

## RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMON GOOD

***"Each of us must consider his neighbour and think what is for his good and will build up the common life."***

**Romans 15:2**

Theodor Angelov

### **Summary**

*The article tackles the relationship between individual and community rights. Our stewardship in society as Christians entails responsibility and Christ-likeness. The Christian attitude should include respect for all. To serve means to exemplify humility and readiness to work for others*

Although traditional forms of discrimination have disappeared in most parts of the world there is no guarantee that people will enjoy full equality without discrimination in the future. The idea that one group is superior to another—and the consequences of that idea—have not disappeared. What is the relationship between the rights of the individual and the needs of the community--should the rights of the individual be valued higher than the rights of the majority? In many countries, the pendulum seems to be swinging towards the rights of the community over the rights of the individual, which in extreme situations could revive the idea of "bolshevism" (the majority over the minority) of the past century.

### **Human rights, duties and responsibilities**

Having in mind the broad spectrum of possible approaches to the question, we should be very careful before giving a "definitive" answer as to what precisely the relationship between individual and community rights should be. What should we as Christians think about such a difficult issue? In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul gives this advice: *"Each of us must consider his neighbour and think what is for his good and will build up the common life"* (Romans 15:2). He goes on to point to the ultimate example of Jesus, who did not please himself but became the servant of all. This is the Biblical sense of the word "servant", that Christ was a servant; he did not come to be served, but to serve the others, and his service brought him to the cross. We must become servants as well. Our stewardship as Christians entails Christ-likeness, and that includes sacrifice. To serve means to exemplify humility and readiness to work for others; to give and even sacrifice something for our fellow man and our community.

### **Responsibility**

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Nothing can so destroy the life of a society, family, or community as quickly as lack of responsibility. A family in which the parents do not fulfil their responsibility towards their children; a government administration which does not fulfil its responsibility to the people being governed; civil servants or financial workers who do not fulfil their responsibilities to those they are supposed to help—we can see in all these cases how lack of responsibility can lead to catastrophe! We are witnesses of many such catastrophes today in the lives of individuals and entire nations.

### **The Christian attitude: Respect for all**

Among the more striking stories about St. Francis of Assisi are the accounts of his profound reverence for every person, every creature, and every thing. He went to great lengths to avoid offending a brother. Any abuse of animals also saddened him deeply. When he encountered other beings, his initial reaction was not one of fear, arrogance, or greed. Rather, he thought of his fellow creatures as having as much right to exist and to flourish as he himself did. Where there is such profound reverence and respect for all creatures, there naturally follows a great desire for peace. A Christian understanding of the rights of others, of the common good, always leads to peace in society.

We have witnessed firsthand the painful struggle that many countries have gone through in order to rid themselves of absolutist, totalitarian ideologies. Under Communism, we saw what it was to live in a society of "justice" without freedom, and equality without responsibility. A Christian vision of society, aware of interdependency and relationships, should be based on the possibility of overcoming indifference and selfishness, as well as the individualism and consumerism that are so widespread today. The presence of God in our world guides us in our realization of the true meaning of the phrase: "*to consider his neighbour and think what is for his good and will build up the common life*", and that is the real transformation of humanity through an act of God's power, through His grace. This will happen only when grace is present in the hearts of human beings—it is through this grace that we will have the freedom to value and respect the rights of others.

### **Do we respect the economic, social and cultural rights of others?**

In addressing the question of human rights we think mainly of elimination of intolerance and discrimination, of protection of human and religious rights, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and protection of minorities. Most European countries have become multi-ethnic and multicultural. It is remarkable that in the Bible God makes specific mention of several groups: the alien, the fatherless, the widows and the poor. "*You shall not deprive aliens and orphans of justice nor take a widow's cloak in pledge*" (Deuteronomy 24:17); "*I command you to be open-handed with your countrymen, both poor and distressed in your own land*" (Deuteronomy 15:11). These words demonstrate that God is especially sensitive toward our treatment of the alien and stranger--immigrants who are very often deprived of their human rights. The economic, social and cultural rights of minorities should be respected in the same way as those of any other human.

An essential feature of the Church's service in Europe is its ministry to the poor and needy. One of the most fundamental aspects of our world today is the challenge of living next to one another while maintaining mutual recognition and respect for people of different nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and religions. The Christian tradition of maintaining charitable institutions is as old as Christianity itself and shows the nature of the Christian faith; as an old prayer says: "*Lord, let me sow love where there is hatred and injury.*" The biblical commandments affirm our mutual responsibility and accountability to our fellow man. The teaching of the Church in Europe about social, cultural and economic rights should be put into practice with profound acts of understanding and love.

In his final description of the Kingdom of heaven Matthew 25, Jesus says: *"Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me"* (Matt.25:40). By *"my brothers here, however humble"* Jesus meant the strangers, the hungry, the poor, the sick and the prisoners. In other words:

To care about the economic, social and cultural rights of the others means not only to respect them but to serve them, and to build up the common life!

### **References**

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