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Children and Poverty: Dynamics of Theology**

ABSTRACT: Persistent poverty in Serbia is affecting everyone, particularly children. This article examines the complex issue of poverty through the lens of Orthodox theology. Historically, Orthodox theology has been criticised for its passivity in addressing social injustices, often promising salvation in an afterlife paradise. Despite critiques of inactivity, the Orthodox Church in Serbia has been actively engaged in humanitarian assistance, extending support through various channels, including dioceses and collaborative efforts with other humanitarian organisations. Yet, there remains a striking difference between the Church's perceived role as a guardian of tradition and national identity and its potential to be socially active within the constraints of history. In that manner, this article advocates for comprehension of a theological framework that would be able to guide charitable efforts. Recognising the intrinsic value that children embody within Christian tradition highlights the imperative of special care for children. Acknowledging the importance of tradition and theology within the Orthodox context, we believe, can inspire a dialogue between the Church and broader society. That would eventually help to transcend social passivity, changing the image of the Church towards active and systemic work, and towards the dynamic of love, justice, and compassion. In other words, the Serbian Orthodox Church should align this presence with its prophetic role of addressing and changing unjust social relations that cause poverty. Therefore, alleviating poverty and increasing social engagement should be top priorities in the coming years.

KEYWORDS: Serbia, poverty, children, Orthodox theology, Christian identity, theological framework, church tradition.

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1. Introduction

Serbia's struggle with poverty has continued for decades, making life difficult for many people. However, the word "poverty" cannot always capture the actual substance of the problem, particularly when we speak about children's suffering. Their economic poverty raises a crucial theological question: how does Orthodox theology define the very identity of a child, and what implications does this understanding have for the Church's involvement in relieving poverty?

Moreover, assessing the reasons for portraying the Orthodox Church as passive and disinterested in social engagement is essential. In other words, it seems the Church has interiorised this false understanding of its role for some time. Furthermore, that role was in downplaying social challenges through the promise of a future life in the Kingdom of God. Diving into some aspects of the tradition and theology, we will try to present the theological place of children and their role within the ramifications of poverty. Social engagement in recent years by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) will also be listed here. Hopefully, this approach will enlighten the need for systematic *Diakonia* of the Church towards impoverished children and change the public image.

2. Poverty in Serbia today

In 2021, over 600,000 people in Serbia, almost 9% of the population, struggled to make ends meet. Now, with the war in Ukraine casting a long shadow, experts fear things could get even worse. It is predicted that poverty could rise by another 0.3% to 2.5%, depending on how things unfold.¹ That could mean millions more families squeezed by growing costs and shrinking paychecks. It is a harsh reality for Serbia, but sadly, it is being felt across the globe.²

In 2021, the absolute child poverty rate stood at 10.6%, with projections indicating a further increase. Even under the most conservative estimates, by 2022, child poverty was anticipated to rise to 13.8%.³ This

¹ Kostadinova, 2023, p. 30.

² Kostadinova, 2023, p. 30.

³ UNICEF - First National Conference on Family (2023), [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/press-releases/first-national-conference-family-2023> (Accessed: 2 July 2024).

translates to nearly 28,000 children living below absolute poverty. Recently, Serbia has invested more money in social services and worked more to relieve poverty.⁴ Consequently, some progress concerning children's poverty has been made.

Nevertheless, children continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty compared to other age groups. Moreover, the highest risk of poverty persists among households with three or more dependent children, which reached 38.8% in 2021.^{5,6}

In the same manner, poverty has an excessive impact on various demographic groups in Kosovo and Metohija,⁷ including women, children, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and rural populations. A striking statistic reveals that one in four children under the age of five resides in the poorest households.⁸ The Serbian population in Kosovo has been facing a humanitarian crisis for almost two decades. The Soup Kitchen, operated by the SOC diocese in Kosovo, now distributes meals to nearly 2,000 people daily.⁹

The exact number of children in the streets of Serbia is still unclear, and we have only estimated numbers with no precise statistics.¹⁰ In 2022, Serbia adopted the first official action plan, *Child Protection Plan in Street Situations from Violence, Neglect, and Exploitation in the Republic of Serbia*, addressing street children.¹¹ While this action plan addresses some critical issues concerning these children, such as the protocols and duties of each municipal service, it omits the potential collaboration with the SOC or other religious groups and organisations.

⁴ UNICEF - First National Conference on Family (2023), [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/press-releases/first-national-conference-family-2023> (Accessed: 2 July 2024).

⁵ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022.

⁶ Kostandinova, 2023, p. 14.

⁷ Self-proclaimed independence in 2008, which Republic of Serbia and some European countries (Spain, Greece, Romania, Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovakia) still do not recognize.

⁸ UNICEF - Children in Kosovo: UNICEF in Kosovo promotes social inclusion of the most vulnerable children. We are committed to leave no child behind!, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/children-kosovo> (Accessed 7 February 2024).

⁹ The Humanitarian Organization of the Raška-Prizren Diocese - Mother of the Nine Jugović Brothers - People's Kitchens in Kosovo and Metohija, [Online]. Available at: <https://narodnekuhinjekim.com/home/> (Accessed 2 July 2024).

¹⁰ Georgievski, 2022.

¹¹ Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2022.

3. From Eschatology to Social Engagement: The Church's Historical Journey

It became evident that the SOC in public space has been primarily identified as a religious institution that preserves tradition and history.

Religion and the SOC have been important factors in the formation and maintenance of Serbian national identity, both historically and at the present stage. The renaissance of religiosity at the end of the 20th century and the crisis of communist ideology determined the increase in the role of religion in the national consciousness of Serbs. At the same time, the church was making a deliberate effort to preserve Serbian national identity.¹²

Society and the government expect the SOC to conform to a certain role, which excludes social issues like child poverty.¹³ The current political climate in Serbia remains turbulent, highlighted by the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's "independence" and the situation of Serbian communities in neighbouring countries like Bosnia and Montenegro. These factors contribute to a complex political landscape where the SOC is viewed as a crucial player tasked with safeguarding these vital national issues. Consequently, social issues, such as poverty, are often relegated to secondary importance amidst these political tensions. It is obvious that the SOC has to work hard to change how people see it in public;¹⁴ the public's perception requires rediscovering its identity through theology, which can lead to projecting a unique and influential presence in society. The SOC should align this presence with its prophetic role of addressing and changing unjust social relations that cause poverty. Therefore, alleviating poverty and increasing social engagement should be top priorities in the coming years.

In the preceding chapters, we provided introductory insights into the current situation in Serbia concerning children's poverty. We also pinpointed SOC's perceived image in modern Serbian society despite its social activities. Theologically, laying the groundwork for a more profound

¹² Morozova et al., 2022, p. 681.

¹³ Jović, 2018, pp. 13-51.

¹⁴ Subotić, 2019.

comprehension of Orthodox theology concerning social engagement in alleviating poverty is essential. For centuries, various factors have influenced public understanding of the Church and its societal role. This understanding is often linked to the Church's response to political issues or perceived passivity regarding social and economic injustices. The roots of this disposition within the Church can be found in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, i.e., in the Alexandrian school's theology in the East (and St. Augustine in the West) and in the historical context in which the Orthodox Church has operated.

The Church used to be rooted in the experience of the Kingdom of God, i.e., eschatology. Eschatology is absolutely crucial to ecclesiology. This had been forgotten for a long time.

When we speak of the importance of eschatology, we sometimes think of it as the *end* of the Church's pilgrimage. I suggest that we must think of the *eschata* as the beginning of the Church's life, the *arche*, that which brings forth the Church, gives her identity, and sustains and inspires her in her existence. The Church exists not because Christ died on the cross but because he has risen from the dead, which means that the kingdom has come. The Church reflects the future, the final state of things, not a historical event of the past.¹⁵

The Church saw itself 'as the actualization of the "eschaton" in this world.'¹⁶ By being the icon of the Kingdom of God, the Church is at the same time maximalised and minimalised.

She is maximalised in that she will definitely survive eternally when her true identity is revealed in the Parousia. And she is minimalised in that she has no hypostasis of her own but draws her identity from Christ and the Kingdom to come. By existing in history "in persona Christi", she is guaranteed the glory and eternal life of her head. But for the very same reason, she is no autonomous entity vis-a-vis either Christ or the Kingdom. Her existence is iconic.¹⁷

¹⁵ Zizioulas, 1988, p. 296.

¹⁶ Schmemmann, 2003, p. 180.

¹⁷ Zizioulas, 1988, p. 300.

In other words, we need to understand the Church in this way, as an eschatological community existing in history, taking upon itself Christ's Cross, 'celebrating its true identity in the Eucharist, then all the institutions which result from this form part of its true identity and its Mystery'.¹⁸

Nevertheless, when the Alexandrian school emerged, the Church transitioned from symbolising new life to representing 'an icon of the origin of beings, of creation'.¹⁹ This change in theology made the Church belong only to the world of creation without caring about history. The main result of this teaching was that the Church focused more on individual salvation and less on the Kingdom of God and its experience. Gradually, the Church interiorised this individual care as its primary task, being perceived as a "sanatorium of souls",²⁰ and losing its ability to speak out about social issues.

Historically, with the formal recognition of Christianity as an imperial religion, differentiation between Church and state blurs significantly after 380 AD. The cessation of persecution and the new circumstances of Christian life within the Roman Empire fostered a closer association between the Empire and the Church. Despite acknowledging Christianity as the official religion, the empire failed to recognise the Church as a distinct community. Consequently, these new relations resulted in the Church's dependence on the empire and the emperor. For the empire, the Church evolved from a distinct community that bore enmity towards the government into a tool of religious governance within the empire, which was particularly evident during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527-565).²¹ This period in history took the Church into a framework where pagan absolutism reemerged but with different actors.²² At the same time, as a consequence, the Church increasingly identified the Kingdom of God with the Roman Empire, leading to social passivity.²³

Another factor contributing to the Orthodox Church's passivity towards socio-economic injustices is the turbulent and multifaceted relationship with the empire that lasted more than 1,000 years in the East

¹⁸ Zizioulas, 1988, p. 301.

¹⁹ Vassiliadis, 1998, p. 54.

²⁰ Vassiliadis, 1998, p. 55.

²¹ Jović, 2023, p. 72.

²² Šmeman, 1994, p. 195.

²³ Jović, 2023, p. 83.

(313-1453). The Turkish occupation lasted several centuries for most of the Orthodox countries. Under the Turkish yoke (Serbia from 1459-1878) and Communist rule (1917-1991), for most Orthodox nations, the Church's primary concern was the physical survival of its members as a prerequisite for any form of action. Over time, this emphasis on safeguarding the people became closely intertwined with preserving ethnic identity for many. The political environment under Ottoman and Communist rule was hostile towards the Orthodox Church, leading the Church to associate political pluralism with hostility.²⁴ At the same time, the concept of *symphonia* (symphony), prevalent in the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) from very early on, has been idealised and viewed as the sole viable relationship between Church and state. Emperor Justinian (482-565) proposed a solution for the relationship between the Church and the empire, which became widely known in history as the idea of *symphonia*. This concept is best expressed in his famous *Sixth Novella*.²⁵

There are two great blessings, he writes, "gifts of the mercy of the Almighty to men, the priesthood and the empire (*sacerdotium et imperium*). Each of these blessings granted to men was established by God and has its own appointed task. But as they proceed from the same source, they also are revealed in unity and co-operative action. The priesthood controls divine and heavenly matters, while the empire directs what is human and earthly. But at the same time, the empire takes full care of preserving Church dogmas and the honour of the priesthood. And the priesthood, with the empire, directs all public life along ways pleasing to God".²⁶

The concept of *symphonia* articulated in this context is merely a formal declaration of cooperation between the emperor primarily and church authorities (hierarchy), rather than between the Empire and the Church.²⁷ This establishment of new relations resulted in the church hierarchy becoming more dependent on the emperor and his authority. Through this

²⁴ Prodromou, 2004, p. 31.

²⁵ Lassard, Y., Koptev, A. (no date) The Roman Law Library, [Online]. Available at: <https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/> (Accessed: 26 July 2024).

²⁶ Schmemmann, 2003, p. 151.

²⁷ Jović, 2023, p. 70.

Novella, the emperor solidified his legalised authority within the Church, justifying it by prioritising the empire as the utmost value.²⁸

In Justinian's synthesis, the Church appears to dissolve, and the awareness that it is radically alien to the world and the empire disappears once and for all from state thinking. The first chapter in the history of the Christian world ends with the victorious return of pagan absolutism.²⁹

In other words, the idea of *symphonia* subjected the Church hierarchy to an emperor's authority. However, despite historical evidence suggesting that such harmony rarely existed in practice, this romanticised notion of *symphonia* served as a means for the Church to escape into an imagined past. Consequently, the Orthodox Church's silence on public social issues can be attributed to its adherence to the ideal of *symphonia*,³⁰ i.e., submission to the emperor, and subsequently, to the ruler, nation, and state.

This lengthy historical modelling of the Church contrasts with the Ancient Fathers of the Orthodox Church, who tried to deal theologically and practically with issues of poverty and Christianity.³¹ However, in light of constant poverty and famine, some theologians tried to overcome this issue through romanticised poverty, i.e., suggesting that poverty could benefit individuals by disconnecting the body from the soul in their reflections. They psychologised poverty as a phenomenon, which helped them overlook the inherent violence of poverty.

For these reasons, the Orthodox Church must critically examine poverty through its own theological lenses instead of offering occasional charity. This necessitates constructing a robust theoretical framework to guide systematic action. Without such a framework, caring for those in need might remain relegated to sporadic good deeds.³² However, if we approach it within a theological framework, we recognise that caring for others is not just an occasional kindness but an expression of our very Christian identity. The next chapter will illuminate the image and identity of children within

²⁸ Jović, 2023, p. 71.

²⁹ Schmemmann, 2023, p. 153.

³⁰ Jović, 2023, pp. 34-116.

³¹ Jovic, 2005.

³² Jovic, 2021.

theology and the possible consequences when addressing the issue of children's poverty.

4. Children as an Intrinsic Value

In the Gospels, Christ gives children a distinct, almost theological role in His salvific work.³³ Additionally, in the narrative of the feeding of the five thousand,³⁴ a child offers his small lunch of fish and bread,³⁵ which Jesus miraculously multiplies to feed the multitude. Moreover, upon entering Jerusalem,³⁶ Christ received praise from children within the temple, which caused anger and fear among the religious elites at the time.

Children also played a significant role in unfolding salvation history and Christ's own proclamations. 'And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.''³⁷ Children were often overlooked in their homes and families at the time, but it seems that Christianity highlighted their unique identity in the history of salvation.³⁸ This underscores the eschatological value attributed to the virtues exemplified by children.³⁹ Children have transitioned from having an almost unimportant existence to possessing distinct value within the Church and family structure. The emergence of their identity holds particular significance, in a birth brought forth by Christianity. Apostle Paul, during his missionary work, mirrored Christ's miraculous deeds, including instances where Christ resurrected children, and Paul resurrected Eutychus.⁴⁰

4.1. Baptism and Eschatological Identity

Baptism was central to those seeking acceptance into the Christian community during the Early Church period. The essence of baptism and chrismation was in their signifying value; baptism signified affirmation of each individual's biological birth and eschatological identity. This sacred

³³ Matthew 19: 13-15; Mark 10: 13-16; Luke 18: 15-17.

³⁴ Matthew 14: 13-21; Mark 6: 30-44; Luke 9: 10-17; John 6: 1-15.

³⁵ John 6: 9.

³⁶ Matthew 21: 14-16.

³⁷ Matthew 18:3.

³⁸ Jović, 2015.

³⁹ Matthew 18: 3.

⁴⁰ Acts 20: 7-12; Matthew 9:18, 23-26; Mark 5: 22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56; Luke 7: 11-17.

rite not only impacted the newly baptised person but also tried to reshape the collective outlook of society upon children in general. The baptism of children played an important role in Early Christianity, communicating a profound message to Christian assemblies by informing them that children hold eternal and intrinsic value, irrespective of the duration of their biological lives, whether short or long. Baptism as a signifier of eschatological identity also signifies the uniqueness of each child, which carries a thoughtful message. Uniqueness implies that every child can and is encouraged to unlock their potential. In the context of the significance of a new Christian identity, an essential component should promote believers' responsible and inclusive freedom. The Orthodox Christian identity is called upon to bear witness to the authentic experience of being Orthodox, one that embraces and respects individuality as a foundation for the universality of its mission. Developing this new identity is a lifelong process in which the Church must play a central role while remaining true to its eschatological vision. Alternatively, the Church could not perceive baptism as coercion upon children because entering the Church is only viable through faith, and remaining within it relies solely on faith. In other words, baptism serves as a commitment to a Christian life rather than an absolute event that rigidly shapes someone's fate, which would be an intrusion into someone's freedom.

Understanding the true meaning of baptism is of utmost importance in a framework dealing with the issue of children and poverty. If children bear such a critical identity signifying the salvific nature of Christianity for each human being—salvation that assumes freedom, which entails the possibility for persons to unlock their potentials—then care for children in the context of poverty is of ontological importance.

4.2. Early Christian Testimonies

The canonical tradition of the Church saw its most intense development between the mid-third century and the first half of the ninth century AD, spanning from Late Antiquity to the early and late Middle Ages. Numerous church canons contributed to shaping a distinct understanding of the role of children and the responsibility for their care.⁴¹ Most of them deal with

⁴¹ Devrnja, 2022, p. 116.

protecting children, their baptism and freedom, and their recognition as independent persons.⁴²

We could ask what these canons mean for the Church's ontology. In Orthodox Church doctrine, canons and canonical tradition hold a unique significance. Rather than interpreting them solely in a judicial manner, the Church perceives them in a therapeutic and salvific sense. Esteemed Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras, in his own words, tried to articulate the meaning of the holy canons:

The canons do not express a system of law. They express one thing only: the ontology of the Church, the mode of existence within the church body. Nor do they do this with theoretical formulations: they delimit the practice and realization of life concerning the individual survival which is subject to death.⁴³

The ontological essence of the canons revolves around eternal salvation, acknowledging historical existence and compassionate care as integral elements. The Church's symbolic embodiment of the Kingdom of God illustrates the dynamic essence of history, constantly evolving and striving to redefine the world. Rather than evading history and the world, it actively works towards their transformation. Hence, the Church is called upon to be a transformative entity fulfilling its purpose within the course of history: a *foretaste* (πρόγευσις) of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁴

In other Early Christian accounts, every member of the Church was recognised as a "child of God". This metaphorical concept highlighted the need for Christians to exhibit sincerity and love. Children functioned both metaphorically and pedagogically, instructing Early Christians and trying to elevate their esteem in society through this role.⁴⁵ In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, for instance, children acquired salvific significance through the rite of cleansing and purifying individuals.

And what do you suppose is the type found in his command to Israel, that men who are full of sin should offer up a heifer, and

⁴² Carthage 35, 110; Gangra 15, 16; John the Faster, 32, 37, 39; Saint Nikifor the Confessor, 38; Trullo 59, 72, 84; Neo-Caesarea, 6; Basil the Great, 2.

⁴³ Yannaras, 1984, p. 188.

⁴⁴ Papatomas, 2018, p. 299.

⁴⁵ Ehrman, 2005a; 2005b.

after slaughtering it, burn it; that children should then take the ashes, cast them into vessels, tie scarlet wool around a piece of wood (again, see the type of the cross and the scarlet wool!), along with the hyssop, and that the children should thus sprinkle the people one by one, that they might be purified from their sins? Understand how he speaks to you simply. The calf is Jesus; the sinful men who make the offering are those who offered him up for slaughter. Then they are no longer men and the glory of sinners is no more. The children who sprinkle are those who proclaimed to us the forgiveness of sins and the purification of our hearts. To them he has given the authority to preach the Gospel. There are twelve of them as a witness to the tribes, for there were twelve tribes in Israel. But why are there three children who sprinkle? As a witness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because these were great before God.⁴⁶

Their souls exemplify the sincerity and transformation that Christianity demands.

Blessed is our Lord, brothers, who placed the wisdom and knowledge of his secrets within us. For the prophet is speaking a parable of the Lord. Who will understand it, except one who is wise and learned, who loves his Lord? Since, then, he renewed us through the forgiveness of our sins, he made us into a different type of person, that we might have the soul of children, as if he were indeed forming us all over again.⁴⁷

The Shepherd of Hermas reinforces these notions, emphasising, ‘Hold on to simplicity and be innocent, and you will be like young children who do not know the wickedness that destroys human life’.⁴⁸ This becomes a recognisable trait of Christians in the pagan world. The Epistle to Diognetus states, ‘They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born’.⁴⁹ Moreover, in the First Epistle of Clement, it is noted that only evil individuals mistreat children:

⁴⁶ Ehrman, 2005b, p. 41; Barnabas 8, 1-3.

⁴⁷ Ehrman, 2005b, p. 33; Barnabas 6,11.

⁴⁸ Ehrman, 2005b, p. 239.

⁴⁹ Ehrman, 2005b, p. 141.

for since they treated the young with injustice, they will be murdered, and an inquiry will destroy those who are impious. But the one who hears me will dwell in hope with all confidence; he will be at rest, fearing no evil.⁵⁰

The Shepherd of Hermas reiterates that only those with childlike qualities can inhabit the Kingdom of God, reaffirming the eschatological significance of children.

As to the believers from the twelfth mountain, which was white: they are like young infants, who have never had evil arise in their hearts, nor have they known what is evil, but have always remained in their childlike innocence. Such people will certainly dwell in the Kingdom of God, because they have not defiled the commandments of God by anything they have done, but with childlike innocence they have remained in the same state of mind all the days of their lives. And so, all of you who remain like this, he said, “innocent as infants, will be more glorious than everyone mentioned before. For every infant is glorious before God and preeminent with him. Thus you who remove evil from yourselves and are clothed in innocence are fortunate; you will live as preeminent above all others before God. After he completed the parables of the mountains I said to him, ‘Lord, now explain to me about the stones that were taken from the plain and set in the building in place of the ones removed from the tower, and about the round stones that were set in the building, and about those that are still round’.⁵¹

In the Orthodox tradition, Early Christian accounts and canons emphasise the importance of showing particular regard for children and their upbringing, as exemplified by the quotation: ‘Let our children partake of the discipline that is in Christ. Let them learn the strength of humility before God and the power of pure love before God’.⁵² This quotation highlights the significance of children not only grasping the concept of love

⁵⁰ Ehrman, 2005a, p. 139; 1 Clem 57,7.

⁵¹ Ehrman, 2003, p. 457.

⁵² Ehrman, 2005a, p. 77; 1 Clem 22,8.

but also understanding the essence of freedom, which is a problem in today's society, where the state tries to protect children more and more, sometimes going too far and interfering with family life and parent's love. The state has to safeguard people, especially children, from harm and abuse but to be cautious in forcing unproved and unscientific ideologies of some activists that irreversibly harm children. These actions can upset the balance in family life, affecting how parents, children, and spouses relate to each other. Instead of helping children grow healthy and happy, they can make irreparable mistakes.⁵³ Moreover, when the state takes greater control over how children are raised through norms and institutions unless there is a good reason, the natural ways of passing on good behaviour from parents to children and from older to younger children break down.⁵⁴ All of this interference contributes to children feeling isolated and losing their sense of belonging, caring for others, and knowing themselves within the network of relationships that a child—someone becoming an adult – usually has.⁵⁵

In addition to addressing the matters of love and freedom for children, ensuring the fulfilment of their basic existential needs is equally crucial. Early Christian testimonies emphasise that anyone striving to be a Christian must refrain from harming children.^{56,57} In "Barnabas", wrongful actions toward children are enumerated alongside other forms of corruption and neglect of those requiring assistance.

It is filled with persecutors of the good, haters of the truth, lovers of the lie; those who do not know the reward of righteousness, nor cling to the good nor to a fair judgment, who do not look out for the widow and the orphan, who are alert not to the reverential fear of God but to evil, from whom meekness and patience are far removed and remote. For they love what is vain and pursue a reward, showing no mercy to the poor nor toiling for the oppressed; they are prone to slander, not knowing the one who made them; murderers of children and corruptors of what God has fashioned; they turn their backs on the needy,

⁵³ Devrnja, 2022, p. 115.

⁵⁴ Devrnja, 2022, p. 115.

⁵⁵ Devrnja, 2022, p. 115.

⁵⁶ Barnabas 10,6.

⁵⁷ Ehrman, 2005b, p. 49.

oppress the afflicted, and support the wealthy. They are lawless judges of the impoverished, altogether sinful.⁵⁸

4.3. Christian Identity and Children in Poverty

As we argued, Early Christian texts signified the critical importance of caring for children and those in need. It condemns individuals who show no mercy to the poor, oppress the afflicted, and are identified as murderers of children and corruptors of what God has created. This language emphasises the moral imperative to protect the vulnerable, including children, and to provide them with support and care. The Early Christian tradition places significant emphasis on the identity and treatment of children and, at the same time, portrays every member of the Church as a “child of God”. The term “child of God” signifies that children hold a special status as representatives of the divine. Consequently, neglecting their well-being disregards their intrinsic value as bearers of divine likeness.

Furthermore, the metaphorical portrayal of children in Early Christian writings highlights qualities such as sincerity, innocence, and transformation, which Christianity seeks to cultivate in its believers. A Christian goal is to imbue the environment with the new ethos that needs to embody these essential virtues. To safeguard children from harm and mistreatment implies some prerequisites, such as care to provide for their basic needs and ensure their physical and emotional well-being. Neglecting this duty not only violates Christian principles but also undermines the spiritual integrity of the community. Moreover, the eschatological dimension of caring for children suggests that our treatment of them has implications for our ultimate destiny. Prioritising their welfare is essential for maintaining our identity as heirs to the Kingdom of God and preserving the continuity of Christian virtues across generations. In response to these teachings, Christians are called to resist actions that harm children, advocating for their rights and welfare. In other words, whenever we ignore the suffering of children, we hurt them, but also we hurt our eschatological identity. Actively participating in relieving their poverty and suffering, Christians can show our love for God and our respect for our Christian identity.

⁵⁸ Ehrman, 2005b, p. 81; Barnabas 20,2.

5. Theological Context: Serving the World

Considering all that has been discussed in the preceding chapters, we can now understand more clearly that protecting children in need and poverty is synonymous with safeguarding the Christian identity and the Church as a whole. This ensures that the Church continues to embody a living representation of God's Kingdom.

The glimpse of historical disturbances in which the Church operates today needs to be reconciled with our theology to get the proper direction of its role. It is imperative to constantly remember the Gospel, developing a transformative relationship between the Church and social realities. The love of God for the world is expressed in John 3: 16-17:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.⁵⁹

We find the framework for our actions and self-awareness within this profound love of Christ for the world. Simultaneously, the Church's identity is confronted by this immense love for creation demonstrated by God. Without a love for creation, the Church risks becoming inward-focused, which contradicts its responsibility to reflect God's love for the world. The command to care for the world establishes a shared responsibility between humanity and God. While the Church's engagement with the world should be rooted in love, this concept may appear overly simplistic to some. Christ's embodiment of love entails actions that challenge societal norms and traditions, prompting a reevaluation of the meaning of love. The Church struggles with what society thinks love should be, which often identifies love with emotions that diverge from Christ's radical love.⁶⁰ Love, seen as an emotion from the societal point of view, expects from the Church a pathetic acceptance and understanding of almost everything with no right to criticise, consequently making it less involved in society and sometimes holding it back from speaking the truth about the world.

⁵⁹John 3: 16-17.

⁶⁰ Evdokimov, 2001.

5.1. Church's Witness: Expectations of Church's Love

Understanding love is needed to direct the Church's mission and witness today. 'Witness, in the biblical understanding of the word *martyria*, is the result of Christ's *Diakonia* rendered to his Father on behalf of the whole human race, which has been called to be One in him'.⁶¹ A theological understanding that *Diakonia* represents the very nature of the Church's being implies many profound consequences. As a sign and witness of the Kingdom of God, the Church must express this truth through *Diakonia*, which goes beyond sporadic humanitarian aid.

Caring for those in need is both an obligation and a fundamental norm for the Orthodox Church and its members. In contemporary Serbia, the Church endeavours to provide humanitarian assistance through various channels, including dioceses and specific organisations. Among these organisations are humanitarian organisations within the SOC, such as "Philanthropy: Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church" (<https://www.covekoljublje.org/>) and "Faith Charity Stewardship" (<https://starateljstvo.rs/>). Established in 1991, Philanthropy emerged as the SOC's response to the escalating humanitarian crises stemming from the Southeastern European region's heightened social and economic challenges. Shortly after its inception, the urgent needs arising from wars, suffering, and atrocities in the former Yugoslavia propelled Philanthropy into rapid programmatic and financial expansion. Until 2000, its primary focus remained to deliver humanitarian aid to distressed people. Post-2000, Philanthropy embarked on a new phase of development, introducing comprehensive programmes and enhancing its organisational framework. Since then, Philanthropy has spearheaded development initiatives for the marginalised, including children and other vulnerable groups.⁶² The Holy Assembly of the SOC serves as the founder of Philanthropy, which operates under the guidance of a Board comprising five Bishops of the SOC. Philanthropy collaborates with and receives support from numerous institutions, underscoring the ecumenical framework within which its philanthropic efforts are conducted. In 2018, they published "Right for Every Child: Guide through Services for Children and Youth Deprived of

⁶¹ St. John 5, 36; Nissiotis, 1962.

⁶² About us – Philanthropy, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.covekoljublje.org/en/about-us> (Accessed: 2 February 2024).

Parental Care”,⁶³ addressing children’s poverty and ways to get help from the government and other institutions.

The establishment of the Faith Charity Stewardship organisation dates back to 1967 under the oversight of the Belgrade Archbishopric, with the blessing of the then Serbian Patriarch - German. The organisation’s main objective is to conduct diverse humanitarian initiatives to offer aid to those in need. Its operations are rooted in timeless Christian principles of compassion and care for others. His Holiness the Serbian Patriarch, Porfirije, assumes the role of president, overseeing and directly assessing the organisation’s collective endeavours.⁶⁴

In addition to these organisations, nearly every diocese has its own entity addressing the needs of the vulnerable, albeit in a somewhat ad hoc manner. However, in Kosovo and Metohija, humanitarian assistance has been consistently provided by the Diocese of Raška and Prizren as an integral part of the SOC.⁶⁵ Establishing a centralised organisation to coordinate and enhance the transparency of humanitarian efforts across Serbia would be more feasible.

The SOC has a vast network of dioceses spanning nearly every continent. This extensive global presence allows the SOC to collaborate with Serbian humanitarian organisations. By leveraging its worldwide church network, these organisations can expand their relief efforts and gather resources to address poverty within Serbian society. This provides the potential for combating poverty. Nevertheless, this role has not been widely recognised in Serbia, where most people still identify the Church and faith with tradition and national safeguarding issues.

According to official statistics from 2019, the SOC currently oversees 359 monasteries, with approximately 568 monks and 855 nuns, totalling 1,423 individuals.⁶⁶ While 122 monasteries accommodate only one monk each, many others can offer a broader range of social services. Some monasteries stand out for their transparency in social initiatives and community care, actively engaging in media coverage to promote

⁶³ Vidić et al., 2018.

⁶⁴ About us - Faith Charity Stewardship, [Online]. Available at: <https://starateljstvo.info/> (Accessed: 20 January 2024).

⁶⁵ The Humanitarian Organization of the Raška-Prizren Diocese - Mother of the Nine Jugović Brothers - People's Kitchens in Kosovo and Metohija, [Online]. Available at: <https://narodnekuhinjekim.com/home/> (Accessed 2 July 2024).

⁶⁶ Jović, 2019, pp. 152–782.

themselves and showcase their philanthropic work.⁶⁷ They effectively utilise financial contributions from the public to alleviate suffering, highlighting the immense potential of monasteries to provide Christian *Diakonia* (charitable service) to those in need. While their potential for philanthropic work has not been fully realised, it is crucial to emphasise and expand their role in future endeavours.

A famous Orthodox saint from Russia, John of Kronstadt (1829-1909), very vividly expressed his concern for the poor, in which he identified the poor with children of God. Children, used metaphorically, serve as a means to recognise and honour impoverished individuals for their goodness and sincerity, embodying the positive attributes associated with them.

You are daily asked for alms, and you ought daily to give willingly, without anger, harshness, and murmuring. You do not give your own, but you give that which belongs to God, to God's children, who bear the cross, and have scarcely where to lay their heads. You are only steward of God's property; you are the daily servant of the least of Christ's brethren... You thus will be serving Christ... Your labours are generously rewarded; be generous to others...⁶⁸

The Church, driven by love, must condemn the injustices of poverty, particularly concerning children. The Orthodox Church has to be involved in society, bringing people together and linking the personal and the public.⁶⁹ The Church will need to do more work to transform its public image, the one which has been anticipated by civil society and the government. In other words, instead of being understood only as a keeper of tradition and religious rituals, the Church would need to project itself as an agent contributing to society's harmony and welfare. As stated,

The mission of the Church is but a struggle to witness and to apply this eschatological vision of the Church to the historical

⁶⁷ The Tuman Monastery, [Online]. Available at: <https://manastirtumane.org> (Accessed: 26 July 2024).

⁶⁸ John and Goulaeff, 1984, p. 244.

⁶⁹ Clapsis, 2000, p. 133.

⁷⁰ Clapsis and Vassiliadis, 2004, p. 194.

⁷¹ Matthew 18:3.

⁷² Matthew 18:3.

realities and the world at large... Theology and the Church exist not for themselves, but for the world.⁷⁰

6. Conclusion

Christ says that children will show us who we are and who we can be and that they are essential for the story of salvation: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.⁷¹ Jesus Christ paid particular attention to children's identity and how they help us get saved. This shows how much he valued children's good things.⁷² Children are like a picture of how we go from being unknown to being known.

Just as poverty makes children lose their voice and identity, Christ showed us who we are through his saving actions. In Early Christian testimonies, believers have been identified and recognised as "children of God". This metaphorical concept highlighted the need for Christians to exhibit sincerity and love. Children's souls exemplify the sincerity and transformation that Christianity demands for each human being, the transformation of the soul modelled by the goodness of children. Moreover, only those with childlike qualities can inhabit the Kingdom of God, which reaffirms the eschatological significance of children. In conclusion, children were intended to signify the imperative for Christians to undergo personal transformation on the journey to salvation. Additionally, as embodiments of goodness and exemplars of Christian conduct, children should now receive due respect as human beings within the Christian community and society.

Children became a measurement for the development of a new Christian identity. Developing a new Christian personality highlights the need to examine how this emergence is evident in church tradition, ritual, and practice, especially concerning children's poverty. Powerful words of Nicholai Berdyaev (1874-1948) stand as a testimony and signifier of the need to rethink our Christian life:

There have always been two races in the world; they exist today, and this division is more important than all other divisions. There are those who crucify and those who are crucified, those that oppress and those who are oppressed, those who hate and those who are hated, those who inflict suffering and those who

suffer, those who persecute and those who are persecuted. It needs no explanation on whose side Christians should be.⁷³

⁷³ Korce, 2004, p. 181.

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