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# **The Church - Manifestation of the Kingdom of God on Earth The Importance of This Topic for Today's Orthodox Theology**

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## **Abstract**

This study analyzes and presents the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church. We show that the Kingdom of God is not just a reality that will be revealed at the end of the ages, according to the Gospel, but at the same time it is a present reality here and now, in the world. The most prominent form of the Kingdom of God's presence in the world is the Church of Jesus Christ. In and through the Church, the Kingdom of God is communicated to people who wish to become partakers of this Kingdom. While keeping a future dimension that looks forward to its complete consummation, the Kingdom of God is actually present in the Church and as the Church. Thus, through the Church, people partake of the ultimate reality of salvation and of the Trinitarian life of love and communion.

## **Keywords**

Kingdom of God, Church, Eschatology, Holy Trinity, Holy Liturgy, Eucharist, Orthodox Theology

## **I. General considerations**

The topic of the Kingdom of God was one of the central themes of Christianity, since it emerged in history as a new form of manifestation and proclamation of the meaning of man's life on earth, that is to remove him from the determinism of history and to design him in a new order of existence, that of the Kingdom of God. Not by chance, the Saviour Jesus Christ began His saving work with the announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God. "Repent!, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4, 17) were the first words of Jesus Christ's work. In another place, the Gospel confesses: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God. And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent you, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1, 14-15). This teaching about the coming and manifestation of the Kingdom of God was not only primordial in the plan of salvation made by Jesus Christ, in the sense that He began His preaching through this proclamation of the Kingdom of God, but also in the sense that it is also the purpose the Son of God came into the world for, that is to open the gates of this Kingdom to all the people.

Theology has a great responsibility to emphasize the importance of the Kingdom of God to the whole world. But often the reality of the Kingdom of God, that is the chapter to which it belongs - the eschatology, was presented in the school textbooks as part of the last chapter of Dogmatic Theology, dedicated to this theological issue. In this chapter the following problems were presented: the Christian meaning of death, the private judgment, heaven and hell, universal judgment and eternal life, or the dwelling of believers in the Kingdom of God. So, in this context, the Kingdom of God appeared as a reality or value which will only be revealed to man after the Lord's Parousia and universal judgment. This way of understanding things was not entirely consistent with the priority that the Saviour put in His preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. An Orthodox theologian of the past century affirmed that

"No other field of theology is as confused as eschatology. This confusion may be somewhat explicable and even excusable because, over the centuries, Christian theology has simply lost the eschatological dimension. But what has disappeared is

eschatology as the precise dimension that forms and penetrates the whole Christian faith as dynamic inspiration and motivation”<sup>1</sup>.

The Kingdom of God is not just a reality that will only be revealed at the end of the ages, according to the Gospel, but at the same time it is a present reality *hic et nunc*, that is, the reality already present in the world. And the most prominent form of the Kingdom of God presence in the world is the Church of Jesus Christ.

## II. Testimonies of the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the eschatological dimension of the Church

Throughout the Sacred Scripture of the Old and New Testament we encounter more testimonies that refer to the Kingdom of God and to the eschatological dimension of the Church. Of course, the Old Testament testimonies are rather predictions, prefigurations and symbols of what would be revealed in the New Testament as direct testimonies of the Kingdom of God entering this world. Often, the chosen people were tempted to believe that the kingdom of God would be closely related to this world, that it would reign on earth, that God would subdue all peoples of the earth, and the Messiah would reign with them as an earthly Emperor. This vision of eschatological realities has been repeatedly rejected in the New Testament; even the Saviour repeatedly makes important remarks from this point of view.

“Jesus Christ did not come to establish a worldly, geographic kingdom for a people against all peoples of the earth. Jesus Christ the Lord was incarnate to establish the Kingdom of God among men and to set it in their hearts... to conquer the souls and to place God the Master on the throne of our hearts”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander SCHMEMANN, *Biserică, lume, misiune*, traducere din limba engleză de Maria Vințeler, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2006, pp. 44-45. Several aspects regarding the theological complexity of eschatology and its various meanings, see more at: Dumitru BELU, “Împărăția lui Dumnezeu și Biserica”, in: *Studii Teologice*, VIII (1956) 5-6, pp. 299-309; Jürgen MOLTSMANN, *Venirea lui Dumnezeu. Tratat de eshatologie creștină*, a translation of the work: *Das Kommen Gottes. Christliche Eschatologie*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995, made by Vasiliță Mugurel Păvălucă, *Studia Oecumenica* 7, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ilarion V. FELEA, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu – Biserica*, Sibiu, 1947, p. 5. “That is why, when St. John the Baptist began preaching the coming of the Lord, he cried out cou-

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The meaning of the Church as Kingdom of God has a dimension of interiority in the sense that it does not take into account the material and transient realities of life, but the spiritual and imperishable one. The Orthodox theologians speak of forms and degrees of the Kingdom of God. The visible form of the Kingdom of God is the Church; this is a theological thesis of the most condensed and clear affirmation. Starting from the words of the Saviour after the Resurrection: “and, lo, I am with you always...” (Matthew 28, 20), the Christian eschatology understands the presence of Christ the crucified, risen and ascended to Heaven, as an eschatological and ecclesial concrete presence in the midst of His new people.

“Jesus Christ is present with us in the Church. Through the Church He continues to preach the Gospel, through the Church He shares us with all the gifts of His sacrifice, and through the Church He also guides us through the path of salvation in all times until the end of the ages”<sup>3</sup>.

The Church bears different names in the Sacred Scriptures, on the one hand, expressing its profound meaning, and on the other, its purpose or service in the world. The most famous phrase describing the Church is “the Body of Christ” (Ephesians 1, 22-23; Colossians 1, 24). This word portrays Jesus Christ the Saviour as living and present in the deepest intimacy of people. Christ accompanies His ecclesial community in the Church or in the form of the Church and also every member of the Church to pass through all the states He endured with His own humanity assumed at the Incarnation. This companionship of people with Christ throughout their life is a pedagogical accompaniment Jesus Christ uses to raise all those He had assumed through the act of His Incarnation, with Himself and to Himself.

### **III. Distortions of understanding the Kingdom of God through a unilateral eschatological vision and the Church’s response to them**

The primary ecclesial community was strongly marked by the acute sense of the presence of Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven in the midst of it, and

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rageously: Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... Prepare you the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Ilarion V. FELEA, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu – Biserica*, p. 6).

<sup>3</sup> Ilarion V. FELEA, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu – Biserica*, p. 47.

by a feverish expectation of the return of the risen Lord in His glory to give every believer His reward. Starting from here, theology has often reflected on these realities to come, and this Christian thought has sometimes been characterized by clear failings about the entire complexity of eschatology, on the one hand, but also about understanding the Kingdom of God in its context, on the other hand. This understanding of the Kingdom of God as an eschatological reality was also altered by the fact that the eschatology and the Kingdom of God were erroneously perceived as a mere “denial” of the world, or it was also altered by the fact that later, over the history of the Church, she came too close to the world. In order to better understand things, it is necessary for the theologian or researcher of the mysteries of God to enter deeper into the spirit of the Church of the first centuries, where it can be seen how the Primary Church has judged and evaluated everything in this world through the prism of the Kingdom of God. According to this vision, the experience the Church did in the world was not a negative, but a positive one,

“not a denial of the world, but a definite way of approaching and experimenting it. Its ultimate meaning and content was not the world, but the Kingdom of God, therefore, it was not anti-world, but pro-Kingdom, which is different from later extended eschatologies”<sup>4</sup>.

In the light of the Kingdom, the world is revealed and experienced by men as “at the end”, in the sense that the Kingdom of God has already been revealed and manifested, and in the sense that by rejecting and condemning Christ to death, Who is the Life and the Light of the whole life, the world has condemned itself to death. The power and gifts of the Kingdom which Jesus Christ announced at the beginning of his salvific work spring from this death of the world, that is, from its exhaustion<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, throughout the history the Church has constantly experienced Christ’s presence within her through the Holy Spirit, and thus the eschatological realities of the Kingdom have been perceived as present now and here, but the Church always had the consciousness that the fullness of this Kingdom cannot be seen in this world. The members of the Church have always known that the world has been redeemed and restored by Christ, and this entire world: time, matter, life and death have

<sup>4</sup> Ilarion V. FELEA, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu – Biserica*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> See more about this at: Ilarion V. FELEA, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu – Biserica*, pp. 46-48.

become transparent means of suggestion, but also of communication and communion with the Kingdom of God.

#### **IV. Time understood by the Church in the perspective of the Kingdom of God**

As she understood the presence of the Kingdom of God as a present reality, but yet not a full one, the Church has already liturgically breathed in this sense of *already* and *not yet*. As such, historical time leaks implacably to the “day without sunset of the Kingdom”. The one who guides time in this direction is the Incarnation of the Son of God. One alone became the Lord of history and life, Kirios, Jesus Christ, Who united Heaven with earth and time with eternity.

“This means that the Kingdom of God has become the decisive factor of *now and here*, of life, of the world and history, and that human history is now under the mark of *kairos*, that is the direct divine intervention on life and time. Hence, the foundations of ecclesiology and the doctrine of the Church, including the whole cosmos and the whole of history in its purpose and perspective”<sup>6</sup>.

Time is closely related to God and it cannot be understood outside God.

“The Eternal God is waiting with respect to us. Thus, it appears the relationship between Him and time. From here we can see that God keeps time bound to His eternity. Eternity accepts time in it, that is, God accepts in His eternity the creature that lives in time, although time also represents a spiritual distance between the created persons and God. Therefore eternity is both in time and over time. There is a distance between us and God, but at the same time, this distance exists within the love, that is, the eternity of God”<sup>7</sup>.

As the faithful man responds to the love of God that he experiences in the Church - the Body of Christ full of the Holy Spirit, he advances to His everlasting Kingdom. The quicker the man responds, the smaller the

<sup>6</sup> Ilarion V. FELEA, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu – Biserica*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, ediția a III-a, vol. I, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, p. 189.

distance between God and man is. The Church's communion dimension is established on this understanding of the time as the distance between the calling of the eternal God and man's response to this call, which promotes the dialogue of man with God vertically, as well as horizontally the dialogue between man and his peers. Only in this way can we speak of a continuous growth of the faithful man within the love of the eternal God and the ascension of man in communion with Him and with his fellow men. From this point of view there is a creative, never-completed dynamic of the growth of men in the love and light of the Kingdom of Heaven.

#### **V. The Church - Kingdom of God - gift of the Pentecost, as a permanent presence of the Holy Spirit in it, and of the entire Holy Trinity through it**

The important moment of mankind's preparation to feel the Kingdom of God with its gifts more and more emphasized is the event of Pentecost or the Descent of the Holy Spirit. This event of human salvation is a sort of "ripe fruit" that is offered to the whole world through the power of the Holy Spirit, descended into the world on the day of Pentecost. At the same time, this event is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the world under the form of the Church. A theologian of the past century says that it is true that

"The descent of the Holy Spirit is the act of passing from the saving work of Christ in His personal humanity to the expansion of this work in other human beings. Through Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension, Christ places the foundation of the Church on His Body. Through these, the Church becomes a virtual being. Nevertheless the Son of God was not incarnate for His sake, but to extend salvation as divine life from His Body to us. And the Church is precisely this divine life, extended from His flesh to believers"<sup>8</sup>.

The life of the Church is the divine life shared from the deified Body of Jesus Christ. As such, the One Who makes Christ present in the Church is the Holy Spirit, Who wants to configure all who enter it in the image of Christ, that is, of the Son, according to the goodwill of the Father. But where

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<sup>8</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, p. 202.

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the love and life of the Godhead is present, there is also the Kingdom of the Most Holy Trinity through its manifestation. The reason of this presence is that God wants all people to become citizens of this kingdom through the work of the Holy Spirit.

“The Church is therefore the union of those who believe in the One and True Christ. By gathering as a church, those who believe in the same Christ are sanctified from the sanctifying humanity of Christ. They are sanctified through her Mysteries they unite with Him through, receiving His grace or uncreated work”<sup>9</sup>.

Through the work of unification of all men in Christ the One, the Church spreads an unmistakable light over the world, receiving this light from the light of the Holy Trinity as a manifestation of His Kingdom.

“The Light of the Church consists of the unity that the Son of God has come to restore between men and Him, according to the example and power of the Holy Trinity. This is the glory received by the Son of God as a man from the Father, that is as He is united as a man with the Father, to make them one with the Father as His sons (John 17, 22)”<sup>10</sup>.

By doing so and through such a work, Christ also highlights the presence of the Kingdom of God in the midst of men and in their hearts. The sense of the Church as Kingdom of God on earth is illustrated by her entire work in the world, making Christ fully transparent, Him who is crucified, risen and elevated to Heaven, and working through the Holy Spirit in it.

“The Church is the one, spiritual, holy, catholic and apostolic kingdom where Christ the King is always present with His power, and where He warms and enlighten all her members as a bush and a chandelier made up of united believers, without being confused...”<sup>11</sup>.

The Church manifests the gifts of the Kingdom of God more and more, in accordance with the demands of the believers to share them, but also according to the challenges that arise in front of the Church every

<sup>9</sup> Dumitru STĂNILĂ, *Iisus Hristos lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, Editura Anastasia, București 1993, p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> D. STĂNILĂ, *Iisus Hristos lumina lumii...*, p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> D. STĂNILĂ, *Iisus Hristos lumina lumii...*, pp. 215-216.

time. But she always remains identical to herself and to the mission she has to accomplish from Christ - her Head.

## VI. Illustration of the Church as the Kingdom of God through its Eucharist

All the Mysteries of the Church have not only an Christological, Trinitarian, and ecclesiological dimension, and so on but also an eschatological one. This is because they all tend to prepare the faithful man in the perspective of that reality, when God will become “all in all” (I Corinthians 15, 28). But this eschatological dimension of the Church is revealed to all members of the Church by the Mystery of the Eucharist. The one who carries out such a work in the Church is the Holy Spirit.

“Thus, the Holy Spirit realizes the plenary and unique presence of Christ in His many dimensions, on the one hand: the Creating Word, the Historical Jesus, Christ of the Glory, the Lord of Parousia and Judgment. This real presence of Lord Jesus transcends the distances and boundaries of space and time. This is the sacramental function of the Eucharistic and liturgical «memorial» that determines the very being of the Church - the Bride of Christ”<sup>12</sup>.

The eschatological presence of Christ in the Church is realized through the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Church,

“commemorating the Eucharistic anamnesis in its memorial: first the historical time of salvation (the Cross, the tomb, the Resurrection), then the heavenly glory (Ascension into Heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father) and, finally, Parousia (the Second Coming). This multi-faceted contemporaneity of Christ with our existence is very difficult to express and maintain in our fallen mentality, in our discursive thinking and especially in our theological language, which also carries the whole burden of decay”<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> BORIS BOBRINSKOY, *Împărtășirea Sfântului Duh*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1999, p. 490.

<sup>13</sup> B. BOBRINSKOY, *Împărtășirea Sfântului Duh*, p. 490.

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In the Eucharist the past is united with the present of mankind, trained in the light of the kingdom of God. To talk about the mystery of Christ's presence in His members - Christ ascended into Heavens, the eschatological Christ - is to talk about the presence that transcends time and space, but who unites the people in the present Church always and everywhere, past, present and future. The Church's Liturgy integrates people and angels, forerunners and contemporaries, the living ones and those who have fallen asleep. The connection between all is one of communion sustained by the Holy Spirit.

During the Liturgy of the Church the gifts of bread and wine brought by believers are transformed into the Body and Blood of the Lord through the work of the Holy Spirit according to the will and desire of the Father. The prayer of invoking the Holy Spirit to turn the gifts of bread and wine is the epiclesis of the ecclesial body. The invocation of the Spirit by the Church is addressed to the Father, but its object is the transformation of the Eucharistic elements and ours too into the Holy Body of Christ and His life-giving Blood. The ultimate goal of this invocation of the Spirit is therefore the presence of Christ and the closeness of the whole ecclesial community to the Father. And the Father invoked in this way and in different ways by the Church is the eschatological Father, that is, the Ruler of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“In the Eucharist the Church anticipates the Kingdom that will come, not as the Third Kingdom of the Spirit, as Joachim of Fiore and Fr. Florensky believed, but as the Kingdom of the Father, and through Him of the Trinity”<sup>14</sup>.

From this point of view the words of St. Irenaeus are suggestive as they emphasize the eschatological dimension of the Church, following the stages of the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the *oikonomia* of salvation.

“God first appeared through the Spirit of prophecy. Then He appeared through the Son, in his adoption. He will finally be seen in the Kingdom as the Father, the Spirit preparing man for the Son of God, the Son leading him to the Father, and the Father giving him incorruptibility and eternal life, which are the fruits of God's sight for those who see Him”<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> B. BOBRINSKOY, *Împărtășirea Sfântului Duh*, p. 498.

<sup>15</sup> Sf. IRINEU, *Adversus haereses*, IV, 20, 5 and V, 36, 2.

In this context, the Father appears in all His splendour and is fully understood as existing in the eschatological plan - that is of His Kingdom.

## **VII. The relevance of the eschatological vision of the Church for theology**

The theological thinking receives impulses and dynamics from taking into account the dimension of eschatology of the Church, the whole creation of God is linked to. Reflecting on Jesus Christ the Risen One, ascended to Heavens, and Who stands on the right hand of the Father means also to reflect on His humanity redeemed and renewed by the Sacrifice and Resurrection. Starting with Pentecost, the plenary and unique presence of Jesus Christ is realized in its various dimensions in the Church and through the work of the Holy Spirit in it. The whole life of the Church and every part of it is impregnated by this overwhelming presence of the Risen Lord in it. That is why theology has an inexhaustible field of manifestation in its “object” of research and reflection. Taking into account the living and infinite content of the Church’s life, the theology of the Church cannot ignore the sacramental and theological-eschatological realism of the life of the Church. Thus, theology must draw up not only a few final considerations concerning the Kingdom of God and the eternal life at the end of its dogmatics, but all the theological thinking must be moved, impelled, and oriented in an eschatological sense. This eschatological way of theologizing will help theology remain deeply anchored in the whole oikonomia of salvation. It will not look at it sequentially, unilaterally and superficially, but it will take into account the theological reflections of the entire complex of the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, from His Incarnation to His Ascension into Heaven, on the one hand. But on the other hand it will also be open to His presence in the Church through the Holy Spirit as the Lord of glory and His Kingdom, now and here. Not without reason, theology has the sharp consciousness that it must always be oriented also from the eschatological point of view. That is why theology must always remain open to its eschatological horizon.

“Of course, a complete theology open to true progress must be inspired by the hope and prospect of the eschatological future, but the hope and perspective of the eschatological future are

sustained by the present experience of continual spiritual progress and by improving relationships of love among men<sup>16</sup>.

In other words, theology must always remain anchored in the Supreme Revelation in Jesus Christ, must be contemporary with every generation of believers, and be constantly permeated by a prophetic-eschatological spirit. All the essential coordinates of theology: to be anchored in Revelation, to be contemporary with every generation of believers and to be open to the eschatological horizon, are simultaneous and not consecutive.

### **VIII. Conclusions**

1. The eschatological dimension of the Church represents a theological understanding of the contemporaneity of Jesus Christ the Crucified, Dead, Risen and Ascended to Heaven, with every historical epoch the Church enters during its pilgrimage through history. Theology also draws inspiration from this experience of Christ - the Lord and the King of glory.

2. In order to be able to make good use of the eschatological reality of the Church, theology must overcome some significant obstacles. Undoubtedly, theology has been tempted to focus primarily on the events of the past with little relevance to today's world, or to unilaterally fix itself upon a present imprisoned in it. If we take into consideration the Person of Jesus Christ, seen in its unity, this will help us to look at the historical events of His saving work, not just as events that belong exclusively to the past, but as belonging to the historical present and anticipating the full revelation of the Kingdom of God.

3. Theology gains a balance by maintaining or regaining its eschatological vision in the sense that through this vision, the lives of believers are oriented towards their ultimate purpose, that is - struggling for living with Christ the One Exalted to Heaven in and through the Church. Thus, both the Church and Church theology are mutually enriching, and the mission of the Church also gains with regard to the enthusiasm, hope and complete and complex content of its missionary work.

4. Believers can overcome time and space through the presence of the eschatological Christ in the Church (ascended in glory at the right hand of God the Father). And the Church is heading with increasing love towards

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<sup>16</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I, p. 106.

the Lord Who will come “to judge the living and dead” (from the Creed), but Who comes even from now in the continuity of His judgment, which is now inaugurated in this “now and here” of the Church.

5. In and through the Church, the Kingdom of God is already present in the world and is communicated to people who wish to become partakers of this Kingdom. Thus Eschaton becomes not only what will be fully shown at the end of the present world, but it is actually present in the Church and as the Church. Thus, through the Church, people partake of the ultimate reality of salvation and of the Trinity life of love and communion.