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Psychospiritual Assistance of Social Suffering. Perspectives of Social Work

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Abstract: *The concept of social suffering is relatively recent, and has been debated in the specialized literature especially in the last 15-20 years. In Romania, the phenomenon is not quite acknowledged in scientific research environments, much less among the political community, and, therefore, no measures are taken to combat the phenomenon. The Romanian Orthodox Church has drawn attention in multiple ways to a state of pronounced suffering of individuals. This suffering, once accumulated at the level of a large percentage of the population, leads to a broader phenomenon, called social suffering. However, scientific research on social suffering in Romania is only in its debut stage. The purpose of this article is to make an analysis of the psychospiritual assistance of social suffering from the perspective of social work. We started our scientific approach by enlisting a series of clarifications to the concept of social suffering. Then, we analyzed the mechanisms of psychospiritual assistance through the lens of specific intervention methods in social work. In the final part of the paper, we discussed the opportunity to apply psychospiritual social work mechanisms to combat the phenomenon of social suffering.*

Keywords: *social suffering; psychospiritual assistance; social work.*

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Introduction

Social suffering is a negative emotion on a macrosocial level, characterized by tension, lack of empathy and solidarity between members of society, social isolation, lack of motivation in participating in public decisions, the feeling of futility and insufficiency of any positive initiative, lack of trust in the mechanisms of the rule of law, acceptance of negative aspects in society from a state of inertia, which includes combating them only superficially or formally, without creating real and effective mechanisms, irritability towards the demands of certain social groups and towards the state's inability to satisfy the needs of citizens, the feeling of insecurity (physical, political, informational).

The phenomenon was first referred to as "social suffering" in the volume entitled "La misère du monde ", published in 1993 by the famous French researcher Bourdieu (1993), along with his collaborators. The concept attracted worldwide attention after Pierre Bourdieu's work was translated and published in English in 2000, under the title "The Weight of the World. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society " (Bourdieu, 2000) - the title refers to the titan Prometheus, who carried the burden of humanity on his shoulders. Just two years earlier, in 1997, Arthur Kleinmann, a professor at Harvard University, in cooperation with his collaborators, published the volume entitled "Social Suffering" (Kleinman et al., 1997). Later, Emmanuel Renault attempted to develop a fundamental theory of social suffering, in the work "Social Suffering. Sociology, Psychology, Politics" (Renault, 2017).

Renault (2017) addresses the issue of social suffering as belonging to one science or another for the first time in a large-scale work. Traditionally, social suffering is seen as a field of study of *political sociology* , starting from the fact that Pierre Bourdieu was a sociologist, and the definition he provided to social suffering focused on the negative effects that the irresponsible use of state power has on the collective psyche, by diverting its political, economic and institutional mechanisms from their fundamental role, that of increasing the quality of life of the individuals in whose service they should, normally, be used. Starting from here, however, the concept was extended in *sociology* (Wilkinson, 2012), to encompass all events that have a negative impact on an extended community, including migration, global economic crises, extreme manifestations of natural phenomena, ecological problems, injustice in the distribution of resources, structural violence, etc.

In *political science*, social suffering has been associated (Arnopoulos, 2004) with subtle forms of abuse of power through different forms of *soft*

power. It is specific to soft power that, instead of coercion, social manipulation is used to coalesce members of society around the political factor. *Manipulation* has as a secondary effect, which is the loss of confidence in political credibility, when citizens realize that they have been subjected to manipulation techniques, which profoundly affect social cohesion and political stability, with all the negative consequences that result from this.

Social suffering in *legal sciences* is correlated (Dăscălescu, 2003) with *positive discrimination*, which involves granting preferential rights to a certain social category, in order to compensate for the suffering that these categories feel because of negative attitudes and behaviors, manifested in society towards them. Those advantages, however, are viewed by other members of society as exaggerated, especially when they are in fundamentally similar situations, but are excluded as beneficiaries of the same advantages. Positive discrimination gives rise to dissatisfaction regarding *the way in which resources are allocated* and the fairness of the decisions made by the political factor regarding the correct administration of public funds, collected as a result of taxes paid by citizens, including those excluded from the use of some benefits precisely because of positive discrimination. Consequently, the climate of discrimination and social isolation of the group that received the advantages deepens, society is even less cohesive with the particular needs of the members of that group, social conflicts escalate and, implicitly, the feeling of social anguish, therefore social suffering, increases.

Methodology

The main thesis of the paper is that social suffering – a collective phenomenon distinct from individual suffering – requires transdisciplinary intervention integrating psychology, social work, and theology. We contend that psychospiritual assistance, particularly through the Church's role as moral guide and community model, can address the value conflicts underlying social suffering more effectively than procedurally-constrained secular social work alone. While existing psychospiritual interventions target individual psyches, social suffering operates at the collective level through social structures and shared meaning-systems, necessitating theoretical development of social-level psychospiritual approaches that transform institutional arrangements, collective narratives, and community practices.

This paper employs a systematic conceptual analysis to examine the intersection of social suffering and psychospiritual assistance within social work practice. Given that social suffering remains an emerging field with limited empirical research – particularly in Romania – our approach

prioritizes theoretical development and conceptual clarification as a necessary foundation for future empirical investigation.

Our methodological approach follows a structured three-phase protocol:

- **Systematic Literature Selection and Mapping**

We conducted a purposive literature review using specific inclusion criteria to ensure theoretical representativeness across disciplines. Sources were selected based on: (a) disciplinary relevance - works that explicitly address social suffering and/or psychospiritual assistance within sociology, psychology, theology, social work, political science, and anthropology; (b) conceptual contribution - texts that provide definitional frameworks, theoretical models, or critical analyses of the key concepts; (c) temporal scope - prioritizing foundational works (Bourdieu, 1993; Kleinman et al., 1997; Renault, 2017) alongside recent contributions (2015-2024) to capture conceptual evolution; and (d) geographical diversity - including both Western scholarly traditions and works addressing Romanian contexts.

The literature mapping process involved identifying:

(1) how each discipline defines and approaches social suffering;

(2) the theoretical frameworks employed across disciplines;

(3) areas of conceptual convergence and divergence;

(4) gaps in the integration of spiritual dimensions within social work responses to social suffering.

- **Comparative Conceptual Analysis**

We employed a structured comparative framework to analyze how social suffering and psychospiritual assistance are conceptualized across disciplines. This involved: (a) extracting core definitional elements from each disciplinary perspective; (b) identifying the underlying assumptions, values, and paradigms that shape each approach; (c) systematically comparing secular (social work, psychology) and religious (Christian theology, Orthodox practice) frameworks regarding their understanding of suffering, healing, and the individual-society relationship; and (d) analyzing points of compatibility and tension between these frameworks.

A critical component of this phase was examining the practical manifestations of these conceptual differences - particularly how procedural requirements in secular social work versus pastoral approaches in religious settings create different experiences for individuals seeking assistance, and how these experiences aggregate into social-level phenomena.

To ensure systematic comparison across disciplines, we employed a multidimensional conceptual framework adapted from interdisciplinary

concept analysis methodology. This framework examined each concept (social suffering, psychospiritual assistance) along five dimensions:

(1) definitional scope - what phenomena are included/excluded in each discipline's definition;

(2) causal assumptions - what each discipline identifies as the origins or drivers of the phenomenon;

(3) unit of analysis - whether the discipline focuses on individuals, groups, institutions, or society as a whole;

(4) intervention logic - what mechanisms of change or healing each discipline proposes;

(5) evaluative criteria - how each discipline determines whether the phenomenon has been addressed or resolved. This systematic framework allowed us to identify not only differences in terminology but fundamental divergences in how disciplines conceptualize the relationship between individual and collective suffering, and between psychological and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

- **Theoretical Integration and Framework Development**

Building on the comparative analysis, we developed a synthetic framework that: (a) articulates the distinctive characteristics of social suffering as distinct from individual suffering; (b) identifies the specific contributions that psychospiritual approaches can offer to social work practice in addressing social suffering; (c) examines the mechanisms through which spiritual guidance addresses value conflicts that underlie social suffering; and (d) proposes theoretical foundations for extending individual-level psychospiritual techniques to collective-level interventions.

This synthetic work draws on social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) as a bridging theory that allows dialogue between theological perspectives on collective humanity and sociological perspectives on society as an emergent entity distinct from its individual members.

Throughout this analysis, we employed a transparent analogical reasoning process to bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications. This process involved four systematic steps:

(a) identifying structural parallels – we examined how therapeutic approaches designed for individuals (e.g., psychospiritual counseling techniques) share structural elements with potential collective interventions (e.g., pastoral guidance, community-based spiritual practices);

(b) explicating the comparison criteria – we made explicit the dimensions along which comparisons were made, including the locus of intervention (individual vs. collective), the nature of suffering addressed

(psychological vs. social-psychological), the role of values and meaning-making, and the mechanisms of healing;

(c) acknowledging disanalogies – we systematically identified where individual-level approaches cannot be directly transferred to the collective level, particularly regarding the distinct dynamics of group psychology versus individual psychology;

(d) synthesizing adapted frameworks – based on identified parallels and limitations, we articulated how psychospiritual principles might be reconceptualized for social-level application. Additionally, we utilized concrete examples from specific social phenomena (domestic violence, labor migration) as illustrative cases to demonstrate how abstract conceptual discussions manifest in concrete social realities.

For the integration of Orthodox Church experience, we employed a comparative institutional analysis that contrasted:

(1) the operational logics of secular social work systems (procedural, documentation-focused, resource-constrained) versus ecclesial assistance models (relationship-based, values-oriented, flexibility in resource allocation);

(2) the underlying anthropological assumptions (individual as rights-bearer vs. person as spiritual being in community);

(3) the practical implications of these different approaches for beneficiaries' experiences and outcomes. This comparative analysis was grounded in documented practices and theological principles rather than subjective impressions, with each claim about Church practice or social work procedures referenced to either scholarly literature or established institutional frameworks.

The primary goal of this methodological approach is not immediate practical application but rather the establishment of a rigorous conceptual foundation that can:

(1) clarify the phenomenon of social suffering within the Romanian context;

(2) articulate the potential role of psychospiritual approaches in social work practice; and

(3) provide a theoretical basis for subsequent empirical research that measures the extent, causes, manifestations, and effects of social suffering, as well as the efficacy of psychospiritual interventions in addressing it.

Social suffering in the fields of psychology, social work and theology

Regarding the difference in the approach to social suffering in theology compared to social work, we start by saying that, in the field of

psychology, the issue of social suffering has arisen especially when scientific works have brought into discussion the experiences of people in a state of suffering (Wilkinson, 2004). When these experiences were analyzed in a correlated manner, it was concluded that there are social aspects that arouse feelings of anguish, refusal to confront reality, an inner struggle generated by the lack of values or the existence of an evasive value scale, and that these feelings are common to many people. From an *anthropological perspective* (Green, 1998), social suffering relates to any aspect that is socially unjust, and in *social psychology* (Nordgren et al., 2011), it is seen as the reunion of all individual sufferings (more precisely, given that most people suffer for one reason or another, their cumulative sufferings lead to a state of suffering at a social level).

In the field of *social work* (Smith et al. 2017), the analysis of social suffering is conducted from the perspective of the rigors imposed by the legislative policies of neo-liberal states. These rules subject social work activity to procedural rigors, documentation and formwork, information collection and verification of beneficiary data, steps that position the social worker in a state of suspicion towards the client. This *institutionalized attitude of suspicion* generates animosity on the part of the beneficiary, thus causing them additional suffering, besides the problem they are already facing. Animosity and suspicion mutually and correlatively potentiate each other, so that citizens end up refusing contact with the state institutions that are assigned precisely to support them.

The Church provides support not only *to people who cumulatively meet the conditions imposed by the law*. It is a desideratum of Christianity that within the Church, each individual is helped, advised, guided when a problem arises, depending on the problem, even if it is not, objectively, as serious as the problems others might face. Each system (the religious and the secular one) has its advantages and disadvantages. In the state-run system of social work, due to *the limits of material resources allocated* to social work, it is necessary to prioritize cases according to severity. In order to prove that decisions were not taken arbitrarily, they must be thoroughly documented. Here, however, the psychological aspect that provokes suffering comes into play.

It can be said that a social phenomenon occurs when the frequency of those who have similar experiences in a social group is so high that, even without popularizing what happened to them to the other members of the group, the facts become self-evident to the whole society.

With reference to the difference in the approach to social suffering in theology compared to social work, we consider that psychology focuses on the individual and how individual suffering contributes to the climate of

general suffering, anthropology has a cultural-historical perspective on suffering, political science sees it as an effect of the partial failure of political systems, social psychology as a combination of all these factors, and social work is blocked by the lack of funds or the need to rigorously justify their allocation. The Church has a completely different vision of what social suffering means. In Christian philosophy, both the individuality represented by each person, as well as the individuality of humanity as a unique organism, in which persons are parts of the same whole, can be noticed (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2013). But humanity is not just the sum of its parts, because the entire existence was created by God, and humanity acquires, in Christianity, its own intrinsic value, distinct from the value of each individual.

If we see society as a living organism, we will understand why the Christian perspective, which treats society differently from the individuals who compose it, is optimal for addressing social suffering.

Psychospirituality and the healing of social suffering

Psychospiritual assistance involves *the integration*, in the fight against human suffering, of the benefits taken from *two fields: psychology* (psychotherapy) and *theology* (spiritual guidance given by the priest) (Umam et al., 2024). However, unlike psychotherapy, which involves working with the individual, *assisting society as an entity is distinct from assisting the individual, because it* moves away from both the techniques specific to psychotherapy and those of social work.

Often, people react together with the group, to certain stimuli, in different ways than they would react to the same stimuli, if they were alone, which in neurolinguistic programming (Dotz et al., 2013) has been called *"mass trance"*. In psychological practice with the individual, psychospirituality involves the integration of *self-awareness techniques* with aspects related to religiosity or spirituality. However, these techniques, because they were created for individuals, cannot be applied as such to treat the suffering of an entire society.

To address the matter of withstanding suffering through psychospiritual assistance, we must first establish a fundamental distinction that is central to this paper's argument: individual psychospiritual assistance operates on entirely different principles than social-level psychospiritual intervention, and these differences are not merely matters of scale but of ontology and mechanism. At the individual level, psychospiritual assistance integrates psychological techniques (cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, behavioral modification) with spiritual practices (prayer,

meditation, sacramental participation, spiritual direction) to address personal suffering rooted in meaning-making, values conflicts, or existential distress. The therapeutic relationship is dyadic or small-group based, progress is measured through individual psychological indicators (reduced anxiety, increased hope, clarified values), and the intervention targets the person's internal psychological and spiritual states. In contrast, social-level psychospiritual intervention – a concept we propose requires significant theoretical development – would need to address collective phenomena that cannot be reduced to the sum of individual experiences. Social suffering, as we have established, emerges from the dynamics of social systems, institutional structures, collective value orientations, and shared cultural narratives. Therefore, social-level intervention must target these collective structures and shared meaning-systems rather than individual psyches. This might involve:

(a) institutional reform that realigns social structures with spiritual and ethical principles (e.g., embedding values of human dignity and solidarity into social policy);

(b) collective ritual and symbolic actions that reshape shared narratives and restore social cohesion (e.g., national days of reconciliation, community-wide penitential services, public acknowledgment of social injustices);

(c) transformation of public discourse through prophetic witness and moral teaching that reframes how society understands suffering, responsibility, and mutual obligation;

(d) cultivation of intermediate communities (parishes, faith-based organizations, civic associations) that model alternative ways of relating and distributing resources, serving as "laboratories" of renewed social relations.

The mechanisms of change differ fundamentally: individual psychospiritual care works through personal insight, emotional processing, and individual spiritual growth, while social-level intervention works through institutional transformation, collective consciousness-raising, reformation of social practices, and reconstruction of shared meaning-systems. The Church's traditional role has encompassed both dimensions – providing individual pastoral care while also serving as a prophetic voice that challenges unjust social arrangements and models alternative communities of solidarity – but the theoretical articulation of how these two levels of intervention differ and interact remains underdeveloped in both social work and theological literature.

This raises a fundamental question: can society itself be "sick," or is social suffering merely the aggregation of individual pathologies? If the

latter, social suffering can only be addressed through treating each individual. However, if society possesses emergent properties and dynamics irreducible to individual psychology – a position we adopt – then social suffering constitutes a collective pathology requiring interventions targeting social structures, shared narratives, and collective meaning-systems rather than individual psyches alone. While psychology has developed robust techniques for individual psychospiritual care, corresponding approaches for collective healing remain theoretically underdeveloped.

Psychospirituality is at the intersection of psychology and spiritual counseling, but in the specialized literature (Nolan, 2011) there have been reservations about the concrete ways in which psychospiritual counseling could be effectively carried out with the beneficiary. In general, it is appreciated that psychospiritual assistance techniques involve a collaborative effort between several specialists, from various fields, based on techniques of "intuitive self-awareness, therapeutic use of psychological and spiritual perspective, and cultivation of psychological and spiritual environment" (Umam et al., 2024). As a field of study, the concept of psychospirituality began to be promoted around 1920, in a work by Culpin (1920), after which it was extended, over time, to fields such as:

- *medicine* – for the holistic approach to the psychological difficulties faced by people with terminal illnesses (Arora, 2013);
- *social work* – for developing case strategies in cases of domestic violence against women and children, especially due to the debate on the religious reasons that determine women not to separate from their abusive partner, because they consider divorce a sin (Galea, 2013);
- *psychology* – for developing new therapeutic methods in addressing cases of depression, psychosis, bipolar disorder, etc. (Spittles, 2018);
- *sociology* – in areas such as volunteering and social cohesion (Crosby et al., 2020);
- *educational sciences* – in studies on the development of school performance in adolescents through alternative personal development techniques, which integrate spirituality in addressing the beneficiaries' vision of life, career and the role of education for the quality of life (Kass, 2018).

The Romanian Orthodox Church has developed several concrete psychospiritual programs that integrate spiritual guidance with social assistance. Three notable examples include:

(1) The Filantropia Federation's Addiction Counseling Training Program, which provides nationally accredited professional training for priests, social workers, and teachers in addiction counseling, combining

psychological therapeutic approaches with Orthodox spiritual guidance on passions and spiritual renewal (Federaţia Filantropia, 2023);

(2) The National Anti-Drug Program, initiated in 2008, which established counseling centers and specialized training programs embedding psychospiritual perspectives within pastoral courses at Theological Institutes, treating addiction as both a medical-psychological condition and a spiritual struggle requiring sacramental and pastoral support (Aurel & Moldovan, 2013);

(3) Pastoral Care Programs for the Elderly, which integrate spiritual accompaniment with practical social services through 21 daycare centers, 54 residential facilities, and 52 home care services, addressing not only material needs but also the psychological suffering of isolation, loss of purpose, and fear of death through regular pastoral visits, sacramental ministry, and community integration activities (Orthodox Times, 2023).

The role of spirituality in assisting social suffering - a social work perspective

Psychological literature (Gergen, 1985) has observed that religion provides hope and emotional comfort to patients, and in *social work*, the existence of religious beliefs has proven to be (SeungJa Doe, 2004) a factor that fundamentally influences individuals' capacity for empowerment regarding their own situation. Other studies (Johnston Taylor, 2023), however, show that religious beliefs can equally generate an inner struggle of the individual against the signals they receive from society, their needs, their desires, and the expectations of those around them. Social work, in these cases, operates with a multidisciplinary intervention team, directing the person to psychotherapists. Psychotherapists, on the other hand, find that, in addition to working with the beneficiary's psyche, they also need concrete support, so they send them back to the social worker. In many cases, even this collaboration is doomed to failure, because the person perceives that they are being transferred from one side to another because all the specialists involved are incapable of giving them the help they need.

As a concrete example of uniting spirituality and assisting social suffering, Mother Siluana Vlad (1944-2021) was a philosophy professor who became a monastic at age 49, founding the "Sfinţii Arhangheli Mihail şi Gavriil" [Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel] Counseling and Formation Center in Iaşi, Romania and serving as abbess of "Sfântul Siluan Athonitul" [Saint Silouane the Athonite] Monastery. She pioneered integrative psychospiritual therapy combining Orthodox spiritual guidance with scientific psychological approaches. Her work addressed dependencies

(alcohol, drugs, pornography), post-abortion syndrome, domestic violence, childhood abuse trauma, and youth counseling. She conducted seminars throughout Romania and diaspora communities on self-knowledge, relationships, depression sources, and spiritual life. Her methodology integrated patristic wisdom with modern psychotherapy, neuroscience, and addiction counseling, treating people as whole persons requiring both psychological healing and spiritual transformation.

Among the psychospiritual activity she developed along her life, we can count:

1. ADDICTION COUNSELING:
   - Alcoholism treatment and support
   - Drug dependency counseling
   - Pornography addiction therapy
   - Integration of 12-step programs (Alcoholics Anonymous) with Orthodox spirituality
   - Collaboration with medical specialists for detoxification
   - Psychological therapy combined with spiritual guidance
2. POST-ABORTION SYNDROME COUNSELING:
   - Specialized support for women suffering post-abortion trauma
   - Integration of psychological healing with sacramental confession
   - Grief counseling and spiritual healing process
   - Breaking silence around abortion-related suffering
3. ABUSE AND TRAUMA THERAPY:
   - Childhood abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
   - Domestic violence victims support
   - Work with street children in Bucharest (1990s)
   - Trauma-informed spiritual direction
4. YOUTH AND FAMILY COUNSELING:
   - Parent-child relationship counseling
   - Youth identity and purpose guidance
   - Premarital counseling
   - Family systems therapy with spiritual dimension
5. PSYCHOSPIRITUAL FORMATION SEMINARS:
   Topics covered:
   - "The stages of love" (Treptele iubirii)
   - "Youth relationships"
   - "The family in today's society"
   - "The source of modern depression"
   - "Self-knowledge" (Cunoaşterea de sine)
   - "Spiritual life"

- "How to listen to your child so they listen to you"
- "Healing through forgiveness"

6. INTEGRATION OF DISCIPLINES:
- Orthodox Patristic theology
- Modern psychology and psychotherapy
- Neuroscience findings on addiction and trauma
- Scientific addiction counseling methodologies
- Therapeutic community principles

The methodology of social work and psychospiritual assistance set in practice by Mother Siluana Vlad comprehends:

- Philosophical Foundation:

- Rejection of treating people as "cases" - emphasis on personhood
- Integration of secular scientific wisdom with Orthodox spiritual tradition
- Recognition that psychological healing and spiritual transformation are interconnected
- Understanding addictions as diseases requiring both medical and spiritual treatment

- Therapeutic Approach:

1. Consciousness-raising: Helping people recognize their problems
2. Self-awareness: Understanding how life patterns create problems
3. Assumption of responsibility: Taking ownership of one's life story
4. Behavioral change: Understanding that life transformation leads to behavior change
5. Referral to specialists: Recognizing when medical intervention is needed
6. Spiritual integration: Connecting psychological healing to sacramental life (Vlad, 2009)

- Key Principles:

- "Dependencies are illnesses" requiring specialized treatment, not just moral exhortation
- Entry into dependency comes from lack of education; exit requires therapeutic intervention
- Importance of naming the problem honestly
- Need for specialists in addiction counseling, not just spiritual directors
- Integration of scientific psychology with Orthodox ascetic psychology
- Emphasis on authenticity and fighting against formalism in spiritual life

The impact of her legacy can be, briefly, defined through:

- Reach

- Conducted seminars throughout Romania

- Active in Romanian diaspora communities (Italy, France, other European countries)

- Extensive online presence through blog and recorded conferences

- Trained numerous disciples who continue psychospiritual counseling work

- Recognition

- Described as "philosophical bridge between Orthodox Church and youth"

- Known for "penetrating spirit and honesty"

- Attracted large audiences (filling conference halls and libraries)

- Trusted counselor for clergy, monastics, and laity

- Work with vulnerable populations:

- Street children in Bucharest canals (1990s)

- Prisoners in Romanian jails

- School students (prevention education)

- Marginalized and suffering individuals

- Influence

- Pioneered integration of Orthodox spirituality with professional counseling in Romania

- Developed training programs for counselors and clergy

- Created sustainable institutional framework (the Center continues after her death)

- Influenced formation of addiction counseling as recognized specialty

- Remembered for tireless work with "patience and dedication" to help and "heal" all who sought her help (Centrul de Formare şi Consiliere "Sfinţii Arhangheli Mihail şi Gavriil", 2019).

Domestic violence is one of the most illustrative for this problematic intersection. Despite comprehensive secular interventions – emergency shelters, adult education programs, psychological counseling – many victims return to their abusers, frequently citing religious reasoning such as viewing divorce as sinful or interpreting religious wedding vows as mandating wifely obedience (Band-Winterstein & Freund, 2018; Bailey et al., 2023). Social workers and psychologists acknowledge feeling overwhelmed by such cases (Busch & Valentine, 2000), where religious convictions create value conflicts that secular interventions cannot adequately address. This exemplifies how

social suffering emerges from unresolved value conflicts at the intersection of personal needs, social structures, and religious/moral frameworks – conflicts requiring spiritual as well as practical intervention.

The integration of Church involvement in social work raises concerns in Western literature about potential proselytization during vulnerable moments (Sherr et al., 2009). However, other scholars (Kalapura, 2015; Whitley, 2012) note that Christian doctrine viewing sinners as persons needing compassionate assistance – rather than condemnation – can enhance cultural competence in addressing social suffering rooted in cultural practices. The Church's moral framework, rather than limiting cultural competence as some suggest (Ridley et al., 2001), can provide ethical resources for addressing culturally-embedded forms of suffering such as domestic violence or substance abuse.

Value conflicts constitute a primary source of social suffering. Individuals struggle to prioritize competing values: in domestic violence cases, personal safety versus family preservation; in labor migration, economic provision versus emotional presence in children's lives.

Establishing a hierarchy of values is absolutely necessary for individuals to make what have been called *"ethical decisions"* (Sandu et al., 2020), that is, those decisions by which individuals choose, from two options, the one they consider the most correct and that gives them inner peace (i.e. the alignment of values with their needs and desires). The ethical decision must be made when there are ethical arguments for and against both options. Social suffering stems precisely from the fact that the way the state prioritizes the distribution of resources is perceived as unjust. As such, individuals suffer not only because their own, internal set of values, in the private sphere, comes into conflict with the set of values in the public sphere (which, most of the time, are the same), but also because these values are not placed at the same level on the value scale with which they operate in their private life, compared to the social space.

This is where the Church's essential role should come in. According to theologians (Baier, 2010), as a spiritual guide, *the Church can* shed light on the value struggle, counterbalancing one value against another, and *show the criteria according to which one value can be given priority over another* (Evan, 2018). Once this process is completed, it is said (Barton et al., 2014) that the Church can help reduce the feeling of social injustice, highlighting the categories of vulnerable people for whom the secular state's care must be a priority, basing its analysis on religious demands for mutual assistance and tolerance of those who are different. Once the feeling of social injustice has been alleviated, the struggle for resources will no longer be so fierce, so

intolerance and discrimination will decrease and social cohesion will increase.

A sick society can make a healthy individual sick. We say this based on certain aspects found by studies (Coplan et al., 2021), which deal with the analysis of the phenomena of voluntary social isolation, of people who choose, freely and consciously – that is, without presenting symptoms of a clinical illness –, to detach themselves from social encounters, conversations or contacts with large groups, opting to socialize rarely, and when they do, only with certain, carefully chosen people. The participants in these studies (Coplan et al., 2021) stated that their choice is determined by the need to reduce the pressure they feel in the social environment, to empathize with states and emotions, attitudes and opinions that do not belong to them, from which they do not obtain any benefit and which only consume their time and inner energy resources. We appreciate that, *when contact with society is perceived by the individual as one that abuses them psychologically and emotionally, then society is the problem and not the individual.*

Conclusions

This paper has addressed a central theoretical tension: while social suffering operates at the collective level through social structures and shared meaning-systems, existing psychospiritual interventions target individual psyches. We have argued that social suffering in Romania – though understudied – requires transdisciplinary approaches integrating psychology, social work, and theology. Critically, we distinguish between individual psychospiritual care (addressing personal meaning-making and value conflicts) and social-level psychospiritual intervention (targeting institutional structures, collective narratives, and social practices). Traditional social work, constrained by procedural requirements and resource limitations, cannot adequately address the spiritual and values dimensions underlying much social suffering, while the Church possesses complementary resources through its role as moral guide and community model.

Value conflicts constitute the primary mechanism through which social suffering emerges and persists. Contemporary postmodern society deconstructs traditional values without reconstructing coherent alternatives, leaving individuals without frameworks to establish value hierarchies necessary for ethical decision-making (Sandu et al., 2020; Reimer & Watts, 2025). When citizens perceive state resource allocation as unjust, this compounds individual value conflicts into collective suffering. The Church's essential contribution lies in providing authoritative moral guidance that clarifies both the content of values and principles for prioritizing among

competing values, thereby reducing the perception of injustice and strengthening social cohesion. However, this guidance must demonstrate concrete social utility, not merely theoretical positioning.

Translating psychospiritual principles from individual to social-level intervention remains theoretically underdeveloped. While individual spiritual guidance techniques are well-established, mechanisms for applying these principles to collective healing require conceptual innovation. We tentatively propose that group therapy techniques might be extended toward mass intervention, though this concept requires substantial further development. Immediate priorities include: empirical research documenting social suffering's prevalence and manifestations in Romania; community-level assessments of both strengths (resources for combating suffering) and vulnerabilities (factors perpetuating it); awareness campaigns to help communities recognize social suffering; development of interventions that, rather than promoting defensive mechanisms, cultivate spiritual and moral awareness enabling individuals and communities to understand, accept, and transform suffering through faith into sources of compassion, solidarity, and renewal.

The Church's traditional dual role – providing individual pastoral care while serving as prophetic voice challenging unjust social arrangements – positions it uniquely to bridge individual and collective dimensions of psychospiritual intervention, but this potential requires systematic theoretical articulation and empirical validation.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *For this paper, AI software Claude Sonnet 4.5 by Anthropic has been used for proofreading and partial copyediting.*

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