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## **Work - Between a Blessing and a Curse** **An Orthodox Response**

### 6 Theses

1. Among the many false beliefs – or *Idées reçues*, as Flaubert would say – concerning the Bible is the assumption that work was invented by God only as a punishment for sin. We know that God said to Adam, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; For dust you are, and to dust you shall return”(Genesis 3:17-19). In the interpretation of the Eastern church fathers such as St. Basil of Caesarea, this toil is the expression of the loss of equilibrium of all creation through the entry of evil, and not an angry reaction of the heavenly Father. Because of the fall of man, life is now laborious and tiresome. This motivates and animates man's longing for his spiritual homeland. As long as we remain remote from and insolent toward God, we must grapple with the difficulties of existence. In other words, those who do not want to understand God can no longer understand the world. Basil sees not God but evil as the cause of this unfortunate situation.

2. Work was also viewed by the first Christians as a tacit recognition of the worldly powers, and the apologists often point to this fact. Like service in the army or the payment of taxes, so is work – both for oneself and for society – presented as proof of Christianity's compatibility with the world. Nevertheless, work is not seen as an objective. This explains some church fathers' criticism of slavery, which – as in the writings of John Chrysostom – was interpreted as a direct result of the Fall. It is not work or the worker which they criticize, but how work was dealt with and the abuse of workers.
  
3. Orthodox social theology – i.e. the ethics of the Orthodox Church – embraces work and, as an echo of the Gospel of Christ, repeats that it is not an end in itself. Without quoting here the well-known passages once again, in summary it can be said that work does not call human dignity into question, and that the person should not be degraded into a work tool. Work is not necessarily linked to success or wealth. And although those who work honestly cannot become rich, they can still improve their lives. Wealth is not necessarily a consequence of work, but work can help us to escape misery. In the biblical tradition, work is seen by the church fathers more as something to be practiced to demonstrate strong character. The virtues are proven by work.
  
4. When work was at the center of communist economic ideology and propaganda, Orthodox theologians in Eastern Europe were in an unenviable position and attempted, on the basis of biblical and patristic passages, to demonstrate the loyalty of their church to the atheistic state. Today, some theological texts of this period on work are more than problematic, if not strongly ideological. Unfortunately, after the fall of communism our Orthodox theology did not take social issues seriously. The social theological documents of the Russian Orthodox Church are a

beginning, but they far from exhaust the possibilities of today's Orthodox theology.

5. The digitalization of work is seen in most post-communist countries not as a threat or paradigm shift since the economy must struggle with a declining number of workers. In Romania, for example, we find ourselves forced to import workers from abroad (from Asia). Large infrastructure projects suffer chronically from a lack of qualified people. This can be observed even in the church, where old skills and professions have almost disappeared. Today, no more churches are built according to the old methods. Concrete has banished all other materials.
  
6. This begs the theological question: how should a person be defined without work? Is unemployment a blessing, a liberation? This question is not only concerned with the disappearance of work as such, but particularly with the rediscovery of time. What should or can a person do with free time? If too much work is a burden, are not overly long periods of unemployment also a danger? For many Orthodox theologians, this may not be a burning question, but we are indeed beginning to face a completely new reality in our communities. There are families that are working elsewhere – including Germany, that are no longer in the country, and that contribute indirectly but nevertheless visibly to the shrinking of the social safety net. There is also a newer generation of young people who are no longer motivated by work. In less than 30 years, Romanian society has changed fundamentally. This development is a matter of mobility (there are more than 3 million Romanians working and living abroad), the funding of social services, which are worsening, and the motivation of the younger generations. In short: we are confronted – both culturally and politically – with a number of questions and have not yet begun to search for answers. I

would like to thank you for the possibility that this conference has given to reflect on this subject and would be happy to answer any questions.