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Christian Churches and the Actual Economic Crisis – a Few Reflections

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Abstract

This paper deals with some aspects of the economic crisis from a church perspective. It accredits the idea that the church as a long standing institution is able to face more successfully the economic crisis due to its experience and stability based on its permanent values and solid estate. It reflects also on the spiritual and ecumenical dimensions of the economic crisis and indicates a few possible strategies to overcome the economic crisis, from an ecclesial perspective.

Keywords

economic crisis from a church perspective, spiritual and pastoral dimensions of the economic crisis, economic crisis and churches as long standing institutions

Introduction

The actual economic crisis we are going through affects the lives of people all around us and also the Christian churches as institutions. Annual financial reports presented by different churches are an evidence for that. Also many churches were so affected by the economic crisis at all levels that they were forced to drastically reduce their staff, especially the administrative ones

in their headquarters and to limit their programmatic activities. Parishes were also forced to reduce both their staff and activities, due to financial constraints. Weak economy and high unemployment rates mean fewer resources for the believers and eventually less material contributions to their respective churches. For churches, members with low income means less potential to support direct their churches.

In this short paper I will try to focus on the following aspects of the economic crisis and its impact on the life of Christian churches: how could churches best respond locally to the challenges of the economic crisis? Are there some opportunities opened by the economic crisis or we can speak only about challenges and negative effects? This paper will try to argue, based on some examples, that economic crisis proved that solid and well established institutions like the churches faced more successfully the actual economic crisis than other institutions. There are also some spiritual dimensions of the economic crisis that need to be taken into consideration. Also, the economic crisis is a proof for Christian solidarity both between churches and between members of the same church. Is it possible to express ecumenical solidarity in time of economic crisis? I mean a solidarity that goes beyond nice and kind messages and takes concrete actions. The economic crisis touched especially the most vulnerable categories of our societies: migrants, people with a low level of education and income, women and children. These categories need a special attention from Christian churches. Are the Christian churches ready to support them or are they more concerned to save and keep their own bureaucratic structures? These are the aspects that I shall try to briefly describe and approach in this paper and eventually to suggest a few possible actions that might be helpful for those who deal with this concern.

As a bi-millenary institution, the Church faced several economic crises

Obviously the economic crisis we are facing today is not the first one in the history and therefore is not the first which is faced by the Christian churches. Church History provides us with plenty of examples in which the Church has been throughout history at the side of the “widow, orphan, and alien” i. e. of the most vulnerable poor. I would like to give here only two examples of church involvement in helping people in need and to

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indicate the lectures we can learn from Church Fathers in the field of facing economic crisis.

The first example I would like to highlight here is a biblical one and it describes a supply initiative of the Early Church. The book of Acts informs us about the initiative of Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to organize a collection among the Christian community in Antioch in order to support the community in Jerusalem.¹ The supply of the church of Antioch to the church of Jerusalem is mentioned also by Euseb of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*.² It is one of the first examples that highlights that the first Christians were deeply committed to help each other in order to overcome challenges represented by famine or other crisis.

The second example I choose to present is taken from the Ecclesiastical history of Euseb of Caesarea and presents the involvement of Christians in supporting those affected by a famine which devastated the cities of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire in the time of Maximinus. Euseb describes firstly the dimensions of the famine that affected big cities of the East:

“5. Those who died in the cities were innumerable, and those who died in the country and villages were still more. So that the tax lists which formerly included a great rural population were almost entirely wiped out; nearly all being speedily destroyed by famine and pestilence.

6. Some, therefore, desired to dispose of their most precious things to those who were better supplied, in return for the small-

¹ See Acts 11: 25-30: “25. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26. and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. 27. During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius). 29. The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30. This they did, sending their gifts to the elders by Barbara and Saul.” (*Holy Bible. New International Version*, New York International Bible Society, 1973).

² “And Luke, in the Acts, after mentioning the famine in the time of Claudius, and stating that the brethren of Antioch, each according to his ability, sent to the brethren of Judea by the hands of Paul and Barnabas, adds the following account ...” (*The Church History of Euseb*, I, VIII, 2, trad. By Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 201, p. 136.

est morsel of food, and others, selling their possessions little by little, fell into the last extremity of want. Some, chewing wisps of hay and recklessly eating noxious herbs, undermined and ruined their constitutions.

7. And some of the high-born women in the cities, driven by want to shameful extremities, went forth into the market-places to beg, giving evidence of their former liberal culture by the modesty of their appearance and the decency of their apparel.

8. Some, wasted away like ghosts and at the very point of death, stumbled and tottered here and there, and too weak to stand fell down in the middle of the streets; lying stretched out at full length they begged that a small morsel of food might be given them, and with their last gasp they cried out Hunger! having strength only for this most painful cry.

9. But others, who seemed to be better supplied, astonished at the multitude of the beggars, after giving away large quantities, finally became hard and relentless, expecting that they themselves also would soon suffer the same calamities as those who begged. So that in the midst of the market-places and lanes, dead and naked bodies lay unburied for many days, presenting the most lamentable spectacle to those that beheld them.

10. Some also became food for dogs, on which account the survivors began to kill the dogs, lest they should become mad and should go to devouring men.

11. But still worse was the pestilence which consumed entire houses and families, and especially those whom the famine was not able to destroy because of their abundance of food. Thus men of wealth, rulers and governors and multitudes in office, as if left by the famine on purpose for the pestilence, suffered swift and speedy death. Every place therefore was full of lamentation; in every lane and market-place and street there was nothing else to be seen or heard than tears, with the customary instruments and the voices of the mourners.

12. In this way death, waging war with these two weapons, pestilence and famine, destroyed whole families in a short time, so that one could see two or three dead bodies carried out at once.

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13. Such were the rewards of the boasting of Maximinus and of the measures of the cities against us. Then did the evidences of the universal zeal and piety of the Christians become manifest to all the heathen.”

It describes thereafter the way how the Christians were involved in supporting those in need and the positive effect of such a behavior for the public image of the Christians and for the success of their mission:

“14. For they alone in the midst of such ills showed their sympathy and humanity by their deeds. Every day some continued caring for and burying the dead, for there were multitudes who had no one to care for them; others collected in one place those who were afflicted by the famine, throughout the entire city, and gave bread to them all; so that the thing became noised abroad among all men, and they glorified the God of the Christians; and, convinced by the facts themselves, confessed that they alone were truly pious and religious.”³

An important approach of the economic crisis which was experienced in the Antiquity by the Church is recorded in the writings of the Church Fathers. Their approaches regarding such challenging are incredibly actual also today.⁴

The economic crisis as a spiritual dimension

The introduction of this paper emphasized in a general manner that the economic crisis deeply affected the life of the Christian churches. This is a reality that we all experienced at the different levels of the churches we are active in. Some statistics offered by church magazines and newspapers from the United States of America shows that at a survey that asked

³ *The Church History of Euseb*, IX, VIII, (see the previous footnote), p. 581.

⁴ See for example Adolf Martin Ritter, *Perspektivendiakonischen Handelns im Werk des Heiligen Basilius des Grossen in Însemnătatea vieții și operei Sfântului Vasile cel Mare pentru misiunea și viața Bisericii* (I. M. Iecliu and D. Buda eds.), Sibiu, 2013. See also Daniel Buda, *Poverty in Antioch at the end of 4th Century and Poverty Today: Some reflections based on St. John Chrysostom's Writings and other Sources in sustainable alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Eco-justice*, în vol. *Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Eco-justice* vol. 1, SAPREJ - 12, Lucas A. Andrianos (ed.), Orthodox Academy of Crete, Chania, 2013, p. 207-219.

churches how they fared during economic recession, nearly 75 percent said “well” or “very well”. The majority of congregations (65 percent) reported that their finances either remained the same or improved in giving from 2010 to 2011, after the worst of the recession. Also one-third of the churches said their finances “worsened” during the economic slump. Questioned about their revenues in relationship with the rate of inflation between 2007-2011, 3100 respondents from the United States of America responded as following: 52% affirmed that the revenues did not keep pace with inflation; 22,6 % that the revenues kept pace with inflation; 16,8 % responded that revenues were ahead of inflation and 8.7% preferred not to answer.⁵ These results might surprise many people. Specialists affirmed, after analysing these statistics, that in the United States of America: “Congregations are remarkably resilient. There are still many in need, but it appears that the majority we surveyed are recovering from the worst of the Great Recession.”⁶ This statistics emphasize the strong attachment of the people to their churches. The fact that the churches are able to walk out of the economic crisis is also due to the fact that they are generally well-established institutions with properties which are income generating and able to sustain the pastoral and diaconal activities of churches. This economic crisis showed to the world that in some cases the churches saved the fate of some nations (see the case of Cyprus).

A Free Church pastor describes the role of the priest, pastor or minister in economic crisis situation as the following:

“Persons facing job loss, sudden financial ruin, home foreclosure, the prospect of homelessness, or a multitude of other economically related problems usually feel overwhelmed and anxious. They may feel that their world is crashing down around them. At such a time, it is incredibly helpful to know that one is not facing this tidal wave all alone. The presence of one’s pastor provides this reassurance.”⁷

Clergy are called to witness to their parishioners the hope as a Christian virtue. They have to highlight the fact that our life has a spiritual dimension

⁵ *Churches weather the recession* in *Christian Century*, April 3, 2013, p. 14.

⁶ The quotation belongs to Una Osili, research director for the School of Philanthropy quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷ Ruth Lofgren Rosell, *Pastoral Care During Economic Crisis* in *Review and Expositor* 107, Fall 2010, p. 499-512; here p. 501.

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which goes beyond this material world. The economic crisis is a good opportunity to remind to our people that this world is perishable and that we as Christian are looking for a reality that goes beyond it.

Especially in a modern society,

“in order to offer pastoral presence to those in economic crisis, it is essential to have done our own soul work of examining our biases and prejudices against those who are poor. Such an examination calls for replacing classism and injustices with the compassion and acceptance reflected in Jesus Christ. It is only then that we are ready to receive one in economic crisis into the safety of our non-judgmental, compassionate presence.”⁸

The actual economic crisis touched people who were thinking that poverty cannot affect them. For an authentic Christian such an experience necessarily implies spiritual dimensions. It could be a painful but useful exercise of humbleness and of fragility of the stability provided by things belonging to this world.

Modern pastoral care during economic crisis should include assistance in going through the trauma of losing jobs and, more important, support for finding a new one, advice in stabilizing the financial situation of families affected by the economic crisis, prevention work to prevent and reduce depression. All these are really necessary and those communities which are able to provide them, perhaps in collaboration with psychologists, sociologists and other specialist, is more than meaningful to do so. But the economic crisis certainly offers a good opportunity for re-evaluating life values and goals. It is good to remind us, for instance, that Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, talks about the futility of vanity. Those who lost many good should be reminded that in similar situation Job had said: “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the Lord be praised.” (Job 1:21).

There are authors who list under possible “moral implications” of the economic crisis: people joining churches because they need assistance; conscious and unconscious perceptions of individuals being treated differently because they do not have the resources to give to the church; people in need of assistance being told no help is available; in addition to anger from those in need because they were brought up to believe church is where one goes for assistance.⁹

⁸ R. L. Rosell, *Pastoral Care during Economic Crisis*, p. 503.

⁹ Yvette Gates, *The Effect of the Economic Crisis on the Church in Review and Expositor*, 107, winter 2010, p. 81-86; here p. 84.

All these aspects are real part of the reality created by economic crisis. As Orthodox, we can only look at the possible positive implications of such “moral implications”: some of those who were helped in need by the churches, even if they joined to church for opportunism, might become faithful members of the church.

It is evident that the economic crisis can be regarded as a crisis of values.¹⁰ We all, including the churches need to reflect on what values mean and it is a serious invitation to return to the genuine idea that the spiritual values prevail over the material values. These are just some of the possible positive spiritual implication of the economic crisis.

Ecumenical solidarity in time of economic crisis

The economic crisis offered new possibilities for improving the connections not only between members of the same church or between churches as institutions and their members, but also between churches. It is well-known that the ecumenical institutions are facing great financial crisis. It is said that the financial crisis of the ecumenical organization is caused by the fact that their member churches are facing financial crisis. There are also other opinions that the crisis of ecumenism in general has other causes.¹¹ However, the economic crisis offers to churches real opportunities to help each other, not only with nice and moving messages of support, but supporting each other in a concrete way.

A good example in this sense is a solidarity visit that was conducted by the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and the General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches to Greece in November 2012. Both the (Orthodox) Church of Greece which is the majority church

¹⁰ See Rebecca Todd Peters, *Examining the Economic Crisis as a Crisis of Values in Interpretation* 65:2, April, 2011, p. 154-166.

¹¹ Metropolitan Hilarion in his keynote address presented at the 10th General Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea had questioned the idea that the WCC is facing financial problems which are commonly connected with the “world economic crisis.” He suggested that the financial problems of the WCC are rather linked with its inability to re-shape in order to address the real challenges of our times. (Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, *The Voice of the Church Must be Prophetic in The Ecumenical Review* 65: 4 , 2013, p. 490).

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in Greece and the Evangelical Church of Greece which represents a small minority were visited by a joined delegation formed by leaders of different churches.¹² The program of the visit included meetings with church leaders and representatives of the Greek government and visits to different aid projects run by the Greek churches. After the visit, the two ecumenical organizations issued a letter addressed to the members of the European Union appealing for a just and sustainable solution to the crisis in Greece.

The damages of the economic crisis are most visible at the level of vulnerable categories

It is well-known that the economic crisis affects especially vulnerable categories of society: women, children and migrants. I will not refer to the situation of women and children, but only of the one of the migrants, from European perspective.

The future belongs to those churches that are able to welcome and integrate migrants in their own structures. Such integration is possible only if there are a clear and coherent policy motivated by Christian love at all levels of Christian churches. Leadership of respective churches and especially local communities are called to welcome and integrate migrants of their own confessional family within their own structures and, where possible, to evangelize those with a non-Christian and/or secular background. Such an approach might have positive impact on the need of migrant's integration in the society and on increasing tolerance regarding migrants.

An American political scientist at Gordon College, Ruth Melkonian-Hoover wrote that “religious groups are major engines of socialization and assimilation. They impart civil skills and increase voluntarism – the stuff of social capital.” In 2006, an immigration survey found that Americans with high religious commitment were more likely to befriend immigrants, regardless of the immigrant's legal status.”¹³

¹² <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/cec-and-wcc-challenge-eu-to-be-in-solidarity-with-greece>

¹³ *The Soul of the Border Crisis. Local churches are key in fixing the immigration mess in Christianity Today*, 53:6, June 2009, p. 18.

Last but not list, the church needs to have a realistic approach and to do its best, while however realizing that it cannot solve all the problems of the society it is living in.¹⁴

A few possible conclusions

1. In its bi-millenary history, the church gathered a unique experience in facing economic crisis. This experience as well as the fact that the churches are generally well-established institutions and possess real estate and sustainable properties makes them overcoming easier their economic difficulties. The real mission of the church in such situations is to be at the side of the people both with material aid, but especially with spiritual one;
2. The economic crisis represents a serious challenge for churches as institutions and for their members. Special pastoral care and activities are required in such needy situations. However, there is a spiritual dimension of the economic crisis which can help by improving a more genuine Christian understanding of values and of attitude regarding material world;
3. The economic crisis is a challenge also for ecumenical institutions and ecumenism in general. It offers a good opportunity for showing Christian solidarity both between churches and churches and ecumenical partners and organizations;
4. The economic crisis affects especially those vulnerable categories of our churches and societies: migrants, women and children. The duty of the church is to support especially these categories in order to be prophetic.

¹⁴ For a realistic approach see Yvette Gates, *The Effect of the Economic Crisis*, p. 86: „How can the church remain true to its call mandated by Jesus Christ and still be effective in these difficult economic times? First, it must realize that it cannot help everyone all the time. Second, it should be available to do the best it can in helping those in need and be forthright about what it is not able to do. Next, it should realize that members and non-members will become angry and frustrated if their needs are not met. When conflicts arise it is imperative that the church maintain spiritual and emotional boundaries by realizing that anger is not really focused at the church but instead at the demanding economic situations. Lastly, it must maintain an active and consistent spiritual life which will prove fruitful in these testing economic times.”