



On the external mission of the Russian Orthodox Church today

The Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod, at its meeting on March 7, 2013, adopted a Concept of the Missionary Work of the Russian Orthodox Church. It states the general principles, aims and tasks of missionary service, defines the missionary responsibility of the clergy and laity and describes the forms and methods of missionary work today. The present document is devoted to a detailed elaboration of external mission as one of the forms of this work.

The term 'mission' is derived from Latin verb *mittere*, meaning 'to send', 'to foreword' and implying 'a task', 'a commission'. The apostles (literarily, 'ones who are sent away') were the first Christian missionaries who were to fulfil the commandment given them by the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Himself: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Mt. 28:19-20).

The Creed of the Church is called Apostolic because it points not only to the apostolic succession of the faith and ordinations but also to the calling of the Church to keep preaching the Christian truth. Therefore, mission is inherent in the very nature of the Church: the Christian Church is a missionary Church.

The forms and methods of missionary work changed in history to generate the notions of internal and external mission.

1. 1. The notion of external mission

The difference between internal and external mission is determined by the different addressees of the Church's missionary service and by the context in which it is carried out.

The internal mission is addressed to members of the Church including those who are baptized but not sufficiently enlightened in the Orthodox faith and who have no experience of participation in the sacramental life of the Church. It is to encourage the spiritual growth of church members. Catechization and religious education constitute an integral part of this mission.

The external mission is addressed to those who are outside the Church. These are adherents of various beliefs and bearers of various worldviews, both religious and non-religious (secular). It results in

initiation of new members into the Church and therefore creation of church communities or involvement of new converts in the life of the already existing communities.

For a long time the Church's external mission consisted in the direct preaching of the Gospel to non-Christian peoples. Following the word of the Saviour, the Church from her inception preached the Gospel to all those 'who were far away and who were near' (Eph. 2:17), and this preaching led in history to the emergence of all the existing Local Churches.

Through the missionary efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodoxy was firmly established among many tribes and peoples living in her canonical territory. Until 1917, our Church carried out her external mission among non-Christian peoples of the Russian Empire in Siberia and the Far East, as well as beyond the Russian Empire, in particular, in Japan, China, Korea and North America.

The preaching by Russian missionaries was accompanied with the work to found church communities consisting of new converts, to intensify translation work, to build churches and monasteries and to open theological schools, libraries, hospitals and craft workshops. The Japanese mission remains a vivid example as a fruit of missionary efforts of St Nicholas of Japan, which began from a single church at the Russian embassy to grow today into the Autonomous Japanese Orthodox Church which continues today the saving task of preaching in her own country.

The selfless efforts of Russian missionaries who worked for many years in China and America resulted in the establishment of the Chinese Autonomous Church, which is now reviving after hard years of the Cultural Revolution, and the Orthodox Church in America, which received autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970.

Until the 1917 Revolution, the external mission of the Russian Church was carried out in a large-scaled and well-organized way, but during the atheistic persecution of the 20th century this work became impossible in its former forms. It partly preserved its organization only in the church Diaspora, while in the Soviet Union it was reduced to individual witness by clergy and laity often accompanied with profession of the faith and martyrdom. The large-scale mission became possible for the Church only after she gained freedom.

1. 2. 'The mission of presence' and its forms

Mission as direct preaching remains the primary calling of the Church where it is possible and appropriate. Today however, along with direct mission, a special importance has been acquired by what can be called 'the mission of presence', that is, witness to the Gospel not in a direct by indirect way through the expression of Orthodox position taken by the Church in various areas of public and cultural

life in the countries in which her members live. The mission of presence is carried out in the following forms:

Informational – the propagation of the knowledge of Christian history, the Orthodox Church and cultures of Orthodox peoples, efforts to inform the public about the position taken by the Church on a wide range of issues through the mass media (printed editions, TV and radio networks, the Internet) and through the participation of the Church's representatives in public discussion.

Cultural – the participation of official representatives of the Church as well as individual clergyman and lay persons in cultural activities with the aim to bear Orthodox witness.

Social – witness to Christ through good works, social service, charity, aid to the poor and destitute, according to the Gospel's call: 'Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven'. (Mt. 5:16).

Personal – witness of Orthodox Christians to their faith, spiritual experience and Christian values by word and deed.

All the above-mentioned forms of the mission of presence are appropriate both in the countries and societies with dominant pluralism in worldviews and religions and legal principle of freedom of conscience and religion and in those which for political or other reasons do not recognize the right to freedom of conscience, religion and religious preaching. Special importance in the letter is given to individual mission which often becomes the only possible one.

The Church calls to freedom of religion and teaches her members to respect and love any person whatever religious views he or she may hold. Remaining faithful to the Gospel, the Church seeks to use such forms of the mission of presence as most appropriate in a particular political, social, cultural and religious context.

1. Witness to Orthodoxy among Christians of other confessions

The Russian Orthodox Church does not refuse to bear witness to Orthodoxy among Christians of other confessions. She has always stressed that contacts with people of other confessions through bilateral dialogues, participation in inter-Christian conferences and work in inter-Christian organizations as well as other forms of inter-Christian cooperation, serve the principal purpose referred to in the Basic Principles of Relations with Non-Orthodoxy adopted by the 2000 Jubilee Bishops' Council: "The Orthodox Church is the guardian of the Holy Tradition and beneficial gifts of the Early Church; therefore, her primary task in relations with non-Orthodoxy is to bear continued and persistent witness leading to the exposition and adoption of the truth expressed in this Holy Tradition' (3.1). The Pan-Orthodox

meeting in Thessaloniki in 1998 too resolutely underscored in its decisions that 'we [Orthodox] have no right to refuse the mission entrusted to us by our Lord Jesus Christ – the mission of bearing witness to the Truth before the non-Orthodox world'. In the cases where our partners in dialogue embark on the path of reviewing eternal and immutable norms sealed in Holy Scriptures, dialogue loses its meaning and comes to an end.

1. 4. Dialogue with people of other religions

The contemporary understanding of mission is based on the culture of dialogue. The principle of freedom of religious choice if recognized presupposes that dialogue should be the principal form of witness in relation with people of other religions. The Russian Orthodox Church has participated in interreligious dialogue in various forms and on various levels, indicating and advocating her position on socially significant issues, such as moral norms and values, peaceful coexistence, respect for human dignity, protection of the environment, human rights, etc.

The Orthodox Church makes an assessment of the belief system and religious practice of other religions on the basis her doctrinal and canonical principles. With regard to those who adhere to these religions or secular ideologies, her attitude is respect and love. As St Innocent the Metropolitan of Moscow, a Russian missionary, wrote, 'if a preacher has no love in himself... towards those who he preaches to, then the best and most eloquent exposition of the doctrine may remain useless, for it is love alone that creates' [1].

It is this approach that helps our Church, using dialogue with people of other religions and worldviews, to promote the overcoming of conflicts and strengthening of solidarity among people.

'In today's world in which the globalization processes, social stratification and intensive mass migrations are accompanied with growing violence, terroristic extremism and ethnic- confessional tension, witness and proclamation of a possibility for reconciliation among people of different ethnic origins, ages and social groups should become one of the key contents of the Orthodox mission. The mission of reconciliation should help people realize the possibility and need to build peace on various levels of individual, family and social life in accordance with the apostolic call: 'Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord' (Heb. 12:14) [2].

1. 5. Mission in the work of the Russian Orthodox Church's parishes abroad

The Russian Orthodox Church's parishes outside her canonical boundaries were originally established to take care of the compatriots who found themselves far from their homeland, but many of these parishes have become a spiritual home also for native people who have embraced Orthodoxy.

The Russian Orthodox Church strictly observes the norms of canon law and does not carry out her own mission in the canonical territories of other Local Orthodox Churches, in accordance with the canon: The **bishops** of every nation may do those things only which concern his own parish and the country places which belong to it' (Ap. 34). She can participate in the missionary work of a Local Church only on her invitation.

In countries where Christianity is a part of the national culture and has formed the identity of the people, the Russian Orthodox Church's parishes in their witness to Orthodoxy among local people do not use the methods which, in the contemporary context, are associated with proselytism [3]. Our Church requires that the same attitude be shown by non-Orthodox religious organizations acting in the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate. At the same time, the Church is open to all who seek to grasp the Truth of the Orthodox faith in its fullness; therefore, in the states observing the principle of freedom of conscience, a move to Orthodoxy made by an individual who formerly adhered to other religious or non-religious beliefs is a result of his or her free personal choice.

In countries where Christianity is a minority religion, Orthodoxy is preached through involving Orthodox Christians in charity, since the language of good works is understood by people of all ethnic backgrounds, religions and cultures. The preaching of the gospel of Christ is most convincing when a non-Orthodox person sees in the work of a missionary the fulfilment of gospel's commandments.

Conducive to the church initiation of locals are also the following: the preaching of the Gospel and celebration of divine services in vernaculars; training of clergy and missionaries from among the local population; the Church's reception of the culture of a people she seeks to enlighten through living preaching and embodiment of Orthodox ideals in the people's cultures and customs; consecration of the national features which allow peoples, while preserving their own culture, self-respect and self-identification, to make their own unique contribution to the worship of God, while remaining in harmonious unity with the fullness of the Church; creation of conditions for active involvement of new converts from among the local population in parish life for their initiation to the Church [4].

1. 6. Areas for developing the external mission of the Russian Orthodox Church

As the consequences of the persecution era are overcome, the Russian Orthodox Church receives ever more opportunities for broadening her external mission. The intensification of her external mission can take place in several areas.

Theory:

Analysing the pre-revolutionary experience of preaching to non-Christians and its re-thinking as applied to today's realities;

Studying the missionary experience of other Local Orthodox Churches and non-Orthodox missionaries;

Publishing practical aids on mission among non-Christians; involving the Russian Orthodox Church's clergy and laity in the task of external mission and their training.

Practical preaching among non-Christians:

Translating Orthodox literature as well as audio- and video-materials into the languages of peoples of non-Christian beliefs who live in the countries of the canonical responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church;

Implementing the proposals in the Russian Orthodox Church's Concept of Missionary Work – celebrating divine services in vernaculars, training clergy and laity from among the local population [5].

Missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church's parishes in traditionally Orthodox countries:

Creating conditions in parishes for them to be open to non-Orthodox and non-Christians who are interested in Orthodoxy;

Providing churches and monasteries popular among non-Christian tourists with information materials about Orthodoxy in their native tongue and information about where they can learn more about the spiritual heritage of the Orthodox Church.

Missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church's parishes in far-abroad countries:

Using vernaculars in the liturgy;

Translating and publishing Orthodox literature in vernacular;

Conducting regular talk in vernacular about Orthodoxy and the patristic understanding of Holy Scripture;

Broadening the social and educational service of parishes, such as children's clubs, social support groups, educational courses for adults, etc., intended for local people;

Using local mass media to introduce the local population to Orthodoxy and parish work (lectures to

external audiences, Orthodox photo-exhibitions, presentation of new editions, tours of churches, etc.);

Selecting and training candidates for priesthood and catechetical missionaries from among local people and integrating them subsequently in parish life.

In a changing world, the forms of the Church's external mission change as well, but the Christian witness itself and the preaching of Christ to those who have not heard of Him is always an invariable task of the Church.

[1] St Innocent of Moscow. Without God's help nobody can become a true disciple of Jesus Christ. From the homily by St. Innocent the Metropolitan of Moscow to a priest assigned to convert non-Orthodox people and instruct them in the Christian faith // Tserkovno-istoricheskiy vestnik, № 8, 2001.

[2] The Russian Orthodox Church's Concept of Missionary Work (2,2).

[3] 'Proselytism' in the contemporary Christian context is not synonymous to the word 'mission'. Proselytism, unlike mission, has a negative meaning, since it implies purposeful efforts to convert other Christians to one's own confession through coercive means. Among them economic and political influence, use of people's miserable situation in which they are offered medical and humanitarian aid, psychological impact as well disdain for other confessions. Proselytism also means organized mission among those who traditionally and culturally belong to the local Christian community.

[4] The Russian Orthodox Church's Concept of Missionary Work (2, 1).

[5] Ibid.

Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/52332/>