

# **Mission and People with Disabilities: A Few Thoughts and Facts from an Orthodox Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This article begins with a few thoughts and some historical and canonical encounters about how lay and ordained people with disabilities have been involved in Orthodox mission work in the past. It then presents two concrete contemporary situations in which people with disabilities are involved in Orthodox ordained ministry work despite the persisting tradition that disabled people not be ordained. The first example is taken from the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, where the involvement of people with disabilities in both ordained and lay ministry provides significant support for a church that lives in a delicate situation. The second example is taken from the Romanian Orthodox Church and presents the case of Father Theophilus Părăian, one of the most prominent contemporary Romanian Orthodox monastic figures, who served as an ordained priest despite his disability. This article pleads for a deeper involvement of disabled people in both ordained and lay ministry in Orthodox churches.

## **Keywords**

*People with disability and Orthodox mission, Orthodox canon/law on ordination of men with disabilities, Didymus the Blind, Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Father Theophilus Părăian*

When the managing editor of *International Review of Mission* informed me that the first issue of this periodical for 2019 would be dedicated to the theme of mission and people with disabilities, I committed myself to write a study on it from an Orthodox perspective.

I had already done some reflection and research on this issue. A few years ago, when I was programme executive for Church and Ecumenical Relations at the World Council of Churches (WCC) with direct responsibilities for relationships with Orthodox churches and with the European churches, I was asked by the coordinator at that time of the WCC-Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (WCC-EDAN), Dr Samuel Kabue from Kenya, to help him organize a meeting of the network in Eastern Europe. I attended the sessions of that meeting, whose main purpose was to create a working group of EDAN in my region of origin. I remember that members of the network asked about my opinion on several issues related to the involvement of people with disabilities in church life and mission, especially around the ordination of men with disabilities in Orthodox tradition. Last year I was approached by a high-ranking representative of the German organization Bread for the World, who asked me why men with disabilities are not easily ordained in the Orthodox Church. I formulated a spontaneous response and later, after some research, I sent her an email with more detailed information.

This article offers me the opportunity to write and reflect in a more coherent way on some aspects of the involvement of people with disabilities in Orthodox mission. One of the basic ideas I would like to highlight here, which is at the same time one of the starting points of my article, is that making mission in Orthodox tradition is not limited to ordained ministers but is the duty of every Orthodox person. Ordained members of the church, that is clergy, are per se more involved in mission than laypeople, but missionary work is in no way assigned only to them. Starting from this principle, in the first part of this article I give a short historical and canonical overview of how lay and clergy with disabilities were involved in mission in the early church. After presenting the famous case of Didymus the Blind, who was a layperson involved in teaching activities in fourth century Alexandria, I concentrate on this canonical question: Is it allowed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition to ordain people with disabilities?

In the second part, I present two facts related to involvement of people with disabilities in Orthodox mission in our time. The first is the description of a personal experience I had during a visit to Eritrea, where I saw how lay and clergy with disabilities are involved in mission in the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. After presenting the facts I have seen, I give my personal thoughts on the, in my opinion, wise and amazing way in which people with disabilities are involved in mission in a church that lives in special socio-political circumstances. The second example is taken from my own church, the Romanian Orthodox Church. I present the case of Father Theophilus Părăian, who served the church as a person with disabilities and had tremendous missionary success. I present Metropolitan Anthony Plămădeală's description of Father Theophilus as a disabled ordained priest and how Father Theophilus describes himself and his mission

as a disabled priest. I conclude my article with a plea for a deeper involvement of people with disabilities both in ordained and lay ministry in the Orthodox churches.

## **A brief historical and canonical overview**

There is a general idea in the Orthodox tradition that mission in the early church was not necessarily entrusted to the strongest persons but rather to those who might be called “weak.” Most of the apostles were not socially the strongest ones. Most of them came from the margins, being fishermen from rural areas with a basic education. The apostle Paul, who tirelessly preached the gospel and travelled in different parts of the Roman Empire, was educated, but he had “a thorn . . . in the flesh,” perhaps an illness, whose role was, according to St Paul’s own interpretation, a way for God to keep him from being too elated (2 Cor. 12:7).

Didymus the Blind is one of the most famous early Christians who was disabled. As his surname shows, he was blind. Born in Alexandria in about the year 313, he became the head of the catechetical school of Alexandria and was one of its most prominent representatives in the fourth century, and the last of its famous teachers. He lost his sight at the age of four, before he was able to learn reading or writing. As he possessed an outstanding memory, he attained great knowledge through listening to those who lectured for him.<sup>1</sup> He authored several treatises, *On the Trinity*, *On the Holy Spirit*, *Against the Manicheans*, *Defence of Origen*; commentaries on books of the Old Testament, such as the Psalms, Job, Isaiah, Hosea, and Zechariah; and commentaries on books of the New Testament, including the gospels of Matthew and John, the Acts of the Apostles, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians. As the famous patrologian Johannes Quasten concludes, “The high esteem that he won during his lifetime sprang partly from spontaneous admiration for a man who, despite the tremendous handicap of lifelong blindness, amassed an amazing treasure of erudition, and too, without ever going to school or learning to read.”<sup>2</sup>

As regarding clergy with disabilities in the first centuries of Christianity, a brief review of the canons regarding this matter might be helpful. I would start by saying that early Christianity inherited the Jewish tradition according to which a member of the clergy, especially bishops, have to possess “bodily wholeness.” Since even any animal to be

<sup>1</sup> For more details regarding his life, writings, and doctrine, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3: *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1959), 85–100.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

sacrificed in front of God had to be “without blemish” (see Ex. 12:5, 29:1 and 38; Lev. 1:3, 1:6, 4:3, 4:14, 4:23, 4:28, 4:32, etc.), the Jewish priests whose mission was to bring the offerings in front of God were certainly not allowed to have any blemish. The law of the Old Testament is clear in this sense:

Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles; no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. (Lev. 21:17-21)

A brief review of the canons of the early church may prove that Eastern Christianity adopted the Jewish principle of the bodily wholeness of the priests with some major amendments. Apostolic Canon no. 77 states, “If any one be deprived of an eye, or lame of a leg, but in other respects be worthy of a bishopric, he may be ordained, for the defect of the body does not defile a man, but the pollution of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> Those men who have a disability that does not hinder them from fulfilling the obligations required of clergy can be ordained despite their partial disability. The argumentation of this decision has a high anthropological meaning: “the defect of the body does not defile a man.” This means that disability is not perceived as an ontological degradation of humanity; disability (or a handicap of any kind) is not something that makes the disabled man unworthy for ordination per se. In cases of a severe disability, like complete deafness or blindness, Apostolic Canon no. 78 prohibits ordination – not because such disabilities defile a man, but for practical reasons. Such a man would hinder the affairs of the church by not fulfilling completely his mission: “But if a man be deaf or blind, he may not be made a bishop, not indeed as if he were thus defiled, but that the affairs of the Church may not be hindered.”<sup>4</sup>

Canon I from Nicaea (325) prohibits the ordination of those who have mutilated themselves and orders the suspension of those already ordained. In case of forced mutilation, no prohibition of ordination or suspension is foreseen:

<sup>3</sup> H. Percival (ed.), *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees together with Canons of all the Local Synods which have Received Ecumenical Acceptance*, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (NPNF), vol. 14 (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1900), 599; text available at <https://archive.org/details/sevenecumenicalc00perc/page/n6>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

If anyone in sickness has undergone surgery at the hands of physicians or has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy. But if anyone in good health has castrated himself, if he is enrolled among the clergy, he should be suspended, and in future no such man should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this refers to those who are responsible for the condition and presume to castrate themselves, so too if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians or by their masters, but have been found worthy, the canon admits such men to the clergy.<sup>5</sup>

Eastern church history has recorded cases of self-mutilation in monastic circles, such as cutting one's ear, in order to escape ordination. In this way, zealous monks who did not want to give up their ascetic life for a bishop position avoided forced ordination. It remains an open question, however, as to what was considered more uncanonical: self-mutilation or the lack of visible bodily wholeness. In my opinion, self-mutilation was a practice heavily condemned and disregarded in the early church, as the roots of such a practice was linked with Gnostic-Manichean heresies.

The manual of canon law used in the theological faculty where I studied resumes the above-mentioned canons and defines bodily wholeness required for candidates for ordination as the following: "By bodily wholeness one may not understand the lack of any physical blemish, but the lack of those physical abilities which harm the priestly ministry; therefore, the canons specify that clergy members cannot be blind, or lame or with other physical visible blemishes."<sup>6</sup> The progress of technology arguably provides many possibilities for disabled people to be efficiently involved in various domains. Why should the mission of the Orthodox Church be an exception?

## **A special experience from the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church**

In September 2017, I headed a delegation of the WCC that visited Eritrea with the purpose of strengthening the relationship with the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, a member of the global fellowship since 2003, and to better understand religious life in this self-isolated country where human rights are systematically disrespected.<sup>7</sup> We visited several communities of the Orthodox Tewahedo Church in different parts of the country, as well as communities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. One detail significant for the theme of this article drew my attention. In several communities, youngsters and children were taught in the yards of the church buildings and

<sup>5</sup> N. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Vol. 1: Nicea I to Lateran V* (London: Burns & Oates, 1990), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ioan N. Floca, *Drept Canonic Orthodox: Legislație și administrație bisericească* (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1990), 53.

<sup>7</sup> See in this sense the statement on the state of human rights in Eritrea adopted by the WCC's central committee in July 2014: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/statement-on-the-state-of-human-rights-in-eritrea?searchterm=Eritrean>.

monasteries how to sing ecclesial songs and chant in Ge'ez, a dead language that is still used in liturgy in the Eritrean Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches and in other Eritrean and Ethiopian churches, as well as for the Beta Israel Jewish community (Jewish community from Ethiopia). I noticed that some of these teachers were blind. One of the members of clergy who accompanied our delegation explained: "Some of these teachers have such a disability. Blind people have an excellent memory, so they learned all the sacred songs and texts by heart and can teach them to our children. On the other hand, because of their disability, they cannot work in the fields and have time for this important ministry in our church."

This explanation made me realize that through the wisdom and practical spirit of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Pauline words – that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world" (1 Cor. 1:27-28) – are fulfilled. Blind people cannot be used for fieldwork in Eritrea because of the rudimentary level of the agriculture there, but their excellent memory, which helps them learn sacred texts and songs by heart, proves to be of a central importance for the ministry of the Orthodox Church there. By teaching the younger generation, they ensure the future of the Orthodox Church. In this way, what is weak and useless in the eyes of the world becomes strong and meaningful in the church.

In other places, I saw that some priests and even archpriests have different bodily disabilities. I was surprised, remembering the custom that prohibits the ordination of men with any "blemish," which I thought would be implemented even more strictly in the Eritrean Orthodox Church, as it is more heavily influenced by the Jewish tradition than other Orthodox Churches. The person in charge of our visit must have noticed my reaction, because he gave me the following explanation:

According to our tradition, men with disabilities cannot be ordained. However, our church made some exceptions for some men who possess the necessary skills, because of the special situation we are living in: because of the unsolved conflict with Ethiopia, our government can recruit young people and keep them in the army for many years. Disabled people are not recruited; therefore, we ordain some of them and make them serve in Church ministry.

When I heard this explanation, I had the same thought as a few days earlier, when I saw laypeople with disabilities involved in youth education: it seems that in the special Eritrean context, God and human wisdom take those who are considered weak to serve the world and use them for ministry in the church. The weak prove to be the strong in the promotion and ministry of Jesus Christ in this part of the world.

## The case of Father Theophilus Părăian (Romanian Orthodox Church)

Father Theophilus Părăian (1929–2009) is one of the most popular spiritual-monastic authorities in the recent history of the Romanian Orthodox Church. He served for many years as a monk and hieromonk in Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery, the most important monastic centre of Central Transylvania. Father Theophilus is well known for promoting a realistic and balanced spirituality, both for monastic circles and for laity. Unlike other similar prominent monastic-spiritual figures of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Father Theophilus promoted a certain openness to other Christian confessions. His conferences attracted large audiences and his books are popular among Romanian Orthodox people, published in large numbers and in several editions. A particularity of his biography is the fact that he was blind. However, he was ordained as a priest in order to be able to better serve the monks and the laity and to witness the Orthodox faith.

Father Theophilus was interviewed by Dr Anthony Plămădeală, the Archbishop of Sibiu and Metropolitan of Transylvania from 1980 to 2005, who served for many years as a representative and leading ecumenical figure of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the WCC and other ecumenical organizations. The interview was published in a book in Romanian entitled *Who Am I? What Do I Say about Me? An Interview with Archimandrite Theophilus Părăian from Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery*.<sup>8</sup> In this book, Father Theophilus Părăian responded to several questions asked by Metropolitan Anthony. This book seems to be the source for answering why Orthodox hierarchs made an exception to the canons of the Orthodox Church and ordained a person with an obvious disability as a deacon and later as a priest. This source also reveals what Father Theophilus had to say about the success of his mission as a disabled person. What challenges did he face in his ministry as a disabled Orthodox priest?

In the foreword of the above-mentioned book, Metropolitan Anthony describes why he decided to publish this book about Father Theophilus. He confessed that at the beginning he “thought that he [Father Theophilus] was like any blind man.” But after getting to know him better, Metropolitan Anthony did an extensive interview that he published “to serve as an example.”<sup>9</sup> In his brief biography of Father Theophilus, he reveals that he became a monk in 1953 – which was not unusual, as all people who are called to ascetic life and have no family obligations are, according to Orthodox canon law, allowed to become monks or nuns. The first unusual thing took place in 1980, when the

<sup>8</sup> Dr Antonie Plămădeală, Mitropolitul Ardealului, *Cine sunt eu? Ce spun eu despre mine. Interviu cu Arhim: Teofil Părăian, Mănăstirea Sâmbăta de Sus* (Sibiu: Editura Arhiepiscopiei, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Metropolitan of Transylvania of that time, Nicolae Colan (1957–1967), decided to ordain him as a deacon.

Metropolitan Anthony provides us with the reason why he decided to ordain Father Theophilus as a priest (hieromonk) in 1983: “When I saw his abilities and his skills in approaching certain issues, I decided to ordain him as a priest and in this way to give him the possibility to manifest in ways he considers most appropriate.”<sup>10</sup> In the same foreword, Metropolitan Anthony writes further about Father Theophilus:

As we read his books, or we talk with him, we realize not only that he is gifted, but also that he is a hard worker and that, beyond all these, he possesses an extraordinary optimism . . . he is always ready to help any person . . . It is amazing, or, if we think further, it is even divine the way he receives the people, the way he feels them and the way he communicates with them.<sup>11</sup>

Metropolitan Anthony writes also about Father Theophilus’ disability, which did not seem to hinder Father Theophilus’ ministry to the flock:

He lives in a big monastery. However, he does not know anything about it. He does not know how the monastery looks. He does not know if it is big or small. But, however, it seems that he knows everything. When he speaks to people, one does not realize that he cannot see. He is so near to people’s struggles, to the problems they are confronted with, to the needs they have! It is like he knows everything, and he understands everything; it is like he has solutions for all cases presented to him. And nobody has the impression that he cannot see. He is an extraordinary man.<sup>12</sup>

Metropolitan Anthony is aware that the missionary success of Father Theophilus is the result of his native gifts combined with tireless work, study, and research:

He knows the order of all liturgical services by heart. When the abbot invites him to preach, people would not realize that he cannot see unless they know it. He possesses an incredible memory. He studies all the time. He has Bibles in Braille writing in Romanian and in other languages. Already in high school he studied French and German. Later he learned English through German, and Esperanto. His cell is full of books in Braille writing, audio cassettes where he has recorded his books, sermons and conferences.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Metropolitan Anthony writes the following about Father Theophilus:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.



I am glad that in Sâmbăta Monastery lives such a man. He possesses many qualities; he is a man who gives hope to everyone; a man who seems to see everyone's needs and requirements . . . I say that he is an extraordinary man. I repeated this sentence a few times, but I feel like I should repeat it again and again. This man has never seen and will never be able to see. In order to understand this, we should close our eyes and we should keep them closed and never open them again. Maybe in this way we could understand something from his destiny . . . He is a gift of God for Sâmbăta Monastery and for all those who visit it.<sup>14</sup>

“I entered in conscious life without sight” and “I never was able to see” confesses Father Theophilus in his interview with Metropolitan Anthony. As a baby he had meningitis, and this likely caused his blindness. He could perceive only the difference between light and darkness, giving him a basic spatial orientation.<sup>15</sup> When he was a child, his parents decided to bring him to Maglavit, a village in south Romania, where a shepherd named Petrache Lupu, who claimed to have seen God the Father in the shape of an old man with a long white beard, attracted people who hoped he would heal them of different illnesses. However, Father Theophilus confessed that even as a child he did not really hope to be healed, and therefore was not disappointed that no miracle happened to him.<sup>16</sup>

Instead, Father Theophilus remembers that he had a great desire to study. After he graduated from a high school for young people with disabilities he intended to study theology in order to become a priest. The Metropolitan of Transylvania at that time, Nicolae Bălan (1920/1955), gave him the blessing to study theology, but he clearly told him, “You will never be a priest!”<sup>17</sup> This clear statement of the Metropolitan did not discourage Father Theophilus, as he received other signs of hope. In an audience with Metropolitan Bălan, he learned that the Metropolitan was lecturing on a book about famous people who were blind, from which he learned of the surprising potential possessed by such people. Father Theophilus mentions three statements of three personalities he discovered that gave him hope, strength, and encouragement in his theological studies: “God gives other gifts” (Theodor Scorobet, auxiliary bishop from Sibiu); “I am glad [about the Metropolitan's decision to allow Theophilus to study theology] Christ rejects nobody” (Prof. Nicolae Neaga, Rector of the Theological Institute from Sibiu); and “Have light in your soul!” (Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan).<sup>18</sup> Later, Father Theophilus came to understand the real meaning of Metropolitan Bălan's words, “You

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 116–17.

will never be a priest!” after he heard him tell another bishop, “I will never give him [Father Theophilus] a parish.”<sup>19</sup> This meant that he would never be a parish priest.

After Father Theophilus graduated from the Orthodox Theological Institute in Sibiu, he decided to enter monastic life at the recommendation, and insistence, of the same Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan, who made him a monk in 1955. In 1960 Theophilus was ordained deacon by Metropolitan Nicolae Colan. He describes in the interview with Metropolitan Anthony how the abbot of the monastery at that time opposed his ordination “for unknown reasons.” When Metropolitan Colan finally decided to ordain him as deacon, he explained to those opposing his decision, “He [Father Theophilus] is a man without light [without sight], but illuminated.” Father Theophilus confessed, “I believe that this was the basis of his [Metropolitan Colan’s] decision to make me deacon, to make me priest.”<sup>20</sup> Father Theophilus kept in his heart the words of the Metropolitan before his ordination: “I will not keep you a deacon for a long time, and I will make you a priest. You will be a spiritual father [i.e., priest with the right to hear confessions].<sup>21</sup> And you will be a concelebrant [i.e., you will conduct liturgical services together with other deacons and priests].”<sup>22</sup>

Father Theophilus kept in his mind especially the words of Metropolitan Colan: “And you will be a concelebrant.” “I never forget this,” says Father Theophilus. He felt that these words spoke to his situation. He realized that being blind, he would never be able to celebrate alone, but only together with other deacons and priests, because he needed their assistance. Therefore, except for some simple liturgical services, such as the blessing of a house or a memorial service, which do not require a lot of movement or complex gestures, he never celebrated alone simply because he could not do it.<sup>23</sup>

Father Theophilus served as a deacon for 27 years. He confessed that sometimes he confronted the scepticism and enmity of some priests because of his disability. For instance, he quotes the abbot who opposed his ordination as saying, “The Metropolitan [Colan] will see what is going to happen to him, because he ordained as deacon a blind man.”<sup>24</sup> Metropolitan Colan was prevented from ordaining Father Theophilus as a

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>21</sup> In the Orthodox Church, not all priests have the right to hear confessions, that is, to conduct the holy sacrament of confession. This right is given by the bishop and involves the saying of a prayer over the head of the ordained priest.

<sup>22</sup> Antonie Plămădeală, *Cine sunt eu? Ce spun eu despre mine* (Sibiu: Editura Andreiana, 2014), 120.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 121–22.

priest because of illness, which lasted from 1961 to 1967, when the Metropolitan died. The next Metropolitan of Transylvania, Prof. Nicolae Mladin (1967–1981), with whom Father Theophilus had a close friendship, did not ordain him priest. According to Father Theophilus, this was because he himself told the Metropolitan that he desired to remain a deacon. He did this to protect Metropolitan Mladin, who had a difficult relationship with the communist regime, from anything that could cause the hierarch trouble.<sup>25</sup> In reality, Father Theophilus really wanted to be a priest, and he was ordained one by Metropolitan Anthony in 1983, whose reasons I mentioned above.

As a hieromonk, Father Theophilus was able to hear confessions. He preached more often than in the period he was a deacon and became a popular speaker. He started to give conferences in other monasteries and cities in Romania, attracting large audiences. His discourse was simple and erudite at the same time. For all these reasons and because he extensively quoted biblical, liturgical, and patristic texts by heart, he enjoyed a reputation comparable with that of Didymus the Blind. In recognition of his missionary work, he was awarded the title of *protosingelos* (1986) and later of *archimandrite* (1988), the highest status of a hieromonk in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Father Theophilus speaks also about the challenges he faced in his ministry as a disabled Orthodox priest. Because most of the prayer books used by Orthodox priests were not published in Braille, Father Theophilus needed to learn all prayers by heart. And they are many. However, this was not difficult for him, as he possessed an excellent memory. He served 27 years as deacon and became familiar with that liturgical role and all movements involved in the Orthodox ritual. As he confesses, it was a challenge for him to get to know the new and more complex role of a priest.<sup>26</sup> He learned all these through perseverance, passion, and the support of other brother clergy.

As Metropolitan Anthony mentioned in the foreword of his book, Father Theophilus was blessed with an extraordinary optimism. He remembers that during his life some people told him, “You cannot do this or that because you cannot see.”<sup>27</sup> However, such words never discouraged him from having dreams and ambitions and doing his best to fulfil them. He rather kept in his mind those words that encouraged and strengthened him. And he was not only an optimist for himself, but, even more importantly, he knew how to transmit this optimism to those around him or to those listening to his sermons and conferences. I can also witness, as one who heard him speak at conferences, that his optimism was truly contagious!

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 19.

## Some final remarks

I already stated that this article is a call for a deeper involvement of people with disabilities in both ordained and lay ministry in Orthodox churches. This plea is based on the following conclusions that emerged from this article:

1. As undertaking mission is, in Orthodox tradition, the duty of every church member, Orthodox churches shall reflect more on how people with disabilities could be more deeply involved in mission today, both as laypeople and as ordained men.
2. The experience of the early church, its canons, and the writings of the church fathers should be one of the main sources of inspiration and discernment for a reflection of this kind.
3. Since canons state that “the defect of the body does not defile a man” (Apostolic Canon no. 77), there is space for a careful reflection on when men with different disabilities could be ordained and people with disabilities could be more involved in lay mission in the Orthodox Church.
4. A strict-literal interpretation of Apostolic Canon 78 prohibits ordination of men with severe disability, such as complete deafness or blindness. This article provides some examples of how people with such disabilities are successfully involved in mission, either as lay or as ordained, in two different Orthodox churches (one Oriental and one Eastern Orthodox). Such an involvement is clearly facilitated nowadays by technological progress. Father Theophilus, unlike Didymus the Blind, was educated with the support of Braille and by using modern means.
5. An important aspect of involving people with disabilities in ordained ministry is understanding that this involvement is done not to be in line with the spirit of the contemporary world, which promotes more inclusivity, but simply because their skills can be useful for the mission of the church. Father Theophilus was ordained not for the sake of having a man with a disability as a priest, but because he could better and more efficiently undertake his mission to the flock. As his own words have proved, Father Theophilus realized that as a priest with a disability, he can fulfil his mission only in close cooperation with other priests. That is why he could not be a parish priest and could never celebrate the holy liturgy as a single celebrant, but only as a “concelebrant.”