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## Parish Leadership

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### PARISH LEADERSHIP. A PROTESTANT MINORITY PERSPECTIVE FROM EASTERN EUROPE/ROMANIA

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#### **Introduction**<sup>1</sup>

To write about the responsibilities of a pastor, of a minister, from a perspective of serving in a post-communist country is nearly one ‘impossible possibility’ – to quote Karl Barth’s words. In a society of permanent transition, values such as responsibility or even responsible leadership are not highly regarded. In this particular area theological ethics has a monumental task to accomplish in the people’s mindset.

In this article I will proceed as follows: I will initially discuss the minister’s responsibility in general and the viewpoint of serving in a minority protestant church. Second, I will present various types of pastors (‘leaders’) based on one of my empirical studies. While this empirical study may not be representative for all post-communist environments, it does reflect the reality of such a society in Romania. Finally, I will formulate some conclusions to ponder. Prior to the first section, I must provide background, clarification, and context. The Reformed Church in Romania (RCR) is a protestant church with very strong Calvinistic and Presbyterian traditions. Thus, the RCR is in fact part of the Western Protestant world. This contact, the tradition of the church, as well as the very close contact with the Reformed Church in Hungary (the RCR was part of the Hungarian Reformed Church until the First World War) determine this situation.

The RCR functions in a country in which more than 80 percent of the population are members of the Romanian Orthodox Church. This creates both a relationship of conflict and, surprisingly, of dialogue with the Orthodox Church. In addition, due to their standing in Romanian society, the members of the RCR are not only a minority from a religious point of view but also from one based on nationality and culture as well. This special situation then determines the nature of the life and work of our church in Romania. For example, some tasks which, in a Western society, would be assumed by the State, are expected to be assumed by the church. As such, the RCR has developed one eminent political theology which has as its foundation the tradition from the Reformation.

## 1. Theological Foundation of Responsibility

What are the sources of the understanding of ministerial responsibility in the RCR? Ministerial responsibility as the responsibility of pastors, is not a primary theme in Hungarian Reformed theological ethics. The most often cited theological works on ethics do not mention the issue of responsibility. One can wonder how this is possible?

One possible explanation is that theologians of the past (especially in the 20th century) argued that responsibility is solely God's responsibility. This is not my view. Though it is a fact that the ancient Greeks considered responsibility to be an essential attribute of the gods, Aristotle writes in his *Ethics* extensively about this theme.<sup>2</sup> As we study the history of ethics and its development across centuries, the connection between the notion of responsibility and freedom is changing in an interesting manner. In humanism the notion of freedom started to be linked more and more to the one of responsibility. The different forms of ethics of responsibility are based on this link between responsibility and freedom.

However, in regards to theological ethics, we should ask whether this link between responsibility and freedom is the most important one. The RCR ethics has been very much influenced by the Swiss reformed theologians Emil Brunner (1889-1966) and Karl Barth (1886-1968). They link responsibility with sin. Barth speaks about responsibility in the context of an existential sin – a specific element of Christian ethics. In Brunner's understanding, by committing the original sin, man did not lose his/her freedom, but personal freedom was changed into formal freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Brunner gives three definitions of responsibility in his anthropology. The first: responsibility is the definition of human existence. His argument originates from the responses humans need to give to God's questions – responses that form the foundation of Christian love. The second: responsibility is an obligation of man, after falling into sin. The third definition of responsibility is related to the experience of freedom in Christ, and has an eschatological dimension.<sup>4</sup> This eschatological dimension of responsibility and its close connection with the responsibility to God, is also underlined in the theology of Karl Barth, the other main source of the RCR's ethics. He speaks in his main work about the man who has to be responsible in God's 'court of law'. The man who needs to stand in God's 'court of law' – and he calls him the 'Real Man' is in fact in his interpretation, Jesus Christ. This, however, does not absolve us from the duty of every-day self-examination in our lives.<sup>5</sup>

Barth and Brunner as the two main sources indicate the direction of understanding of pastoral responsibility in the theology of the RCR.

In conclusion, pastoral responsibility in the understanding of RCR theology is strongly connected with the issue of self-examination.

## **2. Pastoral and Political Responsibility of Pastors**

The self-understanding in the RCR stands on strong biblical foundation. This biblical foundation is obviously the source of moral and ethical judgement. As we look closely at the biblical message, we are faced with a certain form of the prophet's responsibility in pastoral care.<sup>6</sup> The classical biblical witness is Num 18:23 about the special responsibility of the Levites. They have received a special mission from God and at the same time, a special responsibility. In the same sense, we face the problem of responsibility in 1 Sam 3:11: Responsibility is in all situations linked to God. In this sense we read about the special responsibility of the prophets in 2 Sam 12, Lam 2:14, Ezek 3:16-21.

The same understanding of responsibility is described in the New Testament, specifically in Matt 16:11-12, 18:17-18,28; Luke 10:17 and also in many verses in the Corpus Paulinum. The Bible gives us a special model of pastoral responsibility, which is strongly linked to God. It is very important in this context, that the priest/prophet has to know and to utilise the special experiences of his own community. This essential element of the biblical message is characteristic for the understanding of the responsible parish-leadership in the RCR.

In the RCR there are two confessions of faith that are mandatory for the Church: the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Second Helvetic Confession*, both from the times of Reformation. Due to the Calvinist tradition, Calvin's main publication *Institutio Christianae Religionis* also plays an important role in defining the role of pastoral responsibility. In the first document we cannot find any special remarks about human responsibility. Only the classical form in question 83 speaks about the 'power of the keys', meaning in the Churches of the Reformation the work of the whole congregation, not just of the pastors. In the second document we find a chapter (§ 18) about the 'servant of the Church'. In this context we also face the problem of the special responsibility of pastors. This responsibility is given from God and strongly connected to His grace. The same idea can be found in Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (IV/3,6;3,8;3,12). The biblical message was strongly emphasised during the Reformation and it became the foundation for the understanding of responsible pastoral leadership in the RCR.

Until now I spoke about the responsibility of parish-leadership and sources that determine the understanding of the church in the reality of the post-communist Romania. We also have to mention the

obvious political responsibility of the pastor in this context in the RCR. The RCR has always viewed itself as the keeper of our Hungarian culture and national traditions. This fact has determined the life of our Church in the past fifteen years, after the Romanian 'revolution'. If we look at the recent history of Romania, we can see that protestant churches have played a very important role in the different political movements. For example, the Romanian revolution in 1989 was initiated by the RCR. This is the consequence of our understanding of responsibility towards our parishioners as members of an oppressed minority. If we speak about responsibility, we have to mention the only article about this issue in the thirties of the 20th century in Romania. In his very important article, professor Tavaszy speaks about the responsibility of the Church in the society. To date, this article (with minor changes) is in fact determining the RCR's basic standpoint in the above issues.

Given the communist historical background of the country, our Church has developed a special way of understanding itself in a variety of roles. In my doctoral thesis I call it *Intellektuelles Gegensystem*,<sup>7</sup> an 'intellectual alternative' to the existing system. I mean by this that the Church has developed its own theological system that allowed us to eliminate the disturbing factors of surrounding political changes and oppression. The development of the post-communist society in the last fifteen years has opened many possibilities for the churches and this also leads to a change of paradigm in the understanding of leadership in parish work. The post-modern society in Romania, in the 21st century, is characterised by a special phenomenon which the German sociologist Ulrich Beck calls 'risk society'.<sup>8</sup> This risk society means that the old structure of society will rapidly change and the individuals will have to take decisions in new situations they may not have faced in the past. It also means that in risk society people need a much more critical view of old values and understandings in their daily lives and also of theological ethics. Old values and traditions are challenged from one minute to the other, and parishioners expect the pastor's leadership to provide answers and solutions in a responsible and ethical manner to questions and problems arising in this ever-changing society. This decision-maker role of ministers makes pastoral responsibility one of the most important features of pastoral work in the RCR today and tomorrow.

### **3. Typology of Leadership in Parish Work of RCR**

The following typology was presented and discussed in two different deaneries ('dioceses') of the RCR. I spoke with many different colleagues about this topic. Their comments are integrated in the

‘final’ version of this typology. I am very grateful for the comments I have received. On the basis of the same theology, different pastors have developed different types of leadership, and the interpretation of responsibility has also changed in small ways from one pastor to another. That means that in the RCR we can see a variety of understandings about the role of pastors in society and in the congregation. This situation was generated by the RCR’s special situation in history as a minority and by self-examination.

I now concentrate on the personality of the pastor, because on the basis of its special historical development, the RCR has a very pastor-oriented hierarchical structure. I will not speak about the possibilities of the special theology of the RCR and neither about the critical ideology specific to our theological view. I will only mention that the very positive role of pastors and the Church in the life of the national minorities in Romania builds the foundation of the following typology.<sup>9</sup>

*a) Type A: Classical Pastor*

The work of this type of pastor is the so-called ‘classical’ pastoral work and responsibility. The main stream of the understanding of the work, and the self-understanding of this pastor is determined by the spiritual heritage of the theological liberalism and by the heritage of the cultural Protestantism mixed with one special understanding of service. This type of pastor fulfils the traditional pastoral work with traditional methods in full consciousness of his/her responsibility for pastoral care. S/he works in the traditionally oriented communities (the majority of RCR parishes) and has little time for theoretical reflections about the type of responsibility s/he carries. Theoretical problems linked to pastoral leadership are not reflected in this type of work.

This type of leader serves in a ‘one-parson-parish’. Even though this kind of pastor is the most traditional type, s/he at the same time has the most difficult work form of parish leadership. One can ask if s/he can provide responsible leadership, and one can answer: yes, of course – it has been like this for centuries. The problem though arises when this pastor has to carry the full responsibility of leadership by him/herself in lack of persons with whom s/he could share the burdens and blessings of the pastoral work. Of course, we should also see the advantages of this type of leadership: the stability of decisions (if the system works, but what if it does not?) and the power of this historical type in the life of the RCR. But we also have to consider that the risk society needs other decisions and another form of leadership. This form of leadership is still a shadow of the past. I am sure that it is not the type of ministry of the future.

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*b) Type B: Evangelical Pastor*

The second type of leadership that I would like to present is the leadership in which the traditional elements of parish leadership are completed by additional elements. I only mention one element: a very profound evangelical orientation of the pastoral work. This type of leadership looks for a divided leadership responsibility on the basis of the universal priesthood. In this form of pastoral care and leadership, unconventional methods are very much favoured and it emphasises the necessity of personal conversion. This type of pastoral care and leadership includes the danger that it can very quickly become a closed system. On the other hand, shared responsibility is very seriously taken into consideration. In my observation the power and fascination of the closed system that can give answer to all types of questions has fascinated many people. The question that we should answer is whether the vision of a patriarchal church (or a patriarchal pastor) is the vision of the future. Due to the communist past in Romania it is a realistic danger, that this type of leadership will dominate the life of the Church in the future.

*c) Type C: Managerial Pastor*

The third type of pastor is the 'manager-pastor'. Leadership is understood as management. It may well be that this type of leadership can be one of the future. I, however, have ethical questions. In this type of pastoral care the responsibility for society becomes a major part of the parish work. This means that the manager-pastor is involved in several economic and political activities and pastoral work as such occupies little space in his/her agenda. It is to be seen how the problems (mainly economic and political problems) in society can be solved by a pastor, meaningfully and in a sustainable way. We also have to examine how this type of leadership changes the relationship between the Church and society. In this type of leadership, the responsibility is in most cases a divided responsibility. This is a positive element of the model. Naturally, we cannot find these three models in their pure form in the real world, but we see elements of them in the contemporary life of the RCR, mixed and in many sub-types.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretically the idea of responsibility is so strongly connected to the self-understanding of the Church that theologians do not feel the necessity to formulate a special teaching about it. In the new post-

modern and post-communist society, this issue becomes one of very significant importance.

For my personal understanding it is very important to see how we can define the responsible self of the pastor in his/her parish work. In order to understand the meaning of the responsible self (in the parish work, too!!) it is helpful to distinguish between wishes of first and second level,<sup>10</sup> taking into consideration lower or higher values. In the philosophical tradition of the 20th century, we also meet the idea that we have to distinguish between values of first and second level, with strong and not so strong value judgements.<sup>11</sup>

In the traditional understanding of responsible leadership (Type A) responsibility includes a very strong value judgement. The development of the Romanian society has changed the judgement of the parishioner and also the self-understanding of the pastor. It means that, in the work of the manager-pastor (Type C), the responsibility becomes mixed with other elements that create a weaker value judgement and values belonging to the first level. This understanding follows the changing of the society, but we have to ask if this is the way of responsible parish leadership. This society-oriented model of leadership has to remain constantly strong, especially in the situation of transition in our society today.

The biblical foundation of the RCR can be a control mechanism in the building of moral judgments. Some may ask for how long we can work with a model based on biblical values, but the fact is that they are strong components of the identity of the RCR. Responsible parish leadership has to know the connection of the responsibility with God and with the freedom, which is given in the work of Christ. From this point of view, responsible parish leadership has to integrate people in the community and cannot be a closed system. Responsibility means also that the parish shall not be against the world, but in the world with another possibility of moral judgement, based on theology and theological ethics. This makes it possible to build moral judgements not closed but open, not condemning others but sincerely wishing to change something for the best in the world.

We should not forget, in this conclusion, the importance of our own traditions and the eminent political sense of responsibility in the testimony of the RCR. Both are elements from a protestant/minority perspective which can be important for a global ethics of responsibility, not only in the parish work.

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to my colleague and friend Christoph Ammann with thanks for the discussion about this topic – and much more.
- <sup>2</sup> On Aristotelean Ethics see, for example, J. P. Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*, London: SPCK, 1993, pp. 86-88.
- <sup>3</sup> Brunner, E., *Gott und sein Rebell. Eine theologische Anthropologie*, Hamburg: U. Berger-Gebhardt, 1958, p. 74f.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14f.
- <sup>5</sup> Barth, K., *Kirchliche Dogmatik II/2*, Zürich, 1942, p. 707, 713f.
- <sup>6</sup> In the following I will present a selection of a few biblical testimonies, knowing that this is only a very small part of the richness of texts.
- <sup>7</sup> To be soon published in English.
- <sup>8</sup> Beck, Ulrich, *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*, trans. from the German by Mark Ritter, and with an Introduction by Scott Lash and Brian Wynne, London: Sage Publications, 1992. [originally publ. 1986].
- <sup>9</sup> I would like to mention here that the types have a model-function, and as such they are excessive.
- <sup>10</sup> Frankfurt, H., *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 67/1, p. 5-20. The author says in his article that most human beings are able to build wishes not only of first level, but also wishes of second level. This means human beings are able to estimate values. In my view, from the postmodern perspective responsibility should be considered in relation to the different values.
- <sup>11</sup> Taylor, C., *Negative Freiheit? Zur Kritik des neuzeitlichen Individualismus*, Frankfurt am Main, 1988, p. 10f. He speaks about 'soft value judgements' (*schwache Wertungen*) and 'strong value judgements' (*starke Wertungen*) with a difference in quality.