

The Church and the Social Dynamics of the World. The Model of Saint John Chrysostom

The Church is in the world but has no roots in the world, but in the uncreated and above the world. The vocation of the Church is to sanctify, to transfigure the world, to gather it and to perfect it through the power and work of the Trinity present in it. That is why the Church is not against the world and does not abandon the world. It is a Church open to the world and to man, having responsibility for the perfection of man and the world. In this sense, the Church has a significant mission for the people, societies and cultures of the world. In the Church and in the Orthodox icon the world is delimited by the darkness of sin and the final meanings of man and the world are revealed in Christ. The starting point of the Church's mission and pastoral care in the world is Christ and the finality is also in Christ, just as we can say that the starting point is the Trinity and the finality is also the Trinity. These fundamental landmarks of the Church's pastoral care and mission are present in the sacramental dimension of the Church. The Church has always sanctioned what upset the balance of creation and diverted man's purpose in the world, namely sin, understood as man's exit from communion with God, with his fellow men and with the world.

The model of St. John Chrysostom remains relevant to the pastoral care and mission of the Church in the world. The central point of pastoral care in the thinking of St. John Chrysostom is the *social dimension of Christianity*¹, in amplifying this vision by focusing his entire life and ecclesial-social activity. Even though most of the population in Antioch or

¹ Adolf Martin RITTER, "Activitatea bisericească potrivit situației din Antichitatea târzie și de astăzi", pornind de la exemplul Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom", in: *Studia Chrysostomica*, transl. Daniel Buda, Editura Andreiana, Sibiu, 2007, p. 224.

Constantinople was a nominal part of the Christian Church, the behavioural layers specific to paganism still influenced the attitudes and way of life of many Christians. In other words, those who were pagans and became Christians did not completely give up some specific pagan customs and practices. Therefore, the social dimension receives central attention in the entire vision and pastoral dynamics of St. John Chrysostom. For him, concrete pastoral care amid society meant attention to a few aspects that diverted man and society from Christian life. Among these we mention: a) *polarization of the rich-poor*. The central argument in determining rich Christians for their attention and almsgiving to the poor was that *in the poor they may meet Christ*, on the one hand. And on the other hand, that *through the poor they can inherit the goodness of the Kingdom of God*. This argument remains valid even today when in many societies we encounter this polarization, as we encounter this polarization between the north and south of the planet. The polarization of the rich-poor not only has spiritual consequences, but also gives rise to social, cultural and even religious tensions, people enslaved by the “religion of profit” often forgetting the needs, expectations and turmoil of those around them. In this sense, the Church will indicate the transient character of the material ones and the imperishable character of the spiritual ones that can be obtained through the dedication and love that the material ones can mediate; b) *social injustice*. The polarization of the rich-poor, in the context of the “religion of competitiveness” and the “religion of profit” generates social injustice, not only through the material gap, but also through the ability to dispose of the lives of those without economic and financial power. In this sense, it goes as far as the violation of the right to health, to school, to life, the exploitation of man by man, as communism ideologically states, today taking on subtle, refined forms, sometimes initialled by law, but unjust to many people; c) *the polarization of the rich-poor* leads to existential imbalances. On the one hand we encounter the exacerbation of luxury, waste and cult of personality, and on the other hand we encounter the frustration of many people for not being able to support their lives and families; d) *the exacerbation of pleasures* is a general consequence of the loss of the existential compass and of the hope of God’s promised future. It is the immediate consequence of an autonomous world, fallen into the bondage of its own limits that no longer believes in its possibility beyond the bondage of diverted matter in its light-filled sense. We encounter all

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these in the current Romanian and European society to indicate the context we refer to.

What relevance does Orthodox spirituality have for societies in which Orthodoxy is present? What relevance does the ethos of the Orthodox Church have for the postmodern man, atomized, without roots, without the recourse to transcendence, enslaved to matter, passions and the struggle to rule the passing world and people? Or how can the Church be present in this context? The Church will respond with the same values she has always responded to. The content of the pastorate and its mission has not changed, the forms can be updated.

Saint John Chrysostom offers us some coordinates of the pastoral care and mission of the Church that we can capitalize on today. We stop at only three of them: a) pastoral care through Scripture and Mysteries, in which people gather around the same Christ “according to the Scriptures” recognized as God, Saviour and Lord and in which the community can strengthen their communion as a model for the cohesion of society. The two realities, Scripture and Mysteries, understood in the Church, as a community of those who love each other as brothers in Christ, create a real alternative to the virtual forms of “communion” generated by the holidays of secularized societies without a transcendent personal-communion centre as well as media communication channels. This will coincide with the strengthening of the ecclesiastical conscience of Christians; b) pastoral care through homilies that are competently uttered in the Churches. It is not the dogmatic problems that concern St. John Chrysostom in the first place, but the practical ones, which he always places in correspondence with the biblical and dogmatic thinking of the Church. The homilies delivered by Saint John Chrysostom concerned the Christian life integrated in the Church and permanently provoked by the social context in which the vices, the luxury, the idolatry of life influenced the life of Christians. Therefore, his sermons, according to established historians of Christianity, would be the only ones in the whole of Greek Antiquity that could be read as Christian sermons, precisely for their simplicity, balance and especially, their connection with the New Testament². He urges them to live a simple life, to practice virtues, and to trust Christians in God’s promised reward.

² Adolf Martin RITTER, “Dacă și ce anume ar fi de învățat astăzi de la Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur? Încercarea unui răspuns protestant”, in: *Revista Teologică*, serie nouă, XVII (2007), oct-dec, pp. 55-66.

We see how St. John supports the eschatological tension of the Kingdom amid a human society drawn to the immanent cantonment, in what we might call the Kingdom of Caesar. By updating the pastoral forms of the Church, we can add to these our competent presence on social networks and in the media, in general, avoiding sterile and illogical confrontations and coherently affirming the Tradition and faith of the Church; c) pastoral care through the involvement of monks who must be people of truth, prayer and knowledge of theology to enlighten and strengthen others in faith and spiritual experience. For St. John Chrysostom there is no double spirituality or two spiritualities, one of the monks and one of the Christians in the world, but one spirituality. Starting from this vision, Saint John emphasizes the involvement of the monks in the pastoral problems of the Church, the involvement of the monks in the dynamization of the Christian life in the cities, without despising the monasticism and its form of organization. In other words, monasticism was seen as a renewing factor of the Christian life, as a determining factor in the constitution of the Body of Christ, the Church. Therefore, monks are urged not to hide in the solitude of the mountains or the wilderness, but to remain near cities or even in cities to take part in daily life to transform it according to the evangelical commandments and the model of ecclesial life³. In the vision of St. John monasticism was linked to the realization of social justice which monks contribute through their spiritual strength to; d) the daily affirmation of the relationship between the Liturgy and philanthropy as an existential unit of Christians; e) the rediscovery of eschatological longing and the denunciation of social injustice, lies, human exploitation and iniquity, a sign that the standing city of Christians is not here, in an autonomous and secularized sense, but is the expected one that will come. Through this the world will experience the presence of the Kingdom as the presence of Christ who will gradually transfigure it and make it a partaker of eternity. The social dynamics of the world will make sense as far as it becomes part of the Kingdom and will transcend its own immanence.

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³ Adolf Martin RITTER, "Dacă și ce anume ar fi de învățat astăzi de la Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur? Încercarea unui răspuns protestant", p. 225.