

Church History – an Anamnestic, Dialogical and Healing Encounter with the Past

The course of the teaching and scientific activity we have carried out so far has been set through the establishing of several research projects in which we participated from various positions, either as a member of the research team, as project coordinator or as project manager.

We have further explored the area of research with regard to the church life of Orthodox Romanians in North America. Also, as a result of being engaged in a series of scientific and research structures, and after opening up to some interesting training opportunities, we have approached new areas of research, such as ecumenical relations and historical demography.

From a methodological point of view, we have mainly focused on the research of archival material, on the critical editing of documents, especially correspondence, as well as on historiographic analysis and interpretation of findings. We also consider that the research fellowships we have spent in various archives and libraries in the country and abroad were crucial for the innovative results of our research. The results of our research have been validated both by their acknowledgement and entrance in the subsequent historiographical research referencing system, as well as by submitting and gaining funding programmes for editorial projects or through the prizes awarded by church or university structures, or by other organizations funding scientific activity.

The main lines of research I propose to investigate in this habilitation thesis are the American Christianity, the Romanian Orthodoxy and the Romanian people living in North America, ecclesiastical institutions, confessional identities, ecumenical realities and historical demography. The teaching and scientific activity we have carried out so far has been guided by our genuine aspiration of advocating for an **in-depth knowledge and understanding of church history and of the spiritual dimension** of this knowledge, since we only know ourselves in and through history. It is the mirror that shows the shape of our image today and helps us anticipate our future image. Moreover, history provides us with knowledge about the world around us, but also with self-knowledge, the prospect of identity search and identity assertion.

From this perspective, history is seen as a tool of acquiring knowledge by calling upon our ancestors' life experience in the world. Therefore, our appeal to history stands for an anamnestic encounter with the past. The healing potential of history, as well as its spiritual dimension are clearly apprehended by Palladius, who believes that by appealing to memory/history one can heal/transform a person's life, and this transformation stemming from knowledge becomes a prerequisite for the spiritual healing of society.

The dialogue with the past is a clear evidence of recovery and a prerequisite for a healthy dialogue with the present. In this respect, when referring to the contemporary inter-religious dialogue, Leonard Swidler proposes a three-dimensional dialoguing model, namely a dialogue between our minds, our hands and our hearts. The result could be a common vision of the present and the future, common actions and obviously, more solidarity and less resentment.

A substantial part of the books, studies, and articles we have published over time is based on correspondence. We have always supported the documentary relevance of

letters/documents, be it patristic letters, the correspondence between the theologians of Tübingen and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople, the epistolary corpus of Metropolitan Bishop Andrei Şaguna, or the correspondence of the Orthodox Romanians in America with the Church bodies in the country. In order to illustrate the value of the epistolary corpora in the context of this work, we chose to analyse the letters of Saint Basil the Great.

The research on **American Christianity** has given us the opportunity to make an insight into the history of American Christianity during the colonial period, thus accompanying the missionaries who spread the eternal values of the Holy Gospel in the wilderness of the vast North American continent and the leaders of the religious communities who sought religious freedom within these wild lands, in a virtual journey of reverence and remembrance.

Orthodoxy in America is a subject that caught our particular attention, hence our close interest in the matter already since we have pursued our PhD studies. Moreover, after publishing the research findings in several languages such as Romanian, English and German, our studies are currently used as a reference in the domain, at national and European level, as well as in the Orthodox theological environment in America. Our studies aim to investigate the history of the Orthodox communities in America, to identify and follow the missionary thread of the Orthodox presence in the North American area, to question the ecclesiological, canonical, liturgical, social and ethnic elements that define the Orthodox institutional existence in this context and to illustrate the resulting jurisdictional mosaic of prevalence of the ethnic logic to the detriment of the ecclesiological one.

The church and spiritual life of Romanians who emigrated to North America is the central research theme in my scientific and academic work. We have deepened and advanced this particular subject when pursuing our PhD studies, at a doctoral level and continued the research with the view to edit a series of documentary studies that would reveal the complexity and dynamics of the ecclesial life of emigrants.

To achieve the objective of our research, we have explored more than 20 archive funds containing documents relating to the political, social, economic, and especially, the religious life of Orthodox Romanians in America. During our extensive research inquiries, we have identified more than 10,000 pages of relevant documents that have been and will be further documented. In the conviction that church history is an anamnestic, dialogical and healing encounter with the past, we also approached the controversial aspects of the relations of the Orthodox Romanians in America with the Orthodox Church in the country.

Another major direction of research, illustrated through important achievements, is the **history of ecclesiastical institutions in Transylvania**. The research have been structured along two lines: the ecclesiastical legislation and the correspondence of Saint hierarch Andrei Saguna, the Metropolitan Bishop of Transylvania on the one hand, and on the other hand, from a methodological point of view, our research focused on two other levels: the publishing of documentary sources and the publication of studies meant to reveal, interpret and capitalize historiographically the sources we have previously identified.

Given the scale and complexity of our research, the approach we have adopted is long-lasting and cannot be assumed by one person only. Therefore, along our academic and scientific activity, we have been part of and have established successful research teams, being thus able to achieve significant results (8 volumes and 11 thorough studies).

In the realm of contemporary historical research, from a secular and an ecclesiastical perspective, there has been a constant concern over the past years for the defining of a sense of ethnic and confessional identity. This fact is illustrated by the large number of studies and works on the self-image and the image of others or the reality of otherness.

Among the fields that provided significant references from historiographical areas to the study of otherness, is the sphere of study comprising **inter-confessional relations**. The study of two or sometimes multiple ecclesial identities also led to an analysis of reciprocal images, thus allowing us to detect specific identity features that guarantee a better self-definition and self-reference, for a better relation to oneself and to others, in the space of alterity. We have also explored this area of research that mainly focused on examining studies with regard to the outlining of Christian identity in the primary church, and especially to various approaches to confessionalization in the Reformation period.

Ecumenism is nowadays one of the most debated subjects within the church environment. We considered that there is a strong need for a deeper insight both into the history of the ecumenical movement and of the constant commitment of the Orthodox Church in this effort of mutual knowledge and understanding, but there is also an expressed need for a permanent and systematic effort from the great Orthodox theologians participating in the ecumenical dialogue of further advancing their theological positions on ecumenism and their advocating for a true spirit of openness to genuine dialogue among Churches, as well as for a proper ecumenical education.

In the view of the above considerations, we have been so far able to open two lines of research. The first refers to the need to bring the Orthodox testimony and heritage into the ecumenical world. In order to achieve this goal, we chose as a case study the vision promoted by the Orthodox theologian John Meyendorf. The second line of research we decided to focus on highlights the need for a proper ecumenical education within the theological academic area, as a fundamental premise of understanding the importance of ecumenical dialogue.

Historical demography is a rather more recent area of interest to us. The researches we have initiated in this direction have an important interdisciplinary dimension, but at the same time, they can become valuable sources for the development of a series of pastoral and missionary strategies that should be strongly rooted in the current demographic realities of our world. Many demographic and interdisciplinary studies have already shown that we are facing major changes and challenges with regard to the demographic dynamics of the world population, which also brings significant changes in the religious structure of the population at a global level.

From a demographic point of view, the key factors of change are the constant declining in the fertility rate, the rising in life expectancy, the age structure of the population, changes in religious affiliation and migration. In this respect, we think that this demographic data provided by specialized institutions should also benefit from an ecclesial perspective in the treatment and interpretation of actual facts, in order to analyse the demographic developments occurring at a global level and to transfer the predictions based of such analysis to the mission strategy area.

Throughout this thesis, we have tried to present and review the areas of scientific interest and the expertise we have gained so far. As it can be easily noticed, these historiographical areas are widely open to new approaches in research and investigation.

After undertaking such a long-term and extensive research of various historical and interdisciplinary sources with regard to our domains of interest, we strongly believe in the anamnestic, dialectical and healing dimension of history. We also firmly believe that the subjects we have addressed cannot be exhausted by the research activity carried out by one person only. In fact, teamwork is a prerequisite for continuing the research of some of these research topics. One of our constant concerns during our scientific and academic work was not only to link our research to the national and international trends, but also to integrate the results of our heuristic efforts into the international historiographical flow.

On the other hand, the rules of contemporary ecumenical and inter-confessional dialogue and the principles of coexistence in a multi-confessional and multi-religious environment require both knowledge and self-knowledge. Today, knowledge and understanding of one's partner's history and of one's own history, as well as acknowledging the identity of one's peers, along with asserting one's own identity are clear prerequisites for a genuine and open dialogue.