

Man's responsibility. Decency or libertinism?

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ABSTRACT

The Christian teaching shows that man has been created “in God’s image” in order to attain “God’s likeness”. “The image” means: intellect, will, affectiveness, love, liberty, responsibility, conscience. We cannot talk about true freedom if we do not take into account responsibility as well, namely the obligation of a person to acknowledge himself as free and aware author of his own actions and to take upon himself the consequences and results of what he does.

Keywords: Christianity; liberty; responsibility; moral imputation; salvation;

Introduction

Contemporary people are, however, aware that society ought to be Christocentric. Since a certain moment of history, in some parts of the world, people have attempted to build an anthropocentric society: *man for himself*. This trend spread, grew, and has come to show its weakness; our society has become erotocentric. At present, the young man has eliminated the word **decency** from his vocabulary and personal manifestations, and encouraged by the erroneous understanding of a virtue given by God, **liberty**, has arrived, using libertinism, in a very dangerous zone. Today, “*we are not dealing only with a materialism dominating “en gross et en detail”; a huge wave of eroticism is tumbling down on us. The number of erotomaniacs seems to be continually growing. Even though this is lacking elegance and discretion, we have to call each thing by its right name: sex without frontiers*” [1].

Without borders! There is no longer any kind of borders for eroticism. For the young, neither age, nor personal sensitivities and traditions, nor in any case religion or even physical and mental hygiene are arguments for a return to the previous decency.

Very few people today live as they ought to, *namely in the body as if they were not in the body*, this is why we can say that we are all vulnerable. Yet, the greatest danger is for the young generation. Young people are most targeted, and lately they are in the spotlight from age zero. If we take into account the findings of *prenatal psychophysiology* “*the erotomaniac pressure begins even before birth! A Schengen area from minus infinity to plus infinity*” [2].

Our personal conscience doubtlessly has a word to say. It is true that the whole world will not change if I change. But the change in me is the premise of the great change. Each soul sums up, in a particular and immeasurable manner, the universe itself, a universe fully recapitulated in Christ.

By each soul in whom Christ’s Spirit is dwelling, God is working on the world. The Savior explains that the efficiency of the faith that can move mountains depends on fasting and prayer, two highly significant means in the personal spiritual life. Secondly, personal conscience has a great role in the restoration of the full trust in man. One of the important

factors by which the war idea is promoted is: discrediting man. Each believer has the duty to do deeds contrary to this tendency, opposing trust to distrust, hope to despair, self-reconciliation to aware dissatisfaction. A clean conscience is a power like no other in the world, because finally the future of the world will not depend on blind forces, but on men[3].

Man can only live in relations with others, thus the impossibility of imagining him outside the scope of action. Solidarity among men sometimes goes up to sacrifice. What increases this solidarity is the idea that our fellow has an absolute value just like ourselves. For the Christians, this value of man has been revealed by God Himself. God's Son has come in the world for man's salvation. Man is not a simple means for God, but an "alter ego" of His. In other words, man appears as absolute value for God Himself. In the Evangel we are told that God's Son came "to His own [people]" (John 1: 11). Considering man as a purpose, never as a means, defines what in Romanian we call *omenie* and in English *humanity*. A man who kills another man kills himself, denying the humanity in the other and in himself. His humanity has turned into inhumanity.

According to the Christian teaching, man has been created "in the image and the likeness of God" (Genesis 1: 26). This expression comprises, in short, the entire Christian anthropology.

The Holy Fathers see in God's creation certain conformity, a certain likeness, to the extent to which this is possible, between the Creator and His rational creation. They differentiate between image and likeness. According to Saint Basil the Great, "God's image is the principle and root of good, planted since the beginning in man's being; while God's likeness is the target or superior moral state that man needs to acquire, by ceaseless good deeds and virtues" [4]. Thus, God did not give us everything for granted, to be perfect like objects, but left us the honor to acquire perfection ourselves. The Christian received the **image** as a gift from God, while **likeness** was set as a moral mission to him. People, created in God's image and likeness, do not have sense and value in themselves, but acquire them from Christ the Model, the real image of God, to whom they must tend incessantly, "until they have become perfect according to the full measure of Christ's stature" (Ephesians 4: 13). Sure, this moral mission involves man's liberty (but also God's liberty) and his responsibility (as personal effort).

1. Man's responsibility. Decency or libertinism?

Responsibility is the obligation incumbent to a person to admit himself as free author of his deeds, to take upon himself the consequences or their results. Responsibility supposes imputation, namely the act by which someone is considered responsible, being attributed to him, justly, a deed along with all its consequences. Responsibility and imputation have the same meaning, yet they are applied differently: a) the person is responsible, and his deed imputable; b) responsibility supposes an aware relation of dependence between a doer and another person to whom he is responsible, imputation supposes the relation between deed and its author; c) the main object of any responsibility is the evil deed, and imputation can be involved concerning any deed, good or bad; d) imputation can be emitted as well concerning God, as far as his external actions are concerned, yet one cannot attribute responsibility to Him[5]. Thus, we clarified the content of these two notions; despite their differences, they are dealt with together, and most of the theologians plead for their kinship.

Given the diversity of forms of life and of deeds, responsibility takes on various aspects: juridical, political, scientific, practical, social, medical, etc.

Each man, beside other responsibilities, also has **moral responsibility**, which differs essentially from all the other types of responsibility by the fact that it is closely related to moral conscience, which declares us responsible morally, before other institutions give their verdict in this sense. It obliges us to admit ourselves guilty inside ourselves for our bad deeds, and admit all their consequences, starting with the duty to repair them. This is the specific of moral responsibility, a specific that does not allow identifying it with any other form of responsibility. Beside this difference, resulting from the type of organs by means of which responsibility is exerted, one can observe other differences, as well. Starting from the Christian teaching on personality, consisting in an ontological restoration of the whole human nature, from the old man to the new man, which concerns all our deeds, “*moral responsibility engages all the mistakes of the Christian, actions, words or thoughts, viewed not just from the outside, from the perspective of the objective morality, like the other responsibilities, but also from the interior perspective, aim and intention, as subjective morality, before the objective one*” [6]. Responsibility is characterized, therefore, both by profoundness, looking at the mistakes from their root (Matthew 15: 18-19), and by extension, referring to all the evil actions (Matthew 25: 41-45), words and thoughts by which the moral commandments are breached. Despite all these differences, various responsibilities can be reconciled, when they are one in *responsibility*.

The foundation of human responsibility is given in man’s freedom. “*He is responsible, being the subject of his action, since he is its free author. Responsibility is the natural kin of freedom. The animal is not responsible, because it acts out of instinct. Man, however, whose action springs from his inside, from his own decision, is responsible for everything he does*” [7]. Even a certain deterministic philosopher, admitting responsibility, acknowledged a definite liberty of man as basis of responsibility.

The Holy Fathers see man’s freedom as the most beautiful and precious good [8]. They highlight man’s capacity to determine himself, the crucial human feature by which he differs from everything that is not subject or person, object or nature, which do not determine themselves in freedom, but are determined. This is the highest form of existence. Man, being placed within the framework of his own power, being the author of his own conduct, is necessarily responsible for everything he does. Of course, because he is a created being with a psycho-physical nature, man cannot have absolute freedom, which belongs only to God, but only relative freedom. This is the psychological freedom, i.e. the possibility of self-determination that belongs to all people, being inherent to the human spirit[9].

Freedom and responsibility are inextricably linked, as the two sides of the same act. Freedom is not anarchic but is united with responsibility. Their relationship becomes more evident if we consider that the essence of liberty is not in the possibility to choose between good or evil, but in the permanent tendency towards good, in the stabilization in good. To choose evil is equivalent to exhibiting a deficient freedom, it is not exerting freedom naturally. The reason of sin is not the offspring of free choice, but is the triumph of a sinful passion over the will. The entirety of freedom is given by the full possession of good, as it results as well from the words of our Savior: “*If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (John 8: 31-32). Taken in this sense, freedom constitutes the main basis of responsibility.

Along with freedom, a basis for man’s moral responsibility is provided by his conscience, which, under the form of reflection and self-presence, is the faithful witness of our acts. We are aware of what is going on in us, currently, not of what will be, or could

be. Our conscience reveals to each one of us the presence of our individual self, as a determining center of our deeds. Through it we feel that we are the real causes of our deeds and we feel that we are responsible for them. Saying “I” we consider ourselves as causal centers of our life. Responsibility in this case is not a simple logical attribution of the acts to the self-determining self, but a real, moral, causal responsibility. Moreover, our conscience can be counted as a basis of our responsibility also by the fact that, being the truthful witness of our acts, it valorizes them morally. Our conscience shows to us the path of goodness, which it urges us to follow, and signals the evil, warning us not to commit it. Good appears in our conscience as an imperative, but its fulfillment depends, however, on each person’s free will. The Christian, knowing God’s will, feels obliged to accomplish it, and therefore is responsible if he does not accomplish it. God’s Will is a must for our free will. This obligation refers only to those goods necessary for moral perfection, as the virtues, without which the moral nature is missing what it needs to realize its essence in us, and for this absence it is us who are responsible. The conscience of the obligation to comply with the moral order supposes that this order is required for the realization of a supreme purpose. Responsibility therefore is closely related with good, moral order, and the ultimate goal [10].

Other bases that may be brought in support of responsibility are: the attention and reflection before doing a deed, our instinctual appraisals, both on our acts and our fellows, etc. Fatalism and determinism suppress responsibility, not admitting an actual causality coming from man. But their objections rather highlight the reasons reinforcing responsibility. *“Responsibility is real, because we are real causes; we are causes, because we exist in reality, because nature and society do not cancel at all the personality they condition; we are morally responsible because we are moral persons with actual causality; we are not what nature and society do in us sometimes also without us, but we are through all that we do ourselves and to the extent to which we do ourselves”*. [11]

Therefore, the grounds of responsibility are identical to the grounds of subjective morality: freedom and conscience.

Since God is not one Person, but Three Persons possessing a single nature, similarly man has in himself the relation with other persons, bearers of a common nature. Human nature does not feel good in isolation; it asks for replenishment, it gets rich by reciprocity and dedication. Every human being has God’s image in himself, yet, in another sense, the image of each one of us is according to that of our fellows. The free and aware relation between persons forms the content of human life. From this relation springs man’s personal moral responsibility towards his fellows. [12]

We live the feeling of responsibility towards other people, only when we feel that they are equal or superior to us, when we consider them as sons of God. When we look at our neighbor as at someone having eternal value, to whom, through our lives, we could endanger not just a transient life, but an eternal life, when we see him in the name of God, then our sense of responsibility towards him is ever present.

Any attitude an animal may have toward man, man will not get angry with it, will not feel offended by the attitude of the animal, will not consider it responsible; man will feel offended only by another man, *“this is so because man recognizes the value and the freedom of his fellow and waits for an act of closeness and dedication from him, to get richer. When a neighbor refuses this dedication or causes harm, man feels offended, disregarded, because he has a value that must be respected, and requirements to be fulfilled by his neighbor”* [13]. The Christian morality emphasizes precisely this dedication among

fellows. Christian morality is service to God, proven by our service to our fellow. Christ our Redeemer asks of every Christian to be “*salt and light*” (Matthew 5, 14-16) for his fellow, to be an occasion of help, an exhortation and an impetus to moral renewal.

On the contrary, if a Christian does not make himself the “*the fragrance of Christ*” (2 Cor. 2:15-17), toward the life of his fellow, but commits acts that are hostile to God’s commandments, making himself a stumbling block (2 Cor. 6: 3-10) for his neighbor, he is responsible for the misdeeds of his fellow, which he produced, directly or indirectly, by being a stumbling block for his fellow. His responsibility doubles in this case. Our responsibility is greater than the one of those we scandalized. “*If the responsibility for our acts is heavy enough, what will happen when the acts of our fellow are going to be added to it, how are we going to be saved? If not to save another is a sin, it is all the more a sin to scandalize, to occasion the failure of our fellow’s salvation*” [14]. You can see from this that responsibility for our fellow’s mistakes triggers, therefore, responsibility for his salvation. Scandalizing his fellows, the Christian not only does not edify, does not serve his brethren, as he should, on the contrary, he tears down the creation, and not a human one, but God’s Creation. Our responsibility for our fellow’s salvation is also shown by Saint Paul the Apostle, when he says: “*do not destroy by what you eat that brother for whom Christ died*” (Rom. 4:15).

2. Life is the prime responsibility for Christians

The Christian is responsible to his fellow first because through his bad deeds, he takes towards him an attitude contrary to the Christian morality, causing him harm and suffering; then, he is responsible for the mistakes of his fellow, caused directly or indirectly by him. “*Such people sin against Christ; by the stumbling blocks they produce, they batter their brethren’s conscience, they hurt the Lord’s mysterious body, which includes the scandalized person as well. Such people want to tear down, by their ambition and immorality, what our Savior Christ has built by His holy life and His Sacrifice*”. [15]

The Christian is responsible for the misdeeds of his fellows for which he is not a direct or indirect cause, but which he did not exhort his fellows not to do. He must find the right time, place and tact for his observation to be fruitful and not lead to the aggravation of the evil. “*When we see our fellows arguing furiously or committing other sins, how can we remain passive, or, even more painfully, how can we enjoy ourselves feasting our eyes on this scene? What can be more inhuman? You see them tearing one another, and you remain with your arms crossed? Are they beasts? No, they are people who have the same nature as you. Do not just look at them, but stop the argument, bring them back to their peace and honor. Make them blush for their unworthy conduct. How come you do not feel that through them you dishonor yourself, because you are a partaker of the same nature?*” [16].

The Christian is responsible to his fellow also for the good deeds he could have done for him, but which he did not do. “*So the person who knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*” (James 4: 17). This condemns the attitude of indifference towards the needs of our fellow. “*Let no one seek his own advantage, but that of the other*” (1 Corinthians 10: 24). The Christian cannot pass his fellow by indifferently. He must follow the example of our Savior, Who “*came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10: 45). God gives man gift through his fellow. This means that each of us has a great responsibility, namely to always be available to God, as a mediator of His benefactions to our fellows. In this case, the responsibility to our fellows is comprised in that to God. On the basis of human solidarity, the personal responsibility for the deeds of our fellow, the way that they have been analyzed, extends infinitely. [17]

The measure of responsibility is the measure of guilt: we are responsible to the extent to which we have worked with freedom and knowledge. Total, partial or no guilt is followed by total, partial or no responsibility. Various causes such as: lack of knowledge and mistake, dementia, coercion, sinful passions, mental diseases may suppress, decrease or cancel responsibility. Regarding the lack of knowledge, we need to differentiate between innocent and guilty lack of knowledge, since the latter entails responsibility. Similarly, coercion, in some cases, when it cannot affect the acts and the interior states of the Christian, triggers responsibility. Various circumstances may increase or decrease responsibility, giving rise to intermediate levels of responsibility. Acts arising out of habit, which cannot cancel freedom, entail responsibility.

The sphere of responsibility is immense. It has no other limits than those of the present and future mankind. The society prolongs up to the infinity every word, thought and deed of ours, so the limit of responsibility is the infinity. Trying to hierarchize responsibility, we can set several levels: *“one of man in general, one of the Christian, which in turn can have several levels. That of the simple Christian, and another one, a much higher one, for the one called to lead the Christians to salvation; we can speak of an unimaginably high responsibility of the monk, who, out of his own will and without being forced by anyone, has dedicated his life as a gift to God. This [responsibility] grows when ordination is added to it.”* [18]

Generally, the level of responsibility increases according to the talents, hierarchic level, knowledge of each person and it is divided in nuances according to the nature of the body, individuality, age, temperament, sex, education, heredity, social status, internal and external influences in the framework of which a person lives. *“That servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will be beaten with many blows. But the one who did not know and did things worthy of blows will be beaten with few blows.”* (Luke 12:47-48).

Our responsibility also increases when we rather throw ourselves in the way of temptations and run away from the way of virtues. It increases with the easiness of avoiding the mistake, with the presence of the advice not to commit it, with the awareness of the malice of the deed, with the high degree of straining and deliberation required by an action. When the decision is your own your responsibility is heavier than when you were counseled or exhorted by another to do some act. Saint John Chrysostom often warned his believers when they were clapping their hands at the sermon, telling them that, by this, their level of responsibility increases [19]. Then, responsibility grows proportionally with the number of fellows who have been scandalized or drawn towards sin. We should not believe that if we found collaborators to sins, we shall be justified; this will add to our punishment, just as the serpent has been punished more than the woman, and the woman more than man.[20] Our frequent attempt to decrease our responsibility to the detriment of our fellow, invoking various mitigating circumstances is mere illusion; we remain responsible.

The forums deciding on responsibility are: our conscience, human judgment, and the last, absolutely valid, is God’s. It is very hard to decide on the degree of responsibility of a person. Therefore, it is recommended that, when we are not obliged to do so formally, we ought to leave it to God, the Judge of all, and we ought to be as demanding as possible with our own person. This does not annul the endeavor of each one of us, of straightening, in the spirit of love and humility, the one fallen into sin. As a consequence of responsibility, good deeds bring perfection to each person, setting human nature free from the bondage of sin, and guarantee everlasting life and happiness. Evil deeds, on the contrary, destroy human

nature more and more, chaining it in sins and jeopardizing man's perfection and salvation, leading man to eternal punishment.

The Christian, when he has committed a sin, has fallen, he no longer has the same value that he had before, because sin brings a loss for its author as well as for other people. As a result, "*it is necessary for the author to repair these losses and nullify their consequences*" [21]. Not to do so would be to commit a new mistake, namely breaching the law and the duty to repair the mistakes for which you are responsible. Any sin is moral disorder, preparing the way for other disorders. Hence, the need for the guilty person to realize a "*restitutio in integrum*" of the moral order, in him and outside him.

A direct restoration of a moral order is not possible, but only an indirect one, giving back to the order what has been taken from it, i.e. destroying the sin committed and healing the disease produced by committing it [22]. This can be done only by an ontological moral transformation, determined by heartfelt repentance. It is an act of will, since the will comes to hate the evil it once loved, wants not to have wanted it, wants to want it no more. By it, we become full masters over the past full of mistakes, which as act of historical chronology cannot be changed, but whose sense can be changed, from obstacle to good, into basis of a new life. Every moment of our past life, without being thrown out of us, can be cleaned from the evil in it, as one can clean a spring from the mud in it. Taking hold of the past, by remembering it with regret, we can change it, not leaving it empty of the regretted act, but filling it with a basis for a new life. In the place of a sin, thus springs a source of the new life. Repentance must not refer only to certain acts, but to the whole life, so that the new man may rise and grow instead of the old man.

But repentance is not just an individual matter, but also a matter of relationship with God and our fellows. By repentance, we admit ourselves guilty for having disregarded this relationship through our unworthy life. To do this, we need to show our repentance to God by our confession in the presence of the Confessor, as our fellow. It is to God that we can and must admit ourselves accountable, guilty, because it is to Him that we are superlatively accountable. The mending of our errors and the renewal of our life is a common work of God and of ourselves. By this, our responsibility diminishes up to total abolition; this happens by virtue of the promise of our Savior: "*Receive the Holy Spirit! Whoever's sins you forgive, they stand forgiven; whoever's sins you pronounce unforgiven, they remain unforgiven.*" (John 20: 22-23).

The conscience of responsibility is a main factor on which progress depends, both in the moral life, and in other fields of activity. It stems from the awareness of the moral dignity and sense of every person in this life. "*If I preach the Gospel, I do not have a ground for boasting, for it is my duty to do so. Woe is me, if I do not preach the Gospel!*" (1 Corinthians 9: 16). Saint Paul the Apostle was continually pushed by his awareness of his responsibility for his life of persecutor of God, then for the mission received and for the salvation of his believers. For this reason, he worked more than all the other Apostles.

John Chrysostom says: "*we consider only the faults surrounding us and do not think at all about the grievances and wrongs we commit every day. Hence, our complaints. If we were to make an accurate calculation of the wrongs done in a single day, then we would see how many evils we are responsible for. Say no more: I do not know what ought to be done and therefore I am not guilty, if I do not do that. If you were to do all the things you know to be good, the others would be revealed to you in the end*". [23]

The awareness of the responsibility for the past mistakes gives a strong and permanent impetus, driving us towards progresses in the future, thus helping us advance in

the moral life. And, however high we may rise on the ground of our achievements, this conscience is always above them. It is colored with regret for the sins of the past, with discontent for the imperfection of the virtues achieved, a discontent sprung from the awareness that it would have been possible to work more and better, that what we have achieved is only something insufficient compared to what could have been achieved. In this regard, responsibility entails, as we said in the beginning, good works as well, because every virtue has an imperfection of it. Today's progress becomes an accusation for the past. No matter how many good deeds someone could do, he will feel that he has not done enough. "We are unworthy servants; we have done no more than we were obliged to do" (Luke 17:10). In fact, this is the correct and full meaning of what the Christian understands by humility. Therefore, one cannot talk about good deeds in excess. It is precisely here that the ever living dynamism characteristic of the Orthodoxy lies. From it, a powerful zeal is born, new decisions, for the good to get incarnated in all the actions of our individual and community life. The sense of responsibility is the needle with which God spurs our hearts incessantly; responsibility is His hand pulling us higher and higher, to Him [24].

Conclusion

Responsibility has, therefore, a double character: regret and dissatisfaction for the past deeds and unflinching confidence in one's possibilities for the future; it is awareness of one's sinfulness, yet without losing hope. In this sense, it can be counted as a virtue not in itself, as the others, but always remaining dissatisfied with the achievements of the other virtues, regretting the sins, while driving the virtues ahead, being a sort of engine for them.

The Holy Fathers strongly recommend the awareness of responsibility as a factor of progress in life. This awareness should not be exaggerated, in which case it could lead to discouragement and disillusionment. This cannot be counted as something unimportant either, in which case it would lead to indifference and recklessness. It ought to be well-reasoned, proportional to the mistakes and virtues committed, with one's talents and hierarchic level, and with all the other criteria specific of each person.

In this case, the awareness of responsibility also becomes a factor of cultural and material progress, in social life. Having this feeling, each man, as a member of the society, understands his mission, understands that the welfare of his fellows depend on him, too, that he also has his share of responsibility for his fellows' suffering. *This feeling always reminds every man that in the place he has in the society, he has the mission not to be served but to serve, not to exploit his brothers but to do good to all, not to satisfy his selfishness but to sacrifice himself for his fellows' good, as our Saviour Christ has served and has sacrificed Himself for the salvation and the welfare of all the people.* Accomplishing his work in this way, each one of us is contributing to the good progress of the society on the path of welfare and happiness desired by each of us. Thus, each one of us breaks his shell of life draining selfishness, comes back to life, becomes a brother to his fellows, realizing a social harmony in which each of us finds the environment needed to develop his personality to his advantage and to the benefit of the society he is part of. [25]

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