrant groups, again shaped substantially by housing-market and income constraints.[22]

Public trust in policing among Muslim and immigrant-origin populations, and the related question of ethnic and religious profiling, requires particular care in light of the concern, raised in the review of this manuscript, about unsupported claims connecting Muslim immigration to crime. Comparative European research on trust in the police found that trust levels varied more by country, and by individuals' general trust in public institutions, than by any specific ethnic or religious characteristic, a finding that runs against a simple immigrant-crime narrative.[23] The FRA's 2024 survey adds recent, EU-wide evidence directly on this question: a substantial share of Muslim respondents who had been stopped by police attributed the stop to their ethnic or migrant background rather than to any specific behavior, and the survey recorded a measurable rise since 2016 in reported experiences of profiling on this basis.[24]

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[20] Bolt, Gideon, van Kempen, Ronald, van Ham, Maarten, "*Minority Ethnic Groups in the Dutch Housing Market: Spatial Segregation, Relocation Dynamics and Housing Policy*", Urban Studies 45, no. 7 (2008).

[21] Smets, Peer, den Uyl, Marjolein, "*The Complex Role of Ethnicity in Urban Mixing: A Study of Two Deprived Neighborhoods in Amsterdam*", Urban Studies 45, no. 7 (2008), pp. 1439-1460.

[22] Schönwälder, Karen, Sohn, Janina, "*Immigrant Settlement Structures in Germany: General Patterns and Urban Levels of Concentration of Major Groups*", Urban Studies 46, no. 7 (2009).

[23] Juha T. Kääriäinen, "*Trust in the Police in 16 European Countries: A Multilevel Analysis*", European Journal of Criminology 4, no. 4 (2007), pp. 409-435.

[24] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Muslim in the EU: Experiences of Muslims …*

Taken together, this literature supports a claim considerably narrower than the one found in earlier, more sweeping accounts of Muslim immigration and crime: it indicates a problem of institutional trust and of perceived, and in places documented, discriminatory treatment by law enforcement, rather than evidence that Muslim or immigrant-origin populations are disproportionately responsible for criminal offending as such. A claim of that latter kind would require offence-level criminal justice data disaggregated by socio-economic status, which lies outside the sources reviewed here, and this article accordingly does not make it.

7. Empirical Evidence III: Belonging, Cohesion and Media Representation

Despite the structural disadvantage documented in Sections 5 and 6, comparative survey evidence consistently finds that subjective indicators of belonging, identification with the country of residence, and trust in democratic institutions among European Muslims are broadly comparable to, and on some measures higher than, those of the general population. The FRA's 2024 findings describe this directly: despite a sharp rise in reported discrimination, most Muslim respondents continued to express strong identification with, and trust in, the institutions of their country of residence, a combination the Agency itself has described as showing that structural exclusion and subjective belonging can coexist rather than moving in lockstep.[25] This finding, replicated across the Agency's 2017 and 2024 survey waves, is consistent with Ager and Strang's framework, in which the underlying conditions that support belonging, a sense of safety, language ability, familiarity with local norms, can hold up even where the more measurable outcomes in jobs, schooling and housing remain weak.[26]

Media representation of Islam and Muslims in Europe forms an important part of the wider context for these findings, since public perception, and in turn political and policy responses, are shaped substantially by how Islam is portrayed in national media. Research on British press coverage in the 2000s found Muslims and Islam disproportionately associated with conflict, extremism and cultural threat, relative to the demographic and social profile of British Muslim communities as a whole.[27] A parallel content-analysis study of British broadsheet coverage

[25] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Muslim in the EU: Experiences of Muslims …*

[26] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II): Muslims – Selected Findings*, Vienna: FRA, 2017.

[27] Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

reached similar conclusions, identifying recurring associations between Islam and violence that were not proportionate to the underlying events being reported.[28] Writing about Western media coverage of the Muslim world more broadly, Edward Said argued that expert and journalistic framing of Islam had, over decades, tended to flatten a highly diverse religious and cultural world into a small set of recurring, largely negative images.[29]

This literature is now itself dated, drawing mainly on coverage from the 2000s, and systematic content-analysis research updating it for the post-2015 period is comparatively scarce among the sources available for this review, a gap this article acknowledges rather than fills. What can be said with more confidence is that the FRA's most recent survey data show anti-Muslim sentiment and reported discrimination rising over the past decade even as, by the same data, Muslim communities' own trust in and identification with European institutions has remained comparatively stable, a divergence that public discourse and media framing plausibly help to explain, though establishing that causal link rigorously would require the updated media-content research this article identifies as a priority for future study rather than one it can undertake here.

8. Theological Reflection: Integration, Religious Pluralism and the Task of Orthodox Christian Engagement

The empirical findings reviewed above describe a European Islam that is demographically settled, structurally disadvantaged in specific and measurable ways, and yet, on its own account, largely oriented toward continued life within European societies rather than apart from them. This is the context in which the theological question announced in the introduction can be posed directly: what does the durable, growing presence of Islam in Europe imply for Christian, and in particular Orthodox Christian, engagement with religious pluralism on a continent where Orthodoxy has historically been a majority or near-majority tradition?

Orthodox theology brings to this question a longer and more varied historical relationship with Islam than is often assumed from outside the tradition. The earliest sustained Christian theological engagement with Islam, the eighth-century dialogues attributed to John of Damascus and to Theodore Abu Qurrah, were apologetic and largely one-directional in form, yet they remain, as

[28] Richardson, John E., *(Mis)representing Islam: The Racism and Rhetoric of British Broadsheet Newspapers*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004.

[29] Said, Edward W., *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, rev. ed., London: Vintage, 1997.

recent Orthodox scholarship has noted, valuable evidence both of how early Byzantine theology understood Islamic teaching and of a willingness to engage it on its own terms rather than simply dismiss it.[30] Centuries of subsequent coexistence, often under Ottoman rule, in the Balkans, Anatolia and the Middle East produced a body of lived experience, alongside continued theological polemic, that distinguishes Orthodox engagement with Islam from the largely post-colonial encounter that has shaped much Western European theological reflection on the subject.[31]

Contemporary Orthodox statements have moved toward what recent scholarship describes as a middle way between two older positions, an exclusivist rejection of other religious traditions as simply false, and an uncritical religious relativism that Orthodox theology has generally also resisted.[32] The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, meeting in Crete in 2016, affirmed the Church's commitment to interreligious dialogue as an expression of catholicity rather than a departure from it, while maintaining that dialogue does not require, and should not be confused with, doctrinal compromise.[33] The Ecumenical Patriarchate's 2020 document For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church extends this line of thought into a fuller social and ethical statement, treating religious pluralism as a permanent feature of contemporary societies, including historically Orthodox ones, rather than a temporary condition to be managed until it passes.[34] Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, whose collected essays on globalization and interreligious relations remain among the most sustained Orthodox theological treatments of Islam specifically, argues for what he calls a "koinonia of love" as the proper basis for Christian engagement with people of other faiths, rooted not in relativism but in a Trinitarian and incarnational theology that grounds respect for the other in the doctrine of the image of God common to all human persons.[35]

Read against the empirical findings of Sections 5 to 7, this theological trajectory suggests a specific and modest set of implications rather than a grand programme. First, if Ager and Strang are right that integration outcomes rest as much on underlying conditions, feeling safe, speaking the local language, understanding

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30 Christodoulakis, Ioannis, "*The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church and Its Interreligious Dialogue Approach*", The Ecumenical Review 73, no. 5 (2021), pp. 735-744.

31 Himcinschi, Mihai, "*Orthodox Insights for a Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue*", International Journal of Orthodox Theology 4, no. 1 (2013), pp. 90, 104-105.

32 Himcinschi, Mihai, *"Orthodox Insights for a Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue" …*, pp.88-89.

33 Christodoulakis, Ioannis, *"The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church" …*, pp. 735-744.

34 Ecumenical Patriarchate, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, Istanbul: Ecumenical Patriarchate, 2020.

35 Yannoulatos, Anastasios, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

local norms, as on formal access to a job or a flat, then Orthodox parishes and institutions, present in nearly every European country with a settled Muslim population, and often themselves built by earlier waves of migration or minority experience, have a concrete, low-cost, non-doctrinal contribution to make to these facilitating conditions, through practical solidarity, language support and local relationship-building, independent of any formal interreligious theological project. Second, the persistence, and on the FRA's 2024 evidence the worsening, of discrimination against Muslims in several European societies with substantial Orthodox populations poses the question of religious pluralism to Orthodox communities not as an abstract or distant issue but as a matter of how their own societies treat a religious minority in their midst, a question the tradition of Yannoulatos and the Holy and Great Council frames as inseparable from, rather than opposed to, fidelity to Orthodox doctrine. Third, and more cautiously, the empirical picture of a European Islam that is demographically growing but not doctrinally or institutionally unified, spanning long-established and recent-immigrant communities, Sunni and Shia traditions, and widely varying degrees of religious observance, suggests that Orthodox interreligious engagement with Islam in Europe cannot proceed from a single template and, like the integration policy literature reviewed above, will need to remain sensitive to considerable internal diversity within what outside observers often describe, misleadingly, as a single, undifferentiated "Muslim community."

9. Conclusion

This article set out to test a narrower and more precise claim than is customary in the broader literature on Islam in Europe: not whether Europe is being "Islamized," a term deliberately avoided here as analytically imprecise and polemically loaded, but whether the European Union's current, two-way conception of integration is empirically borne out by recent evidence in education, employment, housing and social belonging. The answer that emerges is mixed and should be stated carefully. Structural disadvantage in employment, and to a lesser extent education, has proved durable across successive integration models and, on the most recent FRA evidence, has in some respects worsened rather than improved over the past decade. At the same time, subjective indicators of belonging and institutional trust among European Muslims have remained comparatively stable, and in several respects higher than a purely structural account would predict, a divergence that deserves more sustained research attention than the sources reviewed here allow this article to give it.

Two further conclusions follow for future scholarship. First, much of the empirical literature on Muslim integration in Europe is now a decade or more old; the availability of the FRA's 2024 survey and comparable recent data means that future work in this field has less excuse than before for relying on pre-2015 projections as though they described the present. Second, and more specifically to this journal's field, the question of what a demographically settled and internally diverse European Islam implies for Orthodox theological engagement with religious pluralism remains considerably less developed in the scholarship than either the sociological or the Roman Catholic and Protestant theological literature on the same subject. The reflection offered in Section 8 is accordingly preliminary rather than exhaustive, and the article closes by identifying this as a productive direction for further Orthodox theological and religious-studies research, rather than claiming to have resolved it.

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Faith, Language, and Heritage: A Montessori-Based Religious Programme in the Romanian Diaspora in North America

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ABSTRACT. The present study analyses the role of the Montessori approach as a complementary instrument for developing the Sunday School curriculum in the Romanian Orthodox community in Chicago, as part of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas. The conceptual framework is centred on Orthodox faith and the religious formation of children. Core universal principles focus on religious content, teacher training, and parental formation. The assessment of the pilot programme *Let the Children Come to Me* included two surveys, addressed to parents and church teachers, to collect and interpret results, use the outcomes to improve and further develop the pedagogical process, and improve the programme overall.

Keywords: religious education, religious curriculum, Montessori approach, pilot programme, Romanian as a heritage language

1. Religious education of children in the diaspora

The paper examines the effects of implementing the Montessori method as a complementary pedagogical instrument for developing the religious curriculum of the pilot Romanian Orthodox Sunday School Programme, *Let the Children Come to Me* (Matthew 19:14)[1], in the diaspora, at the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas in Chicago, Illinois. The analysis is based

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1 King James Bible *King James Bible Online* (2017). https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org

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on responses from church teachers and parents who worked together to create a context grounded in the mission of instilling the Orthodox faith, identity, and Romanian as a heritage language in second-generation children who are actively invested in the life of the Church. It is the responsibility of teachers and parents to create an environment that does not hinder children from attending and living the life of the Church.

A catechetical approach to religious education for children within the Christian tradition is evident in the patristic writings, particularly in the homilies of St. John Chrysostom on raising children in the Christian faith. The selected teachings for analysis in this section include the roles of teachers, parents, and the child as a teacher and a disciple. As such, parents bear the sacred duty to educate their children, and they must attend to their religious education as well as their secular upbringing by taking the children to church. In Homily LIX on Matthew on discipleship, the duties of teachers and adults in the education of children are set out as part of the interpretation of the roles of teachers and parents in the education of the little ones, namely, the cultivation of the soul and the love of virtues: "Take heed that you despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven" (Matthew 18: 10)[2].

In Homily LXII on Matthew, the child is presented as a teacher and a moral example of discipleship, as children are blessed and express humility and an inner life that becomes a pattern for all to follow. Young children have a natural sense of wonder, and virtues can be cultivated in their minds: "Then were there brought unto Him little children, that He should put His hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But He said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven. And He laid His hands on them, and departed thence" (Matthew 19: 13-15)[3]. Adults are also taught to be lowly, as the child's soul is pure from all the passions. Agency is manifested both in the child and in the parent as a teacher, with the greatest quality being the attention given to the child.

Metaphorically, associations are also made with the lost sheep, "For how think ye? says He; If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, does he not leave the ninety and nine, and goes into the mountains, and seeks that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, he rejoices over

[2] Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Scrieri, Omilia la Matei, Partea a III-a*, transl. Pr. D. Fecioru, (Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1994), 689.

[3] Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Scrieri, Partea a III-a, Omilia la Matei*, trans. Pr. D. Fecioru, (Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1994), 722.

it more than over the ninety and nine, which went not astray. Even so it is not will before your Father, that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18: 12-14)[4]. On parental responsibility, in Homily IX on 1 Timothy (Timothy 2: 15), the exhortation to parents is to bring up their children with great care and reverence; the patristic writings affirm that salvation for parents comes from bearing and raising children, as the fathers and mothers benefit from their children's virtue and shall be rewarded[5].

In the Christian tradition, within the church, children hear the word of God, a word that must be brought down from the abstract plane, as it is hard to grasp and understand. This is made possible only in the church, a space whose mission is to nourish spiritual growth. Children's spirituality and faith enable them to understand with their whole being. The educational approach proposed for religious teaching at Sunday School in the North American diaspora is based on recognising sensitive developmental periods that enable them to experience faith and joy through all their senses, to participate in divine services, and to live the life of the church. Such an approach resonates with the theological mission of the Orthodox Church, where children experience joy and peace by attending church services solemnly and in silence, with respect for the sacred environment, and by preparing the festive rooms and the clothes that must be in order and clean. As such, parents and church teachers are the ones who imprint the child's religious consciousness, since the home and school environments mirror the church in worship[6].

In modern society, early childhood, as a developmental phase, is paramount to a child's formation, and the sensitive periods must be nurtured by the family. Training programmes that support the family in the upbringing of their young children are essential. To nurture religious education in children, parents must actively participate in the life of the Church to bring children closer to self-directed education, self-control, emotional balance, and a good state of mind. The main educational resources are the prayers that Christian parents should say with their children, instilling, by the power of example, the cultivation of virtues and good deeds[7]. The Montessorian principles align with

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4 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Scrieri,* 690.

5 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Tâlcuiri la Epistola I către Timotei a Sfântului Apostol Pavel*, (Nemira, București, 2020), 44-45.

6 Alexander Schmemann, *Liturgy and Life: Lectures and Essays on Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience*, Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, (New York, 1974), 16-17.

7 Mihaela Brânză, "Early Childhood in Today's Family. The Christian Landmarks in the Lives of Our Children", in SUBBTO 67, no. 1, (2022), 110-112.

this framework, as all the spiritual endeavours and the way the materials are created support the child's development from early childhood to adulthood and aim to prepare for active participation in and living the life of the Church.

Apostle John was the apostle of unconditional love and understanding. Regarding the education of children, their bearing and upbringing must be rooted not in fear but in freedom, as children do not need possessions but good teachers for Christian formation and transformation[8]. Thus, God is love, "He that loveth not knoweth not God: for God is love" (John 4: 8)[9], and the very principle of creation is love, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1: 26)[10].

2. The Montessori Method

A Christian understanding of the child and of agency, developed from a religious perspective, is reflected in Montessorian pedagogy. Religious education encompasses silence, independence, self-directed education, independent movement, and purposeful order in the environment. In this sense, these pedagogical elements were adopted in proposing the Christian Orthodox religious curriculum as part of the Sunday School programme, with the child in mind, to enable mastery through agency throughout the sensitive phases and to provide the freedom to learn and move in an orderly way within a carefully thought-out and prepared environment. From a pedagogical perspective, the main theme in the interpretation was the role of the teacher as a spiritual guide who oversees and, like a missionary, directs lives and souls[11].

The method serves as an instrumental pedagogical model for developing religious knowledge and language. Other programmes that adopted the Montessori approach include *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, a very successful programme[12]. Some of the core concepts for implementing the model in a Sunday School curriculum include preparing children for life in the Church, and acknowledging that the process is natural, implicit, sensorial, and experiential

8 Olimpiu Nicolae Benea, "The Education of the Apostle John Between Discipleship and the Fourth Gospel", in SUBBTO, 66, no. 2, (2021), 14-15.

9 King James Bible, (online edition, 2017).

10 King James Bible, (online edition, 2017).

11 Cristina de Stefano, *The Child is the Teacher. A Life of Maria Montessori*, transl. from Italian by Gregori Conti, (Other Press New York, Kindle Edition, 2022), 222

12 Cavalletti et al., *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey: Revised and Updated.* Archdiocese of Chicago*:* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2014).

rather than based on imitation and memorisation of religious content. Learning progresses in accordance with the child's sensitive developmental stages, resonating with the child's inner being. According to the framework, periods of creative growth and the child's mental and spiritual transformation occur rather unconsciously from early childhood to adulthood, moving from a highly creative phase to calm, to strength and maturity[13].

The spiritual and mental development of children depends on seizing windows of opportunity and being attuned to what the child represents and to what is available to them in the environment, as they are highly receptive to language and knowledge. Under this framework, sensitive periods reflect complete acquisition, achieved with ease, unconsciously, and at no cost. Such sensibilities are at their fullest during these periods and contrast with how they are later absorbed by the mind, underscoring the role of adults in fostering an environment in which such opportunities are not missed. These periods have a spiritual dimension and inner energies that enable the construction of the child's world and the more complex order centred on independence and creativity. Although empirically grounded, the method asserts that spiritual sensibility in childhood is part of the sensitive-period approach to development and precedes any pedagogical and religious formation of the child. Thus, it needs to be nurtured by providing an environment that exudes beauty and joy, because what the child receives during this time cannot be acquired in the same way later in life[14].

The sensitive periods are connected to children's linguistic potential and to how language develops, especially during the first two planes of development, as language acquisition begins before the first words are spoken[15]. Given the bilingual setting, the responses regarding the use of Romanian as a heritage language, as the mother tongue, resonate with the Montessori approach to language acquisition, as the propensity towards the acquisition of words and the construction of phrases goes beyond what can be controlled by the child, as the grammar and the rules are available and can be accessed by the child[16].

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[13] Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, (The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, India, 1949), 24-29.

[14] Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, transl. M.A. Johnstone, Thiruvanmiyur, Madras: (Kalakshetra Publications, 1966), 221.

[15] Maria Montessori, *The Formation of Man*, trans. A. M. Joonsten, (The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras 20, India, 1962), 81-82.

[16] Maria Montessori *The Child in the Church. Essys on the Religious Education of Children and the Training of Character,* edited by Mortimer Standing, (Kemp Hall Press, Oxford, Great Britain, 1930), 93.

The child's linguistic creativity is evident throughout development; thus, language, namely the mother tongue, becomes the primary means of understanding, interpretation, and deep engagement with the world, and this period cannot be missed. The sensitive phases of cognitive and spiritual development are associated with burning flames that do not reach the point of consumption[17]. Regarding language development, the sensitive stages mark the transition to conceptualisation and metaphorical understanding through an action-oriented approach and exposure adapted to their needs, while remaining authentic and resourceful in developing spiritual awareness and language acuity. The materials must be specially designed to use sensorial objects and learning through action, first emphasising active listening and then reading as abilities and strategies for learning[18]. The psychological development of the child, movement in the environment, and the development of religious metaphors are connected with the child's spiritual journey and the sacred obligation of the parents to accompany the child. The second and third parts of *The Secret of Childhood* are dedicated to education and the roles of teachers and parents, the method, and the child in society. In this framework, children's agency is understood as an emergent, not imposed, capacity and as the ability to manifest their will through self-directed education, guided by teachers and parents, and to develop their inner spiritual life in an active, experiential manner, rather than as passive recipients. Thus, agency must be understood as an intrinsic, predetermined drive manifested in spiritual and religious formation through work, and teachers and parents must support rather than disrupt this architectural process in the child. Agency is already instilled, and the child is endowed with covert inner abilities to construct and co-construct from a psychological and linguistic standpoint[19].

The applicability and practical implications of religious education recur as themes in many of the books, guiding children in their active life in the Church and in the relationship between God, the Creator, and the child, the creation and image of God. Through the fundamental writings on religious education as liturgical education, Dr. Montessori reflected that religious education was integral to her work, as she expressed her faith and her pedagogical philosophy. The heritage of her perspective on religious education lies in the divine mission to accompany the child on the sacred self-educating journey[20]. The reference is made to the creation. We are created in the image of God as personal beings; thus,

[17] Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 37-40.
[18] Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Church,* 38.
[19] Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. and edited by Barbara Barclay Carter, (Sangam Press Pvt. Ltd, India, 1985), 17-19.
[20] Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Church*, 150-151.

our freedom reflects the divine freedom with its inner order, and, as personal beings, we are the result of the manifestation of the rationality of creation.[21]

Normalisation is another way of expressing agency and of channelling inner energy through the purposeful work the child does in the prepared environment. If the child's will is not hindered and the approach to knowledge is not imposed by the adult, the child will instinctively and joyfully go towards work, as part of human nature, and will find order, the ability to self-direct and concentrate, and will approach the materials with calm. Also, freedom has to be understood as the child's capacity to act willingly, independent of the adult who is there to guide spiritually, and the child has to follow the inner plan in an environment prepared so that the plan can be fulfilled. As such, adults have to understand, discover, and embrace the mystery and the agency existent in the child, and they have to let it unfold; they have to let the child learn through work, concentration, self-instruction and self-correction. Freedom to acquire knowledge must not be withheld in any form; the family has to help the child experience, exert creative energy, manifest freely, and develop naturally. Normalisation is metaphorically like the lotus flower unfolding as the child flourishes spiritually[22].

As education must be empirically grounded in the child, teachers and parents have the role of guiding and discovering the child in this pedagogical process. Placing the child at the centre of the educational process, with an emphasis on inner goodness and spirituality, has religious roots. In this context, the development of theological language would lead towards a deeper understanding of sacralisation and the meaning of religious metaphors. The orderly inner and outer environment is like water to the fish. Children acquire early on the elements of environmental orientation, which must be understood as a spiritual journey forward, with the purpose of achieving mastery[23]. A precondition in a child's education is the formation of the adult, be that teacher or parent. The spiritual formation of the caregivers, as teachers of love, implies striving and sustained effort, as well as open consciousness. A child surrounded by love awakens a parent's spiritual side[24]. In defining the new teacher and the relationship between the adult and the child, the former must no longer exert power but rather show humility as a servant of the new life in his hands[25].

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[21] Valer Bel, "The Freedom of God and the Freedom of Man in Father Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology", in SUBBTO, 61, no. 2, (2016), 78-79.
[22] Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 137.
[23] *Idem,* 52.
[24] Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Family*, trans. by Nancy Rockmore Cirillo, (Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1970), 27-29.
[25] *Idem*, 115.

The prepared environment is instrumental in harmonious development and is one of the primary dynamic components of the framework, scaled down to help the child better experience reality and act independently. The materials are designed so that children discover and correct errors, helping them deepen their reasoning and other faculties, as well as attention, interest, and curiosity. The fragility of the objects gives children the chance to act with agency, to correct and control their movements without assistance from teachers, to genuinely express preferences, and to stay focused regardless of external stimuli. The environment is built around the concept of freedom, both in the free choices specific to the child's nature and in emergent movement. It must exude beauty and invite the children to act, explore, and engage in the approach and manipulation of objects throughout learning, without overloading the space, as the intrinsic need of the child, who is already connected to the world, is to bring order into the chaos, not more stimulation through sensorial experience. One must discover and explore the mystery of the spiritual child and give the child the freedom to develop in the environment[26].

3. Description of the Pilot Educational Programme

The pilot programme *Let the children come to me* is underpinned by a Montessori-designed curriculum that uses the educational alternative as a complementary approach to enhance the development of children attending Sunday School in the North American diaspora. It was implemented in Chicago, Illinois, at the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas, with the blessing of His Eminence Archbishop and Metropolitan Nicolae[27]. The programme's promoter is Presbytera Andaluiza Ioana Mureșan[28], a Montessori-trained teacher and church teacher who initiated and sustained this endeavour by training teachers across the Romanian Orthodox parishes in North America and by creating a curriculum for different age groups based on the Montessori method.

The pilot programme was initially designed for the 3-6-year-old group, when mental capacity is highly *absorbent*; environmental experiences are absorbed and instilled, laying the foundations of language, culture, and mental

[26] Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, 148-150.

[27] His Eminence Archbishop and Metropolitan Nicolae consented to being mentioned in the present study.

[28] Presbytera Andaluzia Ioana Mureșan agreed to being mentioned and offered great support with the administration of the questionnaires and the presentation of the design of the curriculum.

processes, from impressions to goal-oriented, heightened receptivity towards religious sensibility, language, movement in the set environment, and social attitude. From a Montessorian perspective, the child's nature is divine and transformative. In this respect, the three educational age groups included in the pilot programme correspond to three planes of development: Level I (3-6-year-olds), Level II (6-9-year-olds), and Level III (9-12-year-olds). In designing the curriculum for each age group, the specific characteristics of cognition, language, and movement were taken into account. All curriculum levels include progressively more content in areas such as *Practical Life*, *Creation of the World*, *Infancy Narratives* and *Saint Boxes*, *Parables*, *Holy Sacraments*, *and Sacred Art*, to name a few, and, at the higher levels, add areas such as *Messianic Prophecies*, the *Miracle*s, the *Mysteries*, and the *Liturgical Calendar*. Given that the programme is continuously developing, the main areas are presented here to illustrate how the religious content is scaffolded across different levels.

Within the programme, the main cognitive and linguistic developmental attributes for each level were considered: independence, sensorial awareness and agency in the environment, learning through hands-on experience, and wonder in the presence of great mysteries (Level 1). Gradually, at Levels II and III, children become more sensorially and mentally independent, can concentrate for longer periods, focus on intentional interaction, and become more social, transitioning towards abstract thinking, reasoning, and awareness. The learning environment follows a structured Christian Orthodox framework, with designated areas for icons, liturgical objects, flower arrangements, materials for learning about the Holy Sacraments and the Sacramental Life of the Church, Feast Days, the Lives of the Saints (Saint Boxes), and Parables of Jesus Christ, all at a child level, with specific areas designated for practising quiet movement. Another important aspect of the model is the teacher's spiritual formation, which is associated with inward spiritual and moral preparation as well. The framework resonates with the Christian approach to teaching. The teacher must be a passive observer and let the child act in the contained environment, but this passivity must not be understood as indifference; the intensity and the complexity of the teacher's actions translate into the way the environment is created and what it contains for the children, and into the active observation of the choices made by the children[29].

[29] Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 118.

4. The Analysis of the Responses of Church Teachers and Parents

The methodology for interpreting the results is mixed, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses of responses from teachers and parents who agreed to complete the questionnaires. The strands used in the parents' and teachers' questionnaires included multiple-choice, nominal, and ranking items, 5-point Likert scales, and open-ended questions. The two surveys were administered online, with permission requests and assurances of anonymity[30]. The 8 Montessori-trained church teachers (n=8) and 26 parents (n=26) responded to the survey. *Questionnaire 1*, for the Montessori-trained teachers (n=8), was structured into 10 sections and 58 items; *Questionnaire 2*, for the parents who have children enrolled in the programme (n=26), contained 10 sections and 106 items, some of which are used in this interpretation. In both questionnaires, the quantitative strand included questions ranging from nominal and multiple-choice items to 5-point Likert scales, while the qualitative strand included open-ended questions. Both questionnaires were administered online, with permission for data processing and assurance of anonymity. The goal was to assess the quality of the pilot programme, as well as attitudes, motivation, satisfaction levels, and shared experiences among teachers and parents regarding the implementation process, and to trace future steps towards growth. From *Questionnaire 1*, the following sections were selected: Sociobiological background, Bilingualism, Heritage Language and the Diaspora Context, Development of Virtues, Student Autonomy, and the open-ended *Question 36.* From *Questionnaire 2,* for the parents, the sections used were: Biographical background; Language background and abilities of the children; Reasons for enrolling the children; Religious development; Parental involvement; Challenges; Overall satisfaction; Open reflections, and *Question 58* with an open response.

4.1. Sociolinguistic Profile of Teachers, Parents, and Children

For Romanian as a heritage language, studies on language assessment indicate that US-born simultaneous bilinguals, who speak Romanian and English from birth, have lower proficiency than bilingual children born in Romania and who immigrated to the United States. The results showed that Romanian is better

[30] For the construction and administration of the questionnaires, we used the methodological principles proposed by Zoltán Dörnyei and Jean Marc Dewaele, *Questionnaires in Second Language Research. Construction, Administration, and Processing,* Third edition, (Routledge, New York, 2023).

preserved in these communities than, for example, Spanish. For Romanian bilinguals, the main motivation for speaking and improving Romanian is communication with the family and the community[31]. The Romanian communities are striving to create development programmes; therefore, an instructional linguistic context can be outlined. In this sense, the pedagogical approach of the pilot programme addresses the need to continue the children's psycholinguistic and religious development by identifying the specific needs of children and young adults and offering a space where they can grow. As shown below, the linguistic profiles of the teachers who participated in the survey are diverse; see **Figure 1**. The majority of the teachers speak Romanian as their mother tongue (n=6) and were born in Romania, with one teacher speaking Kyrgyz and another Mandarin Chinese as their L1. Overall, the language of instruction fosters a linguistic environment that supports a bilingual pedagogical setting, with Romanian and English as the two codes, Romanian predominant (n=6) and English the dominant teaching language (n=2) for teachers who speak Kyrgyz and Mandarin Chinese as L1. All the teachers speak English and Romanian, and other languages spoken include Russian (n=3), Spanish (n=2), French (n=2) and Turkish (n=1), making the educational setting plurilingual and pluricultural.

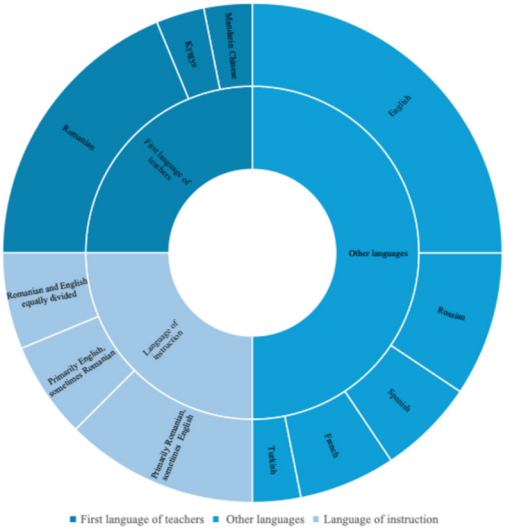

Figure 1. Linguistic profile of teachers

[31] Silvina Montrul, *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015), 306-307.

The teachers' academic qualifications indicate a higher level of attainment; highly trained individuals in specific domains are shown in **Figure 2**. All the teachers who participate in implementing the pilot programme are Montessori-trained, with the majority holding a Bachelor's degree (n=6), a Master's degree (n=1), or currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree (n=1). Given that all the teachers are trained, continue with Montessori training, and hold higher education degrees, this stands as evidence of the programme's quality and as a premise for greater achievement to follow.

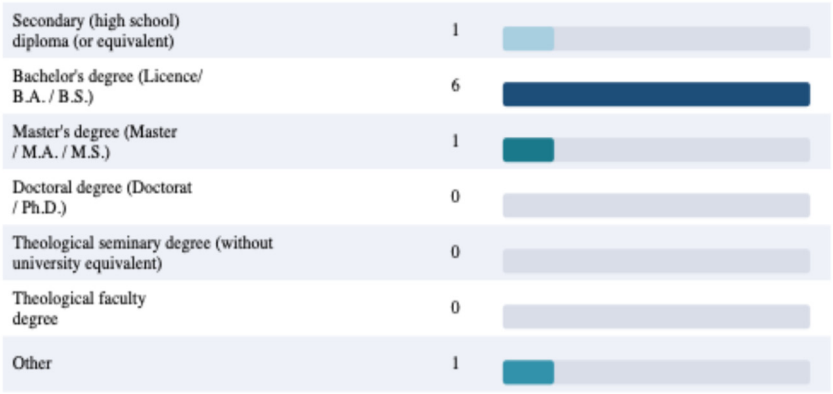

Figure 2. Academic qualifications of teachers

Most of the respondents among the parents were female, with age ranges of 25-34 (n=2), 35-44 (n=11), 45-54 (n=12), and 55 and above (n=1), see **Figure 3**. Questions addressed included the number of years lived in the United States, languages spoken at home, country of birth, highest level of education achieved, and the number of children enrolled. The majority of parents have obtained a Bachelor's degree (n=14) or a Master's or Doctoral degree (n=9), with a small number having completed a trade certificate course (n=2) or high school (n=1). Most of them were born in Romania (n=24), with some in Moldova (n=2). They have been living in the United States for more than 20 years (n=12), 11-20 years (n=11), or 6-10 years (n=3). A large number have 2 children enrolled (n=16), followed by 1 child (n=7) and 3 or more children (n=3). The languages spoken at home indicate that most children speak only Romanian (n=18), with some raised in a bilingual setting using Romanian and English (n=5), Romanian, English and Chinese (n=1), or English

(n=2). The community samples show that the parents are highly educated and invested in supporting their children's development through programmes that promote religious education and linguistic development in their heritage language.

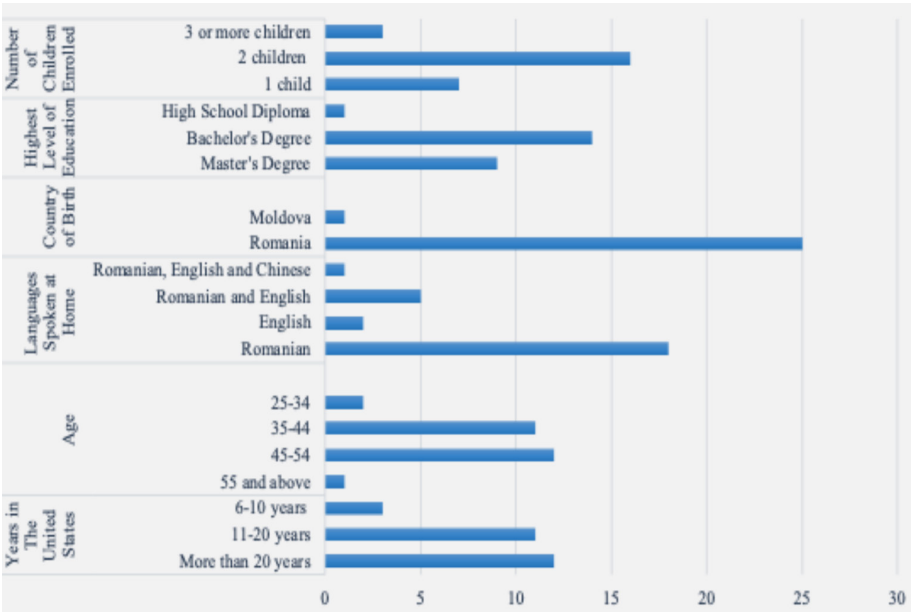

Figure 3. Profile of parents

As shown in **Figures 3** and **4**, the linguistic profiles of the parents and children indicate that Romanian is the most commonly spoken heritage language at home, whereas English is less commonly spoken in the household for many children (n=13). Some use both English and Romanian equally (n=11), and a few speak English at home while Romanian is used very little (n=2). Although the pilot programme has been implemented recently, a considerable number of children had attended the Sunday school before its implementation, for five years or more (n=11), 3-4 years (n=7), with a smaller number attending 1-2 years ago (n=7) and less than 6 months ago (n=1). The children's ages range from 4 to 13, representing three planes of development according to the Montessori approach. They are second-generation bilinguals who need support in expressing and maintaining the dominance of their heritage language.

Figure 4. Profile of children

4.2. Heritage Language, Religious Knowledge, and Academic Motivation

In the community, the preservation of Romanian as a heritage language is closely linked to religious, ethnic, and identity-based factors. Heritage speakers approach language and culture from within the community, and their motivation likewise flows from inward to outward[32]. In preserving language and culture, many communities in the United States have as their mission the provision of education in language and culture in centres specifically designed for language acquisition and cultural development in the construction of their identity[33]. The needs of Romanian children as second-generation speakers are addressed in the same way as they attend Sunday School programmes, in their quest to foster their ethnicity and religious and linguistic identity. The educational context creates continuity among faith, language, and culture; Sunday School activities and social and cultural gatherings foster an environment in which second-generation bilingual children use the language. These children are experiencing a shift from Romanian, the oral language spoken at home and in the community, to English, the dominant language spoken in instructional settings outside the household and the parish. Given this linguistic context, programmes such as *Let the children come to me* serve as bridges that connect children, through a structured environment, to their heritage language, culture, and faith, contextualising their learning and giving them a sense of purpose and the choice to act willingly. The Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas plays an important role in

[32] Silvina Montrul, *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages*, 306.
[33] *Idem*, 26.

fostering the expression of Romanian as a heritage language, as is evident in the Chicago area. From a linguistic standpoint, Romanian as a heritage language is well preserved by second-generation bilinguals in the United States, reflecting that families, cultural spaces, and, one might add, religious communities, among other factors, create environments that nurture the development and preservation of the heritage language from early childhood through adulthood[34].

When assessing the reasons for enrolling the children, items were rated on 5-point Likert scales. The main criteria included becoming more familiar with religious education, exposure to religious education, heritage language exposure and development in a religious context, development in a bilingual context, a deeper understanding of faith and the liturgical texts, readiness for active participation in the life of the church, the introduction of a Montessori approach, or a recommendation of the programme by friends or family members. **Figure 5** summarises the main reasons parents enrolled the children. The majority of parents rated exposure to religious education (n=24) and a deeper understanding of the faith (n=25) as very important, followed by active and meaningful participation in the life of the church (n=19), education in a bilingual setting (n=19), a better understanding of the liturgical text in their heritage language (n=17), development of Romanian as a heritage language in a religious context (n=16), interest in the use of the Montessori method in this setting (n=14), and recommendations from members of the community, family or friends (n=11). The only items rated as unimportant were the programme recommended by others (n=2) and the use of the Montessori method (n=2).

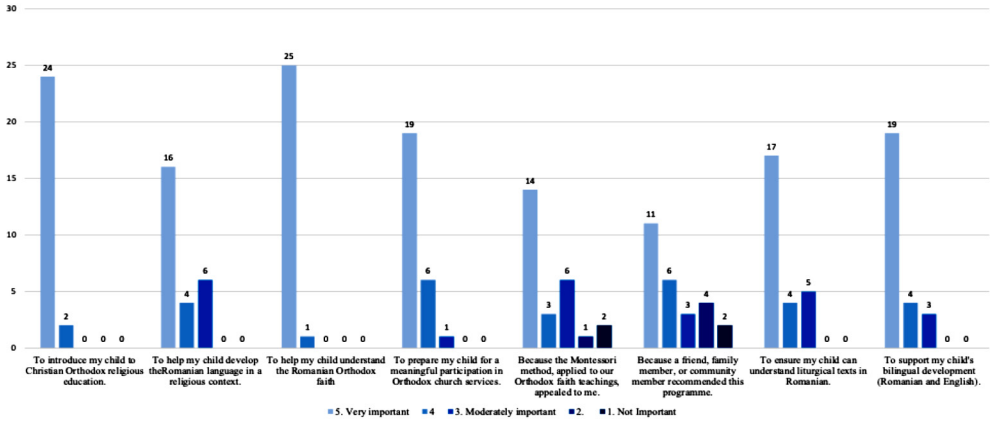

Figure 5. Reasons for participation

[34] Silvina Montrul, "Heritage language acquisition: contributions from Romanian children", in *Bucharest Working Papers in Linguistics*, 27 (1), (2026), 113.

The acquisition of religious knowledge is assessed across five items based on what has been observed at home (see **Figure 6)**, covering the lives of the saints, religious feasts, church services, the Holy Sacraments, and the meaning of icons. The scores indicate that parents observed significant improvement in knowledge of the lives of the saints; the majority strongly agree (n=11) and agree (n=13). There was also strong agreement on understanding the meaning of church services; a large number strongly agree (n=6) and agree (n=13). Similar results were recorded for knowledge of religious feasts (n=11 strongly agree, n=6 agree, n=8 neutral), the meaning of the Holy Sacraments (n=8 strongly agree, n=10 agree, n=6 neutral), and icons and their meaning (n=7 strongly agree, n=11 agree, n=6 neutral). Very few parents disagreed (n=1 and n=2), and none gave answers in the strongly disagree category, reinforcing the premise that the programme's objectives are already fruitful and the results are positive.

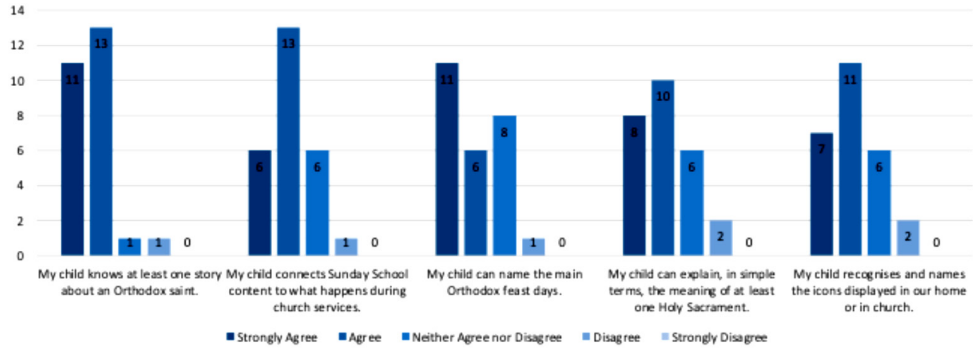

Figure 6. Religious knowledge

The parents also assessed lexical complexity, understanding of what was learned, and use of the two languages of instruction (see **Figure 7)**. Although many responses fall within a neutral range, an upward trajectory is evident in asking more questions, being more receptive, and addressing questions (n=3 always, n=5 often, n=17 sometimes), and in making unmarked references to what was acquired (n=4 always, n=5 often, n=16 sometimes). They tend to demonstrate their learning more by saying prayers and singing at home (n=3 always, n=10 often, n=9 sometimes) and to show more agency by explaining to siblings and family what was taught at school (n=4 always, n=5 often, n=12 sometimes). Given the bilingual context, it was noted that children tended to use English at home as well to express what was acquired at school (n=7 often, n=11 sometimes, n=7 rarely).

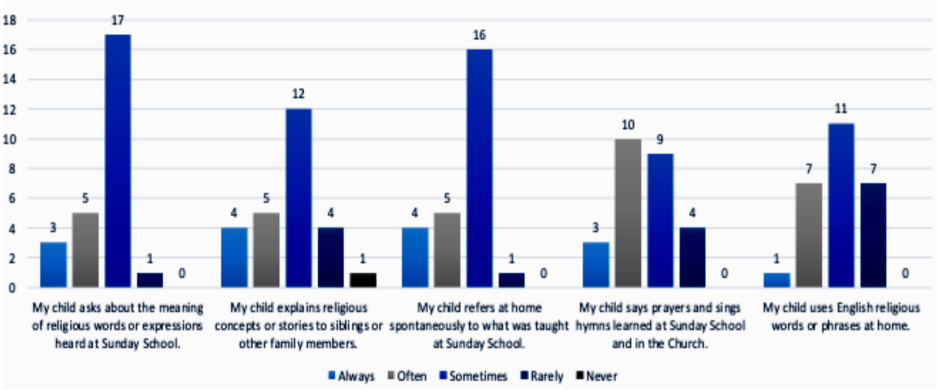

Figure 7. Religious language

The religious vocabulary is acquired not through abstract pedagogical instruction but through lived experience. This approach makes understanding and participation in the community's liturgical life natural, thereby developing the child's religious sense. The teachers assessed the role of the two dominant languages as instruments of communication within the programme. The items were thematically grouped to examine how Romanian, as a heritage language, develops alongside faith among children born and living in the diaspora; see **Figure 8**. The highest scores were recorded for the role of the two languages, Romanian and English. The majority of the teachers believed that a bilingual teaching environment enriches children's experience and makes the learning process more efficient (n=1). However, responses were split on the dominance of English as a language of instruction compared with Romanian, with some agreeing (n=2), some adopting a neutral position (n=2) or disagreeing (n=3), and one respondent strongly disagreeing (n=1). The teachers also strongly agreed (n=5) and agreed (n=3) that the environment envisioned for the children who attend the programme fosters language contact and heritage language development for children born and raised in the diaspora. All the respondents strongly agreed (n=4) and agreed (n=4) that observing the liturgical calendar and integrating it into the curriculum also enhanced language development. Responses were divided regarding the motivation that drives children living in the diaspora to use their heritage language; although many strongly disagreed (n=2) and disagreed (n=4) that they are less motivated, some adopted a neutral position (n=2).

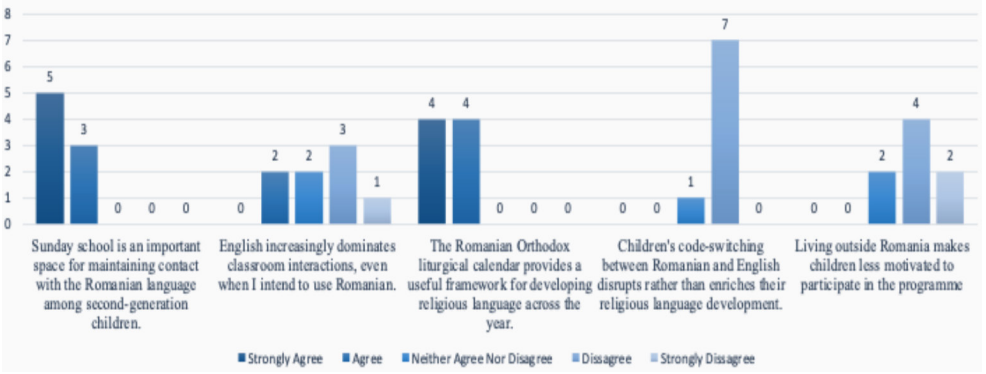

Figure 8. Diaspora and Romanian as a heritage language

The parents were asked to assess the programme as a whole, and half of them were very satisfied with it. Of the parents who responded, 35% were satisfied, 15% were neutral, and none of the respondents was dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the programme, reinforcing once more the programme's quality and the efficacy of the approach.

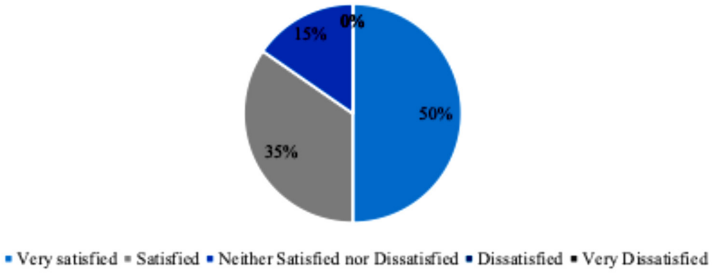

Figure 9. Overall satisfaction

4.3. Agency and Core Curriculum Concepts

The teachers were asked to assess how children manifest agency while working in the prepared environment, as shown in **Figure 10**. Although a good number of the respondents adopted a neutral position on following the natural curiosity instilled in children (n=5), on agency and unprompted initiative in the environment (n=5), on the challenges regarding the use of the Montessori approach (n=4), and on the choices the children have (n=3), the rest of the responses were on a positive track, as most of them either agreed or strongly

agreed that they could see improvement in the way the children perform independently in the environment, show initiative in using the materials, are instinctively curious and do not need prompting for the most part, are responsible in the environment, and engage with their peers of different age groups.

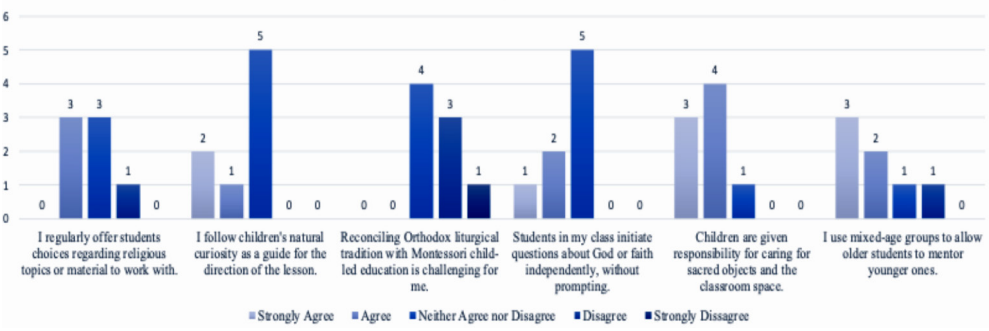

Figure 10. Agency in children

The teachers were asked to assess the autonomy demonstrated while working in the prepared environment and to rank the indicators of child agency based on their experience (Question 102). The item that ranked highest was the child's ability to independently choose the work, followed by their innate capacity to connect faith with life in the church and life outside the church, and by their demonstrated willingness and care for the sacred space and the liturgical objects. The last two options were manifestations of mentorship in the child, namely explaining concepts to younger peers and their inquiry in the form of unprompted questions about religious matters. On the same note, the cultivation of moral virtues was also inquired into (Question 90) – the virtues that the teachers find to be most recurrent during classes. The responses were not interpreted in terms of ranking the virtues, but rather in terms of how often they were present during the presentations of the materials or in interactions. The responses placed love (agape) first, followed by forgiveness, then faith, patience and humility, and ending with mercy and truthfulness. Of the virtues, love was the one most frequently used in the teachers' responses.

4.4. Analysis of the Open Responses

From *Questionnaire 1*, two open-ended questions were selected for analysis in the study. The first open-ended question was *Question 36*: *"Describe a specific lesson or activity in which you successfully helped a child acquire*

meaningful religious language. What did you do, and what was the child's response?" Of the 8 responses, 3 were related to the Holy Sacraments, 2 concerned teaching the Gospel parables, one focused on the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, the Sunday dedicated to Saint John Climacus (also known as Saint John of the Ladder, the symbol of the ladder representing spiritual virtues), and one on the celebration of Easter; one respondent did not provide an answer. All teacher responses reflected the use of Montessori materials, including symbolic miniature objects on trays, Saint Boxes, and child-led education, as well as presentations within the environment, demonstrating a Montessori-influenced approach to teaching the curriculum and a correlation between the sensitive periods, sensorial experience, and abstract religious concepts. The examples given for meaningful language development through the use of the materials indicate that the intrinsic goal is the acquisition of knowledge and language in a well-designed setting. The examples provided by the teachers in their responses are evidence of deeper understanding and internalisation of the concepts.

The children's responses provide evidence of deep learning and language processing, demonstrating the complex acquisition of vocabulary as a learning goal, with materials scaffolded from the youngest children to the oldest. Agency is evident in the language as well, as the children pose profound, unprompted questions, indicating that they grasp meaning and, as the ladder example shows, are evidence of the internalisation of understanding. When the teachers provided a representation of going up and down the ladder and the steps in cultivating virtues, the meaningful, unprompted question the child asked was, "What do we have to do to get up and keep going through each step of the ladder?" reflecting a deeper understanding. The Holy Sacraments were a shared theme, as they were included in a number of responses, indicating that they are a priority for the teachers in their presentations. The children use the terms appropriately and reflect a deeper understanding in their engagement with the work, labelling and using the vocabulary associated with liturgical objects and using their working memory as a language acquisition function.

The Gospel parables were also present in the responses, and the parable that stood out was *The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish* (John 6:1)[35]. In the response, the teacher emphasised presenting the parable slowly and simply, using three small objects: a basket, pieces of bread, and fish. The teacher also emphasised blessing the food and ensuring there was enough for everyone. This created an environment in which the child could *observe* and *absorb* independently, without

[35] King James Bible, (online edition 2017).

being rushed. Given the chance to acquire and internalise the meaning of the parable, one of the children softly expressed: "Jesus made enough for everyone". The responses indicate that the teachers share the same pedagogical values and that children convey meaning about their experiences in a calm environment. The materials are designed according to the planes of development, and even the teachers expressed their wonder at how even younger children, as young as 3-year-olds, were able to assimilate and use, in context, vocabulary connected to each Sacrament and gain a better understanding of what they are.

In *Questionnaire 2*, parents had to answer one open-ended question, *Question 58*: *What is working best about the programme for your child?* The vast majority of parents reported that exposure to hands-on materials, the Montessori approach, and the ability to work independently greatly benefited their children, giving them the opportunity to be more engaged, make the learning process more efficient, and find the curriculum easier to understand. Some of the expressions used by parents to describe the role of such materials were *very attractive*, *simple, engaging*, *and easy to understand*. The answers were consistent across age groups.

Another recurring theme in the responses was the benefit of a teaching environment in which both Romanian as a heritage language (RHL) and English are used, with English becoming dominant because it is used in instructional settings, as all the children are enrolled in the school system. The format was valued by the majority of respondents, as it contributes to a deeper understanding of the core religious concepts taught, helps preserve cultural and linguistic heritage, and fosters a stronger sense of their identity. In this sense, group open discussions and talks with the older children on religious topics were appreciated; there were also proposals to continue at home with research projects that would enrich their knowledge. Other positive points noted in the answers were the presentations, which were age-appropriate, as the complex concepts and content were adapted and presented in accordance with their cognitive and linguistic developmental stages and needs, thus motivating them.

5. Conclusions

The Romanian Orthodox Programme, *Let the Children Come to Me*, has as its mission to bring children to the Church and, organically and implicitly, to help them experience the life of the Church and the Orthodox faith. The curriculum and methods are designed with the child in mind, aiming to develop agency through well-designed, hands-on materials, quiet exploration, guided discovery, and exploration of natural endowments, awareness, and openness to knowledge.

The assessment of the church teachers indicates that the programme is resourceful and nurturing, with potential for expansion. The majority of parents praised the quality of teaching and the constant care and love shown towards the children, and their responses served as tokens of appreciation for their work and the programme. Many responses also expressed appreciation for age-appropriate materials, valuable opportunities for peer interaction, and the ability to work independently, which motivated them. A smaller number of parents added that a workbook as a complementary instrument would be helpful, as would homework and projects to do at home; some believed that the chance to read in advance some of the texts, in the case of older children, would also be beneficial, as would integrating more of the curriculum designed for the Religion Olympics.

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