

SUFFERING

PEDAGOGICAL AND PURIFYING ELEMENT IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

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Abstract

The study highlights the fact that in modern society suffering is perceived as an illness that must be removed at any price and under any conditions in order to increase life's pleasures. In contrast, in terms of proper philanthropic principles, suffering is accepted as part of society's problems that cannot be fully solved. By accepting and assuming pain, it becomes a purifying element. The cause is the sin and the effect is suffering. Modern social work focuses on combating the effects and less on fighting the causes, because 'the pleasures of life' which actually cause suffering in our world are considered targets at which one aims, and not causes of suffering.

Keywords: suffering, the pleasures of life, fighting against social illness, social issues, problem solving

1. Introduction

God created everything good. Social evils and suffering appeared as a result of man's estrangement from God. In this sense, it is good for society's energy to be directed mostly towards returning to God, towards the development of the society together with God's Spirit, towards *the vine abiding in Christ* (John 15.5). The blind, the crippled and the invalid appeared as a consequence of the fact that the sap of God's Spirit no longer flowed through many branches of the vine (channels) of the "Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians. 12.27). And without the nourishing sap of the One who created it, this society is getting dry. Wounds must be stanching and everything must be done for these people, so that these members of Christ's body may reattach (religare-religion) to Christ-the Body. However, we must go beyond this, detecting and understanding the causes, which are much more profound. "I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Psalm 37.25). The man that lives in God does not get dry and does not die. In this context we quote Professor

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Drăgan Ioan, who writes about development, referring directly to society: “Development does not reduce and is not equal to economic growth; the welfare of a society does not reduce to the gross national product and to consuming material goods, [...] man is not just work force [...]” [1]. Man is also love. Man is primarily spiritual and secondly bodily.

“Man, in his depths, is destined to some spiritual experiences that can mend breaches, building bridges over precipices otherwise insurmountable, being the only ones offering the lost man the way back to the shore and this is the *noological experience* or the spiritual one. This is how we can understand the chance that man is offered through the state he so much fears and which we call *suffering*. When he seems to be completely lost and astray, suffering is what becomes his salvation, meant to take him back to the light and peace that had fled from him as a mirage from the man lost in the desert” [2].

2. Hypotheses

First, we must specify that secular researchers have a different understanding of the phenomenon than religious researchers. Most of the secular researchers in this field write about the attempts of social care to eradicate suffering, whereas the Church, through the people involved in social assistance refer to suffering as a purifying and pedagogical element. We also mention that some secular researchers admit the insufficiency of the methods and techniques of secular social assistance. In what follows, I will try to analyse the way in which suffering is perceived in social assistance, attitudes towards it, both at the level of principles and at the practical level.

3. Eradicating suffering - a principle of the modern social assistance

3.1. The limits of the methods and techniques of social assistance

Social assistance, as it is practised today is not directed to the salvation of any of its actors: neither the one that gives, nor the one that receives. In the specialised literature of social assistance, those who are willing to admit the realities of the transformation of the souls of persons and society, warn that the direction in which the Church is involved in social actions is wrong; it is not leading to the proper result. The social assistance practised by the Church nowadays is inspired by the model practised by the state, which in turn follows the Western model, which is ruinous.

As concerns the social security systems, Maria Molnar affirms: “It is important to know that although they have developed much and consume a great deal of financial resources, although they ensure levels of protection superior to minimum standards, the security systems do not manage to contribute decisively to the eradication of poverty” [3].

The affirmation refers to the state social security systems, but the same thing is admitted by authorised persons in the Church. For example, Cardinal Cristoph Von Schonborn writes about a crisis of the Church, at a cultural as well as at a social level.

“The crisis of the Church and the crisis of society cannot be separated, they are intermingled, in the same way in which the life of Christians that form the Church is integrated in the life of the country and of the society” [4].

The decline of the Catholic Church occurred in the flourishing days of capitalism, when man had everything he wanted. People were very self-assured, they thought of themselves as gods, and in this context the teaching ‘God is dead’ gained ground. We do not think we can refer to a crisis of the Orthodox Church in the same terms as the crisis of Catholicism or Protestantism.

3.2. The social crisis is primarily a spiritual crisis

Social suffering has always had the same definition and, at a theoretical level, the same methods and techniques have been put forward. At a practical level things were different, because people thought that through good social policy suffering would disappear. Here is what D. Spânu wrote in 1925: “The present social crisis is rather a moral one; a spiritual crisis more than a material crisis” [5]. People estranged from God have always referred to social crisis and suffering. Others, in proportion as they have acquired holiness, have overcome this state and have interpreted life’s deficiencies from a different perspective: suffering has been attributed the value of sacrifice and as having changed souls. However, many people still thought that good social policy could lead to the eradication of suffering or at least to its amelioration. “The shortfalls and deficiencies of the human society, be they material, economic, physical or spiritual, moral are called social sufferings. Seeking the most adequate means to heal these sufferings constitutes for reflection the social issue and the solicitude to apply the respective methods is known as care, protection or social policy.” [6]

3.3. The Western model in social assistance

After obtaining freedom, the Orthodox Church has copied little by little the Western model of social assistance. In the West, after 60 years of practice, the State in tandem with the Church discovered that as living standards increased the people’s satisfaction with life decreased. Moreover, I recall a discussion with the Anglican Church archpriest of New Castle who said: “In the 70s a friend of mine, a lay person told me, talking about priests and Church: ‘Soon you will all become social workers.’ At that moment I did not agree with him, but now I have changed half of the church building into a day centre for children. Anyway, few people come to church, about 15-20 people, and I do not see any perspective of this number to increase. If people still came, by a divine miracle, there is room in the church for 200-300 people.” The case of this church is not an isolated one, but one of the many that define this state of affairs. Helping people

in need is not real help and there has not been any spiritual progress either because man was at the centre of such endeavours, not God.

“The number of the poor increased in developing countries, as well as in developed countries and poverty extends over a new category of persons, thus appearing ‘a new poverty’ generated by the recent evolutions in economy and society. Causes: the collapse of national economies and of policies of macro-stabilisation and restructuring; the developed countries have 100 million people with an income of 14, 40 dollars a day and they call these poor. These population is often called the fourth world.” [3, p. 12]

4. God and love/development and programming

In the inter-war period (1918-1939) in Romania, organised social assistance began to take shape and the members of the Church were vexed because they had not been invited to become involve in an activity which actually belonged to the Church and which it was legitimate for the Church to organise.

“What do the laws say today? Well, our laws of social organisation, of assistance, health, etc. create corporations, but we saw no law reminding that it is the role of the Church to intervene. They hate the Church and fight against it. We all know that as concerns these associations, although supported by the state, be they homes for ill people, insurance houses, autonomous or non-autonomous, the law maker forgot that the Church had to have a voice in the matter and its representative; the Church should have been given the task to organise and run these corporations. And here, I honestly think that mankind suffers for two reasons: indigence and spiritual deficiencies, the lack of consolation. It is not enough to throw somebody some money weekly, but maybe when doing this it is also necessary to tell him a word of comfort, of guidance, to awaken in him the Christian virtues, and this is a must because these are eternal and can be changed by no philosophical doctrine, as the latter, being of human origin cannot measure with the divine things.” [7]

As concerns the fact that help in money or goods is not enough for progress, without spiritual power that comes from God, Ilie Bădescu asserts: “Man may be prosperous from an economic point of view, but not fulfilled spiritually, between the two there is not a necessary relation because many people are fulfilled spiritually, but with material needs; and the rich may be completely unaccomplished, incapable of improve the world commensurate to their wealth, on the contrary [...]. Wealth makes people accomplished only if it is accompanied by an equal spiritual power, otherwise it does not.” [2, p. XXXV]

In this respect, Elena Zamfir suggests an experiment: “Let us imagine that we have everything we need and we live in safe conditions, protected from external factors that might disturb our life. [...] The surprise is invariable. [...] soon enough there appears a state of discontent, of undefined dissatisfaction that erodes the soul’s peace from its depths.” [8]

“A person who has acquired everything he needs in life, who lives in natural social safe conditions has for a period of time the satisfaction of such a state of balance. He feels happy. But his happiness cannot last. He seems to lack something indefinite more and more.” [8]

In this sense, the money given to the poor does not bring results without this power. The lack of fulfilment following the Western model of social assistance is obvious, but nobody adequately addresses this situation. The mindset is the following: we have no better alternative. Ilie Bădescu makes a relevant observation in this respect, showing that we take over things from the West without analyzing them: “The way of liberation changes into a *dead end of history*, into a swamp. This occurred everywhere in the East after 1989. The West cannot offer it a spiritual principle. And if it could, it would not be allowed to, as it is ruled by materialist elites that want its ruination, its downfall in the swamp of history, moving the centre of the world. Doomed itself, this West condemns to ruination all the peoples it attracts on its way, that is, on the materialist way of the modern cycle, a historical cycle doomed to go down completely.” [9]

In this sense, social services have nothing in common with religious communities. They secularise the Church, replacing what unites the community in the Church, God and love, with development, refinement, programming, etc. How can one refine God or program love?

5. The empathic capacity and suffering

We can compare the beneficiary-social worker relationship with the patient-doctor or penitent-spiritual father relationship. It is one thing for social workers to speak about the empathic capacity and a different matter to practise it. Continuing the argument further, we discover that empathy is one thing and love is much more. Understanding is different from living with the beneficiary and “loving him as I love myself”. Some will say that it is not good to get involved in all the problems of the beneficiaries because you cannot handle them and you may even become suicidal. Maybe we have a different understanding of the words: ‘Doctor, heal yourself!’ If I cannot deal with problems how can I help the beneficiary? If I am not strong, how can I teach him to be strong? There is a new value in the following words: I do not do social assistance for the one who benefits from it, but first of all for me, the one who gives.

This is the main reason why the number of poor people increases and the quality of life is in decline even in the states with a high standard of life, despite social security systems which are better organised and financed. Actually, in these countries one already uses the phrase ‘the fourth world’.

The state’s systems of social protection and assistance are directed towards the eradication of poverty. In the Orthodox Church the problem cannot be regarded this way for our Saviour says: “For you always have the poor with you” (John 12.8). Therefore, the premise for action in social assistance must be “I will have mercy and not sacrifice (Matthew 9.13). I want you to have

compassion for one another. I want you to love each other. Christians that are shown true compassion and love can be healed of their passions and escape poverty on their own. Material poverty has spiritual causes: passions, disordered systems of values, and genetic antecedents. "Repaying the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation to those who hate me. And bestowing mercy on those who love me to thousands of them, and on those who keep my commandments." (Exodus 20.5-6)

Writing about the quality of life from the point of view of happiness, Elena Zamfir approaches a very much debated theological subject, the desire that maintains the continuous search of mankind.

"If we asked ourselves what is important in life the answer comes naturally and no one could contradict it: happiness. It is one of the simplest, clearest and universally accepted truths. [...] What is happiness? This time the answer is not as simple and clear. Although it appears obvious to us, it is hard for us to define happiness. [...] One might say that happiness is not only an ideal to reach, but also an ideal to define. [...] Searching for happiness means firstly defining it and secondly identifying the ways and conditions to accomplish it." [8, p. 230-231]

Defining happiness is a really great task. Some people have wasted their entire lives and have not succeeded in either defining or experiencing happiness.

6. Accepting suffering – the way to infinity

The theologians define this issue as follows: God engraved in man the desire to look for Him. God is infinite, therefore, this desire is also boundless and man will never feel complete and say he can stop because he has had enough of God. In order to find God one must be in a continuous state of pursuit of the Infinite. This is salvation: a state of pursuit. This is happiness: salvation. However, man directs this desire for the infinite towards finite things: money, social status, culture, family, etc., hoping that if he gets these he will be happy. After a while, every new objective remains behind him and man discovers his lack of fulfilment. Each of these elements is mentioned in the Holy Scriptures. For example the family: "Anyone who comes to me and does not disregard his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14.26).

In this sense, reversing the value system leads eventually to suffering. If people in several generations of the same ancestry are unfulfilled, this changes into despair and despair takes them to homeless asylums. These beggars, whom people do not understand have accumulated in themselves the discontent, the experience and the wickedness of their ancestry. They are like a dry branch from the tree called society, a branch which did not take sap from the trunk of Christ and grew in a wrong direction. They directed the desire for the infinite engrained in man in order to find God towards material things.

We can say the same thing about the social assistance system and the programs it aims at implementing in society in order to eradicate poverty. Many such programs have led to an increase in the number of poor people because

they were built on faulty premises.

Because of the lack of compassion and Christian love, the protection and security system is becoming a system of protection of its employees. Tens of thousands of people in the whole country are employed in this system. The problem is that once they are hired they become salaried people with obligations and rights. The social assistance systems consume about 90% of the resources designated to helping people. And if we have in mind the expression *the one who pays is the one who dictates*, we have a full picture of what is happening in social assistance. The secular researchers and the theologians agree upon the fact that self-sacrifice is the one that leads to a better life.

“One can bring examples from history showing that priests have not always accomplished their mission; that instead of protecting the weak, they united with the powerful ones; that sometimes the decadence was so deep that, as they say, Christ Himself had been crucified by the very *Christian* priests of those times if He had appeared in those times. But the power of Christian morality resides in the fact that the sublime image of our Saviour’s life and sacrifice urges incessantly some people to be ready to confess their faith in the endless power of love, assuming the cross of suffering and self-sacrifice.” [10]

The theory of social security as a safety net that helps at certain levels is very good if we think of it strictly from a material point of view. In fact the state has been putting this into practice for a long time. But then, why do we have poor people? Because poverty has spiritual causes. Because in all these systems one willingly ignores the spiritual causes of poverty. Fornication, idleness, gluttony, pride, theft are passions of the soul and causes of poverty that can be explained only by taking into account the spiritual context. Reading in *Noologia* about the difference between the ideal sphere one person relates to – a sphere that has to do with education, culture, intellectual and spiritual capacity – and the spiritual reality in which a person lives, a reality to which the person relates, which the person models if he is aware of it and with which he cooperates, but which is a gift, we think how little man is when he tries to know himself or especially when he tries to understand the mysteries of society. Only the Knower of Hearts can know these. Only He can lead hearts to Him without trespassing upon their liberty. He treats us as persons, giving us *hints* to make us reflect on something, asking us to make decisions with spiritual implications. If guiding a person spiritually is so hard, it is even harder to guide, know and understand a society.

7. The pursuit of God

In the social assistance systems, the supreme aim of every social policy or program is the eradication of poverty; all members of society must come into possession of a sum of goods that, in the conception of the social assistance doctrines, will lead to a better life for the person in question.

In the philanthropic system the supreme value is God, since loving another has no power without God. It has no coherent justification and all the actions converge towards my living in God – the emanation of the divine love that exists

in me towards the other, and, if he wants and feels the power of this love, his return to God. Material goods have much too little importance and they will come naturally to the person in question, to the extent in which he needs them, after he has found God. In this sense, the social worker – beneficiary relationship grounded in proper philanthropy will be oriented towards finding God, not towards eradicating suffering.

“For noological Sociology, the fact that people consume, have fun, fight, kill each other; [have social problems of any kind] is nothing more than the symptomatology of a deeper state in which we discover spiritual disequilibria, the suffering of the spirit, the maladies of the creative destiny, that is the very spiritual condition of man.” [2]

Love does not add conditions. It manifests towards anybody. “God sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5.45). Consequently, if I am a social worker I must help the “bad” one without asking him to change. None of my wishes must affect his freedom. The conditioned gift is not a gift. I can say: “I give you money according to the law of the guaranteed minimum income, but you will have to do a few hours of voluntary work for the benefit of the community”. Therefore, my gift aims at teaching you to learn. And the beneficiary replies: “This gift is too small to convince me to change. It brings me no power. My problem is not working, but idleness, drinking, fornication, spiritual disarray. Or your gift does not carry in it the power to release me from these passions.”

For the one who practises philanthropy, any action becomes a gift, any material thing given is full of spiritual power. “And he that takes away your cloak forbid not to take your coat also” (Luke 6.29). You, the one who stole from me, you did not steal because you needed food, but Spirit, you lost God, not your coat and you don’t know this. Therefore I leave you the cloak willingly, so that it becomes a gift and be filled with Spirit, if you want you can take the coat, too, maybe you will have more Spirit. The Spirit heals the passions of the soul. In the presence of God’s Spirit man changes without anyone attempting to his freedom, he changes naturally, because what is natural is man’s place in God, this is how God made human nature. Man estranged himself from God and God wants to remain close to him, overwhelming him with his love, love also manifested through one’s fellow beings, love which tells man: you can return whenever you want. I am here, waiting for you. I will not beat you. I forgive you! The question is if somebody steals my cloak will I let him take my coat, too? Or will I sue him? If I have not found God my situation is as bad as that of the beneficiary I am trying to help. As many people, as many life situations! Which are good and which are wrong? The situations, the contexts that have God in them are good, the others are bad. Can the blind lead the blind? (Luke 6.39).

8. Conclusions

The *good* things of the world are made by God. “And God saw all the things that he had made, and, behold, they were very good” (Exodus 1.31).

Therefore, everything man tries to do without God is wrong. People permanently want to change something. One person is not satisfied with his salary. Another individual is dissatisfied with his wife. Another is not pleased with the freedom of speech in his country; he feels restricted and causes a revolution. But no change brings a better situation than the one before. The way to something better is through eternity, not merely the future [11]. And it is not in our power to understand it. Consequently, the way to a better life is not the action, but the announcement: ‘Rejoice and give glory to the Lord for all, for this is God’s will with you!’

The words ‘Deny yourself!’ and ‘may your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven’ are also an urge to renouncement. An urge to collaborate with God, but God’s will comes first, not mine. “Society, as spiritual reality *ascends* and *descends* in the individual as well as in the collective manifestations. Great people, cultural elites, faithful peoples bear witness to *high* spiritual realities, just as pseudo-cultivated elites, badinage, hedonist inclination, idleness and elation are, on the contrary, the expression of impaired spiritual realities” [2, p. 401].

Then what is the proper social worker in this context? He is a cultivated person, with a sensitive *spiritual* point of view, a person who has agreed to live among those who are spiritually impaired in order to be their model in life, to be an example, with a different spiritual reality in the midst of the fallen people, fallen among thieves (Luke 10.36). In general, today’s social workers are not willing to understand the moral and spiritual destitution of their beneficiaries. For some of them the beneficiaries are files with numbers on covers, for others theoretically they are people, but outside of their world (“My job is one thing, my family is another, my milieu is different and the two should not interact”).

“Hence, the world is not simply given, but *offered as a gift* (that is some members of a society received the power to actualise the experience of a value, of a latent energy), but the gifts become realities only when they are actualised as spiritual latencies from which the whole existence will benefit. Nothing is more painful for anybody than to carry on his shoulders, beside the burden of his own sins, his fellow’s tension and suffering caused by sins.” [2, p. 401]

Thus, the gift becomes reality only if it is accepted as gift and used. But nothing is more sublime than for me as a person endowed with a gift to be a *collaborator* with God using my freedom. For if I were mature enough from a spiritual point of view, sin would have no effect on me.

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