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MISSIONARY-ECUMENICAL CONFIGURATIONS OF DIAKONIA AS PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL MINISTRY IN THE CURRENT POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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CONTENTS

Research argument and objectives

This doctoral thesis is written in a context of academic reflection on the theorization and practice of diakonia in the mission of the Church. Research on diakonia at the academic level is marked by an interdisciplinary approach as it seeks to bring together knowledge from different disciplines, primarily theology and social sciences. The aim is both to conduct empirical research related to what is (or could be) designated as diaconal *praxis*, and to develop theoretical and normative frameworks when analyzing and evaluating diaconal activity in the mission of the Church in the contemporary world.

Indubitably, today's world has experienced and is constantly experiencing a series of challenges that have accents in destabilizing the smooth functioning of society. Financial and economic crises, armed conflicts, the COVID19 pandemic have left behind a world of growing social divergence, while there is a momentum towards increasing economic convergence, despite growing social crisis and higher unemployment rates. The social impact of the crisis has not been limited to temporary unemployment, but has been marked by rising poverty and exclusion, cuts in budgets for essential public services, including social and health services, and a constant plea for austerity chanted from the economic poles of power. It is true that not all countries have gone through as deep a social crisis as in some parts of the world.

Society is in a period of change, of transition. For example, there is an increasing rhetoric of burden and justification when it comes to social support today. Where once a disabled, sick or socially crisis-stricken person could expect to receive support until the labor market was accessible or the pandemic had passed or, in some cases, for life, now there is talk about how much this support costs and that these people are not as 'productive' as others. The inference that a person's value comes solely from their ability to contribute to economic productivity is contrary to any deaconist understanding of the value and worth of any person. The debate about how much a person costs relative to another person places us in a situation where people are simply units of labor, rather than part of the rich and multi-faceted composition of our societies that goes beyond our employment status and productivity. This emphasis on productivity and people as units of labour has been felt in the European space in recent years, though perhaps not with the intention of depersonalizing people, especially in relation to migrants.

Migration is changing the world, the poles of economic power, but Europe also needs migration, as we have always had. Whether it is generated by poor living conditions or armed conflicts, such as the one between Russia and Ukraine, migration is encouraged, particularly

to take up jobs in certain sectors, including the social and healthcare sectors, migrants, both documented and undocumented, face increasing difficulties in accessing services and support to help them integrate. This leads to another tension - that between citizen and resident. We are seeing a growing divide between those who are perceived as 'belonging' or 'originating' in one country and those who have come to that country from elsewhere. Citizens should have full rights, but questions are often raised about the rights of those who live in the country but are not from that country. Of course there are laws to preserve and promote equal access for all, but at the same time there are ways in which distinctions are made.

Perhaps this indicates, in a way, where there are broken relationships in our societies. The crises of the last 23 years have led to a breakdown of trust between many people and the organizations, administrations and structures that should have ensured economic and financial health, along with responsible governance. For many, trust has broken down between traditional structures and authority and, in the worst-case scenario, such a breakdown of trust gives way to extremism and fundamentalism. But the fracturing of relationships is not just between people and state, but also between people. As many strive to make ends meet and avoid a growing debt burden, or try to maximize their incomes through more jobs, there may be a greater emphasis on "me" than on "we". Solidarity in our communities and societies is perhaps also eroding because we try to ensure that our own home, family or situation is secure, rather than that of our neighbor. Individualism in its complexity is inevitable in such circumstances.

In this complex of contextual realities, diakonia is not only relevant but necessary. It should be mentioned at the outset that the research is not focused on *diakonia* understood as a step in the church hierarchy. Such an analysis is not the object of our endeavor in this paper. What we are interested in is to explore in a missionary paradigm the dimensions of Christian diakonia reflected in philanthropy and social action as an expression of Christian love and responsibility. Thus, diakonia is presented as the social ministry of the Church. Diaconia in this aspect has been valorized by some Protestant denominations, mainly Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist, which, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, were strongly influenced by what has been called the 'modern deacon movement', which led to the formation of communities of deacons and deaconesses and the establishment of hundreds of diaconal institutions. This movement began in Germany in the 1830s but spread to neighboring countries and later to other continents. Diaconal institutions became pioneers in the field of health care and social care and contributed substantially to the development of its professionalism in a way that has had a lasting impact on the development of today's public welfare systems.

The concept of *diakonia* has developed in recent decades, especially within the ecumenical movement, to an extent that can be characterized as a paradigm shift. Three main features characterize this shift: first, the ecclesial dimension of diakonia is strongly emphasized. Whereas previously, diakonia was often perceived as the work of professional diaconal workers or agencies, it is now emphasized that diakonia belongs to the nature and mission of 'being church'. This view has opened up a stronger focus on the biblical and dogmatic foundation of diakonia, as well as its connection to missiological themes. Secondly, it is affirmed that diaconal action must be 'holistic', taking into account the physical, mental, social and spiritual dimensions and rejecting practices that tend to compartmentalize sectors of human reality. Thirdly, it highlights innovative expressions of diaconal action in solidarity with marginalized and suffering people, moving away from the traditions of conceptualizing diakonia as philanthropic ministry.

The authors cited in this paper, most of whom are Western and specialists in the topic of diakonia and Christian mission, largely subscribe to these three dimensions of diakonia as reflected in documents of ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches (one such document is *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, published by the Lutheran World Federation in 2009), documents that maintain some fundamental assumptions when elaborating the understanding of diakonia. Diakonia is a theological concept that points to the very identity and mission of the Church. Another perspective is its practical implication, in the sense that diakonia is a call to action in response to the challenges of human suffering, poverty, injustice and care for creation. This rather open-ended understanding of diakonia is also due to the fact that the concept itself does not allow for a precise definition. The current use of the word *diakonia* has largely been shaped by the way Christians have tried to be faithful to the biblical call to love neighbor throughout church history. This view is based on the conviction that diakonia expresses a biblical call to service.

John N. Collins offers himself for our analysis because his research on the words *diakonia, diakonein, and diakonos* as used in Greek literature, papyri, and inscriptions for the period from 400 BC to about 400 AD shows that *diakonia* primarily means a charge or mission. According to his research, the words *diak* in themselves do not merely connote charitable service or care for the poor. Therefore, Collins concluded that the common interpretation by both scholars and diaconal practitioners that diakonia means humble and humble service directed toward the sick and the poor is based on a misunderstanding. Collins' interpretations are much debated. Notwithstanding the results of this discussion of biblical interpretation, his findings regarding the broad connotation of the words *diak-* in nouthetic biblical literature have

stimulated scholars to explore how *diakonia* might be understood today as part of the identity and mission of the church. J.N. Collins' research has thus contributed to a fundamental reform of how to conceptualize reflection on diakonia as *theory* and *praxis*, highlighting the fact that an earlier understanding of diakonia as an exclusively philanthropic ministry was misled by an interpretation that shaped the nineteenth-century diaconal movement and the kind of praxis that was established in that particular historical context.

The study of diakonia as an academic discipline can be presented in the form of an interdisciplinary theoretical reflection on diaconal practice, understood as a sum of ecclesial activities within the fields of health care, social work or education, at the level of the local community or professional social institutions.

The concept of "diakonia", not in the sense of the step of ordination, is not part of the vernacular at least in Eastern Orthodox countries; instead, they more frequently use terms such as "social ministry" or "social action" or "philanthropic action" when referring to their involvement in this type of activity. However, these terms can be perceived as rather secular, without the capacity to express the distinct Christian nature of such action. Furthermore, they may give the impression that this type of activity is mainly due to external conditions and challenges, and that the Church may or may not choose to be involved. For this reason, some prefer the biblical word 'diakonia', as this concept brings together an understanding of who we are and what we do as Christians and as churches when we serve people in need and when we take on a role as an agent in civil society, promoting human dignity and the well-being of all. From this point of view, the work of deacon is not optional for the Church, but an integral part of its being and mission in the world.

Contextualization and relevance of the research

Today's world, although living in a dynamic of scientific progress, which facilitates social and relational comfort, has not yet solved the acute problems that negatively, even dramatically, impact hundreds of millions of people: poverty. At the opposite pole of poverty is irrational consumption, with equally dramatic personal, community and even ecological effects. Diaconia, as a missionary direction of the Church of Christ, proposes a humane way of valuing the neighbor on biblical and theological criteria: material help for the poor, preservation and enhancement of human integrity and dignity, elimination of social and economic inequalities.

In line with the above, the relevance of the theme can be highlighted. In the first place, the theme is topical given that today the Christian Church as a whole must articulate a mission that corresponds to contemporary contexts. For mission to be relevant it must be connected to the trends of today's world. Only then can the witness of Christ be successful. Michael W. Goheen[1] specifies a number of contemporary factors leading to a new paradigm of mission, and these are not only those associated with the global transformation of the Church, essentially Christianity, but in line with the contextual realities of today's world. There are also significant global realities and mega-trends that set the context for the mission of the church. The first of these is the collapse of colonialism in the 20th century. To the extent that the mentalities, strategies, structures and practices of intercultural mission had been formed in this Western colonial environment, its collapse brought with it the challenge of rethinking the whole approach to mission[2].

In direct consonance with the collapse of colonialism is globalization. The global domination of Western civilization has been a feature of the world for many centuries. However, towards the end of the 20th century, the term "globalization" became popular enough to define a new global reality. Globalization represents the spread of the modern Western narrative of economic progress throughout the world, especially with the help of new information technologies. Globalization is the most appropriate way to describe the context in which we live today. It has a beneficial potential, but it has also been the source of a consumer society in the West, a widening gap between rich and poor, ecological destruction, massive displacement of peoples, and a homogenizing force imposing the spirit of Western culture on the cultures of the world[3].

In another way, a result of a globalized world, is urbanization. In 1800, only 5% of the world's population lived in cities. A hundred years later, that number had grown modestly to around 14%. But by the year 2000, more than half of the world's population could be considered urban, and by the middle of the 21st century this figure will reach 80%. We are facing an urban future, and the city is the "new frontier" of mission[4].

Another factor is the social and economic problems affecting our world. The level of poverty and hunger in our world is alarming. Three billion people, almost half of the world's population, live on less than $2.50 a day, and 80% of the world's population on less than $10 a day. Thirty thousand children die every day from poverty and 1.5 billion people live below the international poverty line. Although the world produces enough food to feed everyone, 854 million people have nothing to eat and the number is growing every year. Tragically, most of the hungry are women and children. And things are not improving; in fact, the gap between

rich and poor is widening. In 1960, the richest billion was thirty times richer than the poorest billion, while in 1990 this number had doubled to sixty times and today it is almost ninety times. The income ratio between the richest and poorest was 44 to 1 in 1973, but had risen to 74 to 1 by the end of the 20th century. The richest 20% of the world's population accounted for 76.6% of the world's resource consumption, while the poorest fifth consumed 1.5%. Americans spend $8 billion on cosmetics and $17 billion on pet food, while $6 billion is needed for education for all, $9 billion for water and sanitation for all, and $13 billion for health and nutrition for all. The main drivers of poverty, hunger and the widening gap between rich and poor are state structures - corrupt governments, unfair global markets, the global arms race, structural consumerism, massive third world debt and many others. To this can be added a long list of other social and economic problems that astound us: The HIV-AIDS epidemic; organized crime, heavily involved in human trafficking, prostitution and the sex "industry", drug trafficking and more; the growing number of wars fueled by racial, ethnic, religious and ideological animosities; a crisis of uprooted peoples and mass migration caused by conflict, persecution, natural disasters and poverty; gender inequality making women more vulnerable to violence, illiteracy and poverty; rising violence, terrorism and crises in food, education, health and other areas. [5]

Population growth over the last century, which shows no signs of abating, brings new challenges to mission. As the global demographic explosion increases pressure on the earth's limited resources and contributes to growing poverty, it also increases the challenge of mission to reach this growing number of people with the witness of Christ[6] We are also witnessing a revival of religions around the world. In addition, the West is witnessing a revival of spirituality among those who have abandoned traditional religion. Not only are we seeing an increase in religious commitment, but we are also seeing growing tension between religious groups and the advance of fundamentalism in all religious traditions. Not only is religious pluralism a fact in many countries of the world, but the rise of ideological pluralism that has given up the search for truth is a global phenomenon.

It should be noted that tectonic cultural shifts in Western culture set a new context for mission today. These changes affect not only the Church and its mission in the West, but also the global Church, as the globalization of Western culture, especially in urban centers, impacts the Church in every part of the world. The economic dimension of Western culture, which began to emerge as a rising power in the 18th century, has become the dominant spirit that dominates all others as it shapes our culture today. The profit motive and the market drive all areas of Western culture. A consumer society has emerged which dominates every aspect of

life. Technological change has been quite dizzying. The digital revolution, information and media technology, medical technology and nanotechnology are raising enormous issues and changing the face of Western culture in many ways. Much of the technology has been driven by economic currents; for example, computers enable global finance and media advertising stimulates consumerism. However, it has done much more. Information overload leads to disorientation, apathy, chronic boredom, and diminished wisdom[7].

We also observe a new, postmodern mindset that is suspicious of claims of truth and authority, craves relationships, values subjective experience, is rooted in local context, and is skeptical of certainty[8].

All of these factors set the stage for a new configuration of mission which, we believe, needs to be much better connected to Christian diakonia.

Secondly, the theme under investigation is also topical from the methodological point of view of its approach. There are two main approaches to the academic study of diakonia. One begins with diaconal praxis, activities commonly called diakonia. Such activity, and the way in which it is carried out, is then made the object of empirical research. This may include diaconal activities organized by a local community or diaconal institutions such as hospitals or homes for the elderly. According to this approach, the theory of diakonia essentially becomes a critical reflection on such diaconal praxis, it poses questions such as: what makes this praxis good? How is diaconal identity expressed? Is there a diaconal distinction in what is accomplished or is it done in the same way as any professional work? The advantage of this approach is that it is reality-oriented; it roots theory in *praxis*. However, the limitation is that it may seem irrelevant in contexts where the concept of 'diakonia' is not used in this sense. It might lead to the conclusion that there is no need to reflect on diakonia in churches that are not accustomed to using the term in their daily work.

The other approach starts from the concept of 'diakonia' and studies it in its biblical and theological sense. The mere fact that the derivatives of the word *diakonia* (διακονια, διακκονειν, διακκονος) are used about 100 times in the New Testament indicates their importance, all the more so when we see that they appear in important passages in both the Gospels and the Pauline epistles. The point of this approach is the theological emphasis that is given to a concept, correcting the idea that it refers mainly to a European tradition, perhaps irrelevant in other contexts. This theological focus can provoke new understandings and also new practices in the Church.

The two approaches should be seen as complementary rather than conflicting. They help us to maintain a healthy dialectical tension between *theory* and *praxis*. If theology ignores

praxis, it risks becoming idealistic, losing its relevance to the reality in which churches carry out their mission. Theology, on the other hand, must be critical; its task is not simply to affirm what is preached and practiced in the churches. Thus, the academic study of diakonia is challenged to respond to the fundamental positions of theology, committing itself to clarifying the faith basis of diaconal action, asking how it challenges the Church to renew its life and ministry in today's world.

Thirdly, the relevance of the theme analyzed lies in bringing into mission theology the approach and interpretation of key documents and statements that set the parameters of diakonia in different Christian traditions, elaborated fairly recently: *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, published by the Lutheran World Federation in 2009; *Called to Transformation-Ecumenical Diakonia*, WCC Publications, 2022.

Diakonia is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation, and striving for justice. This broad definition can be read in the context of the development of ecumenical diakonia, to which a chapter will be devoted in this paper. It articulates two fundamental positions: first, it presents diakonia as the Gospel in action. This understanding is considered to be consistent with biblical teaching, which announces that the Savior Jesus Christ brought the Gospel in word and deed and that the disciples were commissioned to follow his example. This means that diakonia is not just a possible consequence of the proclamation of the Gospel, but an integral part of it, and therefore a central dimension of what defines "being Church". Secondly, it widens the space for diaconal action. In addition to the tradition of love of neighbor, it points to the creation of inclusive communities, care for creation and the struggle for justice. These areas of action indicate that diakonia is both faith-based and rights-based. Inclusion is focused as a deacon concern in contexts where people face mechanisms of exclusion for social, economic or even religious reasons. They also point in the direction of economic and social justice as pressing issues for diaconal reflection and practice.

Research methodology

Taking into account the theme and the proposed objectives, we have mainly used a *historical-systematic methodology* through documentary research and primary sources (biblical and World Council of Churches documents). In researching deaconry and its expressions in the life of the Church within the mission movements, the scope of the period is limited from the

beginning of the 20th century to the present, of course with brief references to the life of the early Christian communities as suggested by the New Testament books, especially *Acts*.

Second, this research uses a *missiological approach* to help understand diakonia in contemporary Christianity, strictly limited to the Orthodox Church. In order to study the concept and understanding of diakonia as a Christian mission, the understanding of diakonia within each church must be examined. Also, diakonia within the Orthodox Church could not be understood in depth without revealing the concept of diakonia in other Christian traditions. Thus, we have also focused on the understanding of diakonia in the documents of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, etc. churches.

Thirdly, we try, through a *theological approach*, to find the concept of *diakonia* in the light of Holy Scripture and through the study of the Holy Fathers and contemporary theologians. I also use the theological framework to analyze diakonia in contemporary society to find the understanding, characteristics and impact of diakonia today.

As for the sources used, I have predominantly used English-language literature in order to specify the frameworks of Christian diakonia as an expression of philanthropy in the manner in which it is received and applied in the Western space. A note of relevance of the thesis is the specification of the symmetry between liturgy and diakonia in the Orthodox Church, a note of particularity. A special contribution in emphasizing Christian philanthropy and diakonia in the horizon of Orthodox Christian mission is well articulated by the fathers professors of missiology in the country, mentioning here Prof. Gheorghe Istodor, Prof. Mihai Himcinschi, Prof. conf. Cristian Sonea, Prof. David Pestroiu.

Structure of the work

The paper is structured in four chapters, each chapter framing a series of sub-chapters in order to provide a coherent and explicit rendering of the analysis. Chapter I - *The challenges of the ideology of consumerism and economic and social inequality in today's society* - brings to the fore, on the basis of statistical arguments, the challenges posed by poverty and consumerism, both of which distort the principles of social equity and promote flagrant disparities in the dignity and integrity of the human person. Thus the following themes will be addressed: poverty in current statistical data; the biblical understanding of poverty; the determinants of consumerism; postmodernism and tendencies towards irrational consumption; consumerism - an ideological pathology as a religious substitute.

Chapter II - *Christian diakonia - foundations, dimensions, applicability in the life of the Church* - proposes a contextualization of Christian diakonia and philanthropy by appealing to six general themes: The conceptualization of diakonia in the biblical and modern research horizon; the biblical foundations of Christian diakonia; the theological argumentation of diakonia; the constant actualization of philanthropy as diakonia in the life of the Church; the diaconal movement in nineteenth-century Germany; an Orthodox perspective on philanthropic diakonia; social disparities and the application of diakonia to the marginalized.

Chapter III - *Diaconia and philanthropy in the practice of the World Council of Churches: paradigm of co-responsibility and Christian unity* - represents a novelty in the specialized literature in the Romanian area, as it inserts the theme of diakonia and philanthropy. The chapter begins with an analysis that revolves around the concept of *ecumenical diakonia*, an ecumenical concept emerging in the World Council of Churches, and then the argumentative attention is centered on how diakonia and philanthropy entered the agenda of the World Council of Churches assemblies (1948-2022). Two other novel elements are addressed in this chapter, namely the meaning of diakonia as empowerment and the conviviality dimension of diakonia. The chapter concludes with a treatment of the application of diakonia and philanthropy in the period of the Coronavirus pandemic and with a specification of the social-philanthropic activity in the Romanian Orthodox Church in recent years.

The last chapter - *Diaconia and philanthropy in the current context of Christian mission* - systematically specifies the indissoluble relationship between mission and diakonia in the new reconfigurations of Christian missionary tendencies in accordance with today's realities. The main ideas developed here are the following: the "holistic" dimension of mission: kerygma, koinonia, leitourgia and diakonia; the symmetry between diakonia and liturgy in the mission of the Church; microdimensional and macrodimensional diakonia in the mission of the Church and the particularities of diakonia in the approach of Alexandros Papadderos.

In the ANNEXES section, we present the translation of a document that we consider essential in synthesizing what defines Christian diakonia as an act of philanthropic missionary service: the declaration of the conference declaration organized by the Justice and Diakonia, Just and Inclusive Communities and Mission and Evangelization programs of the World Council of Churches (Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2-6 June 2012).

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