Theological Dimensions of Citizenship
from an Orthodox Perspective

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I would, first of all, like to thank the organizers of this meeting for having invited me, and thus giving me the opportunity of providing an interpretation of the social and the political in a Christian key. Such an endeavour is very much welcomed in today's European context, which much more often puts forth precisely the opposite process, i.e. reflecting on Christianity in a social and political key, a direct outcome of the privatization of religion.

In broad terms, the social thinking of the Church develops a series of principles, such as the principle of *unity and solidarity*, the principle of *responsibility and social justice*, the *eschatological* principle, or the *incomplete character of human justice*[1]. All of them are based on a genuine theological anthropology.

I. Among the many aspects which could serve as a theological foundation for a Christian's reference to society, and bearing in mind the exigencies of this presentation, I chose to briefly put forth two of them, which are essential to the Orthodox view on the human being in the framework of an anthropology of communion:

1. ***The world is God's gift to the human being***. Orthodox theologians affirm that the world is not bad in itself; it was created good, and is the expression of the Creator's love for his creature – the human being. The deep meaning of the world, as well as its ultimate aim or finality, resides in the fact that it was conferred a sense, a rationality, i.e. the structure which makes it possible for the human mind to gain knowledge of it, and it is called to constitute the *locus*, or the space, of a huge dialogue and communion between God and the human being, but also among human beings themselves. This dialogue was initiated at the creation of the world, and is meant to be continued in eternity.

2. ***The human being is a gift of God to the human being***. Karl Rahner has inspirely talked of the auto-communication of God. The Personal God, out of love, creates a partner of dialogue and communion for Himself, in His image, and set to attain His likeness.

For Orthodox theologians, God is social, or, more exactly, He is a perfect communion of distinct Persons[2]. Divine unity is relational, dynamic, interpersonal, and the Persons define themselves by means of their mutual relations. This social outlook on the Trinitarian God

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[1] Radu Preda, *Orthodox Social Theology. Introduction to the Ethics of Eastern Church*, http://www.teologia-sociala.ro/index.php/en/courses/orthodox-social-theology.
[2] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I (Bucharest, 1996²), p. 195.

leads the Orthodox theologians to a **communional understanding of the human being**. For, if humans are created in the image of the Holy Trinity, then the proper framework for a genuine understanding of the human person is precisely Trinitarian theology[3].

There are at least two major consequences of this perspective: i) all humans are equal in dignity; and ii) a human person is never self-sufficient as an individual, but finds his/her fulfilment in communion with others.

Belief in a God who is a communion of Persons, and who is identified by St John the Evangelist as love itself, makes us oppose any form of exploitation, discrimination, or social injustice: "Our social program is the dogma of the Holy Trinity"[4].

While engaging in a relation with the Trinitarian communion, the human person is equally called to realize a life of communion on the human level, "in the image" of the Trinitarian communion (John 17, 21). In the book of *Genesis*, it is written that "*God created humankind in His image; in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them*" (1, 27), or that "*[i]t is not good that the man should be alone*" (2, 18). Therefore, the human person is considered a being which is open to his/her like by his/her very constitution, while individualism is seen as a consequence of the fall. According to the Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae, the human person is "*the reality with the highest degree of existence, for he is aware of his existence, as well as that of other persons and things. And he is as such for he/she exists as an I, as a You, or as a He, as a conscience which is oriented towards another conscience... You and Him constitute an answer by way of reference to I. We cannot receive this answer from the stones, plants, animals... When I attempt not to see the others as You and Him,... I myself am weakened in my existence, or I lose it altogether. It is probably in an I who got used not to have at all an You, that hell - the extreme impoverishment of existence - abides*"[5].

Nothing is as necessary to a life in communion as self-offering for others' sake. The human being - the solidary human person, who is oriented towards the others - exists for another person and for communion with him/her, and it is through this longing that

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[3] The Trinity is the ultimate basis and the eternal finality of the human being, which exists and is actualized by way of inter-personal communion, D. Staniloae, "Omul şi Dumnezeu" in his *Studii de teologie dogmatică* (Craiova, 1991), p. 232.

[4] The phrase belongs to the Russian thinker Nikolai Fiodorov (†1903) quoted by Kallistos Ware, in his *L'île au-delà du monde* (Paris: Cerf, 2005), p. 52.

[5] D. Staniloae, "Omul şi Dumnezeu", p. 225.

him/herself is enriched and grows[6]. Thus, the human person cannot attain fulfilment outside of communion with God and with fellow human beings. Hence the well known Latin aphorism which says that *unus Christianus nullus Christianus*, as well as the theologians' insistence that *salvation is conditioned by communion* (Al. Khomiakov).

Orthodoxy sees the human person as an image or icon of God, God's gift to humans, just as the whole rest of creation, which was offered with an aim, which leads towards a dialogue. *God's personal auto-communication within His Trinitarian life, as well as His auto-communication towards us, in the Person of His incarnate Son and in that of the Holy Spirit, without a face or a voice, constitute the model, the source, the power, and the aim of any human auto-communication towards God, as well as towards fellow humans.*

Given that *person* and *communion* are the two elements which decisively determine any theological-ontological discourse on the human person, the analogy to the Trinitarian and the Chalcedonian dogmas remain highly significant for the Orthodox. It is in the Person of Jesus Christ, which gathers in itself the divine calling and the human answer, that God reveals Himself as One and Three, the divine nature being united to the human nature inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably. Thus Jesus Christ is The Human Person *par excellence*, "the model of what the human being means to us, the mirror in which we see reflected our real image,"[7] or, as Kierkegaard put it, Christ is not only the revelation of God to the human person, but also that of the human person to the human person. "It is here where you can see what a human being is supposed to be," he says[8].

II. This paradoxical way of keeping one's *identity within unity* has generated a **relational-personal** thinking about the human person, world, and history, which, through Christianity, became a real *forma mentis* of Europe[9], opening European culture towards *freedom in community* or *unity in diversity*. The human person promoted by Christianity, as Denis of Rougemont used to say, overcomes and somehow reconciles the egoism and anarchy which are peculiar to the self-sufficient "individual" and the totalitarian collectivism of the "citizen" who is exclusively obedient to the state. All are to be retrieved here, though judged

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[6] Or, in the words of the Greek theologian Panayotis Nellas, "[being] at once person and nature, the human person is fundamentally characterized by the mystery of love", P. Nellas, *Le vivant divinisé, Anthropologie des Pères de l'Eglise* (Paris: Cerf, 1989), p. 19.

[7] Kallistos Ware, *Préface* to Panayiotis NELLAS, *Deification in Christ* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), p. 13.

[8] Søren Kierkegaard, *La maladie à la mort*, vol. I, p. 268, quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *La tradition chrétienne* V, p. 209.

[9] I. Ică jr, „Biserică, societate, gândire în Răsărit, în Occident şi în Europa de azi", in *Gândirea socială a Bisericii* (Sibiu: Deisis, 2002), p. 50.

upon in the key of a new relation – a vertical one this time – a relation which liberates the human person from social terror and individual arbitrariness, obliging one to a limitless responsibility toward one's neighbour[10] (see Matthew 22, 39: *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"*).

Responsibility is closely linked to human freedom (which nevertheless, from a theological point of view, means much more than the mere possibility of making choices with no coercion), and is based upon the liberation from the dominion of sin, which was granted upon us through the loving sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God.

Hence, each and every time when social imperfections become a burden for the people, as is the case with the current financial-economic crisis, it is even more necessary that human dignity be more boldly defended from the humiliation that stems from poverty, unemployment, exploitation, social injustice, hunger, and suffering. For – we said it before – from a theological perspective, one's live does not constitute a mere "right", but - much more than that – it is a "gift" of God[11]. It is a priceless gift which has to be protected, kept and tilled in relation, in communion, in Church and society. To this end, the Churches have as a basis for their social thinking the Gospel of Christ's love for all humans, a love which also becomes the criterion for the evaluation of human life in history[12] (see Matthew 25, 31-46).

Before being crucified, our Lord Jesus Christ gave His disciples the command to love, a command which He Himself designates as being *new*, and which He would repeat latter on, as if wanting to make sure that the disciples got it: *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"* (John 13, 34; 15, 12). The novelty and hence the greatness of this command stems from the fact that the measure of love is not of this world, as it is not the answer of human beings to God, for, in the words of St John the Evangelist, *"He first loved us"* (I John 4, 19). It obviously points to the fact that love of neighbour is rooted in love of God. Hence, its superiority both to natural law, which is revealed whenever human reason manifests its freedom through solidarity with all of the same kin or nature – *„In everything do to others as you would have them do to you"* – and to the written law, which invites to the completion of this solidarity with concern for the neighbour's happiness: *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Leviticus 19, 18)[13].

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[10] *Ibidem.*
[11] *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"* (John 10, 10).
[12] HB Patriarch DANIEL, „Drepturile omului - câteva consideraţii teologice", in *Misiune pentru mântuire. Lucrarea Bisericii în Societate* (Bucharest: Basilica, 2009), p. 374.
[13] Cf. I. Bria, *Tratat de teologie dogmatică şi ecumenică*, vol. I, (Sibiu: Ed. Andreiană, 2009), p. 128.

One's life in the world has a unique and infinite value, precisely because it paves the way for eternal life. Therefore, the Church, which has a divine-human constitution, being in the world but not of the world, has the mission to serve the world, in order to save the world. This „chosen race", and „people of God" (I Peter 2, 9-10), as St Paul says, has its lasting city in heavens (Philipians 3, 20; Hebrews 13, 14), but this does not mean that the Church or the Christian takes no part in the life of the present city. It does worth recalling here that, in the High Priestly Prayer, the Lord Jesus interceded the Heavenly Father for His followers: "*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one… As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*" (John 17:15, 18). In a document issued in 2000 - *The Basis of the Social Concept* - the Russian Orthodox Church highlights that "[i]t is inadmissible to shun the surrounding world in a Manichean way. Christian participation in it should be based on the awareness that the world, socium and state are objects of God's love, for they are to be transformed and purified on the principles of God-commanded love. The Christian should view the world and society in the light of his ultimate destiny, in the eschatological light of the Kingdom of God"[14].

This eschatological vision on the world has profoundly hallmarked the history of Christianity, from Christ's contemporaries, through the apologists, and then the Constantinian shift and the experience of Byzantium or of the Holy Roman Empire. Because, as St Paul put it, we have this treasure in clay jars (II Corinthians 4, 7), Christians were equally tempted to run away from the world, and by the idea of realizing God's city here, on Earth. The story of Byzantium serves, in this regard, as a real adventure in Christian politics. In the "Christian Commonwealth", as George Florovsky calls it, "churchliness" and "citizenship" were simply identical. Only Christians could be citizens. All citizens were required to be orthodox in their creed and behaviour… The Church and the Empire were ultimately a single Society, a single *Civitas – Republica Christiana*[15].

European citizenship and the European Union are, of course, a different matter, but there are also some common points. There is no doubt that the fathers of Europe relied on Christian ideas when they conceived the new Europe, promoting a personalist-communitarian perspective. But let us not forget that in between the time of Byzantium or of the Holy Roman Empire and that of the EU, a series of events took place which deeply marked the reference of society to the Church and religion. Consequently, the Christian values which laid at the basis

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[14] *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, at https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/.
[15] Cf. G. Florovsky, *Cristianity and culture*, (Belmont, 1974²).

of the European construction have evolved, and were either detached from their Christian roots by secularized humanism, or diluted and gradually replaced with other values, which in turn were put forth as universal values. The current crisis serves as an obvious proof in this regard, for, even though it has not been caused by Europe, it has been strongly felt by Europeans. But why was it so? It was so because such ideas as peace or solidarity, which are fundamental for Europe, and which are based upon mutual respect and common use of resources, were replaced by fierce economic struggles between countries and corporations. All European countries (with the single exception of Finland) broke the "rules of the European game", i.e. the mutual agreements, and it was because of this that the crisis stroke us so hard here, in Europe. The egoism, protectionism, secrecy and deception employed by member states overcame European honesty, transparency, solidarity and unity. Neither the states, nor the corporations in Europe did promote solidarity, but selfish profit. Under these circumstances, when politicians, led by economic interests, believe in Europe only when it suits them, it is extremely hard to overcome the financial-economic crisis, and equally so the socio-political one, for, as president Barrosso was highlighting in his *State of the Union* speech in 2012, Europe faces a generalized crisis of confidence: lack of confidence between the member states, lack of trust between the states and the European institutions, between social partners, between citizens and the EU[16].

It may be that this crisis of confidence is precisely the outcome of an exaggeration, with no total coverage in reality, if we are to borrow the wooden financial language, which is more and more used today. Relating it to the global level, Europe constitutes a model and a point of reference when it comes to the culture of freedom and the social system. In this regard, we all remember the voices of the youths in the Arab Spring, shouting that they wanted nothing else but to be in Europe. Hence, there is a danger of sacralizing European citizenship, which is probably not at all foreign to the ancient sense of superiority of Europeans.

Therefore, even if pejoratively, maybe the model of European citizenship was based upon a particular understanding of the Heavenly Kingdom, as it is described in the Gospel of John: "*In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places.*" (14, 2). For, if we are to have a look this time from within the EU, we can see that, in today's Europe, some citizens inhabit inferior dwelling-places. Then you rightly wonder how could there be trust between citizens and the EU as long as fundamental rights of European citizenship and the nicely packaged

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[16] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-12-596_en.htm

dream of the Heavenly Kingdom on earth are not offered to all citizens of the EU member states. These second-class European citizens cannot move freely within the Union, nor to work or enjoy equal rights or social protection outside their home country. In lack of social solidarity among the states, freedom of movement or work – even if it's graciously offered – will only have one sense – from the poor to the rich.

Facing all these challenges, the Church can only boldly reaffirm the fact that economic utility does not undermine the ontological equality and dignity of all human persons, and undertake a new "breath of life" which would give Europe a living soul, as well as the life of communion or unity for which it was created. On the other hand, the Churches – and the Orthodox Churches even more – have to give evidence of a renewed and creative faithfulness, at once avoiding *isolation from* and *dissolution in* the broader society. For not only the states, but equally so the Orthodox Churches, which are organized on ethnical principles, will have to intensify their universality-catholicity, in order to join together local or national freedom and European co-responsibility[17].

Keenly affirming the capital role of moral-spiritual values within the contemporary society, the Church thus have the mission to work on the reconstruction of the European creation by replacing egoism with solidarity, indifference with mutual care, obsession for profit with the joy of offering, and distrust with hope.

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[17] See HB Daniel, *La Joie de la Fidélité* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), p. 264.