

Liturgical Catechesis. A Pastoral Typology of Father Ilarion Felea

Pr. Lect. Dr. Filip Albu¹

Abstract: In this study I tried to highlight the catechetical profile of father Ilarion Felea, his catechetical activity, and, above all, the constitutive elements of a liturgical catechesis as a pastoral typology. I analyzed several catecheses from the work "Spre Tabor", focused on the interpretation of liturgical texts and the expression of their meanings in front of the faithful from the pulpit of the cathedral in Arad. In this regard, we have identified two catechetical themes, one relating to the Sacrament of Baptism, and the other to the Sacrament of Holy Unction. I highlighted the way in which Father Felea managed to transmit and update the experimental message of the two Mysteries to the faithful, to make them understand their importance for healing, perfection, and transfiguration of life in Christ.

Keywords: *Ilarion Felea, liturgical catechesis, the Sacrament of Baptism, the Sacrament of Holy Unction, pastoral typology*

1. Ilarion Felea as a catechist

Father Hilarion Felea had not only theological concerns regarding dogma, spirituality, apologetics, and liturgy, nor only homiletic concerns, but also catechetical ones. He assumed the status of catechist immediately upon receiving the priesthood in 1927. He is not only a priest in Valea Bradului, but also a catechist at the school in Brad. Priesthood involved not only homily but also catechesis, both in a pastoral and missionary perspective.

Later, father Felea is requested both in the catechization program of the Diocese of Arad and in the Christian formation of the youth. In 1931 "School for Babysitters" was established in Arad. Its goal was to train young women with a thorough moral education

¹ Faculty of Orthodox Theology „Ilarion V. Felea”, University "Aurel Vlaicu" Arad, filip.albu@uav.ro

for child care². The diocesan council designates Father Felea to support this educational program's two hours of religion per week³.

Father Felea asks to be appointed catechist at the School at the Textile Factory in Arad for the years 1931-1932⁴. He was appointed catechist at the primary school in Calea 6 Vânători in the year 1932⁵. In 1936 he was entrusted to preside over the exams of the primary schools in Bujac and Calea 6 Vânători⁶. In the catechetical conference of 1936, he is entrusted to support the topic *Which prayers should be taken in each primary grade, I-VII?* and to review the works included in this theme⁷. Catechism was of overwhelming importance in the context of the propaganda of neo-Protestant groups.

We observe how Father Felea was firmly anchored in the catechetical work of the Church. From this perspective of the catechist who knows the structure of catechesis and a religious lesson, he makes some corrections to the famous work *Christ in the School*, written by Dumitru Călugăru. Thus, in 1934, on the occasion of the publication of this work, he specifies some omissions and inadvertences: the material in 1st grade is desirable to be more biblical and religious, but the question of the analytical program in 1st grade is more difficult and belongs to higher forums.

We mention here some of them. We do not know how the theory that the tower of Babylon was erected as a place to escape from a possible flood was accredited. The biblical truth is that by building a city and tower, the Babylonians wanted to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11, 4), therefore fame, was a sign of pride and civilization, not a refuge in case of a flood. The main virtue in Abraham was faith and obedience to God, so in this sense, the generalization on p. 133 should also be made, which is not exactly appropriate. On p. 185, Iosif's second dream could be added, children like it and memorize it easily. The lesson about Egyptian slavery lacks generalization: work does not weaken, but strengthens man. The addition from the 5th commandment on p. 242 is superfluous. Joshua and the judges are not mentioned as forerunners of the kings. The prayer: The poor shall eat - p. 395 - is said only in the evening. The Our Father is said in the morning and at noon. Lazar had not been dead for 3 days - p. 251 - but had been "dead for four days" (John 11, 39). On p. 434 it would be better to generalize: Charity must be followed by gratitude. In the parable of the debtors - p. 442 - it is not about ten talents, but ten thousand (Matthew 18, 24). Comparing this figure (10,000 x 9000 = 90,000,000) with one hundred dinars impresses even children.

² APORSIA, Condițiuni de admitere în Școala pentru îngrijitoare de copii, Dosar 10, f. 121.

³ APORSIA, Adresa 585(1931) a Oficiului Protopopesc Arad, Dosar 10, f. 122.

⁴ APORSIA, Adresa nr. 157(1931) către Oficiul Protopopesc Arad, Dosar 10, f. 130

⁵ APORSIA, Adresa nr. 1149(1932) a Oficiului Protopopesc Arad, Dosar 12, f. 81.

⁶ APORSIA, Adresa nr. 572(1936) a Oficiului Protopopesc Arad, Dosar 17, f. 33.

⁷ APORSIA, Adresa nr. 782(1936) a Oficiului Protopopesc Arad, Dosar 17, f. 37

On p. 462, it is better and easier to understand to explain the text "they have Moses and the prophets" by the words: they have the Decalogue and the Holy Scriptures, to listen to them, in order to be saved. On p. 518 it must be specified that Jesus chose his Apostles because this choice is based on the Mystery of the Priesthood. The name "Vitfleem" sounds heavy. It would be better to replace it with the popular name: Vifleem, or with the correct one: Betleem. The prayer is missing: The Mother of God, which can be interspersed after the "Annunciation", in connection with the angel's announcement: *Rejoice, you who are full of gifts*. There are some lessons that are too difficult for one hour in second grade, such as David, which deserves 2 hours: David and Gogiat, David as king and prophet. Also, the Babylonian captivity should be separated from the Daniel lesson, also to make the lessons easier to understand and memorize. In the fourth grade, a lesson about the books of the Holy Scripture was also useful⁸. Also, to suggest that the New Testament be used as a method in combating the "sectarians" in the 4th primary grade. The motivation for such a proposal was as follows: "especially in parishes contaminated by sects, the evidence quoted from the New Testament in support of our faith is welcome. The children of the 4th grade also know that the sectarians do not need a cross, incense, icons, mysteries, or priesthood and they ask for clarifications about them. And when you read to them or give them to read from the New Testament places to document the teachings of the Church, they are pleased and satisfied. This is also a preventive measure against the spread of sects"⁹. Although critical of some aspects of the book, Father Felea recognizes its value and the author's. However, these methodological and content suggestions reveal the good orientation of Father Felea in terms of religion in school, catechesis, and the analytical curriculum specific to the time for teaching religion in school. Thus, "without diminishing in any way the crucial importance of the book in the catechetical dimension of the Church, the clarifications and suggestions reveal a well-defined catechetical side of the teaching work carried out by father Felea. He makes technical and content clarifications, proof that he passionately practiced the work of catechization in the schools of Arad"¹⁰.

As we know, Father Felea initiated the development of the Analytical Program of Religion in Primary School with the approval of Bishop Andrei Magieru of Arad. In this endeavor, he is also supported by the priests F. Codreanu, V. MiHuțiu, P. Bogdan, D. Tudor, C. Mureșan, with whom he edits and prints "Religion manuals for I-VII primary

⁸ Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, „Recenzie” la Dumitru Călugăr, Hristos în școală I. Manualul catehetului ortodox pentru școala primară. Seria didactică, Sibiu, 1934, Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 532 p. RT, an XXIV(1934), nr. 9-10, p. 355. See also Cristinel Ioja, *Ilarion V. Felea (1903-1961). Preotul, Teologul, Mărturisitorul*, Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2022, p. 75-77.

⁹ Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, „Recenzie” la Dumitru Călugăr, Hristos în școală I. Manualul catehetului ortodox pentru școala primară, p. 355-356.

¹⁰ Cristinel Ioja, *Ilarion V. Felea (1903-1961). Preotul, Teologul, Mărturisitorul*, p. 75.

school students" (Arad, 1940)¹¹. He also presides over the years at several religious exams at several schools, offering practical exhortations in his speeches. For example, in 1940 he talked to students and teachers about the purpose of books and religion, the teaching and example of Christian kindness, religion in school and in life, learning religion and acting according to its commandments, about the religion exam in school and outside of school, about religion and war, good people and bad people, updating the message and highlighting the role of religion in life and in the formation of children for society¹². He also taught the Romanian language and sectology at the School of Șega and the School of Singers¹³.

In 1940, with the support of priests Florea Codreanu and Cornel Mureșan, he printed the "Orthodox Christian Catechism", which was intended as a new primary education program, implemented in the Arad Diocese from the fall of 1940¹⁴, Catechism that had several editions.

2. Liturgical catechesis as a pastoral typology

As one of the means used in church preaching, catechesis facilitates the transmission of faith teaching. As the teaching of faith cannot be separated from spirituality and worship, we derive from this the necessity and importance of an integrated catechetical project, which includes not only the doctrinal aspects but also the moral and liturgical ones. Father Felea's catechetical model is a witness and an encouragement to us.

Father Ilarion Felea's work, in addition to its dogmatic, mystical, pastoral, and homiletic importance, also has liturgical-catechetical importance as we encounter significant texts that entitle us to talk about a *liturgical catechesis* in the thinking of the theologian of Arad. The researchers of his work noticed the unitary character of his theological thinking, the unity of dogma-spirituality-cult, and its expression as an

¹¹ Arhiva Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă Arad, Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, *Opera vieții mele – ziar personal 1937-1944(II)*, f. 7, 111. See also Cristinel Ioja, *Ilarion V. Felea (1903-1961). Preotul, Teologul, Mărturisitorul*, p. 77-78.

¹² See also Cristinel Ioja, *Ilarion V. Felea (1903-1961). Preotul, Teologul, Mărturisitorul*, p. 78; Arhiva Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă Arad, Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, *Opera vieții mele – ziar personal 1937-1944 (II)*, f. 103.

¹³ Arhiva Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă Arad, Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, *Opera vieții mele – ziar personal 1944-1956 (III)*, f. 20, 29.

¹⁴ Arhiva Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă Arad, Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, *Opera vieții mele – ziar personal 1937-1944(II)*, f. 111-112. He also reviews the manuals developed by the priests Cornel Mureșan (cl. I-II), Viorel Mișuțiu (cl. III), Florea Codreanu (cl. V), Tudor Demian (cl. VI) și Petru Bogdan (cl. VII).

ecclesial message through the homily¹⁵. And we deepened this perspective in the analysis, especially of the texts in the work *Spre Tabor*. But, beyond the Dogmatic-Mystical/Spirituality-Liturgy unity, sometimes also the Homily, the Liturgy-Catechesis unity in Father Felea's thinking was not noticed and approached in an extended way. Indeed, the characteristics of a liturgical spirituality were noticed and deepened, but not those of the liturgical catechesis present in the texts of father Ilarion Felea.

For Father Felea, liturgical catechesis means not simply a form of objective transmission of some information, but the interpretation of the mystery of the Holy Liturgy from within the ecclesial experience, within the ecclesial-liturgical framework, with pastoral and missionary implications. The liturgical catechesis expressed by father Felea is primarily related to the pastoral register, to the mission of the Church, and by no means to the theological science of catechetics, although certain objective elements of Catechetics are not missing.

Father Felea's theology regarding the Liturgy does not develop outside the pastoral area but involves conclusions related to the pastoral care of the faithful. In this sense, for a liturgical pastorate of the faithful, he proposes: a) commenting on the Holy Liturgy for the faithful; b) the fruition of the Holy Liturgy in the life of the faithful; c) overcoming liturgical formalism through the mechanical performance of the Holy Liturgy¹⁶.

Being inspired by the liturgical thinking of Petre Vintilescu, Father Felea states four essential ideas for Theology: a) The liturgy has its foundation in the fundamental dogma of Christianity, the soteriological dogma; b) The Eucharist is not a simple cultic expression of a truth of faith, but dogma in liturgical function; c) The liturgy is not a simple commemoration, but a real personal presence with reference to the mystery of the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ; d) Liturgy is an organization in liturgical reading of texts from Scripture¹⁷.

Father Felea emphasizes the importance of the believer's communion with the Body and Blood of Christ. This has personal-community importance: "We know that the climax of the Holy Liturgy is the fearful impersonation and communion with the body and blood of the Lord. But we ask ourselves: how many of today's Christians know that the holy things are given only to the saints and how many of them partake when they are called to approach "with the fear of God, with faith and love"? Well, — the answer is

¹⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, "Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia Ortodoxă", Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004; Bartolomeu Anania, "Cartea deschisă a Împărăției - o însoțire liturgică pentru preoți și mireni", Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2006; Cristinel Ioja, *Ilarion V. Felea (1903-1961). Preotul Teologul, Mărturisitorul*; Pr. Vasile Gordon (coord.), *Omiletica*, Basilica, București, 2015.

¹⁶ Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA „Sf. Liturghie și predica”, *Revista Teologică*, an XIX(1929), nr. 11, p. 320.

¹⁷ Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA „Sf. Liturghie și predica”, p. 317-319.

painful. The thermometer of an active and real Christian life is the number of believers who partake. He verifies the religious conscience of both the priest and the faithful. Communion in a Christian community are missing, Orthodox mysticism the spirit of religious life, and the experience of the mystery of the Church [concentrated in the Holy Eucharist] are also absent. (...) That's why, I repeat, only where there is awareness, conviction, and full knowledge of the liturgical mystery, only there the performance of the Holy Liturgy be at the height of its divine postulates and only there the communion will be desired and performed as often as possible by Christians and not only once a year, or once in a lifetime, or... never"¹⁸. Thus, he speaks of a personal and communal liturgical consciousness. Precisely because he has such a clear vision of the Liturgy and the faithful's participation in the Liturgy, in their communion with the Holy Mysteries, Father Felea develops over time a true liturgical catechesis. In his speeches, he assumes liturgical interpretations that he conveys to Christians from the church pulpit, he interprets the meaning of the Liturgy, the moments of the Liturgy, and the significance of the faithful's participation and sharing in the Holy Liturgy. Thus, over time Father Felea not only develops a liturgical spirituality, but also a liturgical catechesis. They were the components of a unitary construction on the message of the Church in the context of modernity through the recourse to the liturgical experience of the Church, to the liturgical spirituality united with the dogmas and spiritual meanings of the philokalia texts discovered especially through the translation of the Philokalia by father Dumitru Stăniloae.

The question arises, what significance does liturgical catechesis have from a pastoral perspective? Because it was used by father Felea mainly and primarily for a pastoral purpose. We could identify several motivations and immediate benefits of liturgical catechesis as a pastoral typology: 1) the believers' understanding of the theological and spiritual meanings of the Liturgy they participate in; 2) awareness of the liturgical mystery, of man's personal participation in the mystery of God's presence in the Church and Liturgy; 3) strengthening the community in the conscious ecclesial-experimental communion; 4) preparing the community to answer about its faith and experience in the face of the various challenges of the world, either along the lines of skepticism and indifference, or along the lines of twists and turns from the register of propaganda of non-Protestant groups; 5) overcoming liturgical formalism.

3. Elements regarding liturgical catechesis

These elements regarding liturgical catechesis are often found in the theological approaches of father Ilarion Felea. For example, we refer to two of the Mysteries of the Church, present in the work *Spre Tabor*. In *Spre Tabor*, we find a bunch of liturgical catecheses delivered by father Felea mostly in the historical Cathedral of Arad. Thus, in

¹⁸ Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA „Sf. Liturghie și predica”, p. 320-321.

Purification, we encounter the cleansing through the Holy Mysteries, father Felea familiarizing the faithful through a catechetical method with the theological and spiritual meanings of Baptism¹⁹. Updating the meaning of Baptism for the Christian is particularly relevant: "Thus, you Christian, through Holy Baptism you not only cleansed yourself from the defilement of sin through grace, but you also clothed yourself in the adornment of incorruption, in the garment of Christ's holiness; you became a citizen together with the saints and the household of God"²⁰.

The exhortations he offers to Christians regarding their duties after Holy Baptism are also important. The answer is biblical and liturgical, a paraphrase of the prayers after Baptism: "Remember, Christians, in the light of the grace received in the mystery of Holy Baptism, praise God unceasingly, give warm thanks for such a wonderful gift and strive throughout your life to show that you are a baptized Christian, a good man, a pure soul, an "undefeated soldier" in the battle of life"²¹.

A liturgical catechesis also refers to *cleansing through holy water*²² where Father Felea shows that we cannot understand the Sacrament of Baptism well without understanding at least in part the mystery of the cleansing water, the holy water. He seeks to explain this by appealing to biblical, patristic, and liturgical texts. He turns to the texts of Euchologion about the cleansing power of water. He also explains the readings from the Old Testament at Vespers at the feast of Baptism and at the great sanctification of water²³. These explanations are a constitutive part of Father Felea's *liturgical catechesis*. After the explanation of the parables and other liturgically integrated biblical texts, he concludes for the faithful: "All the mentioned prophecies and parables make us understand the purpose of water in the work of salvation, let us believe that living water, flowing water united with the grace of God, receives a holy gift, a quality that surpasses the natural power of water, receives a mysterious power, sanctifying, cleansing, which can wash away sins and sanctify the souls, bodies, and houses of believers"²⁴.

Father Felea's appeal to the prayers and texts of the Euchologion is an important element of the liturgical catechesis. He answers the various questions he addressed himself to the believers from the pulpit by resorting to these liturgical, clarifying texts, regarding the meanings of Baptism, the baptism of Jesus Christ in Jordan, the connection with the Old Testament, the cosmic and anthropological effects of Baptism. After invoking these liturgical texts, he concludes: "Jesus Christ was baptized in the Jordan in

¹⁹ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, Editura Crigarux, Petru Vodă, 2007, p. 277-282 și 282-287.

²⁰ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 286.

²¹ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 287.

²² Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 287-290 și 291-296.

²³ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 287-288.

²⁴ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 291. We notice that he offers useful explanations for the soul of the believers through questions and answers.

order to sanctify the nature of the waters, to give us the cleansing and sanctifying water of souls and bodies according to the promise, the water that paves the way for our second birth, from water and spirit"²⁵.

Biblical facts are linked to the concrete, spiritual life of baptized believers. Father Felea's extended comment on the consecration prayer of the Holy Water is eloquent for the method used in the transmission of the faith. After this comment he writes: "Knowing all these teachings about the baptism of the Lord and about our purification through holy water, let's remember, beloved and faithful Christians, (...) to use holy water for the cleansing and sanctification of souls, bodies and houses"²⁶. We also find association as a stage of catechesis: "Liquid or gaseous water (steam) by physical or chemical means, combined with soap or other elements, washes all bodies, cleans all stains and impurities. Flowing water united with the Lord's grace, washes and cleanses all souls and all sins" and the final exhortation through an appeal to the text of the sticheron, 6th tone from the Holy Water Service²⁷.

The second Sacrament in which we can identify the constitutive elements of liturgical catechesis is the Sacrament of Holy Unction. He shows that "strengthening in faith, cleansing by grace and healing of soul and body are considered by all the chants, commemorations, anointings, prayers and parts (pericopes) that are read from the Apostle and the Gospel, included in the service and order of the Holy Unction. We don't stop at the troparia and kontakia, at the canon and litanies, at the exapostilarion and at the verses, all full of hope, light, and power that renews the soul and body, but we stop to remember only the seven parts (pericope) from the Apostle and from the Gospel and the seven prayers that are read after each Gospel. What are they telling us? What do they teach us? What is their meaning?"²⁸.

In these words, Father Felea gives us the sources of the liturgical catechesis regarding the Mystery of Unction. He interprets each mentioned text to the believers in the church, and after interpreting the texts from the Gospels, Apostles, and prayers, he concludes, showing that they are all related to their experience, liturgical practice, and healing: "All of them resound in the ears and hearts of the listeners and especially of the sick, like messages of salvation, all of them are meant to show the cleansing and liberating purpose of the mystery of the Holy Unction; all aim at the healing and strengthening of man and his faith (...) This, dear Christians, is the speech and interpretation of the seven Apostles and the seven Gospels from the order of the Holy Unction. They accompany the sacrament of the anointing of righteous Christians, with

²⁵ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 293-294.

²⁶ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 295.

²⁷ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 296.

²⁸ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 384.

consecrated oil, to the organs of the senses", the end belonging to the liturgical text of the prayer for the consecration of the oil²⁹.

Father Felea interprets the prayers of Saint Unction and at the end of the interpretation shows their significance for the Christian life and their connection with the biblical text: "We rarely meet, dear Christians, more beautiful teachings and more uplifting prayers, grown like some wonderful flowers from the garden and the inspiration of the Holy Scripture! All of them have an interpretation and a cleansing purpose, to enlighten the eyes, to establish hopes, to cure diseases, to strengthen the powers of souls and bodies, to lend man new powers, heavenly powers, powers to fight against troubles, pains and sufferings, until at death, all have in mind the purification of senses, bodies and souls, all are means of purification, sanctification and salvation"³⁰.

Conclusions

All these aspects reveal the structures and content of the liturgical catechesis that Father Felea expresses in an ecclesial environment, from the pulpit of the Church. The connection with the biblical and liturgical text, the associations, and the updating of the message for believers represent the constitutive elements of the liturgical catechesis in which we discover not only a mystagogy of the texts but also a mysterious theology of the presence of God in the life and ecclesial experience of Christians.

His work *Spre Tabor* offers us not only an impressive resource that can be used even now but also an impetus worthy of following in the pastoral activity assumed by the recipients of the sacrament of ordination.

²⁹ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 388.

³⁰ Pr. Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor. Curățirea II*, p. 392. It is interesting the way in which he conveys to the faithful the balance between the remedies of medicine and the remedies of the Mystery of the Unction. He says that the grace of Saint Unction is no less useful than the cures for which people run to the pharmacy when they are sick, and on the other hand, he says that Unction "doesn't make hospitals, pharmacies, or medical sciences superfluous, but complements them with spiritual and heavenly powers, which go to the roots of diseases" (p. 393).