DISABILITY AND HUMAN DIGNITY ON THE *IMAGO DEI* AS PROOF OF HUMAN WORTH

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Abstract:

The issue addressed in this paper pertains to one of the most vulnerable human categories – children with disabilities, and by implication, people with disabilities. Many a time the behaviour "normal" people have toward the disabled in the community is faulty and degrading. Most often this is so because of the erroneous perceptions many of us have in regard with the worth such persons have. This paper advances the premise that disability is neither a degrading experience nor should it affect how one's dignity is being perceived. Disability is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition, a common experience we all share. Moreover, the biblical claim that we are created in God's image, does not preclude disability, but rather it elevates the status of the disabled.

Keywords: *Disability, Human dignity, Imago Dei, Creation theology, Human worth.*

Introduction

Disability is a common human condition. The terminology can either describe a congenital disability (a condition present from birth), an acquired disability (a condition where one loses the ability to function normally due to an accident), or the degeneration caused by aging, accompanied by a gradual loss of abilities. However, none of these aspects do full justice as definitions of disability. Seen in its broader sense, disability is the limitative situation created by the intersection of one's detrimental medical condition, which causes the person to be limited in performing an activity, and the environment within which such a person carries out his or her activity. By environment, in this context, we refer to the totality of factors that determine, influence, enable, or incapacitate, the the person in difficulty. So, whenever we refer to disability, we need to understand it as a unique rela-

tionship, which differs from person to person, from case to case. Disability is the point of congruence between the unique limitations one has, the barriers related to the physical / medical condition of the person, and the ability to overcome these barriers by the contribution of the potentiating factors involved in the process of becoming. In a nutshell, the key factors that play a key role in empowering people with disabilities are:

- The health-condition of the environment of one's origins: hygiene, medical care, treatments.
- Access to information.
- Access to education.
- The capacity the person concerned has and the capacity of family members and the community, to accept disability.
- Personal motivation and support from those close to the disabled person, in order to overcome the limitations imposed by the physical condition.
- Physical accessibility at home and in community spaces.
- Financial capacity and access to various recovery therapies.
- The organizational structure of the community, oriented towards achieving a climate of friendship and inclusion for the person with disabilities.

So, on the one hand, we have the medical condition that causes the disability, and on the other hand, there is the attitude towards it. Attitudes toward disability differ from one community to the other, starting with how one deals with disability at an individual level, and gradually moving toward behavioral norms at the collective level. And this, of course, can be a move towards empowerment and inclusion, or towards disinterest, isolation and exclusion. The level of the community's involvement with the person with disabilities (child, adult or senior) plays a major role in the development and empowerment of the person with disabilities.

It should be noted that there are sustained efforts toward normalization and the inclusion in the social life of people with disabilities. These actions are available worldwide and are implemented from the top down, from macro to micro, from the decision-making forum to the conduct of the common person. There are regulations, laws and guidelines that advocate for people with disabilities and impose a minimum of decency, inclusion, rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. All these actions should lead to a better, more harmonious community, ac-

cessible to all equally, with the potential for skills training, an ideal model of living.

Surprisingly, these efforts often prove ineffective, especially when it comes to the emotional state that accompanies the deficiency. There is no law that can impose a perception of peers facing disability. Most often, in a completely wrong way, people with disabilities are perceived as inferior to those without disabilities, of a lesser value, with a lower potential, a kind of consumer of resources. As a result, these people are not in the community, they feel uncomfortable, inadequate and as a result, excluded. Children with disabilities, more than adults with disabilities, are exposed to higher, more complex risks, such as:

- lack of adequate care,
- inability of the parents to process the pain,
- risk of dropping out of school,
- lack of accessibility in educational institutions, etc.

The parents of such children with disabilities are often helpless in the face of deprivation and physical and emotional exhaustion. They are oft exposed to the humiliation and the disinterest shown by governing bodies and by the community in general, and fed up with fragmented access to child rights. Even Christian communities fail in the same areas by showing a widespread attitude of disinterest and non-involvement.

Children with disabilities, like any other child, need assistance in all five areas of life: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social, but most of the time they need extra help to achieve this, to become independent adults. The major problem related to the erroneous attitude of both the person and the community in relation to people with disabilities, is rooted in the equally erroneous beliefs about identity, and the human value of the person with disabilities. Hence, the feeling of futility that leads to disappointment and abandonment of sustained efforts of the family, the child with disabilities, and the community to help them flourish and become. It seems easier to continuously care for a person with a disability than to train them for an independent life.

Addressing Disability

Disability is a complex human condition that must be addressed simultaneously in at least two aspects: (1) the public aspect, related to legislation, rights and standards of implementation, and (2) the individual aspect, re-

lated to the uniqueness of each individual, consisting of case-by-case assessment, intervention and training. It would be unfair not to acknowledge that there are efforts to correct the wrong attitude towards people with disabilities. Efforts in the medical field are clearly exemplary. For instance, when a child with congenital multiple disabilities, with a prognosis of four, maximum five years of life, reaches the age of 19, both the parents and the medical staff are to be applauded[1]. The fact that more and more children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream education also indicates an increase in the opportunities for children with disabilities to be included in the community. When the authorities offer vehicles for people with locomotor disabilities, offering transport as a free service[2], provide access ramps and parking spaces, it means that accessibility and free access for people with disabilities are part of the interests for the good of the community. All these can be contributing factors to increasing one's sense of self-worth.

However, there are also shortcomings in assisting people with disabilities. For example, some of the major issues that remain silent, which we never talk about, are issues related to the spirituality of the child with special needs, the identity, potential, capacity, his or her becoming. Such concepts are missing from the discussion on the care provided.

The present paper proposes that to assist a child with special needs should be a holistic, interdisciplinary and above all, deeply biblical approach. Certainly, in today's world, multiple efforts are made to assist the child with special needs, from a legal, medical, psychological point of view. But in reality, the assistance is fragmented, cumbersome, inaccessible, and the implementation of the rights of the child with special needs is done superficially and inefficiently. There is no forum that can orchestrate, harmonize, and bring together the efforts made in order to increase the efficiency of assistance and therefore of the results.

It should also be noted that the literature, both classical and theological, does not talk much about the spiritual wellbeing of the child with special needs, about the way he is perceived, about his ability to interact

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1   The reference here is to a real situation from my practice as a social worker.
2   For instance, since June 2019, the city of Timișoara, Romania, offers a specialised free transport service to people with locomotory disability. On this, see Adriana Mîț, „Serviciu de transport gratuit destinat persoanelor cu dizabilități, la Timișoara", available online at https://www.pressalert.ro/2019/06/serviciu-de-taxi-gratuit-destinat-persoanelor-cu-dizabilitati-la-timisoara/ (accessed on 16th of February 2000).

with God and about the role of faith in training and potentiating a child with special needs. In the reminder of the paper we aim to introduce a few theological notions that will address such conceptual shortcomings in order to inform existing practices towards a more holistic approach to care.

Addressing Disability Theologically

Before discussing the theological dimensions proposed in this paper, we should agree on what we mean by "Theology of Disability". The literature often refers to the theology of disability either in terms of addressing the needs of the child with a disability, or in terms of enabling the service to the child and the family of the child with disabilities. Understanding disability from this perspective is related to pastoral theology and missiology. Most often, however, the questions of why, who is to blame, why God allowed such a thing, remain unanswered. It is normal to be so, for God cannot be fully known, and our understanding of his providence is limited. Revelation is gradual and increases as we grow relationally closer to God. This is not to say that the role of pastoral care and missionary involvement is not relevant. On the contrary, we affirm together with Lacoste that theology is both about word and a deed: "The logos of theology also includes a praxis…The community of faith can only tell the truth by doing good, because the urgency of the word is linked to the urgency of the act"[3].

However, more than pastoral care, we suggest the theoretical grounding of such practice in the biblical theology of *Imago Dei*. This is a step of major importance in addressing disability theologically, as it leads to an approach to the topic that identifies both aspects related to the being of the child with special needs: (1) identity and (2) becoming. Firstly, *identity* from this perspective refers to the unique code, the script given by the Creator, the imprint of divinity in every child with or without special needs. Identity therefore is the DNA of the deity in us, it is the inevitable and recognizable image of the Creator in each of his creatures. How can this unique code be defined? What are the traits, or what in a child with special needs shows the image and likeness of God? Is it something visible that reflects the image of God, or is it something that transcends the physical, the mental, the intellect, and the environment of origin?

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3   Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Prezență și parusie*, trad. Sorin Ovidiu Podar, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Viața Creștină, 2012, p. 176-177.

Secondly, *becoming* is the consequence or result of the intended process of development, of the holistic growth to which the person with disabilities has (or may have) access following the services of assistance. From our perspective, the holistic development of any person includes the possibility of being included in the Body of Christ, hence the emphasis in this paper on the spiritual dimension of the human being, a dimension that must be addressed in the work of assisting the disabled person along with other issues related to his or her existence.

Created in the Image and Likeness of God

The creation account shows that the God of the Bible is a God who reveals himself. His revelation began with creation, more precisely with the creation of Man in His image and likeness. Thus, man was expected to live in a relationship of love and communion with his Creator. However, as a result of his own choice not to listen, man has moved away from this relationship of love and communion, and as such, the covenant of love between God and Man has been affected. This then led to the separation of man from God, and since then the only way in which man can know God is through the acts of self-revelation initiated by God for him. In this perspective, every narrative in the Bible speaks of, and gradually reveals notions and truths about, God, a God who wants to be reconciled to man.

The core of such an argument obviously is in the narrative of creation. The story of creation announces the divinely ordained mandate man receives as blessed consequence of being created in God's image. The passage in Genesis 1:26-28 reads as follows:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;[male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

We propose that a correct interpretation of the text that addresses the question at hand must address three distinct aspects: (1) who God is and, consequently, what is His image. (2) Who man is and how is he created in the image and likeness of God. (3) How does man created in God's image live out the blessing bestowed on him and "multiply" means in this context.

The purpose of these questions is to help point out that "growing and multiplying" is not primarily about covering the earth from a geographical perspective, but rather about the human capacity and need to leave a legacy for future generations that is more than a genetic code. It is the ability of human beings to be like their Creator insofar as they procreate offspring who are themselves capable of relating to God in a similar way. Thus, the image of the Creator becomes evident in the ability of people to relate to one another, to create and form communities that are able to further transmit their identity.

Who is God and what is his image?

The story of creation is the beginning of God's self-revelation in history. God cannot be understood unless he chooses to reveal himself to us. God reveals himself to humans so that they may enter into communion with him, thus becoming the beings created in the image of God[4]. "God reveals Himself through Himself"[5], and to do that, he uses notions that mankind has the ability to understand[6]. Three aspects of divinity should thus be highlighted: (1) the plurality of God, (2) the community of God, and (3) God as Creator.

Although markedly monotheistic,[7] the passage surprises by suggesting some form of plurality in God. It has to do with the form of God, with His existence. The passage refers to God by using plural pronouns: "Let *us* make man in *our* image and likeness" (Gen 1:26). Several explanations have been offered to explain this peculiarity, but in the light of the

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4   Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community. Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living,* Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1998, pp. 45-66.

5   Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of Creation", in *Church Dogmatics* III.1, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1958, p. 296.

6   Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994, pp. 149-152.

7   Mircea Eliade, *Istoria Credinţelor şi Ideilor Religioase,* Volumul 1, Chişinău: Universitas, 1992, pp. 72-76, 170-176.

larger context it is clear that the passage indicates plurality of persons within God. The divine being exists from eternity, without beginning, in three persons: the Father who is unborn, the Son, who is born of the Father, and the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father to the Son[8].

The community of God refers to the activity of God, to the dynamics within this plural unity. It is the mutual relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God exists from eternity in these three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person is entirely God and they act as one, in communion[9]. God is internally relational, within the Godhead, and therefore eternally relational. God is three in one. This suggests that the simple one-to-one relationship does not exhaust the essence of God. Instead, the only God of the Bible is the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to quote the traditional Trinitarian terminology. In short, the God revealed in Jesus is community or community[10].

God is the creator of all that has life. He has the power to call things into existence. This power that brings things into existence culminates in His self-expression, in the creation of man in his image, in his likeness. This reveals to us the capacity to create communities that bear his image. We could therefore say that God is a plurality that lives in communion and transmits his identity to man, the crown of his creation. We cannot fully understand God as plurality (one in three persons), but we can understand God's community, the dynamics, the activity in God at different times throughout history. And we can understand him as Creator, as a reflection of himself, by analogy[11]. By presenting these aspects of the Godhead, we emphasize that "created in the image of God" means "created for communion", a plurality that acts in unity, a community that should express God, a community "Created to express the identity of God", the identity that God transmitted in man, his creation.

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8   Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime sau la început a fost iubirea*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2005, p. 32.

9   See Stanley, Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, Nashville, TN, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.

10   Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*.

11   Barth, "Doctrine of Creation", p. 196.

Who is man and how is he created in the image and likeness of God?

The narrative of God's creation, the love story designed and put into action by God, is the story of man, of beings created in his image. In this part of the paper we will deal with three aspects of man, the crown of God's creation. Man is the object of God's love and communion. Man, as he was created in the image of God, is: (1) a plurality, male and female, from the beginning, (2) a communion, a relational being, able to understand and communicate, and (3) a creator, able to procreate and therefore form communities of people in the image of God.

Man in the image of God is a plurality. The use of the plural pronouns related to God: "Let us make man in our image, our likeness" (v. 26) is closely related to and emphasizes the plurality of mankind as created in the image of God as "man and woman" (v. 27). The idea of plurality is part of God's decision to create mankind. According to Evans, two complementary conclusions can be drawn from this verse First, that the creation of mankind finds full meaning not in man alone but in the creation of man and woman. Second, that human personhood should be expressed as male or female form. Brueggemann states that the human person is divided by God into male and female, and human sexuality does not express the person of God, but expresses God's will for the creation[12].

Man in the image of God is a community. In the creation account, God reveals himself as a communal God, the one who embodies the community and, therefore, His created image can be nothing but community. Thus, the very appearance of the community is linked to the act of creation[13]; and the newly created community of mankind must reflect who God is, the creature who reflects the Creator. The image of God as communion in man refers to his ability to communicate, encourage, and maintain relationships. As a relational being, man has the ability to promote and share relationships with himself, with God (his Creator), with other people, and with the creation. Westermann argues that "human beings are created in such a way that their existence is intended to be their relationship with God"[14].

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12   Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* [Interpretation], Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 33.
13   Cf. E.M. Klaaren, "Creation and Community", in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 5/1988, p. 82.
14   Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary*, London. SPCK, 1974, p. 158.

Finally, man in the image of God, as a creator, has the ability to convey the image of his Creator. And this potential that man received in creation remains in him even after the fall. Genesis 5:1-3 connects the story of man's creation in the likeness of God to Adam's ability to convey that likeness as he has a son "in his own image, in his likeness". Of course, the culmination of this reflection is Jesus Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God", the only one "who is the likeness of God".

No other living thing has been given this capacity to share in the creativity and glory of God, outside of man. In this status, man is given administration, both man and woman are called "to have dominion" over the creation. Thus, true man, created in the image of God, always becomes, not just is. God calls us to a relationship with himself, but he also gives us a task to undertake, a destiny to follow. And this task is to convey the likeness of God. As Richard H. Niebuhr puts it, "Man's response to God, the Creator, is to participate with his own limited creativity in the reality of God's creative action. He shapes things as the Creator shapes things; he does things that didn't exist before – a symphony, a car"[15].

Living the blessing

In ancient times, the word "image" was used to describe the quality of being a "son"[16]. The term suggests that the person to whom it applies is in some way another person, usually a high-ranking person. The blessing of fertility in the history of creation is at odds with other accounts of creation from the antiquity. Consequently, human creativity, and especially the ability to procreate, "is a dimension of creative divine love manifested in us who are the image of God"[17]. Therefore, in this interpretation, man, as the image of God, has the capacity, the calling and the responsibility to procreate and to instruct his descendants in the creation and promotion of communities that reflect the image of God in the world. This, we argue, is implicitly present in the divine blessing spoken upon man at creation: "grow, multiply, and fill the earth". Man's responsibility to raise and instruct his children "in

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15   Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self. An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1978.
16   Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning. The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity, 1984, p. 86.
17   David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1990, p. 41.

the ways of the Lord" is stipulated throughout Scripture. Man, as the bearer of the Divine image, receives the authority and responsibility to reflect this image by creating communities that are images of the Godhead.

Conclusion

The teaching of the Scripture regarding human identity presented in this paper states that man, created in the image and likeness of God, is a plurality. He is called to live in communion with the divine being who created him, in communion with himself, with other people and with creation. The responsibility received at creation mandates and enables man to procreate in the image and likeness of himself. In other words, man is given the ability to perpetuate his image by procreation. This portrayal of human identity speaks about the inherent value human beings have and can provide the foundation for asserting the uniqueness of human dignity.

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