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THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

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Abstract:

The article aims to conduct an analysis regarding the concept of social responsibility in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the COVID-19 period. The research investigates the social activities conducted by the Church in the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to emphasise its social responsibility toward the community and its impact in times of crisis. In this regard, a descriptive case study was conducted that analyses how the Church implemented the decisions taken by the national authorities, as well as its own measures, in order to fulfill its social mission in such difficult times.

Keywords: Romanian Orthodox Church, social responsibility, COVID-19 pandemic

JEL Classification: M1, M00, M14

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to individuals, communities, and nations around the world. With the rapid spread of the virus and its impact on public health, economies, and societies, it has become clear that the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities and social injustices. The pandemic also had a great influence on spirituality and religious practices (Kowalczyk et al., 2020; Papadopoulos et al., 2021). In the midst of this crisis, the Church played an important role in providing spiritual and humanitarian aid to those who needed it. In addition to its spiritual role, the Romanian Orthodox Church has an important social mission, being active in the life of society through its clerical employees. Considering the confessional structure in Romania, where 85.3% of people declare themselves to be Christian Orthodox (National Institute of Statistics, 2023), the responsibility of the Romanian Orthodox Church for carrying out social-philanthropic activities is high. The Church's mission has been extended to schools, hospitals, military units, prisons, reeducation centers, etc. Consequently, in the last period, an intensification, systematisation, and diversification of aid actions were observed (Lumina Newspaper, 2021). In this respect, social responsibility represents a very important aspect of this organisation because it proves commitment to the community and, at the same time, gives confidence to its members (Helma & Yulistri, 2022).

In this context, the present research investigates the social activities conducted by the Romanian Orthodox Church during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to emphasise its social responsibility towards the community and its impact in this time of crisis, from a social perspective.

The first section of the study presents the literature review on the concept of corporate social responsibility with an emphasis on the Church and its role in society as an institution that can have a real impact at the social level, besides its spiritual role. The second part comprises a case study that presents the main actions and measures of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to establish its social impact and responsibility towards society. The study ends with conclusions and research limitations.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW REGARDING THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

The concept of corporate social responsibility took shape around 1930, once with the debates about the role of the manager, initiated by Merrick Dodd (Kraus & Brtitzelmaier, 2012, p. 283, Mintzberg, 1983). CSR was conceptualised in 1953 by Howard Bowen. According to Bowen's definition (1953), "social responsibility refers to the obligation of business people to pursue those policies, make those decisions, or follow those course of actions that are desirable in terms of the goals and values of our society". The other definitions of social responsibility acknowledge that managers must take responsibility for the public well-being. Thus, in Drucker's view, managers "must consider whether the action is likely to promote the public well-being, promote the basic beliefs of our society, contribute to its stability, strength, and harmony" (Hamidu et al., 2015, p. 84).

Corporations' social responsibility (CSR) has become an essential dimension of corporate strategy (Durand et al., 2019). In this context, an organisation can demonstrate its commitment to the community. In addition, it helps the organisation bond with its members and the community as well (Malini & Yulistri, 2022). MacLeod (2011, p. 30) stated that "corporate social responsibility reflects the idea that businesses have obligations to society involving consideration of factors beyond profit maximisation and strict adherence to legal regulations. These extralegal responsibilities include the promotion of sustainable growth, the protection of human rights and long-term social and environmental well-being, and (more controversially) ethical and moral concerns related to corporate policy".

Crane et al. (2008, pp. 4) pointed out that "for a subject that has been studied for so long, it is unusual to find that researchers still do not share a common definition or set of core principles". For the same authors (Crane et al., 2008, p. 7) CSR situates at the intersection of several disciplines and therefore needs to be analysed from several perspectives and ideological points of view. Russell (2010, p. 44-50) has made a comprehensive overview of the definitions given for CSR, arguing that academic definitions are highly theoretical and conceptual. The author argues that there is a consensus among researchers on this general idea and points out that "social responsibility, as defined by the theses, refers to the idealistic views of organisations that carry out activities that protect and enhance the welfare of society beyond the extent necessary to serve directly economic and technical needs".

According to Palmer (2012), social responsibility is an ethical framework. It suggests that an entity, whether an organisation or an individual, must act to benefit society as a whole. This may include non-profit organisations, and also the Church.

Even though the CSR concept is analysed by specialists mostly as a corporate management instrument, it can also be analysed from the religious organisations' point of view (Brammer et al., 2007). A gap in the literature was observed because the concept related to the Church is less studied, even if the social mission of this organisation is clearly stated. It should be pointed out that at the Church's level, whether Roman Catholic or Orthodox, it was observed that a series of decisions have been adopted, specifically regarding the social responsibility of the Church toward its believers (Sessa et al., 2020, pp. 22-23; Valache, 2020, p. 126). The Church's concern for social issues is not new; it has been at the heart of pastoral and missionary activities since the early centuries. The social responsibility of the Church is primarily calibrated on the activity of social assistance, which is an essential element in fulfilling the mission of the Church (Adebayo & Govender, 2020; Melé, 2006).

Lately, besides social activities, the Church started to participate in solving environmental issues (Basilica, 2018). As an example, due to his actions in regard to environmental protection, the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I is known in history as the *green patriarch* (Chryssavgis, 2007). Moreover, since the second part of the XXth century, environmental and ecological issues have been taken into consideration by the leaders of the Catholic Church (Secchi, 2007, Francis, 2015, Zigan & Le Grys, 2018).

Like the corporate domain, it is expected for the Church to expand its interests to other problems encountered in society.

In 1993, within the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Diaconia Charity Sector was established. Its purpose is to support various Church institutions in initiating social activities. More than that, in regard to the Church's structure, dioceses, protopopes, and offices of social assistance are organised to carry out these types of activities.

Taking into account the social activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church both in the past and today, the study analyses the ways and means by which this organisation has acted from the perspective of social responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research explores the concept of social responsibility in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the COVID-19 period. The originality of the research stems from the fact that this topic was little approached in the literature, in relation to the Church's actions.

The main purpose of the study is to analyse the social measures taken and implemented by the Romanian Orthodox Church during the pandemic in order to establish if this institution proved to be a reliable partner of the state and if it integrated in its values, the concept of social responsibility.

The main objective of the study is to investigate the social activities conducted by the Romanian Orthodox Church during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to emphasise its social responsibility towards the community and its impact in times of crisis.

The research methodology consists of a descriptive case study on the main actions carried out by the Romanian Orthodox Church during the pandemic that analyses how the Church implemented the decisions taken by the national authorities, as well as its own measures in order to fulfill its social mission. The case study was conducted using the document analysis research method, where official documents from the Orthodox Church as well as articles in newspapers and other unofficial sources were analysed.

3. THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS - A CASE STUDY ON THE MAIN ACTIONS OF THE CHURCH DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Romanian Orthodox Church is defined as the community of Orthodox believers formed of clerics, monks, and laymen, canonically constituted in parishes and monasteries of the Romanian Patriarchate dioceses, located inside and outside the borders of Romania, that confesses God in the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, based on the basis of the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, and participate in the Church's life through the same Holy Mysteries, liturgical services, and canonical ordinances (Romanian Orthodox Church, 2020, p. 12).

From the legal point of view, as Law no. 489/2006- the Law of Cults states, the Romanian Orthodox Church is a legal entity of public utility, being an economic unit with its own organisation and management system, necessary to fulfill its main objectives (Romanian Parliament, 2006). The Romanian Orthodox Church has a hierarchical synodal leadership, which is administered autonomously through its own representative bodies made up of clerics and laymen. Law no. 489/2016 regulates the status of religious structures, how they are organised, and their function. Within society, the Church occupies an important place, both in terms of spirituality and social philanthropic activity. The population highly trusts this institution because of its mission

and role in society. Additionally, the Law on Cults stipulates that the state cooperates with cults in areas of common interest and supports their activity (Art. 9) (Romanian Parliament, 2006).

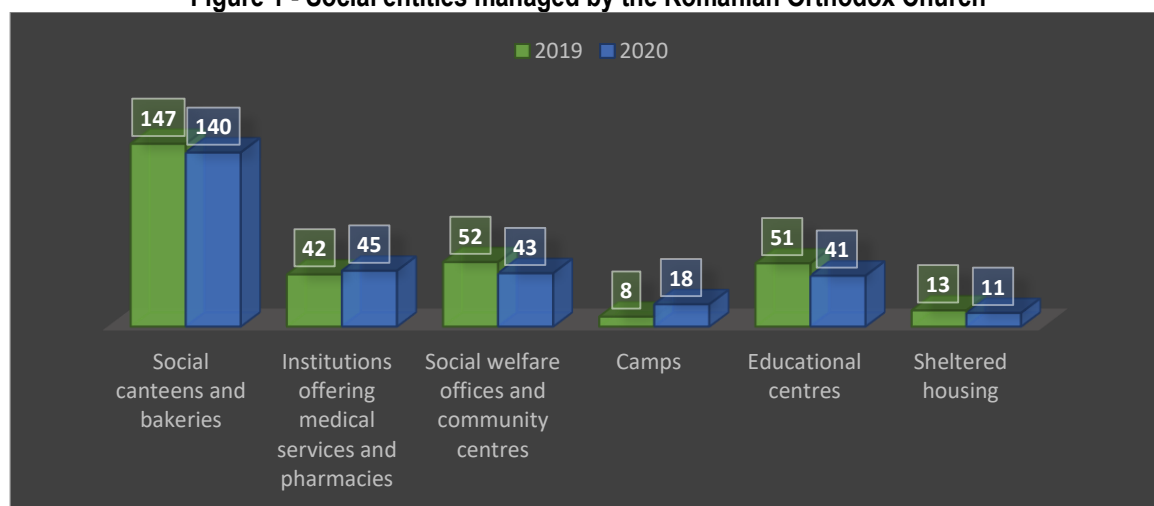
In addition, the Church is both an organisation and a spiritual entity (Irwin & Roller, 2000), which means that it faces two types of problems: religious and social-administrative. Therefore, the Church has in its theandric, two aspects that harmoniously combine: the spiritual aspect, which is aimed at the spiritual side, and the institutional aspect, which allows the Church as an organisation to relate to state institutions or other private organisations to help those in need and suffering. The two directions of the Church's actions do not exclude each other and are often complementary. Thus, in addition to pastoral and missionary activity, the Church, as an organisation, has a high social responsibility toward its members. The social involvement of the Church is a desideratum, a necessity, and a priority (Istodor, 2015, p. 116).

The pandemic crisis has generated challenges not only among the authorities but also in the ecclesiastical environment by imposing restrictions on the performance of services. From another perspective, the pandemic generated opportunities in the administration of the Church and its social responsibility for the community, demonstrated by the numerous activities carried out by the Eparchies of the Romanian Patriarchate. The Romanian Orthodox Church responded immediately to the call of the state's authorities, but especially to civil society and its believers, providing both spiritual and material support, demonstrating its social responsibility and having an important impact on managing the impact of COVID-19 on society.

Since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Romania, in February 2020, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been preparing to provide the necessary support to vulnerable persons such as the elderly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, families with low incomes, people from isolated communities, or with no family to support and help them (Serescu, 2020). Furthermore, the Church was prepared to offer help to medical centers or hospitals in need of medical supplies (Observator, 2020).

One of the measures implemented by the national authorities during the emergency state - declared in March 2020 - was to forbid physical participation in religious services (Guțu, 2020). In this context, more than ever, the Church had to continue its philanthropic mission and conduct social activities, be close to its parishioners, and offer its help together with the state's authorities. This crisis also represented an opportunity for the Church to modernise and find the necessary means to be close to its believers, even if direct contact with them was not possible. In this sense, the Church embraced the process of digitalisation and strengthened its social responsibility (Ojică, 2020).

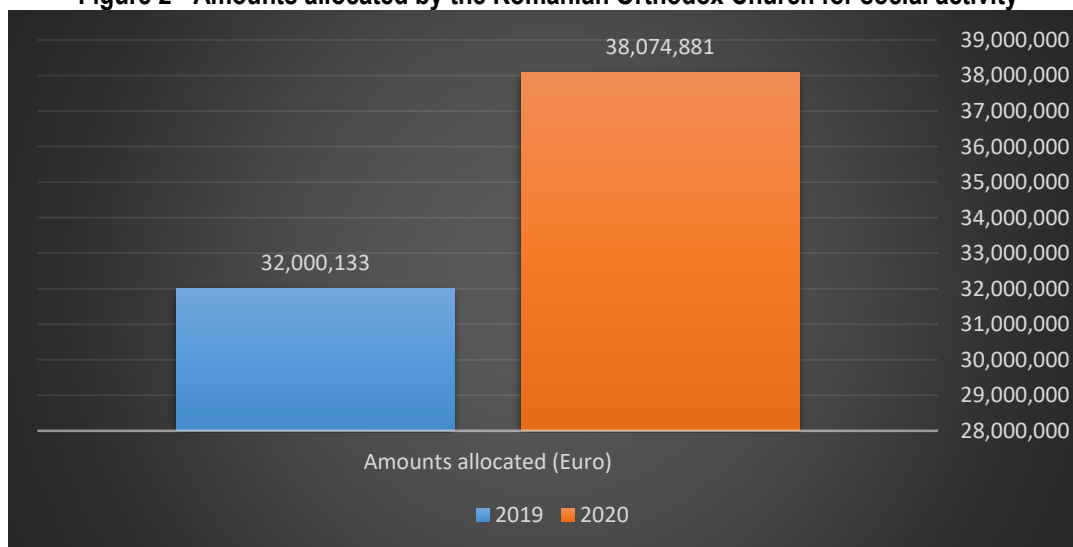
Figure 1 - Social entities managed by the Romanian Orthodox Church



(Source: authors, own data processing, 2023)

In order to fulfill the social responsibilities within the Romanian Orthodox Church, there are a number of entities that cover a wide spectrum of this activity (social canteens, social day centers, elderly people's homes, camps), as can be observed in figure 1.

Figure 2 - Amounts allocated by the Romanian Orthodox Church for social activity



(Source: authors, own data processing, 2023)

To support the entire social and philanthropic assistance activity and the victims, in 2020, the Romanian Patriarchate spent 185.599.815 lei (38.074.881,02 euros), the amount is higher compared to 2019 (Basilica, 2020). According to the report (2021) presented at the National Church Assembly, during the pandemic period, there was an increase in expenses, by 17,6%, representing a greater social engagement of the Romanian Orthodox Church within the communities (Basilica, 2020). This increase is due to the donation of medical equipment to hospitals, the distribution of packages by volunteers to people, and the support of those in need.

When the pandemic began, one of the first actions of the Church was to provide humanitarian aid such as food, medical supplies, and equipment, as well as other basic necessities, to those who needed it. These actions continued throughout the pandemic period.

(1) Food assistance for vulnerable people

When the emergency state was declared and physical activities and contact were restricted, one of the most urgent needs was access to food. With the isolation and social distancing measures in place, many people were unable to leave their homes to buy food (especially those who lived in isolated villages or those who were in quarantine), and many others lost their jobs, making it difficult to purchase basic necessities. In response to this need, the Church has provided food assistance by distributing food packages to families in need and hot meals to those struggling to access food and has set up food banks (Basilica.ro, 2020a).

In an annual report on the Church's activity in the first year of the pandemic, it is mentioned that during the state of emergency and the alert state, the volunteers of the Cathedral of the Salvation of the Nation Parish (one of the Church's NGOs) helped 4.531 families, vulnerable people, people with disabilities, elderly, single people, and poor families with children, as well as families affected by severe floods from 147 villages, in 22 counties. They distributed 4,531 packages, worth 362.480 lei, containing essential food products, hygiene products, clothing, shoes, household appliances, disinfectants, sanitary masks, and prayer books (Basilica, 2021).

(2) Medical support

Another crucial need during the COVID-19 pandemic was access to medical supplies and protective equipment. As hospitals and healthcare facilities struggled to keep up with the challenges of the pandemic, the

Romanian Orthodox Church, through its dioceses, helped the most vulnerable people with masks, and other medical supplies, and also donated personal protective equipment to health facilities.

As an example, one of the Archdioceses of the Church (Bucharest) has provided hospitals in the county of Prahova with medical equipment consisting of ten automatic ventilation devices and respiratory assistants, filters, and supplies, 140 tracheal tubes, and 120 endotracheal intubation sets, representing real use both for medical staff and patients (Basilica 2020b). In addition, another Archdiocese (Suceava and Rădăuților) organised a campaign "Alături la greu" (Together in difficult times) and raised 100.000 euros that were used to provide hospitals in the county of Suceava with 10 Vista 120S vital monitors for the intensive care units, an electrocardiograph, and a portable ultrasound. (Alături la greu, 2020).

Furthermore, some monasteries made masks and bed linens for hospitals in their areas, providing the necessary support to medical centers. For example, two monasteries belonging to the Archdiocese of Iași-Galata and Copou Monastery, through their tailoring workshops, have provided support to hospitals in Iași (Știrile ProTv, 2020). Also, between March and December 2020, the volunteers of the National Cathedral Chapel distributed medical equipment, medical furniture, hygiene products, and food to the hospitals in Bucharest, struggling with the high number of patients, such as Matei Balș, Marius Nasta, Victor Babeș, Grigore Alexandrescu, Elias, and the Emergency Hospital in Bucharest. At the same time, the Bucharest Oncological Institute, Fundeni Clinical Institute, and Urlați City Hospital were supported with medical equipment by volunteers from the National Cathedral Chapel" (Basilica, 2021).

As can be observed, the Orthodox Church has intervened with logistical support not only for people in need, but also for medical centers unable to purchase certain medical equipment and hygiene products for the large number of patients diagnosed with COVID-19.

(3) Spiritual support

The main role of the Church is to provide spiritual guidance and support. In this respect, the Romanian Orthodox Church has continued to offer support and spiritual guidance to its parishioners through online services and other electronic means. Most places of worship have begun to broadcast Sunday services online, and the idea of podcasts and online conferences has gained popularity. From this point of view, the Church has embraced change and proved its openness towards modernisation and digitalisation (Ojică, 2020; Rusu, 2021).

Additionally, Churches have held webinar sessions and spiritual conferences, necessary for community spiritual support. As an example, most people within the Church, but also from the Holy Mount Athos, had organised Q&A sessions. Clerics from different monasteries have been present in the weekly online environment with programs of spiritual strengthening. Through its actions, the Church increased its presence in the online environment and on social networks (Covaci, 2021; Vidican-Manci, 2020).

In addition, to support people in need, one of the Churches' NGOs, the Philanthropy Federation of the Romanian Patriarchate, has developed an online platform 'Ajută cu bucurie' (Help with joy) and opened a Green line, because it was necessary to support people in need, but also those who wanted to help as volunteers at the national level, providing support to about 600 people and generating logistical support of 600 volunteers willing to offer support to members of communities (Ajută cu bucurie, 2020).

Furthermore, the Church strengthened its real spiritual support by creating special prayers during the pandemic period, at Masses and private prayers, or by organising processions with the holy relics (Basilica, 2020). Furthermore, confession and communion of the sick have been done by the priests at home, according to the following procedure: the priest would draw up the personal declaration of travel according to the model approved by the state authorities, declaring the reason for travel to be the provision of assistance to the elderly, vulnerable, or to accompany children (Basilica, 2020c).

(4) Promotion of health

Along with the authorities, the Church has promoted health and safety measures to prevent the spread of the virus, such as wearing masks and keeping a social distance. According to the 2020 report presented to the National Church Assembly (the central deliberative body of the Romanian Orthodox Church), the special health measures adopted by the Romanian authorities, transmitted, through the Holy Synod Chancellery, to the units

of worship and to believers, were compiled into a guideline for parishes and monasteries for the observance of measures to prevent the spread of the new Coronavirus (COVID-19) (12 March 2020) (Basilica, 2020d; Ionițe, 2021).

Also, when the emergency state was declared, in March 2020, the Church established new measures regarding the Church's services and social activities, stating that: "The social activity of parishes and monasteries will be adapted to the new social and medical needs, i.e., helping people who are unable to move in order to get food or medicine, but respecting all hygiene and protection measures established by the authorities" (Holy Synod Chancellery, 2020).

Another aspect that should be mentioned is that the Church developed a series of guidelines, as for all its activities to be conducted, respecting the safety measures (i.e., Guidelines for the services of the Holy Week and Holy Easter; Guidelines to the units of worship of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the country regarding the access of Orthodox believers to places of worship, cemeteries, and their participation in the services of divine worship; Guidelines to the units of worship of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the country, regarding the participation of the faithful in holy services inside and outside places of worship (Romanian Orthodox Church National Assembly, 2021).

The above-mentioned measures show that the Romanian Orthodox Church stood by its communities even in the most challenging times, respecting all legal provisions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Even though, in general, the concept of CSR is associated with corporations, it can be successfully applied by religious cults and various NGOs. Practicing social responsibility should be a priority in the work of all types of organisations, not only in companies. It could be embedded in the organisational culture that is implemented at the employee level in order to strengthen communities at philanthropic and environmental levels, where we are all responsible.

Nonprofit organisations should provide all the support needed to develop the concept of social responsibility as effectively as possible. In nonprofit organisations, as well as churches, the majority of income comes from donations from the community. As a legal entity of public utility, the Romanian Orthodox Church has developed social responsibility through its approach during the pandemic. At the same time, it has proven to be a reliable partner for the Romanian state in social actions. Of course, social responsibility is not only limited to philanthropic-social activities but has much wider implications, and a good example of the Orthodox Church's involvement is its responsibility for the environment through community involvement and the establishment of a day of prayer for the environment since 1989, on September 1.

The present study highlights the fact that there is an interest within the Romanian Orthodox Church to respond to the social responsibility call and to develop a managerial system, specific to the ecclesiastical environment by involving a large number of volunteers and the transparency of decisions during this period, regarding the organisation of religious services. Not only did the social responsibility of the Romanian Orthodox Church did not end with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also continues by running philanthropic programmes for all age groups. Within each diocesan unit, there is a sector dedicated to social assistance and philanthropy, where various activities are carried out to help communities, showing a fundamental role in social responsibility.

The present study is limited only to the study of social responsibility in the Romanian Orthodox Church. In the future, this analysis could be extended to other religious denominations in Romania. The study can also be approached from a comparative perspective, analysing the social responsibility of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the different denominations in Romania.

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