

THE SACREMENT OF SERVING OUR FELLOW MEN. AN EXAMPLE OF COMMUNION IN THE AGE OF INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION. MORAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS

GABRIEL NOJE*

ABSTRACT. In this study we intend to offer, in a succinct manner, a moral theological diagnosis from the Orthodox perspective to the contemporary individualism. Without insisting on the origins of the phenomenon, our study focuses on a few consequences that individualism posed in the spiritual life and social plan. Finally, we propose a model of communion based on the serving of our fellow men, as a way of overcoming the social fragmentation fueled by individualism.

Keywords: secularization, individualism, moral relativism, social fragmentation, serving our fellow men.

Preamble

One of the greatest challenges of our time is the growing tendency of emphasizing the moral worth of the individual, ideology widely known as individualism¹, which is one of modern society's defining features. The growth of this moral stance, which was especially underlined by the multiple approaches and scientific methodologies used to define it, can be felt on all social levels, as individualism affects the living human society. This ideology was generally known as one of the greatest "achievements" of the triumphant modernity² (Charles Taylor), namely a new attribute of the new human condition emancipated from the influence of religion and transcendence. However, three centuries after the

* Ph.D. Candidate, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Cluj-Napoca, e-mail: nojealexandru@yahoo.com

¹ Erin Dufault-Hunter, *Individualism*, in Joel. B. Green, *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 403-405.

² Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991), 2-4.

emergence of modernity, the same individualism represents now, paradoxically, one of the illnesses of a secularized society. Therefore, we may say that it perfectly portrays the modern individual, as well as its identity. In other words, modern society and culture were both built on this basis, a set of ideas which people started nowadays reconsidering.

In the present study, particularly in its first part, we aim to underline, in a briefly manner, the reasons why the phenomenon of contemporary individualism is a great challenge for the Christian mission, trying at the same time to comprehend its functional mechanism and logic and, not lastly, to perceive its disadvantages within a moral and spiritual life. Then, in the second part of the study we intend to present the example of Christian communion based on the serving of our fellow men, knowing that in the scope of spiritual life the presence of our fellow men is not only desirable but also imperative, given that the man can be saved only through a living communion with his fellow men.

The age of individualism – a brief moral and theological diagnosis

As we stated in the first part of this study, the entire culture of contemporary society bears the imprint of this ideology, namely individualism. Without going into detail regarding its modern intellectual origins³, we have to keep in mind that the individual along with his independent principles and values represents now the main focus of the entire social life, as he has become the apogee of the entire contemporary ethical hierarchy. In other words, the entire contemporary social and cultural universe revolves around the individual and his needs and fulfillments. In extremely developed societies, such as the United States of America, these needs and fulfillments have become rights and are highly promoted and defended by the state itself. This becomes understandable when it is brought to our minds the fact that the so-called capacity of self-determination and expression of freedom and liberty of the modern individual has been perceived as the proof that the man has succeeded to go beyond his old

³For more details concerning the context in which individualism emerged, as well as its development in the modern era, see Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983). In order to identify the philosophical sources of modern man's image upon himself, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989). Reference volumes from the Romanian Orthodox theology are those written by Fr. Ștefan Iloaie, (where he aims at analyzing this complex phenomenon from a moral and theological perspective). See also *Morala creștină și etica postmodernă. O întâlnire necesară*, (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujană, 2009), and *Relativizarea valorilor morale, Tendințele eticii postmoderne și morala creștină*, (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2009).

religious and moral horizon determined by the reality of transcendence, Church norms and the morals of self-denial and virtuous life in order to gain salvation. In the spirit of his achievement, the modern individual, liberated from the constraints and norms of rigid morals, can now dictate his own morals and forge his own principles that will guide him through life, independent of divinity, ecclesiastic authority or even his fellow men.

From the perspective of its great purpose, namely admitting the individual to being the only moral instance capable of creating and running his own life, individualism and/or the individualistic culture represents a significant moral and cultural deviation and its consequences will be as impactful.

First of all, we have to mention the shifting and weakening of the ecclesiastic authority's center, meaning of all moral values and Christian spirituality.⁴ Before the emergence of modernity man's life related to a transcendent order, as he strived to live as virtuously as possible, following the divine orders. However, once modernity arose, the man started to call into question this divine moral order, pushing it aside or even completely denying it. Christian values have been replaced by a new moral order growing out not of eternal, but mundane and ephemeral values. The process of secularization, which originates from modernity and is in full swing even nowadays, captures, from a moral point of view, the axiological reversal we described above and in the center of which is the individual. Instead of cultivating the sacred values that bring man closer to God, assuring him the eternal life, the new ethos of modernity proposes a new ideology according to which man's interests and activities should be self-limited, focusing solely on the biological plan of his existence, burying his divine origins and narrowing his horizon of aspirations only to what is immediate, tangible, ephemeral.⁵ In other words, modernity thinks of Christian values as being obsolete, incompatible with today's reality, therefore with man's life goals, namely living solely on Earth while enjoying an ephemeral happiness.

Second of all, another aspect of this major deviation and one of its direct consequences is the moral relativism. The fact that the ecclesiastic authority and the Christian norms have been contested and even dismissed from the public space is closely related to the perception that, according to moral relativism, both the source and purpose of any morality can be found within the individual, excluding the hypothesis of the moral act deriving from a transcending source. Another consequence of modernity and individualism is that the revealed and moral order has been replaced by a multitude of individualistic and minimizing morals. According to the Christian principles, modern beliefs diminish the source and purpose of human morality, by offering

⁴ See Fr. Ștefan Iloaie, *Morala creștină și etica postmodernă. O întâlnire necesară*, 90.

⁵ See the book of Fr. Dumitru Popescu, *Omul fără rădăcini*, (Bucharest: Nemira, 2001), where the author writes about the effects of secularization upon the human being.

man a so-called permissive moral. This new set of principles can easily relate to the spirit of this age and the caprices of modern individual; Christian's responsibilities towards God and his fellow men are disclaimed, as modern ethics are based solely on rights that proclaim self-supremacy.

Moreover, we have to mention that moral relativism not only facilitates the fast proliferation of moralities of all kinds, but also prepares the ground for false and diffuse modern religiosities, generating a state of moral uncertainty and everyday unease, nourishing individual's feeling of insecurity and permanent frustration. Paradoxically, contemporary moral relativism does not provide a sense of human life, but rather enhances identity confusion, as modern individual is in a continuous pursuit of qualities he can identify with and morals that could confer him authenticity. The modern man "lacks" profound moral qualities, as he never stops seeking the authentic moral meaning of his existence that the secularized society he lives in failed to provide him. From this perspective, the true meaning of man lies only in Christian faith and the morals revealed by God, considering that man's fulfillment and life goal can only be achieved through absolute communion with his Creator, on the vertical axis of his existence, and with his fellow men, on the horizontal one.

Lastly, in terms of Christian morals, individualism may lead to social fragmentation, meaning the dissolution of human interrelationships, which is the most important consequence for this study. Individualism drives man away from his fellow men by cultivating moral attitudes such as selfishness and narcissism, as well as unfaithfulness among human relations.⁶ Such attitudes seem to be somewhat encouraged by the consumerist mentality of contemporary capitalism which promote secular values such as competition, individual welfare, economic prosperity and progress at the expense of understanding, mutual support and respect as fundamental elements of human relations. For modern individual his fellow man is no longer a mandatory condition for achieving communion, but rather a threat or even an uncomfortable presence. However, as we shall see below, in terms of Orthodox moral theology, it is our fellow man who makes us more responsible and aware, given that it is with him that we are permanently conversating with.

The sacrament of serving our fellow men – an example of communion in the age of individualism

Orthodox moral theology aims at reinforcing man's calling towards communion as an answer to the ever-growing tendency of contemporary individualism and the danger of social fragmentation. The values of contemporary

⁶ See Fr. Ștefan Iloaie, *Morala creștină și etica postmodernă. O întâlnire necesară*, 162.

society single out as important the moral worth of the individual, while Christian values, growing out from the fertile soil of the divine revelation, are a strong reminder that men should live in communion with his fellow human beings.⁷ Far from simply living as a monad or a self-enclosed being, the man symbolizes one great personal reality. However, modern individualism continues to nourish his desire of self-worship and vainglory, an attitude which is perfectly portrayed through contemporary narcissism. That is to say, the entire cultural landscape obstinately promotes the priceless and absolute value of the individual, ignoring the reality and the value of his fellow man. Therefore, we may comprehend why our attitude towards our fellow men vary from acceptance and tolerance to denial or even disregard. Just as common is a certain utilitarian attitude that begins to take shape and characterize human relations and, according to which, our fellow man proves his usefulness only as long as he helps us achieve our goals. The message of moral theology, as opposed to that of individualistic culture, aims at emphasizing the intimate nature of our fellow man. He is the alive and undeniable proof that we cannot exist as loners, that we have flaws and are incomplete without his help. Also, the simple presence of our fellow man helps us fight against our tendency of self-worship. From this perspective, it is of our responsibility to identify ourselves with our fellow man in the most humble, modest and critical situations (Matthew 25: 35-36). Thus, this reality helps us realize that our fellow man is an intimate presence that will help us to grow spiritually and improve our quality of living, which we will fully enjoy in the Kingdom of God.

REFERENCES

- Dufault-Hunter, Erin. *Individualism*, in Joel. B. Green, *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2011.
- Iloaie, Ștefan. *Morala creștină și etica postmodernă. O întâlnire necesară*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujană, 2009.
- Iloaie, Ștefan. *Relativizarea valorilor morale, Tendințele eticii postmoderne și morala creștină*. Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2009.
- Dumont, Louis. *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'ideologie modern*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983.
- Popescu, Dumitru. *Omul fără rădăcini*. Bucharest: Nemira, 2001.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Le sacrement du frère*, în *Dieu et l'homme d'aujourd'hui*, translated from German by Robert Givort (Paris: Desclée and Brouwer, Paris, 1966), 281-290.

- Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991.
- . *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- Urs von Balthasar, Hans. *Le sacrement du frère*, in *Dieu et l'homme d'aujourd'hui*. Translated from German by Robert Givort. Paris: Desclée and Brouwer, Paris, 1966.