

# SUGGESTIONS REGARDING THE ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE UNIVERSITIES FROM ROMANIA

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**ABSTRACT: The orthodox theology within Romanian universities.  
Proposals and suggestions for future.**

Exiled from the amphitheater of public universities, theological education at the university level in Romania remained confined to historical models hermetically isolated from everything that modern education meant. The air of change, felt in the interwar period (when the German model, infiltrated through the Faculty of Chernivtsi, tried to give a new vision) was quickly suppressed by the communist fog.

In a so declared freedom of expression and in a sort of self management and determination, the universitarian education was in fact restrained to the single two enclaved universities (Sibiu and Bucharest), and having less and less contacts with the theological universities from Europe and from the entire world. So, the Romanian theological education remains unchanged from the beginning of 20th century and oriented more to the past than towards the future. And this situation, even today is quite similar. Although the number of disciplines has increased since the beginning of the last century, in reality the process is not due to a normal and natural growth in response to the modern systems of university education, but it was the result of the segmentation of some fundamental disciplines and the emergence of complementary disciplines.

Starting from this reality, because of a considerable personal experience<sup>1</sup>, our

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article proposes some reflections on this issue, suggesting few solutions, and even some structural changes in the architecture of theological education, aimed at improving the quality of graduates.

**Keywords:** *university teaching methods, Romanian modern theology, new architecture of curriculum*

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## Status quaestionis

Romanian education is getting weaker, not only international comparative tests show it<sup>2</sup>, but especially the way in which the scandals and problems of higher education are managed, a reality that we also see every day. Universities chase after students and struggle to keep them in the system in order to not lose basic funding, which implies a poor quality of education: you have no students, you have no money, you have no money, you have no salaries. Every year the “mill” turns. Admission is more of a joke; attendance is ridiculously low, and graduation is a formality. Poorly paid until last year, teachers have become second-class citizens. It is no wonder that fewer and fewer people dedicated to values have entered the system and more and more for a comfortable job, maybe even for a second job. The truth is that it is precisely the more disciplined teachers with a more emphasized didactic seriousness who are ridiculed and put in embarrassing situations; those who would rather die on their feet than beg for a salary on their knees. The former minister of education, Mircea Miclea, signaled this reality in 2017, which is increasingly deteriorating before our eyes:

“... I draw attention to a risk: in order to keep their student numbers so low, universities will be inclined to cut corners on quality and promote everyone to avoid losing funding, which will further erode interest in learning.”<sup>3</sup>

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2 Nicoleta ONOFREI, *Oglinda pentru starea Educației: Romania e țara UE cu cei mai slab pregătiți profesori, cea mai mică finanțare, cei mai puțini studenți și în care elevii de la sate sunt condamnați la eșec*, HotNews: Marți 5.12.2017 (<https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-22158859-oginda-pentru-starea-educatiei-romania-tara-cei-mai-slab-pregatiti-profesori-cea-mai-mica-finantare-cei-mai-putini-studenti-care-elevii-sate-sunt-condamnati-esec.htm>, accesat în 23.11.2020).

3 Monica Pantazi, *Mircea Miclea, avertisment: universitățile, predispuse să promoveze toți studenții pentru bani*, „Edupedu”, 1 oct. 2018 <https://www.edupedu.ro/mircea-miclea-at->

We are not interested here and now in a detailed analysis of the causes of the deterioration of Romanian education<sup>4</sup>, but rather in the solutions that we propose after a rich experience accumulated in the field of quality of Romanian education, especially in the theological education, which suffers along with other areas of higher education in Romania.

In the past, theological education in Romania was considered an elite education, with a rigorous selection and a complex curriculum. Particularly after the emergence of the national movements (1848), when priests were the enlightened leaders of a rural society, but more strikingly after the Great Union, along with the contribution of the clerical elite from the Transylvanian region to the consolidation of national institutions, and until the fall of communism, Romanian society recognized theological studies at university level as among the most complex and difficult. In the perception of the public, a priest could have held any public office due to the erudition with which he was credited a priori. For centuries priests have been perceived as cultural, knowledgeable and scientific cognizants; humanists in the broadest sense of the notion. Their word was often the letter of the law, and their advice was followed by all parishioners. Unfortunately, the credibility of the clergy in the last 30 years has eroded catastrophically; if in the 1990s, at the fall of communism, the first sociological studies on the religiosity of Romanians and the credibility of the Orthodox Church indicated percentages of over 90%, today, Romanians' trust in the Church and the clergy has dropped to 50%<sup>5</sup>. Undoubtedly, secularization has its part to play in this degradation of public trust, but the causes are

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rag-atenția-asupra-unui-risc-pentru-a-mentine-numarul-de-studenti-si-asa-mic-universitatile-vor-fi-predispu-se-la-rabat-de-la-calitate, accesat în 23.11.2020)

4 Signals on this decadence have been made in the recent past in various press articles or TV news, but also in some extensive monographs. See Petre T. Frangopol, *Mediocritate și excelență. O radiografie a științei și învățământului din România*, Editura Albatros, București, 2002; Tudor Oprea, *Drama învățământului românesc de azi*, Editura Roza Vânturilor, București, 2004.

5 In a study which take in account multi-year values and statistical results of several public opinion polling agencies are analyzed by Dan Ungureanu which shows how Romanians' trust in the Church has dropped from 89% (2004) to just over 50% (2017): „Biserica ortodoxă română : Trei decenii de statistici, sondaje, târnosiri, caterisiri”, în rev. *Vatra*, decembrie 4, 2017 (<https://revistavatra.org/2017/12/04/dan-ungureanu-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-trei-decenii-de-statistici-sondaje-tarnosiri-caterisiri/>, accesat în 23.11.2020)

numerous and, unfortunately, many of them could have been prevented. Again, it is beyond the scope of this article to determine whether we can count among the causes the alleged simony in the Church, or the ultra-mediatized moral scandals, or the arrogance of the clergy, but we note a cruel reality: The BOR has reached a dangerously low level of trust. It seems that the sympathy for this venerable institution has been buried to some extent with the last great confessors: Cleopa Ilie, Teofil Părăian, Arsenie Papacioc, Mina Dobzeu or Iustin Pârnu. If this situation does not change in the coming years, Romanian Christianity will take on the face of Western Christianity: empty churches, aging clergy, closed seminaries and theological faculties.

These are the premises and the reason why we propose to put forward some of the directions that we consider necessary for the recovery and revitalization of Romanian theological education. Our long experience in the national academic structures and our involvement in the evaluation of the quality of Romanian university education give us, we believe, the necessary authority to issue possible solutions to this problem.

### Clergy recruitment

The small number of university-educated priests in the first half of the 20th century made the priests with higher education “demigods”. For example, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the following one, the number of students at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest did not exceed 300<sup>6</sup>. Certainly that situation was not favorable for the BOR, since there were many more parishes in need of a priest with higher training. The number of theological students increased encouragingly at the beginning of the 20th century, so that after 1930, the four theological faculties (Bucharest, Chernivtsi, Iasi, Chisinau) had just over 3,000 students<sup>7</sup>. Surely, if the statistical analysis provided had also taken into consideration the theological academies of the time, the real weight of the field of Theology in Romanian education would prove to be much higher. In addition, con-

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6 Iordan Petrescu, Emilia Gogu, Constantin Anghelache, Mădălina Gabriela Anghel, *Geneza și evoluția învățământului superior din România – în date statistice*, Editura Economică, 2018, p.48.

7 Unfortunately, the statistical data did not take into account the Faculty of Theology in Sibiu.

sidering Romania's economic boom at that time, we cannot help but wonder if the priests had a decisive role in enlightening and educating, in the "growth" of Romanian society?

Communism meant the regression of theological schools, but not their disappearance. Two institutions of higher education (Bucharest and Sibiu: about 80-100 graduates per year) and five theological seminaries (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Caransebeș, Buzău, Neamț, Craiova), where about 150 young people completed their studies, allowed the Romanian Orthodox Church to survive not only functionally but also culturally. At that time, six Orthodox periodicals appeared: a central scientific publication (Theological Studies), five metropolitan periodicals (MMS, MO, MA, MB, GB) and an official magazine of the Synod/Patriarchate (BOR). In reality, although the official purpose of these publications was to reflect pastoral activity, all of them also published scientific studies. However, theological education was closely monitored, external exchanges and public communications were censored (and self-censored) and, most probably, the whole system was infiltrated by people willing to betray either for a better parish or to renew the "insurance policy" issued by the liaison officer.

With all these shortcomings (by no means on the scale that the Church's hostile press, in our opinion, credits), the priests continued to be "the light of the world and the salt of the earth"; many of them had been educated in the pre-communist period and the replacements of the Greek-Catholic priests who had not returned to Orthodoxy, although they were mostly priests with less schooling (many of them graduates of the Seminary of Curtea de Argeș), had great zeal and great piety. At the same time, the huge competition in the theological schools contributed to a good selection<sup>8</sup>, which maintained not only the status of priests, but also their intellectual quality.

After the collapse of communism, theology resumed its place in the amphitheater of Romanian culture; theological faculties were established/re-established in 15 university centers and the number of students in theology programs had become far too high; admissions to each of the

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8 There were Seminaries and Faculties of theology in which the average number of candidates per place easily exceeded 35-40 candidates, as was the case in 1982 at the Seminary in Craiova, where myself I took the exam. But at some seminars the competition was even greater.

theological faculties included three-digit numbers and the national/annual average of the number of students enrolled in theology was between 4,000 and 5,000 students. The Church joined the momentum of the new cultural revolution in which we had to reach Germany, France and England in the number of students per thousand inhabitants... as we were always the last, theology contributed to raising the percentage. Now we find that, unfortunately, it was only a revolution of diplomas, since a significant proportion of graduates cannot find a parish. (Of course, in this discussion, the lack of real vocation, of sacrifice, can also be taken into account; how else can it be explained that dozens of parishes remain vacant, even though hundreds of graduates leave theological schools every year).

### 2.1. Declining quality in the selection of candidates and during schooling

Inevitably, the large number of students brings with it an almost inevitable decrease in quality (this phenomenon is not specific to theology, the entire Romanian education has been confronted with it). Unfortunately, the European concept of “lifelong education” has been indigenized in our country among maids, gatekeepers and drivers enrolled in university studies. The Bologna process has brought an air of change; double majors have disappeared and ‘double degrees’ - students who are enrolled in two faculties in parallel but attend their courses and exams in the same school term - have emerged. My experience tells me that most of them are not doing *parallel studies*, but rather *parallel studies with science* (rights that will never intersect).

Poorly funded and poorly managed, Romanian university education had reached a level from which it was impossible to go any lower: a university lecturer had a salary lower than a high school teacher and much lower than that of a bank clerk, a utility and service company etc. Under these conditions, teachers chase after students and hold on to them tenaciously; full attendance is a utopia, and exams become a formality that teachers try their best to disturb the morning habits of the students. In this context, the “queen” of the faculties of yore is in a nosedive.

Today, we still have 15 university centers providing theological or associate theological education. Of these, nine are autonomous faculties (Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Arad, Craiova, Oradea, Constanța),

two are combined faculties (Targoviste and Pitesti), and four are departments or departmental collectives (Timisoara, Galati, Baia Mare and Resita/Caransebes)<sup>9</sup>. In 13 university centers there are undergraduate degree programs - *Orthodox Pastoral Theology* - which prepare future priests. However, the trend in the number of students enrolled in the first year of theology faculties is downward; some centers are even in agony (Caransebeș and Pitești; others will probably follow soon). Those who still have a three-number admissions figure are not jubilant, because of the large faculty. However, “pastoral theology” still seems “attractive”.

Is that really so? A quick glance at the list of admission subjects (on all the theology faculty websites) shows that the “sieve” in which the faculties use to filter out applicants is not rare..., it’s in fact non-existent. The topics/questions are unbelievably simple and sometimes students with questionable knowledge of Romanian and zero musical aptitude are admitted. Without questioning the piety, which a priest should have, we ask ourselves rhetorically: what else can the “light of the villages” excel in if he can no longer sing, does not know how to preach, and he “helps” himself to serve with the singer, who is older and has more liturgical knowledge. All this in the name of the critical mass needed to maintain the economic efficiency of study programs. Rectors look at numbers, they rarely listen to sermons.

There is no doubt that not only the underfunding of the system, but also secularization has contributed to the decline in quality. Despite A. Malraux’s (apocryphal) maxim – *The 21st century will be religious or not religious at all*, secularization is a contagious and hard to beat virus. Some have even said that it is a universal, inevitable and irreversible process due to the modernization of society; technology, industrialization, science, urbanization, digitalization and consumer focus come between us and God. It has also been said that “the engine that retires the gods” is modernization<sup>10</sup>.

Connectivity consumes our time and turns us into visual beings. We no longer speak; we no longer write, and we now communicate through *gigabits* more easily than through sound vibrations. “*Check spelling or*

9 Government Decision no. 299/2020 regarding the approval of the Nomenclature of fields and specializations/university study programs and the structure of higher education institutions for the 2020-2021 academic year, dated 04/09/2020, published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I no. 375bis of 11/05/2020, Appendices no. 1-6.

10 David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994.



*grammar*” does all the work, and the stylus gives us the shivers. More keyboard-friendly than paper-friendly, we communicate with *emoticons* and express our appreciation with *likes*. Delving into the great digital ocean, we find that we have returned to the hieroglyphs on the walls of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Sadly, the cultural flower of yore, the students of theology, are not much different from the generation that they belong to. A simple foray into the statistics of theology libraries should worry us. The *online* reading argument is a unanimously accepted public lie. Rather thematic *zapping*, provoked by the need to write a seminar paper or a dissertation, such digital reading can rather be defined as the ultimate bibliographical hurdle, erected by professors between students and the coveted degree.

Due to a lack of reading, a lack of a consistent body of knowledge, learned not only from reading required courses, but also from a lack of personal passion for study, more and more theological students do not understand common theological metaphors, because they no longer grasp fundamental meanings and lack the intuitive ability to connect information; they have neither the pleasure nor the training for reading. The cultural baggage is stored on Google, Facebook and Instagram (unfortunately, you can only search there when you have internet and battery). Expressions such as “my tongue is the reed of a skillful writer” (Romanian translation of Ps. 44:2) or “They who sow in Timan with divine tears...” (Sunday Orthros, 1<sup>st</sup> Antiphona) unfortunately remain not just gaps in the vocabulary, but huge black holes in theological understanding.

### **Possible solutions (1)**

In order to try to alleviate these problems, it is first necessary to change the admission methodology. Currently, admission is based on the compilation/submission of a file with previous school documents, baptismal certificate and formal recommendation of the parish priest, and a minimum religious knowledge test, preceded by a musical aptitude test. As the funding system is based on student numbers, and rectors have financial pressure on their shoulders, most exams are formal, so a significant number of those admitted either have no real spiritual inclinations or no musical inclinations; or when they have both, they lack the necessary knowledge and culture to be able to start quickly on the path of learning the intellectual and spiritual tools necessary for future pastoral activity.



### **3.1. A more complex admission system**

We consider that it is necessary, for the future, that the admission should be based on a combined system of interviews and meetings between the admission committee and the candidate, his/her family and the parish priest; obviously, the meetings will be separate, either to avoid inhibiting the candidate's responses or to avoid the current formalism and identify the true concerns and aptitudes of the future student. Not being obliged to give a written document that could expose them to strained relations with the candidate's family members - their own parishioners, parish priests/priests may be somewhat franker in describing the virtues and aptitudes of future priests. Involved in their child's admission, having already met some of the members of the teaching staff, parents will feel more obliged to supervise their child's academic and religious-moral journey, and perhaps more confident to approach the members of the teaching staff.

Similarly, a careful supervision and honesty in assessing the intellectual and moral qualities of the students can materialize in a non-academic and collective evaluation of each student at the end of the first year of studies. An honest, straightforward discussion, free from the pressure of years of tuition spent, can take place at the end of the first year with each candidate, to whom it is recommended to continue or abandon the academic path in pastoral theology and to be oriented towards another specialization or another faculty.

Directly dependent on this idea would be the introduction of a propaedeutic year for all candidates without the necessary knowledge that those who have graduated from a theological high school/seminary have. In the present format, students who have not gone through a theological school have a disadvantage, not impossible, but difficult to make up; and it is not just advanced and difficult to understand theological concepts, but rather it is about fundamental notions, for which a holistic and elementary initiation is required.

### **3.2. The theological student and spiritual maturity**

In general, psychological studies consider that the age of adulthood coincides with social autonomy and civic responsibility. Whereas in past centuries, these criteria were reached at an age of approx. 18-20 years (marriage and family responsibilities, employment and economic inde-

pendence), this reality is still more prevalent today in rural areas, where the difficulties of living in rural areas mean that these responsibilities are assumed at a much younger age than in urban areas. Likewise, the age at marriage and the age of finding a stable job - the criteria of maturity - has also increased because of longer schooling, but also because of the comfort and security felt within the family, which young people leave quite late<sup>11</sup>.

Newer specialized literature considers that between adolescence and adulthood, superimposed over the "window" of young adulthood, a new category of young people appeared - *emerging adulthood* (developing adult) -, young people between 18 and 30 years old. Their main characteristics are: *the need to explore one's own identity* (work, love, concepts about the world and life), *self-concern* (not in the egocentric sense, but rather avoiding obligations to others), *optimism and decision-making freedom* (they can be anyone if want and live how I want), *instability and insecurity* (emotional, financial, social, etc.)<sup>12</sup>.

*Why is this aspect in the present topic?* Because, leaving aside late vocations and mature students, theological faculties now award a bachelor's degree around the average age of 25-26, which for most coincides with entering the priesthood, which basically ignores to some extent both the research mentioned, but especially the old practice of the Church, for which the age of spiritual maturity was 30<sup>13</sup>.

At the moment, so-called late vocations (although they come with complicated and sometimes unexpected problems sometimes), in the long run can be the solution for a stable and committed clergy. Ultimately, according to the research cited, what we today call "late vocation" coincides with "spiritual maturity". Based on these premises, theological candidates should only be admitted to university studies after having already obtained

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11 In a Eurostat study, carried out at the end of 2016, one in four young people between the ages of 25 and 34 still lived with their parents: "*Bye bye parents: when do young Europeans flee the nest?*" (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20180515-1>; accessed on 23.11.2020).

12 Maria Roth, „Percepția tinerilor romani despre maturitate”, in *Revista Copiii de azi sunt părinții de mâine*, Vol. 35/martie, p. 27-34. (online: <http://tctp.cicop.ro/documente/reviste-en/TCTPnr-35.pdf>, accesat în 23.11.2020).

13 The research carried out by Lucian Bologa showed the fact that in the interwar period there was a threshold at the age of 25, related to a certain personal stabilization of the option for religious values, including for their conscious assumption (Lucian Bologa, *Psihologia vieții religioase*, University of Cluj, 1930).

a degree in another field of study or after working for several years in another environment and already having a stable family. This new recruitment system would allow for physical maturity, *emerging adulthood* and, implicitly, spiritual maturity.

It is downright impressive how visionary the Church Fathers were when they set the clerical age thresholds at 25 for the diaconate and 30 for the priesthood:

“LET the canon of our holy God-bearing Fathers be confirmed in this particular also; that a presbyter be not ordained before he is thirty years of age, even if he be a very worthy man, but let him be kept back. For our Lord Jesus Christ was baptized and began to teach when he was thirty. In like manner let no deacon be ordained before he is twenty-five, nor a deaconess before she is forty..” (14 Trulan; 11 Neocaesarea.; 16 Carthage)

### 3.3. Changing the theological student profile

In all theological faculties approx. 30% of students are now mature students (and the percentage is increasing). Most of them are already in their second faculty and, in most cases, have other commitments outside of academic ones. Although they are the most eager and serious, due to other personal obligations (work, family) they cannot afford a constant participation in the school program. In this matter, faculties have resorted to workarounds, such as percentage and differentiated reduction of compulsory attendance in classes.

In contrast, traditional students (18–25-year-olds) no longer have either the knowledge or the motivation to learn; they read less, find it hard to make connections between information, and find it harder to concentrate and easily irritated. They spend hours on FaceBook and find it difficult to take on long-term commitments, such as singing in a church (the shortage of singers, even in university centers, is already notorious). Even the pious and eager are hard to motivate. You rejoice when you find among them a bright mind, thirsty for knowledge and driven to the library by scientific curiosity rather than the obligation of a seminar paper.

For this reason, it is imperative that theology faculties adopt a more flexible timetable - with more afternoon and even Saturday hours, taking more account of students' availability, and - complementary - a program with active individual tutoring.

### 3.4. Minimum clerical internship

Especially for younger people, to reach spiritual maturity, clerical internship would also be useful. This solution is one that medicine, and law, for example, have successfully preserved. I think theology should also introduce this system. Working in a parish can help in spiritual maturation, learning the ways and activities of pastoral practice, etc. Furthermore, it could at least partially solve the problem of the shortage of church singers. According to the data we have now, this is practiced in the neo-Protestant communities, but also in the Reformed Church. Obviously, such an option is more complicated for Orthodox clergy who have families; for this reason, the internship should be recommended for a limited number of years and only in those parishes that manage to have some financial consistency; basically a few urban parishes<sup>14</sup>.

### 3.5. Revision of the university curriculum

A complicated and complex problem that called for quick and radical intervention is the way in which theological disciplines are distributed and taught. What still saves the theological education in Romania today is the dedication and openness to the new of some teachers with visions different from the model “in our time”, much more anchored in reality and sometimes with saving academic initiatives.

Unlike at the beginning of the century, when the curriculum of Orthodox theology faculties consisted of four to seven subjects per semester, today each semester includes 10 to 12 subjects. They are organized over four years (240 FTEs), with four semesters allocated to almost every discipline. Leaving out of the discussion complementary subjects, such as *Introduction to Scientific Research*, *Sport* or *Modern Languages*, the first two years are reserved for ‘biblical’ subjects (*New Testament*, *Old Testament*, *Greek*, *Latin and Hebrew*) and ‘historical’ subjects (*Universal Church History*, *History of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, *Patrology and patristic studies*, *History and spirituality of Byzantium*), so that in the third and fourth year the ‘systematic’ disciplines are studied (*Dogmatics*, *Fundamental Theology*,

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14 The current solution applied by the diocesan centers to fragment the larger parishes, cannot be a long-term solution, because the secularization and depopulation of the villages will further weaken the current parishes so that supporting the salary of the clergy will be impossible.

*Morality and Spirituality, Missiology, History and Philosophy of Religions*), and 'practical' disciplines (*Liturgical and Christian Art, Homiletics and Catechetics, Church Law, Pastoral*); the queen of disciplines seems to be Music, which is studied in all four years of studies<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.6. Overlapping and repeating information

The problem arises where information overlaps. Take the discipline of the New Testament and universal church history, for example; both study "The Foundation of the Church and the Activity of St. Apostles and St. Paul" or "The state of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world at the advent of Christianity". A close look shows that thematic and content overlaps can also be identified in other disciplines:

*Universal church history with History and spirituality of Byzantium and Patrology, Dogmatics with fundamental Theology*, etc. In another context we could have said "*repetitio mater studiorum est*", but today repeating the same information can be not only boring, unnecessarily time-consuming, but also a source of attention and concentration deficit.

### 3.7. Restructuring the hierarchy of disciplines

Another problem identified by us is the poor ranking and concatenation of disciplines. For example, in the first year, in the *New Testament* and *Universal Church History*, the "beginning of the Church" is studied, but not the "beginnings of the Eucharistic Liturgy" (the very rationale of the Church), which is not studied until the third year. At the same time, the *New Testament* and the *Universal Church History* present information about the Greco-Roman world at the emergence of Christianity, but the philosophical currents of the religions with which it collided are only discovered starting from the third year. In *Music*, the songs of the Holy Liturgy are taught in some schools from the first year, but the liturgical order and theology is only discovered in the fourth year.

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15 The information was taken from the website of the Romanian Patriarchate, where the subject sheets are posted: <http://patriarhia.ro/fisele-disciplinelor-teologice-din-in-vaamantul-teologic-ortodox-universitar-318/> (accessed on 23.11.2020).

## 4. Possible solutions (2)

### 4.1. Organization of the theological education system on thematic clusters

What are thematic clusters? Located in an area of intersection between interdisciplinarity and *transdisciplinarity*<sup>16</sup>, and in the vicinity of the idea of *branched curriculum* combined with the concept of *integrated learning*, the idea of *theological clusters* relies on information coming from many parts, in concentric circles that make information grow hierarchically and organically.

For example, students will study topics, not disciplines; they will not encounter many dates and years (these will inevitably come by themselves), but rather with phenomena, mentalities and mental-historical *habitus*. Grouped in thematic units, the information will coagulate from several such units that will finally build the whole<sup>17</sup>. Students will be taught to view Christianity of the first-third centuries through the lens of time, not through the eye of the present. One such cluster might be the *Beginning of Christianity*; during an entire semester, students will study concatenated elements, but which aim at a detailed vision of the whole: from the *New and Old Testaments* they will learn about the Jewish world and the inter-testamental apocalyptic; Jewish culture and civilization (Jewish liturgical models), from *Universal Church History* they will learn about the areas of spread and the conflict with the Roman administration, from *Liturgy* they will learn about the structure and content of the first liturgical ordinances, and from *History of Religions* they will learn about the religious mentalities of the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians and how they may have influenced Christian concepts of the world and life. They will learn about missionary models and paradigms from the *Missiology* Professor, and the *Homiletics* Professor will talk about types and styles of preaching. *Dogmatics* will add

16 Julie Thompson Klein, "Discourses of transdisciplinarity: Looking back to the future", in rev. *Futures*, nr. 63, 68-74.

17 We are convinced that pedagogues and didacticians from various disciplines have thought about such learning systems. Of course, theories may have been written on the side of such ideas, so I must apologize for the audacity of venturing into a field without the necessary specialization. However, perhaps that is exactly why such a proposal would be able to provoke reactions, precisely because it does not come from theories read, but from feelings and lived experiences.

notions about the construction of dogmatic concepts, heresies and schisms and *Law* and *Morals* will complete the information about the public and private discipline of Christians of the first three centuries. Ultimately, the strongest argument for such a solution is precisely the fact that life is not divided into categories of disciplines (James Moffet).

#### **4.2. Avoiding redundant tasks**

In the current context, in which young people come from an education system in where they are no longer used to multiple learning tasks and individual study, students find it increasingly difficult to participate in heuristic activities and to apply the research/writing methods learned in the seminar activities, in 'homework' system. If in the 1980's a theology student did a seminar paper in each discipline (about five to six per year), to-day this is done either superficially or with great efforts and pressure from professors/assistants. For this reason, we propose that the seminar papers be much less compared to the old system. These will no longer be done by disciplines, but by categories of disciplines. Most of the time scientific tools and working methods are like several disciplines. Thus, even if the research tools may be slightly different, the method must be the same, regardless of whether we are talking about the New or the Old Testament; and it must be the same for the historical disciplines – Universal Church History, Patrology, Byzantium, etc. Obviously, the papers will be more extensive and will have to be prepared more thoroughly, and their presentation will be made not only in the presence of colleagues, but also of all teaching staff and assistants in the category of those subjects. In this way, a seminar paper will be like an event, a small integrated exam.

#### **4.3. The problem of faculties in agony**

This is one of the most painful problems; a solution has always been tried but never succeeded in reducing the number of university centers offering theological education. Although there are good professors in any of the faculties, the quality of theological education is decreasing day by day. The small number of students in some faculties has dropped dramatically, which causes the Rectors to put pressure on the teaching staff by avoiding new hires and promotions. For this reason, there are some faculties that are agonizing, where the quality of theological education



has steadily declined, and the university competition and effervescence has reached a breaking point. Thus, the professors in these faculties with few students are less and less motivated and more and more busy with teaching subjects for which they have not prepared through specializations and publications. What quality are we talking about if a professor also teaches *Old Testament* and *Church History* and *Canon Law*. I know that it is hard to close a faculty in which a hierarchy has invested and placed its hopes (mission, prestige, public image, etc.). However, the prolongation of this agony is not at all useful to the Church; and the coming years will be increasingly difficult.

I believe that this problem can only be solved if the Church fixes a set of minimum quality standards for quality theological education. For example, a minimum number of full-time teaching staff should be decided with which a bachelor's program can function effectively and normally to ensure quality education (there are Pastoral Theology programs with less than six-eight full-time professors, each teaching four-six radically different disciplines, while others have double the number of holders).

We believe that faculties managing theology programs for which at least eight-ten holders for theological disciplines cannot be secured will have to be closed.

Another standard could refer to a minimum number of new students enrolled annually – for example, no less than 10-12 students in three consecutive years. Otherwise, we risk bringing in all kinds of students just to ensure the survival of a dying undergraduate program.

#### **4.4. The quality of the teaching staff**

This issue is even more sensitive. There is a lot of scientific waste in academia, as there is no real system for measuring the quality of the production of theological literature. Everyone agrees that most rankings and academic promotion systems in the field consider the quantity of scientific production, not its quality. Probably not only theology, but also other fields suffer in this chapter. Novelty, innovation, research of sources are words used less and less in theological scientific literature. Since 2016, over 900 doctoral theses have been completed in the field of theology, of which over 80-90% are completed by doctoral students at Orthodox theology doctoral schools.

Not the large number of doctoral theses, not the detected plagiarisms, but the platitude of these theses is, in my opinion, the biggest problem. People pursue a doctorate degree because they hope to get a parish more easily. So, most of the time, the ideas are taken up and repeated again and again, or, in the best case, they are processed from foreign literature. Romanian theological literature is less and less relevant. It is not the number of books or articles written that should be relevant, but the impact his writings had on readers and how they were received in scientific debate.

And in this matter, I believe that minimum standards should be imposed. For example, entering the contest for the position of lecturer or professor should not be allowed if you do not have a hirsch index<sup>18</sup> greater than or equal to 3; at least on the Google Scholar platform (Google Academic), because the others are almost inaccessible to the field of theology.

Another quality standard could be participation in at least 1-2 scientific events outside the country, not in pompous international exhibitions in Romania. In many situations, this criterion of internationalization, in many situations was “dribbled” by declaring the theological conferences in Romania as “international”, although the participation of foreign theologians was often extremely weak.

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All these analyzes and reflections are based on our concrete experience of permanent evaluation of the theological higher education in Romania from the last ten years, both as an expert of the *Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Romania* (ARACIS), and as an expert of the *Council National Attestation of University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates* (CNATDCU). Of course, our proposals, which I have also made in another paper,<sup>19</sup> has a challenging role, rather one of reflection and analysis than of application and implementation which, in addition to the fact that it needs detailed planning and in-depth analysis, also needs an as-

18 The *hirsch index* is a scientific visibility indicator that calculates the ratio between the number of articles / books published and the number of citations of one's works. There are various such platforms, better rated, such as *Publons* or *Scopus*.

19 This article is an improved version of the article “Orthodox theology from Romanian universities. Themes for reflection for the future”, in *Proceedings of 19<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Science, Theology and Arts – ISSA 2020: Christian Education in a Pluralistic Culture*, vol. II, Alba Iulia October 12, 2020), pp. 21-36.

sumption of the Holy Synod (which most consider to be too conservative to make some bolder decisions).

However, whether now or in the distant future, the Church will decide to change something, this change must necessarily consider:

- ✦ Modification of the admission system;
- ✦ Rethinking the entire curricular architecture;
- ✦ The closer relationship between theoretical and practical instruction in a new apprenticeship system.

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