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The dignity of man in the present ecumenical context from the
orthodox theological perspective:

St. Gregory of Nyssa and Father Dumitru Stăniloae

- abstract -

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1. Introduction

A retrospective look at the centuries passed in the history of mankind, designates the society we live in as a reality in continuous movement and transformation. In relation to these aspects, the Church always expressed its religious doctrines in its attempt to offer a vision as equilibrated as possible on the human being, understood by the theology not only as a social and political actor, but especially as a character invited to an eternal communion with God. In this context, the perception officially expressed by the Russian Orthodox Church, regarding the liberties promoted in the context of human rights, the partial consent of the Protestant and Catholic theology, as well as obscurities denounced in the Russian theological discourse represent aspects that need a special attention.

2. The actuality of the research theme

In the first part of the thesis we realized a presentation of the object of the research, in relation to the perception of each notion involved in this debate. For the Russian Orthodox Church the notion of human rights is based on the existence of human dignity, which at its turn it is understood especially by the state of morality of the human nature. For this reason Patriarch Kyrill's opinion is that the freedom of the human nature as an expression of God's freedom fulfills its authentic role only when it decides in favor of the morality. In contrast to this aspect the laws of the state based on moral autonomy represent indirect means of promoting the sin. Due to this very reason the Russian Orthodox Church thinks that it is necessary to associate the liberties and rights with morality without which, aspects such as freedom, democracy, human rights or human dignity lose their value and may even transform into their opposite.

The notion of human dignity based on human based on the existence of the face of God in man, the manner in which this subject is interpreted as well as consequences resulting from these aspects in the vision of every religion involved in this debate, represents the essence of the first part of the thesis. In the conception of the Russian Orthodox Church expressed in the year 2008, the dignity of the human nature represents a moral category, a result of the moral life that starts from the existence of the divine in the human nature, a intrinsic and eternal value of the human being "the value is something given, the dignity is something to be earned".

After the year 2008, the Russian theologians reformulate the terminology regarding the dignity of the human nature renouncing the difference between value and dignity of the human nature, and arguing that human dignity is based especially on the existence of the divine in the human nature who maintains this even after the sin of the forefathers. Even with this, the state of human dignity is directly associated to the moral life in which every makes personal efforts to surpass the sin and reach purity and virtue. Equally, the Russian orthodoxy asserts that the freedom of human nature receives value and the human dignity when the human being chooses to do good instead rejecting bad. In contrary the imponderability state of the human nature leads to the loss of dignity and disappearance of freedom (chap. 1.5, 3.3)

In my perspective the aspects that led to the reaction coming from the other Christian confessions are motivated by the lack of clarity, constancy, and sometimes coherence in the vision of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the notion of human dignity and the elements that form it. The unclear terminology regarding the structure of the face of God in the human being as well as the conditioning of the human existence to the divine face and the free will in the state of morality of the human persona led to vehement reactions and ecumenical space.

3. Theological reactions and perceptions on the Russian orthodox vision

In the second part of this thesis are presented reactions the other Christian confessions has regarding the Russian Orthodox Church. The first reaction came from the Union of Evangelic Churches from Europe (GEKE) that issued a document in the year 2009, by which it expresses only partial agreement with the Russian theology. In GEKE's vision the dignity of human nature is based on the creation of man by God and giving him Its face, reason for which the deeds are irrelevant in the establishment of dignity of each person (3.1). the dignity of the human nature represents a tabu which must not be conditioned by the moral state of human nature, and which is the root of the secular institution of human rights, rights perceived as social coexistence norms in a pluralist society in continuous change, and not as a set of laws dedicated to spiritual plenitude (3.2)

For some of the representatives of Catholic theology the conditioning of existence of the divine face – and implicitly the dignity of human nature – by the state of morality of the man, represent aspects that must be avoided especially due to the fact that the point of view of the Russian Orthodox Church is clear in this respect. For others the points of view expressed by the Russian theologians regarding the content of the human rights, represent a true proof of

the lack of vision, their sole attempt to being that of imposing specific exigencies to theology and their tradition in relation to such an important theme. (3.3)

For some Greek orthodox theologians, human rights represent a very important modality by which the Orthodoxy might contribute to such a central theme for humanity.

For the Romanian orthodox theology the divine face in the human nature fundamentals theologically and ontologically the dignity of each person. The human dignity is not a conditioned reality but a gift a Divine gift, that cannot be eliminated or destroyed by nobody and nothing not even the death of the body. But, if the Godly face Gift in the human nature is common to all humans the resemblance to God (at ethical level) is achieved only by those who stay in communion with Him. Therefore ethical dignity is understood as a completion of ontological dignity of human nature.

The questions leading to the analysis of this theme are the following:

1. What are in the orthodox theology the constitutive elements of the face of God on human nature? Are there in the Godly face elements that might be lost?
2. Is it possible to talk in Orthodoxy about a destruction of free will in the case of immoral choices?
3. To what extent the face of God in humans is conditioned by the moral and immoral deeds of a human being?
4. It is possible to discuss in Orthodox theology about a dynamic manifestation of the face of God in humans? Is there an ethical expression of dynamism?

The analysis of the obscurity shall be made by the anthropological view of St. Gregory of Nyssa and father Dumitru Staniloae. The reason for which we chose to consult the anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa is given by the fact that the perception of this author is used as argument in the presentation of Russian Orthodox theologians and because the vision of St. Gregory of Nyssa is represented by orthodox anthropology. The decision to consult the vision of the priest Dumitru Staniloae was motivated by the renowned theological authority of the priest- professor in the theological and ecumenical field. At the same time father Dumitru Staniloae is part of the cultural context of Romanian Orthodox Theology, aspect which can bring a substantial contribution to the research theme, by traditional and spiritual resemblances between the Romanian And Russian Orthodoxy.

5. St. Gregory of Nyssa – dogmatic and moral perspective

In relation to the questions addressed to the research theme, the anthropological vision of St. Gregory of Nyssa, confirms that the perception of Russian theologians regarding the notion of human dignity based on the face of God within the humans. In relation to the possibility of losing freedom of choice, personal dignity and implicitly the Divine face by the state of morality, the anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa does not offer details to confirm this hypothesis. But despite the lack of initial clarity, the vision of the Russian Orthodox Church may be now correctly interpreted by the anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa, who states that immoral choices do not lead to the loss of Divine face nor the free will. The dynamic manifestation of the divine face in the human nature is perceived as a rediscovery of the resemblance in virtue of man with God. This spiritual state can be achieved by subordination of the affects of the rational parts in human nature, created for a permanent communion with God the rational. For St. Gregory of Nyssa the virtue model offered by the embodied person of the Savior Christ, represents the centre of the spiritual life and ethics of human nature and the premise of rediscovery of the resemblance with God.

6. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae – the dogmatic and moral perspective

Father Staniloae does not clearly express the elements forming the face of God in man, because “the last mystery of the person cannot be expressed in other concepts” in itself the divine face in man refers to all spiritual capacities of human nature, crowned by rational knowledge and freedom of human nature. On basis of the spiritual characteristic human nature is invited to enter in an eternal dialogue with God.

This way, in the perception of Pr Staniloae the visibility and clarity of the divine face within man depends on the participation of human nature to divine life, by knowing the divine meanings at the foundation of the created world, and by responsible use of the free will. In contrary moving away from God leads to a lack of visibility of the face, but not to a destruction of this. therefore the anthropological vision of Pr Dumitru Staniloae does not sustain the possibility of losing the divine face about which the author affirms that cannot disappear not even in the case of death because – “God cannot leave any of the capacities of bearing his son’s seal be lost” a state of immorality of the human persona leads to an ambiguity or duplicity that can be this way covered not loving and despise can become hideous but never lost due to the fact that God does not leave people who created out of nothing, as unique persons, according to the face of His Word, disappear “.

The dynamism of the divine face presupposes the understanding of divine meanings based on which God created the entire creation, and by this permanent update of the communion of humans and God. At the level of spiritual life the manifestation of the divine face in man presupposes as with St. Gregory of Nyssa the imitation of the model of virtue offered by our embodied Savior Christ “Christ represents the man as it must be [...] to be as Christ, this is the goal of human life” this study of the spiritual life is penetrated by the ethical state of life, therefore, the whole human existence is called in the vision of Pr Staniloae to authentic blessing and uninterrupted interpersonal communion : “the face of Christ imprinted in us, and transparent through us, is shown in our feelings, thoughts, deeds, in our virtues, in a renewed ethic”

7. An overall vision on the research theme

In this part of the thesis is summarized the entire research. The method of work used is based on renewed of vision of the Russian Orthodox Church and the aspects ambiguously expressed in the documents published by the Patriarchate of Moscow between 2000-2008. The clarification of the orthodox education regarding this theme is achieved by offering a systematic response to each question addressed to the research in the second part of the thesis.

8. Final conclusions

The creation by God and gift of Its Godly face to human nature, represents for St. Gregory of Nyssa as well as for Father Dumitru Staniloae the most authentic argument in the affirmation of the human persona. The existence of the Divine face can be developed by an appropriate moral life or can be obscured by sin. But in this case also, the real motivation of human dignity remains the relation to God that the man can (re)develop by the divine rational face on basis of which it keeps permanently the possibility to participate to the divine, in the Godly light even if one does not see it as clearly anymore.

In the context of creation of man by God, and giving him Its face, the human persona represents the highest standard of dignity the creator shows towards the entire creation. In fact, the face of God in man is the face of His Son, who according to Father Staniloae cannot leave the human being disappear forever, even when this is in the lowest state of sin. On basis of this reality it is based the indestructible dignity of human nature, because – pr Staniloae says – the infinity of God shall never cease to show itself to the man and shall not lose any of

the carrier entities of the Face of His Son, even if shall be very faded in those leading an immoral life.

The dignity of human nature is motivated by the blood relationship of man with God, relationship that emphasizes the depth of the human persona sipping its infinity from the infinity of God.

As Christian ideal, the resemblance with God represents the goal of bodily life, that St. Gregory of Nyssa as well as D Staniloae have I the centre of their anthropology. The Savior Christ is the model both authors offer to humanity, without differences, and according to Russian theologians, of personal moral dignity. But these aspects of moral completeness remains justified as long as they are associated to the resemblance to God, and as long as they do not mean the loss of divine face by the lack of their presence. If in this pint the Russian orthodox would have emphasized much more clearly the impossibility of loss of the divine face in the human nature and would not have conditioned the ontological dignity of man in the state of morality, the contribution – indisputably of great value – would have been better accepted.

In the same context I consider that the possibility to destroy the free will on basis of immoral choices is not identified with what Russian theologians wanted to explain, even less what they learn in reality within the orthodox religion they represent. Even though on basis of the text published by the Patriarchate of Moscow in the year 2008, the disappearance of the free will, represents a real possibility of interpretation, the ensemble of the document published does not sustain this. in this case, the point of view of the Russian orthodox Church presupposes a stringent necessity of elimination of ambiguities and dogmatic obscurities in order to be considered an authentic contribution of the Church of Christ to the challenges of contemporary societies.

Keywords: dignity, human nature, liberty, image, sin, redemption, ethics, morality, rights

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