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The unity of the Church in Saint Irenaeus' ecclesiology

Abstract

The unity of the Church has always been of major concern for early Christians. They understood this unity as a real tangible experience, remote and hidden in the uncertainty of the future. They believed that the unity of the Church could secure the cohesion among the Christian communities, and the communication inside the Christian community was, in its turn, the essential condition that provided the support for the consolidation and the development of the ecclesial unity. The Fathers of the Church have understood the importance of keeping and supporting the unity and the stability inside the Church, in order to provide an efficient Christian mission everywhere in the world. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the evolution and complexity of the ecumenical dimension of Irenaeus of Lyon's ecclesiology, one of the most representatives of the Fathers of the Church, during the early centuries. Aware of the power of dialogue and pastoral mission, he preached not only for the early Christians who at that time found themselves surrounded and confused by different inaccurate doctrines, but also for the pagans, to whom he spread the message of Jesus Christ's Gospel of love.

Keywords: unity, Church, dialogue, ecumenism, Irenaeus, mission.

Jedność Kościoła w eklezjologii św. Ireneusza z Lyonu

Streszczenie

Jedność Kościoła od najwcześniejszych lat była głównym przedmiotem troski chrześcijan. Już w starożytności rozumieli oni tę jedność jako rzeczywiste doświadczenie, choć odległe i ukryte w niepewnej przyszłości. Wierzono, że jedność Kościoła może zapewnić spójność wspólnot chrześcijańskich, z kolei komunikacja wewnątrz wspólnoty chrześcijańskiej jest podstawowym warunkiem, zapewniającym konsolidację i rozwój jedności kościelnej. Ojcowie Kościoła rozumieli, jak ważne jest utrzymanie i wspieranie jedności i stabilności wewnątrz Kościoła, aby zapewnić skuteczną misję chrześcijańską na całym świecie. Celem niniejszego studium jest ukazanie ewolucji i złożoności ekumenicznego wymiaru eklezjologii św. Ireneusza z Lyonu, jednego z najbardziej reprezentatywnych Ojców Kościoła pierwszych wieków. Zdając sobie sprawę ze znaczenia dialogu i misji duszpasterskiej, ze swoim przepowiadaniem zwracał się nie tylko do ówczesnych chrześcijan, konfrontowa-

ných z różnymi błędnymi doktrynami, ale także do pogan, którym głosił orędzie Ewangelii miłości Jezusa Chrystusa.

Słowa kluczowe: jedność, Kościół, dialog, ekumenizm, Ireneusz, misja.

Dialogue and cultural adjustment – linguistics as a missionary approach

Saint Irenaeus was born in Smyrna. In the Orthodox tradition this is the point of view generally accepted, and even if he was not born in Smyrna, he must have come from a nearby region¹, in Asia Minor, where Greek was the *lingua franca*. When he moved to Lugdunum, Gaul (nowadays Lyon in France), in the late years of the second century, he had no real problems in overcoming the linguistic difficulties, but the cultural differences were great enough to require some adjustments, especially when he had to join the clergy and begin his missionary and preaching activity.

During Irenaeus' time, the Celts were living in Gaul, as well as in other parts of Europe for hundreds of years². The pagan customs and traditions had existed long before Christianity, and these traditions continued to be a part of the local people's way of life even after the Roman conquest. The Celt gods received Roman names, but the local traditions and customs still remained deep in their minds and souls³. In the third century the Celtic/Gallic *leuga* was reintroduced in place of the Roman mile, as a unit of length meant for measuring the distances⁴.

Lugdunum which meant "the stronghold of god Lug", remained a central point for the annual meetings of the chieftains of the local tribes. Except for the prohibition of human sacrifices and the introduction of the emperor cult, the local religion had not been suppressed by the Roman authorities. The Celtic paganism, which was practiced several centuries before the arrival of Christians, was a historical reality in the area surrounding Lyon. As a result, a preaching mission in those territories was not only an act of bravery but a dangerous adventure, and Irenaeus was willing to risk his life in order to teach the words of Christ. The evangelisation of the Celts was probably one of the most outstanding achievements of Saint Irenaeus.

¹ Dennis Minns. 2010. *Irenaeus*. London: T&T Clark, 1. For some interesting comments on his life see Morton S. Enslin. 1947. "Irenaeus: Mostly Prolegomena". *Harvard Theological Review* 40 (3) : 144–146.

² Gerhard Herm. 1976. *The Celts: the people who came out of darkness*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 47.

³ Jean Daniélou. 2008, *The beginnings of the Church. From origins to the end of the IIIrd century*. Bucharest: Herald Publishing House, 136.

⁴ Herve le Floch. 2002. *The Celts – an original civilization*. Bucharest: "Prietenii Cărții" Press, 121.

Although in Lungdunum, as a part of the Roman Empire, Greek and Latin were both considered official languages, they were not spoken by all the people, given the large diversity of the rural and urban population. For example, during the Flavian and Antonine dynasties (68–192) the majority of the rural population, in contrast with the urban people, was more reluctant in adopting the two official languages of the empire and continued to use (in parallel with Latin and Greek) their native languages. Throughout the Roman Empire numerous populations continued to use their own language such as: the peasants in Phrygia and Galatia, the Berbers from Africa, the Celts living in Britannia and Gaul, the Iberians of Spain, the Germans on the Rhine, the Thracians and Illyrians from the Balkan Peninsula and hundreds of Semite and non-Semitic tribes living in Asia Minor and Syria⁵.

In the third century, Latin was adopted by the Gauls who wanted education and also to have a better understanding of the Latin culture and civilisation, but lawyers still recognized the validity of the documents written in Gallic language⁶.

On the other hand, the language spoken by rural communities was the native one, the so called “heart language”. It was a period of linguistic and religious diversity, which was sort of fascinating, but this amazing diversity represented a hindrance for the work of a missionary, in our case Irenaeus, who advocated for *the unity in diversity*, the unity in the same religion, adjusted to the needs of each particular community. Therefore, being convinced of the fact that the evangelic message loses its original meaning and purpose with each misinterpreted or erroneous translation, he decides to learn the language of those who are willing to convert to Christianity. This decision proves to be a very inspired one, and the results are visible in the outcome of his missionary actions among the pagan communities of Celts and Gauls that lived around Lyon.

He certainly could communicate more easily with the Greek and Latin inhabitants that lived in the same area, but on the other hand he is well aware of the limitations imposed by the partial knowledge of a language or local dialect. He doesn't pretend to be capable of using the newly acquired language in order to achieve an elegant discourse with witty sentences. All that mattered to him was to be able to convey the religious message in a simple and direct manner, and to adjust the conveyed information to the social and intellectual context of his listeners. He confesses this, openly in the preface of *Against Heresies*: “You will not expect from me, who am resident among the Keltæ, and am accustomed for the most part to use a barbarous dialect, any display of rhetoric, which I have never

⁵ F. Bohîlțea Mihuț. 2004. Social and economical structures. In *The history of the Ancient Rome*. Bucharest: Fundația România de Măine Publishing House, 36.

⁶ Dan Grigorescu. 2003. *The Druids and their enigmatic world*. Bucharest: Universul Press, 49.

learned, or any excellence of composition, which I have never practised, or any beauty and persuasiveness of style, to which I make no pretensions”⁷.

If Greek and Latin were widely used in towns, by the local and central administration, and the official documents were written only in these official languages, why did Irenaeus need to use a “barbarous dialect” to accomplish his work? The answer is not hard to find. Although the urban inhabitants were accustomed to use, to a certain extent, the official languages, in the rural communities Irenaeus had to speak to less educated and simple-minded people who spoke only their native language. Irenaeus understood perfectly that in order to convince and convert people to Christianity; he had to use their own language, the language that people felt and understood perfectly, with all its semantic and spiritual depths.

Several ideas expressed by Irenaeus in the Preface of his work *Against Heresies*, have produced some confusion and led some of the eccentrics to believe that he was of Celtic origins⁸, and learning a new dialect was only natural for him, and the use of dialects in his preaching work shows the fact that his knowledge of Greek language was somehow limited⁹.

Maybe the most appropriate interpretation of Irenaeus affirmations would be that his poor knowledge of Greek is partially due to the frequent interactions with local Celtic people that spoke only the Celtic language. In other words, Irenaeus’ words have been interpreted in different ways by the church scholars and researchers. Some of them consider it obvious that Greek was for Irenaeus only a second or maybe a third language¹⁰.

In other words, following a logical interpretation of the facts we may reach the conclusion that the praises he received for the evangelisation of the Gallic and Celtic populations that lived around Lyon are somehow exaggerated, because he was familiar with the Celtic language, and learning a new dialect was not a challenge for him. Even if the hypothesis according to which Irenaeus was of Celtic origins proved correct – although there is not any real evidence to prove that – nothing can take away from him the praises that he deserves for his outstanding missionary work among the pagans. He succeeded in evangelizing the pagans and he enabled them to embrace Christianity in a period in which even admitting to be a Christian was an act of courage.

Some researchers (such as Fox Robin Lane) believe that the ideas expressed by Irenaeus in his Preface to *Against Heresies*, do not support the aforementioned

⁷ Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les hérésies*, Preface III, 409.

⁸ Dumitru Berciu. 1970. *The world of the Celts*. Bucharest: Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 121–130.

⁹ Harvey W. Wigan. 1857. *Sancti Irenaei: Episcopi Lugdunensis. Two volumes*. Cantabrigae: Typis academicis, 231.

¹⁰ Harvey W. Wigan. 1857. *Sancti Irenaei: Episcopi Lugdunensis*, 231.

hypothesis, but come to prove that the bishop of Lyon was rather modest. He does not consider himself to be a great orator, and he does not pretend to master the harmony and the beauty of the discourse. These ideas presented in the Preface seem rather the excuses that a lettered man makes for the simplicity of his conventional style, a style which he sees appropriate for his time. In other words, the statement in *Preface* is more like a literary disclaimer written as an excuse, similar to the “witty excuses” written by the poet Ovid, while in exile at Tomis¹¹.

The second hypothesis seems to be more convincing because it proposes a more cautious analysis regarding the linguistic knowledge of the bishop of Lyon, and his capacity to speak different languages and dialects, capacity that allowed him to perform such a complex missionary activity, unique at that time.

Of course, there have been other exceptional individuals in the first centuries such as Ulfilas who in 350 invented a Bothis script and taught the people the Scriptures by using his own translation. Thus, we cannot be entirely sure what a minor preacher in a small African or Pontic township may have tried for his missionary end.

As for the case of the bishop of Lyon, we do not know exactly what happened, to what extent Irenaeus used the Greek language or the Celtic with its dialects. If he used a certain Celtic dialect, it should not come as a surprise because, living among them, “he was used to speaking their language”, especially because he was born in Asia Minor and thus came into contact at an early age with the Celtic people¹². What we know for sure is that the object of Irenaeus concern were the simple people, or as he calls them: the “simple minded”, the “inexperienced” and the “simple ones” and we know his mission was successful because the majority of the pagan tribes that liven in the Lyon’s area converted to Christianity thanks to Irenaeus sustained efforts.

Missiologists consider that the linguistic approach adopted by Irenaeus was an approach of adjustment, accommodation and adaptation and even of contextualisation¹³.

Several studies that deal with trans-cultural activity point out that it is advisable and even necessary when working with a foreign community to use their native language in order to achieve a meaningful communication. If Irenaeus’ concerns were more pastoral than evangelical, it is of little importance. But the fact that he made a lot of efforts to adapt to the conditions in which he was compelled to work indicates his cultural sensibility, even if he didn’t think highly of the local Celtic dialect.

¹¹ Fox Robin Lane. 1989. *Paganas and Christians*. London: Penguin, 286.

¹² For a quick analysis of *Against Heresies* see James R. Payton jr. 2012. *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith. A Condensation of Against Haeresis*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 210.

¹³ Nichita Runcan. 1999. *The History of the Patristic Literature during the age of Anti-Christian Persecutions*. Constanța: Europolis Publishing House, 27.

Ecclesial unity: the main dimension of Christian ecumenism

The Church was compelled even from its beginnings to fight against heretics and schismatic movements which tried to undermine its doctrinal, moral and administrative unity. The internal quarrels regarding the confession of faith caused an unhappy turmoil which threatened the very existence of the Church as an institution. Facing such a difficult situation, Irenaeus understood that to preserve the ecclesiastic unity, key elements were imperative. These were the readiness to dialogue, Christian mission and the power of the words¹⁴.

The desire for unity led Irenaeus to conceive a plan to avoid confronting those who – due to various reasons – have deserted the Church, embraced other beliefs and became heretics. He tried to find a way to talk to them and to make them reassess and change their beliefs. He was not a man who loved confrontations, despite the fact that in his writings, namely *Against Heresies* he presented a long list of heresies that troubled the Church and endangered the Christian unity¹⁵. He rather assumed a role as a mediator in the quarrel among the bishops of his time regarding the exact time of the Easter celebration¹⁶.

His actions, according to the contemporary church scholars, show that the ecumenical idea has always existed within the Church and this idea found its origins in the ecclesiastic unity, wider culture and Christian motivation¹⁷. According to Irineu Pop, bishop of Alba Iulia, Saint Irenaeus managed, in a very successful way, to contrast the diversity of Gnostic doctrines with the unity of faith, based on the rightful understanding of the writings of the Holy Writs. And for that, it is necessary to consider Irenaeus, *par excellence*, as one of the most important theologians of Christian unity, because he sought peace instead of war, and preferred dialogue, instead of confrontation. His influence regarding the development of the Church as an institution was most likely greater than any other scholar that lived in the early three centuries¹⁸.

The pages that the bishop of Lyon had written about unity, purity and the greatness of the Church are glorious and immortal. He was convinced that the unity of all Christians is achievable through the Church, because the Church, thanks to

¹⁴ Mathew Hollen. 2015. *Irenaeus of Lyons: A Defense of Recapitulation*, a thesis submitted to the Faculty of George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Candidace for the Degree of Master of Arts in Divinity. Portland/Oregon, 51.

¹⁵ Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon wrote many works against different forms of Gnosticism. See Denis Minns. 2010. *Irenaeus*, 10–21; James Payton jr. 2012. *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith. A Condensation of Against Haeresis*, 4–13; Robert Grant. 1997. *Irenaeus of Lyons*. London: Routledge, 11–20.

¹⁶ Sorin Bădrăgan. 2013. „Considerations regarding the nature of the Church, according to the most representative Church Fathers of the first centuries”. *Jurnalul Teologic* 12 (1) : 22–23.

¹⁷ Irineu Bistrițeanul, P.S. 1998. *Saint Irenaeus polemist and theologian*, Cluj-Napoca: Carimpex, 21.

¹⁸ Alexandru Ciurea. 1940. *The concept of Church. The doctrinal and sanctifying role of the Church, according to Saint Irenaeus*. Iași: Mitropolia Moldovei Publishing House, 78.

the Tradition, is the guardian of the apostolic faith and preaching throughout the world. In Irenaeus' understanding, the world is the house where all the Christians live; he believes and speaks to all of the believers as if they were a single soul and a single heart. According to his sayings, the Tradition promotes the same message for all, and that is because, while the various languages spoken on this earth are so different, the Tradition always remains unique and the same.

For Irenaeus, Ecclesia is "the place of redemption and life in the most accomplished way possible" and all this is tightly associated with the Holy Spirit because "where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is also the Church with all its grace; and moreover the Holy Spirit is the Truth"¹⁹. Saint Irenaeus continues to apply the teachings adopted at the end of the 2nd century, according to which the leading role in the Eucharist is firmly attributed to the bishop. He considered that the bishop is the "centre" of Eucharist and the one who ensures the unity seen of Christians in the Church²⁰.

This restrictive practice regarding the Eucharist was modified over the centuries, allowing not only the bishops but also the priests, and especially those that guide the Christian communities to perform the sacred ritual of Eucharist (the symbol of the Church unity)²¹.

Because of all the heresies that he has to confront during all his religious activity, the bishop of Lyon focuses his attention on the continuous process of education/teaching of the new members of the Church, especially regarding the sacramental service, and this concern of his comes from the desire to manage properly the Eucharist, the secret Ritual that ensures the knowledge and personal development of every Christian, and also the consolidation of the Church itself²².

The bishop of Lyon has greatly contributed and succeeded in preserving, the unity of the Church. Moreover, he helped identify the fundamental truths regarding the structure, the extent and the functionality of the Christian Church which was always under the assault of numerous heretical doctrines.

His call to the faithful ones was formulated very clearly: "Flee to the Church, and be brought up in her bosom, and be nourished by the Lord's Scriptures. The Church has been planted as a paradise in this world"²³.

¹⁹ Irénée de Lyon. 1974. *Contre les hérésies*, III, 24.1, Sources Chrétiennes. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 453.

²⁰ Kallistos Ware. 1982. "Patterns of episcopacy in the early church today: an orthodox view". In Peter Moore (ed.). *Bishops, but What Kind?: reflections on episcopacy*, 11. London: SPCK.

²¹ For the role of the Eucharist in the Church in view of the salvation of believers, see Mathew Hollen, *Irenaeus of Lyons: A Defense of Recapitulation*, 51–60.

²² Kallistos Ware. 1982. "Patterns of episcopacy in the early church today: an orthodox view", 11–12

²³ Irénée de Lyon. 1974. *Contre les hérésies*, II, 32.4, Sources Chrétiennes. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 398.

Saint Irenaeus fully understands the unity of the Church in its entirety, by means of a double connection: an external one which regards the relation between the Christians and the Church, and an internal one which focuses on the communication and cooperation between the members of a higher hierarchy (such as priests and bishops). The Unity between the Christians and the Church consists in identifying both the faithful and the Church with the same religion and the refusal of any other teaching that would endanger the existence of that religion. The cooperation between the bishops is realized in order to promote the same doctrine, the same moral and spiritual values, the same canonical rules, so that there would be no divergence between the theoretical and practical values in the process of preaching.

Those who deserted the Church were summoned back and reintegrated within the church, but only if they repented and showed signs of humility.

If there is an *ecumenical dimension* in his ecclesiology, this doesn't mean that Irenaeus is disposed to compromise regarding the teaching of Christian belief, he doesn't want to keep his followers within the Church at all costs. On the contrary, he seems to be stricter than others when he must take measures in order to protect the Church against the threats from the heretics. The mercy that he shows to those who have left the Christian community refers only to a limited number of rites and customs that do not affect the fundamental principles of the Church and its doctrine.

Ecumenical diplomacy

Although the Church was compelled to respect several universal doctrines, from the historical perspective the Church had to protect itself against the threats represented by local and provincial religions.

Saint Irenaeus was a true visionary in the field of missiology, during the first Christian centuries. Preoccupied by the necessity of preserving the unity of the Church, he always sought to guard his community and the new converts against the threats of the local Gnostics, and for that he strived to know every doctrine, to expose it and to dismantle it by using biblical arguments. However, he did not adopt an aggressive approach, which would have eventually led to conflicts, but rather a persuasive approach, using common sense and persuasion.

For that, he should be considered an *ecumenical missionary*, because, without demonizing his religious adversaries and without despising the culture of those whom he sought to convert, he knew how to use his mediating qualities, his art of speaking and skills of persuasion.

Despite his own convictions he succeeded in creating communication bridges between people coming from different cultures, different religions and different

linguistic traditions, by preaching to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to each and everyone according to their level of understanding and expectation. For that reason I firmly believe that even from its beginnings, Irenaeus' missionary activity had had a well-defined *ecumenical dimension* because his purpose was to bring everyone to know the truth, to preserve and strengthen the unity of love between people and to preach the words of God by means of intercultural dialogue.

I think the missiologists and the researchers on the field of missionary methodology should very carefully analyse the life and activity of this influential Christian missionary as there are still numerous sources of inspiration to be discovered.

Pastoral mission – motivation, continuity and religious conversion

Saint Irenaeus was a gifted missionary, who carried out his work in a very organized manner. His mission was never devoid of meaning, but well planned and following all the steps necessary in order to succeed, in accordance with the places and communities within which he had to work. Furthermore, his missionary activity was always carried out according to his sincere motivation, a motivation that followed him throughout his entire life²⁴. It is also necessary to point out the fact that he was forced to perform his missionary and pastoral actions during a period of extremely difficult social conditions.

At the end of the 2nd century the Christians were still persecuted by the Roman emperors. Irenaeus succeeded Pothinus as bishop of Lyon, knowing that his predecessor suffered death as a martyr after a short but brutal persecution during Emperor Marcus Aurelius' reign²⁵. Eusebius the historian describes persecution as an act of paganism against the people of God, and he gives accounts about many persons that have been killed following persecution. Life in Gaul was far from being simple and peaceful. The Christians had to be aware of many dangers; the Roman government was hostile, and the Celtic population was not ready to give up their long-standing religious traditions. The position as a priest of the Christian church was not a secure one, because the persecution could begin at any time, if the emperor wanted it to happen. Rome did not approve the missionary preaching of Christianity among his subjects. On the contrary, most of the persecutions began whenever Rome thought it necessary. This was the reason that determined Irenaeus to write "letters of correction to Schismatics in Rome"²⁶.

²⁴ Regarding the reasons that have influenced him and his missionary methods see Cairns Earle. 1992. *Christianity over the Centuries*. Oradea: Societatea Misionară Română Publishing House, 143.

²⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea. 1987. *The History of the Church* (Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești [PSB]). Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al BOR Publishing House, 106.

²⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea. *The History of the Church*, 87.

This fact proves that Irenaeus had a vast missionary and pastoral experience and he also showed a great amount of courage, almost like a martyr. Those who are skeptical regarding the motivation of his actions, must not confuse the power of confessing Christ (a confession that our Lord was willing to make even if it meant risking his own life) and the desire to obtain earthly fame and glory. Saint Irenaeus was a man who was well aware of the tendencies in the religious politics of his time; he was pragmatic enough to know what he had to do, how and when to take action

We do not know exactly all the aspects and reasons that influenced, in one way or another, Irenaeus' motivation, but the writings that are available make us believe that there is a close connection between his moral character, his way of dealing with different social and religious situations, as was the case in Lyon, and how he took action in a practical way, whenever necessary. This mental equilibrium must have helped him make the best decisions during his missionary works of teaching the Gospel. The same mental equilibrium gave Irenaeus the strength to consolidate the unity between Christians, despite their differences, and helped him carry out a high quality, coherent and extensive pastoral-missionary activity. He went beyond the borders of his community, and sought to fulfil his mission as well as he could.

The biblical motivation of his mission

His enthusiasm throughout his entire literary work, *Against Heresies*, shows Irenaeus to be a religious man with a lot of affection not only for his community of Christians but also for the ones to whom he preaches the Word of God, with the hope of bringing them back into the light or converting them to the righteous path of salvation through the Church of Christ²⁷.

These feelings of affection have been seen as a motivational reason, pointed out by the author's explanations and the reasons that drove him to write his literary work. At the beginning of Book V, he explains his intentions and his purpose, intentions that were detailed in the first four books. He claimed that he had described and refuted different Gnostic errors, revealed the truth as it is taught by the Church and described and explained the continuity that exists between the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ and the contemporary Church. He also claims to have rejected as untrue and unworthy all the questions that the heretics had raised. His purpose was very clear: to offer support to all those who had contact with the heretics, and to bring them back to the righteous way as

²⁷ Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les hérésies*, I, Preface 2, 315.

in the parable of the prodigal son; to convert them to the Church of God and to strengthen the minds of the neophytes²⁸.

As a conclusion to what we have already said, we believe that the bishop of Lyon was a gifted man, endowed with many virtues. He was an authentic missionary even if acted sometimes like an experienced preacher, but not a philosopher or missionary. Anyway he instilled spiritual warmth, dedication and ardour in the fundamental concepts of religion, which he promotes with a convincing and concise enthusiasm²⁹.

According to Irenaeus, the Gospel has an *intrinsic ecumenical dimension*, because it had to be preached in the entire world. He was convinced of the necessity and obligation to fulfil the commandments that Jesus Christ gave to his disciples and apostles. Irenaeus was the disciple of the bishop Polycarp, who, in his turn knew Saint John the apostle in person. It is possible that Irenaeus somehow felt this duty, as being entrusted to him directly by Christ, via this apostolic succession³⁰.

So it follows that, Irenaeus believed in the necessity of the evangelisation of all the people, and this necessity had its roots in the essence of the Gospel and in this divine "authority" passed on to him by his predecessors, the final goal was the salvation of all humanity.

His determination and his enthusiasm are supported by his belief that God was always present within man, and man must praise God by receiving and attending to His Son, who was born as a man on this earth, Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, according to Irenaeus, the true call of the human being was to have the "the vision of God" through the work of Jesus Christ because the glory of God is in man, and the life of man is dedicated to praising God³¹.

The accomplishment of this "objective" was somehow conditioned by the way in which people listened and understood the teachings of the Gospel learning about the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit as a fulfilment of the prophecies from the Old Testament.

That is why his missionary strategy based on the continuity of the divine message between the New and Old Testaments, comes in a natural way and strengthens the universal dimension of Christianity. Although this universalism is explicitly incorporated in the Evangelic texts, it seems that the inner motivation that helped him carry out his missionary activity comes from the Old Testament, which he enthusiastically uses in all his works. This is how we can explain the

²⁸ Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, V, Preface, 526

²⁹ Igino Giordani. 1969. "The Ecumenism of the Greek Fathers". *L'Osservatore Romano* 157–158 : 3.

³⁰ Kallistos Ware. 1982. "Patterns of episcopacy in the early church today: an orthodox view", 11.

³¹ Mary Ann Donovan. 1997. *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus*. Collegeville/Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 17.

fact that he only makes one reference to the biblical classical text: “Go, then, make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28: 19a), but without insisting on it too much.

He describes the apostles as the chosen messengers of Jesus Christ, “to hear the calling of the Gentiles”³². By paraphrasing verse 19, the bishop of Lyon say that “God has promised, that in the last times He would pour Him (the Spirit) upon his servants and handmaids, that they might prophesy” and “also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ”³³.

This is a rather ambiguous statement, which leaves room for interpretation. Although it contains the main idea according to which the Holy Spirit will work with and influence the will of the newly converted Christians, he nevertheless does not fail to mention the importance of the divine plan and the message of our Saviour to his disciples.

When it comes to the Old Testament, he uses plenty of quotations, leaving us with the impression that his missionary mission was assigned to him from the beginning of the world. In other words, Irenaeus believed that his missionary works represented the fulfilment of God’s promises towards His disciples and His Church³⁴. Thus, he makes 71 references to Genesis, 47 to Exodus, 27 to Deuteronomy, 90 to Psalms, 114 to Isaiah, 37 to Jeremiah, 9 to Ezekiel and 19 to Daniel³⁵.

The continuity between the Old Testament into the New Testament is also pointed out when he interprets Psalm 2:7, as follows: “These things were not said of David; for neither over the Gentiles nor over the utmost parts did he rule, but only over the Jews. So then it is plain that the promise to the Anointed to reign over the utmost parts of the earth is to the Son of God, whom David himself acknowledges as his Lord, saying thus: The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit on my right hand”³⁶. Therefore, the prophecy of Isaiah 45:1 is fulfilled in Christ as “King of the nations”³⁷.

Saint Irenaeus seems to have identified himself with those who “found God” even though “they didn’t know him” before (according to Isaiah, chapter 45.1) Moreover he identifies himself with the *Gentiles*, that inherited the blessing

³² Irenaeus. 1997. *Proof of Apostolic Preaching (Sec.49:80)*. Transl. J. Behr. New York: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press.

³³ Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les hérésies*, III, 17.1., 444.

³⁴ Jackson Lashier. 2012. “Irenaeus as Logos Theologian”. *Vigiliae Christianae* 66 (4) : 357–358.

³⁵ Paul Beuzart. 1960. *Essay on the theology of Irenaeus*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 45.

³⁶ Irenaeus. *Proof of Apostolic Preaching (Sec.49:80)*.

³⁷ Irenaeus. *Proof of Apostolic Preaching (Sec.49:80)*.

of God, blessing that the Jews had previously refused, as it is shown in Deuteronomy 28:44 and 32: 21³⁸. His arguments and exhortations are concisely presented in the same work, as follows: “This, beloved, is the preaching of the truth, and this is the manner of our redemption, and this is the way of life, which the prophets proclaimed, and Christ established, and the apostles delivered, and the Church in all the world hands on to her children. This must we keep with all certainty, with a sound will and pleasing to God, with good works and right-willed disposition”³⁹.

The detailed analysis of all the aspects of his missionary motivation, deeply anchored in the ancient testamentary message about the coming of Jesus Christ leads us to the conclusion that the bishop of Lyon truly believed himself to be one of the chosen messengers that had to teach the word of God to the *Gentiles*, in the same way that Paul the Apostle had done a century before him. That is the reason why he insists on several old biblical texts that might justify and grant him his position in a long line of illustrious (prestigious) missionary messengers that transcend the world and its history.

This assertion is confirmed and supported by quotations taken from Genesis 9:27 and 10:2-5 referring to God's promise to Noah, and his son Japheth. In both his works, *Against Heresies* and *Proof of Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus uses the example of God's promise to Noah, to “enlarge Japheth” as a reference to the preaching and teaching the Gospel even in the area where he carried out his work as a bishop, Europe. For Irenaeus the fulfilment of God's promise, through the first coming of his Son, Jesus Christ as a man, is a reality that cannot be denied and he confesses it with all his strength, when he says: “He (Christ) appearing in these last times, the chief cornerstone, has gathered into one, and united those that were far off and those that were near; that is, the circumcision and the uncircumcision, enlarging Japhet, and placing him in the dwelling of Shem”⁴⁰.

Irenaeus supports his point of view, bringing further arguments in *Proof of Apostolic Preaching* when states that Japhetus “blossomed forth, at the appearing of the Lord, through the calling of the Gentiles, when God enlarged unto them the calling; and their sound went out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world”⁴¹.

He further explains, in his own words that: “The enlarging, then, is the calling from among the Gentiles, that is to say, the Church. And he dwells in the house of Shem; that is, in the inheritance of the fathers, receiving in Christ Jesus the

³⁸ Irenaeus. *Proof of Apostolic Preaching* (Sec.95:105).

³⁹ Irenaeus. *Proof of Apostolic Preaching* (Sec.98).

⁴⁰ Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, III, 5.3., 418.

⁴¹ Irenaeus. *Proof of apostolic preaching* (Sec 21:60).

right of the firstborn. So, in the rank in which each was blessed, in that same order through his posterity he received the fruit of the Blessing”⁴².

And once more, Irenaeus acknowledges that the descent of the Holy Spirit, which “was given to him by baptism” is in fact the “the blessing of Japheth, in the calling of the Gentiles, made manifest through the Church, standing in readiness to receive its dwelling in the house of Shem according to the promise of God”⁴³.

He insists that the work of preaching to the Gentiles, accomplished by Paul, was much more difficult than the preaching to the Jews, also called the people of God⁴⁴. Thus, he states that his work of evangelisation is in fact a continuation of Paul’s apostolate, and the fulfilment of God’s promise to Noah. Irenaeus is motivated in his pastoral and missionary actions by placing them in the lineage of Shem and Japheth (in the Old Testament) and Paul the Apostle (in the New Testament). His missionary quests are identified with the accomplishments of the Church through its legitimate sons, one of them being Irenaeus himself. Thus his intention to prove that “the Christian work prophetically accomplished in the Old Testament is taken over and continued in the New Testament” appears to be very obvious⁴⁵.

Irenaeus dismisses the Gnostic theory, according to which there are two Gods and two Christs, claiming that there is only one God, who created the world and its creatures, and only one Christ, who came into this world, and whose nature is both human and divine⁴⁶. It is obvious that Irenaeus identified his Christian quest of converting the pagans of southern Europe with the geographical area inherited by Japheth.

Paul the Apostle might have preached to the native people of Gaul (the Celts) during his first missionary quest (Acts 13-14); Paul claimed that he had preached in Illyricum (Romans: 15:19) and Dalmatia (2 Timothy 4:10) which implies that he came into contact with some of the Celtic tribes. The Celts might have emigrated down the Danube river, then along the Rhine and Rhone Rivers in order to found a military and cultural settlement named after their god Lugus or Lug⁴⁷.

In order to point out the providential nature of his ecumenical missionary activity based on the aforementioned continuity, Irenaeus assumed that the south-

⁴² Irenaeus. *Proof of apostolic preaching* (Sec 21:60), 51.

⁴³ Irenaeus. *Proof of apostolic preaching* (Sec 42:74), 83.

⁴⁴ Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les hérésies*, IV, 24.2., 490.

⁴⁵ Dănuț V. Jemna. 2009–2010. “Biblical references of Saint Irenaeus’ anthropology in the four Gospels”. *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă Cluj-Napoca* 13 : 201. It also seems clear that the eloquence used to point out the unity between the Old and the New Testament was mostly anti-Gnostic.

⁴⁶ Ioan Goje. 2002. *Saint Irenaeus protector of the Christian teachings*. Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea Publishing House, 229.

⁴⁷ Brendan Lehane. 2005. *Early Celtic Christianity*. London: Edition Continuum, 77.

ern regions of Gaul, where he performed his activity of evangelisation were part of the land that Japheth had inherited from Avraam. The traditional interpretation of the biblical texts embrace this point of view according to which the European nations are among the descendants of Japheth⁴⁸.

This eloquence of Irenaeus, while claiming and bringing arguments in support of the idea according to which there is only one God, also tends to identify his theological manner of expression and preaching with the way in which God reveals His plans and works and consequentially the fulfilment of His plans according to His own promises.

There are however some questions that remain unanswered regarding the success of his missionary quest, bearing in mind that in a society still dominated by pagans where Christians were still persecuted, even though not always in the same merciless manner, working and teaching the pagans was far from easy. But Irenaeus was always convinced that his missionary and pastoral pursuits were part of the work of God, and through his efforts to convert the polytheistic communities to Christianity, he helps fulfilling God's promises to his people.

However even the fiercest adversaries of Irenaeus must admit that regardless of his motivational reasons or his missionary methods, the content of his message was profoundly biblical, having as its central theme the search for salvation⁴⁹.

The spiritual force of Irenaeus missionary work resides in the embodiment of the evangelic words into the lives of the faithful ones, and his motivation is part of the great Christian philosophy bound to change the history of humankind.

Conclusions

Saint Irenaeus' missionary activity is characterized by his extraordinary capacity to adapt to different situations and difficult social and religious contexts. His remarkable intellectual and linguistic background enables him to provide answers in a practical and well documented manner to all the troubles provoked within the Church by the Gnostic followers, neophytes and the new converts. It comes as a surprise that Irenaeus' attitude towards his adversaries is somehow paradoxical. On the one hand he dismisses their teachings, on the other hand he appears to be full of affection and good will towards the pagans and the neophytes troubled by pagan beliefs. It is an attitude of *religious diplomacy based on an ecumenical concept*, which proves that Irenaeus' way of thinking was ahead

⁴⁸ Aurel Pavel. 1955. "The Old Testament in the reflections of Saint Irenaeus of Lugdunum". Altarul Banatului 1-3 : 9.

⁴⁹ John Lawson. 1948. *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus*. London: Epworth Press, 3.

of his time. For that reason, the process of identifying the sources that shaped the motivation of his missionary activity was and is extremely interesting for scholars and researchers, be they theologians, historians (studying the history of religion and the Church), religious philosophers or sociologists.

Irenaeus' missionary activity and faith are deeply rooted in the Christian philosophy. Even though, just like the other Church Fathers and writers of the first centuries, he embraced the millennial eschatology doctrine, he was convinced that his involvement in the doctrinal controversies of his time will eventually lead to the fulfilment of God's wish and work.

In the light of the facts presented above, we can assert that Irenaeus' figure stands out as an *ecumenical missionary*, and as a remarkable theologian, although some researchers might say that the two notions find themselves in opposition, rather than in harmony and continuity. How do accuracy and doctrinal inflexibility get along with the diplomatic flexibility of his pastoral and ecumenical vision? It is certain that for the majority of his contemporaries the association of these above mentioned notions created confusion and uncertainty, but not for Irenaeus – nor generally speaking for the Church Fathers that were to come in the following centuries – because he (Irenaeus) builds his entire missionary strategy by employing the internal resources of both his visions present in his world. The first conservative vision does not accept any deflection from the significance and contents of the Church teachings. The second liberal vision closely observes the human relations and the situations which could be exploited in order to achieve the unity of Christians, even with the risk of introducing, at the first sight, new elements. One might say that he was ahead of his time, because he understood the remarkable potential that resides within the Church, being aware that he had to pay attention and understand the differences between people, between different cultures, between traditions. He was a *visionary ecumenical* who knew how to use his knowledge and his faith to pass to all the people that he met the word of the Gospel of Christ.

He understood better than others that, abstract theology, limited only to doctrinal definitions, to unchanged rituals, to canonical rules which are accepted by people only because of tradition even if they do not understand them, and also the badly planned mission among the heretics and pagans and the lack of a well-structured, well-defined and concise teaching made in the name of a God about who they know nothing, can easily lead to dissolution and separation, instead of unity and understanding.

The bishop of Lyon managed to avoid falling into one of these two extremes, and he adopted a system of Christian values in which missionary work associated with a *clear and coherent ecumenical dimension* is based on a profound theological knowledge and on the implementation of its rules according to the particulari-

ties of each religious, political and social context in which he was compelled to interact with the Christians or those who were about to be converted.

The early ecumenism, or more precisely the desire to preserve Christian unity, in a world dominated by the diversity of religious doctrines that were present at that time, took shape and gained coherence in the writings and missionary activity of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon. Living in a period where the Christians were persecuted, he was compelled to find different ways to carry out his mission, to protect the Church and the Christian communities, and to leave to posterity a series of historical documents in which to present the geographical particularities of the heretic, Gnostic and pagan communities of his time.

With a solid theological education, mastering an impressive linguistic knowledge, having a well-educated mind, capable of speaking to everyone and being willing to understand the particularities of each Christian and pagan community, Irenaeus has managed to accomplish remarkable deeds: to strengthen the faith of those who were weak, to bring back to the rightful faith the ones who were lost and to convince the unfaithful that the Gospel of Christ was the true way to the Christian faith. And for that he ought to be considered one of the most influential personalities that contributed to the development of the Christian theology in the first centuries, and a true “pioneer of the ecumenical movement” in its most profound meaning, that is the creation and consolidation of Christian unity. He was sure that this unity could be achieved, despite the differences that existed within the Church and despite the different ways of being in the service of God, without altering the doctrine that was still in search of a crystallized form to answer thoroughly to the requirements of the Gospel of Christ. He was a man who loved the world as much as he loved God and he believed with all his heart that all the Christians could be united under the sign of the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

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