

# The Role of the Social Assistant Worker in Romania and the Involvement of the Church

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**ABSTRACT:** In Romania, social assistance is the totality of measures taken by the state, the Church and other non-governmental organizations to support people in special situations of difficulty due to poor mental or physical conditions such as chronic diseases, accidents, natural disasters, age and others, in order to overcome the state of difficulty. Social assistance in the form of social policies and the implementation of these actions in the territory is done by applying legislative regulations, which focus on people in difficulty. The social assistant worker must know the main forms of the social assistance system, is the most important normative acts of the moment and the institutions that deal with their provision. According to Father Stăniloae “deeds are the manifestations of the loving relationship between person and person” (Stăniloae 2003, 244). The importance of good works is based on the conception of God and man as personal realities.

**KEYWORDS:** Romania, social assistance, social assistant worker

## **Introduction**

Epidemic and pandemic are words that cause fear. I am thinking of an overworked health system, protective masks and an increase in deaths. These associations are understandable but have nothing in common with the definition of the two terms.

We talk about an epidemic when a certain disease occurs unnaturally frequently, in a certain region, in a limited period of time. A pandemic is an epidemic that spreads beyond the borders of a state or a continent. In our case it is a pandemic called Covid-19.

The struggle in hospitals is supported by the effort of the social worker who, by carrying out the profession, ensures the absolute balance necessary for the life of the social worker. When the isolation given by the conditions of the Covid epidemic has cut off any connection between people, the only help remains in volunteers but especially in the social worker who can fight for a normal life of those who need support. Involvement is one of the great achievements of the entire social assistance system and the support given by the state, the Church and people of good faith has proved to be absolutely necessary because there are people who actually depend on the support given.

The life of the social worker was made more difficult by his own exposure to the virus, the establishment of barriers given by the isolation of target groups but the adaptation to reality could be done only by giving and worshipping work in the service of God and for the benefit of suffering people.

## **The Church’s involvement in social assistance**

The construction of new churches and chapels, monasteries and hermitages, which can be found today in Romania, is permanently accompanied by the creation of social and philanthropic structures, such as: canteens for the poor, orphaned or abandoned children’s homes, nursing homes and social health centers.

The economic crisis, unemployment, health problems, loneliness and suffering urge our Church to be, above all, sensitive to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and, at the same time, in the social and philanthropic activity of the Church. Christ the sufferer in every human being in this world calls Christ the servant to manifest himself iconically in the social work of

Christians, that is, Christ is present in both the sufferer and the one who alleviates suffering. In this connection, it can be said that liturgical prayer has a social dimension (often invisible but real), just as the social work of Christians has a liturgical dimension in the love of God. Today we must both extend the liturgical prayers in the philanthropic work and unite the social work with the prayer.

The Church's involvement in social assistance is both a spiritual vocation and a practical necessity. The social work of the Church derives from the Gospel of the love of Christ for all men and from the Holy Liturgy of the Church, in which the merciful and sacrificial love of Christ for the salvation of men is celebrated. This explains the multitude of charitable institutions or social assistance established or patronized by the Church over the centuries, often with the support of Christian emperors, kings and rulers, but also with the support of all the merciful and generous, with greater or more modest help.

The one who opens the way in social terms is Saint Basil who lays the foundations of the famous Vasiliade, a social assistance complex, conceived as a real fortress, next to the fortress itself, with hospitals, orphanages, guest houses, schools and workshops, with the church, and next to it a bishop's seat and housing for monks. The placement of the Church in the center of the city indicates that the Christian service is born of the Liturgy. The Church does not withdraw from the world, but is present and active, where man suffers and is wronged. In addition to its spiritual mission, the patristic Church thus fulfilled an important humanitarian, Samaritan function, remaining an example for the Church's effort today in its openness to the world. The social activity of Saint Basil was animated by an incomparable love for God and people, for the realization of human communion, according to the supreme model of the communion of the Holy Trinity. As a monk and great ascetic, St. Basil was one of the great organizers of monastic life.

The monastic model established by Saint Basil has a strong social extension, of service in the social space. Monks serve each other in the monastic community, but in this way, they serve the entire social community, without remaining isolated in a space outside the world in which they live. The heyday of charity is reached by the amazing philanthropic work of Saint Basil the Great, a model of Christian love and organization. St. Basil the Great organized social assistance in the Church since his pastorate as a priest. He built a complete charitable institution, which remained unique in its own way, even in the history of Christianity. The great social assistance establishment near Caesarea Cappadocia, called Vasiliada (Câdea 2010, 67), was founded in 369-370 (Vătămanu 1969, 301) and inaugurated in 374, being invited by St. Gregory of Nazianzus who gave a famous speech on this occasion (Ioniță 1983, 13).

St. Basil the Great generalized his initiative, asking his choir bishops to establish settlements for the sick and poor, as he did in Caesarea. St. Basil the Great, in addition to giving his faithful the social assistance establishment, to set it up, endow it and lead it, to put in it the rest of the wealth and the gift of the heart, did something more: he gave him all his soul, all his care, all the time and his joy as a father, and through this he transforms the sporadic and accidental character of the Christian charity into an institution of the church, permanent and organized (Ioniță 1983, 13).

The revolutionary novelty that the creator of Vasiliada offers to the society in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, is that every man, and first of all those who did not have the means of subsistence, not only had the daily bread insured in the Christian society, but they found here the possibility of asserting themselves according to the gifts and inclinations of each. Through such ideas, Christianity could no longer fear the competition of dying paganism, structured on social discrimination. St. Basil the Great was a preacher of almsgiving and his actions were widely debated in sermons.

According to Father Stăniloae, "deeds are the manifestations of the loving relationship between person and person" (Stăniloae 2003, 244). The importance of good works is based on the conception of God and man as personal realities. In this context, "every good deed is an

opening in love to another or to several others, to the world, from the opening which Christ himself has to the virtuous” (Radu 2007, 82). Salvation can in no way be seen outside the facts. Man is called to respond to God's love by works, which are also a sign of his righteousness. As a person, man cannot remain insensitive to the love of God. Man manifests this love; it is open to God with whom he is in dialogue.

In Romania, social assistance is the totality of measures taken by the state, the Church and other non-governmental organizations to support people in special situations of difficulty due to poor mental or physical conditions such as chronic diseases, accidents, natural disasters, age and others, in order to overcome the state of difficulty.

### **The role of the social assistant worker and the social assistance legislation**

Social assistance in the form of social policies and the implementation of these actions in the territory is done by applying legislative regulations, which focus on people in difficulty. The social worker must know the main forms of the social assistance system and the institutions that deal with them.

According to Buzducea (2005), the mission of the social worker is to participate in solving community social problems, ensuring a decent minimum standard of living and increasing the quality of life of vulnerable social groups, in improving the social functioning of people. Hence the need for the social worker to have certain specific skills, but also theoretical knowledge (psychology, sociology, law etc.), but, not least, to have a vocation. In fact, this is a prerequisite for practicing this profession.

According to the sociologist Buzducea (2005), in general, the values on which the social worker should base the help process are respect for the person and his dignity, respect for privacy, respect for confidentiality, respect for the right to choice and self-determination of the client, but also respect for traditions and the local cultural model, cooperation with local social actors and adapting the intervention to the specifics of the community and its adequacy according to its cultural values.

With regard to social responsibilities, the social worker must:

- a) to advocate for the improvement of social conditions in order to satisfy basic human needs and to promote social justice;
- b) to act in order to facilitate the access to specific services and the possibility to choose for the vulnerable, disadvantaged or in difficulty persons;
- c) to promote conditions that encourage respect for social and cultural diversity;
- d) to promote policies and practices that encourage awareness and respect for human diversity;
- e) to facilitate and inform the public about the participation in community life and the social changes that take place.

The state has assumed the main role in the training of social workers, starting with their schooling in prestigious institutions, their training through postgraduate and professional courses and by setting up the National College of Social Workers. The mission of the social worker is to participate in solving community social problems, ensuring a decent minimum standard of living and increasing the quality of life (Lazăr 2015, 7).

The professional vocation of the social worker is to contribute to the well-being and self-realization of the human being. The social worker has duties such as assisting people who are going through difficult times in life, developing their own personal skills to deal creatively and effectively with problems, mobilizing community resources to support those in difficulty, participating in initiating, developing and implementing policy measures social participation in the field and active participation in social life.

Social assistance is a vast field of activity that has well-developed and well-founded legislative regulations. In our country the most important is Law 292/2011 - the law on social

assistance (Legislativ/Asistentă socială, 2018). Later, Law no. 231/2020 for completing the Social Assistance Law no. 292/2011 (M. Of. nr. 1036/2020).

Government Decision no. 797/2017 on the approval of the framework regulations for the organization and functioning of public social assistance services and the indicative staff structure, Law no. 197/2012 on quality assurance in the field of social assistance, Government Decision no. 08/2011 on granting the levels of professional competence of social workers, Order no. 1313/2011 on the approval of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy on reform in the field of general assistance, Government Decision no. 1826/2005 for the approval of the National Strategy for the development of social services, Government Decision no. 539/2005 for the approval of the Nomenclature of Social Assistance Institutions and of the indicative staff structure, of the Framework Regulation for the organization and functioning of Social Assistance Institutions, as well as of the Methodological Norms for applying the provisions of Government Ordinance no. 68/2003 on social services (updated) and Law 466/2004 on the status of the assistant socially forms as a whole the basic legislative regulations of Romania.

The rule imposed by the quarantine of social workers in social centers, although respected, was not generally and unanimously accepted. It can be seen that the individual demand was high and with a profound impact on social workers. The social assistance system has been subjected to a functional stress due to the lack of staff reserves and the decrease of work capacity due to the illness of its own staff.

Social assistance directly felt the blockade at the national level as an effect of the effort to combat the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). Among the issues highlighted were:

- The effect of the isolation imposed on residential care for the elderly, the occurrence of anxiety and even paranoia in people but especially for those suffering from mental problems;
- Serious impairment of social activity by changing habits, affecting the upbringing and education of children, measures against religious freedom;
- The creation of moral blockages due to the impossibility of access, the embracing of loved ones hospitalized in COVID wards, intensive care or the Christian burial of those who died during the pandemic, the further isolation of those in the environment with restrictions on freedom and movement (prisons, asylums, militarized institutions, etc.);
- “Solving the isolation in the house” for those who do not have a house;
- Exposure in the absence of protective equipment;
- Individualized existential crises were forgotten in the context of the crisis of hospital beds and ventilators in ATI wards.

## Conclusions

In this moment of relative calm, of uncertainty given by the end of the pandemic, we can show the good things given by the legislative adaptations to the concrete situations, the legislative coherence in the field, the immense effort of the workers in the field that must be recognized and respected. Things that have not gone well can be solved in time through the joint effort of social workers, employers, professional associations and policy makers. Using the results of social (socio-human) studies carried out on the basis of adequate scientific theoretical basis, the politician can anticipate and regulate a coherent legislation in support of all forces participating in the social act that has the beneficiary in the foreground and can take care of those who do not to overcome alone in the face of social problems (old age, medical, economic, security etc.).

The social worker is directly linked to ethical values assumed as respect, empathy and compassion for the people he treats, so the difficulties in providing social services have made him vulnerable, exhausted physically and emotionally. These ethical implications are of a new

nature, unknown before the pandemic and they need to be rethought so as to remove the serious effects and inequities suffered by people during the pandemic. The effect of globalization acquires new valences in the face of the new challenges posed by the pandemic, social workers being now generally affected by the same ethical and economic problems.

An indefatigable guide in grace and spirit is I.P.S. Teodosie, the archbishop of Tomis, who through his charitable actions is closer to the heart of the needy. His Holiness puts clarity of thought in the service of the common good, brings relief to the oppressed (newly built and sanctified social settlements), support of the homeless, but especially creates the support of uniting the power of those who want to do a good deed under the sign of blessing.

In everyday life, people in need seek support in the family, society, God and social assistance. Social workers have social and philanthropic activities in addition to professional ones. The love of one's neighbor with faith in God brings with it all the qualities of a good social worker, and the essence of the code of ethics is based on the legitimacy of their actions.

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