



Ὁ Μητροπολίτης Μπουένος Άϊρες Ἰωσήφ

Orthodox Mission as *Imitatio Christi*

A Key for Interpreting Orthodox Mission in South America

Metropolitan Iosif of Buenos Aires and South America

"When the Apostle says, 'Put on Christ,' he exhorts us to clothe ourselves entirely with Him. He desires Christ to dwell within us and our soul to become His dwelling place. He wants us to wear Him as a garment that completely envelops us, so that He may become our all, both within and without. For Christ is our fullness. He is the path by which we advance, the Bridegroom who loves His Church, the root that sustains us, the drink that refreshes us, the food that nourishes us, and the very life that gives us life. He is our Apostle, our High Priest, our Teacher, our Father, our Brother, and our Co-heir. He shared with us the tomb and the Cross. He intercedes for us before the Father. He is our house and at the same time the One who dwells within it. He is our friend. He is the foundation upon which we rest and the cornerstone that sustains the entire building. And we are His members, His field, His building, His branches, and His fellow workers. What has He not wished to become for us? In what way has He not sought to unite Himself to us? By every possible means He draws us to Himself and joins us to Himself. Such is the conduct of One who loves infinitely."

— St. John Chrysostom, Homily XXIV on Romans, 2.

Dear Participants,

First of all, I would like to thank His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America for granting us this opportunity to share with you our **vision** and **missionary activity** in South America. Dr. Mantasavili, who follows me in this presentation, will describe from the perspective of action what I shall attempt to describe from the perspective of vision, as a **key** for interpreting the entire issue.

I earnestly ask you to listen with your heart, with that intelligent heart with which the Creator has endowed us, for the vision I present may differ considerably from what you are expecting to hear in a presentation of this kind.

The concept of Orthodox mission has unfortunately, in modern times, drifted away from the criteria proper to our Tradition in many respects, from **methodology** to **geography**. It is necessary to purify it of the **clichés** that either magnify it as an activity autonomous from the ecclesial community or minimize it as a sub-product of it. We must return to the principles that sustain it in a radical and irreversible manner.

The Lord's commandment to proclaim His word and initiate the whole oikoumene into the mysteries of His Redemption is fulfilled after Pentecost. Consequently, in order to carry out the so-called "**Great Commission**", one must first become a **recipient of the Paraclete**. And in order to become a living vessel of the Spirit of Life, **spiritual exercise** is necessary. **How can I transmit to others the treasures of salvation if I myself remain outside this dynamic?**

The coming of the Spirit therefore precedes everything. But He comes to make His dwelling within us when we are **empty**, when we make room for Him to expand throughout our entire existence. This **emptiness**, this **personal kenosis**, is accomplished as an extension of Christ's own *kenosis*. Thus, spiritual exercise must necessarily be *imitatio Christi*; only afterward comes **transmission** and **proclamation**, which are themselves also *imitatio Christi*.

Mission, as we Orthodox understand it, is this *imitatio Christi* from **preparation to proclamation**. Thus, spiritual exercise in order to **attract** and allow ourselves to be **captivated-seduced** by the Paraclete becomes identified with the necessary accomplishment and fulfillment of mission itself, which is the **fervent and irresistible desire to transmit, communicate, and share this experience with everyone, without any limits, distinctions, or prejudices**.

And while we continue sharing this experience, we also continue exercising ourselves within this dynamic that is essentially **relational, therapeutic, and perfective**. **For this reason, Orthodox mission is very far removed from proselytism. It rejects every form of indoctrination, every tendency toward religious colonialism, and every form of gerontism or guruism.**

Thus, our clergy and lay missionaries in South America do not seek the **spectacle of the masses**, nor do they employ **methodologies characteristic of religious fetishism**. They do not seduce future "**proselytes**" through **deceptive artifices** clothed in **degenerate and controversial spiritualities**. They do not perform miraculous acts, nor do they speak in tongues. Neither

do they offer **politicized discourses**, nor do they sweeten the ears of “**benefactors**” with **patriotic, ideological, and sensationalist harangues**.

I constantly exhort the missionaries of my Archdiocese to live and understand mission “*in reverse*”: while they transmit and share the experience of faith, they themselves are once again catechized, enlightened, and vivified. It is a matter of “**exercise after exercise**” in order to remain in the Spirit.

In this spiritual and practical context, what is our fundamental priority?

The systematic, organic, and experiential proclamation and promotion of the Gospel and the Orthodox Tradition through every means at our disposal, including:

- The liturgical life of the Church in all its dimensions.
- Catechesis and faith formation for all members of the ecclesial community—children, youth, and adults—as well as for those who desire to become part of it.
- The spiritual and moral formation of the educational communities in our schools, including both educators and students.
- The ongoing theological education of the clergy and of candidates for the holy priesthood.
- Philanthropic outreach open to society as a whole.
- The development of collaborative programs with missionary and philanthropic institutions throughout the world.
- Ecumenical and interreligious engagement as a means of promoting and proclaiming our Orthodox faith.
- The promotion of a wide range of cultural initiatives as expressions of the various sectors within of society in which we minister.

However, our means are limited, our resources are scarce while the current challenges are huge. This, of course, is a main obstacle but, of course, we face it as part of the exercise, the spiritual asceticism we pursue doing mission.

In this sense, the fruits of mission in South America¹ differ from the results found elsewhere, and this is natural. In our Continent we transmit our experience—our ancestral experience—to brothers and sisters who are already Christians. South America constitutes a highly varied religious and spiritual landscape, with innumerable versions of Christianity ranging from the most conservative and intransigent to the most liberal and reactionary,

¹. The results of the mission in this frame in South America, although the effort is ours, do not depend upon us. They depend upon the true “**Sower**”, who is simultaneously the **seed**, the **irrigation**, and the **harvest**.

passing through a broad spectrum of adaptations, inculturations, distortions, and ideological reinterpretations that reveal an *á la carte menu* tailored to every taste and need.

From Liberation Theology and Prosperity Theology to Queer Theology; from Santería, Candomblé, and Umbanda, South Americans express their Christianity with a unique elasticity, dynamism, and syncretism.

What does Orthodox Christianity offer within this multifaceted panorama? It offers the **living Christ**—not as a religion, an ideology, a mythology, a fetish, or an altruistic and philanthropic *modus vivendi*. And for Christ to be alive, this “**urban asceticism**” must be exercised and accomplished: **spiritual training** as the **methodology** that enables us then to go forth and share and proclaim Him as we can.

This is a continuous *imitatio Christi* which is also amphidromic; that is, while we clothe ourselves with Him and He becomes our Bridegroom, food, drink, root, path, Apostle, High Priest, father, teacher, brother, co-heir, advocate, dwelling and indweller, cornerstone and friend, we ourselves also humbly **desire** to become all these things—by His Grace—for all those who do not yet know Him in this way.

For, as Chrysostom says, He desired by every means and in every way to attract us to Himself and unite Himself with us. Thus we, His humble envoys, also desire by every means and in every way to attract and unite ourselves to all our fellow human beings, for such is His conduct and therefore ours as well.

For mission, in an ultimate analysis, is the fulfilment of Christ love for everyone.

Thank you for your patience.