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**ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS**  
**THE THEOLOGICAL VIEW ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. AN**  
**ECUMENICAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

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I wrote this research paper because of the importance and topicality of the theme. The motivation, importance and topicality of this scientific approach come from the fact that the family is God's gift and blessing given to fallen humanity and that in the small domestic family and the big family of the Church, God has given us the opportunity to relive and retrace the path of paradise lost. Awareness of the importance of the family is the chance for humanity, which is in spiritual turmoil, and the possibility for man to put himself back together spiritually in a fragmented world.

The aim and objectives of the work are to analyse and study the causes and forms of domestic violence and healing solutions. The conceptual definition and analysis of the ways in which domestic violence manifests itself against women, children, the elderly and men and the effects of violence are part of the study of this research work. The contrasts and dysfunctional realities of intra-family and couple relationships have paradoxically led to the pressures on the democratisation and modernity of family life.

This paper aims at an interdisciplinary (including theology, sociology, psychology and social work) and interfaith/ecumenical exposition of the Christian family and marriage. Among the methods used in this work we mention: the analytical method which follows the position of great thinkers from different fields, a method used especially in the first three chapters; the theological method with the specification of various contemporary theological opinions and views used especially in the interfaith treatment of Christian marriage; the comparative method used in the last chapter where the psychological approach on the perception of domestic violence in society is presented.

The study of the challenges of uniformity as a destructive element of the family starts from the purpose of the creation of the world and of man. Man was created as a family, in the garden of heaven, and he was given the privilege of bearing the image of his Creator. All of God's creation reflects the communion of the Holy Trinity, wishing to extend love to all creation. Through the Holy Spirit, God calls man to be glorified, wishing to extend his love through man to all creation. The family is an institution of divine origin, whose main characteristics are unity and indissolubility. Being instituted by God, the family has a sacred character, and this sacred character is also highlighted by the fact that the human family has as its prototype the divine

family of the Holy Trinity, whose characteristics are: perfect love, communion, unity and equality of Its Persons”<sup>1</sup>.

Being "the image of God" (Genesis 1:27), man, by the very act of creation, was destined for the life of communion: "It is not good that man should be alone; let us make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18), "and God made man in his own image..., male and female" (Genesis 1:27).

Man is the image of God, a relationship of desire, of communion, and this communion is fulfilled in the family. Man is born, grows and is spiritually perfected in the family. His fall is a fall from the framework of communion, of the living bond, a consequence of bearing the wounds of sin over the image of divine glory. Since Adam's fall, since his divorce from God, man has known many falls throughout history that have deepened this estrangement.

To understand this fall more fully, we must go back to the primordial fall. This understanding of the fall shows us the real dimension of sin, of man's repentance and the influence of the passions on man's state of relationship. When man closes his eyes before the light, he finds himself in darkness. When he loses his center, he becomes disorganized. When he turns away from life he dies. God's commandments are not threats of punishment emanating from an authority outside man. They circumscribe the integrity of human existence. Sickness, pain, death, which follow the transgression of the laws of health, are not punishment coming from some law, but are the natural consequences of breaking the commandment. The creator of evil is not God, but man. This truth has a fundamental significance.

In these frameworks of the fall, *the path of the family must follow the path of moral perfection*. In love, man first becomes aware of himself. God has planted in man the power of love, the attraction to one another, the desire to be together. However true and powerful love may be between a man and a woman, it is limited, relative, sensitive. *The sacrament of marriage implies the reception of divine grace over human love, a grafting of God's love for the world, intended to transfigure human love and raise it to the dignity of the little Church. In the family, man appears as the highest expression of self-giving*. In this way, the frameworks for the restoration of the path to communion with God are restored. The Christian family has something

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<sup>1</sup> Mihai VIZITIU, *The Family in the Teaching of the Saviour and the Holy Apostles*, in "The Christian Family Today", Iasi, Trinitas Publishing House, 1995, p. 27.

of the aroma of eternity, because the eye of love for the other leads to the beauty with which God has clothed the world.

Only through love can the human person be fully known. The human person is a desire towards communion, a continuous becoming and advancing towards the likeness of God. Without a life moving towards sanctification, we cannot understand the human person. *This is why the family will remain until the end of time the laboratory for the acquisition of Christian virtues and the factory of saints.* It is the principle of love that transforms us from individuals into persons. Man is essentially made as a being to love and to be loved. The "proper help" that woman gives to man consists in the fact that man begins to come out of himself to seek communion. It is a help given on an ontological level, a spiritual help, which will remind him of the relationship, of the person. He will thus begin the path of salvation, coming out of death and his own selfishness. In the same way, Eve will find her life and peace only in the place from which she was taken. Man and woman will seek each other; in this is the image of God. *Love in the bosom of the family is the way to heaven for man who has lost heaven.*

The family is the environment of subjective salvation and the source of life. Its value is reflected in the value of life itself. The intimacy of a fulfilled life and the human life that fulfils existence is given by intense spiritual life. The family is the first human institution designed to preserve and protect life. At the confluence of collective and individual life, the family forms the basis of the society that builds human civilisation. The family has also always defined itself as a crucible for preserving the values of tradition, beliefs and morals of a society. It is through the family that spirituality is preserved and transmitted. *The presence of authentic love in the Christian family anticipates the presence of the Kingdom of God in the souls of those who love.* Only in this way, through self-sacrifice, is there a prophetic announcement of the event of salvation in Christ. Christ's presence at the wedding in Cana of Galilee shows us that man is called by the wedding to participate eternally in the love of the Holy Trinity.

In this context, the Council of Crete comes, through its document, to restore, in the Church, Christian values related to the family and to show the world the Orthodox vision of the world. Summing up the document, the Synod states that the family is threatened today by the phenomenon of secularisation and moral relativism. The Christian family is in a painful pendulum swing between tradition and its authentic roots and post-modern materialistic pressures that bury the authentic values of the spirit, and therefore of humanity. Having an



unshakeable foundation, the perfect love of the distinct persons of the Holy Trinity, the Christian family is going through a phase in which its fundamental role risks being diverted by the horizontal pressure of a world in the process of divorcing itself from the spiritual. The family has been and will continue to be the fundamental source of life for humanity. Without a morality to protect its boundaries, the family can lead humanity into an era in which the human can be seriously called into question. Between a morality that can guarantee the divine roots and an idolatrous slavery to fallen materiality, *the family can only be a priority for the Church.*

The falls brought about by postmodernism can be considered, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes not, real falls like the primordial one, through which man and the world experience real revolutions in the awareness of the self and the divine.

A first aspect would be the theme of the family in the captivity of the postmodern televangelism of the screens. At the cultural level, postmodernism is constructed by the media, because it sets the global and at the same time uniformising cultural tone. Through the media the meaning of reality is altered, shaping a new socio-cultural picture and marking the shift towards the visual. Media culture shapes attitudes, consciousness and behaviour. All this 'catechises' the world in the spirit of autonomy, rebelliousness, non-conformism and disrespect for any authority. The world, through the media, is moving towards a new behaviour, a behaviour desired by those who control the media. Media globalisation increases the impression of a single world concentrated in a single point and of a collective sentimental uniformity. Direct experience is missing because it is mediated, leaving room for manipulation of all kinds. Similarly, critical attitude is abolished, because everything is pre-digested. Television is a place of collective emotional contagion. Emotions are no longer individual, but controlled towards targets that elude reason, which itself is in decline. The illusion of truth comes from the illusion of the immediacy of the event, so that one can speak of true government through the media. Television is in possession of a portion of the space of the human mind, cultivating attitudes, desires, habits and political ideas on this terrain. It is serious in this situation that there is no longer a distinction between reality and media image, truth and the presentation of the situation in another form. The main target is human freedom, which should no longer be autonomous but turned into a commodity.

Globalisation and its social mutations are also involved in everyday family life. Globalisation means interdependence, the erosion of the nation state, responsibility for

supranational organisations. Globalisation is emerging as a recent economic turning point that is affecting the traditional role of the state and political actors and, some say, is calling into question the anthropological resilience of humanity. Globalisation is producing a new type of human being reduced to a single value, economic value, a human being who transforms his existential space exclusively into consumption and who obeys a single command: the logic of money. Money thus becomes the ordering principle of all things, and man and his society a commercial extension. The entire social dimension is transformed into a global market, it can be reduced to economic relations, where every decision can result from comparing an advantage and a cost, everything is bought and sold, the only thing that matters is money. Everyone is worth what they earn, everyone earns what they are worth. Man evaluates himself by his market value and learns what he is from what happens to him in the capitalist economy. The logic of money can tip the world into a new totalitarianism, mainly in the form of a non-terrorist economic-technical standardisation that works by manipulating needs in the name of a false general interest.

The contemporary family has undergone some changes that the old world has not experienced. The single-parent family, the blended family, the family working abroad, plus the spread of divorce, the increase in the age of family formation, cohabitation and promiscuity, the changing role of women in the family and society, have all led to a vulnerability of the traditional family. At stake is the future. The sick family will breed sick members, who in turn will negatively influence society. All of this is closely linked to the weakening of morals in relation to sexual practices. Let us close our eyes and imagine that we are children and our parents love us dearly. What could be better for a child than parental love? Unfortunately, there are many children who suffer from a lack of affection. It's true, the sexual revolution has impoverished man of love, of spirituality and left him meaningless in a world where you can only survive.

The phenomenon of secularization translates in this desacralized world as an attitude of indifference, in our case, a religious one. In this new system of values, man no longer accepts a morality imposed by a transcendent authority worthy of consideration. In this case, Christian morality and even divinity are no longer considered values by which to guide one's life. In general, revealed beliefs have slowly, slowly lost their impact on the masses and, by implication, truth entering the realm of relativism has meant that the meaning of life no longer imposes supreme instances. The morality of religion has been replaced by the morality of economics.

Hence we can define a new form of atheism, a subtle but much more effective form. God is no longer present in the world as meaning. Truth is no longer an absolute value, unless it is profitable. A de-spiritualized world will probably be a future for humanity, but one that will probably also mark its end.

Challenges to the family are affecting Christianity around the world, which is fragmented into different denominations. In the Catholic world, there are apparently no radical differences. In pastoral discourse, the same themes are addressed. Going into the depths of this issue comes to bring to our attention the great theme of salvation. The differences between the two Christian worlds, after medieval theology, after the Vatican Councils up to modernity have led to the different development of societies marked by confession. It is known that Christian dogmas do not have a marginal influence on everyday life. Although attempts at rapprochement, especially through Cardinal Henri de Lubac, have made significant progress towards rapprochement with Orthodoxy, nevertheless these two great theologies still remain in a significant gap. The practice of marital consent and the non-recognition of the marriage of divorced people are the main points of difference.

In relation to the Protestant world, we can say that the Reformation brought to Europe a critical and free spirit, education, economic entrepreneurship, but also an unprecedented division of Christian communities. The theme of the family in the Protestant world is very broad, as is the Protestant world. From the Anabaptist communities that laid the foundations of the New World, to the pragmatism of the Calvinist Helvetic communities, to the German evangelical society, this whole movement, which was intended to be one of renewal, had a decisive influence on family life. It is a very vast subject to deal with, so we will limit ourselves to the fact that the reform brought about the denial of the Holy Sacraments, and therefore marriage is not recognised as such. The major difference between Theology and the Evangelical World revolves around the discussion of the Sacraments. In the Lutheran Church and Protestant churches in general, Marriage is not seen as a Sacrament of the Church. Beyond the benefits brought by the Reformation, which we do not deny, the Reformation contains something that we need to keep in mind, namely, the Reformation itself contains an error. An error in the understanding of Christianity. A Christianity without holiness is a watered-down Christianity. The family, understood only from a social perspective within the Christian community, without eschatological openness leads to a weakening of the sacred understanding of life. We wonder

whether the manipulation of the human body for medical studies and experiments, the manipulation of the genetic code for unethical purposes, the development and proliferation of artificial intelligence, the development of anti-life medical practices (abortions, euthanasia, cloning) are but the implications of a life desacralized and devoid of the authentic wellspring of spirituality: the sanctification of the human being.

Returning to the topic of domestic violence, we can start with the passion of anger. Of all emotions, anger is the most degrading of all human emotions. What is more, when a man is possessed by this passion, it influences those around him towards the same urges. Aggression transmits a strong emotional charge that can also be felt on a psycho-somatic level.

*Violence is a problem faced by all societies* because of the changing mentality of the traditional family and the deterioration of the climate of security and refuge with which this model has been associated. The mutation of post-modernism and the shift of civilisation towards the urban pole have generated new forms of violence based on changing human aspirations and values. Indeed violence and its avatars are one of the greatest challenges of the world we live in. This is why *knowledge of the causes, forms of violence and ways of preventing it is an approach that can highlight the seriousness with which this phenomenon is treated.*

The most common forms of violence are: violence against women, violence against children, violence against the elderly and, more recently, violence against men. Violence against women is associated par excellence with domestic violence. Violence against women can be physical, psychological, sexual, economic or cyber violence.

Violence against children can take different forms: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, abuse through neglect, abuse through exploitation. Statistics on violence against children must be correlated with those on women.

Violence against the elderly is a fairly widespread form and involves additional suffering. Male victims do not fall within universally accepted norms, but nevertheless the phenomenon is no less worrying. In today's media culture, violence against men is widespread and clothed in a form of humour, but with notable social consequences.

In order to treat this social scourge, the Church proposes its therapy, the forgotten cure for domestic violence, *the Sacrament of Confession*. The science of psychology only helps to a point. True healing is God's grace, as an abundance of love and forgiveness that is shared with man. Therefore, it is not enough to have therapeutic sessions with psychologists alone, but a

greater loving energy is needed, capable of spreading the healing power of God's love over a troubled soul.

Confession is the expression of repentance. The initial component of a confession is the admission of wrongdoing. The individual's redemption then begins with a rigorous regimen of physical movements, such as public shaming and prostration before religious leaders. The spirit participates in the atonement through feelings of sorrow and repentance, while the body undergoes purgation through sackcloth harshness, sleeping in ashes and abstaining from all forms of pleasure and happiness<sup>2</sup>.

The danger of repression and the liberating power of confession are demonstrated by the millennial experience of confession. Sin has great power to take root in the soul and gradually become habit. There are many emotions of the soul that escape attention. There are many feelings of the abused person, for example, or of the abuser, that can escape attention. Only through confession and with the help of the confessor, who operates surgically to remove the deepest and most hidden roots, can a person be healed. The aim of spiritual healing is to break through subjectivism and selfishness and restore the healed person to the communion of the Body of the Church.

But what is the purpose of parish life in accordance with the Orthodox tradition? *The true function of parish life is shown in the healing of man.* From the teachings of the Holy Fathers we know that the Church is the spiritual centre of health, the spiritual hospital that heals man. Healing implies purification, enlightenment. A Church that does not heal man is not a Church. "The constitution of the parish and of the whole of ecclesial life is made with one purpose, unique and invariable: the *deification [theosis]* of its members. This purpose must remain unchanged throughout the ages"<sup>3</sup>.

*The role of the parish and the priest in preventing domestic violence is more of an educational role.* Education must start in the family first and foremost, and in the school, the Church being able to make its mark on the subject effectively. The Evangelist John in chapter 13 verse 35 teaches us the words of the Saviour showing precisely what the basis of such education should be. Violence in the family means lack of interpersonal education. Victims of this type of

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<sup>2</sup> Ilarion FELEA, *Repentance. Theological and psychological documentation study*, Bucharest, Scara Publishing House, 2000, pp. 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> Gheorghios D. METALLINOS, *Parish - Christ in our midst*, Translation by Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan Ică, Sibiu, Deisis Publishing House, 2004, p. 23.

violence approach the priest very easily. Whoever is wrong in relation to his partner in life is wrong in relation to the moral principles of human existence. The only way to help these tried people is not to be indifferent to them. There is also a social and community responsibility towards this phenomenon that can be cultivated in the parish environment. In the community, the priest can also be a mediator or even an authority that everyone listens to.

Domestic violence is a serious reality, especially because of its social implications. *The Church, through its structures, seeks to prevent and heal this phenomenon and to bring the gift of peace to families in need.* In families where this phenomenon occurs, respect and love between spouses and between parents and children is often lost. This is why a parish community cannot remain indifferent to this phenomenon. Best practice in dealing with this phenomenon is to set up shelters for victims of domestic violence in urban or rural parishes. In order to increase the effectiveness of this social service of the Church, it would be advisable to have such a centre in every county capital. It would not be a bad idea for these centres to combine several social services, especially those related to addictions. In addition to liturgical and missionary activities, parishes must also deal with the vulnerable population, such as victims of domestic violence.

The degree of involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the issue of domestic violence and the analysis of the social perception of the involvement of priests in the pastoral counselling of victims of domestic violence, as well as of aggressors, are presented in a psychological study in which the respondents, priests or lay faithful, both urban and rural, men and women, try to create a picture of the perception of domestic violence in society. The research sample comprised 346 respondents, mostly from Vrancea County, selected through a convenience sampling procedure from among potential respondents who were interested in answering the questionnaire and who answered all the questions in the questionnaire. The answers summarised in the graphs show first of all that verbal, psychological and economic violence are known in a higher proportion by priests than by the faithful, while for social violence there is a slight tendency to be more known among the faithful than among priests. The priest has a much deeper connection with the soulful mystery of those who pour out all the soulful passion of sin before them. Psychological, economic, spiritual and verbal violence are better known to priests because they encounter these forms of violence more often in their pastorate and confession. Personal advice that goes beyond stereotypes and generalities highlights the sacredness of spiritual guidance. The slight tendency for social violence to be

more common in non-clerical environments is not necessarily a lack of social integration of altar servers, but rather a greater emphasis placed by the laity on the social aspect.

Violence not only damages the physical, emotional or psychological integrity of the victim but also destroys the human quality of those who cause violence. The Church sees the act of violence as an insult to the body of Jesus Christ which causes a community of men and women to be affected in the most fundamental way. As a community called to liberate all the oppressed, *the Church's major goal is to engage in liberating both men and women from the culture of violence and to lift them up to the fullness of life and communion.* The prophetic role of the Church is to recreate the balance destroyed by violence.

As an instrument of shared hope, of caring for others, the Church offers hope and alternatives so that victims have the chance for a new life and aggressors the opportunity to repent, to transform, and to ask for forgiveness. The Church will need to ensure that future generations are true communities capable of living the word of the Gospel. Churches around the world can play a dynamic, essential role in addressing this problem. At the same time, the Church will need to be open in examining its structure, policies, theology, practices, in order to be able to reach the stage of a transformed community, able to transform in its turn.

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