The parish in the diaspora and its missionary framework

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Abstract. The diaspora parish has significantly different characteristics than the traditional parishes in rural or urban areas in Romania. The process of establishing these parishes takes place gradually, deriving from the desire to experience a deep spiritual life and from the need for religious assistance for the Romanian community abroad.

Keywords. Priest, Parish, Diaspora, Spain, Mission

1. Parish – Church mission cell

The parish represents the smallest vital unit of the church structure and is considered the foundation of religious life. It constitutes the organic nucleus of the Body of Christ, that is, the Church, and does not act in isolation, but functions in close connection with the Ward to which it intrinsically belongs. Therefore, the integrity and coherence of the work carried out within the parish exerts a crucial impact on the entire church community. The fundamental purpose of any parish must coincide with the overall purpose of the Church, which is the spiritual transformation of the individual (theosis). All activities carried out within the parish are focused in unison towards achieving this goal, meant to transform and enrich the members of the community, this goal being immutable over time. The same goal transcends parishes in the diaspora, regardless of circumstances, period, challenges or geographical location. While the ultimate goal remains constant, the methods to achieve it may vary or adapt innovatively from traditional, widely known and applied strategies.

Romanian communities in Spain and Portugal have expressed particular interest in establishing parishes in these countries. Although at first glance it might seem that parishes were formed from the need to provide religious services such as baptism and marriage, the reality is more complex; They are the result of a deep search for an authentic religious life, similar to that lived in one's native land. This is supported by the fact that churches in parishes in the Diocese of Spain and Portugal are frequently populated on Sundays or during services, the level of participation being influenced by the size of each parish.

1 Gheorghios D. METALLINOS, Parish – Christ in Our Midst, p. 9.
2 † Metropolitan Emilianos TIMIADIS, Priest, Parish, Renewal, p. 125.
3 Before 1989 there was an Orthodox parish Romanian Madrid, which was the only one until 1999-2000. From 2000 until the establishment of the Diocese of Spain and Portugal (2008), 43 more parishes were established, and since 2008 their number has reached over 135 without filia.
2. Conditions for the establishment of the parish in the diaspora

- The creation of a parish is often a lengthy process, carried out gradually and influenced by the limitations of knowing the members of the community. The essential stages of establishing a parish in Spain can be summarized in the following stages: first, there arises a desire and a necessity for the establishment of a parish, motivated by various liturgical or pastoral considerations. This desire is supported by a group of individuals from a Romanian community, either with or without a priest. Subsequently, this intention is communicated to as many inhabitants of the city and its surroundings as possible through the representative group. Often, the proposal to establish a parish comes from the priest himself, but it is conditioned by the desire and consent of the faithful in that area. Once this initiative is triggered, the Diocese starts the necessary procedures for the establishment of the parish. The time it takes to complete the establishment process may vary depending on the circumstances, but never rush this process as it requires a period of consideration of all aspects, advantages and disadvantages of that community. In this initial stage of parish formation, missionary activities in those locations or communities are carried out with difficulty, given the significant number of unknowns (such as membership, missionary priorities, willingness of members to be actively involved). Thus, for a significant period, some of these future parishes may operate as branches or missions in development.

- The process of establishing a parish is itself an extended one. However, the parish in the diaspora differs from the one in the country of origin, where you find it already formed, having a concentrated presence and revolving around the parish church. In the diasporic context, stable parish churches are not common presences, but they are often created improvised. So until the community comes together around these makeshift and ephemeral altars, it can be a considerable amount of time, including years. The maturation of the parish in this environment is a blurred process, because some of the members of the community, even if they live geographically close or in the surroundings, do not yet have a clear awareness of their belonging to that parish. Unfortunately, the development of this parish consciousness does not take place synchronously with the actual establishment of the parish, which requires a significant missionary effort on the part of the priest to strengthen this bond. The duration of the process of parish formation can be reduced if the priest adopts a truly missionary profile and dedicates himself to finding and guiding his parishioners, helping them to realize that the parish represents a space of their spiritual unity as believers and as a place where the divine and terrestrial spheres meet. The absence of this missionary profile of the priest in the diasporic environment hampers missionary efforts as a whole and can generate a state of apathy regarding evangelization. At this point in the formation of the parish, the missionary priorities of the community gradually take shape.

3. Elements of the exercise of priestly mission in the diaspora

The missionary framework during the founding of a parish has a profoundly apostolic dimension. Priests move like the Apostles, to regions and cities in search of Orthodox believers. Initially, there is no permanent church, so meetings take place either in the homes of believers or in open spaces. An advantage of this missionary process is that the priest does not address foreigners or unconverts, but Christians, even if some practice religion more or less. A positive

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missionary characteristic is that from the first meeting of the priest with the faithful in a region or city, a team of missionaries begins to be formed. These faithful become the first apostles of the future parish.

This missionary team generally includes enthusiastic and deeply open members to faith, Church work, and commitment to founding the parish. Together with the priest, these first parish missionaries explore the city and develop strategies to attract as many believers as possible to this ongoing missionary endeavor, a process that takes time to mature. In this missionary context, things generally evolve favorably, because there are believers who want to start a mission or establish a parish in their city. However, it is important to highlight that some difficulties may arise due to people who either out of ignorance declare that they are not interested in a parish or church, or because of sectarian propaganda aimed at creating obstacles. However, these elements of opposition are not present in all situations. Generally, the desire for a parish is much greater than opposition from individuals promoting counterpropaganda.

During the formation stage of the parish, the percentage of passive believers, who are not actively involved, but who later, after its establishment, become active members of the parish, seeing things in a positive light, must also be taken into account. The beginnings of the Church's mission in the world were marked by a small group of Apostles; such beginnings are also found in the founding of a parish community. A group of dedicated believers, together with the priest, must attract around an altar all the faithful dispersed in that area or region. The key to developing a favorable missionary environment in founding a parish lies in activating and mobilizing the passive majority so that they become living pillars of the parish, participating both in services and in various parish projects. The level of passivity is influenced either by the lack of necessary information and details, or by the fact that many of the faithful are not yet practitioners, but starting with involvement in services, most gradually become part of the parish community. Also, receiving the Holy Mysteries and developing a parish conscience helps the faithful to gather around the parish altar.

4. The institutional-legal framework in the legislative context in Spain

When a parish is established, after the fundamental details of the parish framework have been established, according to the legal context in Spain, a mission or branch officially becomes a parish through the founding act issued by the Diocese. This act is supplemented by the act appointing the parish priest and/or minister. The process of establishing the legal status of the parish takes place after a series of steps and efforts made by the Diocese to the Spanish Ministry of Justice. The legal recognition of the newly established parish comes at a stage subsequent to the recognition of the parish priest as official priest by the Ministry of Justice. Initially, it is necessary to complete the formalities related to the status of the priest (residence documents, enrollment with the Diocese, official recognition by the Spanish state as a priest, medical insurance, etc.), and then the procedures are started to obtain the recognition of the parish and the tax number, which gives the parish legal status and various rights, according to the laws applicable to legal entities in Spain, as well as in Portugal. In many parishes, especially in the first years after their establishment, between one and several years pass from the issuance of the founding act by the Diocese to obtaining legal recognition from the Spanish State and

5 See Fr. Prof. Dr. Boris BOBRINSKIOY, The Mystery of the Church, p. 221.
6 Fr. Prof. Dr. Valer BEL, Mission, parish, pastoral care. Coordinates for a Missionary Strategy, pp. 56-58.
issuing the tax number\textsuperscript{7}. This interval may vary, being also determined by the fact that parish recognition files are not registered individually, but for a larger group of parishes, thus having advantages in the recognition process. Although excessive bureaucratisation can prolong this process, submitting documents in groups and at different times is more efficient to avoid further delays. Even though waiting for legal recognition may take time, this period does not affect the mission of the parish or its ongoing projects.

5. The specific elements of the Orthodox parish in Spain
The establishment of an Orthodox parish in the diaspora is an extremely complex process, requiring considerable sacrifices, the allocation of adequate resources and generous patience. The Orthodox parish in the Diaspora differs by its method of establishment, its mission, its recipients and especially by the geographical and cultural context in which it exists as an entity and as a shelter of salvation. The characteristics of a parish in the diaspora are significantly different from those of parishes in the country of origin.

a) The priest from the diasporic environment must be a dynamic personality, a dedicated missionary and with a great capacity to expect results in time. Primordial for the development of the community is the priest, who must actively go out into the world and not wait for believers to come to his church. In the first year, it is crucial for the priest to be energetic, always on the move and actively seek out the faithful. In the diasporic environment, the priest is a shepherd who has his flock, but sheep are spread over a wide geographical area. His missionary and pastoral efforts are directed towards gathering these sheep around the same altar, in the same spiritual fold. A distinctive feature of the priest in the diaspora is that initially he seeks the faithful, and only later, along the way, the faithful seek him. The dedication and interpersonal skills of the priest are crucial in the process of establishing the parish, given that in the diaspora, Christian communities are substantially influenced by the character and behavior of spiritual leaders. The dynamics of mission and pastoral care within the diaspora parish are of paramount importance for creating a community identity and strengthening parish consciousness.

b) Another distinctive feature is related to the members or beneficiaries of the parish, who for the most part are Orthodox, but who are not located in a single village or neighborhood, as is the case in Romania. They are spread over a much wider geographical area, in some cases covering 10-15 neighboring localities, especially when their number is small in each locality. But setting up separate parishes in each of these localities is not feasible, because the total amount of believers can be 800-1000 in total, and all of them are, in some way, part of a single parish located in the locality with the largest number of Orthodox Romanians. At the time of establishment, the exact number of Orthodox believers is unknown, but only an estimate of the Romanians living in the area, and this does not mean that they are all Orthodox or that they will all automatically become members of the parish. It is essential to emphasize that the members of a parish are formed over time, and their number gradually increases. The first members of the parish are the group of missionary believers, involved together with the priest in the efforts to establish and consolidate the parish. In the next 2-3 years, believers from the area are added to them, which begins to shape the parish and give it consistency. The recipients of an Orthodox parish are Orthodox Romanians from city or area X, who become members

\textsuperscript{7} After recognition, every parish receives from the Tributary Agency (lb. sp. Agencia Tributaria, through the Administration Office- lb. sp. Oficina de Gestion Tributaria) the NIF, i.e. Tax Identification Number, in Spanish: Tarjeta Acreditativa del Numero de Identificacion Fiscal, example: R4801379-C.
through active participation in services and involvement in the community over time. This process requires constant pastoral care and patience, and is often marked by successes and disappointments. Another important aspect is related to migration dynamics. The community is very active and mobile, always influenced by job opportunities. This causes many families to migrate or move at regular intervals. The economic crisis of 2008 had a significant and long-term impact on the number of Romanians in the community/parish. This dynamic pattern is influenced by fluctuations in the economy and means that the parish never has a closed or stable list of members. Every year, some families leave the community, while new ones join, coming from different parts of the country or even from other European countries. This aspect adds a level of dynamism, but at the same time complicates the statistical and pastoral efforts of the parish priest, who must always identify new families, build a continuous relationship with them and provide the most effective pastoral care.

c) The liturgical synaxis and communion in the diaspora develop with difficulty, because members not only come from the city where the main church is located, but come from numerous localities, each with its own geographical, cultural and social peculiarities. Despite these differences, people understand over time that they are united in Christ (Galatians 3:28), and the Divine Liturgy gathers them under the same roof and unites them around the same altar, regardless of their differences. A notable aspect of the liturgical synaxis in the diaspora is the pace of members’ participation in the liturgical life of the parish. In the initial stage of the parish, the liturgical synaxis may be reduced in number, but intensely involved, as the group of several dozen faithful consolidates and develops over time. Although the number increases, the character of the liturgical synaxis varies from Sunday to Sunday, due to the fluctuating participation of Christians in the diaspora. They engage in liturgical services in a rotational way, i.e. they attend services on some Sundays but are absent on others, depending on their personal schedule or level of faith and orthopraxis. This variation in participation is significantly influenced by work and level of spiritual engagement. There is a stable core of believers who regularly attend Sunday services, and around them are added those who come on a rotational basis. As time passes and the parish gets older, the liturgical synaxis matures and becomes more constant and involved, with more regular and stable participation of members.

d) The allocation of parishes in the diaspora is not defined concretely, but rather indicatively, based on a number of localities or a particular region. This situation is not because delimitation is not desired, but because in the diaspora, the geographical delimitation of parish boundaries is difficult to achieve and brings few advantages in terms of pastoral care or concrete benefits. First, the mix and mobility of believers in the diaspora would lead to frequent changes in parish boundaries, and this could create interference and confusion regarding the jurisdiction of neighboring parishes. Second, in the diaspora, believers do not always have a clear awareness of the geographical boundaries of a parish, but often choose to attend the services of the church that seems best for them, even if it is not the closest geographically. This is a reality given by the fact that some believers are in localities where there is no parish nearby, and their choice to join a particular parish is made individually. Thus, it is possible that in some localities there are several priests who carry out pastoral care at the same time, depending on how the faithful affiliated themselves to the parishes in the area. For this reason, the concept of assigning a parish to the diaspora is more indicative than strictly geographically delimited.

In most situations, neighbouring parishes collaborate and support each other, because this collaboration is beneficial for all involved: both believers and parishes. In an effort to support mission and pastoral care more effectively, some larger parishes requested the establishment of other parishes in the same area, which had a significant impact on spiritual life.
in the region. Parishes with a large geographical area and numerous faithful spread over considerable distances have reassessed their mission and have chosen to establish more parishes. This strategy led to an extraordinary dynamization of the spiritual life in the area. The more parishes there are in a given area, the higher the quality of religious assistance and spiritual life. The presence of more priests means more churches, smaller territorial borders, shorter distances and the possibility of carrying out more parish projects. Thus, collaboration between parishes and their multiplication in an area is an effective approach to meet the demands of believers and to develop spiritual communities in the context of the diaspora.

These are the main characteristics that define parishes in the diaspora, but in addition, there are other aspects to consider. For example, the lack of churches or places of worship, as well as the absence of cemeteries, are significant logistical and administrative issues.

6. Problems encountered by the diaspora parish

In the Orthodox Diaspora (Romanian), in addition to the aforementioned parish-related peculiarities, there are a number of (missionary) difficulties deriving from these particularities or occurring separately. These deficiencies can complicate parish mission and negatively affect community development. Here are some of them:

a) Lack of places of worship: One of the main challenges in the diaspora is the lack of places of worship dedicated to Orthodox parishes. Most parishes must serve in rented premises or use Catholic churches for services. This situation can generate uncertainty and make it difficult to carry out parish activities, as the same spaces must host several activities at the same time, including services, sermons, parish schools and community events.

b) Time Restrictions and Overlapping Activities: The fact that parishes do not have their own places of worship can lead to time restrictions and overlapping activities. In Catholic churches rented for services, the time allotted for liturgies and activities is often limited, which can lead to pressure on ministers and parishes to fit all activities into a short time frame.

c) Lack of Consistent Catechesis: Catechesis, i.e. religious education and spiritual formation, can be inconsistent or inconsistent across the diaspora. Although there are efforts to provide catechesis, it can be difficult to implement due to time restrictions and other challenges specific to the diasporic context. Catechesis is essential for the formation of believers, especially in cases of conversion to Orthodoxy or to strengthen the theological knowledge of the community.

d) Catechesis in the Diaspora: Since 2014, efforts have been initiated to improve the situation of catechesis in the Diaspora. The diocesan catechization program was developed and baptismal catechesis and pre-marital catechesis were introduced. There is also an effort to train and specialize catechists through the Dumitru Stănăioae Study and Research Center in Paris.8

These missionary challenges reflect the specific difficulties faced by Orthodox parishes in the diaspora in their quest to fulfill their mission and develop as spiritual and religious communities. However, continuous efforts to improve catechesis and find solutions to overcome restrictions on places of worship can contribute to the development of a strong and active community in the diaspora.

A distinct missionary situation is found in the case of large parishes, also known as "mammoth parishes". They face significant challenges, characterised by covering a territory

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comparable to that of a county, managing a considerable number of believers and overcoming
great distances, including more than 100 kilometres. We looked at these issues in more detail
in the previous section. Parishes of this type risk becoming in some way a "diaspora within the
diaspora", a complex structure difficult to manage from the perspective of pastoral care and
mission. They face significant requirements, requiring considerable involvement of the
ministering priest, while the obstacles to carry out the Sunday liturgical synaxis are multiple,
including issues of logistics, distance and limited space for conducting services. This problem
was more pronounced in the 2000s, but with the establishment of the Diocese of Spain and
Portugal, partial solutions to this situation began to be identified. Various strategies have been
proposed to address this complex issue. For example, within large and extensive parishes, it
was considered useful to develop branches that could evolve into independent parishes in the
future. The possibility of dividing large parishes into smaller entities to facilitate religious
management and mission was also discussed. In addition, the association of several priests and
deacons within the same parish proved to be a solution to divide responsibilities and improve
the efficiency of church actions at the local level. However, a number of challenges remain. The
lack of clerical personnel is one of the most important, and current figures show that the number
of approximately 140 Romanian Orthodox ministers \(^9\) in the Iberian Peninsula is insufficient to
meet the spiritual requirements of Orthodox communities. Consequently, a sustained and
continuous approach is needed to bring a greater number of priests and deacons to this area, and
the active involvement of the laity in the ecclesiastical mission plays an essential role. Also, in
the diaspora, the parish priest faces additional challenges, such as the absence of support from
teachers or teachers of religion, which are more common in the Romanian context. In addition
to the usual religious responsibilities, the parish priest may have additional tasks, such as
managing the parish school. In the diasporic environment, it is rare to find teachers of religion
or other specialized educators within parishes. However, there are ongoing initiatives with a
focus on youth volunteering that support the parish and priest in their missionary activities.
Another missionary challenge concerns organizing activities during the weekend. In this
context, the diaspora priest is often forced to combine multiple responsibilities in a very short
space of time, including religious services, parish school, interactions with young people and
catechesis on Saturdays, followed by Mass, sermon and other activities on Sunday. It is worth
mentioning that most believers carry out their professional activities during the week, similar
to the situation in Romania. However, in the diaspora, working hours are often longer and
demanding than in the country of origin, which complicates participation in the entire church
program\(^10\). In many situations, even the priest faces a busy schedule during the week, and may
have to provide the income necessary to support the family by working beyond this interval. It
is desirable for the parish to be able to financially support the priest, so that he does not have to
spend five days a week in another field of activity insignificant for the Church and its mission.
The effectiveness of the Church’s mission, at parish level, is closely linked to the commitment
and time that the priest invests in serving the Church and guiding those entrusted to his
pastorate.

There are parishes that have programs during the week, but attendance is low and the
number of believers present is limited, which causes the parish priest to concentrate most
activities almost exclusively on weekends or certain holidays. The differences between the
Romanian Orthodox calendar and the Spanish or Portuguese working calendar are significant,

\(^9\) This was the statistical situation of ministers in the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Spain and Portugal in May 2021.
\(^10\) John I. ICA Jr., Germano MARANI, Social Thought of the Church, p. 485).
making it difficult to participate in holidays that do not coincide directly. However, the evening program (Wednesday and Friday) brings a significant benefit in pastoral ministry. Being scheduled on these evenings (usually after 19:00 or 20:00), allows believers to participate in spiritual services and activities after work, including confession or other spiritual needs.

As the Orthodox Romanian diaspora in Spain and Portugal matures, these deficiencies in the missionary-pastoral sphere are likely to be eliminated and the solutions proposed in this context will be updated accordingly.

References