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MERCY, LOVE AND SALVATION IN ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

ABSTRACT

Mercy was demonstrated in the Hebrew and Greek traditions. The ideal state of Plato's *Republic* exhibits mercy in a form that contrasts sharply with the Christian concept. The latter does not distinguish between those of different social conditions. In the Jewish tradition, non-observance of mercy was perceived as a transgression against a divine command which could potentially bring divine retribution on the entire community. For the Christians, mercy is not limited to members of one's own community, but includes others, regardless of race, social class or even religion. It is a form of love which is not wasted in temporary and sentimental effusions, but actualised in concrete deeds, with the ultimate example supplied by Christ. Mercy also functions as a medicine against social inequality, serving to suppress the kinds of injustices present in every political system, as well as social solidarity. Mercy is the practical manifestation of interhuman love; it raises man from the image to the likeness of God.

1. HISTORICAL INSIGHT

The practice of mercy in the Greek and Hebrew traditions was a positive and conscious principle, but contrasts with the general Christian concept.

For example, like all Greek philosophers, Plato dreamed of an ideal world, only possible in a Republic led by the wise, in which order and equality reign. However, this required the suppression of personal differences, as well as the promotion of a collectivist and egalitarian type of thinking about material goods. Premises of a community society are created, with an advanced but exclusivist interrelated system (Platon 1986:233-263, 347-355). It was a world where the philosopher class

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– founded upon warriors and purified selfishness through the community of goods, women and children – dominated, subjugated and subjected the lower class people, who had hardly any education, who were poor and without rights. Therefore, although we are talking about a community type of society, of an aristocracy, it is rather an imperfect copy of the Christian world, where there is no social segregation, because it covers all social classes (Coman 1945:41-42).

In Christianity, there is no difference between people of different social backgrounds, between women and men, children and adults, because all are children of the same God, the God of love and mercy, and brothers of faith.

In the Jewish world, mercy is described as a continuous social fact. A tumultuous and tragic history, including frequent replacements of kings, conflicts with the great empires of the time (Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Romans), exiles and slavery, brought the people of Israel to a state of considerable poverty. The Royal court and the aristocratic world knew how to protect or increase their fortunes on the back of the many and the weak that paid heavy taxes. The prophets resisted these injustices. They criticised the luxury of the rich, the evil and the contempt for the poor, and called for mercy (Amos 2:4, 3:2, 6:4, 6; Micah 2:2, 3:2). They unanimously condemned the lack of human solidarity, considering that all ills that afflicted their people had one cause, namely a departure from God and an indifference towards their neighbours in suffering (Jeremiah 3; Isaiah 1:4; Amos 5: 21-27, 6: 7-8). They viewed mercy as a divine command which their countrymen did not respect, bringing God's punishment over all of them (Coman 1945:43-44).

In such a social and spiritual context, Christian teaching appeared to and would fundamentally change the relationship between people and their relationship with God. Based on the facts of Jesus Christ's absolute love for the people, Christian mercy has been and will, undoubtedly, remain one of the most important means of preaching and spreading the religion of love. Christian religion is a religion of love and communion of people regardless of nation, race, social class or even religion, because mercy was not limited to members of Christian communities, but it encompassed both the Hebrews and the pagans. In both the East and the West, Christian mercy and brotherhood were practised in the same way, a mercy which was discrete, unobtrusive, inconspicuous, and without reciprocity (Coman 1945:44-47). Fathers of the fourth century and, in particular, Basil the Great, made mercy the real creed of their confession of faith. Basil the Great certainly wrote the most beautiful page on the philanthropic spirituality of the everlasting Church. Mercy was a way of life that did not cancel individual

work and responsibilities but, on the contrary, brought a discipline of the soul and a balance of the body which – in full harmony – defined the features of the image of God in man. It is a concrete manifestation of the love for people and a strong medicine to cure the physical and moral pain of a society regardless of its stage of development.

2. MERCY AND CHRISTIAN LOVE

The essence of Christianity is love, because God Himself is love (1 John 4, 8). Thus, Christian ethics or morality is inconceivable in the absence of love. Christians have changed and renewed their moral lives only through their love for the Gospel and “love for neighbour is for them love for every man, regardless of race, religion or class, even the enemy” (Damşa 1980:441).

Love for the world is real when it goes through God as the source of love (Apostolu 1989:57). Christians love their neighbour through the love they show to God, because love is

to unlimited open your heart without limit to the others in Christ; love is self-forgetfulness for the others, according to the example and the power of Christ. Living in love means to live in the generous boundlessness, irradiated in us from the divine infinity, which reflects on all the people who acquire the love of Christ (Stăniloae 1978:367).

Christians learned and followed the divine love, felt and lived it in a concrete way through facts. Without it, their faith was dead (Damşa 1980:442).

The life and the facts of man must be inspired by the love of God. This manifests not only in prayer – though it is extremely important for the health of the soul – but also and especially in the merciful act addressed to the needy, the ill and the elderly. The love which urges us to perform good acts for our neighbour was sown by God in our own nature, because we all are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3: 26) (Apostolu 1989:54-55).

Holy Scripture lists six acts of Christian love as varieties of practical charity, after the word of the Lord (Mathew 25: 35-36) (Apostolu 1989:62). Mercy is the daughter of love. It is love that eases the neighbour's pains; it is the bread that satisfies the hungry; it is the water that quenches the thirst of the thirsty; it is the home that houses the foreigner; it is the coat for the naked; it is the oil that soothes the suffering of those who are ill; it is the word that strengthens those in prison; it is the bridge through which the neighbour's pain flows to us, and it is our love that is poured upon him to bring him comfort (Mladin 1947:123).

The primary subject of Christian Love is God and the secondary one is the people, noting that the latter truly love their neighbours through the love for God (Teoclit Dionisiatul 2008:213-214), and the manifestation of this love, as its practical consequence, is the charity of Christian mercy (Maximos the Confessor 1990:56).

Our neighbour is the altar upon which we place our sacrifice to God. Love changes man, makes him perceive his neighbour as himself, to enjoy his good as if it were his own, to support the mistakes he makes as if he had made them himself (Apostolu 1989:56).

God is the source of merciful actions. Without a personal God, the potentiality of our continuous awareness could not exist, because we would not ask for His mercy believing that He can give it to us, or more clearly, that He himself is full of mercy for us. The merciful love of Jesus does not expect to be requested but it is full of initiative, kindness, relief, healing, release and lifting of the sick, the enslaved and those who are fallen (His Holiness Daniel 2011:12). The heart is the spiritual body through which we feel compassion and become compassionate. It is the sentient bridge between person and person; through it we give mercy, but we also feel God's mercy.

Christian mercy is the most divine feeling towards human beings. It is not an emotional weakness or a sign of naivety but, on the contrary, it is a strong feeling that raises man through the sincere evangelical love and makes him God's collaborator. Through it we rediscover ourselves as better, more human and thus as children of the Heavenly Father. Mercy is an expression of love, not love itself. Mercy is not directed on him who is healthy and robust, happy and cheerful, but on those who are ill, who suffer, who are deprived, who are spiritually or bodily helpless, and who are lonely and oppressed, while love goes both to the one who is in trouble and to the one who is well. Christian mercy springs from love and is a concrete expression thereof. Christian mercy is not wasted in temporary and abstract sentimental effusions, but in facts that are consistent and that work through love.¹ The absolute example on this line of thought is Jesus Christ, who made *merciful love* the criterion whereby, at the last Judgement, the facts of human beings from this life will be investigated and analysed.

1 However, mercy must also meet certain conditions, namely to be made of assets acquired by honesty, not by fraud and deceit; to be done discreetly with joy and fun, not with a bent heart and with sadness; not to demean those who need it; without accusations and insults, and without expecting gratitude or future benefits (Cornișescu 1971:109).

Christian love and mercy are fundamental features of Christianity which have raised it above many religions and philosophical concepts (embodied in the most diverse ethical systems), especially through the strong impulse that they brought to the life and relationship between people, considering everyone brothers between them and sons of the same heavenly Father. Several Eastern Fathers have dedicated their lives to the service of people, but no one can equal Basil the Great (Zăgrean 1980:220, 228). He embodied like no other this mingling between love and Christian mercy, living the evangelical word and enacting its message, and sacrificing everything in the name of love for the suffering neighbour (Damșa 1980:445).

3. MERCY AS MEDICINE FOR SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Sanitation and rebalancing of the social life has always been one of the major concerns of the Holy Fathers of the Eastern Church, with mercy as one of the most important *ethical weapons* of their time.

Christian mercy, not to be confused with degrading begging, is also a means of *social education*, because it involves, in addition to disinterested generosity, human solidarity and community cohesion. It is the expression of the divine love transferred to the human level, according to the model of Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a *bloody sacrifice* in order that we human beings might make *bloodless sacrifices* for one another.

Genuine sacrificial solidarity can be achieved only in the “space” of an honest and sincere love. Social support without love can cover, for a smaller or a larger period of time, some gaps and material or even spiritual needs. However, it does not promote, develop and support the social harmony of a community, but rather humiliates the needy and maintains for them the sense of inferiority and uselessness (Coman 1945:58-59). Mercy should not be a simple philanthropic act, but a religious one (Špidlík 1998:295).

Christian mercy is also a work of *individual education* that, for reasons often unknown, but not without Reason, is made by the suffering. In Orthodox spirituality there is interdependence between the injustices and sufferings of man in earthly life, consciously undertaken based on his strong belief in the Gospel of Christ and his *moral values*, and gifts or benefits that he will receive in the next life. Therefore, solidarity that we manifest with our fellow human beings on earth will be transferred to our account from the Kingdom of God. The love for neighbours is a sentiment of noble mercy that we must carefully cultivate as the highest blazon of our divine origin (Coman 1945:60).

Mercy is the one virtue through which man can suppress social inequities that are present in all political systems in history. Old Testament legalism and the Roman law formalism are replaced in Christianity by the emotional balance of the discovery of the value of the soul. Merciful love, as the reflection of the inner Trinitarian love in the world, requires a dissipation of material and spiritual goods between Christians everywhere (Popa 1971:224). In other words, if we wish to keep the great commandment of love for our neighbour, we will have to ensure that everything we give to ourselves we will also give to others. Therefore, we will share all that is in excess for us with those who are poor. Excess increases the wealth of a man, often diminishes his love for other people, and implicitly increases the distance from God (Maximos the Confessor 1990:84, 85). Mercy provides a *moral balance* between material and spiritual wealth. Wealth can become a means of humiliation rather than of mercy. The pleasure to humiliate comes from the inability to love and to understand the true hierarchy of values that should govern our existence. Unfortunately, the world is currently ruined by greed. It leads to degradation and to the dehumanisation of modern man. This is the real scourge of the present.

Ideal mercy suppresses external differences between social classes. However, it gives rise to an important and natural question: Does it also bring material and spiritual equality? Theoretically, the answer would be affirmative; practically, however, there are many ethical and spiritual differences between people that arise naturally, so that the assumption that mercy could unify the facts and the minds of people by some unique ethical criteria and rule seems to be an illusion. The Christian principle that all men are spiritually equal before God contradicts our current experience and practice. Moreover, the Apostle Paul admirably explains the diversity of attitude, behaviour, and action of men, when he mentions the variety of gifts with which God has endowed them (1 Corinthians 12: 8-10).

Paradoxically, however, if we consider that our earthly life is only a stage in preparation for immortality, meaning to achieve the maximum potential of each man, depending on the gift he received to enter the Kingdom of God, then we can hope for a positive answer. More specifically, our earthly life is a continuous struggle for raising all to the level of a paradisiacal state before the Fall, a state of purity and grace in which, although endowed with freedom of choice and the ability to think, people might think along similar lines, because living in Christ (after His evangelical commandments, *which is the absolute moral code*), in perspective of our deification, the variety of options would merge into the supreme unity of grace.

According to the Apostle Paul,

There are many kinds of spiritual gifts, but the Spirit who gives them is one; there are many kinds of service, but only one Master; there are many kinds of divine power at work, but only one God who is at work in every case (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6).

With this ontological equality of spirits, divine equality can be reached only by achieving the absolute love, love for people and for God simultaneously. To put this differently, the maximum love that man can have for his neighbour may be equated with the knowledge of God at man's supreme capability. We know that human reason, irrespective of how powerful and practised it is, cannot achieve a real and complete knowledge of the divinity, because it cannot pass from a human existential level to a divine one. This transition from natural to supernatural can be realised only by the love that surpasses any moral and any knowledge. Therefore, only superlative love can bring a spiritual equality in man; this implies a maximum love between people that must be a real projection of the love that God shows to us all. More clearly, *people will feel equal each to another only through love*. All other external spiritual and ethical elements differentiate between them, although the orientation of all people should move towards a continuous progressive discovery of God. The love for people brings with it the perspective of a spiritual equality.

Although this speculative exercise (idealisation of love and of the likely equality between men) does not have a concrete or practical projection; it provides another perspective in understanding our ultimate purpose on earth, namely that only through spiritual equality, meaning equality through merciful love, can a material equality be achieved. This means that *the spirit must order the matter*, and not vice versa.

According to Eastern patristic spirituality, everything is under the sign of providence (so of the faith in the care of God to all people) and we can strive to acquire the image of the wise man who does not trust *in the present* (in material prosperity, subjected to degradation and destruction), but *in the future* (which is not destroyed either by moth or rust). This implies that he respects at least *three clear ethical principles: not to harm anyone*, because God honours those who are pious and humble with goods even in this world, causing through His blessings, the blessings of people to their neighbours; *to believe in God* in order to understand that suffering is not the fruit of evil, but of a certain divine distribution, and to *ask from the rich* a merciful love to the poor, the ill and the suffering people, by means of material goods, not necessarily in crisis and test situations, but in normal times of prosperity.

St. John Chrysostom mentions that, above all else, we first have to learn mercy, because to be merciful means to be human. If we are not merciful, we have ceased to be human! Mercy makes us wise (Chrysostom 1991:325).

Christian wisdom involves being removed from all evil things and deeds and to care for the kindness of soul and healing the suffering of others through the *loving mercy* which never ends. Christian mercy is the sorrow at foreign evil, and also the love for the poor and the needy.

Exercise of mutual love between people can gradually lead, by steady extension of its example, to the *state of grace* in which differences merge in a crucible of faith in immortality. Perfect equality of all people, meaning the Kingdom of God on earth, will happen only when the (sour)dough of love for people, that currently works in a limited number of people, will include the entire humanity in its fermentation (Coman 1945:64-65).

4. MERCY AND ESCHATOLOGY

In its teaching about salvation economy, orthodox spirituality emphasises the *communication and interdependence of the gifts* that people receive at the time of their creation. The Christian cannot save himself through himself in isolation and indifference, but in communion with his fellows (Clement of Rome 1996:15). In other words, every Christian is saved by the measure of the contribution that s/he brings to the salvation of others. Man tries to acquire spiritual wealth and heavenly treasures, but the beginning of this road to perfection is on earth, in this world, in direct relation with other people.

Therefore, charity is not merely an act sprung from an ethical duty; it binds two worlds, one seen and another unseen, one earthly and another heavenly, one temporal and another eternal, both created by God, one as an exercise and a test to acquire the other.

Mercy, even if it is done on earth, becomes a means of connection with God. The poor man, who asks you for aid in his need, in fact asks you to look back to the Lord the Master, that He may remove your fear from potential future poverty. You do charity to fulfil an act of justice, because to share is to give in abundance. He who gives love in this life will receive love as a crown of victory in the other life. The more you are merciful with Christ on earth (in the image of the poor, the thirsty, the prisoner, and so forth, Mathew 25: 35-36), the more He will be merciful to you in the next life. Dress Christ to be dressed by Him in the final day, cover Christ to be

covered by Him in the day of wrath as He says, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy” (Mathew 5: 7).

Mercy does not engender loss, but brings a gain, because what is acquired here on earth does not remain unnecessary, but gives a hundredfold fruit in the other world, in heaven.

According to Chrysostom,

[L]et us love mercy, on her let us set our affection, not one day, nor two, but all our life long, that she may acknowledge us. If she acknowledges us, the Lord will acknowledge us too. If she disowns us, the Lord too will disown us, and will say, I know you not.’ (Chrysostom 1994:183).

Mercy does not bring sorrow and fear with it, but only joy and hope. The merciful are not concerned with earthly riches, because they consider that these are not their possession; the owner is God and they view themselves only as temporary administrators. They are not dangerous, because they do not feel the lack of material goods and they are not overwhelmed by their importance. For them, the love of wealth is unnatural, a burden of the soul that hangs like a millstone on the way to salvation. Wealth humiliates and draws down, while charity humbles and exalts.

Mercy brings us spiritual fruit every day, our approach to God, the approach of the angels, pure conscience, spiritual happiness, joy, hope without shame, and all the gifts that God has prepared for those who love Him (Coman 1945:66).

Mercy brings forgiveness of our sins and leads us to the Kingdom of Heaven (Acts 10:4). He, who has done mercy, who gave from his wealth to the poor and passed away to the other life, will take with himself all that *he gave* on earth. Therefore, it is customary in the Eastern tradition, in the cult of the dead, to *give alms to the “go”* (people who passed away); if they did not give, they have to give it in their name, so as to fill their lack of mercy with your gift.

Mercy defends you “beyond” (in the other life), but even more so, it is the repurchase price because “Righteous souls are in God’s hand” (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1). More specific is the text “For the judgment is without mercy to one who did not have mercy, but mercy is victorious on judgment” (Jacob 2:13). To put this differently, facing a sentence of man, mercy – as a fruit of the love for neighbour – is so powerful that it sees it from the top, despises it, and laughs at it (Anania 1995:411, note 3).

Convinced of the creative power of Christian love and charity, Chrysostom worked by word and deed, throughout his life, to found the

Kingdom of God on earth. Therefore, often, when he talked about the poor standing in the front of the Church and asking for mercy, he mentioned that the true altar is the body of these people. Consequently, the sacrifice of justice and mercy should be offered not only at the altar of the Church itself (The Holy of Holies), but also at this altar of their bodies so that our gifts are laid in front of God. He states that charity is even greater than virginity. The Lord our God received those who were not virgins, but had the virtue of mercy with great honours, blessed them, called near Him, gave them to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, and made known their value to the entire world (Chrysostom 1991:468-469).

Therefore, he advises us to restrain our language, to pull inhumanity out of our soul, to reach out our hand to mercy, to comfort the poor not only with money but also with the word, *to escape from punishment*, and to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, because of our good words and our mercy (Chrysostom 1991:237-238).

5. CONCLUSION

Mercy is the social expression of Christian love. God is the greatest benefactor of all, but man who does good to others imitates God and enters into the moral rhythm of the transcendent. Mercy is the practical manifestation of interhuman love. It is the loving work of God Himself through the people. It brings peace of mind and social peace among men.

The importance and beauty of mercy do not lie in the amount of good works done by man, but especially in the purity of disinterested love that accompanies these actions. Benevolence is beyond any deed worthy of praise and is pleasing to God. Mercy and benevolence of any kind puts man in order of grace, on the path of deification that raises him *from the image to the likeness of God* (Coman 1945:81-83).

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