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Delusion of Truth: Church as Community

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Abstract. *Today, the word Pharisee means a self-righteous or hypocritical person. In the New Testament they have been portrayed as those who symbolically expressed the Law in their words, but not always in their deeds, falsifying the reality of life and salvation. Even more, expressing the Law they suffocated freedom of thought as we comprehend it today. Christ in the Gospel showed mercy to honest sinners at the same time despising righteous hypocrites. Honest relationships within a community bring different dynamics in comparison to forced hypocrisy. In a fragmentary look at Church law, the 8th canon of the 7th Ecumenical Council will be pinpointed. This canon brings the issue of freedom and honesty to the forefront of the Church's concern for authentic community. At the same time, sincere concern needs to be expressed when some ecclesiastical laws promulgate "institutionalized" hypocrisy transforming the shape and content of the believing community. Established hypocrisy is a danger for genuine Church life, leading our conception of ecclesiology and dignity of human being to a death end. For that reason, this paper invites more sensitivity and respect for diversity of human thoughts which in the end could have positive theological outcomes. Allowing people within the Church to bring their freedom of mind, against hypocrisy, is nothing less than enriching the Church community as a whole.*

Keywords: Icon, freedom, lies, obedience, responsibility, Kingdom of God.

In the New Testament Pharisees are portrayed as those who symbolically expressed the Law in their words and judgments. In the Gospels Christ showed mercy to *honest sinners* at the same time despising *righteous hypocrites*. Christ's insistence on honest relationships brought different dynamics into his mission. On that matter, a sincere concern for honesty should not be neglected in our ecclesiastical laws. It is my argument that we need to express our deepest concerns whenever we are facing the danger of some ecclesiastical laws promulgating something similar as "institutionalized" hypocrisy. Through my article I will try to reason my argumentation with some examples that could help with this difficulty.

As we mentioned before, in the Gospels Christ shows exceptional condescension and understanding towards sincere sinners who repent. At the same time he is astonishingly rude towards the Pharisees, i.e. moral hypocrites. Symbolically, the Pharisees represented those people who had been faithful to the law. Simultaneously they suffocated the freedom through their tyranny of the law over their thoughts. Their words expressed the law, but not their own ideas. In this sense, Christ calls them "white-washed tombs." A man who has no freedom to express his thoughts is nothing but a "whitewashed tomb." The freedom of man to talk freely is nothing less than freedom to think freely.

Christ's judgment of the Pharisees was a judgment of hypocritical words which are not able to express their own personal's *self*. In such cases, honesty is diminished in favor of a more acceptable image that someone is pursuing in the framework of the faith and its laws. Put differently, honesty and freedom have been those virtues that Christ acquired from his followers in contrast to Pharisees as a metaphorical "other". The Pharisee mentality does not only corrupt the individual but it has a devastating influence on the community as well.

1. The Canon of Consciousness: VII, 8

The lack of freedom and honesty already targeted in the Gospels found its expression fragmentarily in canon law. Canon VII, 8 seems to be defending both honesty and freedom. The canon is discussing the issue of Jews that converted to Christianity, but who continue to follow their old customs. At the end canon expresses its sincere concerns:

we decree that these persons shall, not be admitted to communion, nor to prayer, nor to church, but shall be Jews openly in accordance with their religion; and that neither shall their children be baptized, nor shall they buy or acquire a slave. But if any one of them should be converted as a matter of sincere faith, and confess with all his heart, triumphantly repudiating their customs and affairs, with a view to censure and correction of others, we decree that he shall be accepted and his children shall be baptized...¹

It seems that this decision of the Church was promulgated in order to reject the decision of the Emperor Leo III the Isaurian from 721-722², which ordered forced conversion of Jews and Montanists into Christianity.³ Theophanes the Confessor (752-818) witnessed that Jews were baptized against their will. In order to erase the baptism, some found a way of rejection through the sacrilege – “taking Eucharist on a full stomach.”⁴ Historians believe that the Emperor withdrew these laws very early, at least on part of Jews, for the reason that already in *Ecloges* from 726 Jews are not mentioned anymore. The Church wrote many tractates against forced Christianization believing it is truly wrong.⁵ Such works within the church only point to the fact that forced conversions have been motivated by Imperial interests, and not the church ones.⁶

The rejection of forced baptisms was sealed by the Church through the 8th canon of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787. What proceeds from this canon should be of the Church’s great interest in every epoch. The canon promulgates two main principles for Church life, i.e. freedom of thought and honesty in life. Honesty gives human beings the possibility to live an authentic life as much as possible. Newly baptized Jews in most cases lived “according to the Orthodox faith” outwardly. Secretly, inwardly, they interiorized their authentic Jewish life. The 8th canon stands in favor of freedom, i.e. against the simulation of Christian life. Metropolitan Nikodim Milas (1845-1915) in his commentary on this canon concluded that any forced baptism is something “against the spirit of Christianity,

¹ *The Rudder*, ed. by Ralph J. Masterjohn, West Brookfield, Massachusetts, The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 2005, p. 899-900.

² Yossi Soffer, „The View of Byzantine Jews in Islamic and Eastern Christian Sources,” in *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. Guy G. Stroumsa David Shulman, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2012, p. 845-871, p. 859.

³ Andrew Sharf, *Jews and other Minorities in Byzantium*, Jerusalem, Bar-ilan University Press, 1995, p. 109-119.

⁴ Yossi Soffer, „The View of Byzantine Jews in Islamic and Eastern Christian Sources,” p. 845-871, p. 859.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 869.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

which condemns the oppression of human consciousness and any other type of proselytism.”⁷

The value of freedom expressed in this canon strives to protect the dignity of human personhood. In that sense, the canon articulates Christian anthropology and ecclesiology. From the truthful understanding of human being proceeds the correct conception of community which is consisted of free persons, i.e. the Church.

2. Alienation of Relations: Obeying Lies

The alienation which we see today within the Church is the consequence of murky relationships between different layers of Church members. Relational connections between bishops and clerics, between bishops and laity do not constitute the identity of these services within the Church Body. Instead, the hierarchy is based upon other values, such as power and ontology given by some theologians. The ontological fixation of the services within the church made the relational mode of existence obsolete.⁸ The danger of the losing relational mode of services will mean that the Church risks losing its own ecclesial identity in its historical experience.⁹ In order to get a glimpse of authentic relational links the very communication between different services needs to be truthful and welcome. In his famous book, bestseller *12 Rules for Life: an Antidote to Chaos*, Dr. Jordan Peterson¹⁰ underlines the danger of lies prevailing in peoples' communication. Moreover, this danger threatens the existence of the world if human beings are forced to lie.

If you will not reveal yourself to others, you cannot reveal yourself to yourself. That does not only mean that you suppress who you are, although it also means that. It means that so much of what you could be will never be forced by necessity to come forward. This is a biological truth, as well as a conceptual truth.¹¹

Insisting on the necessity for human beings to tell the truth, Professor Peterson explains that every system which insists upon a forced lie leads human beings into simulation of life and consequently into totalitarianism. Victor Frankl gives a socio-psychological explanation of this statement: “deceitful, inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism.”¹² Freud similarly believed that repression leads to the development of mental illness, while Alfred Adler knew that lie gives birth to disease. Jung from his perspective believed that moral problems that tormented his patients were caused by untruth.¹³

⁷ Никодим Милаш, *Правила*, I, p. 609.

⁸ Zoran Devrnja, „Dijaloski identitet Crkve i posledice njegovog urusavanja,” *Crkvene studije*.XV (2015), p. 234-246.

⁹ D. J. Lane, "Episkopos, Presbyteros, Diakonos: Language, Theology and Practice," in *Teologie Slujike Ecumenism*, III-IV (1996), p. 305-316.

¹⁰ Dr. Jordan B. Peterson (b.1962) is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, a clinical psychologist, a public speaker.

¹¹ Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, Random House Canada, 2018, p. 150.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 152.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

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If you betray yourself, if you say untrue things, if you act out a lie, you weaken your character. If you have a weak character, then adversity will mow you down when it appears, as it will, inevitably. You will hide, but there will be no place left to hide. And then you will find yourself doing terrible things.¹⁴

Above I pointed to canon VII, 8 trying to present it as a protector, albeit a fragmentary one, of human freedom of consciousness. The canon served to express the Church's concern that what matters within logic of the church community is the quality of her members and not the quantity. In other words, the quality of the members implies their freedom to express themselves freely and openly. The Church rejected quantity, i.e. large numbers of new baptized Jews through which they lied to themselves and simulate Christian life. Their simulation of authentic life within the borders of the Church puts at risk other members and even Church's identity. Logical proceeding of these statements leads us into conclusion that, not only entrance but also life itself in the Church's being needs to be authentic – rejecting lies and deception. The Church need to build and to be built by persons as responsible subjects of history. This is the main outcome of this canon VII, 8 – the ideal that the Church should work more on the process of “individualization” (responsibility) of human beings instead of collectivization (obedience with no historical responsibility). The suffocation of the freedom within church life can only develop different anomalies:

- A) Silencing the church members
- B) Forcing lie on the church members, i.e. hypocrisy
- C) Simulation of the Christian life within the Church.

3. Church Community and Freedom of Thought

Bearing in mind everything that has been said, sometimes we get surprised by the implementation of church laws which go against Christian anthropology or even ecclesiology. The protection of individual freedom, protection from collectivization did not always find understanding in church rules. In the *Constitution of the Serbian Orthodox Church* (SOC) we find the article which awkwardly implies that freedom should be subject to obedience. Article 214 prescribes that ecclesial courts should investigate and judge priests who work on „examination and criticism in the homilies those laws, orders and actions issued by the competent (church) authorities.” The wording of this article implies some different ecclesiology from the one that is proclaimed from the most orthodox theologians. The draft of the *New Constitution of SOC* (2018) suggests in article 171 that church courts should deal with those priests which „criticize publicly church order and decisions of the competent church authorities.” Similar could be said for some articles that can be found in the *Regulations (Regulamentul) for the Disciplinary Canonical Authorities and the Courts of the Romanian Orthodox Church* (RMOC).¹⁵ Article 11 could be arbitrary judged and consequences are rather severe: “The schism is

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 151.

¹⁵ *Regulamentul: autorităților canonice disciplinare și al instanțelor de judecată ale bisericii ortodoxe Române*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2015.

the separation from the Church through special actions or public interpretations of norms of discipline, morality and cult...” The consequences are very clear and harsh:

a) in the case of the clergy, with the dismissal from the clerical ministry or by defrocking;

b) in the case of the laity, with the destitution for church singers, with the withdrawal of the bishop blessing (written approval) for the teaching members of the pre-university and university education or for the laymen carrying out other activities with the blessing of the Church

c) in the case of the monks, the exclusion from monasticism and the prohibition to wear the monastic garment¹⁶

Similar to this we can quote another article from *Regulamentul*, article 39:

Public contradiction, in writing or by visual or audio media, of the official position of the Church concerning events or aspects of its life and activity concerning faith, ecclesial unity and pastoral mission, is considered disobedience to the canonical authorities and is sanctioned, according to the gravity of the act, with one of the sanctions ***without a right of appeal***, and in the case of a relapse, with the revocation for church singers, the withdrawal of the blessing (written approval) for the teaching members of the pre-university and university education or for the laymen carrying out other activities with the blessing of the Church, or with dismissal from the clerical ministry.¹⁷

These articles from the *Constitution of the SOC* and *Regulamentul of RMOc* bear within them the very danger which implies that Church favors quantity of obeying collectivity which should represent the Church.¹⁸ It seems that the Church would not respect individual freedom when it comes questioning Her decisions. Moreover, even if you believe differently you should obey; suffocating your Christian call for authenticity.¹⁹

Criticism and dialogue present the possibility for a human person to express themselves freely, to think and develop. In other words, the possibility to think and discuss freely means the possibility of telling the truth, developing talents, and having the opportunity to be recognized as an “Icon of God”. Abandoning discussion as a mode of questioning certain decisions leads to

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24-25.

¹⁷ *Regulamentul: autorităților canonice disciplinare și al instanțelor de judecată ale bisericii ortodoxe Române*, p. 53.

¹⁸ First-Second, 15: But as for those persons, on the other hand, who, on account of some heresy condemned by holy Synods, or Fathers, withdrawing themselves from communion with their president, who, that is to say, is preaching the heresy publicly, and teaching it bareheaded in church, such persons not only are not subject to any canonical penalty on account of their having walled themselves off from any and all communion with the one called a Bishop, before any synodal verdict has been rendered, but, on the contrary, they shall be deemed worthy to enjoy the honor which befits them among Orthodox Christians. For they have defied, not Bishops, but pseudobishops and pseudo-teachers; and they have not sundered the union of the Church with any schism, but, on the contrary, have been sedulous to rescue the Church from schisms and divisions.

¹⁹ Maxim Confessor is good historical example, disobeying to the church authorities when they betrayed the truth.

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dictatorship over people's thoughts. Consequently from that position human beings are treated as numbers with no voice and right to have a voice. Moreover, with such attitude we are questioning much more and that is our theology: What should the Church iconize? What kind of community?

4. Delusion of Truth: Lack of Responsibility

Totalitarian states may outwardly look very powerful and strong. They could even be praised by someone from the outside because of their discipline and order. Inwardly they have been constituted by individuals who are corrupt with everyday imitation of life. Vasily Shukshin (1929-1974), the Russian writer, describing the situation in the Soviet Union during 70's, which was decadent on many levels, posed a painful question, "What has happened to us?"²⁰ The quality of life has deteriorated, but even more so human relationships. Solidarity faded away together with compassion for other human beings. "It is like people did not care for each other anymore."²¹ Behind the façade of power and discipline it was hidden rotten kingdom. Being forced to lie, human being trades its responsibility for obedience. Prof. Peterson would say that lies mean a lack of responsibility which in the end destroys one's society.

There is no blaming any of this on unconsciousness, either, or repression. When the individual lies, he knows it. He may blind himself to the consequences of his actions. He may fail to analyze and articulate his past, so that he does not understand. He may even forget that he lied and so be unconscious of that fact. But he was conscious, in the present, during the commission of each error, and the omission of each responsibility. At that moment, he knew what he was up to. And the sins of the inauthentic individual compound and corrupt the state.²²

If we seriously consider this warning and transfer it onto the Church the answer would be more than clear. In most of our Churches we use any opportunity to write a lofty theological *Preamble* before any *Constitution* or *Regulations*. In the end, in most cases it seems that Preamble with its idealistic ecclesiology does not represent reality of Articles present within the same document. I strongly believe that we need to reconsider danger of a Church that would not iconize Kingdom of God, but the disciplined community of alienated members who all together simulate their Christian existence within the Church.

We can overcome alienation only through the respect of human individuality, freedom of thought and freedom of consciousness which this respect needs to imply. Freedom does not mean anarchy but responsibility. Similarly, we could argue that a "delusion of truth" within church structures produces a distorted lens through which we look upon the world. Moreover an erroneous view of the

²⁰ Вольтер Лакер, *История Еспоне 1945-1992*, Београд, Clio, 1999, p. 622.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, p. 152.

world but also of other Christian/Orthodox churches²³ puts the Church at risk of being inclined to falsify these relationships.

If some in the Church still believe that we need the “obedient collectivism” of Her members then we will be unable to find authentic human person. Ultimately we will need to pose ourselves a difficult question: “Can we talk about authentic Church anymore?”

²³ "An internally stratified church with developed administrative structures has a tendency to be centripetal and autarkic. It often considers itself in parallel to, not in the world, where it is called to go and preach. The divisions and separations inside the church often serve as a model for building the church's relations with the world outside. The mentality of sharp-cut borderlines extrapolate itself from within the church to its borderlines that separate it from the world. An alternative to the mentality of sharp-cut borderlines is the open mentality of frontiers. Frontiers are a key image to understanding what the church is in its nature and how it is related to the world." Cyril Hovorun, *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology*, New York, Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, Kindle Edition, 2017, p. 163.

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