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Witness through holiness of life. A quick look into the biography of a concept

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Abstract

“Witness through holiness of life” is a phrase often used in theological texts. This study analyses the origin of this concept and identifies a series of reference points in its intellectual biography in Romanian theology (with special emphasis on the developments brought about by mission theologians from Cluj-Napoca). The two final sections try to enlarge upon the reflection on the witness through the holiness of life by considering the phrase in a biblical and spiritual context.

Keywords: holiness of life, implicit mission, orthodox mission, mission theology, effective mission, missiology

“WITNESS THROUGH HOLINESS OF LIFE” is a phrase often used in theological texts. In this study we will analyse the origin of this concept and we will identify a series of reference points in its intellectual biography in Romanian theology (with special emphasis on the developments brought about by mission theologians from Cluj-Napoca); in the final section we will try to enlarge upon our reflection on the witness through the holiness of life by considering the phrase in a spiritual context.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae

The phrase “witness through holiness of life” begins its career in Romanian theology with the publication of a text in English by father Dumitru Stăniloae entitled *Witness Through “Holiness” of Life*. It originally appeared in 1978 but it gained notoriety once it was included in the volume *Martyria/Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today* edited by father Ion Bria and pub-

lished in Geneva in 1980¹. The Romanian theologian begins his article with a surgically precise diagnosis of his contemporary society, acknowledging the partial failure of the Christian mission; at the same time, employing a statement by Frances Colte, a Melchite Catholic living in America, he highlights the potential the Orthodox Church has to accommodate the needs and pursuits of the western world.

Father Stăniloae's thinking is profoundly influenced by the ascetic writings and what he puts forward is that the whole Church should take ownership of its past failures:

The areas of human society that have become spiritually estranged from the Church and thus lost any understanding of Christian faith are very extensive. The degree to which they are spiritually removed or do not understand the faith varies from a sort of innocent misunderstanding – related to mental indifference – to open hostility. In respect of them the Church must ask itself what are the causes of such a situation and particularly whether among them there are not some whose origin lies in the Church's behaviour in the past. How can it change this behaviour and how, in each area, can it either end or reduce this estrangement?²

Speaking on “the outer mission” carried out among those who have no knowledge of Christianity he remarks that:

[...] the Church must ask why it is that in the second millennium it has not been able to win the hearts of such people, except in a fragmentary way or for short periods of time. One cannot fail to notice in these situations that people have hardened their hearts to Christianity in a way that non-Christians in the first millennium did not.³

The main element in father Stăniloae's approach is a critical solidarity with the way in which mission had been previously carried out and he proposes a careful analysis of both this and the constantly changing social context. The increasingly central role of technology and the relentless concern to satisfy material needs and pleasures has led to the drop in the interest for spirituality. But within this framework, father Dumitru Stăniloae identifies the return of religion in society under different guises: “astrology, witchcraft, eastern religions, Pentecostal glossolalia”⁴, and this is where the need

¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Witness through «Holiness» of Life”, in Ion Bria (ed.), *Martyria/Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, WCC, Geneva.

² Dumitru Stăniloae, “Witness Through «Holiness» of Life”, 45.

³ Stăniloae, 45.

⁴ Stăniloae, 46.

to articulate a clearer message of the Eastern, Orthodox Christianity comes from, because it could provide the world with a robust answer.

Father Stăniloae has a critical view of the mission of the Church and states that it “cannot have great and lasting effect if it is done in an institutional way that seeks to enlarge the authoritarian power of the Church”⁵. Another possible failure regards the individualistic mission, one which combines will for power, pride, and personal views with the truth of the Gospel. Both missionary forms show the light of Christ in a manner contaminated by sin. In order to be able to avoid these potential failures, the Christian missionary must have certain qualities. Talking about them father Stăniloae drafts a portrait of the missionary who must himself be crucified, who must overcome the inventiveness of his personal reasoning and the arguments of his group, as well the thirst for power of his ecclesial institution. “Mission is effective only when the power of the Holy Spirit radiates from the one who preaches Christ. This power purifies him so that the Holy Spirit can shine unhindered through his word which will then be the pure and powerful confirmation of the Spirit that is in him”⁶.

The Christian mission was fully carried out by the saints and martyrs who relinquished their whole being in order to bear witness to Christ’s Truth by the power of His Spirit. Every church began with a saint or several saints who gave their lives “and not just the talent of their words, to make known to others the wholeness of the Christ” they had experienced: even though they were “supported by organizations and financial resources, there was in (their) preaching no mixture of personal, group or institutional pride”⁷. Saint Apostle Paul outlined the image of the effective missionary in just a few words: “And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (I Cor 2, 4-5). He himself embodied the type of missionary he suggested⁸.

For father Dumitru Stăniloae it is self-evident that only saints and martyrs are able to bring people to Christ. The values of Orthodoxy are reflected in the belief that holiness is possible, and in the fact that it sees the Church as a communion in Christ, not as an institution. These values are still alive today and they can be experienced chiefly in the Holy Liturgy and the Sacraments of the Church. For these values to become visible and for the Church to be truly missionary, it must fulfil three requirements:

1. It must “be open to the uncreated power of God”
2. It must believe that with the help of God’s power we may “live a life of sacrifice and holiness”

⁵ Stăniloae, 47.

⁶ Stăniloae, 47.

⁷ Stăniloae, 48.

⁸ Stăniloae, 48.

3. It must “fully actualize the character of the Church as communion”⁹.

The drastic conclusion of father Stăniloae is the following: “if we do not seek this experience of divine uncreated power, and through it holiness and the total gift of self, it is useless to hold conferences on mission and to develop bureaucratic plans for mission. We will continue to lose souls that the Church now has. [...] Orthodoxy must go beyond its theoretical anthropology to become, like a saint, involved in the specific human relationships found in the complicated circumstances of our daily lives”¹⁰. In this context, his brief text ends with a strikingly rational question: “According to the Holy Fathers the “wonderful deeds” of God that Christians must make known to the world are qualities of their holiness, which show the power of the Spirit of Christ. How can non-Christians receive our faith if they do not see that we are better than they are?”¹¹

This text of father Stăniloae has enjoyed an illustrious reception as it became an essential work of reference for all those interested in the topic of the witness through holiness of life¹² as an essential part of the Orthodox mission.

Father Ion Bria and the theologians from Cluj-Napoca

When talking about Romanian missionary theology and implicitly the topic of the witness through holiness of life, an indispensable reference is father Ion Bria, who in 1982 published a *Course of Orthodox Missionary Practice and Theology*¹³. In it father Bria identifies 12 requirements of the Church’s mission, one of which is “the quality of the Christians’ lives”¹⁴. Father Bria’s starting point is a simile from the Epistle to Diognetus¹⁵ (VI,

⁹ Stăniloae, 49.

¹⁰ Stăniloae, 50.

¹¹ Stăniloae, 51.

¹² See for example: Valer Bel, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană 2, Exigențe* [The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World 2. Exigences], (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2002); Aurel Pavel, “Misiune prin sfințenia vieții în opera Părintelui Profesor Ion Bria” [Mission Through the Holiness of Life in the Work of Fr. Prof. Ion Bria], in *Relevanța operei Părintelui Profesor Ion Bria pentru viața bisericească și socială actuală. Direcții noi de cercetare în domeniul doctrinei, misiunii și unității Bisericii* [The Importance of the Work of Fr. Prof. Ion Bria for the Contemporary Social and Church Life], ed. Nicolae Moșoiu (Sibiu: Editura Universității Lucian Blaga, n.d.), 300–308; Cristian Sonea, *Paradigme misionare: de la Edinburgh la Sinodul din Creta* [Missionary Paradigms: from Edinburgh to the Synod of Crete], (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017).

¹³ Ion Bria, *Curs de Teologie și practică misionară ortodoxă* [Course of Orthodox Missionary Theology and Practice], (Geneva, 1982).

¹⁴ Bria, 52.

¹⁵ Clayton N. Jefford, ed., *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text and Commentary*, Oxford Apostolic Fathers (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 147.

1): “what the soul is in the body, that is what Christians in the world”. Christianity brings a new way of living, which has the power to revolutionize the old world. Father Bria identifies two main characteristics defining it:

1. This “new life” can only be lived in the communion of the Church, as members of the Body of Christ. The communion is realised and maintained by the Eucharist, as a joint action of the clergy and the believers.¹⁶

The Church exists only through the coordination and the harmony of the different members in a unique service (Rom. 12, 6; I Cor. 12, 4). The personal life of the Christian is influenced by and influences the life of the body. Each member can sense how the other lives and takes it upon himself to bear their burdens: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6, 2). For God fashioned the body so “that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another” (I Cor. 12, 25)¹⁷.

2. The faith of the Christians must be expressed in an authentic spirituality.

The essential element of Christian piety is not the way, the technique or the “how”, but rather the substance and quality of this life: they are at the core of the Christian identity. Therefore, the credibility of spirituality stems from the quality of the person.¹⁸

What sets Christians apart is their spirituality, which to many may seem a “scandal” because it does not comply with the ethics of the majority or the society. They respect the body’s spirituality with its own virtues: forgiving those who hate us, voluntary poverty, non-violence. However, by this “new way of life” Christians do not preach alienation from the social community in which they live. On the contrary, they are present in and solidary with the society they live in, fully aware that a little leaven will leaven the whole dough (Luke 13, 21)¹⁹.

Father Valer Bel structures his missionary theology through a dialogue with father Ion Bria’s theology (although this may not be explicitly mentioned each time). In the second volume of his book “The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World”, dedicated to the mission’s requirements, father Bel also identifies twelve distinctive elements of the mission,

¹⁶ Bria, *Curs de teologie și practică misionară ortodoxă* [Course of Orthodox Missionary Theology and Practice], 53.

¹⁷ Bria, 54.

¹⁸ Bria, 54.

¹⁹ Bria, 55.

one of which is “The Witness through Holiness of Life”²⁰. His reflection starts from the Saviour’s words in the Gospel of Matthew: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5, 16). “A life lived in the spirit of the Gospel is one of the most important means of Christian mission, because through the personal meeting with God and through living in the divine love, Christians become the salt of the earth and the light of the world and they help people find the true meaning and fulfilment of their lives in Christ”²¹. The quality of the Christians’ lives is essential for an effective Christian mission. Christian life has three essential coordinates: a witnessing community, an authentic spirituality, and an eschatological expectation²². In such a context, the witness given by the saints is what makes the mission of the Church effective.

The mission is especially effective when the power of the Holy Spirit radiates from the person preaching Christ. This light shines unencumbered from his words, as a confirmation of the Holy Spirit’s action in and through him. This happens only when the one preaching embodies the truth of Christ in his own life [...]. The capacity of the missionary and of the priest depends not only on their theological and pedagogical qualities, but also on their personal holiness²³.

The topic of the witness through holiness of life is also among the interests of father Cristian Sonea, for whom the holiness of one’s life is also a requirement of the Christian mission²⁴. Within the context of an analysis of father Stăniloae’s vision of the witness through holiness of life, set in the wider framework of the great Romanian theologian’s thinking, father Sonea finds a forte of Orthodox Christianity: *the universally personalistic character of the saints’ witness*. More precisely, we can talk about a personalistic spirituality in which the action of God’s grace is emphasised, a spirituality that has a martyrial and ascetic dimension and one in which the Church is a real communion in Jesus Christ (the corrective aspect keeping in check the institutional dimension of the Church)²⁵.

The witness through holiness of life also concerns father Grigore Dinu Moş, when he writes about the “Spiritual Dimension of the Mission”²⁶. In

²⁰ Bel, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană 2, Exigențe* [The Mission of the Church in the Contemporary World 2. Exigences], 181–96.

²¹ Bel, 181.

²² Bel, 186.

²³ Bel, 195–96.

²⁴ Sonea, *Paradigme misionare* [Missionary Paradigms], 101–14.

²⁵ Sonea, 105.

²⁶ Grigore Dinu Moş, “Dimensiunea duhovnicească a misiunii” [The Spiritual Dimension of Mission], in *Misiunea Bisericii în Sfânta Scriptură și în istorie* [The Mission of the Church in Bible and History], (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2006), 98–122.

this text (rich in references from the Philokalia and the writings of contemporary saints and spiritual fathers) he states that “the mission of each Christian begins with themselves, with them personally taking on the work of their salvation, by striving to sanctify their own life”²⁷ because “whoever has not acquired the Holy Spirit by means of a holy life, does not preach Christ, but themselves and their own state of passion, even if their words comply formally and intellectually with the Revelation”²⁸.

Such a mission is mainly implicit: “the only effective mission is the secretive, quiet one, operated when a holy life and prayer irradiate”²⁹ the lives of others.

The Paradigm of the witness through holiness found in the New Testament

The witness through holiness of life as an essential missionary dimension, or as a form in which word and image meet, is strongly supported by the New Testament. Jesus Christ, Son of God incarnate, is the Word of God, as it is stated in the well-known Prologue of the Gospel according to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1, 1-3). At the same time, Saint Apostle Paul mentions another quality of the Son in his Epistle to the Colossians, namely that He is the Image of the Father: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1, 15-16). Man, “created in the image of the One who is the Word and the Image of the Father, is in his turn word and image, and for his witness to be authentic, the words must express the internal reality of the person speaking, they must be born out of an authentic experience of the reality being preached. If not, words remain mere words and never transcend their sounds (albeit articulated), remaining the plain superficial shells of a far-away reality”³⁰. Therefore, the effectiveness of preaching is also determined by the degree in which the person preaching the Word of God has succeeded in embodying the message of the Gospel in their own biography and thus in becoming a living image, an icon of their preaching.

²⁷ Moș, 100.

²⁸ Moș, 100.

²⁹ Moș, 101.

³⁰ Paul Siladi, *Cuvânt și imagine. Fundamente teoretice pentru o teologie a comunicării* [Word and Image. Theoretical Bases for a Theology of Communication], (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2019), 486–87.

In the New Testament there are clear references to missionary work, impetuses to open, explicit mission. The best known of them are Christ's words at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, the so-called "Great Commission": "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen" (Mt. 28, 19-20).

Alongside such clear and open calls to engage in missionary work, we have a whole series of recommendations for what could be called an "implicit mission" or a witness through holiness of life. In the Gospel of John, the Lord says of Himself: "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8, 12). Those who follow Him become bearers of light and shine a light in their turn: "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5, 14-16).

The model offered by Christ Himself is the one of a preacher whose words are fulfilled in Himself first of all: "learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt. 11, 29). Both Saint Apostle Peter and Saint Apostle Paul talk about an implicit mission and about how simply observing the commandments irradiates a light all around: "that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2, 15). Saint Peter in his turn writes the following: "having your conduct honourable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men" (I Ptr. 2, 12-15).

Witness through holiness of life at the Ascetic Fathers

The overview of the topic of the witness through holiness of life must be completed with the brief mention of how it was understood by the ascetic fathers. The Christian calendar lists two main categories of saints: martyrs (mostly those of the first centuries) and monastics, ascetics. The courage

of the martyrs sacrificing their lives for Christ without any hesitation was probably the most powerful form of implicit mission in the early centuries. In his treaty, "Apologeticus", Tertullian unequivocally affirms that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of a new life³¹.

After the edict of 313, which gave the Christians the freedom to practice their faith, the monastic life begins to take shape as a form of perpetual martyrdom. The place of the martyrs of the first centuries is now taken by the Christian monastics and ascetics. The crucible of Eastern monasticism was the Egyptian desert and its influence was felt all over the world. The emblematic texts of the Egyptian monasticism are collected in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*³².

The commandment to go and engage in an active mission (Mt. 28, 19-20) comes into conflict with that to abandon the world, which established monastic life³³. The first to apophthegms of Abba Arsenius stress this very fact: "flee from men and you will be saved"³⁴ or "flee, be silent, pray always"³⁵. Abba Alonius says something along the same lines: "If a man does not say in his heart, in the world there is only myself and God, he will not gain peace"³⁶.

Saint Isaac the Syrian, one of the great solitary figures of Christianity, is even more radical with regard to the importance of seclusion and personal ascetic practice:

Love the ease of solitude rather than satisfying the hunger of the world and the converting of the multitude of heathen peoples from error unto adoring God. Let it be more excellent in thy eyes to detach thyself from the bonds of sin, than to detach the subdued unto liberty from those who subject their bodies. Prefer to make peace with thyself, in harmony with the trinity within thee: body, soul and spirit, rather than to appease those who are angry at thy teachings³⁷.

³¹ Q. Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Apologeticus, the text of Oehler annotated, translation by Alex. Souter with introduction by John E B Mayor, Cambridge University Press, 1917, at: https://www.tertullian.org/articles/mayor_apologeticum/mayor_apologeticum_07translation.htm

³² Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Mowbrays, 1975).

³³ For further details see: Paul Siladi, "Missionary Theology in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*," in *Unitate și identitate. Ortodoxia românilor între comuniunea răsăriteană și dialogul cu Apusul* [Unity and Identity. Romanian Orthodoxy Between Eastern Communion and Dialog with the West], ed. Vasile Stanciu and Paul Siladi, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2019), 522–31.

³⁴ Arsenius 1 in Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 9.

³⁵ Arsenius 2 in Ward, 9.

³⁶ Alonius 1 in Ward, 35.

³⁷ *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Niniveh*, translated from Bedjan's Syriac text with an introduction and registers by A. J. Wesnick, published by the Royal Academy for Sciences, Amsterdam, 1923, 32.

The solitude of the ascetic fathers is neither cantankerous, morose, nor bitter, but rather operative. The cleared and best known words regarding inner peace belong to Saint Seraphim of Sarov:

Acquire the Spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved. When a man enters into a peaceful state, he can give out from himself and also upon others light for the enlightenment of the mind³⁸.

The force the holiness has to irradiate is also described in the Synaxarion of the Church. An overview of the saints' biographies is enough to see how they became flames that shone light and peace around them. For instance, let us take a look at the saints commemorated on September 1, the first day of the church year. According to the Synaxarion two of these saints had a strong presence, effective by itself. The life of the first one, Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder, is marked by humility and ascetic efforts: "the most wondrous thing was that after he had fought so many spiritual battles and devoted himself to feats of the strictest abstinence, and after he had reached such high virtues and performed so many miracles, this man of God still saw himself as being beneath all men"³⁹. When he reached the apex of his spiritual life Saint Simeon "reposed in peace, while deep in prayer, at the age of 69 (in 459), having spread all around him the peace that reigned in his heart" after fifty years of ascetic labours⁴⁰.

Another saint commemorated by the Church on September 1 is Saint Meletius the Younger. His life has what we might call a classical trajectory, following the example found in the biography of Saint Anthony the Great. He seeks peace and discreetly takes refuge in deserted places, but precisely there, in the most ignored of spaces, his virtues shine and attract people. Saint Meletius the Younger's indirect mission is extremely effective even in that remote place: "There he thought to dwell in prayer away from people, but his virtues again attracted many visitors and the desert soon became a monastery"⁴¹.

Conclusions

These few examples amply show how the witness through holiness of life is an essential characteristic of the Christian, and especially of the Orthodox, mission. In the article we analysed at the beginning, father

³⁸ Moore, Lazarus, *Sfântul Serafim de Sarov. O biografie spirituală* [Saint Seraphim of Sarov. A Spiritual Biography], trans. Paul Bălan (București: Agapis, 2002), 39.

³⁹ Macarios Simonopetritul, *Sinaxarul. Viețile Sfinților* [Synaxarion. Life of the Saints.], vol. 1-Luna septembrie (București: Editura Sfântul Ioan Casian, n.d.), 34.

⁴⁰ Macarios Simonopetritul, 36.

⁴¹ Macarios Simonopetritul, 42.

Dumitru Stăniloae identifies something deeply rooted in Orthodox spirituality, something that manifested itself over all generations. We are left, however, with this question: If we are not holy, what can we do? Should we abandon our mission? Should we consider ourselves no longer compelled to answer this call addressed to each baptised Christian? The Paterikon provides us with a possible answer. Whereas Amma Syncletica (12) says that

It is dangerous for anyone to teach who has not first been trained in the “practical” life. For if someone who owns a ruined house receives guests there, he does them harm because of the dilapidation of his dwelling. It is the same in the case of someone who has not first built an interior dwelling; he causes loss to those who come. By words one may convert them to salvation, but by evil behaviour, one injures them⁴²,

Abba Poemen (25) offers a more realistic and heartening perspective: “man who teaches without doing what he teaches is like a spring which cleanses and gives drink to everyone, but it not able to purify itself”⁴³.

In other words, you could be of some help to others, even though you are not doing much for yourself, even though you do not practice what you preach. And this is so because Christ is the ultimate basis of all preaching and His words are eternally true.

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⁴² Syncletica 12, in Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 233.

⁴³ Poemen 25 in Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 179.

- [The Mission of the Church in Bible and History], 98–122. Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2006.
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