

**UNIVERSITY „1 DECEMBER 1918” ALBA-IULIA**  
**FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY**  
**DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY**  
**THE FIELD OF THEOLOGY**

*PhD Thesis Summary:*

**THE MISSIONARY ASPECTS OF  
THE PILGRIMAGE IN CHRISTIANITY**

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**Alba Iulia**

**2021**

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### **Keywords of the paper**

Keywords: pilgrimage, miracle, jews, mission, visionary, icon, relics, apparition, ecumenism, asceticism, distortion, Liturgy, communion, epidemic.

### **Theme argumentation**

The topic treated in this paper was chosen by Father Professor Mihai Himcinschi, the coordinator of this doctoral thesis, the subject of the paper being a current topic, which grew in our country after the fall of communism.

If before the Revolution of 1989, pilgrimage in Romania was not encouraged, and the Romanian Orthodox Church did not have the necessary means to organize pilgrimages in our country, much less outside the national territory, today, the Romanian Patriarchate and some centers dioceses have their own pilgrimage agencies. Thus, the pilgrimage became part of the religious life of Orthodox believers, and we have highlighted, in this paper, the multiple spiritual benefits of the pilgrimage, but also the social effects it produces. The pilgrimage took place after 1990, not only because of the full religious freedom enjoyed by the faithful, but also because of the mobility of people. The movement of people is much easier, and, on the other hand, after 1990 other pilgrimage places appeared, and here we refer to the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca from the Prislop Monastery.

In this paper we did not limit ourselves only to the national pilgrimage, but we also analyzed the pilgrimage in the Roman Catholic Church, a pilgrimage that highlights more strongly the fact that humanity is seeking God, and world economic progress could not satisfy all the needs of postmodern man.

Besides the fact that the pilgrimage is topical, it is not a new religious manifestation, but on the contrary, it has a considerable antiquity, it also existed in the pre-Christian, Jewish era, which I highlighted in this work, the search for the sacred through pilgrimage becomes a constant concern of Christians since the first centuries. They went on a pilgrimage to the tombs of the martyrs, being convinced that they were full of grace, death passing no one through, and thus the body of the saints became the abode of God's grace.

Noting that the pilgrimages in Romania in recent years have been strongly contested, the media highlighting only their negative points, especially collateral events, theology is obliged to argue the need for the pilgrimage. Moreover, the pilgrimage in Romania in 2020 was even banned by the State, in the first period of the coronavirus pandemic, and at the end of 2020, the pilgrimages were restricted. Thus, a misunderstanding of this phenomenon was found, a disregard for holiness itself, and the Church is forced today, more than ever, to argue the need for pilgrimage.

Even if in Latin, the word “pilgrim” means “traveler”, “one who goes to a foreign country and settles there for a while”, in this work the existential pilgrimage was also highlighted, i.e. the inner one, which it has nothing to do with any actual journey, because, in essence, the pilgrimage is the search for God that we can do without any spatial movement, namely through the Liturgy. Thus, the pilgrimage is a path to God that we do physically, but that we can also go through from a spiritual, spiritual point of view. The act of pilgrimage is a particular experience of religious life, but at the same time a collective one. The authentic pilgrimage is the mixed one, when the spatial pilgrimage is combined with the existential one, the spatial one being necessary to reach the existential one, but there may be exceptions.

Thus, in a society that allocates time only for profit, the pilgrimage is almost mandatory because man also needs spiritual pursuits, not only strictly material, which do not fulfill him in its entirety.

### **Purpose of the paper**

The purpose of the work is to make us understand that the pilgrimage is an integral part of Christianity, this being an essential method by which we can know God.

In general, man makes particular efforts to know God, but a path to the end of which we find Him in an icon, in the relics of the saints or in the form of holy clergy, is recommended for each of us, because in the places of pilgrimage, God shows His power, the sanctity of certain places is highlighted, but especially the sanctity of man who is not lost with physical death.

The work also aims to give hope to the sick, the helpless in the face of life's difficulties. That is why the mercy of God, the One who healed many good people, both in soul and body, was highlighted in this work.

At the same time, we have highlighted the truth that the most powerful and important place of pilgrimage in the world is not the one with the most relics or miracle-working icons, but the Tomb of Jesus Christ, where annually takes place the miracle of the descent of the Holy Lights at the feast of the Lord's Resurrection. In this part of the paper, our goal was also to highlight the fact that this miracle occurs only in the Orthodox service, which is more than eloquent.

Also, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the fact that some pilgrimages are publicized without any genuine solid support (Medjugorje), while others are not officially highlighted (Arsenie Boca, Maglavit). In other words, pilgrimages can be influenced by church authority, but also by the media.

Another purpose of this work is to enhance the value of ecumenical pilgrimages, pilgrimages that play an important role in a good understanding between denominations.

The description of the specific aspects of the distortion of the pilgrimage is another aim of this work. We must say that in certain situations the pilgrimage is distorted both by those who should defend this method of expression of faith, i.e. by clergy, and by believers who do not know the purpose of this spiritual journey, and they mix magic and miracle, tourism and pilgrimage.

Also, the purpose of this work is to highlight the fact that the pilgrimage was a method of approaching God both in times of public health and in times of plague, and the freedom of believers was not restricted in this regard, the freedom religious being a fundamental right stipulated in the Romanian Constitution.

Finally, the pilgrimage aims to sanctify people's lives, this being a spiritual ascent that we can do through the Liturgy, in this case being an existential pilgrimage.

Thus, the purpose of this work is:

- to highlight the fact that the pilgrimage is an essential method by which we can know God;
- knowing the places of pilgrimage, spaces where God shows his power;
- highlighting the fact that the pilgrimage has an important role in acquiring or consolidating the spiritual life;
- highlighting the fact that the pilgrimage increases communion between people;
- arguing the need for believers to know the authentic places of pilgrimage, which requires knowledge from them, so we can say that the purpose of this work is to confess the phenomenon of pilgrimage as an educational method;
- enumeration of the distortions that lead to the alteration of the pilgrimage;
- knowledge and differentiation of Orthodox and Catholic pilgrimages;
- highlighting whether or not a place of pilgrimage may be authentic;
- highlighting the fact that a pilgrimage aims at inner transformation and not necessarily the accounting of miracles.

### **Documentary basis**

The present scientific work is based in its elaboration on some elements of theology that we will enumerate synthetically:

- elements of biblical theology, which highlights the essence of Orthodox theology;
- elements of historical theology, with the highlighting of some data and events related to the practice of pilgrimage in the first Christian centuries;

- elements of dogmatic theology;
- elements of contemporary theology on the subject of the paper, which are based on Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition.

A large part of the documentary base of this work was extracted from the Library of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia, from the Library of the "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, from the Library of the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu. Also, information was extracted for the writing of this paper from the Library of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, from the County Library "Lucian Blaga" from Alba Iulia, from the Mureş County Library, from the Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca, from the "Institute of Jewish Studies" from Cluj-Napoca, from the "Teleki" Library from Târgu-Mureş. Information from some web pages was also used.

Of the total materials used to write the thesis, some are recent, but I did not fail to use older essential information, just to address in detail the phenomenon of pilgrimage to Christianity, from a missionary point of view.

### **Research stage**

The topic of pilgrimages is current and has sparked many heated debates, pros and cons, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Much has been written about the pilgrimage, books, magazines, studies and articles have appeared debating this topic. so that it is, we might say, almost impossible to analyze the missionary pilgrimage exhaustively. Also, the pilgrimage is intensely debated in the media, arousing harsh controversy between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Romanian State, and here we refer to the period of the State of Alert, during which time the pilgrimages were severely restricted.

Following the research done so far, in Romania there is no work that fully analyzes, from a missionary point of view, the Catholic and Orthodox pilgrimages. There are works in other languages, there are articles and studies that deal with certain pilgrimages, but they do not treat in the same work the great Christian, Orthodox and Catholic pilgrimages.

The present research has several reference works that address the topic of pilgrimage and from a missionary point of view.

*The book of human life* was written by Menachem Hacoheh, translated from Hebrew by Rodica Amel, it was printed in 2005, at Hasefer Publishing House in Bucharest. The author, rabbi, writer, publicist and politician, records in this book the religious customs of the Jews, related to the Jewish religious holidays.

*The miracle in the life of the modern man: a sociological monograph of the pilgrimage* was written by Valentin-Lucian Beloiu and printed in 2015, at the Christiana Publishing

House in Bucharest. The author, a scientist and psychologist at the same time, highlights the miracle as a concrete fact that supports the pilgrimage, the miracle being the engine that leads the pilgrim to the sacred places.

*Investigation on the appearances of the Virgin Mary*, whose author is Yves Chiron, is a book translated from French by Dorina Oprea and was printed in 2012 in Bucharest, by Philobia Publishing House. The author is an essayist, journalist and French historian, specialist in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. In his work he treats the apparitions of the Virgin Mary on a planetary level, but also the controversial apparitions or false apparitions, making the difference between false and authentic.

*Fátima 100: the centenary of the apparitions of the Mother of God in the Romanian context* is a collective volume, written under the coordination of Wilhelm Dancă, published in 2018 in Bucharest, edited by the Publishing House of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese. The work highlights the pilgrimage from Fatima and especially the person of the Virgin Mary, has an important role in the study of pilgrimages because it highlights the role of the Mother of God in promoting freedom.

*The need for a miracle: the phenomenon of pilgrimages in contemporary Romania* is a book written by Mirel Bănică, it was printed in 2014 in Iași by Polirom Publishing House. The author holds a PhD in political science from the University of Geneva, and is currently a scientific researcher at the "Institute of the History of Religions" of the Romanian Academy and a member of the "French Association of Social Sciences of Religion" in Paris. In his first part, his work contains some notes from the Orthodox pilgrimages in our country, and in the rest of his work he addresses the types of pilgrimage, but also the miracle as an essential element of this phenomenon.

*The religious sentiment of Romanians, a historical perspective (XVII-XX centuries)*, is a book written by Doru Radosav, which took the form of printing in 1997 in Cluj-Napoca, under the auspices of Dacia Publishing House. The author is a professor of history at the "Babes-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, and his book describes the religious feeling that manifests itself both individually and collectively. The importance of this work derives from the fact that it describes in an exemplary way religious piety, an essential component of the pilgrimage,

The collective volume, *Otherwise about Father Arsenie Boca*, appears in Cluj-Napoca in 2016, being edited by Școala Ardeleană Publishing House. It contains thirteen studies that analyze the personality of Father Arsenie Boca, highlighting first of all his holiness, the last study requiring his canonization. It is an exceptional volume that describes the main arguments that support the need for the pilgrimage to the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca.

*The Virgin of Fatima: the Queen of the Holy Rosary* is written by Bishop Ioan Suciuc and the priest Cristian-Florin Sabău, being printed by the Lauretane Sisters Publishing House, from Baia-Mare, in 2017. Bishop Ioan Suciuc obtained the title of doctor in Rome, and this paper marks the centenary of the apparitions at Fátima (1917-2017). It is an exceptional book that deals extensively with the pilgrimage to Fátima, being the most important book in Romanian that deals with this pilgrimage.

### **Research methodology**

This doctoral dissertation, developed under the coordination of Father Professor Mihai Himcinschi, addresses the issue of pilgrimage from a missionary point of view, with priority, but does not neglect the interdisciplinary perspective of this topic. Biblical sources, patristic sources, documents, church newspapers, books and volumes, studies and articles, but also web sources were used to write this thesis.

Among the research methods used in this paper we mention:

- the historical method, ie the research of the evolution of the pilgrimage in Christianity, but also the one before Christianity;
- the theological method, by highlighting current theological opinions, Catholic and Orthodox, but also the methods that the Church, especially the Orthodox, should propose to preserve the pilgrimage, especially in times when religious freedom is restricted ;
- the analytical method, which follows the position of theologians, historians and scientists, being useful for the analysis of the pilgrimage phenomenon.

### **The limits of the research and the brief presentation of the thesis chapters**

Although this paper highlights the missionary aspects of the pilgrimage to Christianity, we must say that this thesis does not cover the Christian pilgrimage outside Europe. The work is limited to the great Orthodox pilgrimages in Romania and to the consecrated Catholic pilgrimages in Europe. However, we consider that the pilgrimages highlighted by us are a landmark for the rest of the Christian pilgrimages outside the old continent, and the work can be a landmark for both theologians and lay people who want to know the role of the pilgrimage.

Regarding the general framework of the thesis, it is divided into four chapters, preceded by the content of the thesis, the list of abbreviations and introduction, and after the paper itself, follows a general conclusion, followed by the bibliography.

In the introduction, there are exposed six components, namely: the argumentation of the topic, the purpose of the paper, the documentary basis, the research stage, the research methodology, the research limits and the general framework of the paper.

The first chapter, entitled *Necessity, causes and fruits of the pilgrimage in general. Missionary aspects of the phenomenon to the Jews and in the first four Christian centuries*, highlights the miracle as the essential cause of the pilgrimage, the collective piety, with an important role in initiating a pilgrimage and its fruits. There are also some Jewish holidays where pilgrimages were made, but also the practice of this phenomenon in the first four Christian centuries, before and after the Edict of Milan.

The second chapter, entitled *Pilgrimage to holy relics, icons, uncanonized clergy and the Holy Sepulchre. Interfaith differences and similarities*, highlights the importance of relics and icons made or not made by human hands, of the clergy who are alive, the pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre, but also the differences and interfaith similarities between Orthodox and Catholic pilgrimages.

The third chapter, entitled *Missionary Aspects of the Pilgrimage to the Roman Catholic Church*, deals with missionary and counter-missionary pilgrimages to Fatima, Lourdes, Medjugorje, and Taizé.

The fourth chapter, entitled *The Pilgrimage through the Liturgy, the initial one, the one from the time of the epidemic and its distortion*, deals with the spiritual journey of the believer who reaches the encounter with Jesus Christ through the Holy Liturgy centered on the Eucharist. This liturgical spiritual journey being an essential, qualitative, and not quantitative pilgrimage. Next, this chapter analyses a current topic, namely the restriction of pilgrimages by state authorities in Romania, as well as the reaction of the Romanian Orthodox Church. We also make a comparison between the behaviour of today's pilgrims and that of pilgrims in the third century, during an epidemic, and at the end of the chapter we make an analysis of the distortions of the pilgrimage, which will be listed in this paper.

### **The conclusions of the thesis**

The theme of this work is very topical today, in the context of the epidemic of the new coronavirus, so a work that includes the pilgrimage as a missionary event in the past and today, both in our country and beyond, is welcomed. Even though the missionary aspects of the pilgrimage and its role in the world have been highlighted, we do not claim that the subject it is treated exhaustively, but we can only say that it is treated broadly, but enough to make even the greatest opponents of this phenomenon, which is the pilgrimage, think.

Going through this work, we conclude that during the pilgrimage you come into contact, willingly or unwillingly, with the other pilgrims, that is, in the pilgrimage we refer not only to the sacred, but also to the other participants in the pilgrimage. Thus, in the atmosphere of the pilgrimage it is found that the connections between the pilgrims become more consistent. Also, the pilgrimage promotes discipline, respect for peers and tolerance, absolutely necessary, given the multiple categories of pilgrims who may meet at the same time in a pilgrimage. Thus, the pilgrimage puts the believer in order, that is, brings him closer to God.

Also, even if it was analysed limiting ourselves to Christianity, we find that pilgrimage as a religious practice has a long history and was met with Jews before Jesus Christ, the pilgrimage being part of their religious life, and the fruits of the pilgrimage to the chosen people were similar to those of Christianity, that is, the increase of communion with others and with God, especially, the Jewish pilgrimage on the occasion of the celebration of Easter being fulfilled even by Jesus Christ.

We also conclude that the pilgrimage was a constant in the first Christian centuries, regardless of the social category of the pilgrim. Ordinary and dignified people have practiced this sacred journey, which highlights the fact that man ontologically feels the need to approach God. We can therefore say that this method of approaching God is necessary for any person, knowing full well that the Empress Elena herself practiced the pilgrimage, thus discovering the Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.

Another conclusion that emerges from this work is that the pilgrimage has a special role in the lives of believers because through the pilgrimage you meet God, you find him in the healing power of relics, icons and more, because many receive healing. In this work, the miraculous role of holy relics and holy icons was highlighted. We can say that without them the pilgrimage itself would weaken, the Christian often associating the pilgrimage with palpable holiness.

Thus, it is very important that this role of holy relics and miracle-working icons be highlighted clearly and pragmatically, especially in the context in which postmodern man, influenced by secularism, believes less and less in the miraculous power of these saints, relics or icons, and we have emphasized this aspect. In our country and not only there are relics and icons revered by pilgrims, but they also become confessors, increasing the faith of believers regardless of their confession, especially if we know their role in the spiritual ascent of man. Also, being knowledgeable from this point of view, the faith of the pilgrims remains unaltered and pure. Moreover, the faith of the pilgrims is strengthened and sustained by their worship at the graves of uncanonized clergy, but who proved their holiness by the miracles that take

place in these places, and here we refer primarily to the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca. Thus, we conclude that the pilgrim seeks holiness, regardless of the official opinion of the Church, which is not necessarily wrong, but a refutation or an official confirmation of the church authority would be useful for pilgrims.

Another conclusion we emphasize is the reality that, although it is a quintessential ecumenical pilgrimage space, the Holy Sepulcher offers the supreme proof that there is only one true faith, the Holy Light appears only in the Orthodox service.

We also find that the Orthodox Church, although it does not have an administratively organized state, such as the Vatican in Catholicism, Orthodoxy still has Mount Athos which has an administrative autonomy from Greece, although the peninsula is not a state, and this space is place of pilgrimage, a territory where prayer prevails to the detriment of the administration, which is missing in the Roman Catholic Church.

Going in the sphere of differences between the two Churches in terms of pilgrimage, it was highlighted that Catholic pilgrims are more disciplined than Orthodox, this aspect was highlighted by the Romanian media, and Catholic places of pilgrimage are much better organized materially than the Orthodox.

We also find that in the Roman Catholic Church, the pilgrimage is more visible than in the Orthodox Church. First of all, there are more Catholic believers than Orthodox, but at the same time we highlight the influence of the Vatican in the world, which makes the Roman Catholic Church a state force capable of unitarily promoting its interests, and at the same time their own places of pilgrimage are highlighted much more effectively. Of course, some aspects have been exaggerated, trying to use these sacred places to highlight and maximize papal power or to highlight Catholicism itself. However, the good part of this behaviour is that the Catholic pilgrimage sites are visible, while in our country, for example, the theophanies of Maglavit are no longer relevant, today this major pilgrimage site in the interwar period, being only visited, there is no pilgrimage in this space.

Also, in the second chapter of the paper, we find that Catholic places of pilgrimage are much more open to ecumenism, and the Roman Catholic Church stands as a promoter of universal pilgrimages, eclipsing local ones. Thus, Catholic pilgrimages are ecumenical, both in terms of the clergy, for example at Taizé, but also of pilgrims, which makes Catholic pilgrimages recognized by other religious denominations and even promoted by them.

As for the miracles, we believe that the Medical Offices, which find miraculous healings in the great Catholic pilgrimages, are auspicious, thus eliminating any suspicion of miraculous healings. These offices are necessary, especially if we consider that society is

rapidly secularizing, and influencing factors (politics, media) sometimes discredit or disregard the value of sacred places.

It was also concluded that the Roman Catholic Church with all its strengths and which I have listed, also has weaknesses, and here we refer to the pilgrimage to Medjugorje which, even if it raises serious questions, it is not forbidden by the church authority for financial reasons, but also for pastoral reasons. Thus, we notice that Catholic pilgrims, even if they are more disciplined, fail to distinguish an authentic pilgrimage from one that is on the verge of imposture.

The last part of the work highlights the fact that throughout history, because pilgrims wanted to receive help and blessing, sometimes icons or certain relics were carried in procession through towns and villages, this being a pilgrimage in the opposite direction, from God to man. The engine of the pilgrimage was and is the miracle, without which the pilgrimage would not last in time, in the long run. The miracle is what sustains the pilgrimage, even if it is often missing or left to wait, but the fact that once, in a certain place, God performed miracles, it is enough for that space to become a place of pilgrimage. But relics and icons have been used not only for the purpose of performing miracles, but the Church uses this treasure to highlight the faith of practicing believers who honour them and, moreover, highlights the reality that the world in its wholeness and the problems that all mankind can go through at some point can be overcome not only by science but also by the power of God.

On the other hand, we find that there is a tendency to absolutize relics, icons or other holy places, leaving God out of the pilgrimage. This is a negative part of the pilgrimage recorded in this work, and this distortion of the pilgrimage has been permanently highlighted by the Church's opponents. One solution would be for the church authority to clearly establish the places of pilgrimage in Romania and to highlight the authentic ones, canonizing those revered by the faithful, among them mentioning Father Paisie Olaru or Father Arsenie Boca. Also, the Church through pilgrimage guides must explain to the pilgrims the priorities within the pilgrimages, so that they know who they worship, why they worship, but especially to know that any healing or help comes only from God.

Another conclusion of this paper is that the freedom of pilgrims was restricted during the epidemic in the 21st century, unlike other historically difficult historical periods, which shows that the miracle of today's pilgrimage is incomprehensible and even contested by the State, both in Romania and throughout Christian Europe. We believe that the Church, in general, must take the necessary steps to defend the religious freedoms enshrined in the Constitution, especially when they are abruptly annulled or restricted by the State.

At the same time, because the pilgrimage is a way to God, we understand that a pilgrimage can also be the Holy Mass, at the end of which we meet Jesus Christ physically through the Eucharist, this being the most important pilgrimage even if, for most or, the miracle visible to the eye is missing. The pilgrimage itself achieves its goal as we approach God on a being level, but more than that, the pilgrimage presupposes His appropriation in our being, being able to say that only in this way our pilgrimage has reached its goal, that is, our transformation, deification.

Thus, we can speak of an authentic and distorted pilgrimage, and the conclusion of this work is that the pilgrim's ascent to God can be slowed down even by those who should preserve the authenticity of the pilgrimage, namely the clergy. The distortions have as a background both a moral, spiritual and a material side (confusing the pilgrimage and the pilgrimage space with tourism that does not aim to sanctify man).

We also see the superiority of the Christian pilgrimage over the non-Christian one, even if the Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimages total more pilgrims than the Christian ones. Superiority consists in its goal, that is, deification, which is lacking in any other non-Christian pilgrimage. We can say that the pilgrimage is a sublime method by which man becomes closer to God and to his fellow men, and in this sense, we encourage this form of manifestation of faith or the acquisition of faith.

We find that pilgrimage is necessary, but not compulsory, for salvation, so that, paradoxically, it has the capacity through its engine, that is, the miracle, to change man's life, to bring man out of sin, and to lead him to the path of salvation.

We conclude that the work is necessary because it includes the great Orthodox pilgrimages, the great Catholic pilgrimages, but at the same time highlights their miraculous character compared to non-Christian pilgrimages. Also, in addition to the laudatory nature of the work on the Christian pilgrimage in general, the work highlights the lack of Christian pilgrimages, large and recognized, but also the distortions of the pilgrimage caused by pilgrims, but also by the clergy. The work is also necessary since it uses accessible language, so that it can be read and understood by the untheological pilgrim. Thus, the work highlighting the strengths or weaknesses of some pilgrimages, while using an accessible language, brings added value in the space of theological books that debate and analyse the Christian pilgrimage from a missionary point of view.

We also believe that the purpose of this work has been achieved, so the reader will be able to conclude for himself that pilgrimage is necessary but not mandatory to acquire or strengthen faith, and most importantly that the work emphasizes the need to achieve the goal in pilgrimage, that is deification.

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