

Mission in Scandinavia: Exposure, Experience, and Expertise for the Master's Students in Mission and Ministry at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Iași (April 28 – May 9, 2025)

Introduction

To serve as an Orthodox priest within the Romanian diaspora in Europe may constitute an ideal for many students of the Master's program in Mission and Pastoral Ministry in Iași. On the one hand, it promises an unprecedented experience and challenge; on the other, the Romanian diaspora urgently needs priests to minister to those who have left the country—willingly or not. Finally, the prospects of placing young graduates in clerical posts in Romanian parishes are approaching zero.

Two paradoxes have marked recent Romanian history, visible especially after 2016: first, Romanian emigration remains the largest in the world after Syria (a country at war for over twenty years); second, uniquely among Romanians, more children are now born outside the country than within. Romanian villages are shrinking—some disappearing—while the population ages and declines, erasing pastoral prospects for young clergy. According to the latest statistics, more than 1.2 million dwellings in Romania are abandoned and severely degraded—essentially beyond recovery.

Mission in Scandinavia

The project was entitled “**Mission in Scandinavia**” (MiS) and addressed realities in both Denmark and Sweden. Norway could not be included due to time constraints and because the Romanian presence there is significantly smaller than in Denmark.

Following a similar Erasmus+ experience in the United Kingdom in 2023, a group of ten Romanian students and one Greek student (on an Erasmus+ placement at the Faculty in Iași) undertook a practical and formative visit to Denmark and Sweden. The aim was to engage directly the problems and challenges facing future ministers serving Romanians abroad, at the gracious invitation of the Diocese of Viborg. The project was coordinated on the Romanian side by the undersigned, building on longstanding contacts and ecumenical programs carried out within the Archdiocese of Iași since 1999.

The participants were first- and second-year students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iași, accompanied by Assoc. Prof. Rev. Dr. Dan Sandu. As we draw upon their reflections after the project, we list their names here:

1. Bulai Ioan Alexandru
2. Coșuleanu Gabriel-Cosmin

3. Drăghici Cătălin
4. Enăchescu Robert-Nicu
5. Evangelos Champilidis (Greece)
6. Gârbea Ionuț-Mădălin
7. Grădinariu Sebastian-Lucian
8. Grigorași Gheorghiță-Adrian
9. Ipate Vlăduț Mihai
10. Morcov Vasile
11. Pîjîn Grigorie

The project was made possible through Danish partners with whom collaboration began approximately twenty-five years ago—namely Pastor Karin Vestergaard and Pastor Martin Boje Kristensen. They enabled the inclusion of *Mission in Scandinavia* among the projects of the International Relations Committee of the Diocese of Viborg, coordinated by Pastor Peter Fischer-Nielsen, within the jubilee year commemorating 1700 years since the formulation of the Nicene Creed. Additional pastors and volunteers serving on the *Church in the World* International Relations Committee of the Diocese of Viborg also contributed: Grete Bækgaard Thomsen, Niels Arne Christensen, Poul Erik Knudsen.

Emigration and Emigrants: Romanians in Scandinavia

The conditions of emigration and of labor in the diaspora are far from easy. The types of work are diverse and often unattractive. Middle-class Romanian emigrants rarely own homes; they frequently lack formal employment contracts, take on jobs avoided by locals, receive lower wages, live far from their families, and are pressured by family needs or loans that compel them to work. Their public visibility in Danish society is often negative, marked by a reputation for criminal predisposition; religiously, they tend not to practice their Orthodox faith and are, at best, nominal Christians seeking a better life.

The situation of Romanian clergy in emigration can be viewed from two angles. Officially, there is the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Northern Europe, a diocese of the Romanian Orthodox Church with jurisdiction over Romanian Orthodox communities in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Established in 2007 and headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden, it is shepherded by His Grace Bishop Macarie Drăgoi. Its mandate is to offer pastoral care to all Romanian faithful abroad. To that end, Romanian parishes have been established and priests ordained to serve them, focusing on evangelization—not so much of the heterodox as of

Romanian believers who are uncatechized and unfamiliar with their new socio-cultural and economic contexts.

These priests receive only minimal financial support from the Romanian Orthodox Church—an assertion I make not on the basis of official patriarchal financial data, but from direct, on-the-ground sources. In practice, priests are ordained and assigned if they are already resident in the country, have housing (owned or rented), and if their spouses and children have already adapted with means of support. In other words, a Romanian priest typically works Monday to Friday in a secular job (ranging from installing furniture or working as a “pizza delivery guy,” to bank brokerage, research, or university teaching) and from Friday to Monday must gather the scattered Romanian faithful into what may be called a “parish.” In reality, gatherings take place improvisationally in unconventional spaces obtained free of charge (disused gymnasiums, industrial halls, ground floors of old buildings, improvised tents) or in churches lent by Roman Catholic, Lutheran (more rarely), or Anglican communities (in the UK), sometimes gratis and sometimes for rent—modest at times, burdensome at others. The (weary) Romanian Orthodox priest not only has no weekend time for his own family; he brings his family along and involves them in church service—his wife at the chanter’s stand or tending the candle desk, his children in the altar—seeking to create a welcoming community of love in which the faithful rediscover something of their village or hometown parish. Often the rent is not fully collected each month; the same (weary) priest ends up paying church rent from his own income to guarantee a place to serve the following month.

As for the priest’s relations with host Catholic or Lutheran clergy, these are closely monitored by the hierarchy, such that Romanian Orthodox communities can sometimes resemble exotic, self-sufficient Muslim enclaves. The project therefore aimed precisely to expose students to these realities, through scheduled meetings with Romanian Orthodox priests as well as high-level visits and encounters within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.

Impressions, Appreciations, and Lessons

The program was diverse, engaging, and practice-oriented, offering Romanian students an overview of Lutheran Christianity in Denmark—from parish life (with participation in Sunday worship and parish-specific projects), to pilgrimages and an audience with the Bishop of Viborg, His Excellency Dr. Henrik Stubkjær; and to presentations on the diaconal and missionary activity of the Church of Denmark in the world, dating back to the seventeenth century, within The

Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark and the National Council of Churches in Denmark.

Below is a selection of participants' impressions. We highlight constructive and edifying aspects, as well as perceived shortcomings—less to offer a general evaluation than to gauge the impact of the students' encounter with Scandinavian Christian realities, the willingness of this society to accept and cooperate with emerging Romanian Orthodox communities, the meaning of mission, and the presentation of Romanian Orthodoxy under minority conditions.

A fitting introduction was offered by student Ioan Alexandru Bulai, who wrote:

“The experience lived in Denmark, within the Lutheran Church, was one of the most intellectually demanding, yet also full of unprecedented and beautiful moments. This program was a genuine window into another ecclesial world, which helped me to understand the Church, in general, in a new light. I drew close to the idea of interreligious dialogue not only as theory, but as a living, necessary, and fruitful experience [...] I met wonderful people, profoundly dedicated to their Church, people who assume their mission with seriousness and faith. At the same time, I consolidated relationships within the group with whom I traveled, sharing joys, questions, reflections, and communion.” (Ioan Alexandru Bulai)

On the Role of the Church in Danish Society, through the Participants' Lens

1. “I appreciated the transparency of the Lutheran Church and its representatives. This openness seemed to me not only interesting but essential to a Church's mission in today's society. It led me to reflect deeply on the need for the Orthodox Church also to assume such a way of being—transparent, sincere, and present in the world.” (Ioan Alexandru Bulai)
2. “In a way, the project offered a foretaste of problems that we too will face, as well as possible methods of prevention and resolution, which I noted with responsibility and hope.” (Ioan Alexandru Bulai)
3. “The organization of the Lutheran Church, and the manner in which it carries out its activity, are very different from what I had learned about this Church. I was impressed by the social work it undertakes and by the way parish members help one another, even if, overall, I also identified several shortcomings in its activity.” (Gabriel-Cosmin Coşuleanu)
4. “Participation in workshops and conferences organized in Viborg and Copenhagen helped me learn more about how the Lutheran Church is structured, about its history and

perspectives, and about the relationship it maintains with other religious groups in the area.” (Gabriel-Cosmin Coșuleanu)

5. “I noticed that the Lutheran Church’s strong point is its social-philanthropic activity, which facilitates the evangelical message and assists better collaboration between laity and Church.” (Cătălin Drăghici)
6. “The Lutheran Church is open to interconfessional dialogue, and this fosters better collaboration with other Christian confessions. I note that it is necessary for the churches to present their doctrinal positions within a dialogue of peace and understanding and to act together when Christianity is threatened.” (Cătălin Drăghici)
7. “Lutheran worship spaces, cemeteries, and annexes are very well maintained, with optimal operating conditions, furnished with all that is necessary and with up-to-date technology. It is easy to understand that the Danish state and, to a great extent, the Danish people are proud of their national Church.” (Cătălin Drăghici)
8. “I could not overlook the common challenges in Denmark and Romania, especially the declining interest of young people in church life. This prompted me to reflect on the reality in Romania, where, as a minister, I am called to facilitate the young generation’s continued connection with Christ.” (Ionuț-Mădălin Gârbea)

Personal Experiences—Food for Mind and Soul

- “Until this experience, my understanding of doctrinal differences between Orthodoxy and Protestantism was limited to theoretical study undertaken in preparation for the 12th-grade Dogmatics Olympiad. I considered that reading a systematic manual could provide a sufficiently clear image of the spiritual life of the approximately 600 million traditional Protestants in the world.” (Grigorie Pîjîn)
- “An intense experience within an interconfessional exchange, an experience that enriched not only my knowledge, but especially my soul and theological perspective.” (Ioan Alexandru Bulai)
- “Surprising and memorable at the same time was the meeting with His Excellency Henrik Stubkjær, Bishop of Viborg and the representative of the Lutheran World Federation in Ecumenical Relations. He presented himself to us as a warm, open, communicative, and amiable person, who introduced us to Viborg Cathedral and to numerous interesting aspects about the Lutheran Church and its activity locally and internationally.” (Gabriel-Cosmin Coșuleanu)

- “With the help of Christian values, the Danes have succeeded in building a solid society in which honesty and human dignity prevail.” (Cătălin Drăghici)
- “Visiting cultural sites emblematic for Danish Lutheran Christianity, meeting parish representatives and persons involved in the administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, gave me a natural and profound taste of the authenticity of Danish faith and spiritual life.” (Ionuț-Mădălin Gârbea)
- “I was deeply impressed by the warm welcome and openness of our hosts. From the meeting with Bishop Henrik Stubkjær to the discussions with priests, theologians, and members of local communities, I felt a sincere spirit of hospitality and mutual respect. I was surprised by the way Lutherans in Denmark integrate social, cultural, and ecumenical activities into parish life while retaining a deep attachment to tradition and spirituality.” (Robert-Nicu Enăchescu)
- “This Erasmus+ mobility was more than a simple academic experience; it was a genuine life lesson which not only crossed geographical boundaries but opened minds and hearts, strengthening common Christian values.” (Ionuț-Mădălin Gârbea)
- “Our hosts were willing to answer any question and curiosity, and this improved the way these interactions unfolded.” (Sebastian-Lucian Grădinariu)
- “I returned somewhat different from how I left, and I say this because I was enriched culturally by learning new things, by daily practice of the English language—where I also felt an improvement—and by realizing how important it is to know and love our culture, whether we are speaking of the spiritual tradition or the folk tradition of the Romanian people.” (Sebastian-Lucian Grădinariu)
- “A complex formative experience, with distinctive theological, cultural, social, and personal valences, which will remain an essential landmark in my academic and vocational path as a master’s student in the ‘Mission and Pastoral Ministry’ program at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iași.” (Gheorghiță-Adrian Grigorași)
- “Together with my colleagues, I noticed how much openness, patience, and honesty matter in such theological exchanges, in which confessional differences do not become barriers but opportunities for shared understanding and work.” (Gheorghiță-Adrian Grigorași)
- “Personally, I was received into the home of a family of Lutheran pastors, an experience that offered me an authentic perspective on their daily life, the balance between family

life and pastoral ministry, and on the spirituality they live out in simplicity and serenity. Moments of family prayer, discussions about vocation, and pastoral challenges formed a sincere dialogue beyond academic formalism.” (Gheorghită-Adrian Grigorași)

- “As the days passed, I felt how I was adapting, learning from interactions, and gaining more courage to express my ideas—even in English, which was not my strong suit (the language representing for me a continual struggle, yet I was not overcome).” (Vasile Morcov)
- “The ten days spent there awakened in me a particular longing, which I had not felt for a long time: a longing for Orthodox services. The Vespers on the last day brought me such deep peace and fulfillment that, on the way to the final dinner, I realized I was smiling without noticing. Nevertheless, I sincerely tried to set aside subjective arguments, to look with openness at their search for peace, the way they pray, the way they connect with God—to understand what formed them and how they arrived here.” (Vasile Morcov)
- “I was challenged to view the reality of Western secularization in a more nuanced way. Although there is a visible decline in formal religious practice, I discovered an authentic thirst for meaning—a discreet yet sincere search for the sacred in the midst of the everyday. This led me to re-evaluate certain personal prejudices and to desire a deepening of interconfessional dialogue in a spirit of openness and fidelity to Orthodox Tradition.” (Gheorghită-Adrian Grigorași)
- “I realized that a narrow, rigid, and exclusivist perspective is not, in fact, what guarantees the fulfillment of our mission as theologians and future ministers—especially in an increasingly diverse society where God may well appoint us to pastor.” (Vasile Morcov)
- “This experience also motivated me to develop my linguistic competencies, especially in English, realizing that a well-chosen word is not only a form of socializing but also an instrument of communion and dialogue. In a European context marked by ideological confusions, clear and sincere communication can become a means of bringing people closer and of affirming the identity of the Christian faith.” (Grigorie Pîjin)

Romanian Presence in Denmark—An Assessment of MiS Outcomes

As stated in the preamble to this Report, the project’s principal aims were to become acquainted with the religious realities within the Lutheran Church in Denmark and to meet official representatives of Romanian Orthodox communities, engaging in dialogue about life in

the diaspora—its challenges and its beauty. While the first aim was largely achieved thanks to the excellent mobilization of the Danish organizers, the second fell short. The schedule foresaw several meetings and the presence of Romanian Orthodox priests in Denmark at group activities; this materialized only partially, thanks to the priests in Copenhagen and the priest in Lund. Two reasons were invoked: the absence of a specific blessing from the Romanian hierarch and the priests' heavy weekday schedules. The explanation is unconvincing, since the program was set well in advance, all parties were informed in writing, and the lack of communication from the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Northern Europe with the Romanian and Danish organizers prevented the young theologians both from receiving our hierarch's blessing and from benefiting from the experience of Romanian priests in Danish parishes.

From group evaluations, we observed a certain “enclavization” of Romanian Orthodox communities—insufficiently open to cooperation under the pretext of safeguarding authentic faith—even though dialogue need entail neither doctrinal compromise nor intercommunion. Rather, it should be a constructive communication through which the faithful can see a visible witness to a Christian desire for knowledge and collaboration. We appreciated that the Lutheran Church in Denmark does not engage in proselytism among non-Danish believers and does not expect them to become members of the Lutheran Protestant community—not even in the case of Muslim believers, with whom it conducts social projects and educational programs.

Lutheran pastors devote maximum attention to catechetical classes for children and to preparation for Confirmation, which each pastor provides both individually and at the parish level. Confirmation is another official ceremony of receiving members into the Lutheran Church (besides Baptism) during preadolescence or adolescence, with the direct effect of registering them as official members. This ministry has proved to be an open door for Romanian children to become members of the Lutheran Church through participation in Confirmation classes and the ceremony alongside their Danish peers. In the long term, within a generation, Romanian children born and raised in Denmark may be fully assimilated not only into Danish culture and economy but also as “confirmed” members of the Lutheran Church in Denmark.

We also noted that Romanians are invited and often employed predominantly on farms, in rural areas. Frequently we heard the phrase “they are in the countryside” in response to questions about why they are not visible in cities, churches, festivals, or fairs. Although this may seem unusual, the situation is also due to the fact that most Romanians arriving in Denmark do not speak Danish and often struggle even with English, making communication a major obstacle to socio-cultural integration. We did not discover Church of Denmark projects specifically designed to help Romanians learn Danish, become familiar with local ethos and culture, or receive support

when they wish to learn—unlike Ukrainian migrants, who enjoy considerably greater care and attention from both state and church authorities.

From our meetings with active members of the Danish Church (notably, of the older generation), we observed their desire to know other forms of Christian faith, their interest in Orthodox culture and iconography, and their willingness to form personal ties. Students were surprised by the care and interest with which each person who had visited Romania spoke enthusiastically, showed photos, recalled people met on pilgrimage, and displayed small souvenirs acquired on trips to Romania.

Proposals for Future Cooperation

We are convinced that a project is not merely a set of activities with corresponding outputs; it should become a source of inspiration and an open door to further initiatives. It is the responsibility of the participating student generation to carry forward, improve, and diversify what they have learned or found inspiring—if this contributes to more effective pastoral work with the faithful, to cultivating interconfessional relations, to renewing apostolic enthusiasm for proclaiming the Gospel to all, and to living the Gospel as authentically as possible in a (post)modern society facing unprecedented challenges—from consumerist individualism to the use of advanced technologies and Artificial Intelligence in the sphere of faith. Below are proposals intended as catalysts for future Orthodox–Lutheran collaboration and as sources of inspiration for students in designing other projects:

1. **Structured Interconfessional Study.** Interconfessional dialogue through direct relationships should be a formal subject of study, at least for students in the Master's in Mission and Pastoral Ministry. Theoretical study has its place; yet today's institutional dynamics—including within the Church—require continual “upgrading” of information that does not depend solely on one professor's perspective.
2. **Leveraging Erasmus+ with Co-Funding.** Erasmus+ is an exceptional platform that supports such initiatives by providing necessary funding, even if expenses can exceed the daily budget allowance. To avoid burdening host budgets, co-funding from the educational institution or the diocese should be considered.
3. **Operational English Proficiency.** English, as the general medium of communication, must be taught, mastered, and practiced by students preparing for mission; without it, evangelization, preaching, pastoral care, dialogue, and pilgrimage will not achieve their aims. We welcome proposals to increase English-language instruction hours at the Faculty of Theology in Iași and to encourage intensive practice.

4. Ecumenical Humility and Method Sharing. The history, instruments, and methods of mission cultivated and employed by the Lutheran Church in Denmark can inspire young Romanian priests in their ministry to Romanian faithful within the Scandinavian cultural context. We should cultivate *ecumenical humility*—the willingness to learn from another Church what is good and useful for one’s own faithful—applying pastoral and missionary methods validated by others’ experience, while avoiding both isolation and proselytism.
5. Concrete Support for Clergy in the North. Romanian priests and future pastors in Scandinavia cannot conduct authentic and effective mission without more consistent support from the Romanian Orthodox Church, especially as many are young, with families and children. While St. Paul counsels that those who serve at the altar should live from the altar, greater communion and fraternal support are crucial where parishes are nascent and the faithful are new, poor, and disoriented. Creating a formal parish and ordaining a priest whom they are then obliged to support financially can cease to be help and become another way of capitalizing on their faith.
6. Renewing Missiology and Ecumenism. Courses on church mission and ecumenism in theological faculties must be taught in an irenic spirit and grounded in primary, lived realities—not in manuals written under the previous regime. If missiology was once equated with “sectology”, emphasizing what differs and divides, now it has the chance to become a vehicle for communication and dialogue, knowledge and cooperation.
7. Beyond Services: Catechesis and Formation. Orthodox mission among our own faithful in the diaspora cannot and must not be reduced to the provision of religious services. It must include ongoing catechumenal formation, Bible study or Sunday School, age-specific camps and gatherings, distribution of books and brochures, accessible online resources for learning the faith, familiarization with the Gospel of Christ, and the creation of minimal parish logistics that nurture the Orthodox cultural spirit of children born abroad.

Conclusion

The ending of the Gospel according to John exhorts the reader to believe that “Jesus is the Christ,” in order to have eternal life. This is the message that every young person who aims at mission and pastoral ministry must proclaim with utmost conviction: that Jesus is the Christ, to offer each believer hope. Through the MiS project, we sought to discover how we might give

hope—that more can be done; that there is work in the Lord’s field both here and afar; that Christian dialogue and collaboration are vital for Europe today.

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