

REVIEW

Sorin Lungoci, “Hristos împărtășit copiilor”. *Rediviva catehizării parohiale: context, conținut, strategii didactice [Christ to the Children. The Revival of Parish Catechesis: Context, Content, Didactic Strategies]*, Publishing house: Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj Napoca, 2020, 365 p.

The topical nature of this work derives from two factors of equal importance and bearing: on the one hand, it is the first exploration of an utterly novel project in the Orthodox world, which is still underway in various forms, hence the dynamic character of the research; on the other hand, it deals with a topic of paramount importance in the life of the Orthodox Church today, i.e. catechesis or catechumenal training, which gives this work a pragmatic dimension. The author constructs it, patiently and diligently, as a doctoral thesis, having meticulously collected first-hand documents over the 12 years of research, while also being involved in implementing the project at country level and establishing in his own parish a space conducive to the formation of Orthodox catechumenal awareness. The project itself is the outcome of cooperation between World Vision International and the Romanian Patriarchate, having been launched in 2005 and becoming in 2008 a national project of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC). In the preface to the book, Dr. Vasile Gordon, the thesis supervisor, recommends it as an effective work tool that should not be missing from the bookshelves of parish priests, religion

teachers in schools and university faculty, thanks to its valuable theoretical documentation, case studies and examples of good practice.

From the very first pages, it is highlighted that the Church is an institution with an educational and not only liturgical calling. The project could not have been more appropriate in this regard, as it was prompted partly by the sinuous path of religious education classes in public education. In fact, while these classes were mandatory, they had failed to achieve the expected results in terms of shaping children's Christian characters, for reasons that are easy to understand: the inclusion of religion in an atheist education system, which had systematically promoted scientific materialism for more than fifty years, could not be a simple undertaking; the status and outcomes of religious education depended to a large extent on the capacity of decision-makers (i.e. school board inspectors and school administrators) to grasp the importance of religion and also on the reluctance of fellow teachers. Organised as a theoretical-informative subject, based on methodological and scientific principles in the school system, “religion” had become

just one among other subjects, without any practical relevance in children's lives. For these reasons, the Orthodox Church launched and welcomed the opportunity to complete and enrich the content of religion textbooks and workbooks approved by the Ministry of Education with the materials and activities provided by the project, to be used throughout its ecclesiastical structures. As the author contends, religious education and group catechetical training needed to be enhanced by a Christocentric and pneumatized catechesis, aiming for children to be filled with the Holy Spirit (p. 14).

The project timeline, presented in Chapter I, takes us back to the 1990s, when, in the United States, World Vision and WORDirect worked in partnership to publish a set of introductory resources to the biblical text ("Youth Bible Curriculum"), deployed as part of the "Christ to the Children" project. The project would be extended to Russia and other Orthodox countries, thanks to the dedication of Dr. Constance Tarasar and Fr. John Matusiak. In Romania, the project first arrived in the year 2000, when the resources, drawn from Gospel Light Worldwide publishing house, were published as an 'Orthodox Catechesis Textbook' by the Oastea Domnului organisation in Sibiu. Since 2005, through the involvement of the Holy Synod of the ROC, the project has been deployed and recommended at diocesan level. More specifically, the project would include a publishing path, i.e. translation and publication of appropriate catechetical guides by age groups and a practical path focused on the training of trainers and catechesis activities with children in parishes (contests, camps, catechetical programs, social activities, etc). Soon after

the project was adopted at Patriarchate level, the need for a logistical dimension emerged, specifically to create in each diocese, and afterwards at deanery and even parish level, a catechesis office, that would coordinate the parish catechesis work. On the theoretical level, the project strategy and the assessment of activities are organised at an annual convention, "Christ to the children", which has reached its 12th edition and is attended by representatives of the Patriarchate and the dioceses in the country and of World Vision Romania, the project partner. Chapter II of the book provides a comparative overview of the status of the project in other Orthodox countries, namely Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Lebanon and Russia, which is certainly necessary in order to analyse objectively whether the initiative has been opportune. The subsequent a chapter deals with the church legislation and the decisions of the Holy Synod of the ROC on the catechetical program and each edition of the convention, beginning with 2008, with the resolutions, decisions, challenges and difficulties encountered during each year of implementation, as well as with the themes of annual contests, in light of the decision of the Holy Synod to devote each year to a different topic in the history or life of the Church, to be explored, researched and celebrated in homage or commemoration.

Chapter IV provides an in-depth analysis of the logistical resources underpinning the curriculum proposed by age categories: biblical themes, catechetical guides, the catechetical compendium, the catechetical diary, in addition to a demonstrative catechesis: *A father seeks to heal his daughter*. With the fifth chapter we enter the applicative part

of the thesis, which shares the practical principles based on which the project is run at parish level. The following chapter expands on the strategies for the application and implementation of the project in parishes. The didactic principles and the methods of teaching/putting into practice the acquired knowledge are drawn from the literature specific to preparing lesson plans and teacher promotion theses. Nevertheless, certain challenges specific to this activity emerge, as it demands from catechists more dedication, passion for their work, skills and creativity, when compared to the religious class, where things are clear, organised and arranged according to strict criteria, determined by recognised institutional discipline. The first challenge is the lack of a dedicated space within the parish equipped for catechetical activities. The church building would be the last option, although it is generally the only option. The catechist trainer must look for, improvise or adapt an already existing space: a celebration house, a cultural centre, a multifunctional space, a closed-down school, an abandoned house and so on. Of course, increasingly in recent years, multipurpose spaces have been built (including for school activities). The second obstacle relates to the participation in the project, by age groups, of the children and young people it is meant for, as well as the engagement of the whole community of parents and volunteers, guardians, teachers or local institutions, and of as many volunteers as possible. Cooperation with the priest and the religion teacher is no less important, as they are essential factors in the effective implementation of the project at the local community level. The role of the priest is crucial, his enthusiasm and motivation are decisive: no one and nothing can replace

the contribution of the shepherd of souls, who has all the authority and competence to facilitate and to proclaim the word of God to the minds and souls of the faithful.

The second part of the paper is devoted to the practical results and activities derived from the project “Christ to the children”, namely: models of parish training and catechesis centres; examples of good practice; projects inspired by the experience and intended to reiterate, in children’s lives, the importance faith, the role of the school, the opportunity of education and the importance of completing all the cycles in the Romanian education system, so as to reduce as much as possible the dropout rate, through projects such as “Choose school” or “The road to salvation”, two subsequent projects still in progress with notable results. The reports prepared and delivered at the annual conventions or for the assessment of projects indicate that the projects have sparked great interest among a large number of children and not only: over 50,000 children have benefitted and over 6,000 adults have been involved in the training for faith process.

The thesis is presented to the reader, on the one hand, as a work tool for religious training in the Orthodox world, which all too often asserts itself as a space of liturgical formalism, hierarchical control, organisational patriarchalism and ascetic excess, and on the other hand as a documentary book, from a historical perspective, as it collects facts and documents from an area of work of the Romanian Orthodox Church that has been hardly visible until now: the requirement to educate the faithful in the spirit of faith, according to the principle of Tertullian, “Christian are made, not born”.

Between the lines we discover that the author proposes certain catechesis and evangelisation practices which are not specifically Orthodox, yet which foster the initiation of a special relationship with God, such as the suggestion that each child should say a personal prayer (not bound by the formal model) reflecting their own desires and their experience in the relationship with God (p. 189) or the recommendation that the local hierarch be an integral part of the catechesis program (p. 326). Accordingly, work with young people would have a prominent practical component, a natural manifestation, a flexible structure, acting as a preamble to embracing the Orthodox faith in all its complexity in adult life. If we were to systematise them, the objectives of the program would be: to create convictions of Christian life, both by education and by personal example; to prepare all the members of the Church to believe in and to proclaim the faith in all the ways and by all the means at their disposal; to show that the life in faith means knowing the will of God, which one can achieve by bible study and exegesis, by prayer, kindness, joy, patience, perseverance, devotion, and other gifts of the Holy Spirit; to foster the conviction that Christian living is a personal process that requires authentic and progressive living, and the effort to pass on spiritual values from one person to another; to develop an attitude to life in which the notion of obligation to the Church or to God must disappear (obligation has no biblical support; Christ never conditions the presence or work of God in one's life on the obligation to perform certain mandatory gestures or acts).

The contemporary secularisation of the faith environment is a negative vector,

since it proposes the "biological world" instead of the "theological world", anthropocentrism instead of Christocentrism, hedonism instead of being filled with the spirit, human adaptation to the world, and its use for the sake of materialism and immediacy. A secular society eliminates the religious, God and the Church, isolates them exclusively within the private sphere, in the name of a false neutrality; it views religion as retrograde, an institution belonging to a bygone era, one that is useless today, no matter how beneficial it might have been in the past. It is, simply put, another age in human history, in which classical religion is replaced by science as religion, a world of the techno-god. Beginning with the French "Enlightenment", secularism became state policy in many parts of the world, inaugurating the separation between religion and culture, society and community. It is a first form of atheist militancy, which confines the religious to the sphere of private concerns, cuts the affective roots of the Eucharistic man, breaks ties with the past and transforms man into an individual easily manipulated by false ideologies and harmful life models. Herein lies the danger of secularism, an obviously insidious, aspiritual and non-religious process. Therefore, secularism requires a response from the Church, an adaptation of its catechumenal mission, in order to continue the work of preaching and deepening the knowledge of the Gospel of Christ, the purpose for which it was founded by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Secularisation cannot be overcome by overt opposition, but by the direct and effective work of catechetical education of the "people of God", by infusing the main elements of faith that can sustain the human person in

the face of the aggression from equalising nothingness. Missionary renewal and deeper catechesis are requirements of ecclesial responsibility, in the process of preparing the creature of light, i.e., of transforming, of changing man and, through him, the society, no matter how hostile it may be to the Christian faith. The clash with secularisation carries on discreetly, through authentic proclamation and responsible living of the true faith, through a common effort to enlighten the human mind, guiding the community of those who believe and will believe, changing it and transforming it into the image of Adam in paradise, i.e. the one compatible with the Creator.

The “Christ to the children” program and the present thesis exploring it can serve as a good parish guide for any priest seeking to embark on the program of renewing the community that he is entrusted to lead to the heavenly kingdom.

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