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CHARITABLE WORK OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH  
IN THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH  
(16th–18th cc.)

In the Orthodox Church faith is based on three principles:

1. all the believers bear responsibility for their deeds;
2. every man bears responsibility for other people;
3. sincere reconciliation with other people assures God's forgiveness for sins.

From these three principles stems the moral doctrine of the Orthodox Church. It also has its roots in the very concept of the Church as a "community of believers based on love". A believer must connect his own thoughts, strivings and actions with the community of the faithful. He cannot be unconcerned with the fortunes of other people. Since we have all been made in God's image, we all, being members of a Christian community, have to show concern for the good of other people, even those of a different faith.

The moral doctrine of the Orthodox Church reflects her teachings and the life of her members. It is based on biblical principles and the views of the Fathers of the Church. It differs from the Catholic doctrine not so much in its contents, as in form. The Catholic Church places emphasis on the role of the law, on the rational justification of moral norms, hence on our behaviour towards our neighbours. In the Orthodox Church the religious consciousness of the community of believers is recognized as the criterion of appraisal, with emotional factors going hand in hand with rational ones.

Charity for the sake of hospitals was not confined to the act of foundation. The benefactors became the wardens of alm-

shouses and hospitals, providing them both with a financial and legal support. Through alms, donations and bequests they participated in this large-scale process of helping the poor and the sick. Charitable work was a proof of a Christian attitude to one's neighbour. This work was taken up both by Orthodox Church institutions and private people.

In early modern times the impulse for extensive charitable work of the Orthodox Church was given by the resolution of the synod of bishops in 1594. The synod, which reformed the internal life of the Church, decided to earmark part of the revenues of Ruthenian bishops for the creation of schools and almshouses for poor people. Also Orthodox brotherhoods were obliged to run schools and hospitals<sup>1</sup>.

Charitable work was also to be conducted by Orthodox monks. By taking monastic vows they promised obedience, chastity and poverty. The vow of obedience imposed on a monk the duty to fulfil the will and orders of the Father Superior, bishop, or the resolutions of the local council. Many of these resolutions concerned giving spiritual and financial support to impoverished believers. Some founders of monasteries obliged the monks to offer free religious ministrations to poor or crippled people. The vow of chastity enjoined on the monks moderation in eating and drinking, an ascetic life. This vow related to solidarity with the suffering and hungry. Finally, poverty, obligatory for a bishop or a monk, in the light of canon law and in keeping with ecclesiastical practice, meant they had to assign part of their income for the needs of the Church, the upkeep of monastic servants, for institutions attached to the monastery (e.g. schools), economic and building investments as well as the needs of the poor. The monks were obliged to take care of persons without means of living, of orphans and those who — due to misfortune — were reduced to destitution. At the same time assistance was given to the crippled, disabled and sick, for whom the bishop should found a hospital.

In Greek a hospital was called *xenodochium*, a place of travellers' rest. Because of such an interpretation of the word "hospital", contemplative monasteries were not eager to set up

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<sup>1</sup> The Central State Historical Archives of Russia in Petersburg, f. 832, op. 1, № 154; K. Lewicki, *Książę Konstanty Ostrogski a unia brzeska 1596 r. (Prince Konstanty Ostrogski and the Union of Brest 1596)*, Lwów 1933, pp. 104–105.

hospital establishments. They rather gave expression to their charity by handing out victuals and clothes to impoverished people, or by teaching the poor believers' children in schools attached to monasteries. In return for education the children did menial jobs in the monastic church. Teaching was combined with charitable work only in larger monastic centres. Such a solution was adopted e.g. in the monasteries of the township of Orsza. Exclusively charitable institutions active at monasteries, such as hospitals for the disabled and the aged, were not a mass phenomenon. Among 16 monasteries in the Polotsk diocese, only five had their hospitals with an average 3–6 inmates<sup>2</sup>. Orthodox monasteries had above all a contemplative character; they were centres of spiritual and cultural–educational life. Their charitable role was in most cases confined to giving alms to the needy.

It was frequently the founders or patrons of a monastery who determined its rank and size. The founder of a hospital attached to the Byteń monastery, Mikołaj Tryzna, ordered the local *ihtumen* (head of the monastery), to have “permanently ten men and ten women living there”. The founder earmarked for their annual upkeep “360 groschen of Lithuanian measure, six barrels of rye corn, three barrels of barley corn, three Słonim measure barrels of buckwheat corn, one barrel of salt, a whole live hog to be fed and two barrels of winnowed corn for its food, as well as one fruit garden, bequested to them for ever near our country town of Byteń, measured and delineated within secure boundaries, wherein for the needs of the hospital they will be allowed to sow any garden vegetables and use them; on top of that, both in winter and summer, every year, the burghers and our subjects from Byteń will be obliged to provide a cart of firewood from their homes for this hospital”<sup>3</sup>.

Of large significance were hospitals and almshouses run by the secular clergy. It was the duty of the archipresbyter, the Cathedral parish priest, apart from watching over the proper order of services in the Cathedral, to supervise charitable work in the whole diocese. The protopresbyter of Przemyśl was a direct

<sup>2</sup> L. Bieńkowski, *Organizacja Kościoła wschodniego w Polsce (The Organization of the Eastern Church in Poland)*, in: *Kościół w Polsce*, ed. J. Kłoczowski, 16th–18th Centuries, vol. 2, Kraków 1969, p. 1025.

<sup>3</sup> *Akty izdavayemyye Vilenskoyu Arkheograficheskoyu Kommissyeyu dlia razbora drevnikh aktov v Vilne*, vol. XXXIII, Vilno 1908, № 169, pp. 235–236 (henceforward AVAK).

warden of the hospital attached to the Cathedral Church and encouraged the brotherhoods of Przemyśl to be generous towards the poor. He supervised the hospitals in other towns and villages through general inspectors and deans<sup>4</sup>. Parish hospitals were parish agencies of their own kind. Some of them were supported jointly by an Orthodox parish and its patron. In the 16th and the 17th centuries hospitals were at the height of their development. The collapse of establishments run by the Orthodox clergy came in the 18th c. as a result of a dwindling number of believers in the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Hospitals and almshouses accepted those who were most in need, especially old people and cripples from a given parish. In contrast to the Middle Ages, in early modern times the very fact of being poor was not enough to entitle a person to hospital care. Only the disabled, blind or sick could find their place there, on condition that they had no means of support. In the hospital attached to the Byteń monastery Father Superior was "to see to it, that no strange subjects be accepted to the hospital, but only our local people from Byteń, on top of that ill, and disabled, who would not be able to earn their living"<sup>5</sup>. In the 17th c., when the number of Orthodox parishes diminished, hospitals started to accept also people from other localities. Only vagabonds and beggars able to work could not find their shelter here.

Just like in the Western Church the inmates were obliged to do some duties towards the clergy and the founder. Those who were able, performed some services for the sake of the Church, hospital or almshouse. All the inhabitants of the hospital were bound to offer their prayers for the patron of the hospital and its personnel.

The endowments of Orthodox hospitals were modest. The poor inmates were often obliged to beg. On the occasion of great church fairs or holidays money collections were organized for the sake of the hospital. The funds thus acquired were destined for the support of an almshouse, or divided between the poor. The hospital depended for its existence on its endowment and society's gifts in the form of alms, bequests and donations. An example of such a gift can be the bequest by a burgher from Drohiczyń, Mikołaj Kozak, who presented three gardens and 60

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<sup>4</sup> L. Bieńkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 904.

<sup>5</sup> AVAK, vol. XXXIII, N° 169, p. 236.

pieces of timber to St. Salvator's Church, "so that a hospital be erected attached to this church"<sup>6</sup>.

Charitable work was an important field of activity of Orthodox brotherhoods. They were born of the spirit of evangelical love and expressed charity in all forms of their activity. For this reason members of brotherhoods were called "charitable brethren"<sup>7</sup>. As is said in the document issued by Patriarch Jeremiah II, who established a brotherhood in Lwów in 1588, it was they precisely who were to take care of "the other honest brethren"<sup>8</sup>. King Sigismund III Vasa's privilege granted to the brotherhood of Wilno in 1592 gives a name to this organization. "And this brotherhood is called Orthodox and they called it 'charitable' themselves, since it offers charity and pious deeds"<sup>9</sup>. This charitable action had its roots as far back as medieval "mead" brotherhoods. The earliest of the latter were attached to Orthodox churches. In accordance with an old custom, during the main Orthodox holidays, these brotherhoods drew mead and organized "*piras*"<sup>10</sup> — i.e. feasts for the poor and homeless.

From the 16th c. onwards the action of charitable relief run by brotherhoods changed its forms. This action started to be carried out within a definite framework. Brotherhoods founded and maintained hospitals for orphans, the crippled, sick, and disabled. The function of the hospital was defined by the statute of the brotherhood. The Wilno brotherhood had such a statute, defining the methods by which their hospital was to be run. In line with this statute two hospital managers were appointed each year. They were to administer the funds bequeathed to the hospital and to try to ensure meals to the poor and sick inmates. Moreover these managers attended to the needs of the poor pupils of the school run by the brotherhood, and to other needs of the hospital.

<sup>6</sup> AVAK, vol. XXXIII, N° 159, p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. Mironowicz, *Geneza bractw cerkiewnych (The Origin of Orthodox Brotherhoods)*, "Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne", N° 2 (6), 1996, pp. 22-30.

<sup>8</sup> *Pamyatniki izdavayemyye vremennoyu Kommissyeyu dla razbora drevnikh aktov pri Kiyevskom, Podolskom i Volynskom general-gubernatorye*, vol. 3, Kiyev 1849, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> I. Flerov, *O pravoslavnykh tserkovnykh bratstvakh protivoborstvovavshikh unii v yugozapadno Rossii v XVI, XVII i XVIII stoletiyakh*, Sankt-Petersburg 1857, pp. 81-82.

<sup>10</sup> A. A. Papkov, *Bratstva. Ocherk istorii zapadno-russkikh pravoslavnykh bratstv*, Sankt-Petersburg 1900; F. Zhubro, *Istoriya Mogilevskogo Bogoyavenskogo bratstva*, "Mogilevskiy Yeparkhialnyye Vedomosti", 1889, N° 29, p. 453.

It was one of their duties to register and supervise church furniture and utensils, to raise funds for the sake of the church as well as to keep a record of receipts and expenditures of the collected money.

Thus relief to the suffering people was one of the main tasks of a brotherhood. Means for its charitable work came from the members' contributions, from donations and profit from the houses and buildings owned on the basis of bequests and legacies. The means coming from the gifts of brotherhood members and their contributions to the common fund were used for the upbringing of orphans and the sick, relief to widows, support for unmarried girls, the defence of the wronged, relief to those who suffered a loss as a result of a fire or flood, the ransoming of prisoners, relief to those suffering during a famine, clothes and burial for those who died in poverty, as well as the renovation of churches and monasteries<sup>11</sup>.

We learn of the tasks set to brotherhoods as regards charitable work from King Sigismund III's privilege of 1592, which entitles the Orthodox burghers of Minsk to establish a school and a hospital. According to this privilege they are "to take good care of the poor and the sick in their hospital, to provide the inmates with warmth, food and any other necessary care, and as far as in them lies, to offer the inmates charitable and pious deeds, as well as their own money and work"<sup>12</sup>. In his privilege given to the Divine Revelation Brotherhood in Bielsk on June 26, 1594, the King demanded that its members should help others "in case of attack, poverty, infirmity, burials"<sup>13</sup>, as well as orphans and widows.

Four times a year, on the occasion of the liturgy for the living and dead brethren, the members of the brotherhood gave a feast from the common fund, for the poor. On holy days, too, alms were handed out from the brotherhood money-box to "all the inmates of hospitals, and people idling about the streets who have no place to rest". The statute of the brotherhood of Łuck says that the money contributions or gifts should not be assigned for anything

<sup>11</sup> I. Flerov, *O pravoslavnykh tserkovnykh bratstvakh*, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Akty odnosyashchiesya k istorii Zapadnoy Rossii sobrannyye i izdannyye Arkheograficheskoyu Kommissseyu*, vol. IV. Sankt-Petersburg 1853, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> AVAK, vol. XXXIII, Wilno 1908, N° 108, pp. 137-139; A. Mironowicz, *Bractwo Objawienia Pańskiego w Bielsku Podlaskim (The Brotherhood of the Divine Revelation in Bielsk Podlaski)*, Bielsk Podlaski 1994, pp. 42-43.

else but only the renovation of churches and help and support for people (mainly within the brotherhood) in various cases of misfortune. Just as other brotherhood statutes, it mentions the necessity to help the poor, to provide the support for orphans, the upkeep for schools and to ensure a burial for impoverished people. The members of the brotherhood were obliged to offer prayers for their benefactors and other members of the community. The elders responsible for the division of financial means within the brotherhood should "watch themselves like the eye of God and remember the severe punishment that reached Ananias and Sapphira for appropriating part of church money." Everything that concerns the good of our neighbours should be the object of constant concern of the brethren and of constant deliberations at the meetings of the brotherhood<sup>14</sup>. "If any brother because of God's dispensation and not out of his own will or lack of industry became impoverished, fell into misery or was a victim of attack, then all the brethren, both with the aid of brotherhood money and their own, were obliged to help him: and, it should be added, in everything, to attend to him in illness, and to take care of his soul, to show their love for their brother both alive and dead. Those who are in good condition and rich should do nothing else, but only help the impoverished and use brotherhood money one for another without any usury"<sup>15</sup>.

It was also the duty of brotherhoods to help the impoverished brethren materially. They ensured them attendance in illness, a Christian funeral as well as the protection of widows and orphans. It was also the brethren's duty to organize a Christian funeral for "strangers who died in the street of cold or hunger, as it often happens". All those united in a brotherhood were obliged to take part in the deceased person's funeral. The members of a brotherhood could also see their brother off to the grave "of a brother from the same parish, but not enrolled in their brotherhood, or somebody from another parish", at the request of his relatives, but "for a certain agreed reward", which would be assigned for the costs of funerals, candles and other needs of the brotherhood<sup>16</sup>. The statute of the brotherhood of Mohylew in-

<sup>14</sup> *Pamyatniki izdavajemyye vremennoyu Kommissyeyu*, vol. I, Kiyev 1848, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> I. Flerov, *O pravoslavnykh tserkovnykh bratstvakh*, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> S. T. Golubev, *Kiyevskiy mitropolit Piotr Mogila i yego spodvizhniki*, vol. I, *Prilozheniya*, Kiyev 1883, № 36, art. 6, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18–21. L. Bieńkowski, *Organizacja Kościoła wschodniego w Polsce*, pp. 834–835.

voked the Christian tradition of performing the last offices for the dead person. "If God sends death on any of the enrolled brethren and does not leave him any property, with the help of which he could be buried, then the whole community should organize his funeral from the brotherhood's plate, according to the Christian custom, as it is dictated by their good will and piety"<sup>17</sup>. This statute orders that everybody: both the rich and the poor, should go to the funeral of a dead member of a brotherhood. Leaving their normal occupations, the members of the brotherhood had to carry the body, and during the holy liturgy stand at the side of the deceased with burning candles. Usually liturgy was held for the peace of the soul of the deceased person, and the *koliwo*<sup>18</sup> was prepared; when the service was over, alms from the plate were handed out to the poor. If somebody did not take part in the funeral of a dead brother, this fact was treated as omission of the duty to perform the last offices and such a person would be obliged to pay an adequate fine to the fund of the brotherhood.

Services for the deceased people were held twice a year: on the last Saturday before the Sexagesima and on the Saturday before the Quinquagesima, i.e. the Holy Trinity Day. During the services the *koliwo* was prepared. The members of the brotherhood together with their families prayed for the dead, standing near the body with burning candles. An absence from the service was punished by an adequate fine. In the brotherhood of Łuck, it was a pound of wax. The members of the brotherhood were obliged to enter the names of all their ancestors in a memory table called *pominalnik*. This *pominalnik* was usually read during a *proskomidia* at the time of the above-mentioned services for the dead people's souls. Also during Lent, according to an Orthodox rule, a clergyman from the brotherhood was obliged to pray for the dead and living members of the brotherhood before the end of the matins and the vespers<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> The Statute of the Brotherhood of Mohylew, "Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosveshcheniya", Moskva 1848, March, p. 299.

<sup>18</sup> *Kolivo* — cooked wheat, with the addition of honey and raisins, almonds, prunes, brought to the altar on definite holidays for the blessing of food. (A. Znosko, *Mały słownik wyrazów starocerkiewno-słowiańskich i terminologii cerkiewno-teologicznej* (A Small Dictionary of Old Church Slavic Words and Orthodox-Theological Terminology), Warszawa 1983, p. 152).

<sup>19</sup> I. Flerov, *O pravoslavnykh tserkovnykh bratstvakh*, p. 79.

Brotherhoods organized Orthodox schools, which were addressed to the whole Orthodox community. In this way they tried to raise the level of the believers' education. Following the example of the brotherhood in Lwów, that in Wilno pledged itself in its statute, confirmed by King Sigismund III in 1587, to teach "Ruthenian, Greek and Polish language and writing to the children of brethren enrolled [in the brotherhood — A. M.] and poor children", free of charge in this school. In order to "teach people in church", the brotherhood pledged itself to maintain learned men, both clergymen and laymen<sup>20</sup>. The same ruler, in a privilege granted in 1597 to the brotherhood of the Divine Revelation in Mohylew, committed its members to maintaining a teacher who taught the children of members of the brotherhood and poor persons. Schools and hospitals run by the brotherhoods were integrated. This is shown by the fact that when in 1633 the Uniates took over the school attached to the brotherhood of the Divine Revelation in Bielsk, its pupils took shelter in the hospital of the brotherhood and continued learning<sup>21</sup>.

The brethren were obliged to show their love to all their neighbours, not only their co-religionists, but also people of other denominations. It is possible to establish when such a large-scale charitable action was usually organized; most often it took place at Christmas and Easter<sup>22</sup>. In St. Nicholas brotherhood in Mohylew substantial assistance was given to all the poor on the day of the sanctuary's patron as well as on the days of the beheading of John the Baptist and St. Demetrius. In the above-mentioned privilege, granted to the brotherhood of Mohylew in 1597, it was added that twice a year presents would be handed out in hospitals, prisons, and "to all the poor in the street"<sup>23</sup>. The brotherhood of Łuck carried out such an action on the anniversary of the consecration of their church<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> *Zbiór dawnych dyplomów i aktów miast: Wilna, Kowna, Trok, prawosławnych monasterów, cerkwi w różnych sprawach (A Collection of Old Diplomas and Records of the Towns: Wilno, Kowno, Troki, Orthodox Monasteries and Churches Concerning Various Subjects)*, part 2, Wilno 1848, № 4.

<sup>21</sup> AVAK, vol. XXXIII, № 187, p. 283; A. Mironowicz, *Podlaskie ośrodki i organizacje prawosławne w XVI i XVII wieku (16th and 17th c. Orthodox Centres and Organizations in Podlachia)*, Białystok 1991, pp. 186–190.

<sup>22</sup> "Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosveshcheniya", p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> F. Zhubro, *Istoriya Mogilevskogo Bogoyavenskogo bratstva*, "Mogilevskiy Yeparkhalnye Vedomosti", 1889, Nos. 34–35, p. 534.

In the second half of the 17th c. the number of hospitals and almshouses run by brotherhoods and monasteries shrank greatly. The wars waged in the Ruthenian territory of the Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had led to the considerable impoverishment of society. The growing influence of the Union of Brest resulted in the weakening of the position of the Orthodox Church at the end of the 17th c. About forty monasteries existing at the beginning of the 18th c. were undergoing an economic crisis and could devote only modest sums to schools or charitable work<sup>25</sup>.

The decline of the towns inhabited by the Ruthenian population also brought about the weakening of the position of burghers who constituted the basis of Orthodox brotherhoods. Small agglomerations of Orthodox population did not allow to run a large-scale charitable activity. It should be noted, however, that every Orthodox monastery and brotherhood conducted such actions in the 18th c., though to a limited extent.

The role of charitable work was noticed during the reactivation of the independent structure of the Orthodox Church at the time of the Four Years' Sejm. The resolutions declared on July 3, 1791, by the Pińsk Congregation — which called into being the Highest General Consistory of the Greek-Oriental denomination and created an independent structure of the Orthodox Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — in two articles defined the manner in which charitable work would be carried out by the Orthodox Church. Article 11 of these resolutions underlines the necessity to call into being a hospital for the poor in every parish church. It should be built by the common efforts of vicars and parishioners, and “be supervised by vicars together with the elders of secular congregations”. Article 12 commits the heads of monasteries to distribute means for hospitals and schools “as well as for the provision of senior priests who cannot

<sup>24</sup> “Mohylovskiyе Gubernyalnyye Vedomosti”, № 35, Mohylev 1851, p. VI: *Pamyatniki izdavayemye vremennoyu Kommissyeyu*, vol. I, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> On the state of the Orthodox Church at the beginning of the 18th c. cf. E. Sako wicz, *Kościół prawosławny w Polsce w epoce Sejmu Wielkiego 1788–1792 (The Orthodox Church in Poland at the Time of the Great Sejm 1788–1792)*, Warszawa 1932, pp. 6–10; F. I. Titov, *Russkaya pravoslavnaya Tserkov v Polsko-Litovskom Gosudarstve v XVII-XVIII v.*, vol. II, Kiyev 1905, pp. 82–87; A. Mironowicz, *Ośrodki zakonne od XII do XIX wieku (Monastic Centres from the 12th till the 19th c.)*, in: *Kościół prawosławny w Polsce. Dawniej i dziś*, ed. L. Adamczuk and A. Mironowicz, Warszawa 1993, p. 103–105.

work any longer, for novices and some alumni"<sup>26</sup>. The resolutions made at Pińsk, voted by the Great Sejm on May 21, 1792, appeared too late to be executed. The Orthodox Church, having an ages-long experience in assisting the poor, even in the years of crucial decisions on her fate and the fate of the State, did not forsake her mission of extending charity to the needy. Only the extent and forms of charitable action changed. What distinguished Orthodox from Roman-Catholic or Uniate organizations was a greater share of the lay people in charitable actions. The community spirit characteristic of the Eastern Church had a great influence on the emergence of joint responsibility of the clergy and lay people for the fate of their neighbours. For the same reason the care of the poor and sick was a concern of the Orthodox hierarchy, monastic and secular clergy as well as Orthodox brotherhoods.

*(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)*

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<sup>26</sup>E. Sakowicz, *Kościół prawosławny w Polsce w epoce Sejmu Wielkiego 1788-1792*, p. 206; A. Mironowicz, *Cerkiew prawosławna na obszarze Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w latach 1772-1795 (The Orthodox Church in the Territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1772-1795)*, in: *Ziemie północne Rzeczypospolitej Polsko-Litewskiej w dobie rozbiorowej 1772-1815*, ed. M. Biskup, Warszawa-Toruń 1996, p. 88.