

## COUNSELLING AND RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE IN ORADEA PENITENTIARY

Priest candidate to PhD **Dan Lele**  
Ministry of Justice  
National Administration of Penitentiaries  
High Security Penitentiary Oradea

### **Abstract:**

*In time, the church has demonstrated its active presence in all the segments of our political, social and cultural life, providing help, support, impulse and moral guidance and bringing its contribution, with its characteristic means, to the perpetuation of a stable spiritual and moral climate for the Romanian people.*

*Counselling is described in the Bible as the action of making those in need aware of their wrong deeds, drawing attention upon their mistakes, warning and presenting them with a viable alternative.*

*The religious attendance is a means whereby the detainees are helped to find a way out of their sinful life. Besides conversations of a pastoral nature, the chaplain priest should explain the detainees the implication of sins such as: murder, raping, theft, burglary, lying, etc. The sins that made most of them become prisoners, isolated from their families or communities should be counteracted by the Christian values: Belief, Hope and Love, together with their turning towards good deeds, whose value should be properly understood.*

**Key words:** counselling, religious attendance, prisoners

The year 1990 marked the beginning of a period of profound changes in the Romanian society not only in the political field, but also at the social, cultural and spiritual level, marked by a recovery of the sense of normality, based on the principles perceived as good and valuable during the two-millennium history of our people.

In time, the church has demonstrated its active presence in all the segments of our political, social and cultural life, providing help, support, impulse and moral guidance and bringing its contribution, with its characteristic means, to the perpetuation of a stable spiritual and moral climate for the Romanian people.

The exclusion of the religious factor from the social and the political life of the country after World War Two, the elimination of religion as subject matter from the educational curricula, the army, health institutions, social assistance centres, penitentiaries and other institutions of national importance, its isolation from the political, social and cultural life of the country, could not eliminate it, in spite of the repressive means used for that purpose, from the soul of the

Romanians, who preserved it as a latent and intimate power that, once unchained, can become again an extraordinary force of positive change in the human soul.

Starting from this fundamental assumption and being interested in the moral and the social recovery of those who, as a consequence of the delinquent acts they have committed, are currently imprisoned, we shall focus on those factors that, in the context of the above mentioned transformations in the Romanian society at large, have contributed to the moral rehabilitation of people completing their sentence in Romanian penitentiaries and to the continuation of the long-lasting tradition of religious attendance in the prisons of our country.

This activity has started with the putting into operation of the order of the General Department of Penitentiaries, with the number 65075/1990, which found its fulfilment with the agreement signed by the Romanian Patriarchy and the Ministry of Justice on 21.09.1993, regulating the presence of the penitentiary priesthood, hired by the Ministry of Justice and the General Department of Penitentiaries, together with the beginning of the action of building, or the arrangement of worship places within the detention place.

This agreement is in conformity with the European amendments regarding the functioning of penitentiaries, which at points 45 and 47 ratifies not only the right of the detainees to practice the elements imposed by their religion or to attend masses, in conformity with the religion they declared to belong to, and be allowed to possess religious books, but also to be able to get assistance from qualified priests, hired by the institutions mentioned above, and benefit from spaces where the pastoral-missionary activity can be conducted efficiently.

A priest in a penitentiary is the provider of religious attendance par excellence. He is not the administrator of a parish, since the detainees can never become a real Christian community.

In penitentiaries, the chaplain priest will receive the confession of prisoners and, depending on the situation, will provide expiation from sin and impose the required penance. However, the main duty is that of supporting the prisoners' hope for liberation, their determination to reform and wish to become part of a healthy society, having liberated from the "weaknesses" that caused their imprisonment.

Isolated from society and their families, men, women, young people or children often experience uneasy states of mind or become hopeless. Others are crippled by feelings of indifference, the absence of the moral sense, a lack of concern for their destiny as human beings, and anxiety in relation to the future, etc. There are situations when the isolation and the loneliness make them experience even more anger in relation to society; for each detainee, the chaplain priest should become a friend, a parent, who encourages them to make peace with God and tries to give them hope for their future life.

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, while describing the last day of judgement, indicates that one of the conditions for salvation is the following: "I was in prison and you came to me" (Matthew, 25:36). The analysis of this fragment indicates that the ones that are in prison should be visited and helped by those who live in freedom.

## **I. The religious counselling in penitentiaries**

Counselling is described in the Bible as the action of making those in need aware of their wrong deeds, drawing attention upon their mistakes, warning and presenting them with a viable alternative.

The counsellor (the chaplain priest) and the person who receives assistance (the detainee) should establish a sense of harmony between them, from a pastoral point of view.

The counsellor will strive to create a special atmosphere, where the presence of the Holy Spirit can be experienced by the detainee, who should not forget his or her sense of responsibility for the wrongs that he/she has committed, so that he/she might become aware of the future “Judgement”. He/she should understand that each person is responsible for good and wrong done while living in this world. Our deeds represent a measure of our faith. We are free to choose in this world, but we will not be able to receive absolution if we don’t take part to the communion with God.

### **The person who receives assistance**

1. Is marked by isolation and the public knowledge of the reasons for his/her imprisonment.
2. Is inclined to avoid accepting the culpability for the delinquent act and prefers to find culprits.
3. Should be approached after an analysis of the data included in the juridical file.
4. Is often unaware of God’s message.
5. Should be regarded as potentially recoverable.
6. There is no situation that cannot be solved by the words included in the Holy Bible.

### **A. The fundamental principles of spiritual counselling**

1. Life should have an inherent meaning. Besides the vital daily activities, necessary for the good functioning of this ephemeral existence, Saint Paul indicates that the purpose of our human existence is to search for and eventually find God, while the lack of such awareness can cause depression, anxiety and mal-functions.

2. We shall believe in the possibility to change for the better, trust God and His Word, never give up hope, all these aspect having been illustrated by Jesus Christ. The detainees should be listened to with patience and the good deeds should be appreciated.

3. The meaning of prayer and fasting should be rightly understood, starting from the biblical message.

4. The biblical dynamics of counselling brings about change through accustoming to good discipline.

## **B. The procedure of counselling and the process of change**

1. The language that is being used is very important. What we say or repeat can bring about the acceptance of a certain attitude.

2. The language of emotion and action. The language used by the counselled person is often emotive and tear-exciting, but it should be corrected through the clarification of the biblical message and the necessity of redemption; the detainee should become more confident, starting from his/her trust in the power of God, for elements such as the absence of education during childhood, sexual abuses, raping or drugs leave their marks on the personality of the prisoner, bringing about severe psychological disturbances.

3. The attitude is a thinking pattern that has a strong influence upon behaviour.

4. The sin is the problem. Consequently the spiritual counselling is a complex activity.

5. Making decisions: the two types of lifestyle:

a. Making decisions taking into consideration God's will and Commandments: "Who are you, my Lord", "How can I act in accordance to your will?".

b. Making decisions in relation to the personal will: "What I want!"

The Holy Fathers used to say: "It is not the sinner who should be hated, but the sin that overcame him or her".

The sin dulls the mind and weakens the will, and makes many people do reprobable acts, which trigger their punishment and even imprisonment.

For the reasons mentioned above a special attention should be directed towards wrong-doers, so that they might be re-habilitated and start anew in life.

## **II. The religious attendance in penitentiaries**

The religious attendance is a means whereby the detainees are helped to find a way out of their sinful life. Besides conversations of a pastoral nature, the chaplain priest should explain the detainees the implication of sins such as: murder, raping, theft, burglary, lying, etc. The sins that made most of them become prisoners, isolated from their families or communities should be counteracted by the Christian values: Belief, Hope and Love, together with their turning towards good deeds, whose value should be properly understood.

Prayer, singing and reciting religious poems are other means whereby the chaplain priest can make detainees understand that words, coming from a heart overcome by repentance, represent the easiest and the more sincere way to communicate with Our Holy Father. The prayer in the company of other believers will help the detainee to understand the value of loving other human beings.

The sermons uttered on Sundays or at the time of other religious celebrations, the periods of meditation, the conferences and community prayer represent elements of balance for those that are imprisoned and means whereby

they are helped to experience a closer community with God and their fellow human beings.

The bearings I took on a number of 40 detainees (underage persons, young people, men and women) indicates with clarity the fact that the chaplain priest is the person they trust most, who helps them overcome their periods of crisis characteristic to the period of adaptation to a life in prison and to anticipate their getting out of prison. The chaplain priest is the substitute for their family and friends, being an element of connection between them and the society outside.

In addition with the activity of the department responsible with the detainees' education, competitions, recitals, watching movies, round tables, meetings, learning to sing can help prisoners in their moral and spiritual evolution. Such activities make the detainees existence in prison more diverse and meaningful. The positive thoughts are transmitted to their families as well, whose members become more confident in relation to detainees' behaviour after the period of imprisonment.

Very often the cultural-educative activities interweave and supplement one another, opening new horizons in the process of recovery and re-socialization of he detainees.

The combined efforts of all those who strive to make delinquents aware of the consequences of their wrong deeds help the activity of the chaplain priest.

The sublime character of the latter's activity indicates the priceless treasure each human being carries in his/her soul and the possibility to associate all our actions to the words of God, to the eternal and unchangeable moral values of Love, Kindness, Forgiveness, Compassion, The Beauty of the Soul, Mutual Understanding, since all the virtues are rooted in the love of God and the words of His Holy Scriptures.

## ***CONCLUSIONS***

### **The guilt, the repentance and the paschal re-integration**

Using the methodological means mentioned so far and the richness of pastoral supporting elements, he chaplain priest can assume, in his activity, an authentic Christian perspective, where the juridical acceptance of crime is constantly balanced by the evangelical commandment of forgiveness. Human guilt cannot be approached from the perspectives of a secular anthropology, since anthropology itself can be enlightened by the idea of Revelation, illustrated by the example of Jesus Christ.

Consequently, the concept of guilt should be approached and interpreted from the perspective of forgiveness, since human beings can only be revealed in the light of Jesus Christ. The true biblical and patristic anthropology is centred on Jesus Christ and circumscribed to the theme of the "figure" (tselem), that is the dynamic relationship between human beings and God. The Christian ethos, that

implies the attitude towards our fellow human being who was victimised by the forces of evil, cannot leave aside the evangelical kerygma. Without eluding the socio-juridical implications of the phenomenon, we are compelled, as followers of Jesus Christ, to relate constantly to the mission of “Helping the sinners improve” (dikaion ton asebe / Zromans, 4,5).

The gravity of transgressions of all kinds, as well as the guilt of their author, is clearly revealed by the Gospels of Christ. However, the fiery delinquents often transgress the law without accepting their guilt. By avoiding the acceptance of guilt, they simply send it to the misty levels of the subconscious, wherefrom it will return, periodically troubling the even surface of consciousness, and the latter will become incapable to take into consideration the aetiology of morbid phenomena. From the perspective of the Gospels, the human guilt should be cured through a process that involves repentance, sincere confession of sins and the responsible commitment to improve.

Regarded from the perspective of forgiveness, the guilt appears, especially in the case of inveterate delinquents, to be defined by the following four complementary aspects: the difficulty to repent (the insensibility of the heart), the refusal of forgiveness (the refusal of the gift), the persistence in a state of sin (the persistence in passion) and the desperation subsequent to the commitment of the sin, associated with the absence of trust in the goodness of the All-Forgiving (sin against the Holy Spirit). All these aspects represent a proof concerning the nature of guilt, in its evangelical signification<sup>1</sup>.

Human beings are creations endowed with awareness. Thus, they possess not only consciousness, but also the awareness of their own consciousness. The human being is aware of the ideas it puts forth, his or her aims, sufferance and the fact that he or she is mortal. In relation to other human beings, when good deeds are performed, the man or the woman are aware not only of his or her deeds, but also of the position of being a person “that does the right thing”, or, when he or she is sinful, of his or her wrong-doing. When the inter-human relationships are defined as amiable, instead of internalising them simply through the concept of friendship, the human beings define themselves as “friendly”.

The self-awareness objectifies and “breaks” the unity of the ego, which assumes a number of hypostases centred on a specific role. On the other hand, the human being identifies himself or herself with each ego projected by the consciousness, which brings about a sui-generis co-habitation between good and evil within the inner space of the person. Saint Paul acknowledges this fact when he says: “I see in my limbs a different law, fighting against the law of my mind and making me slave to the law of the sin, which lies in my limbs” (Rom. 7,24). As Paul Ramsey has pointed out, “instead of a number of simple faculties of the self, its real name is legion. For this reason, the self can actually identify simultaneously ... with the love for the good and for the evil, at the same time”<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Paul Ramsey, *God's Grace and Man's Guilt*, in *The Journal of Religion*, vol. XXXI, January, 1951, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p.11

Due to such a multiplication of the self, an integral and authentic repentance is extremely difficult. Very often, we can find ourselves in front of an evident act of forgiveness, paradoxically searching both the sin and the forgiveness. As the great creator of *The Karamazov Brothers* indicates, the human soul is too “broad” - a human being animated by the counter-ideal of Sodom cannot give up the genuine ideal of Madona. This absence of cohesion and extreme contradiction, which has been emphasized from the time of the ancient Greeks, represents a serious obstacle in front of a complete ignorance of sin and the acceptance of a radical metanoia.

Sensing the danger of such an inner splitting, the great pastoral tradition of the Desert Fathers insists upon the unification of thoughts achieved by means of **prayer** and of gathering our thoughts from the confusion created by our passions. The difficulty of **penitence** can be understood only in the context of a conscious and the free separation of human beings from any relationship with God, of their alienation from their own selves and their fellow human beings.

The spiritual unbalancing of human beings, the centrifugal movement generated by sin breaks them apart, bringing them close to the border of non-existence, for, as Filaret of Moscow has pointed out, human beings rely on the word of God as on a bridge of diamond, crossing the abyss of the non-existence, wherefrom they were born. Refusing the support of the creative word of God, asserting their autonomy, human beings fall victim to the sin of pride that hinders their access to repentance and makes them succumb to the lethal burden of non-assumed guilt.

Emphasizing of the negative impact of the non-assumed guilt on the ontology of the face, Saint Gregory of Nysse speaks of a disharmony in the human being “for the words of man are addressed, through their nature, to his fellow human beings, and these can unite them all, or can make them enemies (without being able to set them apart), as its self is reflected, when in harmony with others, in virtues, or in conflict, due to their passions; thus the state of harmony in human beings is reflected in their progress through virtues, as the dissonance is indicated by the state of sin. Thus, in the words of passionate people, there is no musicality: it cannot be defined as harmony or symphony, but as an unpleasant noise, lacking any form of illumination”<sup>1</sup>.

The return to the state of harmony, dissipated by the correlative guilt of the sin, cannot be achieved in the absence of a re-established communion, through the sacramental forgiveness, that places the sinner in the position of the spendthrift son.

It is worth mentioning that before returning to his father and confessing his sins, the spendthrift son goes through a state of inner crisis, that can be described through the following succession of events: he returned to himself, he remembered, he felt a deep-seated grief, made a decision, returned to his father, confessed and

---

<sup>1</sup> Apud Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, *Spiritualitate ;i comuniune in liturghia ortodoxa*, p.429.

eventually received the absolution. The elder brother is unable to grasp the deep signification of the paternal pedagogy.

According to the Church Fathers, the sin is not simply a transgression of a divine commandment: it represents the abandoning of the communion with the one who loved us in an unconditioned way, going as far as accepting the Sacrifice on Golgota, that is not circumscribed to an isolated historical moment (Jesus will agonise as long as the world will exist, said Pascal), illustrates the terrible drama of the Son of God. The breaking of the communion with Christ causes the deterioration of inter-human relationships, as the re-integration and the receptivity towards the divine grace of forgiveness (which is not natural, but, on the contrary, the most “supernatural” attitude), opens the way to the collaboration in the Holy Spirit and the re-integration in the community.

The path from guilt to redemption and ecclesial re-integration involves repentance, through the baptism of the tears or through what Robert Frost called “one-man revolution”. This revolution, the only legitimate one, is not one that aims at the changing of the whole world and all the human beings (as it happened in the case of the Marxist-Leninist utopia), but the elimination of the evil hidden inside the self. Kallistos Ware defines this type of repentance as a positive revolution aimed to reveal the face of God in each one of us. He writes: “It (repentance) is not hopelessness, but uneasy waiting; it does not mean feeling that you are at crossroads, but to find the way out. It is not equivalent with the hating of your own self, but with the affirmation of the authentic self, created to reflect the face of God. To repent is not to look down on your own weaknesses, but upwards, to the love of God; not to look behind, in a self-reproaching manner, but forward, full of trust. It means to see not what you could not achieve, but what you can become through God’s grace”<sup>1</sup>.

The sin isolates and emphasizes the isolation of man, while repentance redeems him to community. The more isolated a person is, the stronger the power on sin over him or her for the darkness of non-communication poisons the whole being. On the other hand, the repentance helps the penitent perceive the light of the divine grace and dissipates the darkness. The sacramental confession closes the doors of self-justification (suggested by the devil) and opens the gates of Heavens through the recovery of the communion with God, the ecclesial re-integration and the openness of the heart towards the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The penitence, as a prelude to re-integration, marks the beginning of a life of grace, which is equivalent with a return of our will towards God and the refusal of the insinuating and false discourse, characteristic of “this world” (Berdiaev). Helping human beings to overcome their weaknesses, the Holy Spirit can turn the human being with a repentant heart and a mind in the state of metanoia into a healthy part of the ecclesial community. In a liturgical context, “the awareness of the completeness of the Holy Spirit, given to each member of the Church, in relation to the spiritual elevation of each of them, dissipates the darkness of death,

---

<sup>1</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Experience of Repentance*, Sobornost, 2nd volume, no.1/1980, p.70



the fear of judgement, the depths of the Hell, while the attention is exclusively turned towards God, who comes in all His Glory. This joy of Resurrection and of the eternal life turns the Easter night into “ a feast of belief”, where each takes part, even if in a little way and only for a few moments, to the fulfilment of “the eight day”, that shall never end”<sup>1</sup>.

In the absence of the paschal light, the world appears as mutilated by sin. In this world, the divine paternity is replaced by the juridical authority, and the ecclesial event (which implies the communion) or the social relationships (whose motive force is the collision) are replaced by communities. In this context, the transgression of habits and juridical norms, aimed at the creation of a minimum level of social cohesion, represents at the same time an offence for the authorities, an ignorance of righteousness and a repression of love. Each phenomenon that can be described as a form of criminality is the expression of a certain choice, of a morbid preference that places the criminal in the situation of self-exclusion from the community. The reclusion is merely the institutionalised form of the agreement through which the repressive element tacitly offers to the individual that has opted for the emergence from the social group of those who accept the prescriptions of the law. The legal correctitude, as different from the moral rightness, often implies the use of force and of repressive methods in order to ensure a minimum level of order, in the absence of which the society becomes an entropy, being threatened by a “thermic death”.

The coercive measures create a minimum of order through the isolation of delinquents from the rest of the society and the recovery of the juridical order, when the ethic discourse of a persuasive nature has not been successful. At the same time, they satisfy the feeling of justice, inherent to the human nature, discovering their double finality: the psychological and the sociological one.

The coercion imposed by law is a way of fighting against delinquent acts, without implying the metaphysical ambition of eliminating the evil. The elusion of rightness, its ignorance, is a way of complicity with the help of the evil. As professor Ilie Moldovan has pointed out, the imperative of righteousness is accompanied by a thirst of spiritual nature, deeply seated in our rationality. Any form of absent-mindedness is a form of guilt, any form of undeserved compassion is a form of cruelty, directed against others<sup>2</sup>.

In this respect, Augustine indicates that there is a form of cruelty that ends with forgiveness, as well as a form of compassion that punishes (“sicut enim est aliquando, misericordia puniens, ita et crudelitas parcens”<sup>3</sup>).

In relation to the legal righteousness, which is aimed to have effects at the social level, the moral righteousness is targeted at the spiritual life of human beings. Regarded from this perspective, the delinquent, besides being a transgressor of a juridical code, represents a failure from the point of view of the human

---

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistica a Bisericii de Rasarit*, Anastasia, p.277.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Prof. Ilie Moldovan, *Invatatura ortodoxa despre dreptate si rolul ei in realizarea ordinii morale*, Ortodoxia, 2/1989, p.80.

<sup>3</sup> Apud ibidem

existence, which should be a constant preoccupation for people conducting a pastoral mission.

The mission of the chaplain priest is not only a work of consolation. The presence of the church in penitentiaries is not simply formal. It is not intended to add some colour to a monochrome space, but to contribute to the real transformation of the detainees, from detained objects into ecclesial subjects. The success of such an anthropo-genetic attempt is conferred by the combination of righteousness and love in the communion of the moral order. In the absence of righteousness, love is blind and becomes tolerance, or even compliance. In the absence of love, the righteousness is just a mechanical “chain drive”, and the human being loses its uniqueness and implicitly the possibility to have access to the eternal life.

The church accepts “the un-assumed sacrifice” of detention, being confident in its positive potential. The awareness resulted from the experience of living in a prison makes the human being confront all its possibilities and encourages confession. The lucid reflection can help the detainee perceive the two existing alternatives: a life in the love of God or nothingness, life or death.

The perception of life as a gift of the Resurrection relieves the penitent of the angst associated with the life in a penitentiary, offering the chance of salvation. Taking into consideration both the laws and the holy Grace, the penitent embarks in a way towards the real freedom. The experience of imposed solitude causes the sensation of offered communion. In their grief, they discover the image of Christ. Such a discovery, and its concretisation into a real and radical metanoia for the detainee (“to return and be alive”), represent the support and the ideal of the entire activity of the chaplain priest.