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A Brief Introduction into Scriptural Grounding of Contemporary Social Work

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Abstract: *Social work, as a model of welfare practice in contemporary society, is based on the mutual aid principle of those in need or in a situation of vulnerability. Its historical foundations can be identified from the ancient writings, including the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments.*
This paper brings to the attention of the students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, the Social Work specialization, but also of those concerned with a deep social-theological knowledge, the perspective of a theoretical analysis, but also that of a good practice model for contemporary social work based on the examples existing in Holy Scripture. Also, the focus is on developing, through study, professional skills that provide for the projection and elaboration of a discourse based on sacred texts (verbal and written exposure), but also the correct statement of the doctrine of the Church and the means transmitted by it for the perfecting of the person and of the world in the context of a constantly changing society. Thus, through this comprehensive analysis, the paper highlights the relevance and sustainable impact of the teachings and practices of social work in the Old and New Testaments on contemporary issues solvable through social justice, christian love, solidarity and community responsibility.

Keywords: *social work, scriptural foundations, Christian love, Christian mercy, social principles, Christian precepts, Christian values.*

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Introduction

"God's kingdom can be acquired with only a drop of water and a crumb of bread, if offered with love. Exactly, as far as we know, that any man needs!"
(†Calinic, Archbishop of Suceava and Rădăuţi)

According to experts, the practice of social work or mutual aid is as old as human history. The hypothesis on which almost all research in this field starts is based on two arguments: all communities, regardless of time and place, have always had individuals who, for various reasons, such as genetic, natural or social, were unable to meet their needs by their own means, and a second reason is that, in any civilisation, the care for members in need has not been entirely lacking (Zastrow, 2010; Neamţu, 2003).

The problems of poverty, disability, orphaned or abandoned children, and the elderly who are sick or without family support (Apostu, 2016) have been turned into problems of the old and new world, which mankind has tried to solve by resorting to spontaneous mechanisms of self-regulation or institutionalization. Society has tried to intervene in support of them in different ways, but the emergence of a profession, with the specificity of treating "social diseases" can be mentioned at the beginning of the twentieth century (Neamţu, 2003).

Local communities of all time had their own forms of mutual help, but with the advent of Christianity, for two millennia, the concern for disadvantaged people, groups or populations belonged exclusively to the Church, and the social work practiced by the religious institutions was the main support point for the poor, but also for the other categories of disadvantaged or vulnerable people (Neamţu, 2003; Semen, 2007). One should also remember that the Church, over time, has constantly taken care of the social work problems, not only for her faithful, but for the whole being, contributing to the spiritual and bodily relief of people.

In the 3rd and 4th centuries, named also the golden centuries of the Church, precisely because of the strength of faith lived in deeds of love, the Holy Fathers gave special importance to philanthropy, showing through writings, words and especially deeds, that the most beautiful way to serve God is to show mercy and concern for those in need and suffering. An edifying example in this regard is St. Basil the Great, founder of the great social-charitable complex, the *Vasiliada*, a complex whose objectives were to provide for the protection, upbringing and education of orphaned and abandoned children, young people without work, care for the sick, widows,

the exploited, the homeless and the needy, as well as St. John Chrysostom, who preached the mystical presence of Christ among the poor and suffering (†Calinic, 2020, 2024).

The example of the Holy Fathers was followed by the Byzantine emperors. Returning in time, more precisely around the 300s, it helps us to notice that the social work institutions during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) and up to the Emperor Justinian (527-565) make their presence felt. They carried out their actions in a religious and social setting. The records mention the existence of *brefotrophies* (cradles of found or abandoned small children, aged up to seven years), *partenocomies* (homes for young girls from poor families or orphanages), *girocomies* (asylum for old widows and without support) and *orphanotrophies* (orphanages, special establishments for Christian or non-Christian orphans whose care was entrusted to clerical staff, who carried out their work under the guidance of bishops and presbyters), hospitals for the poor (built with the help of the church), and, asylums for elders, settlements for widows, these institutions being administered by bishops (†Calinic, 2020; 2024). Under these conditions it was the Church that was involved in the administration and supervision of the administrators, and at the same time, he also took care of the way in which the activity was carried out in the mentioned social work institutions (Paşa & Paşa, 2004; Manoiu & Epureanu, 1997). Even though these institutions acted individually or within the churches, they received, without distinction, material support or spiritual guidance from the churches, through bishops, religious and spiritual educators.

If until the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century the Church's social work actions were based on the conception that poverty and wealth were normal facts, the poor being satisfied with the fact that they were born into such families, believing that it was easier for them to enter the Kingdom of God, at the end of the Middle Ages poverty was no longer seen as an opportunity for salvation or virtue, but as a consequence of laziness, a moral mistake and even a crime and subversion that must be repressed.

The Renaissance period also contributes to erasing the "positivity of poverty", and the reform of Luther and Calvin withdraws its absolute meaning from poverty. This way legislation is developed in order to reduce social mobility and punish vagrancy and begging, which were often considered dangerous for social stability (Neamtu, 2003). In spite of all state aversions, the Church does not retreat, but will continue to practice and preach a welfare behavior towards the poor, remaining until the nineteenth century the most important actor with social responsibilities (Necula, 2015).

Today also, unlike in the 16th century and the following centuries, "social care is the great sector of love, in which the Church has already committed herself, with gifts of value, in a disinterested way, through institutions of protection for every category of disadvantaged people, with economic provisions, with pastoral care for those in need, for the support of a system of social justice, for the help of the cripples, disabled people, for the protection of those disowned by the society in which we live" († Hristodulos, Archbishop of Athens, 2002).

The Old Testament scriptural grounding of social welfare services

Scripture argues that philanthropic manifestations appear both in the pre-Christian era and in the Christian world. The most important precept of the Old Testament Holy Scripture, but also the new testamentary one, is: ”‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ’This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Deuteronomy 6: 5; Matthew 22: 37-40; Mark 12: 30-31).

The love, which is mentioned in these scriptural texts, from a philanthropic point of view, means to care for the suffering, the old or the young, to help those who are in need and suffering, to desire and do good to others, to denounce social injustices, to respect man's freedom, to promote a certain balance between the interests of oneself and those of one's neighbor. Therefore, from a Scriptural perspective, social work is about putting into practice the commandment to love your neighbour, which implies the desire to restore him to his dignity. Or, we could also say that, according to the scriptural norms, the basis of the philanthropic and assistant act must be the common good and the feeling of social equity (Semen, 2007).

The ethical foundations of social work in the Old Testament are highlighted in social principles and values such as charity or compassion, social justice and responsibility towards the vulnerable. These principles, with broad social values, are fundamental to the teachings and prescriptions of the Old Testament. Examples such as the commands to help strangers, the poor, widows and orphans (Deuteronomy 24:19-22), or the prescriptions to love your neighbour as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18) form the moral foundations of social welfare.

The first form of social welfare mentioned in the Old Testament Scriptures was the fulfillment of justice to all who are socially afflicted: "Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge" (Deuteronomy 24:17). We note that the Old Testament contains clear provisions inserted into the Moses`Law with reference to the

marginalised of society, the poor, widows and orphans. Often God states that if society neglects them, He will protect them all.

In this regard, the Book of Exodus makes valuable recommendations concerning the care and work of all underprivileged social categories and the form of divine care of the poor, the work of widows, ofphans, strangers, slaves and others. The idea that this Old Testament Book expresses is that God the Lawgiver wants to cultivate in people the love for these disadvantaged social groups, otherwise he threatenes them with divine intervention (Semen, 2007): "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherles" (Exodus 22:21-24).

Also, the Book of Deuteronomy says that "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18), and of those who have an unjust attitude towards the weary and burdened of society, he says: "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." (Deuteronomy 27: 19).

As we can easily observe from the above, the most common social welfare practices were charity and care for those in need, which were promoted through various means, including laws and rituals. Laws stipulated practices of freeing slaves and redistributing resources in regular intervals to avoid chronic poverty. Community social networks were fundamental to social welfare, and the community was responsible for supporting the vulnerable.

A significant role in the adjustment of the social norms was played by the Old Testament prophets. Alongside the other Old Testament writings, major and minor prophets highlighted the importance of helping the needy. The principal precepts of the prophetic books were responsibility to the poor and needy, the protection of widows and orphans, accompanied by the exhortation to do justice to the poor and widows, and not to wrong the orphans. The social attitude of the prophets was a critical one. They harshly condemned social hypocrisy and injustice; by their utterances they urged concrete actions of mercy and justice, they emphasized the responsibility of protecting widows and orphans, who were considered the most vulnerable members of society; they promoted social judgment and the just economy. The Prophet Amos is known for his harsh criticism of social

and economic injustice (Apostu, 2018). He denounces the exploitation of the poor and calls for fair and ethical conduct in business. Another constant concern in prophetic writings is the protection and love of foreigners and migrants, encouraging people to take them in and integrate them into community.

The prophets have shown particular concern for the categories of people who require social protection. Although they stopped with the diagnosis of social ethics, their objective was to achieve changes in consciousness, through a sanctimoniousness attitude towards contemporary society, and thus contributing to awakening consciences of humankind in the long term. In this regard, the Prophet Isaiah said: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:6-7); "Learn to do right; seek justice.Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17), and Jeremiah says: "This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place" (Jeremiah 22:3). "This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other'" (Zechariah 7:9-10), says the prophet, and the psalmist David says: " But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless " (Psalm 9:34) or "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed" (Psalm 82:3).

Other teachings with a strong social norm character are found in the Book of Wisdom of Jesus Sirach. "My son, deprive not the poor of his living, and do not keep needy eyes waiting. Do not grieve the one who is hungry, nor anger a man in want. Do not add to the troubles of an angry mind, nor delay your gift to a beggar. Do not reject an afflicted suppliant, nor turn your face away from the poor. Do not avert your eye from the needy, nor give a man occasion to curse you; for if in bitterness of soul he calls down a curse upon you, his Creator will hear his prayer. Make yourself beloved in the congregation; bow your head low to a great man. Incline your ear to the poor, and answer him peaceably and gently. Deliver him who is wronged from the hand of the wrongdoer; and do not be fainthearted in

judging a case. Be like a father to orphans, and instead of a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother" (Ecclesiasticus 4:1-10).

The image of Job, "is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8), is pleasing to God, being mentioned as a model among people in the discussion with Satan. His Christian virtues were associated with good material status "and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East" (Job 1:3), but also of perfect social relations in the community, living in harmony with the neighbours, doing good deeds: "because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist them" (Iob 29: 12) and "I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger" (Iob 29: 16)" and living profoundly the love of fellows: "Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?" (Job 30, 25).

All these scriptural references want to demonstrate the need to abolish acts of social injustice, which have as consequence the creation of unfavorable situations for various vulnerable categories. The prophetic writings of the Old Testament constantly reiterate the importance of social work, charity and social justice in society. These principles were fundamental to the Jewish community and remain relevant today, providing moral and social guidance to all believers.

The New Testament scriptural grounding of social welfare services

Social welfare in the New Testament is a central theme reflected in the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ and the early Christians. They promoted principles such as compassion, generosity and care for the disadvantaged and marginalised in the society of their time. Through analysis of scriptural texts and historical context, we seek to explore and identify the role and relevance of contemporary social welfare in light of the teachings and based on examples from the New Testament.

The Holy Scripture of the New Testament is founded on the precept of Christian mercy, mercy directed towards the poor, the needy or the suffering as the Redeemer says: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9: 13). Mercy toward man has solid scriptural reasons, it cannot be optional. The New Testament writings, having Jesus Christ at the center, show us that Christianity must have Christ as its model, for when He saw the hungry crowds, did not confine Himself to sympathetic words, but resorted to the deed and fed them all (†Calinic, 2020; 2024): "I have compassion for these

people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat" (Mark 8:2). And in another place it is said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18) or " Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6: 36) or "I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:36).

Inspired by the model of our Savior Jesus Christ, Who showed His sacrificial love for people by sacrificing His own life: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13), Christian philanthropy, becomes a practice to follow. Thus, the teachings of Christ the Savior and the example of the early Christian community provide a solid foundation for the development and implementation of social work practices in the contemporary world, stressing the importance of humanitarian values (Apostu, 2023) and commitment to the common good.

We learn from the sacred text that in the Jerusalem community "all the believers were together and had everything in common"; moreover, they all "sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 2:44-45). In the books of the New Testament we have descriptions of how the early Christians shared their goods and helped one another in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), but also clear examples of the creation of support structures for the poor, widows and orphans within the early Christian community.

The individual behaviors of some Christians such as Cornelius the centurion " He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly" (Acts 10: 2) or Barnabas who " sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4: 37), become gestures to follow for entire communities of Christians: " For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem" (Romans 15: 26).

The Jerusalemite community, in turn, was to become a model for other Christian communities, which, when in need, was helped by the communities under the coordination of St. Paul the Apostle; these were the communities "all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ" of which he wrote to the Christians in Rome (Romans 15:19).

He also exhorted the Christians in Corinth: " Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem" (I Corinthians 16:1-3). From these entries we understand that the community act of charity was already ecclesial in character by the middle of the first Christian century, being practised in the local Churches of the various provinces of the Roman Empire and supported by the Holy Apostles, bishops and ministers of the respective Churches.

The institutionalisation of charity in early Christianity

Social work in the New Testament is a paradigm of compassion and concern for the vulnerable/needy in society. The teachings of Jesus Christ and the example of the early Christian community provide a solid foundation for the development and implementation of social welfare practices in the contemporary world, highlighting the importance of humanitarian values and commitment to the common welfare.

Interpreting in the context of the above mentioned and of the topic researched, we observe that since the beginning of Christianity we can speak of a beginning of community institutionalization of charity at the level of local churches. It can be assumed that some of these aspects of the mission of the Church of Christ were also discussed at the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem, which took place in 49/50, since - after this high ecclesiastical forum, the first known form of conciliar leadership of the Church - the Christians of Lystra and Iconium, on their second missionary journey, preached to those who received the Gospel, teaching them "they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey", so that " so the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers" (Acts 16:4-5). This regulation - by laying down quite precise rules - would characterize the Church's philanthropic activity from the beginning, placed under the authority of the Holy Apostles, who were commanded to preach the Gospel to all nations.

In addition to *a first institutionalization*, we are dealing with a *universalization of the philanthropic act*, which was to be extended to all those who received the Gospel Word, regardless of the nation to which he belonged, as Saint Peter the Apostle pointed out at the Apostolic Synod: "Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for His name from the Gentiles", because He has planted in the heart of every man the longing to seek the Lord; such people can be met " all the Gentiles who bear my name". This explains why among Christians, from the beginning, there are

many" Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15, 14 and 17-19), which benefit from these charitable services or support these philanthropic activities. What is even more important from the perspective of this analyzed manifestation of the charitable act and its evolution from the simple act of charity to its institutionalization, first beside the Church of Christ, and then slowly becoming an act of specialized institutions under the ecclesiastical structure, is a *transcendental perspective given to the charitable act*, because – at the Dreadful Judgement - the criteria that will prevail will be that related to the love of your neighbor: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25: 34-36).

Conclusions

Both the Old and the New Testament provide a moral and practical foundation for social work, emphasizing the importance of compassion, justice, and community responsibility toward those in need. These principles and examples remain relevant and inspiring in the contemporary fight against poverty and social marginalization.

Christianity, as a revealed religion, without constituting into a political-social-economic system, has a spiritual mission, but also a pronounced social character. This is mainly due to the fact that Christian teaching is based upon principles that promote equality, social justice, human and social rehabilitation, condemnation of slavery and other social inequalities and others (Vizitiu, 2002). As a result, the material work of the poor, the sick or the stranger is a work related to the existence of the Church conceived as a divine-human institution, in which the imitation of divine mercy is needed, the Mercy of Christ who solemnly declared that " the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28).

The highest level of Christian charity and implicitly of social work is to help man to help himself, to help him capitalize on his potential, to help him reach the stage of managing himself in a hostile society, supporting him to undertake actions from which to earn his own existence (Semen, 2007), since no one in this world, institution or man, will succeed in making people equal, but only in cultivating the noble feeling of selfless love for of the neighbor and of social justice.

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