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Contemporary Ecclesial Priorities of Social Involvement. A Romanian Orthodox Perspective

Ionut Adrian GHIBANU[1]

Abstract

Social engagement is an urgent need of our world. For the Church, social involvement is part of its missionary vocation, because it is not only an eschatological purpose, but also a temporal, earthly one. It aims primarily to create communion and human solidarity, as an expression and understanding of experience of the divine presence, but also as a necessity of life, as a fundamental need to help each other. We were created by the same single God, we all share, regardless of race, colour, gender, education and religion, the same humanity that we customize specifically, so we have to be sensitive to the needs of those around us. From its very beginning, the Christian Church was involved in social activities, initiating the very first institutions for social assistance such as: hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, with free care without discrimination of beneficiaries. Furthermore, the first free public schools appeared under religious patronage. Today, the Romanian Orthodox Church is concerned with social involvement, as in its entire history, having such priorities as: helping those who are unable to support their own existence; integration of migrants into society; supporting the education of children whose parents have emigrated abroad; supporting social equity through direct community initiatives, including legislation; promoting solidarity and social communion; supporting youth education for dialogue, openness to the needs of the neighbour; and promoting the common values of humanity

Keywords: social, church, orthodox, solidarity, contemporaneity.

1. Introduction

The contemporary priorities of the Church's social involvement are numerous and they are related to the development paradigm of our civilisation. Although there are many tensions and conflicts, wars and still

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plenty of aggression, the man of the first century of the third millennium is more sensitive to solidarity and help, empathetic and willing to appreciate, in terms of the aid offered to their neighbour, any endeavour, person or institution.

Of course, we neither idealise nor generalise. But the civilised world, at least at the level of the elite and middle class, sees things differently. Here, the contemporary media involvement as well as the huge examples of human solidarity have mattered much, in the wake of the various heavily publicised disasters or misfortunes.

The free generalised medical care is a Christian acquisition, which began to develop at the end of the apostolic age, and to organise and generalise in the fourth century, with the formidable social work of St. Basil the Great, known as the Basiliada [1].

This involved the creation of special care institutions for the sick, orphans, widows, the poor, the young, or the crippled. The Basiliada spread throughout the Christian world, developing and deepening, turning Christianity into the most important social actor on the world stage in all times [2].

In our country, the first hospitals, "*bolnita*" [3], as well as the first school or printed works appeared near our churches and schools; in fact, today, the Romanian Orthodox Church is the most important social actor, after the State institutions.

The Church is increasingly preoccupied with the poor, migrants, with people with health problems, or with settling some social inequalities by identifying the political factors in charge of promoting or changing such laws [4].

We shall further examine the main directions of the Church's actions at the social level; we are considering here the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Romanian social environment.

The social doctrine is a concern of the Romanian Orthodox Church, because it is an institution that acts in the world, and as one of the preparatory documents for the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church states, *The Church of Christ lives "in the world", but "it is not of this world" (John 17.11 and 14-15). The Church is the sign and the image of God's Kingdom in history, as it is announced by a new creature" (II Corinthians 5, 17), "a new Heaven and a new Earth wherein the justice will live" (II Peter 3:13), a world in which God "will delete all tears from their eyes, and death shall be no more; neither the complaint, nor cry, nor pain" (Apoc. 21: 4-5)* [5].

The social involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in contemporaneity is an issue of great relevance from an international perspective, as it is the second largest Orthodox Church in the world, after

the Russian Patriarchate, even though the lay media have not granted to it the visibility it deserves. The social involvement in the orthodox area is often overlooked and emphasis is laid only on the implication of Western Churches, thus neglecting the extensive social philanthropic concern in the sphere of Romanian Orthodoxy.

The social priorities related to the involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in contemporaneity respond to concrete social needs and challenges that exist in the present-day Romanian society. Then, it must be stated that Romanian Orthodoxy is today the most important institution involved in the social area, in our contemporary society, after the state, which is proven by the numerous social projects and programmes at parochial, eparchial and national levels.

2. Theoretical Background

Almost all the works printed in the first decade after 1989, whether theology or sociology, insisted on pointing out the lack of experience and adjustment of Romanian Orthodoxy to the contemporary context, speaking about the Orthodox liturgical ghetto, the lack of social vocation or the Byzantine immobilism; all of these were merely stereotypes which emerged out of ignorance. It is true that, during the Communist regime, any manifestation and social involvement of the Church was extremely limited, and our priests could hardly fulfil the minimum required pastoral mission. But it should not be forgotten that, although the social ecclesial involvement was minor, even imperceptible and quasi unknown in communism, it was still there. After the 1990's, the Orthodox Church quickly adjusted to the new realities, first rebuilding its organisational structure and then developing its own institutions capable of fulfilling their missionary desiderata, including the social and philanthropic ones.

The Romanian Orthodox social work has been compared to that of Western Churches; it has been nevertheless forgotten that the Orthodoxy had, first and foremost, a mystical orientation, but was in the defensive for a long time, given the Ottoman occupation. This does not mean that it neglected the social involvement aspect altogether, it just carried it out without ideologising, without propaganda, and, indeed, with limited means, as the poor Church of some poor believers.

The Social Doctrine of the Church is based on the incarnation of the Son of God and on His paradigm, His social involvement (Lc. 22, 27; Mt. 25, 31-41), as His model, each of us having a duty to involve in the community in which we live and a responsibility not to be shaded by

anything divine from our neighbour through the failure of observing the fundamental human rights, the rights that are given by the Creator in our nature [6].

The Western ecclesiastic genius emphasised the social nature at the expense of the liturgical and spiritual ones, but this does not make them be less Churches.

It should be said that the Church has a duty to catalyse the public welfare, to provide examples, to help, but it is totally wrong to ask of it to solve the issue of the poor, of the lack of solidarity or of the inefficiency of the system [7. What the State cannot do, although it has a very well developed administrative apparatus and huge funds, the Church cannot do either. It is not the task and mission of the Church to eradicate such inequities, but nor can we say that it must be alien to them. The Church should be a guiding light which motivates, gives examples and should be followed, but believers, local communities must deliver solidarity and emulation [8]. The Church is meant to catalyse the social good and to provide examples to be followed by others, because its mission is primarily spiritual, without, however, disregarding the problems and challenges of the world in which we live [9]. In the Romanian space, social theology elements are to be found in the Homilies of St. Martyr Antim Ivireanu, in the Social Apostolate of Patriarch Justinian, in the Doctoral Thesis of the Metropolitan Antonie Plamadeala, "*The servant Church*", Sibiu, 1972; however, the first major social ecclesial synthesis belongs to the Archdeacon Prof. Ioan Ica jr., Ph.D., in his work "***Social Thinking of the Church***", Deisis, Sibiu, 2001; later works by Priest Ioan Bria, Priest Ioan Tesu, or Radu Preda were published.

There were also those who challenged the social-philanthropic role of the Orthodox Church or its so-called 'weak' social involvement, especially in the first decade after 1989; moreover, in recent years, the alleged low social involvement of the Church or the lack of a solid programme of social activity.

The reality, however, is obvious;:the Romanian Orthodoxy, through all its organisational structures, namely patriarchal, eparchial and parochial, has an intense social activity, a well-articulated social programme, perfectible indeed and with possibilities of optimisation, but it exists. The novelty of this study comes from the fact that it presents the current priorities of the social involvement of the Church, summarising the main directions of social-ecclesial activity in a synthetic way, presenting the most important elements and also the more weakly outlined areas of it.

3. Argument of the paper

The central idea of this study is that the Church has a well-articulated programme of social involvement in contemporaneity. A priority of its social-philanthropic mission is the concern for supporting those cases of extreme poverty within the parishes, through what is called the programme of micro-philanthropy parish. Within this programme, each parish, regularly and not just on the occasion of the most important holy days, gets involved in the identification and assistance of these cases, through parochial collections or by directing funds from eparchial centres toward them or by means of sums of money coming from donations. In most parishes, there are the budgetary provisions to support charitable activities. Then, for the urgent cases, collections are organised in the parish the person with problems comes from or even throughout the whole diocese. A recent case is that of the victims of the fire at the Bucharest Club – "*Colectiv*", in which the parishes of those youths and the neighbouring ones were involved. Then, when natural disasters, especially floods, occur, crowd-funded campaigns are immediately organised to support the affected communities. As for the support of poor children, most of the eparchial centres grant scholarships and some of them are involved in programmes to prevent school abandonment or improve school performance, such as the project of the Archdiocese of Targoviste entitled the "*Alliance for a hope*" [10]. Similarly, there is implication as regards disease prevention, especially for people in rural areas with low possibilities of undergoing medical investigations, a project first implemented in the Archdiocese of Bucharest, entitled the "*Health Caravan*" [11]. At the same time, in order to support the children's school performance, many parishes organise after-school tuition free lessons, and blood-donation campaigns are organised to regularly support blood transfusion centres. There are also programmes that combat drug and human trafficking, which involve pilot-parishes, or awareness-raising and violence-combating programmes.

As regards the children whose parents – one or both – have emigrated, many parishes run programmes to support them educationally or spiritually, to correct and improve the trauma of their temporary separation.

With regard to the elements of social justice, the Church has opined every time on the major contemporary social themes, such as the recent one related to corruption and fighting corruption [12].

As for migration, the Church has declared to be in favour of aiding and supporting those who have fled from conflict areas, in order to help them take refuge temporarily until the problems in the country of origin improve, naturally with the intent of giving them the utmost hospitality and,

as far as possible, to convert non-believers to better integrate into the Romanian and European space and to fulfil its own missionary vocation.

We may find arguments supporting these actions in the orthodox social doctrine whose model is the work of the Saviour Himself, carried out in favour of man; this doctrine starts from the assumption that the Church is a divine-human institution mainly concerned with man's salvation, but does not neglect the secular issues people are faced with and try to come to their assistance.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

The main arguments in support of the social involvement and of the need to develop social priorities nowadays are related to the very nature of the Church's mission. Its purpose is primarily to convert, modify mentalities, transform people, in accordance with the model of Christ, wishing to make them better and more righteous, in order to become the reflections of Godly perfection in love and mercy [13]. The main argument of this study is that the Church has a human side and cannot remain indifferent to the issues of the time in which it operates. Man consists of body and soul, therefore the Church cannot address the soul of man only, but also the issues of the flesh and the concrete challenges man goes through in a particular time and space.

The Church as the body of the Lord's life, made up of all those who believe in him, *"sees in man, every man, the image of God himself, the image which is found and to settled deeper and learn the full insight into Christ, the perfect image of God, the Revelator of God to man and man to himself* [14].

The Church cannot be indifferent to the everyday problems of its sons and daughters, therefore is aware of the need for social involvement. But it is also aware of its own limitations and of the fact that it cannot solve these issues; but it needs to send a positive signal to the society, to urge and be an example worth following by as many as possible. Even though it does not have the State's administrative and financial levers, and its social activity is not its main activity, it is not alien to the concrete needs and the social mark of the age in which it pursues its mission.

Through its social involvement, the Church is willing to offer help, relief, hope, and confidence to the people and to show them the merciful face of God, who did not hesitate to incarnate and come into our world to be with us, to walk the paths of life with us and to join us in all the trials of life. The incarnation of the Son of God is not only fundamental to the existence of the Church, but also the argument of its social involvement. Man, with all his issues and concerns, is the main priority of the Church and

the Church, therefore, will always have a schedule of its social priorities to support man with all his needs, as much as possible [15].

Since its inception, the Church has had an intense social activity; it just so happened that, in Romania, the first forms of medical and social assistance emerged inside the Church and owing to the Church, a situation that is identical to that at the European and global level.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

There are plenty of counter-arguments to what we have mentioned above. Of these, the most important are: the Church does not have a well-articulated social program, it carries out a social activity only for propaganda reasons; the true social activity is that of the modern State, the Church does it social work most often with money received from State, central or local, authorities. The Church has large amounts of money at its disposal, which it does not direct towards its social works. Its social activity is too modest. Romanian Orthodox Church does not have a long social experience. Some have even said that it is only during the contemporary period that it began to conduct its social work modestly, and that the Apostolate of Patriarch Justinian of the past century is in fact a collaborationist work, with Marxist overtones. The Romanian Orthodox Church is not concerned with an intense social activity. Of course, these are arguments, we have only mentioned the most common of them, but they summarise the contemporary anti-ecclesial or critically ecclesial thinking.

It is generally considered, in the specialised literature, that *traditionally… cults are not studied as direct actors of the social economy, for they do not entirely correspond to social economy criteria and cannot be subordinated to it* [16]. However, cults, in general, and the Romanian Orthodox Church, in particular, currently have a concrete substantial historical involvement in the Romanian society. The supporters of the contemporary progressist humanist ideology criticise the poor involvement of the Orthodox Church in society, considering that it does too little or using funds from the state.

The social involvement of Romanian Orthodoxy is also criticised when compared with the social activity of Western churches, particularly the Catholic and Protestant ones, which presumably have a more consistent social implication.

According to some, the social involvement of Romanian Orthodoxy is still insufficient and superficial. At the same time, there are those who appreciate, support and popularise the Orthodox Church social mission, substantiating this view on the obvious reality [17].

Researchers such as M. Vlăsceanu and E. Zamfir appreciate the ecclesial social involvement, deeming it as normal and necessary [18].

6. Dismantling the arguments against

The reasons why we consider the arguments against the social involvement of the Church and against the existence of priorities of its contemporary social involvement to be erroneous are as follows: first of all, the Romanian Orthodox Church, currently has an intense social activity, the problem is that the media coverage is deficient in non-Church media, which are interested in the Church's ecclesial failings rather than in negative things. [16] The Church has had, from the very beginning, a social activity adapted to the needs of each time, because it is already a widely known fact that the first elements of the social involvement, the first hospitals and schools were organised by the Church, being a Christian acquisition as we have previously stated. The social-philanthropic ecclesial side is an important part of its pastoral mission that cannot be neglected. Currently, in Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church is the largest social actor after State, spending, directly or indirectly, about 40 million Euros only on social works. All eparchies and parishes have budgetary provisions and concrete social projects laid down each year. The social ecclesial activity concerning the newest challenges and priorities of our society is best reflected in the lives of the poor and the lonely who are regularly helped by the Church without intending to make a name for itself out of it. Secondly, the Church's media regularly and thoroughly reflects this reality that is observable especially by means of the institutions with which the Church cooperates, whether it is the County Councils or the City Halls, the decentralised institutions of the Government, such as the County School Inspectorates and County Welfare Directorates and Child Protection or the National Anti-Drug Agency.

Furthermore, the counter arguments mentioned in this study must be rejected because they are non-constructive, false and originate from people and NGOs with the secular humanist militant activity, or from anti-orthodox people [17]. There are many situations we can easily read about in contemporary media, where a simple internet search of people or institutions that are against our church can clearly reveal the pro-neo-Marxist and globalist ideological orientation of these. The most recent case occurred two years ago, when, during the unfortunate incident at the Bucharest Club "Colectiv", in which the Church had absolutely no negative implication, there were attempts to involve it in this case, with no connection whatsoever – a clear situation of manipulation and diversion of attention from the real

issue of those days. Such cases are numerous nowadays when one can notice an unprecedented media aggression levelled at the Church, a strategy which aims to point to the alleged weak implication or social ecclesial non-involvement. Such involvement can best be seen by simply going and seeing what the Church does, which are its social priorities and how it gets engaged, either at the eparchial or parochial level.

7. Conclusions

The conclusions of this article shall take into account the fact that the Romanian Orthodox Church is heavily involved in the Romanian social paradigm, even if it is poorly publicised. Then, it has a clear agenda regarding the contemporary social priorities that best arise theoretically from the decisions of the Holy Synod, from the acts of the Diocesan Assemblies, and are seen, in practical terms, in every local community, with a greater or lesser involvement, weaker or better results; but the important thing is that they exist and are of real benefit to people in the local communities that run such ecclesial projects. Involvement in supporting persons marked by extreme poverty represents a special help for local communities [18]. Primarily, through the good ecclesial organization, we can easily identify such cases and support them by concentrating the mercifulness of the local community, by means of donations or collections, or with the direct financial support from the Parish or Eparchy. Naturally, one does not claim that such help completely solves such cases, but it mainly gives an example in the community and urges people to get involved and they do get involved. When various natural disasters occurred, the fund-raising campaings organised by the Church were the most effective and rapid, while the blood-donation campaign held with ecclesial support also have a high degree of effectiveness.

The social involvement of the Church is not for reasons of propaganda or to win public goodwill, but because this is how it has to be, because the social-philanthropic mission is an important part of the ecclesial mission without which there cannot be any work of public preaching of the Gospel, which has a theoretical component, but especially a practical one. You cannot therefore speak about the love of your neighbour without trying to help solving the problems they face [19].

The most important basis of ecclesial social involvement is, as we have seen and argued, the Incarnation of the Son of God, His entry to our world, in His creation, and the fact that this unique and the only new thing

under the Sun has exemplified concretely what love (and love unto death) means and how to correctly connect to one another.

There are certainly many things related to the social involvement of the Church and the establishment of its social priorities that should be improved and further developed, but this does not mean that they do not exist or that they have a minor impact on our society. The Church cannot and must not take over the social involvement of the State; each has a social implication for the greater good of people for various reasons and with different arguments, but this does not mean that it should be considered to be in competition or dissonance, but only complementary [20].

Ever since ancient times, Romanian Orthodoxy has had an outstanding involvement in society, and this can be seen by studying the history of ancient hospitals and old forms of social assistance [21].

Today, as we have seen earlier, Romanian Orthodoxy is concerned with the issues of migration, health and helping people in need, with the fight against poverty and school dropout, with drug and human trafficking, as well as with fighting against violence of any kind. Its involvement is not partial or marginal, but does not seek to compete with the State - in fact it could not, but to carry out its own social-philanthropic projects as practical arguments of Christian charity [22].

Promotion and protection of human dignity is a contemporary ecclesial priority that manifests itself through all social projects we have mentioned above [23].

Contesters or detractors of the Orthodox social involvement and of the preoccupation to permanently have a clear up-to-date agenda with social philanthropic goals challenge the visibility and the extent of the Church's social projects. They start from the assumption that, on the one hand, the Church manages huge financial funds which are not directed toward the social area, but invested in other programs or matters considered not to be necessary, such as the construction of the New Patriarchal Cathedral. On the other hand, the entire social activity of the Church is carried out marginally and for propagandistic purposes, but what we have seen above that this is totally false.

The novelty of this work is that it summarises the latest projects of Romanian social ecclesial Orthodox involvement and that it presents detailed arguments pro and against it as arising from the contemporary social debate.

If the ecclesial work does not have high visibility in the secular media, it is not because it does not exist; as previously stated, the Romanian press is interested in presenting some negative situations rather than positive

ones, and that is why these arguments cannot be supported conscientiously and with respect for the truth [24].

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