COMMENTARY

Principles and Practices of Diaconia in the Romanian Orthodox Church

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Defining the context of the issues at stake: Church and State

The emergence of the modern Romanian state founded on the secular Enlightenment principles led, in the latter half of the 19th century, to a "split" in the social sphere, which originally had been rooted in Christian principles and values. In the traditional Romanian society, prior to 1859, the year of the unification of the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Walachia, the Latin identity and the Christian faith, in Byzantine form, constituted the foundational values that shaped community relations. The two identity values were fostered and disseminated by two categories of intellectuals: teachers and clergy. Following the unification of 1859 and its formation, the modern Romanian state did not abolish these ideals, rather it embraced a series of roles based on secular values, encapsulated in the well-known motto of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity.

Whereas the Orthodox religious ideal is salvation, *theosis*, deification, the secular ideal is the good citizen, respecting the legislation and organising principles of the state that focus on legal constraints and human rights. Under these circumstances, the Romanian society accepted the perpetuation of a typical concept of Byzantine culture, *symphonia*, which advocated the cooperation of civil authority with the ecclesiastic authority and was applied in tacit fashion in the Romanian territories after the Fall of Constantinople

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to the Ottomans in 1453. In other words, the Church continued to play a role, albeit a less important one, in the social life, in conjunction with the State. The State deprived the Church of its assets by transferring them to secular ownership, diminished its social influence by confiscating its right to draft official civil status documents and dented its credibility by upholding lay Enlightenment ideals that replaced the traditional Christian values. A tacit partnership ensued from 1863 to 1947, as the State supported some Church initiatives as moral reparation for confiscated assets. With the advent of communism, the situation aggravated: a ban was imposed on the social involvement of the Church, which was condemned to quasi-clandestine ministry, including in places of worship, being forced to be highly cautious in its public discourse in order to avoid violating communist values or contributing to the "indoctrination" of the "emancipated" people. Church history, literature, poetry, art and social diaconia could be pursued individually, using private resources, with great caution and risks in order not to offend the pride of the "perfect" communist state and to elude the censorship of the secret policy apparatus. The message of the Church was the Gospel ideal of salvation, which depended not only on the faith in God and the belief in Jesus Christ, but also on social service, the mystery of the brother, which the Church found it could no longer put into practice.

Christ – the purpose of social diaconia or the principle of christocentrism

The foremost concern of any member of the Church must be the salvation, i.e the cure of the soul, in the first instance, then of the human person as a whole. "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Mark 8:35–37). St John Chrysostom (350–407) recommends: "Therefore, let us not seek wealth; let us not avoid poverty. However, above all these, let each one take care of his soul and make it pursue the economy of the future life as well as cause it to depart from the present life to the next" (Chrysostom, 2005:49). Man was created by God to enjoy their dialogue of love, after the original sin to work for his own deification, in whose absence earthly life is devoid of value and meaning. As highlighted by the biblical

quote, salvation involves more than faith in "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16): it entails the act of human engagement and solidarity or service in favour of all those in need, as if they were Christ Himself: "Inasmuch as you did it unto one of these my brethren, even this least, you did it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

The main driver of social diaconia is therefore the will to follow Christ in word and deed or being Christ-centred. Christ advocates service to his disciples, practises humility with dignity and obeys the Father to his own death, being moved by love. This love must become the driving force of any form of diaconia, which is why Eastern theology has favoured the term philanthropy[1], as the present paper will show.

"The Christ" is "the philanthropist"

Jesus Christ, "Lord" and "Saviour" is the "philanthropist" and "deacon" *par excellence*.[2] The Church teaches that subjective, individual salvation is a process and pursuit that unfolds gradually and is accomplished by the joint work of God and man (*theandreia*), a cooperation where the divine grace of God is necessary, while man must contribute with his faith and good works. Hence, the prerequisites of individual salvation in Orthodox theology are the divine grace, man's faith and good deeds. Two fundamental biblical texts underpin this perspective: "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5) and

> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? [...] In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? [...] his [Abraham's] faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. [...] As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14, 17–20, 22, 26.)

Christ's coming marked the advent of an unmediated relationship between God and mankind, built on love and empathy. He came into the world to

bring the simplicity of existence, mutual recognition, spiritual and physical wellbeing and the return of all those saved to a life in communion with their Creator. The healings performed by Christ were the result of forgiveness out of love, which he first offered to the soul of those cured. "Forgiveness breaks the chain of causality, for the one who forgives you takes upon himself the consequences of your actions. Therefore, forgiveness always involves a sacrifice" (Hammarskjöld, 2001:197). Christ's life was indeed the ultimate sacrifice as He took upon himself the sins of the world and healed human nature from within, bringing it up to *theosis*.

Man generally views wellbeing in his earthly life in terms of primarily material welfare and spiritual wellness. For a theologian, wellbeing is primarily a state of mind. It begins with a certain discipline that one must acquire and exercise: first one must rank his wishes, and then set a transcendent ideal to follow steadfastly. Finally, as one aims for this ideal, one must relate to one's fellow, because spiritual progress is only achieved by relating with other people. In the Eastern Christian experience, starting from the example of the first Christian congregations (Acts 2), welfare cannot be accepted as an individual fulfilment but as communal achievement wherein man disciplines his own desires and selflessness and is aware of sacrifice. Providing help to the neighbour becomes, for the practising Christian, his contribution to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as a visible and attainable ideal. Giving presupposes forgiveness, that is, a positive spiritual state.

Philanthropy – the founding principle of diaconia

Theological discourse has retained the term "philanthropy" to refer to the attitude of a Christian towards his/her neighbour in dealing with welfare, poverty and illness. The extent of one's commitment to one's neighbour is determined by the fraternity of all in God and not by social standing, ethnicity or religion, which is why the term "social assistance" has not been used in this context throughout the centuries. Social services constitute a more recent formula, one might say a secular one, requiring professionalism in addressing social issues and targeting groups rather than the inner motivation of social action.[3] One could argue that the notion is less generous and so philanthropy takes precedence. Philanthropy means care for the person seen as an eternal being of immeasurable value and not simply the concern for man's social

needs or for making the social system be more equitable for man as a physical entity. Philanthropy may be and has been practised in all the political and social systems as it is a question of vocation and of person-to-person communication even under atheistic ruling.

Christianity seeks to harmonise human person's material and spiritual needs, which it has always viewed as complementary realities. The early Christian Church viewed philanthropy as a duty of the eternal life, rich in moral meanings. The first types of organisations through which the Church worked to protect the disadvantaged were the church communities with communal property, church communities organised as colleges, corporations and associations, as allowed by law, and the communities without communal property which had a network of religious societies and social care establishments. The oldest such religious societies grouped widows, virgins and deaconesses, whose goal was to help people in need. From the earliest times, the social care institutions set up by the Church have helped poor families, orphaned or abandoned children and the sick elderly, providing care, schooling and religious education, aiming for their moral and social integration with no publicity.

During the first Christian centuries, under the patronage of Roman emperors, from Constantine the Great (4th century AD) to Justinian (6th century AD), several types of institutions providing social care were established, including nursing homes for abandoned children up to seven years old, orphanages, shelters for young women raised by poor families or in orphanages, asylums for elderly and deprived widows and groups of Christian volunteers who provided medical services to the sick. During the Middle Ages, monasteries preserved, further organised and promoted the spiritual model that combines contemplation and practical action for the benefit of the disadvantaged.

The theological principle of philantropy

For Christians, philanthropy means following Christ and is a natural duty. God "loves people" (Plămădeală, 1986:14) and man is called to imitate God's "philanthropy". The word "philanthropy" is derived from the Greek "*philanthropos*", "*philia*" meaning "love", "affection", while "*anthropos*" means "man". Love for people was initially attributed to God alone. Dimitrios Constantelos noted that in the first three Christian centuries the term "*agape*" would or-

dinarily describe human relations. From the third century onwards, the term "philanthropy" would increasingly be used to refer to humans equally. The same author argues that "philanthropic" would tend to replace "agape", and later to designate charitable actions. In substituting "*agape*", "philanthropy" also acquired its content. Philanthropy is, by definition, an attribute of Christ. (Constantelos, 1968:67 *et passim*.)

The shift from agape to philanthropy was the result of the clarification of the doctrine on man in keeping with the new Christian theology of the early centuries. Philanthropy gained ground as a concrete and expanded expression of *agape*. Man's historical condition became a Christian focus. The Saviour constantly referred to God's concrete acts of love towards people: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18). In each man we love Christ for the sake of Christ and by loving our neighbour we love the body of Christ – the Church. Philanthropy emerges then as a condition of man's existence as a person in the Church. It is the condition for any relationship with Christ: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Church philanthropy as organised care for the disadvantaged is motivated by the fact that the person was created in the image of God. The theological base of social assistance resides in man's dignity, which is not highlighted by science: it is the work of a rational and personal reality, i.e. a partner in the universal rationality from which it derives. Human dignity also derives from God's personal care, as he was willing to become flesh and restore man to the original communion. Equally important is man's Trinitarian makeup, namely his communal dimension, as a person seeking and capable of relating (Moltmann, 1991:111).

Christian communion is founded on love and sharing (1 John 4:8). The love for one another has nothing to do with *eros*, as it encourages empathy and sharing in the suffering of one's neighbour. Love is the greatest biblical commandment. The neighbour is designated in the Christian scripture as an unknown person who becomes the Samaritan from whom no sympathy could have been expected for the one who "fell into the hands of robbers" (Luke 10:29 et seq.). The notion of neighbour does not exclude one's relatives or friends, but also includes strangers, one's enemies and those who have left this world:

> And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:40–45.)

According to the same text, one's obligations towards one's neighbour include the respect for life and forbidding any murder, the protection of the neighbour's health and property against greed, the responsibility for the neighbour's freedom, the responsibility for the neighbour's salvation, empathising with the joys and trials of one's neighbour, regardless of their social standing and also irrespective of the way they actually react to Christian love.

The first step that the loving religious community makes is to urge all its members to join in solidarity with those in need and provide instant aid, i.e. *diaconia*. There follows a process of stewardship and education aimed at overcoming deprivation and providing health care, shelter and food. There will also be religion-themed visits, activities that foster better knowledge of faith, inclusion in social life and raising the awareness of one's responsibility.

God made Man for man: the incarnational principle

Since the moment of the creation of the visible and the invisible world, God has manifested love (philanthropy) for the creature endowed with the gift of speaking, as He chose man as *the crown of His creation*, bestowing upon him glory and special dignity, and affording him the opportunity to progress towards deification. God was made Man in order to start this ascending process, thus His incarnation becomes the deepest form of empathy. *Diaconia*, as a result of empathy carries several meanings: serving at the table: "Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him" (John 12:2), serving the community:

> He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer." (Acts 19:22) The term *char-*

ity occurs in the same context, defining love for one's neighbour (Vicovan, 2001:22). Yet however we may seek to define love, its foundation is the incarnation of Christ, as He is its origin, His whole life being service out of love: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45.)

An epitome of the Saviour's service in the world is the episode of his washing of the disciples' feet, during the Last Supper, when Christ the Saviour offers a perfect proof of humility and love, foreshadowing His ultimate sacrifice for humanity: "When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:12–15).

A further facet of ministry is highlighted in the passage of the last judgment, as the Lord Christ proclaims service as the sole criterion for salvation:

> The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' (Matthew 25:40–45.)

Philanthropy becomes a condition for our existence within the Church (Plămădeală, 1986:5). While the essence of Christian ministry is to preach the Gospel of forgiveness, resurrection and eternal life, such preaching is valid, credible and effective only as long as it is not isolated from the Gospel of love, which recognises that Christians as disciples of Christ, by their acts of compassion and sharing in the sufferings of fellow, wherever these may occur (Bria, 1996:128).

The principle of apostolicity in diaconia

The examination of the *Acts of the Apostles* might lead to the conclusion that preaching and teaching took priority over the serving at tables (Ritter, 2012:153). Setting up these priorities, they decided to appoint seven deacons for practical stewardship, both at the "breaking of the bread" (Acts 2:42) and at the agapic meal which followed the liturgical celebration. Still, other texts indicate that no one was saved merely by serving at the table: deacons were highly educated, needed to be worthy to teach and be good communicators. The Archdeacon Stephen did not die because he served or did not serve at tables, but rather because he proclaimed the word of God steadfastly and competently, relying on his knowledge of the Scriptures.

Essentially, early Christian life revolved around three key activities: *diaconia* (social service), *martyria* (the profession of faith) and *leitourgia* (public work) (Ritter, 2012:154). Accordingly, diaconia would become primarily missionary work; for as long as it lacks the philanthropic purpose and does not lead to individual conversion (*metanoia)*, it fails as simple social activism. Perhaps it was this concern for the mystical and celebratory dimension of the diaconate that caused the deacon to become, relatively early, the servant of the bishop and coordinator of *leitourgia*, the subject linking the altar (the *hierarchy*) and the faithful (the *laos*). He brought to the altar the spirit of the believers' faith and could also teach them. Consequently, the liturgical status of deacon would emerge early, as deacons would fill very important administrative or educational roles (e.g. deacon Athanasius the Great, at the First Ecumenical Council). It is understood that every Christian can and should be a "deacon" in his/her environment, partaking in the liturgical life of the Church and in the social life of the people of God.

Being a "steward": in or out of the Church?

Early Christians argued that outside the Church there is and there can be no salvation.[4] Should diaconia therefore be confined only to the Church and its members? If yes, what are the criteria and arguments to exclude the others? What do we mean by Church? One potential answer is provided by Theodoros Meimaris (2012:207): "The world is invited to become the Church and to participate in the new way of life."

The Church is viewed on the one hand as "the mystical body of Christ" and on the other as "the people of God", as God and man attempt to grow nearer and know each other. As an institution that is organised by and assembles all people, the Church calls everyone to salvation. Its identity and authority are encapsulated by four fundamental characteristics, i.e. being One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. As such, the Church shows care for every Christian, through constant and continuous prayer to God, through social service, through the communion created among people around the Christ risen from the dead. Christian receives sanctifying grace through the Sacraments, the Church includes the Christian throughout the services celebrated at the key junctures of his life, helping him to reach the stature of Christ.

Liturgical worship affirms the unity and solidarity of the body and soul and their shared calling to glorify God. That is why the Church is mindful of the inability of human nature in general, not only of its individual members, it heals spiritual sufferings and attends to wherever and whoever it is called to serve, following the example of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35).

The Church: A steward for society at all times

In the first three Christian centuries, many Christians participating in the Eucharistic assembly used to bring as offerings not only the bread and wine required for the religious service, but also their wealth which they were willing to share with others (Acts 2:41 ff). After the persecution ended, beginning with the 4th century AD, such acts of diaconal ministry of the neighbour, linked to the celebration of the Eucharist, became organised and constant.

Starting with the *Pentecost*, as the divine philanthropy became the philanthropy of the Church, the inspiration was *agape*, the pattern that the Church would use for several centuries. Alms were and still are gathered and pursued through offerings, collections and agape meals, deacons and deaconesses distributing charity, with the help of the other member of the community. The recipients of alms, i.e. of the Church's social services, included widows, orphans, the disabled, the elderly, prisoners, the sick, the poor and strangers, and any such donation was preceded by the celebration of the Eucharist (Vizitiu, 2002:97). The gifts brought to the church were meant to reduce the gap between surplus and shortage and thereby restore the original equality. As the

Apostle Paul taught "your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality" (2 Corinthians 8:14).

Examples of good practice: Basil the Great (330–379) and John Chrysostom (350–407)

With the dawn of Christianity, religious undercurrents would shape social assistance. From the earliest days of its work, church cared for "the daily bread" and for the other needs of those in distress, always rooted in the evangelical command of love for one's neighbour. Consequently, helping the poor and the oppressed became a primary concern of the Church, in parallel to the preaching of the saving message of the Gospel. Indeed, social service, pursued in individual and communal fashion in the early stages of the ecclesial organisation, would subsequently crystallise into social institutions or establishments.

In the history of Christian theology, the 4th century is remembered as the *golden century*, i.e. the era of the most prolific theological quest and preaching, which laid the foundations of theological discourse and doctrines of Triune God, of God-Man and the relationship between the human and divine nature in the Person of Jesus Christ. From the social standpoint, it was a time when most people lived on the edge of subsistence, due to military campaigns, tribal wars, political instability, harsh living conditions and subsistence agriculture which was completely dependent on slave labour. Amid these circumstances, some would be accumulating huge amounts of debt, inevitably leading even to expropriation, a situation that the rich would abuse to increase their wealth substantially.

The foremost representatives of the Church during the *golden century*, considering their philanthropic activities, were Sts. Basil the Great and John Chrysostom. St. Basil the Great discovered his own *call* to ministry through philanthropy. As bishop, he boosted philanthropic actions: on the one hand, by instructing his *chorepiscopi* (rural bishops) to set up permanent philanthropic establishments and by calling on political leaders to demonstrate love and generosity towards those in need, and on the other hand, by establishing a philanthropic network popularly known as the *Basiliad*,[5] in the vicinity of Caesarea, which included a church, hospitals, poorhouse, care homes for the elderly, shelters for foreigners and orphanages. Judging by the scale of the

activity, by the number of buildings and institutions, Caesarea was said to genuinely be a different city compared to the old one (Vicovan, 2001:83).

St. Basil's charitable work was driven by spiritual engagement, both from those who made donations and the beneficiaries; he regarded suffering, disease and infirmities as consequences of sin, hence the need to tackle such problems firstly by religious, rather than solely medical assistance. The Cappadocian bishop granted a secondary role to doctors, as they could only treat certain diseases and could not make the patient aware of the meaning of life and suffering and lead to a change in his life. Although the model and inspiration was Christ, St. Basil stressed that the sick, strangers, the destitute and the marginalised needed to be treated as if they were Christ, as long as provided that they were themselves "striving towards life according to His Gospel" (Müller, 2012:180).

Another prominent figure of the *golden age* was St. John Chrysostom. Referring to the calling of philanthropy and charity, he states, *in extenso*:

> For I am now ashamed of speaking of almsgiving, because that having often spoken on this subject, I have effected nothing worth the exhortation. For some increase indeed has there been, but not so much as I wished. For I see you sowing, but not with a liberal hand. Wherefore I fear too lest ye also "reap sparingly". For in proof that we do sow sparingly, let us inquire, if it seem good, which are more numerous in the city, poor or rich; and which they, who are neither poor nor rich, but have a middle place. As, for instance, a tenth part is of rich, and a tenth of the poor that have nothing at all, and the rest of the middle sort. Let us distribute then among the poor the whole multitude of the city, and you will see the disgrace how great it is. For the very rich indeed are but few, but those that come next to them are many; again, the poor are much fewer than these. Nevertheless, although there are so many that are able to feed the hungry, many go to sleep in their hunger, not because those that have are not able with ease to help them, but because of their great barbarity and inhumanity. For if both the wealthy, and those next to them, were to distribute among themselves those who are in need of bread and raiment, scarcely would one poor person fall to the share of fifty men or even a hundred. Yet nevertheless, though in such great abundance of persons to assist them, they are wailing every day. And that you may learn the inhumanity of the others, when the

> church is possessed of a revenue of one of the lowest among the wealthy, and not of the very rich, consider how many widows it succors every day, how many virgins; for indeed the list of them has already reached unto the number of three thousand. Together with these, she succors them that dwell in the prison, the sick in the caravansera, the healthy, those that are absent from their home, those that are maimed in their bodies, those that wait upon the altar; and with respect to food and raiment, them that casually come every day; and her substance is in no respect diminished. So that, if ten men only were thus willing to spend there would be no poor. (Chrysostom, 2007:407.)

St. John also advocated direct charity, without the intervention of the Church or other institutions, rooted in the concept of the family as a "little church" (Bara, 2012:196). He uses a compelling argument when he states that the rich have an obligation to help the poor because their wealth is from God, as He granted it to them for this particular purpose: to use their gift of making money and use it for the benefit of those who lack this talent, thus building a society based on solidarity (Bara, 2012:202).

The local Church: A vocationally diaconal church[6]

The Church on the territory of present-day Romania has apostolic origins[7] and has adapted over time to the political organisation of the Principalities (Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania), which were under the Byzantine influence and jurisdiction from the first Christian centuries until 1885. Its Byzantine model of organisation also impacted social assistance as early as the 4th century (Pătuleanu, 2012:227). The earliest instances of diaconia in this area were, as in all other countries, the simple charitable and philanthropic actions of the local communities, mainly rural, benefiting those in need and driven by purely religious motives. Such activities aimed to provide occasional help to the marginalised and often powerless. One could speak of a Christian spirit of human solidarity from the very beginning, a spirit that underpinned the development of the modern social welfare services[8]. What is now Romania has always been a paradoxical socio-economic and geo-cultural space: a poor people in a rich country. As the riches of the land drew many even before the pre-Christian era, the history of the land has been shaped by migrations, wars,

earthquakes, floods, fires, prolonged droughts, whose victims have often been innocent people or what in modern times is called "collateral victims". Poverty has never been truly eradicated in the area, for various reasons, yet various institutions have constantly worked to aid the poor, the suffering, the orphans, and the elderly by establishing shelters, homes for strangers, orphanages, hospices, and hospitals. The Orthodox Church was the originator of these activities, which were then taken over by the modern state[9].

Since 1990, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been able to resume its traditional social activities, which have expanded and diversified, benefiting an increasingly high number of people and addressing social issues caused by the socio-economic transformations undergone by the country. The post-revolutionary era (from 1990 on) in Romania brought to the fore a reality which neither theologians nor sociologists had foreseen: the strength and vitality of Christianity which, despite having been subject to oppression during decades of communism, had not surrendered but instead, paradoxically had strengthened in its intensity and work. The need for social diaconia increased in the context of freedom and democracy, as the free-market thought has caused ever-increasing gaps between the wealthy class (also linked to high-level corruption) and the destitute class (still influenced by the socialist view that they are entitled to receive, without giving anything in return). In this respect, a contemporary theologian argues that "the need for social assistance in Romania after 1990 is imposed not only by the evangelical commandments, but also by the secularism in religious life and by the immorality of political and social life" (Pătuleanu, 2012:216), and this is expected to be undertaken mainly by the Church.

The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided on 27 May 1997 to establish a network of social assistance facilities as part of ecclesiastical bodies and to approve the *Internal Regulations of the social services system of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, which instituted an organised and coherent framework for the social-charitable activity. In agreement with the objectives of the social services network,[10] the Church-based infrastructure was overhauled to meet the requirements of specialised activities and the diverse actions in the religious community, which range from simple after-school activities to providing welfare programs and projects benefitting the elderly, aid for disadvantaged people, youth courses and camps on topics such as of ecology, Bible study, family violence and many more.

The *Statutes governing the organisation and functioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, adopted in 2008, specifically refers to the importance of social work as part of religious assistance which is the responsibility of the Church. Article 137 states:

> The social services system of the Romanian Orthodox Church is integrated and operated by its administrative-organisational units or by social and philanthropic organisations under its patronage. The Romanian Orthodox Church, through its component units at central and local level (parish, monastery, deanery, vicarage, diocese, metropolitanate and patriarchate) and through the non-governmental organisations overseen by competent ecclesiastical authorities, provides social services accredited in accordance with the legislation in force.

The document outlines the existing organisational structure of the Church institutions and non-governmental organisations that social services, which must be accredited to be in line with the general national and European policies in the field.

The document also sets out the Church-run training system for social services professionals, which includes the Social Theology departments of the Faculties of Theology. The target groups are "individuals, groups and communities in distress, without discrimination" (art. 137, para. 4). The document also provides for partnerships between ecclesiastical component units and the "specialised agencies of the state, local government or non-governmental organizations" (para. 5).

Social services vs Church's social diaconia?

The formal social work of the Church in contemporary Romania, an imperative and a vocation at once, is carried out in line with the legislation in force, yet there is also social diaconia advocated and practiced at the parish or community level or privately by individuals. According to Adrian Lemeni, the general principles underlying the Romanian social security system include: social solidarity, subsidiarity, universality, respect for human dignity, individual approach, partnership, engagement of beneficiaries, transparency, non-discrimination, effectiveness, efficiency, respect for the right to self-determina-

tion, awareness, the unique nature of the right to social services, proximity, complementary and integrated approach, competition and competitiveness, equality of opportunity, privacy, fairness, focus, the right to choose the social services provider (Lemeni, 2012:413–414). Given the partnership between the State and the Church, these principles are observed in inter-institutional relations, as the State acknowledges that all denominations in Romania play a role in the spiritual, educational, social, charitable, cultural and social areas and act as factors of social peace. The Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC), comprising 86% of the population, carries out a complex diaconia, ranging from accredited social services to pastoral philanthropy.

The Romanian Patriarchate includes 14,574 places of worship, of which: 63 cathedrals (24 diocesan cathedrals and 23 cathedral churches); 10,580 parish churches, 2,072 filial churches, 433 monastic churches, 208 cemetery church, 12 charity churches, 48 isolated chapels, 298 parish chapels, 171 cemetery chapels, 74 parish chapels, 182 monastic chapels, 403 churches and chapels in state-run institutions (89 in military and home affairs establishments, 37 in prisons, 166 in hospitals, 50 in schools, 61 in social care establishments).[11] The component units of the Church (Patriarchate, dioceses, deaneries, monasteries, hermitages) employ 841 management staff and 12,855 ordained persons, of whom very few are deacons.

These figures indicate that the ROC has developed a complex organisational system which, at least theoretically, has the financial and human resources to address social problems. Each parish can support a social centre, each member of the hierarchy or an ordinary Christian can become a "deacon".[12] The 14,574 places of worship can become strategic hubs in coordinating social work and serve as starting points for the implementation of a national strategy for philanthropy of the Church. The secular organizations under the spiritual patronage of the church present a large-scale volunteering potential.[13] What is needed is for the energy of volunteers to be supported by coherent funding programs that could come from central and local civil authorities. As regards the specialised institutions, the ROC has created, established or organised, since 1990, a system of establishments providing social services, which currently consists of 785 institutions. At the level of the organisational components of the Church (diocesan centres, deaneries and parishes), the map of social-charitable establishments includes: 158 soup kitchens and bakeries, 51 pharmacies and clinics providing medical services,

85 day care centres for children, 14 day care centres for the elderly, 44 residential centres, 29 community centres, 35 family centres, 38 social kindergartens and after-school centres, 14 shelters, 94 information, counselling and resource centres, 1 adult education institution, 21 emergency centres (for the homeless, victims of domestic violence and of human trafficking), 21 campsites, 63 educational centres and 117 other institutions with various profiles. The dioceses are currently implementing 576 social projects and programs, of which 36 with external funding, 53 publicly funded, 430 self-funded and 57 with shared funding. The establishments and the social programs and projects provided services to 87,474 beneficiaries as follows: 39,006 children in social centres of the Church, mainly children from families lacking resources or whose parents work abroad; 3,892 people with disabilities, speech, vision and hearing impaired, with drug or other types of addiction, people living with HIV/AIDS; 22,429 elderly people in Church-run welfare establishments, social temporary and homeless shelters, lonely, homebound, abandoned elderly with serious health problems; 19,857 unemployed persons, adults in distress, victims of trafficking, victims of domestic violence, released prisoners, victims of natural disasters; 2,290 from other categories.[14]

Philanthropy carried out by the Church is not always reflected in figures and statistics, but mostly in the active presence in every place and region of the country, through constant action aimed at educating and raising awareness of the need to engage every member of the community in social work. Nevertheless, the Church is able to establish, fund and offer patronage to social services institutions, private NGOs that are subject to accreditation by the state and are open to free market competition. Such institutions drawing on the century-old experience of the Church can offer an opportunity to expand the social services from a Christian Orthodox perspective, while adhering to the requirements of European legislation.

The European Union, whose regulations apply in the member states, has ruled that social assistance is an independent concept manifested in the activity of governmental and local institutions, aimed at promoting justice and social solidarity. Such institutions are served by professionals known as social workers and care staff. Yet the risk of such an approach is the emergence of a class of professionals in social services but lacking spiritual motivation, albeit highly capable in terms of knowledge and application of social theory and the legislation in the field, able to secure funding from various national and

foreign institutions. Effectiveness in philanthropy is often sought by circumventing the concept of love of neighbour, by treating persons as figures.

The purpose of this approach has nothing to do with the salvation of souls through which man is entitled to become eternal, but to report an ever greater number of meals or donations offered to the poor and sick. It is in this area that the religious system can complement and enrich social service through spiritual and emotional focus and empathy.

From the perspective of the Church, philanthropy is most effectively applied in the parish, the community of helpers and the helped, where everyone has the chance to act as the instrument of God's benevolent love. Through ordination and appointment to the parish, the priest stands out as a model of philanthropy, alongside the family. The post communist conditions of liberty reinstated the ability of local church institutions to help the poor, no longer leaving this duty to private organizations or public persons who may use them to boost their own image. Philanthropy is, in a sense, the heart of the parish, expressed in liturgical glorification and mutual help. It should not be devolved to an NGO that may provide sporadic and inconsistent help, limited to providing food twice a year or during election campaigns. We would not want to exclude from such work the public social institutions, such as military garrisons, prisons, hospitals, university campuses, where priests are appointed as chaplains. They are not appointed to a parish, but they organise the community as parish, i.e. a community of those who believe, share in the liturgy and are joined by common demands of the spiritual life. As noted by a prominent Romanian theologian, "The social mission of the Church in schools, the army, hospitals and prisons requires dedication, love, compassion, fortitude. The priest's ministry is not an invention of the Church or society, it is a divine commandment" (Plămădeală, 1996:205).

The solution, or rather the basic structure, is still the parish community, where the priest is called to be a liturgist, a philanthropist, a model of love of one's neighbour, the first servant and carer of the poor and the sick, the one who in giving bread or a medicine also offers teaching, as Jesus Christ did. Only He, the Son of God, being in the world, promised "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven [...] Therefore [...] whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21 and 5:19).

Conclusions

Social diaconia in Orthodox world is rooted in the liturgy.[15] In pastoral work, we have found greater sensitivity and availability among the practicing members of the Christian communities than among non-practicing Christians. The liturgical life of the community sustains and strengthens the members' interest to serve those in need, and vice versa. As the current Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church once remarked "Liturgy without philanthropy quickly turns into self-centred ritual, just as philanthropy without Liturgy becomes propaganda for publicity, self-glorification rather than praise of the Love of the Holy Trinity."[16]

No less important is the role of responsibility in the salvation of every human being as an impetus for fostering and pursuing actions with a diaconal focus. The doctrine on the Judgment (both private and universal) plays a quite important role in living *vita evangelica*. The Christian feels at once blessed with hope and filled with responsibility to act in order to aid the other; indeed, the other may become, on one's departure from this life, the accuser or the advocate before the Judge Christ, depending on the empathy and generosity demonstrated during life, as shown in chapters 24 and 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. The Christian is convinced that his life does not end with his own passing out of this world, hence the concern to prepare the life after, by focusing on the quality of the relationship with God and with the others, in whom one sees Christ's image.

In the ROC most of her social diaconia is mostly unseen, unknown and unpublicised. Although society experiences profound transformations in the field of communication, as information crosses the Earth in seconds, Orthodoxy preserves the ideal of mystery, the secret of good works and humility regarding engagement in social work, in keeping with the Gospel principles: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3) or "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (Luke 17:10).

The Fathers of the Church argued that the authenticity and validity of the Orthodox faith are dependent on genuine diaconia, which is driven by love. Diaconia accordingly becomes a confession of apostolic faith, applied to everyday life through the participation in the liturgical life, whose goal is the

salvation of the soul of every believer. Orthodoxy does not encourage prosperity, wealth, enrichment, nor does it idealise poverty and social suffering. There is no amoral wealth, and there is no talk about wealth or poverty *per se*, but instead there are references to rich people and poor people. Assets are valid and contribute to salvation depending on how they are utilised, as long as they become instruments of salvation or of abuse in relation to God's justice.

The ROC has an integrated social services system, with institutions accredited in accordance with European legislation, yet its focus is not limited to training and employing "professionals". Rather, it strives to engage all the members of the Church in the act of charity. The phenomenon of secularisation has become unexpectedly pervasive in the Romanian post-revolutionary society, the immediate effects being the increasingly lay turn of society, the banishing of religious references to the private space, the marginalisation of the Church as a public institution and the discrediting of the Christian message. Social stratification, the fragmentation of social services and the channelling of public funds based on political criteria have caused social assistance in Romania to have a double reality: there is a visible and publicised face, with funding from the state budget, coordinated by a directorate in each county (Directorate General for Social Assistance and Child Protection) and another, unseen face, underfinanced, sporadically supported by the absolutely selfless generosity of parish communities and private individuals, oftentimes lacking an institutional set-up and being known only the two main stakeholders: the benefactor and the beneficiary. Recent years have seen efforts to build State-Church partnerships, whereby the State provides the logistics and funding from the public budget, while the Church contributes local organisations, its own logistics and volunteering potential that it can leverage and mobilise.

Beyond these realities, the agenda of the ROC is not fully aligned with the political and social agenda of the secular and secularised state, which makes the future of social diaconia in the Church become an act of "madness" of faith, nevertheless an act of courage to confess the perennial values of the Gospel.

Footnotes

1 For a detailed linguistic and historic analysis of the term "philanthropy", see Constantelos, 1968.

2 The genuine nature of diaconia "has been revealed to humankind through the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Begotten Son of God. Christ voluntarily assumes the role of the first servant, thereby overturning the human values and showing the way to true greatness, which is not the way of the rulers of this world, but the way of the Cross, which He Himself suffers." Meimaris, 2012:205-206.

3 Theologians define secularism as meaning the irreconciliable separation between the religious and the lay society. According to Alexander Schmemann, secularism is the medieval reaction of society against the Christian clericalism, its most conspicuous form in the life of man being the lack of public and private prayer. Other theologians have described secularism as the individualistic behaviour of man, as from a belief that death does not exist or as if God does not exist (*etsi deus non daretur*), to use Hugo Grotius' formula. For a classical discussion of this issue from a Christian Orthodox perspective, cf. Schmemann, 1973:98-99, 117 et seq. and Popa, 2000:21.

4 *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* - "outside the Church there is no salvation" and "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother" according to St. Cyprian of Carthage (Cugetări duhovnicesti' 2009:17).

5 St Gregory the Theologian considered the Basiliada to be a "wonder of the world in Asia Minor". Cf. Müller, 2012:161, 179.

6 The precepts of patristic philanthropy embodied by Sts Basil the Great and John Chrysostom now serve as examples for all Christendom. The two hierarchs exchanged letters with the bishops Bretanion and Teotim I of Tomis (present-day Constanta in Romania) on topics in theology, canonical organization and church life.

7 In addition to archaeological evidence and historical records, the book of the Acts shows that the Apostle Andrew preached the Gospel in Scitia Minor, on the coast of Pontus Euxinus, nowadays known as the Black Sea, where he established Christian communities. Andrew is known in Romania as the "Apostle to the Romanians".

8 Further details on social services in Pătuleanu, 2012:227-235.

9 An in-depth research into the activity of social services establishments is Vicovan, 2001: 271 ff.

10 Fulfilling the mission of the Church. Providing primary social and medical specialized services, community support, establishing social and medical care centres, designing and implementing social practices, partnerships with professional public services, raising awareness about social issues etc (Art. 3).

11 Information on www.patriarhia.ro, November 2019.

12 There is an initiative to establish educational and philanthropic centres in every parish, with a potentially important role in providing the kind of education that the children cannot receive at home (as there are countless children whose parents now work abroad) or in school, as the quality of education has declined due to underfunding. The activity of such centres could focus on: religious education in the spirit of Christian tolerance, general knowledge, rules of conduct and civic education, development of communication skills, health education and hygiene, environmental education, art education, information technology, physical education, after-school programs. Cf. Pestroiu, 2012:399 ff.

13 Notable national organization include the Association of Christian Orthodox Students (Asociaţia Studenţilor Creştin-Ortodocşi România, ASCOR), the League of Christian Orthodox Youth of Romania (Liga Tinerilor Creştini Ortodocşi Români, LTCOR), the National Society

of Romanian Orthodox Women (Societatea Naţională a Femeilor Ortodoxe Române, SNFOR), the Christian Medical Association "Cristiana" and the "PRO-VITA" Association for the born and the unborn children, alongside a multitude of NGOs active in dioceses, deaneries and parishes.

14 Data from the 2014 Report of the Romanian Patriarchy, to be published. Further up-dated information is available at www.patriarhia.ro.

15 "Christian diakonia has its source in the eucharistic and liturgical life of the church". Limouris, 1994:70.

16 Daniel, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina, Foreword to the doctoral thesis of Fr. Mihai Vizitiu, p. 5, in Pătuleanu, 2012:215.

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