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The moral law versus the culture of sin

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Abstract. Sins touch human dignity. There is an undeniable connection between sin and human dignity. We were created for virtue, and sin robs us of the honor of people created in God's image. The fight against sin is a permanent part of the Christian life and it extends throughout our life. But sins bring damage not only to the perpetrator, but also on a social level. Sin takes away human's freedom, bringing him slavery. Sin thus ends up ruining the order of human life, inverting values, overturning them.

Keywords. The moral law, the culture of sin, conscience, the natural law

1. The role of conscience and the moral law in human’s relationship with his fellow people

Conscience, the Holy Fathers teach, is our guardian and judge. That is why God asks us to take care of our mind so that it remains pure¹. If bodily sins are more difficult to commit and require the fulfillment of certain conditions, on the other hand, mental sins are committed quickly, "as much as the human thought". That is why God gave us reason, so that we can control our thoughts and flee from sins. And Saint Basil the Great exhorts us to remember and to take care of the soul, so that by remembering all the defilement that has come upon it due to wickedness is removed and it shines with all the beauty of virtue. The human who examines himself will be able to see if he is following God's commandments and will no longer be proud, remembering his human nature².

¹ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great), Omilii la Hexaemeron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cavântări, (Homilies to Hexaemeron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), traducere, introducere, note și indica de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 1986, p. 365.
² Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great), Omilii la Hexaemeron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cavântări, (Homilies to Hexaemeron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 358.
Saint John Chrysostom often talks about the conscience placed by God in our nature. This made Abraham a righteous human, even though he had no teacher. The Christian keeps his conscience clean, doing things that are pleasing to God\(^3\).

The way Adam and Eve behaved after breaking the divine commandment shows that they had within them, from creation, the conscience, which called out to them and accused them of their sin. Since creation, human has received in himself the conscience, this accuser that cannot be absent from human, which cannot make a mistake, nor can it be deceived. And because we have in us this judge called conscience, it is enough to open the "doors of our conscience" and see this judge, located in our mind. Even if we can hide from all people the sin committed or the shameful deed, we cannot hide it from this accuser\(^4\).

Conscience will show itself as our judge, especially at the final judgment. Then she will remind us of all our sins, she will bring them before our eyes\(^5\).

2. **The natural moral law, the inner consciousness of good and evil**

God placed in His creatures, says Saint Basil the Great, the natural power to choose what is good and what is useful to them, what to do and what to avoid. As for people, they received the gift of reason and the illumination of the Spirit, by which to order their lives. Therefore, no human can be ignorant of his deeds\(^6\).

And the work of the virtues is accomplished through a teaching innate in our nature. Because no one has learned from someone what to do to hate the disease, nor what is necessary to avoid what upsets him, but our soul naturally avoids evil. In us, people are virtues that our soul accomplishes not through a human education, but are innate in our very nature. For example, no one teaches us to hate illness, but by nature we have repulsion towards what upsets us, just as the soul, without being taught by anyone, avoids evil\(^7\).

The natural law works in the believer through conscience, through the law of the mind, as the Holy Apostle Paul calls it. Our conscience becomes our "repository" of our knowledge of what is good and what is bad, building us up inside. Conscience is both the accuser and the judge of our bad deeds. It helps us to naturally discern between good and evil. And the people before the old law was given knew what was good and what was bad, what to do and what not to do, through the natural law written in their hearts. The natural law is in human nature itself and is divine law. In it nothing is doubtful. It is inscribed in the soul, manifested through consciousness, makes possible the distinction between good and evil, is linked to free will and

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3. **Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom), La Facere, Omilia XXXVI, (Homily XXXVI, on Genesis), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 22 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 22), traducere, introducere, note și indici de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic si de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 1989, p. 96.

4. **Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom), La Facere, Omilia XVII, (Homily XVII, on Genesis), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 22 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 22), p. 189.

5. **Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom), Cuvântul II la parabola despre bogatul nemilosiv și săracul Lazăr, (Word II to the parable about the unmerciful rich human and the poor Lazarus), traducere de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), în revista Mitropolia Olteniei (in the Metropolis of Oltenia journal), an (year) XXVIII, nr. 7-8/1976, p. 549.

6. **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great), Omilii la Hexaemeron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări, (Homilies to Hexaemeron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 153.

7. **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great), Omilii la Hexaemeron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări, (Homilies to Hexaemeron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 174.
belongs to human as a superior being. All these ideas can be found in the Chrysostomian teaching.

3. Sins affect the dignity of human

The Holy Fathers speak about the slavery of sins. There is an undeniable link between sin and human dignity. We were created for virtue, and sin robs us of our honor as people created in the image of God. The fight against sin is a permanent part of the Christian life and it extends throughout our life. In order to win, it is necessary not only to strive, but also to have a steadfast education, to be determined, in order to eradicate the disease of sin from the root. When human's mind thinks evil, his deeds will be correspondingly evil. And when the mind is directed to good, the deeds are virtuous, because they belong to the intention of the perpetrator. The entire sermon of St. Basil the Great is an exhortation to follow God, to free oneself from passions, to purify the heart and mind, the objective being the acquisition of salvation. When the Christian distances himself from the bonds of this worldly life, he also distances himself from the passions and evils that darkened his mind.

The fight of Saint Basil the Great is especially with the heavy sins in human life. He shows the consequences these have on the life of the Christian, trying to convince Christians to give them up. He combats pride in a homily on humility. He fights miserliness, in a speech about greed. He rises against anger, envy and drunkenness. For him, greed is not primarily related to food and drink, but above all to the love of riches and the clinging of the soul to the material ones. The merciless rich are rebuked, showing them the purpose for which God gave them the abundance of their possessions. Even sins committed out of ignorance bring guilt to the perpetrator.

But sins bring damage not only to the person of the perpetrator, but also on a social level. That is why the Great Hierarch urges their avoidance, in order not to become the cause of the suffering of fellow human beings. His sermon becomes the sermon of love of fellow human, and his exhortation is to communion. Because "he who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8, 34). As for the cause of sin, that is none other than the devil, who can only tempt, mislead, using people's weaknesses and desires. However, the freedom of choice belongs to human. The easiest and most diverse sin to commit is that of the tongue. When we are angry, the mouth accuses. Language often becomes a weapon, through which we work injustice. This is why Saint Basil the Great exhorts Christians to weep for their sins, to come to the knowledge of their mistakes and to torment their bodies with work and toil.

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8 Drd. Niculce Stoleru, „Învățătura despre Legea morală naturală în opera Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur” (The teaching about the natural moral law in the work of Saint John Chrysostom), in revista Studii Teologice (in the Theological Studies journal), seria a II-a (the second series), an (year) XXIV, nr. 3-4/1972, pp. 266-268.
9 ÎPS (Bishop) Nestor Vornicescu, „Aspecte ale desăvârșirii creștine în viața și opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare” (Aspects of Christian perfection in the life and work of Saint Basil the Great), in revista Ortodoxia (in the Orthodoxia journal), an (year) XXX, nr. 4/1978, p. 604; Pr. Dr. Constantin Băjău, „Trăirea virtuoasă după Sfântul Vasile cel Mare” (Virtuous experience according to Saint Basil the Great), in revista Mitropolia Olteniei (in the Metropolis of Oltenia journal), an (year) LII, nr. 1-2/2000, p. 95.
10 Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great), „Învățături morale (IV)” (Moral teachings (IV)), traducere de Preot Profesor (translation by Professor Priest) Nicolae Petrescu, in revista Mitropolia Olteniei (in the Metropolis of Oltenia journal), an (year) XXX, nr. 7-9/1978, p. 586.
11 Protop. Drd. Irineu Pop, „Învățăminte morale și sociale în opera și activitatea Sfântului Vasile cel Mare, necesare activității preoților în vremea noastră” (Moral and social teachings in the work and activity of Saint Basil the Great, necessary for the activity of priests in our time), in revista Studii Teologice (in the Theological Studies journal), seria a II-a (the second series), an (year) XXXVII, nr. 3-4/1985, p. 281.
More than any Church Father of the first four centuries, St. John Chrysostom speaks about the consequences of sins in the Christian’s life, about how much the perpetrator's human dignity suffers and about the slavery brought by sins in his life. Sins are a burden on souls. They bring annoyances, worries, dangers, intrigues, disturbances, anxieties. Admirable thing is the recognition of one's own mistakes, the persistent memory of sins, in the mind of human, which will protect him from falling into other mistakes.\(^\text{12}\)

Temperance becomes one of the means by which the Christian can gain his salvation, being closely linked to the work of the other virtues, giving them impetus and energy. On the horizontal level, temperance helps to preserve some social equity, and on the upward level, it lifts our soul to the sky.\(^\text{13}\)

The call of the Christian is to forgiveness, not to judgment. Therefore, let us not despise our fellow people, nor rebuke them, but advise them. Let us not speak ill of them in any way but let us teach them. By judging another, we show disrespect towards him, disregarding him as worthy, worthy to stay by our side. The reason for judging fellow people is false love towards them. In fact, if we loved them, considering them our brothers, we would not accuse them, we would not scold them, but we would advise and comfort them, convincing them of our good intentions and the fact that we wish them well and we respect them. We don't have the right to judge our fellow people because we don't know the mysteries of their lives. He who despises his fellow people will end up despising God as well, the One who shows us all such great love. Cain showed contempt for his brother and then came to despise God as well. In the same way, Joseph was despised by his brothers, who despised God. On the contrary, Abraham showed tolerance towards Lot and obedience to God. This is why we must not despise our fellow people, so that we do not come to despise God.\(^\text{14}\)

Sometimes people eat each other, wronging each other, blaming each other, defaming each other. If we do not guard our mouths, countless evils will spring from the words we speak. This is why we must not judge our neighbour. The talkative one should only talk about himself. If he wants to condemn someone, then he should condemn himself. Let him look at his weaknesses, and then he will no longer be so harsh with his fellow people. It is not those who speak evil that lose, but those who speak evil and who will be punished. Even if we tell the truth about someone who has done harm, we will still be punished for what we told them. For we must not condemn and judge the sins of others. Those who speak evil must be troubled and tremble because they will be dragged before the fearful judgment for what they have spoken. The human who speaks evil gathers evil treasure in his soul. There is also a good rebuke of the fellows, "according to justice", which is not started from hatred, in order to prevent him from falling into the abyss of sins. Therefore, let us not be lazy to rebuke others, nor be angry when we are rebuked, but let us do everything in our power to save them from "soul death". A good scolding often brings about the desired correction. That is why the scolded human should not

\(^\text{12}\) Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom), *La Matei, Omilia XXXVIII* (Homily XXXVIII in Matthew), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), traducere, introducere, note și indici de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misie al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 1994, p. 472.


\(^\text{14}\) Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom), *La Matei, Omilia XXIII* (Homily XXIII in Matthew), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), pp. 294-295.
be disturbed, and the one who argues should not make fun of himself but should give his advice gently. We must be able to endure the offenses of others, knowing that we are also sinners, humbling ourselves without being upset, without getting angry.\(^\text{15}\)

The highest dignity of human is the very fact that he was created by God in His image. Human is thus the crown of the divine creation, he is the only creature that God made "in His own image" and blessed him to be the master of the whole world. The Holy Fathers highlighted the privileged role of human in the world. At the same time, they highlighted the equality of people, which comes from the fact that all people are bearers of God's image, and all are worthy of being respected. Hence the emphasis on human dignity, an idea that we often encounter in the patristic works.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Holy Fathers oppose the moral law to a culture of sin. They emphasize the role of conscience and the moral law in human's relationship with his peers. Conscience, they teach, is our guardian and judge. That is why God asks us to take care of our mind so that it remains pure. Since creation, human has received in himself the conscience, this accuser that cannot be absent from human, which cannot make a mistake, nor can it be deceived. Conscience will show itself as our judge, especially at the final judgment. God placed in His creatures the natural power to choose what is good and what is useful to them. In our conscience there is a feeling that makes virtue pleasant and vice abhorrent. It depends on the choice of our will. The natural law is in human nature itself and is divine law.

Sins affect human dignity, and they are criticized by the Holy Fathers of the first four centuries. They speak of envy, hatred, anger, drunkenness, laziness, greed (as a remedy for greed, the Holy Fathers speak of temperance, so necessary for the pious human), usury, miserliness, superstitions and suicide. Offending one's peers is proof of disrespect and contempt for them. Even sinful human is not to be reproached. He who despises his fellow people will end up despising God as well. Seemingly small sins, such as blasphemy, lying, backbiting, are not so small. They become stains on the face of the soul and end up depriving human of the kingdom of heaven. Judging one's fellow human, a seemingly unimportant act, does great harm to our fellow people. Judgment is an obstacle to loving one's fellow human. The call of the Christian is to forgiveness, not to judgment. Therefore, let us not despise our fellow people, nor rebuke them, but advise them. Let us not speak ill of them in any way but let us teach them.

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