

HUMAN VALUES REFLECTED IN SERVICE AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT OF ORTHODOX PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Human Values reflected in Service and Social Commitment of Orthodox Pastoral Theology.

In the Orthodox pastoral sense, the action of helping others through prayer represents a concrete and direct way of supporting others. This work has an extraordinary spiritual character based on inner feelings and experiences of faith, which reveals the fundamental tension of Orthodox theology that resides in the protective communion of the ecclesiological space and the involvement in prayer for others, for the whole world. It is a sharing in the Mysteries of the Church of Christ and perfect involvement in the work of the Church through prayer for the elevation of the entire creation to deification. A contemplation and a praxis. It is an apparently paradoxical polarity, because it achieves a withdrawal from society, misunderstood as a rejection of the secular world, and at the same time an awareness of the secular dimensions that need to be embraced by Christ.

Although they seem like two contradictory directions, they cooperate and are complementary. In the Orthodox tradition there is no tension in this kind of understanding of the world, because its inclusive attitude is addressed to all of creation. In fact, it is not something new in the field of theology, but proof of the fact that pastoral theology reflects the human values of serving one's neighbor based on a lasting social commitment. It is in fact the study that this paper aims to explore.

Keywords: *Church, pastoral theology, prayer, monasticism, hesychasm, human values.*

Introduction

In order to shed light on the ministry of the Church, Orthodoxy begins by highlighting the role and importance of living in the ecclesiological space

and the communal value of prayer. John Jillions, an Orthodox priest in America, points to the two essential aspects of Orthodox pastoral theology: „the liturgical life (,where two or three are gathered together in my name’, Mt. 18:20) and the interior life (,go into your room and, closing the door, pray’, Mt. 6:6).”¹

Each of these aspects, in Jillions’ view, reinforces the other.² Father Dumitru Stăniloae points out that the whole of creation has the natural face of the mystery of ecclesiality and prayer, which is why none of the Christian confessions can be completely deprived of the work and prayer of the Church: „all the more so since this Church exists in the other Christian confessions; given their connection by faith with Christ, the Incarnate Logos, and since they share faith in Christ with the Orthodox Church, the full Church”³

This kind of pastoral ministry, which is difficult for contemporary thinking to accept, reveals the importance of involvement and participation in the liturgical worship of the Church, as well as the role of common prayer as practical ways of helping and supporting one another. In the Orthodox pastoral understanding the action of helping others through prayer is a concrete and direct way of supporting others. This work has an extraordinary spiritual character based on inner faith experiences and experiences, which reveals the fundamental feature of Orthodox theology, which resides in the protective communion of the ecclesiological space and involvement in prayer for others, for the whole world. It is a sharing in the Mysteries of Christ’s Church and a full involvement in the work of the Church through prayer for the uplifting of the whole creation towards deification. A contemplation and praxis. It is a seemingly paradoxical polarity because it achieves a withdrawal from society, misunderstood as a rejection of the secular world, and at the same time an awareness of the secular reaches that need to be embraced by Christ.

The help that the Orthodox Christian believer offers through prayer to others appears as a refusal and direct non-involvement in the practical life of society. However, a correct understanding of the liturgical life of the

1 John A. Jillions, „Pastoral Theology: Reflections from an Orthodox Perspective”, in *British Journal of Theological Education*, 13, 2003, (pp. 161–74), p. 164.

2 *Ibidem*.

3 Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae, „Some characteristic features of Orthodoxy”, in *Rev. Mitropolia Olteniei*, 7-8, 1970, pp. 730-742.

Church highlights its pastoral character par excellence, since the practical work of the Church begins with the celebration of the Holy Mass in which the Eucharistic model of living together is proposed as a pattern of community and communion for society. The Eucharist is the divine work which cultivates in each member of the Church an attitude of dedication to the other members of the community. This is why the prayer practiced in the Orthodox liturgical space is not a meditation or a passive individual contemplation, but a work that generates constructive inner states. Eucharistic prayer extends the liturgical life of the faithful beyond the walls of the Church and deepens the inner life of each individual believer. In this way the centrality of the Liturgy in the Orthodox tradition is highlighted.

Liturgy is sacramental space, the transfigured universe centred on the mystical work of the Eucharist. Georges Florovski explains: „Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is primarily a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second”.⁴ „Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures,” Kallistos Ware also points out, „who are most truly themselves when they glorify God and who find their perfection and self-fulfillment in worship.”⁵

The Eucharistic liturgy, however, is not a self-centered ministry, but a service for the building up of the one Body of Jesus Christ. It is a liturgical gathering in the house of the heavenly Father, a response to the invitation constantly extended to the world to participate in the divine banquet, addressed to the members of the Church and to the whole world. It is the supper at which the participants sit together with the Son of God, with whom they partake of the same cup and bread, in order to realize the serving community and transfiguring communion of the Holy Trinity in this world. It is the Eucharistic foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Eucharist unifies them all and confirms the truth, this is what made St. Irenaeus of Lyons affirm that „our opinion is in agreement with the Eucharist and the Eucharist confirms our opinion”.⁶ Where there is the Body and Blood of Christ there is unity and where there is unity there is

4 Timothy Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1964, p. 271.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 272.

6 Sfântul Irineu, *Împotriva ereziilor IV*, 18, 3; PG 7, 1028A *apud* Vasilios Gondikakis, *Intrarea în Împărăție*, traducere Pr. Ioan Ică și Protos. Paisie, Sibiu, Editura Deisis, 2007, p. 65,

the Church. From here begins the pilgrim journey that leads the believer to the reality of God and back. It is man's most important bridge of communication and communion with God. The state of being in direct relationship with God and the deepening of this transfiguring state is the primary condition that man must acquire in order to recognize the image of Christ before his neighbor and to become aware of the responsibility and love of Christ's Incarnational ministry for the world as a model for the work and life of Christian believers in the world. By participating in the Holy Mass and sharing in the Holy Eucharist we understand that indeed, „this is the nature of love: the more we move away from the centre and do not love God, the more we move away from our neighbour”⁷ Therefore the whole spiritual life of the Christian faithful and their individual prayer must be a permanent preparation for participation in the Mass, and at the same time a continuous state of prayer fulfilled in the Eucharistic moment of communion with Christ. Prayer is the state in which the human being „converses with God, he/she enters, through grace, into communion with Him and lives in God”⁸

In the Orthodox tradition, the Isistic life gives the believer the possibility and the ability to acquire and achieve the state of perfect prayer. Isihasm, a term derived from the Greek ἡσυχία, *esychia*, meaning silence or stillness, is practised particularly in monastic communities or by hermits, but it remains a commandment of the Church to the whole of secular human society. The Apostle Matthew recalls the Saviour's exhortation: „But when you pray, go into your room and close the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:6).

Temporary withdrawal from the world in silence and intense prayer, understood as a way of communicating with God, represents for the Orthodox Christian believer the beginning of life in the spiritual space of the Church. Of course, lay people cannot live an ecclesiastical life in the same way as monks. An application of the Isishatic model of life could ultimately lead to a dysfunctional life in society. That is why the Church is preaching to the community to use this model of Isishatic living, based on the practice of silence and prayer as a paradigm to inspire their spiritual and social life. J.

7 Vezi: Daniel (Metropolitan) Ciobotea and Dorotheus of Gaza, *Confessing the Truth in Love. Orthodox perceptions of life*, Iași, Editura Trinitas, 2001.

8 Theophan the Recluse, „What is Prayer?”, în *The Art of Prayer. An Orthodox Anthology*. Edited by Chariton of Valamo Igumen, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, p. 21.

Jillions points out that: „Invisible but transformed inner life leads to visibly transformed action. (...) Far from abandoning the world, the transfiguration of the world - society, economy, politics, art, music - becomes possible through Christian prayer, living and acting from within this transfigured inner life.”⁹ Referring to the Isiastic paradigm, Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos noted that „this activity acquires at the same time a social character, for when the human person is treated, he/she becomes at the same time the most sociable of persons.”¹⁰ Transfiguration through prayer is understood as a healing process through which the Christian believer is prepared to interact responsibly with his or her fellow human beings, because „Word and image are interior to one another. It is only that in the word the meaning predominates, and in the image the form, but neither the meaning excludes the form, nor is the form without meaning.”¹¹ Awareness of this profound empowerment in turn brings about the gradual change that society as a whole needs.

1. Sanctifying society by bringing Christ into its midst

A significant tension or polarity becomes apparent. There is a visible dissociation between withdrawing from the world and sanctifying the world by bringing Christ's presence into the midst of the world. The most conclusive model that highlights the presence of this tension in the world, in the Orthodox Christian ecclesiological space, is the polarity between monastic life and the secular life of the world. Monasticism, as a way of life in the world, is built on total and complete devotion to a life lived in prayer, centered on communion with the Holy Mysteries of the Church. For the secular world monastic life is a rejection of the world. Contemporary society is inherently bound in a downward spiral and follows a life different from life in Christ. Therefore, is the Orthodox Christian model viable for Christian believers living in today's secularized society?¹² Can Orthodox Christians share the

9 Jojn Jillions, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

10 Nafpaktos (Metropolitan) Hierotheos, *Orthodox Spirituality. A Brief Introduction*. Translated by Vlachos Hierotheos, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, Levidia, 1994, p. 12.

11 Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *O teologie a icoanei. Studii*, București, Editura Anastasia, 2005, p. 23.

12 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, „Aspecte ale secularizării și ale omului secularizat”, *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa*, (2006), L-LI, nr.1, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 251-266.

human values of the contemporary world from the perspective of ecclesiological life and the practice of Isisha prayer? Or can they assume the social responsibilities that today's world needs? This aspect of service is evidence of respect for fellow human beings and religious freedom as a foundation of human dignity.¹³

In the context of these horizons, Orthodox Christian theologian Stanley Harakas proposes a vision that he addresses both to the monastic universe and to Orthodox society as a whole: „One radical [trend] is the rejection of the world. In this vision, only ‚God’s people’ are holy, while the world, by definition, is in complete submission to evil (...) The other tendency is in contrast to this essential denigration and rejection of the world in what might be called the incarnational worldview. Here, the Church sees herself compelled to reach out to the world, to be somehow a vehicle for injecting at least some measure of the divine into an environment that has rejected it but cannot find its own purpose and fulfillment without it.”¹⁴

In the space of the Church’s ministry of incarnation of the world, where the principles of pastoral theology are applied, philanthropy and social commitment are the means of sharing God’s presence. Thus ecclesiological ministry and prayer, as expressions of the social and spiritual life, though contrasting, appear together as a work carried out through an „unresolved but mutually influencing paradox”¹⁵

2. The monastic work of the Church as the supreme human value

The life of the Church for the Orthodox Christian believer is a tireless journey back and forth between the contemplative isolation of prayer and immersion in the troubled reality of society, in which, through his life of

13 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, „Libertatea religioasă – temelie a demnității umane”, in Daniela Ioana Bordeianu, Erika Androne, Nelu Burcea, *Manual pentru liderul Departamentului de Libertate religioasă*, Casa de editură „Viața și Sănătate”, București, 2013, pp. 210-215; Idem, „Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience”, în *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Editions IARSIC, Les Arsc, France, 2016, pp.30-37.

14 Stanley S. Harakas, „Orthodoxy in America: Continuity, Discontinuity, Newness”, în *Orthodox Perspectives on Pastoral Praxis. Papers of the Intra-Orthodox Conference on Pastoral Praxis (24–25 September 1986)*, Edited by Theodore Stylianopoulos, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1988, pp. 13–14.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 14.

prayer and communion with God, he brings the peace and love of Christ to society by carrying the whole community of Christian society in the solitude of his prayer. Withdrawn from the world, Orthodox Christians find God's fullness through prayer only by relating to others, whom they connect to God's triune society. In the world, they feel like strangers, but the world is not a foreign land to them, but only a land that has not yet known the truths of the faith. In this theological reality, Orthodox Christians are pilgrims who are on the way with Christ, the One who gives meaning and strength through sharing the Holy Mysteries and prayerful service to others.

Thus, the Church resolves these apparent contradictions through the special dynamics that the relationships between monastic communities and the secular world acquire. Monasteries are not islands within human society. Their withdrawal from the world does not mean a break from the Church community, but an uplifting work of prayer for society, which is invited to step out of its comfort zone and explore such spaces, which offer them the paradigm of Christian life and the prospect of salvation.

Orthodox Christian monasteries are directly connected to the life of the society with which they interact, for example, by organizing educational and philanthropic projects, following the model of the ancient vasilias of St. Basil the Great, who conceived both the monastery and the vasilias in such a way that „in all things the theory of Christian love is also put into practice.”¹⁶ Monasteries also offer an incalculable amount of spiritual counsel to the whole of human society, which turns to their liturgical space for answers and healing for the anxieties and problems that plague it. However, monastic life is not an activity of a group of people in search of salvation, but a social structure that seeks to save the world to which it proposes prayer as a way of being in the world. Although this is not always reflected in the reality on the ground, this theological vision nevertheless underpins the monastic reality whose values the Church proposes as Orthodox Christian principles for living to the whole world.

The Orthodox Christian model of accountability and pastoral involvement of the Church, however, does not cancel the tension between the inner and outer vectors, nor does it present it as an irreconcilable contradiction, but in fact it relies on it as a constructive and positive comple-

16 Pr. Dr. Neculai Dorneanu, „Viața și opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare – inspirație pentru lucrarea preoților”, în *Teologie și viață*, Nr. 1-4, ianuarie-aprilie 2010, (pp. 24-41), p. 37.

mentarity. Orthodox pastoral theology, as in fact the whole of Orthodox Christian theology, is represented by a continuous spiritual movement from the inside to the outside of the human being, without in any way disjunction in its constituent elements. In the Church there is no interior without an exterior, just as there is no rest, no status quo, but an unceasing dynamic pulsation.

A model for such incessant dynamic movement was provided by St. Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th centuries AD) in a useful visual description: „The soul, too, has (1) a circular motion - an orientation of vital energy towards the inner world and the unified concentration of its spiritual powers - which gives it a kind of fixed revolution and, turning it from the multiplicity outside, gathers it first into itself. (2) And the soul moves with a spiral motion whenever (according to its capacity) it is enlightened with the truths of Divine Knowledge (...) (3) And it moves straight forward when it does not enter into itself to feel the movements of its spiritual unity (for this, as I have said, is the circular motion), but goes towards the things around it and feels an influence coming. Even from the outer world, as from a rich abundance of cunning signs, drawing it to the simple unity of contemplative acts.”¹⁷

The three stages of this movement from within to without in order to bring the outside in are the basic feature of Orthodox theological thought: the movement within that prayerfully uplifts in an upward circular motion that, freed from its centripetal inward drive, spreads horizontally throughout all the outer dimensions of the world. It is the fundamental cycle that characterises the dynamics of the values and deeds of the Christian life. Retreat in prayer, in view of individual growth in Christ, shares with the community the Church's concern for the world. Through prayer, the Orthodox Christian believer moves into the inner depths of Christ Who became incarnate to save the world, and thus the believer moves outward engaged in society. Because Dionysius describes the outward movement as an abundance rich in symbols, Orthodox Christian theology specifies that this movement is addressed to human society, because the world in general communicates and in particular confesses its faith through symbol, whose immediate purpose is to reveal, express and transmit notions, ideas

17 Sfântul Dionisie Areopagitul, cf. Clarence Edwin Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, Cosimo Classics, New York, 2007, pp. 98–99.

and concepts¹⁸. According to Orthodox Christian theology, God's works in the world are carried out according to the model of the Holy Trinity, in communion and interrelatedness. Therefore, within the communion of the Church, according to the Trinitarian model of God, in whose image we humans function, the value of our works lies in the way we live as one multi-hypostatic being.

Conclusions

The Orthodox Christian model of social commitment and service to others is primarily an expression of the centripetal movement of inner spiritual exploration and is sustained by personal dialogue with Jesus Christ. In this way the gift of divine love is shared, which balances the thoughts and deeds of believers according to the model of Trinitarian love. Secondly, it is the fulfilment of the state of theosis in which believers join the communion of the Holy Trinity. It is the state of deification through which the supreme fulfilment and fullness of life is discovered. This stage gives them the ability to open themselves and to give themselves completely, it is the stage in which Orthodox Christian believers acquire the spiritual power necessary to embrace the whole world. It is the perfection that gives meaning to the theological act and to the Orthodox Christian's ministry in the world.¹⁹ The Sinaxa, or liturgical assembly centered on the Holy Eucharist and the Sacraments, rises like the rays of the sun from the Body of Christ, and fills the Church with light both *intra muros* and *extra muros ecclesiae*, because sacramental communion „is not a mere manifestation of good ecclesial relations, but implies and expresses unity of faith.”²⁰

The human values which the Church addresses to the world have two essential dimensions: the mystery of the Church and the mystery of neighbour. The liturgical life and the involvement of the faithful in society thus become inseparably complementary. For Orthodox Christians, all the activities carried out within the Church community - including pastoral and social activities - are not complete and truthful if they are not artic-

18 J. Romanidis, „Notes on the palamite controversy and related topics. Part 1”, in *The greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Volume IX, Number 2, Winter, 1963-1964, p. 236.

19 Vezi: Răzvan Porumb, „An Orthodox Model of Practical/Pastoral Theology”, in *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 21, 2017, (pp. 127–154).

20 Diac. Ion Bria, „Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericii creștine”, teză de doctorat în teologie, în *Studii Teologice*, anul XX (1968), nr. 1-2, (pp. 3-170), p. 57.

ulated to the spiritual, liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. The mystery of the neighbour - the starting point of any pastoral/social process in the Orthodox Christian context - is rooted in the Sacred Liturgy, specifically in the Holy Eucharist, which through their life they continue and complete. By seeking and achieving deity, through communion with the head of the Church who is Christ, the faithful implicitly enter into authentic communion with one another. The Church thus becomes a communion of deity, from which union with God and communion with other people begins.

Therefore, what may initially seem a contradiction becomes the very internal logic of Orthodox pastoral theology. Orthodox pastoral theology starts from an inner spiritual movement, represented by prayer as a means of communication and communion with God, and then moves towards a hierarchical communion with the Church community and the whole of society, starting at the local level and advancing in concentric circles towards humanity in general. As in a breathing movement, the inner vector must be followed by an outer vector and then back inwards again and again. The inward-outward dialectic is not a contradiction, but a rotation that generates the supreme values that the Church addresses to the world as the perfect model of coexistence.

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