

Aspects of Laity Mission in the Romanian Orthodox Diaspora within the Iberian Peninsula

Vasile POP*

Abstract: The mission of laity in the Church is particularly important. In diaspora, the role of laity in parish settlement and development is overwhelming, especially since most parishes have been established at the believers' request. The parish priest in diaspora, as hard as he would work, he cannot cover alone, satisfactorily, and constantly, all the levels of parish life and all the geographical areas. Therefore, the concept of „team” in the priest's missionary-pastoral work must not be unfamiliar to him. The believers' involvement in parish activities and in the ecclesial cult provides to diaspora additional maturity and consistency, making a decisive contribution to cultivating and shaping the parish conscience. In search of salvation, Christians do not take into account only themselves or strictly those of their family, but they must be in communion with the parish/liturgical synaxis members and accept each one of them as peer and brethren in Christ. Moreover, they must avoid in any possible way harming the parish, synaxis, peace, communion and Church life in general.

Keywords: mission, laity, participation, diaspora, parish;

Laos tou Theou – Laity as Member in the Body of Christ

In the nowadays Church, as a result of the visible foundation at Pentecost, *It is the Spirit Who gives life* (Jn¹ 6:63) and *He will guide you into all truth* (Jn 16:13), He not only *animates* the Church, but makes the Church *last/exist* visibly in history, but altogether, the Holy Spirit is also beyond history and, when He works in history, He

* Pr. Dr. Vasile Pop, Parish priest at St. Efreem the New Parish, Torrent, Spain, E-mail: pr.vasilepop@yahoo.com.

¹ See *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Thomas Nelson Publishing House since 1798.

does this in order to bring into it the last days, namely *Eshata*². Therefore, ever since the Spirit's Pour onto the Holy Apostles, *He may abide with you forever* (Jn 14:16) in a continuous/permanent³ Pentecost, having His divine energies in the Church, working to the believers' perfection, starting in all with Baptism and continuing with the other Holy Mysteries and religious services. The Church is God's people (*Laos tou Theou*) and all believers or Church members represent this people who is *holy priesthood ... a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people* (I Pt 2:5; 9). The ethnical principle, according to which the people of Israel was chosen, is now replaced with the principle of Church allegiance⁴, in which, every obstacle, principle or barrier is overcome as *there is neither Jew, nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28). In this *Israel (Laos tou Theou)*, everyone – clergy and people – is called to salvation and, at the same time, to work salvation. The work of salvation and, implicitly, Church mission are not exclusively clergy work. Both the clergy and the believers must have a missionary profile and, efficiently and decisively, involve in the mission of the Church. Laity as *holy priesthood...*, *a chosen generation, a royal priesthood* (I Pt 2:5;9) have this mission towards the Church and fellows, to endeavour to make the missionary work living and fruitful. Every Christian, baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, is called to be a living limb in the Body of Christ – The Church, both through his own life, lived spiritually and as a model for others, and as a living member involved in the mission of the Church, only to enrich the salvation work of the Church in the world. It is very important to understand the fact that laity not only has rights in the parish community and expectations to which it should automatically respond, but they also have rights and obligations, both as community members and as participants to the liturgical synaxis, for laity „cannot endeavour themselves with certain ecclesial rights without making their own lives responsible, without imposing on themselves certain canonical laws of ecclesial conduct”, and not only canonical but also communitarian, missionary and socio-cultural ones etc.

² Ioannis Zizioulas, *Ființa eclesială*, trad. Pr. Dr. Aurel Nae, Editura Bizantină, București, 2007, p. 135.

³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Isidor Todoran, *Simbolul Credinței – o sinteză dogmatică*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2008, p. 91.

⁴ Nikolai Afanasiev, *Biserica Duhului Sfânt*, vol. I, trad. Elena Derevici, Editura Patmos, Cluj Napoca, 2008, p. 31, and Pr. Prof. Dr. Boris Bobrinskoy, *Taina Bisericii*, trad. Vasile Manea, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2004, pp. 256-259.

Laity's Decisive Role in Parish Settlement

Laity's mission in the diaspora is quite obvious if we take into account the involvement of the faithful in the life of the Church⁵. It is well known that, in the diaspora, most parishes were established at the request of believers in a particular place or city. The sincere desire of the Orthodox Christians to live their faith, as faithfully as possible, towards the teaching received, and, as close as possible, to the church / Church led to the union of many and, without being influenced by anyone, to demand the establishment of a parish in the city where they live. In the Diocese of Spain and Portugal, over 75% of the parishes, in the period 2001-2019, were established, on request and through the direct involvement of the faithful who wanted to have a priest and a parish nearby, where they can *live and grow spiritually*, and an altar around which they should gather in order to taste from the Mysteries of the Kingdom.

Many times, the faithful, set out on their own missionary path to establish a parish, gathered signatures for months, and popularized this intention among those living in the area, precisely to hold them accountable for it. The approach is not very simple or easy, especially since things coagulate slowly and not everyone expresses, in unison, their desire to be part of a parish, but after accepting the idea of establishing a parish, they move on to facts. Believers, who have been active in the country and have had the consciousness of belonging to a parish, are trying to cultivate here, in the diaspora, this consciousness, an effort that has borne fruit through the settlement of so many parishes, postmodern man's *places* of meeting with God.

Parish Integration and the Other Members' Contribution to Integration

The establishment of a parish is a decisive fact, but it is only the beginning of a rather long and difficult process of crystallization and maturation. The becoming of a diaspora community *into a parish*, often scattered in 10-12 localities, and over a large geographical area, is an evolutionary process that needs the integration of believers, parish awareness and the efforts of those already part of the parish, the integration of those who appear along the way and do not participate rhythmically in the services and life of the parish. Very important is also the transition from *a mass of people* to a liturgical synaxis and communion. Those who, at the beginning of the parish, are a motley mass of people, who do not know each other, must become a large parish family in a communion of love and brotherhood⁶.

⁵ John Binns, *Las Iglesias cristianas ortodoxas*, traduccion Aurelian Marrero Munoz, Editorial Akal, Madrid, 2009, pp. 39-43, and Arnold Ages, *The diaspora dimension*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, pp. 10-13.

⁶ Arhim. Gheorghios Kapsanis, *Probleme de Ecclesologie și Pastorație*, trad. Nicușor Deciu, Editura Anestis, București, 2015, p. 29.

The life of a parish pulsates and becomes evident through the services and the liturgical program held. Only the Sunday Holy Liturgy is no longer enough to sustain the parish life, but a constant weekly liturgical program is needed. Then, in addition to a rigorous liturgical program, *participation* is required. Without participation, there are no signs that the parish is mature, defined or self-sustaining. In the diaspora, it is very true that over the week most believers are at work, caught up at work, but the fact that in a parish there is a constant weekly schedule (at least Wednesday and Friday), offers the opportunity to participate to those who can and want. The presence during a week compared to that of Sundays and holidays is significantly lower, but it shows that there is continuity in the worship of the parish.

The week-long program offers a great opportunity to analyze on the faithful of the parish, even by rotation. The constant participation of the faithful leads to the definition of a synaxis / parish community, and through this, one can take an extra step in pastoral care and mission. The constant believers of the parish become the necessary missionary extensions of the priest to those outside, who do not go to church or who, somewhat, participate obligatorily-occasionally in the ecclesial events of the family (Baptism, Marriage, Funeral). Thus, the calling and participation are inter-dependent, in the sense that, those who participate and really live the Mystery of the Church call those outside the parish life to become a working part of the parish of which, until then, they were only, geographically or conjuncturally, part of.

In the diaspora, it is obvious that the priest cannot cover all the rigors and activities of parish life alone, that is why, a team is needed with which the priest is in close contact and collaboration. Most of the time, this team starts with members of the Parish Council and Committee, who, although having mostly administrative and municipal tasks, must be trained, in this sense, to be the leaven of the community that spiritually leavens all the inactive or impractical from the parish community. It is noteworthy that those parishes have grown and matured, where the priest has constantly worked with a team involved in the parish's mission at all levels of parish life. In time, this parish team expands, it brings into its composure the others, it gathers the community and increases the missionary factor of *being sent* to those outside the stable, not to those of other religions, but to those within the parish, but who are only nominally orthodox and are, somewhat, spiritually *inactive*⁷. Those involved must carry out *an integrative mission*, assumed, and of support for the new ones that appear, especially in the beginning years of the parish. Thus, in order to be able to speak in the diaspora about a parish in the proper sense, we must first have:

- *integration*, through participation and calling;
- *parish team*: counselors, committee then extended team;

⁷ See Maria Luisa Candau Chacon, *La Religiosidad en la edad moderna. Dogma y disciplina*, Editorial Síntesis, Vallehermoso-Madrid, 2020, pp. 189-196.

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- *constancy*, in terms of participation in the life of the parish;
- *involvement* in the worship, life and activities of the parish;
- *uniting* and *unity* in /through faith, support and love, „so that everyone feels part of the troubles and joys of others, as if they were his own, and is forced to give others everything they need”⁸.

Without these few points of support, the parish remains something indefinite, defined as the path between the desired and, at most, branch, or mission.

Church Worship Participation

Worship and services (Holy Mysteries, religious services, etc.) are the heart of the parish, although there are many other activities and aspects of parish life next to these, but activities and involvement in social, cultural etc. ones without public worship and liturgical rhythm dilutes the parish until its becoming into a simple social activism or a cultural center. Although they are also included in the parish life, they are secondary, it is desirable and very useful to exist, but not to become the supreme agenda of a parish. The liturgical synaxis gives meaning to the parish officiation, and, through participation, the faithful manifest their role as living members of the Church and assume the rhythm of the liturgical life. It is very important to point out that participation in services must be done as safely as possible. The mere presence in the place of worship is not enough and does not make you an active member in communion with the other members. It takes something more than the act of being present, and that is participation.

We must note that, like the presence, not all participation is saving and useful, that is, passive, occasional / disinterested or indifferent participation, which in fact leads to simple assistance; it is not desirable and, spiritually, it harms the person in question and, sometimes, even those around. The cult of the Church does not propose the exchange of assistant-theater or auditorium-show / show, but an active, living and obvious participation both visibly in worship, and especially spiritual, through experience. The concrete way of participation and involvement of the faithful, present in the church, is done during officiation and during the Holy Mysteries through chanting, reading / praying together with reverence, prostration and, above all, the reception of the Holy Mysteries culminating in Holy Communion. This participation in the worship of the parish is not done individually, but in communion:

„And the Eucharist is, precisely, the revelation and perfection of the unity of God’s new people. The visible place of worship, to which the faithful run, not for individual prayer, but to gather in the Church, is nothing but the image of the place of the unseen and unmade by the hand. The believer can never stand alone before

⁸ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Biserica Trupul lui Hristos*, vol. I, trad. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sophia, București, 2013, p. 20.

God, separated from his fellows, separated from his family and nation... The believer can only be saved in a liturgical way through everyone”⁹.

Participation of the faithful in parish worship is an essential aspect for the health of parish life, but emphasizing a **communion** involvement / participation, not an individual or selfish-indifferent one to the other members of the Church.

Laity Role in Parish Activities (Social, Cultural, Educational, Edilitary)

In addition to the missionary contribution to parish establishment, the faithful are, then, involved in parish activities in all aspects. The difficult period is the beginning, 1-2 years, in which the parish priest and his presbytera must support the parish program (liturgical, social, educational etc.), but, in time, the parish gains consistency and, gradually, a team is formed, a nucleus that contributes significantly to the course of parish life. The laity are present and are part, both at diocesan and parish level, from the administrative structures up to the educational ones. In the work with young people and children, the faithful are involved either in the Parish School or in the camp program, where the laity make up the specialized team of monitors, animators and psychologists. Also, in the lay diaspora they have set up many Associations, either together with the parish, or separately, as directorship, through which they carry out a special social-philanthropic activity in collaboration with the parish and the local authorities. The involvement of laity in humanitarian campaigns (blood donation, funds, and others) carried out by the Diocese of Spain and Portugal, and the testimony they give in the midst of a society different from the Romanian one, in many respects, are aspects to be observed. The church is the assembly of the faithful, and, in order to maintain its role as a „spearhead” in social activity, it must use all the elements of social life, especially its members. Among them, there is the laity’s apostolate, which makes the gospel much more credible. The mission is therefore not only about the priest, but about a whole apparatus that must be set up with exact attributions and with the aim of changing peoples’ lives and the world¹⁰. In this sense, the mission of laity is urgently needed and desirable. There is also a counter-mission of the laity, carried out by incentives, foreign to the spiritual life and the Church, this type of counter-mission is not desirable and brings temporary problems to the parish or diocese. Without the involvement of the

⁹ Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Ilie Moldovan, *Ortodoxia misionară, stâlp de lumină în lumea contemporană*, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2009, p. 217.

¹⁰ Pr. Lect. Dr. Dan Sandu, „Teologia și practica misiunii în Biserică azi. O tratare comparativă”, în *Analele științifice ale Universității Al. I. Cuza Iași*, vol. VIII, Editura Universității, Iași, 2003, p. 49; also see Francis Grob, *Envoi*, în *Dictionnaire oecuménique de missiologie*, Editions Du Cerf, Paris, 2003, p. 109.

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faithful, the mission of the Church is not complete and is widowed by the most consistent element and to which the whole work of the Church is directed.

Parish Financial Support

Orthodox parishes in the Iberian diaspora depend a lot (also) on the financial aspect, especially since most of them have rented officiation spaces, some for quite large amounts of money, thus, parish sustainability is very important. In the life of any parish, the financial contribution of the faithful is decisive. From a financial point of view, parishes are supported exclusively by the faithful, with some exceptions in which some parishes submit certain projects financed by certain institutions, or, in some extreme situations, they receive financial aid from the Eparchy, such as for the Covid 19¹¹ pandemic, rent payment for small parishes etc. The believers' contributions and donations in a parish ensure the payment of the rent and expenses of the parish, which, although it seems an administrative or internal management aspect, is, nevertheless, an aspect with a strong parish impact.

Rent payment ensures the further officiation in the rented space, and priest and parish reader/chanter support allows for the priest's existence and his dedication to everything that involves serving in the parish; project and parish activity financing helps in assuming the parish call, that of feeling responsive to the sufferings of those in her bosom, but also in the bosom of society. The financial support of the Parish School and of the Nepsis activities (youth camps and meetings) contribute decisively to the pastoral care and mission with the youth. And this time, we see how important is – in a project and, also, in parishes – the triplet M.E.T., meaning money, energy and time. Without them, the logistical, administrative, cultural, household edility and social-philanthropic aspects of the parish would not be possible, and the consequences would be among the most negative for the whole parish life. Judging by the few aspects outlined above, we can easily deduce that any parish needs the financial support of its parishioners, but it is also known that the financial aspect is a thorny issue in any institution, be it a parish, thus, transparency and good management of financial resources are required from the beginning. What is achieved in a parish in the diaspora, from land purchasing, or space for officiation, to various activities and projects, is also achieved for the use and benefit of the parish believers, which is essential to be understood in a parish both by the priest, as well as by the parishioners. It is necessary to clarify a few aspects in this regard: the

¹¹ In March, 2020, The Romanian Orthodox Eparchy of Spain and Portugal founded a bank account dedicated to parish and priest financial assistance for hard economic times, unemployment, insufficiency etc. By this method, several small parishes, priests with low income and, also, believers found in the Diocese received financial support This represents a form of assistance at times of pandemics and difficult trial and will continue to remain a constant means to help everyone at trial in the Eparchy, either believers or priests.

contributions and / or donations made by parishioners to the parish must be voluntary, as far as possible, and without any constraint, they must also be made without any pretensions from the donors. The parish council and the priest have the duty to manage, as well as possible, the funds of the parish, ensuring the community of good management in community / parish interest. These aspects help the parish to prosper in its steps and activities, to provide peace and collaboration, absolutely necessary ingredients in a parish for as fruitful a pastoral, administrative, philanthropic and communitarian activity.

Laiety Counter-Mission at Parish and Communitarian Level

Parish settlement in diaspora is not easy, and the maturation process of the parish is often hampered by certain shortcomings and various negative factors, including the counter-mission of some people in the parish or area. If the involvement of the parish believers helps a lot and is decisive for the formation and existence of a parish, the passivity / ignorance and / or non-involvement of the laity is counterproductive, slows down the natural life of the parish and can cause immense harm to the parish and its active members. Thus, we can speak of laity counter-mission, carried out by incentives, foreign to the spiritual life and the Church. The involvement of laity in the mission of the Church is absolutely necessary and helps to build the *Body of Christ* – the Church, because Christians *are members individually* (I Cor 12:27) of the Church. Church life, in general, and parish life, in particular and immediately, are affected by several forms of counter-mission: the ignorance and passivity of those targeted or called to settle or be part of a parish, the percentage of the indifferent is great as compared to that of parishioners, usually the number of those involved and active is considerably lower than that of the careless or ignorant. There is also a kind of *temporary ignorance*, in the sense that many parishioners do not participate in any way in the life of the parish, but only occasionally, biased, when they need to baptize their children or get married, or when invited to various ecclesial events. These rare and occasional cross-interaction with the parish / church do not make the above-mentioned involved/active believers, because coming to church every 2-3 years is occasional, rare or even accidental for some, especially since they do not participate constantly in the liturgical synaxis and do not really live the life of the parish.

The most harmful form of counter-mission is the malicious one, with hidden purposes or treacherous interests stemming from hostile attitudes toward the Church, Christians, and all that the faith in general entails. This type of counter-mission exists in some places in the diaspora and maybe, even more intensely than in Romania, but this phenomenon seems to be gaining momentum lately, being fueled and directed by those who (it seems!) make a goal of being against the Church, and therefore, often, the priests, the officiation, the faithful's devoutness, the hierarchy become the content and the main targets of the various attacks against the Church. Such approaches are even

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joined by media trusts, television, coordinated actions on social networks and even exponents and people especially (self) dedicated to anticlericalism and spiritual life. It is sad that, in many such attacks against the Church, even Christians (nominal!) are recruited, either manipulated or attracted, or on basis of conflicts at parish level, with the parish priest or other believers. In the diaspora, there is sometimes the danger of decimating or fragmenting a parish by the fact that some give up being part of the parish and choose to migrate to a neighboring parish or not to be part of any parish, at least for a while. Those who participate in such *migrations* to other parishes try to discredit the priest and the parish they left from or sometimes even create inter-parish conflicts, which is very detrimental to the peace of parish life and the spiritual life of all those involved in the context. There is also the risk of inter-parish commuting, not at all saving, which delays the maturation of a parish. I do not propose a hermetic parish and no closed or exclusive circuit of parish life, nevertheless, the lack of steadfastness of the faithful and their oscillation between the various neighboring parishes does not help to form the parish consciousness, nor to altar-pertaining and / or a constant parish way of life. In assuming the spiritual life, the Christian does not consider only himself or those of his family, but he must be in communion with those in the parish / liturgical synaxis, because it is saving to assume the parish life and the other believers exactly as we hear in the litany from the Holy Liturgy: *Let us offer ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God*¹², thus, Christians, together work for salvation by shining as *lights in the world* „(Phil 2:16), therefore „the Christian has the responsibility not only for his own salvation, but also for the salvation of others ... every believer has a duty ... to confess the faith, to defend it, and to invite others to the faith.”¹³

Among the most common forms of counter-mission at parish and inter-parish level are: cultivating conflict with the parish priest and / or other members of the parish, denigrating them, their biased presentation and „preaching” on the impotence and slippage of clergy and parishioners, actions directed on social networks, lying and lacking in arguments, or inventing, telling on them and trialing them, discrediting their pastorship and their preaching, negative articles and reports in the media, newspapers, shows, gossiping etc. It is very important to understand that identifying these forms of counter-mission and resolving them correctly is not a form of self-victimization of the clergy and parishes involved, but a right and an obligation of them precisely to restore and perpetuate a state of peace in the parish, a more effective relationship and a more intense search for salvation and this, in the most sincere and peaceful way. It is necessary that the parish priest and the clergy in the parishes are not factors that trigger certain

¹² The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, Andreiana Publishing House, 2009, p. 125.

¹³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Valer Bel, *Misiune, parohie, pastorație. Coordonate pentru o strategie misionară*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p. 89.

circumstances and conflicts that are harmful to parish life. The parish priest must be well behaved, attentive to potential dangers and conflicts, determined to take on the resolution of unpleasant and unwanted situations in the parish, being a model through his life and actions for those he pastorates. Both believers / laity and clergy can be exposed to the danger of counter-mission, so in a parish, in order to avoid various negative and destructive situations, it is imperative that sincerity and prayer work together in collaboration, so that, between those who truly believe in Christ the Lord, to create an indissoluble and saving bond¹⁴ and to always seek peace: *Shun evil and do good, seek peace, and pursue it* (Ps 33:15).

Conclusions

- The work of salvation and, implicitly, the mission of the Church are not exclusively clergy work. Both the clergy and the faithful must have a missionary profile and be involved effectively and decisively in the mission of the Church. The laity, as *holy priesthood..., a chosen generation, a royal priesthood* (I Pt 2:5;9), has this duty to the Church and to his neighbor to strive to make the missionary work alive and fruitful.

- Laity's role in the life of the Church and in that of parishes, in particular, is a decisive one, they contribute to the establishment of parishes in the diaspora, to their growth and maturation and are involved in all the activities of the parish.

- Parish worship participation is an essential aspect for the health of parish life, but emphasizing a communion participation, not an individual or selfish-indifferent one, in relation to the other members of the Church.

- Financial support, and not only laity's to the parish, is very important in diaspora, especially since here there are no church premises, but rented spaces, which serve the parish mission only partially or for a limited time. The natural evolution of a parish involves the purchase or construction of places of worship that are appropriate to the mission and activity of parishes in the diaspora, but to achieve this goal, the financial involvement of all parishioners is imperative.

- Beyond all these decisive roles of laity in the life of the parishes in diaspora, the emergence of various forms of counter-mission and division from laity must be avoided. It is necessary that the parish priest and the clergy in the parishes should not represent triggering factors of certain circumstances and conflict situations that are detrimental to parish life – scandal, side-taking, and internal conflicts are to be avoided.

¹⁴ See Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, „*Biserica în sensul de locaș și de largă comuniune în Hristos*”, Ortodoxia, XXXIV(1982), nr. 3, pp. 336-346.