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Joseph A. Loya O.S.A.
Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA

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CHRISTIAN MISSION AS A RELEVANT APPLIED HERMENEUTIC
IN THE POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN CONTEXT
by Joseph A. Loya, O.S.A.

Joseph A. Loya is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Villanova University, Philadelphia PA. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of CAREE in March 2011, held in New York city. Loya is a long term CAREE member and contributor to its journal.

In the summer of 2001 the University of Leeds, in conjunction with the Universities of Nijmegen and Utrecht, hosted an international conference dedicated to reflection on Orthodox Christianity in its contemporary European context. Alexander Agadjanian, from the Center for the Study of Religion at the Russian State University for the Humanities, offered a study of the balance of identity and relevance in the social vision of the Russian Orthodox Church (hereafter, ROC) in the period commencing with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The task is identified to be complicated by the fact that adaptations must be authoritative, and this authority must proceed from the body of the Tradition itself. Agadjanian specifically noted that the fundamental functional triangle of relevance-authority-identity contains within it the challenge of sustaining identity preservation on its own authority on the one hand, and seeking relevance outside of the Tradition on the other. In this the ROC is constrained to negotiate, as all faith traditions must, the narrow path between a twin danger: either chance becoming irrelevant, or risk dissolution into nothingness through hastily attempted self-adjustments to the world. The axial observation around which his study turns can be stated as follows: through the course of the previous century this dilemma became grounded within the field of vision staked out by social theory, with both relevance and identity becoming increasingly perceived within the framework of social categories. In his own estimation, The Russian Church was “relatively late” (in comparison with western Christian Traditions) in addressing the social issues, but when its time came, the Church found within itself the ability and confidence to speak “in a thoroughly systematic form.”

Included in his presentation was a quantitative analysis of the authoritative references to the Bible, saints, religious writers, canonical source and historical precedents employed in the composition of the document “The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,” one of the major official documents adopted by the Bishops’ Council of August 2000. The “Social Concept” was deemed to be a corollary (or a separate related chapter) of a broad and comprehensive process of “applied hermeneutics” consecrated to the purpose of redefining the identity and vision of the Church’s life in its disordered and inextricable post-Soviet context. By the term “applied hermeneutics,” Agadjanian means “a large variety of forms of interaction between clergy and laity, through which the Church tests relevant responses to new social circumstances and formulates, on a case-to-case basis, a new social message.” He cites mission as an example of one such operational form among others, and it is to this type of ecclesial theory and effort that attention is now directed.

The Missionary Department of the Moscow Patriarchate was established by a decree of the Holy Synod of December 26, 1995. Its present organizational structure comprises sectors that

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2 Agadjanian, p. 163.
3 Agadjanian, p. 164.
It oversees such activities as coordination of missionaries and missionary bases, the training of mission personnel, publishing and promoting mission awareness in the media, plus anti-sectarian work and spiritual security. The foundational principles of these activities were formulated by Bishops’ Councils between the years 1994 to 2008. The Department makes available two particular documents that it identifies as key to its foundational theory and modes of action. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the worthiness of these documents to be received as “related chapters” in that “broad and comprehensive process” of interpreting and redefining the identity and vision of the Church for the period beginning at the time of the the first Chechen War.

I. The 1995 “Concept of the Revival of Missionary Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church.”

This Concept approved by the Holy Synod in October of that year intended to set the direction for the revival of missionary work in all its forms based on the domestic needs of the Church as a vital organism and in light of the challenges that arise as a result of modernity’s need for “spiritual purification and renewal.” Correlatively, the opening section registered a call for a strong response by the Church to aggressive proselytizing activities by non-Orthodox churches, non-Christian religions and different sects in the canonical territory of the Church that threaten the spiritual health of people baptized into Orthodoxy or have spiritual roots in the national traditions and culture.

The Second Section grounds mission awareness in the nature of the Church instituted to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (Mk.16:15). This preaching adds to the growth of the Body of Christ from the time of the Church’s birth – Holy Pentecost – when there was baptized “about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). Mission as an apostolate is confirmed to ever constitute a main responsibility in the fulfillment of the commandment of the Lord to His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19-20). Scripture citations in this section were judiciously selected and matched so as to affirm an Orthodox Trinitarian understanding of mission as situated within a vision of the entire Divine economy of salvation: Thus, a reference to John 20:21-22 (“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you . . . . Receive the Holy Spirit”) is presented together with John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”). With this elevated sense of mission the scope of mission responsibility is greatly widened beyond the mere transfer of intellectual belief and moral ideals; the task of mission is to transfer the experience of communion with God and the community of humans-in-relationship that exists in God.

God’s involvement in history aims to bring humanity and all of creation into this community which has the very life of God as its own. True to Orthodoxy’s expression of its liturgical nature, mission is affirmed as possessing a mysterious connection with the Resurrection

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4 The recent institution of these sectors within the Patriarchate’s central office has drawn comment from analysts as it assumedly relates directly to the Patriarch’s efforts to create a consolidated “power vertical” within the ROC’s authority structure. Concern has been registered over the fact that the Mission Department itself is headed by Archbishop Ioann of Belgorod and Starooskolsk: “The Belgorod See and its institutions have long had the reputation as being among the most conservative of Russian Orthodox places and also one of the most hostile to Protestants, Catholics and others that the Orthodox refer to as ‘sects.’” Paul Goble, “Kirill Expanding Patriarchate’s Missionary Effort in Russia and Abroad,” The Moscow Times (January 13, 2010), http://www.themoscowtimes.com/blogs/432776/post/kirill-expanding-patriarchates-missionary-effort-in-russia-and-abroad/433077.html.

and thus bears witness to Christ as the Risen Lord establishing His Kingdom in the world. It is this Kingdom that is explicitly blessed by the celebrant and congregation at the very opening of each celebration of the Eucharist. From the eschatological perspective, as the Gospel is preached “to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20) mission looks to the transfiguration of the cosmos so that, according to the Apostle Paul, “God may be all in all” (1Cor. 15:28).

The Third Section treats various principles of missionary activity present from the time of the Church’s birth.

First, Use of the Vernacular. Through the Power of the Holy Spirit the apostles “began to speak in tongues,” and the crowd that had gathered for the occasion were astounded, “because every man heard them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:1-9). Thus there is Divine Warrant for the Good News to be proclaimed in idioms understood by the hearers of that Word.

Second, the Principle of Universality. In Apostolic times when relations with Gentiles and the stance of non-Jews before God were still at issue, a vision was sent to Peter by our Lord, prompting him to confess, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation whoever fears Him and works of righteousness is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35); and thus it is that Christianity is non-exclusionary.

Third, the Principle of Ecclesial Reception of Culture. This is best expressed by the Apostle Paul: “To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law – though I myself am not under the law – to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law – though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ – to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the Gospel, so that I too may have a share in it” (1Cor. 9:20-23). This principle requires those responsible for mission initiatives to be aware of and sensitive to the context in which they work, be it among the heterodox or devotees of other religious traditions, urban or rural settings, youth, etc.

Fourth, the Principle of Freedom in Christ. The Lord Himself has shown the conditions of true freedom within each believer and community: “And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (Jn. 8:32). Here the document distinguishes its understanding of freedom through truth as holding priority over any other type of freedom espoused by those who do not stand with truth. That all religions are equally true – a position held by various proselytizers, according to the text – is a cited example of an untruth that those in the Lord cannot espouse. A caution is registered: application of laws of secular perspective that do not take into account the ROC’s historical role in culturally uniting and bringing its adherents to Christ by its witness to Apostolic truth is a recipe for social disunity and conflict.

Fifth, the Principle of the Canonical Basis of Mission. The canons provide order in the Church while expressing the dogmatic truths of the Church. According to Paul, each apostle received his apostolic measure appointed to him by God (2Cor. 10:13). “The apostolic measure” is taken here to refer to the concept of the “canonical territory” of a Local Church. Ecumenical Apostolic rules and regulations stipulate the bishop to be the head of a Local Church. It is he who is responsible for preaching and piety of the people; it is he who sanctions public teachings. Therefore, all missionary work is to be sanctioned by the local bishop. A missionary endeavor that ignores, circumvents or defies this proper authority automatically places itself outside the life of ecumenical fellowship of the Churches of Christ.

Section Four explicates the four subforms of mission: Information (mass media, organization of parish libraries; special editions of missionary literature); Apologetics (witnessing to Orthodox truth, especially when proselytizers or sectarian teachers issue false or misleading
characterizations of the truth); Education/Churching (forming the Baptized in an appropriate, well-grounded and full Church life); External Mission (Orthodox witnessing among non-Orthodox).

On the parish level, educational mission is to proceed according to the scheme of Catechism – Baptism - Continued Learning. The clergy should take care that the Sacrament of Baptism is properly reverenced and celebrated as a parish event for the edification of the community rather than performed as a private ceremony. Parochial rehabilitation centers should be instituted for “those who have become victims of totalitarian sects and pseudo-religious organizations.” Also on this level, care is to be taken to guarantee a full, comprehensible and authentic church life for Eucharistic communities composed of Orthodox who constitute a minority in their own particular localities.

The establishment and maintenance of seminaries, theological academies, missionary training schools and institutions for retraining and continuing education is a responsibility of diocesan-level authorities. Officials operating at the highest Church-wide level are charged with an array of responsibilities, among which are listed the following: collect, edit and disseminate instructional resource materials treating ROC missionary work through the various periods of Russian history; develop studies that direct how to best institute effective missionary programs in non-Slavic environments and traditionally Muslim and Buddhist areas; establish a department dedicated to examining available legal recourse in cases where rights of Orthodox are transgressed by non-Orthodox missionary efforts; establish a Commission for the translation of the Holy Scriptures and the revival of the worship services in the languages of the peoples living in the ROC’s canonical territory.

II. The 2005 “Concept of the Missionary Activities of the Russian Orthodox Church” (2007 Version.)

This document summarized the experience the ROC acquired during the ten-year period of intensive missionary activity between 1995 and 2005 and formulated the missionary vision for the subsequent half decade. Its content was tested for concordance with previous ROC documents and decisions, first of all with the aforementioned “Bases” document, and local church authorities were consulted for their input. For almost two years the church leaders at diocesan and at parish levels subjected its content to close scrutiny. In April 2007 the final form of the Concept was completed and immediately communicated to the dioceses for practical implementation.

The document’s Preamble echoes and magnifies the eschatological theme of the “Revival” document, and amplifies the cultural component: “The mission therefore is to approach the world, sanctify, renew it, put new content into its usual way of life, and assume local cultural forms of expression not inconsistent with the Christian faith, transforming them into means of salvation.”

Extensive is the missionary field and unprecedented and daunting is the task of implementing the necessary “Second Christianization” of those liberated from the yoke of godless ideology. Of particular concern are widespread indifference, seduction by non-religious worldviews, an absence of depth in theological understanding regarding particularized Orthodox traditions of pastoral care and guidance (for example, that found within the monastic tradition), a lack of quality in catechetical materials and programs, plus atomized and unwholesome spiritual-moral environments. Specific challenges call for appropriate reciprocal responses. To be protected are vulnerable populations victimized by certain social-economic reforms and their consequences. Needed is the development of proper perspectives on the nature and role of science, especially

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when issues addressing moral norms and the essential foundations of life are at stake. Highlighted for opposition is informational aggression targeting the impressionable emanating from anti-Orthodox sources. Vigilance is called for in safeguarding the unity, universality and absoluteness of Christian truth against non-Christian counter-claims.

The detailed section on Methodology does not overlook the mastering of the language of the deaf so that they too may be evangelized. Of broader scope, the implementation of mission goals and objectives is stated to be possible only when every member of Christ’s Church is aware of his/her personal missionary responsibility. Duties of bishops and priests are delineated, and the non-ordained are also called to witness to the truth of Orthodoxy throughout their lives in accord with the counsel of the Apostle Peter: “In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you” (1Pet. 3:15).

The subforms of mission, over and above the four treated in the original 2005 listing reviewed above, include a fifth subform that seems especially engaging to this observer: the Mission of Reconciliation. The text draws attention to present day realities such as globalization processes, social disintegration, active and massive migration of peoples accompanied by escalating violence and manifestations of terrorist extremism. Tensions underscore the need to pursue reconciliation between people of various nationalities, ages and social groups. This form should assist people to understand the possibility and the need to build peace at the various levels of personal, family and public life in accordance with the Apostolic directive: “Strive for peace with everyone, and for that holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ calls one to love his/her neighbor, “neighbor” being understood as anyone, regardless of faith, ethnicity, gender or social origin. Attitude towards one’s neighbor, to society and to the whole world is to be attuned to the angelic song: “Glory to God, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk. 2:14). Inherent in this mission of reconciliation is the development of a “dialogue of life” as Christians live and communicate with people of other faiths and ideologies in common social circumstances. People are to know each other, respect each other and learn from each other in acknowledgment of the truth spoken by St. John Chrysostom: “With the devil alone we have nothing in common, but with all men we have many things in common.”

The mission of reconciliation also involves a “dialogue of social activity” through which people of different faiths work together for the sake of civil peace. Shared effort should foster creative traditional moral values and more equitable laws that protect the sacred gift of life and confront the dangers of globalization. Another important aspect of the mission of reconciliation is “the mission of reconciliation in mind,” that is, the promotion of reconciliation transpiring in the socio-political consciousness of people so as to attenuate conflict, alienation and sharp ideological polarization.

The various types of missionary service are based on the principle of divine love and forgiveness: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). Always remaining true to Orthodoxy, Church members are obliged to respect the members of other religious beliefs. At the same time, peaceful coexistence with people of other faiths should not be understood as a qualifying condition for unwarranted mixing of the principles of different religious traditions.

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7 Attached to the “Apologetic” subform is a footnote that provides the working definition of “proselytism”: it is taken to mean any direct or indirect attempt to induce apostasy through some type of “bait,” deception, concealment of truth, or taking advantage of personal inexperience, ignorance or neediness.

8 John Chrysostom, “Concerning the Statues,” Homily. 1, sec. 32. (Citation provided by author.)
A section on the image and quality of the modern missionary follows. It is necessary that a missionary express the joy of salvation in Christ. Patriarch Alexy II is quoted in enjoining missionaries to follow the centuries-old traditions of “dukhovnichestva,” that is, spiritual direction that is not the manipulation of people’s minds or the manifestation of spiritual violence, but rather it is the power of love itself. A missionary is subject to the admonition of the Apostle Paul: “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1Cor. 9:16).

The Concept then addresses the practicalities of mission work informed by “field experience.” Demonstrated here is sensitivity to the concerns of the youth in their full range of status: sincere believers, nominal believers, the curious and sincere inquirers, the agnostic, the disaffected and the outright hostile. Appearing for the first time, over and above the content of the original 2005 form of the Concept, is recognition of the role of women in missionary endeavors. Scriptures that reference their active service in the life of the Church abound (Rom.16:1-15, Phil. 4: 2-3, Col. 4:15, 1Cor. 11:5, 1Tim. 5:16). For these modern times the text of the Concept under review confirms women in diverse mission work such as the founding of charitable organizations and fulfilling commitments to prison ministry.

The penultimate section on Mission and Divine Worship Services begins with a quote from Patriarch Alexy II taken from a 1994 report to the Moscow assembly of diocesan clergy. He reminded them that with regard to liturgical or pastoral tradition, adherence to tradition is not a mindless and mechanical copying of external forms, but a living reflection and creative implementation of adapted life experiences. At bottom there is but one fundamental operating principle: there is to be no self-will or self-delusion involved, but all action is to be imbued with reasonable discipline and well-ordered freedom. Liturgy by its very nature bears a missionary character. Liturgical prayers for the catechumens suggest that the Church extends the Lord’s love to those who have not fully entered complete communion with Him and His Church. Liturgical preaching that bears an exegetical nature is a particular form of doctrinal care for the flock. Worship services could be accompanied by theological commentary or the distribution of printed supporting materials when necessary and in a manner that does not disturb the integrity and prayerful attitude of the faithful. It is recommended that preaching be done immediately following the reading of the Gospel. (This observer has often witnessed the sermon delivered just before the final blessing, and thus going unheard by those who did not remain present for the entire Liturgy.) For communities without a physical church building, it is permissible to use an adaptable room or even a tent as a gathering place, and worship crosses should be erected before which the faithful could pray. The main task is to inculcate among contemporaries an understanding of Orthodoxy’s liturgical culture: depending on the quality of resources in the parish community, this end should be served by the establishment of liturgical education programs for both adults and children.

The concluding section entitled “Promising Directions of Missionary Service” includes the following among its broad range of recommendations: disseminating among and between the different dioceses knowledge of positive experiences of mission initiatives; adding a mission dimension to all types of catechesis, church programming and service training; establishing partnerships with secular educators; heightening the profile of those preparing for Baptism; improving the quality of communication of people through parish-sponsored meetings and shared meals during which pressing issues of the day are discussed; generating in each parish an environment conducive to strengthening the institution of the family and the perception that a strong family life is entirely compatible with strong church life and service.

The concluding section teaches that in the modern historical-cultural and socio-political
realities of the twenty-first century missionaries are to be Gospel people, bearers of Good News to people of extremely diverse lifestyles, age, education, interests and professions. The missionary must never forget that the task is not one of being a propagandist or agitator, but being a co-worker of the Holy Spirit and evangelist of the saving Word of God. Thanksgiving is to be rendered to God for each blessed opportunity to carry out missionary work in modern conditions, and the Orthodox missionary must always take to heart the apostolic words: “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1Cor. 13:2).

III. Concluding Thoughts

Bulgarian-born educator Valentin Kozhuharov explicitly credits the Russian Orthodox Church as being the bellwether among all the former Soviet States in terms of heightened consciousness and practical application of social mission, adding the following: “We should note that ROC first started practically with mission and only then tried to theologically formulate what Orthodox mission was. It appeared that the theology lying behind the practical mission fully corresponded with the teaching of the Holy Fathers and the modern Orthodox theological research in Orthodox mission. This means that the ROC’s missionary activity confirmed again the true understanding of mission as interpreted and practiced in the Orthodox Church for centuries . . . .”

He also notes that the missiology and missionary practices of the ROC are still to be fully assessed within that Church, by other Orthodox Churches, by other Christian Traditions, and by other religions as well. Certainly, many missiological points reviewed above relating to sacrament, liturgy and soteriology accord well with Catholic teaching on these dimensions.

But a separate and significant issue remains subject to determination. Some interested observers are currently disquieted by the suspicion that, with its centralized Mission Department, the ROC is collaborating with State Ministries to promote an ideological commitment to a “greater Russia” in the diaspora while subverting the activities of non-Traditional religious organizations at home. It is this author’s firm hope that the “Mission of Reconciliation” with its appeals to various types of dialogue as explicated in the 2005 Concept (2007 version) will henceforth be the ROC’s predominant mode of interaction, and thus allay rather than compound this uneasiness.

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11 For example, the second section of the “Revival” Concept harmonizes well with this from Vatican II’s Ad Gentes:Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church: “Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God’s decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation. By the preaching of the word and by the celebration of the sacraments, the center and summit of which is the most holy Eucharist, He brings about the presence of Christ, the author of salvation.” (Section 1, no. 9.)