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**FACULTY OF REFORMED THEOLOGY**

**SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT OF THE CHURCH:  
THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES WITH  
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE REINTEGRATION  
OF EX-PRISONERS SINCE THE ROMANIAN  
REVOLUTION FROM 1989**

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## Key Words:

Social involvement of the Church, reintegration, post-detention, the Centre of Social Reintegration “Onisim”, biblical foundations of reintegration

The purpose of society in general is to maintain balance, social and normative order. The involvement in the reintegration and at the same time in the development of the socialization process of people after detention is a desideratum that determines the optimal functioning of social structures, groups and collectivities. Solving the existing conflicts between aspirations and behavioral attitudes, habituation and religious beliefs (belief in God) is the fundamental process in the activity of social reintegration of people released from detention. The social reintegration and post-detention people socialization, as well as creating a buffer zone between penitentiary and society through the promotion of some centers by the National Administration of Penitentiaries from Romania are both components of the same process of reducing and fighting against crime, in order to maintain a normal society in the context of European integration and implementation of European Union standards. It is remarkable that after the Romanian Revolution from 1989 there has been a radical change of criminal policy, justice system and social reintegration optics of people from or after detention, a change that clearly reflected through practical experience, legislative evolution in the domain, granting of human rights, aspects which implicitly led to a change in the mentality of people employed in prisons and civil society (of course partly) in relation with the possibility of former offenders and those which are still in a detention center. The employment of a spiritual father within the penitentiary, opening the penitentiary gates through the law of volunteering, whereby various associations and churches have the opportunity to deal with the social and spiritual problems of those who are in custody of penitentiaries, have proved a real change within post-revolutionary period of the behavior of many inmates, a deletion of the relapse desire and of course a decrease of crime and implicitly, of the prison staff. This thesis has set its aim to reflect and analyze the solid motivations leading to prisoner status, suggest ways of prevention, demonstrate the possibility of social reintegration after detention through well-structured and specialized

reintegration centers and especially to highlight the importance and the role of the Christian spirit, the Word of God in the process of change and reintegration. The access to specialized literature favored an interdisciplinary, judicial, sociological and spiritual approach in the researched aspects. Beyond these approaches, it has been also attempted to identify the specific aspects of post-institutional activity with regard to prisoners released from detention, such as the role of the family, economic agents and of course the role of civil society in general by accepting those bearing the emblem of ex-prisoner.

### **Delimiting the Subject**

Throughout the centuries, social involvement in general and the one of the Church in particular are highlighted as an ample subject. The main aim of this thesis is to approach social involvement in Romania after 1989, namely social reintegration of ex-prisoners, as it has been stated for a long time it is “better to prevent than punish”.

Therewith, the present research provided an in-depth analysis and a case study of an institution specialized in the reintegration of current and former inmates with almost 20 years of experience in prisons of Transylvania within a well-organized context designed for post-detention activities called Christian Centre of Social Reintegration “Onisim” from Bistrita. A second goal of the current work is to keep as a red thread the importance of Church involvement in general, the role of promoting Christian beliefs in particular and the power of the Word of Scripture in the process of reintegration and rehabilitation of former criminals.

### **Summary of the Thesis on Chapters**

The first chapter highly focuses on introductive aspects, emphasizing through its content the purpose of the present work, the urgent need of the Church social involvement and describing to what extent the subject of the work is delimited by the other papers written up to the present. This delimitation involves the specific study of the social reintegration of former detainees, giving details of some specific cases. Also, within this chapter the main research methods and the sources of documentation were highlighted.

The second chapter provides the biblical and historical structure of social involvement both through the theological and historical bases of the concept of Church social involvement and through its critical role in the patristic period, in the Middle Ages and during the Reform and Post-Reform period.

The third chapter outlines a presentation of social involvement history with clear reference to the detention field at an international and national level. This chapter also includes a brief description of the basic sociological aspects in the process of social reintegration of ex-prisoners.

The fourth chapter is meant to present extensively the practical methods used within penitentiaries so as to prevent and manage the situations resulting from the acquisition of prisoner status.

In the fifth chapter the focus is on a general review of the procedures, tools and methods indicated and used in the process of social reintegration of ex-prisoners. It also refers to national policies and the implementation results.

The sixth chapter emphasizes the most significant part of the current research, namely a case study within the Christian Centre of Social Reintegration “Onisim” from Bistrita, a specialized and accredited institution on social reintegration process of former inmates. The case study consists of a detailed presentation of the methods, instruments and nominal cases of reintegrated people as a result of the center activities.

The last chapter is especially intended for the study, highlighting conclusive arguments on the issue of Church involvement in social domain, namely the reintegration of ex-prisoners, is of real importance, and in addition to all the sociological and psychological methods used, the proclamation of the Word of God and moral Christian values constitute a complete ensemble with decisive character in the fundamental change of individuals and their rendering to the family and society.

## **Research Methodology**

The present paper consists of several research methods, belonging both to sociologic and theological domains.

In order to define theological concepts of Church social involvement in the reintegration of ex-prisoners, both electronic and classical libraries have been consulted and used. The most eloquent software used in this regard was BibleWorks 8.0.005s.1 (available on <http://www.bibleworks.com/>). It is constituted as software that provides important tools and information for an appropriate exegesis of biblical text, written in the original languages. This electronic library has over 200 Bible translations and over 40 texts in original languages (Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament). Among the libraries used in conducting this study are: The Library of Faculty of Reformed Didactic Theology,

Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca and “Lucian Blaga” University Central Library from Cluj-Napoca.

The documentary methods were: the observation (carried out for a period of 3 months in an institution aimed to help former detainees in their struggle for reintegration into society) and several bibliographic sources that helped to prepare this work.

Due to the particularity of the current survey, I have consulted the statistics provided by the National Administration of Penitentiaries in Romania, which highlighted the way in which the released offenders are reintegrated into society and especially the results of this reintegration, showing a clear numerical decreasing of relapse.

## CONCLUSIONS

The need of a common point between penitentiaries and society is extremely urgent, firstly due to the fact that the penitentiaries do not possess the complex capacity to prepare the prisoners for post-detention period, and secondly society is not prepared yet to receive such individuals among it. Undoubtedly, the detention period marks the human existence (with feelings, senses, relationships, the individual or individuals state of health), and consequently ex-prisoners need a time to readapt to the new environment, social changes that took place during their detention period. In order to slowly succeed in reintegrating and readapting former prisoners to a new life style, it is extremely important to offer them minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency for a certain period of their lifetime, called “an unstable one”. Labor market reintegration is undoubtedly very difficult taking into account the fact that many companies and potential employers are reluctant to hire people whose criminal record background was compromised, consequently being forced to wear an unwiped label of “ex-prisoner”.

The second chapter of the current work starts with some examples from the Old Testament, New Testament, ministry of the Lord Jesus, apostles’ and the church fathers’, and attempts to demonstrate that social involvement is a basic component of the Church mission. Even using the term “holistic mission of the church” I emphasized that this refers to the service for all people, ending (culminating) with the renovation realized by the power of the Gospel. Through the description of the undertaken study it has been revealed the value of the positive impact and the undeniable contribution of the Church representatives in the social life, contribution which changed not only the Church direction, but the entire direction



of contemporary society. Within the same chapter we have noticed how the modern and postmodern organization and functioning system of new society, even the concept of democracy, have been initiated and promoted by the Church representatives, thus contributing, through their involvement and writings, to a stable society with balanced principles.

The third chapter presents a general review of existing resources in the domain, focusing on the study of historical stages of the Church, the way the Church understood its calling and its response to serve prisoners or former inmates. The same chapter includes a study of history of prisons, types of prisons at the international level and in Romanian area from the Antiquity up to the modern and even after December 1989. It has been also given a presentation of the sociological aspects in being sentenced and some specific methods used in the process of reintegration.

The fourth chapter aims to highlight the ways and principles that can be used to intervene in individuals' lives during and post-detention period. Within the same chapter it has been emphasized and analyzed the deprivation of liberty effects on individuals, and later on I systematically laid stress on the adaptation strategies to the detention regime. This chapter ends with relevant testimonials of people who experienced detention. This part of research was completed due to the access to specialized materials in the field, approached from social and psychosocial perspective and simultaneously by taking some interviews, throughout the time, within the prisons.

Within the fifth chapter I presented a record of the number of prisoners for over ten years issued by the National Administration of Penitentiaries. Later on, I highlighted the urgent need for social reintegration, the causes of being sentences, the most frequent problems encountered during the reintegration process and certain failures in the reintegration process. I have also studied and highlighted existing methods and national policies in this field.

I concluded the final chapter of the thesis by presenting a case study of the Christian Center of Social Reintegration "Onisim" from Bistrita, an institution specialized in supporting current or former inmates. This goal is achieved through constantly sustained programs both in detention centers and specially-designed accommodation space as well as the possibility of participating to a complex set of social reintegration programs. Within the same chapter I have mentioned some nominal case studies of some people who undertook the social reintegration program with positive results. Finally I referred to the projects developed by Christian Center "Onisim" from Bistrita, projects that gave support to a large

number of people, many of whom succeeded in reintegration into society through inclusion on the labor market, thus regaining the human dignity and also obtaining a new perspective on life.

In the content of this thesis I attempted to chronologically reveal the historical periods from the “The Great Commission” of Jesus the Savior: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15-16) and continuing with the challenging remark of the Lord Jesus “I was in the prison and you came to Me” (Mathew 25). Later on I continued with the Patristic period, the Middle Ages, reform and post-reform period, and lastly with the contemporary period, highlighting in all these historical periods the great importance and the urgent need for social involvement of the Church in the life of those who are experiencing a major setback in their life, and implicitly, of those with special needs. We have also shown the contribution of the Primary Church representatives, Church Fathers, religious movements, Church Orders, Crusades and Reform in attempt to change the way of thinking and perceiving lower social classes, and by invoking and promoting the Word of God so that the whole society will be motivated to help their peers to overcome the critical moments of their lives. Within this large chapter called “Social Involvement of the Church” I chose to detail through an elaborated study the “reintegrating process of former prisoners” wishing to demonstrate, despite the generally transmitted opinions (“former inmates cannot be reintegrated”), that through sustained involvement in their lives and through consistent programs there is the proven possibility that those who have gone through such negative experiences can be recovered.

This study also highlighted the valuable contribution of society and state institutions to achieve this desideratum, and as a red thread in this paper I wished to emphasize the importance of proclaiming the truth of Scripture in this sense. Throughout history the Church has proven through its involvement in social matters that it represents a link between generations, conceptions, social classes or different personal states. In has been proven that the Word of God preached even in detention centers or in post-imprisonment conditions, interwoven with spiritual warmth and material help given to desperate and under-privileged people, has the power of life renovation and open new horizons to our peers by helping them to find a real reintegration as well as to restore the relationships between individual and him/herself, between individual and his/her family and between individual and society.

In a history of Romania since December 1989, when European values and human rights began to be promoted, when legislation allowed in different forms to be able to intervene spiritually, morally and even materially in inmates’ life, the Church through its

volunteers or employees did not delay to be present as similar to Paul the apostle and Onesimus (see The Epistle of Paul Apostle to Philemon) tried and in many cases succeeded in bringing a soul balm and spiritual silence so that our peers would overcome tough times of their life. The major problem we have been facing with is the fact that those who have had such an experience in their lives, according to the general mentality of society, they will permanently have the emblem of “former prisoner”, and as I have already mentioned, the perception of the majority is that they are impossible to recover. Being moved by a tremendous desire to intervene in these people’ lives during their imprisonment and post-detention period, the founding members of Onisim Center from Bistrita (constituting the case study in the sixth chapter of the current paper) have made an attempt, and largely succeeded in offering adequate accommodation, by social, psychological and spiritual activities, to create a favorable framework for the process of social reintegration. It is worth mentioning that in this initiative the above mentioned institution benefited from the penitentiaries collaboration from Transylvania, the support of the National Agency of Penitentiary as well as the help of the state authorities at the county level and not only. It was the Church who lay at the heart of this courageous initiative, through its efforts made in all aspects and fields with clear and solid motivation of fulfilling the Word of God. Due to the fact that we, humans created by God, we carry God in us, beyond the sociological and psychological methods which are extremely useful in our moments of social slippage, the Word of God, the fear of Him, the love for Him and our fellows remain strong points in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society of the offender.

According to Jesus’ parable in the Gospel of Luke (10:25), there are more and more people whose behavioral relationships with peers bear a resemblance to the Levite and the Priest who, for objective reasons (at least from their perspective) passed by, while there is a very small number of “merciful Samaritans” who are actually ready to expose, sacrifice and finally succeed in recovering and rehabilitating those in critical situations. The first major purpose of the Christian Center of Social Reintegration “Onisim” was and continues to be the same, recovering those who have had a negative experience by serving a punishment and not leaving them to return in penitentiary. Since in prisons most inmates come from children’s homes or disorganized families and for this reason many of them have also relapsed, trying to help them never return to prison is not easy. “Onisim” Center statistics show that of the approximately four hundred people who have benefited from programs within this institution, a percentage of 95-97% did not return to the penitentiary. A second proposed objective largely achieved by this Center is the restoration of the current and

former inmates' relations with their family. Through home visits, psychosocial and spiritual counseling or material help, where family members are still alive, in many cases the relationships with the family were restored and their returning home was warmly accepted by the family. The third major aim of "Onisim" Center work is social inclusion on the labor market. Since the majority of recovered people have never worked, their involvement in the workforce is not a simple task to perform. The role of mediator between the individual and employer is very important given that the Center as an institution, in the initial stage, should be the guarantor for the employer to sign the employment contract. Then another impediment is, as I have mentioned above, the lack of work experience of the person proposed for employment. It is worth mentioning here that the training courses inside the penitentiaries through the projects run by "Onisim" Center with financial support from the European funds have been of a real help as when they release from the prison, the people enrolled in these courses have a minimum of knowledge in a certain field of activity and certainly a qualification diploma facilitating the process of reintegration into the labor market. Therewith, through these projects the "Onisim" Center also managed to build some workshops in which a part of the Center assistants work, assuring their existence and implicitly being of a real help in prisoners' launch on the labor market.

The fourth objective of the "Onisim" Center considered to be of major importance in the reintegration process is and remains the involvement in the lives of individuals from a spiritual perspective. Through weekly biblical Bible studies and prayers held for over fifteen years within the penitentiary of Bistrita and for over ten years inside the penitentiary of Targu-Mures, representatives of the "Onisim" Center, assisted by a team of servants of different Churches are voluntarily engaged in transmitting the Scripture Word and offer personal counseling of those in these places of detention, meetings through which prayer and biblical message are desired to be a balm for the souls of inmates. Also, the development of such programs within the Center, where the inmates can voluntarily participate, personal discussions and counselors required, group and individual prayer practised voluntarily by those living in the Center are and remain a solid pillar in the emotional, sentimental and physical balance of each person who, due to past experiences, has a higher degree of vulnerability. The constant involvement in these people's lives, the transmission of genuine soul warmth, the creation of family environment (according with Psalm 68:6 "He gives a family to the destitute") for them who have never had a family warmth, involvement and motivation in various fields activity and confidence-building are solid levers, proven in time through this complex process, with the aim of raising these people out of the dust of their

falls and failures, and then being brought back into the family and society, and even more, most of them shall wait through faith the perspective of Other Life. I am truly convinced that people of this category who return to a new life putting the Gospel as the foundation of their actions and lives will be rehabilitated not only for themselves, their family and society, but certainly for eternal life.

### **The Author Contribution to the Research**

#### *The uniqueness of the research*

This thesis is remarkable in the manner in which it highlights the chances of a former inmate to reintegrate into secular and religious society in Romania. Starting from the argument that the Bible holds the truth that can convert man and using socio-psychological methods, it has been attempted to show that there is a good chance that a former prisoner will be given to society, family and even the Christian community.

#### *The originality of the scientific work*

The authenticity of the present work is provided by the manner in which the social and religious tools/methods are applied for a former inmate within the Christian Center of Social Reintegration “Onisim” from Bistrita.

#### *The challenge of the research*

The current study does not claim to have exhausted the topic of social reintegration, either theoretically or even practically (due to the limited space of the present thesis it was not possible to analyze even all the cases of social reintegration within “Onisim” Center), nevertheless its aim is to serve as a groundwork for further studies in this field.

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