

## THE ROLE OF PSYCHOEDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK SERVICES WITHIN THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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### **Abstract:**

This paper theoretically approaches the role of psychoeducation and professional social work services within the Romanian Orthodox Church in the prevention of domestic violence, as a contemporary social phenomenon. Domestic violence is not a new social problem, as social history demonstrates, but due to its recent worrying frequency, it can be considered a phenomenon that can be thought of as a form of contemporary social pathology, on the one hand, or a social anomaly, as the recrudescence of violent acts currently increases significantly compared to the previous periods in history. The intervention of the Church within the family or society in the prevention of family violence is oriented towards the three dimensions of psychoeducation: the spiritual-pedagogical dimension, the psychological dimension, and the behavioural dimension, which aim to change the perspective on the purpose and existence in life, the reduction of aggressive behaviours and promotion of respectful and nonviolent conduct in interpersonal relationships. The objective of this paper is to analyze the connection between psychoeducation and social work from a socio-spiritual perspective, by taking into account the specificity of this activity within the professionalised social work services provided by the Romanian Orthodox Church, to see if there are systemic differences in the approach to cases of family violence in religiously infused assistential services compared to secular services.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, psychoeducation, social work, professional social services.

### **Resumé**

Le présent article aborde, au niveau théorique, le rôle des services de psychoéducation et d'assistance sociale professionnelle au sein de l'Église Orthodoxe Roumaine dans la prévention de la violence domestique, en tant que phénomène social contemporain. La violence domestique n'est pas un problème social nouveau, comme le démontre l'histoire sociale, mais en raison de sa fréquence inquiétante, elle peut être considérée, d'une part, comme un phénomène ayant des valences de pathologie de la société contemporaine, ou comme une anomalie sociale, lorsque la recrudescence des actes de violence augmente considérablement au cours d'une certaine période de temps par rapport à la période

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précédente. L'intervention de l'Église, au niveau familial et sociétal, dans la prévention de la violence familiale s'oriente vers les trois dimensions de la psychoéducation : la dimension spirituelle-pédagogique, la dimension psychologique et la dimension comportementale, qui visent à changer la perspective sur le but et l'existence de la vie, la réduction des manifestations agressives et la promotion de comportements respectueux et non violents dans les relations interpersonnelles. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser le lien entre psychoéducation et assistance sociale dans une perspective socio-spirituelle, à travers le prisme de la spécificité de ce lien au sein des services d'assistance sociale professionnalisés au sein de l'Église Orthodoxe Roumaine, mais aussi d'observer s'il existe différences systémiques dans l'approche des cas de violence domestique dans les services d'assistance religieuse par rapport aux services laïcs.

**Mots-clés :** violence conjugale, psychoéducation, assistance sociale, services sociaux professionnels.

### Abstract

Lucrarea de față abordează, la nivel teoretic, *rolul psihoeducației și al serviciilor de asistență socială profesionalizate din cadrul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în prevenirea violenței domestice, ca fenomen social contemporan*. Violența domestică nu este o problemă socială nouă, astfel cum demonstrează istoria socială, dar prin frecvența sa îngrijorătoare, poate fi considerată un fenomen cu valențe de patologie a societății contemporane, pe de o parte, sau o anomalie socială, atunci când recrudescența actelor violente crește semnificativ într-o anumită perioadă de timp, față de perioada anterioară. Intervenția Bisericii, la nivel familial și societal, în prevenirea violenței în familie se orientează spre cele trei dimensiuni ale psihoeducației: dimensiunea spiritual-pedagogică, dimensiunea psihologică și dimensiunea comportamentală, care au ca obiectiv schimbarea de perspectivă asupra scopului și existenței vieții, reducerea manifestărilor agresive și promovarea unor comportamente respectuoase și nonviolente în relațiile interpersonale. Obiectivul acestei lucrări este de a analiza legătura dintre psihoeducație și asistență socială din perspectivă socio-spirituală, prin prisma specificului acestei legături în cadrul serviciilor profesionalizate de asistență socială din cadrul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, dar și de a observa dacă există diferențe sistemice de abordare a cazurilor de violență în familie în serviciile asistențiale religioase prin comparație cu serviciile de tip laic.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *violență domestică, psihoeducație, asistență socială, servicii sociale profesionalizate.*

## 1. Introduction

The Romanian Orthodox Church, based on the Old and New Testament Revelation and as a result of the Tradition of the Holy Fathers, has always faithfully supported and continued spiritual life, religious education, and social-philanthropic missions within society and families. Currently, as sociological, psychological, and theological studies reveal and demonstrate, as well as official statistical data (Hendry, 2007; Zajdel et al., 2014), society and, implicitly, the contemporary family are marked by an economic, social, and a deep moral-spiritual crisis. Domestic violence, as a particular form of social violence, due to its worrying frequency, can even be seen as a form of contemporary social pathology or social anomaly, when it is manifested within families belonging to some social strata

where cases of domestic violence were rare, or when the phenomenon becomes uncontrollably high even within vulnerable families, which are considered predisposed to domestic violence. The phenomenon is caused not only by the spiritual, as studies undertaken worldwide conclude (Collins et al., 2010), but also by multiple factors that stem violence globally, within families, factors that have undesirable effects on the behaviour of individuals both in the long term, as well as in the short term, and these correlated behaviours generate extended social impact.

In the spiritual-Christian therapeutic approach and social work, psychoeducation is centrally placed, along with the other methods of social intervention. In the view of the Church, but also of professional social workers, psychoeducation is a form of honest dialogue between the specialist and the beneficiary, a way for the beneficiary to acquire a superior understanding of their own person or of the problem they face, of the ethiology of the dysfunctional elements in their life, which causes a change in perspective on life, that begins with acceptance and continues with healing. Psychoeducation, carried out mainly by the members of the interdisciplinary team, but also by other social actors whose action or intervention could influence the beneficiaries of social works, has an essential role in the prevention of domestic violence. Thus, by providing information and developing practical skills related to healthy relationships, effective communication, conflict management, and recognizing early signs of abuse, psychoeducation can be a real case-by-case intervention method, that supports the prevention and reduction of violent contexts within the family, in particular, and violence in society, in general. Also, psychoeducation can contribute to awareness of the negative effects and consequences of domestic and social violence, both for the individual, but also for families and society itself, and to the promotion of respectful and nonviolent behaviours in interpersonal relationships.

According to the Romanian Orthodox Church (Gavriliuță et al., 2016), violence degrades the dignity of the person and within the family, and undermines the unity and harmony of the family. The Church is in total disagreement with aggressive behaviours, with any form of violence within the family or in society, and promotes an attitude of responsibility and respect for human dignity, intervening, through its structures, by taking specific measures and providing certain services, by promoting protection laws against violence of any kind, as well as intervention through institutions and programs that protect children, adults and the elderly from violence.

Thus, within the professionalized social work services of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which focus on preventing the phenomenon of domestic violence with the help of psychoeducation, three distinct dimensions of psychoeducation emerge the pedagogical dimension, through which information about violence and its effects is made available to children and adults in an accessible way; the psychological dimension, through which the problems inherent to the phenomenon of violence are addressed, such as the emotional burden that both the victim and the aggressor experience after a violent event and that hurt

parties both on a conscious level, but especially on a subconscious level, causing new excessive, impulsive or violent reactions; the behavioural dimension, through which strategies aimed at changing violent intentions and behaviours are presented and taught.

Basically, psychoeducation within the professional social work services of the Romanian Orthodox Church is a psychosocial intervention with an essentially educational objective and structure and with therapeutic elements that have a fundamental role in improving dysfunctionalities within the family, in preventing negative events, but also in resizing the existential context in which the victim and even of the aggressor find themselves.

The purpose of this paper is to theoretically address the role of psychoeducation and professional social work services within the Romanian Orthodox Church in the prevention of domestic violence, as a contemporary social phenomenon. The objective of this paper is to analyze the connection between psychoeducation and social work from a socio-spiritual perspective, by taking into account the specificity of this activity within the professionalized social work services provided by the Romanian Orthodox Church. We start our approach with the following research question: are there systemic differences in the approach to cases of family violence by psychoeducation techniques in religiously infused social work services compared to secular services?

## **2. Psychoeducation – models and theories**

Psychoeducation is an interactive process that uses educational strategies to promote mental and emotional well-being (Srivastava & Panday, 2016). Depending on the intended beneficiaries, psychoeducation can be addressed to the person, the family, the social group, or the community as a whole. Depending on the psychoeducational techniques used, we can identify compliance to psychoeducation or adherence-focused psychoeducation, disease-focused psychoeducation, treatment, and rehabilitation-centered psychoeducation, etc. (Duran & Barlas, 2016). Psychoeducation can be seen as a form of empowering the patient. Thus, it is a practice aimed at promoting awareness of one's situation and proactivity in solving one's problem. As a working method or a technique in social work, psychoeducation provides tools to manage a chronic condition, to maintain the client's highest possible level of quality of life (for example, by improving endurance or resilience, identifying early signs of illness, changing lifestyle, crisis management, communication), increasing people's capacity to change behaviours and attitudes related to their condition (Colom, 2011). Psychoeducation replaces guilt with responsibility, helplessness with proactivity in the care process, and denial with awareness (Colom, 2011).

Barker (2003) defines psychoeducation as the process of teaching clients with mental illness and their family members about the nature of the illness, including its etiology, progression, consequences, prognosis, and treatment, in order to identify the options and alternatives that are most appropriate for their particular situation. In clinical practice, psychoeducation aims to ensure the basic

knowledge and skills of patients and their relatives regarding the disease, provide a comprehensive perspective on the disease, its prevention, crisis management, and prevent suicide (Sarkhel et al., 2020). Psychoeducation has developed over the years, and due to the benefits of the practice in the field of psychiatry, it extended to other fields of assistential practices, where it has also scientifically proven its contribution, so that today it is enriched with a diversity of models, based on theories from psychology, psychotherapy, medicine, sociology, education, as well as from other fields.

Although there are several models of psychoeducation, each with its own strengths and applications, we exemplify only some of the best-known and most practically used models, in order to analyze how psychoeducation techniques can be transferred from the clinical to the social level, by way of education and culture, especially for preventing family and community violence.

The informative model focuses on providing clear and accurate information to people who need information about a particular condition or disorder. The model aims to increase knowledge and understanding of a particular problem, reducing potential fear and/or anxiety, and is often used in early intervention. The model is put into practice through lectures, giving brochures, or posting information online (Authier, 2012).

The skills training model goes beyond the simple provision of information, in that it involves individuals actively learning specific skills to manage their emotional state or successfully overcome challenging situations. Applications of this model include acquiring coping skills to deal with anxiety, communication skills to improve relationships, or problem-solving skills to get through difficult life situations. This model is often used in group interventions and can be practiced in psychotherapeutic or informational workshops, training sessions, or individual therapy (Guerney, 1979).

The support model emphasizes the provision of emotional support and validation to individuals experiencing distress, and creates a safe space for them to share their concerns, express their emotions, and receive encouragement and empathy. This model is often used in individual therapy or in support groups, focusing on building trust and creating a sense of community (Ranz et al., 1991).

The comprehensive model incorporates elements of all the above models, providing information, building skills, and providing emotional support. The model aims to holistically address the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural needs of the individual and is often used in intensive intervention or rehabilitation programs, usually implemented by a team of professionals (Beale, 2002).

These models have various applications, among which we will list the most frequently used ones. Family psychoeducation educates families about a member's physical or mental condition, promoting understanding and acceptance of the diagnosis or the behaviour associated with this diagnosis, and also promotes supportive relationships within the family. Cultural adaptation models adjust traditional models to specific cultural contexts and take into account the language,

values, and beliefs of the beneficiaries. Technology-based models use digital tools and online platforms to provide remote or interactive psychoeducation.

Choosing the best model depends on several factors, including the targeted population (individual, family, or community), the specific needs of the beneficiaries (knowledge acquisition, skill development, emotional support, or even a combination of these), available resources (time, expertise and access to technology). Through the understanding and strategic use of the different models presented above, psychoeducation can effectively serve to rehabilitate people with different characteristics and adapt to the challenges that their specific situation entails.

### **3. Applicable theories in the practice of psychoeducation**

Several theories support the practice of psychoeducation and that influence how information is presented, skills are taught, and support is provided. Next, we outline a series of key theoretical frameworks for each group of core theories.

**Learning theories** include social learning theory, constructivism, and adult learning theory. *Social learning theory* emphasizes learning through observation, imitation, and reinforcement of positive behaviours. This theory emphasizes patterns of skill formation, suggesting that individuals can acquire new behaviours by observing positive patterns provided to them and receiving positive feedback (Bandura & Walters, 1977). *Constructivism* highlights the active role that individuals play in building, through functional communication, a common reality that is comprehensible to them as a group. This theory emphasizes how information is presented in psychoeducation, it encourages the active participation of the beneficiaries in the intervention process and the personalized interpretation of the particular context of the subjects (Li, 2023). *Adult learning theory* recognizes the unique needs and preferences of adult participants in the educational process. This theory emphasizes self-directed learning, collaborative activities, and the relevance of what is learned in the concrete practices of everyday life, thus being a method that leads to effective and impactful psychoeducational experiences (Merriam, 2018).

**Motivational theories**, such as the theory of self-determination and the transtheoretical model, are also relevant to the present study. *Self-determination theory* focuses on the intrinsic motivation that fuels a person's change in behaviour. This theory suggests that individuals are more likely to engage and persist in learning when they feel autonomous, competent, and emotionally connected to others. Psychoeducation can stimulate the individual's intrinsic motivation, by creating a supportive social environment and aligning learning with the individual's personal goals (Grolnick et al., 2021). *The transtheoretical model* or *the stages of change model* is based on the idea that individuals progress through different stages of preparation towards change (Grant & Franklin, 2007). This model suggests tailoring interventions to the specific stage of individuals, using strategies such as motivational interviewing and personalized goal setting (Mansuroğlu & Kutlu, 2022).

Relevant **communication theories** in psychoeducation are interpersonal communication theory and health communication theory. *Interpersonal communication theory* emphasizes the importance of clear, respectful, and empathetic communication. This theory guides how information is delivered in psychoeducation, ensuring inclusion, understanding, and effective knowledge transfer (Bylund et al., 2012). *Health communication theory* focuses on communication strategies to promote health behavior change. This theory is applied in psychoeducation to encourage individuals to use learned skills and adopt healthy behaviors (Ruben, 2016).

Some authors (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009; Mahyuvi & Nursalam, 2020) also refer to specific theories that support psychoeducational practices through other forms of models or principles: family systems theory and social-cognitive theory. *Family systems theory* emphasizes the interconnectedness of family members and their influence on the well-being of each, and every family member. This theory guides family psychoeducation toward facilitating communication, promoting understanding, and supportive family dynamics (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009). *Social-cognitive theory* focuses on the interaction between individuals, their environment, and their internal factors, such as beliefs and self-efficacy. This theory focuses on interventions that address and deconstruct negative thoughts, stabilize self-confidence, and promote behavior change (Mahyuvi & Nursalam, 2020).

It is important to note that these theories are not mutually exclusive, and psychoeducation often integrates multiple theoretical frameworks to create holistic and effective interventions. The choice of appropriate theories depends on the specific context, the intended beneficiaries, and the objectives of the psychoeducational program. By understanding and applying these theoretical frameworks, professionals can ensure that their psychoeducational interventions are evidence-based and effectively address the diverse needs of individuals and communities.

#### **4. The role of psychoeducation in violence prevention**

Psychoeducation plays a significant role in the prevention of violence, by addressing risk factors and promoting protective measures for the individual, the family, school life, and community as a whole. Globally, the field of psychoeducation is generally known as the primary source of information and resources for school staff, families, and students, through mental health professionals, who use various techniques to educate students' emotions, behaviors, and achievements. We could say that the field of psychoeducation is largely reserved for psychologists, who usually have the best knowledge about its practices, theories, and psychological implications, while also having experience in providing special educational services, which involve understanding the barriers that intervene in the learning process, in behavioral and mental health interventions, in the processes and stages of academic learning and in the collaboration between family and school, to which are added the practices of consultation and assessment. In and out of the school educational setting, these

professionals effectively position themselves to provide psychoeducation to a wide range of individuals (Brown et al., 2020).

If we refer to the impact of psychoeducation in society, we can consider major contributions that psychoeducation has made over time: it develops socio-emotional skills, by formulating and supporting strategies for effective communication, management of anger, resolving conflicts and developing empathy, reducing the risk of escalation of tensions in difficult situations (Akan, 2021); it raises awareness, in the sense that it educates individuals about the negative consequences of violence, the impact on victims and the community, stimulating responsibility and mutual respect (Onnela et al., 2021); it promotes alternative behaviors, in that it offers non-violent alternatives to solving problems, promoting a culture of peace and tolerance (Iuso et al., 2022); it helps improve self-esteem, as it develops a sense of personal worth and self-respect, reducing vulnerability to victimization and aggressive tendencies; it helps develop healthy relationships, by encouraging open communication, mutual respect and non-violent conflict resolution in family and interpersonal relationships; it ensures individual and community empowerment, by providing the necessary tools to intervene in risk situations, support victims and promote social change (Howard & Goelitz, 2004).

Research (Auty et al., 2017; Schuengel et al., 2012) demonstrates the effectiveness of psychoeducation in reducing violence. Its positive effects have been demonstrated in the short and the long run. Implementing well-designed programs, that are adapted to the specific context of the beneficiary, can significantly contribute to creating a safer and more harmonious environment for all. Psychoeducation is an important strategy for violence prevention, providing the necessary tools to defuse conflicts, promote healthy relationships, and build a society centered on understanding and cooperation. Investing in psychoeducational programs is essential to creating a safer and more prosperous future for all citizens. In Romanian practice, the connection between psychoeducational practices, assistential practices, and the spiritual-Christian dynamics of the Orthodox Church in solving or improving social problems was considered beneficial (Țugui & Țigmeanu, 2010).

## **5. Towards the psychoeducational organization of Christian Orthodox humanitarian practice – European perspectives**

In an almost diagnostic rendering of the Orthodox social work services and the role of the Orthodox Church during the economic crisis of Greece, Molokotos-Liederman (2012) exemplifies the brief evolution of the development of Orthodox social services and how the intervention of the Orthodox Church in social work differs from other interventions, promoted by other religious denominations. In Central European countries, the social actions promoted by the Orthodox Church are based on social theology and especially on the Christian concept of *Diakonia*. This concept is based on the principle of solidarity and is inspired by Christian values, such as God's love and compassion. Orthodox social actions focus on



charity and philanthropy towards those in need. The term diakonia has been used since the beginning of Christianity, meaning philanthropy and love towards other human beings, meanings that were used interchangeably in Christian theology (Molokotos-Liederman, 2012).

Since the time of the Byzantine Empire, the Church has been responsible for philanthropy, activities ranging from providing support to individuals to looking after the needs of all members of society in an organized and structured way, by overseeing social welfare services, including hospitals, protection and care centers for children and the elderly or victims of domestic violence. The philanthropic diakonia of the Byzantine Empire was used as a source of inspiration and even constituted a model that was duplicated in the welfare services offered by the Western Church (Molokotos-Liederman, 2012). Since those times, Christian theology aimed to integrate social action into spiritual life and theology, making efforts to address the problem of social welfare in an optimal manner.

Case studies carried out in Greece and Romania, within the WaVE and WREP projects, the results of which were published in 2018 in the volume „Religion and Welfare in Europe: Gendered and Minority Perspectives”, coordinated by Lina Molokotos-Liederman, Anders Bäckström, and Grace Davie, clearly showed the different forms of social welfare in traditional-Orthodox Christian societies, where the family and the Church were the institutions that usually supplemented the niches insufficiently covered by the welfare systems promoted by the secular state. The Orthodox Church contributed, through specific actions, to the well-being of the communities that needed its intervention, but, due to the specifics of Christian philanthropy, which is not to overly popularize the interventions, their lack of public visibility made the actions of the Orthodox Church less known or appreciated by the general public than other interventions, made by other religious organizations.

The European research (Molokotos-Liederman et al., 2018) regarding the projects mentioned above shows that the activity of the Orthodox Church must be seen in its wider context, due to the way in which it has grown as an organized action since the specificity of the Orthodox approach to social services becomes evident when the comparison is made between Orthodox Diakonia worldwide and the actions of the Catholic Church and the Protestant organizations, which are involved in international humanitarian activities. Orthodox Diakonia differs, therefore, because the Orthodox Church did not always have an adequate, consistent, and systematic response to social problems and humanitarian concerns. The study (Molokotos-Liederman, 2018) shows how this difference in approach has discouraged the development of an Orthodox system in the provision of humanitarian social work around the world. Orthodox Christian organizations seem to have a weaker international presence and a less well-known public profile in the area of humanitarian action, compared to many other secular and Christian NGOs, which have contributed to the field of international social policy, the development of humanitarian assistance and professionalized social services, while

being visibly active, especially after the Second World War, in response to urgent humanitarian needs (Molokotos-Liederman et al., 2018).

## **6. The actions of the Romanian Orthodox Church – from spiritual practices to professional assistential practices**

The Romanian Orthodox Church is actively involved in the continuous education of individuals and Christian communities, promoting peace, nonviolence, and harmony between people, developing actions that involve combating violence and discrimination, respecting human dignity, offering professional or specialized social services, developing programs of social and spiritual assistance, offering shelter, food, social and moral-religious assistance, spiritual assistance, psychological and legal counseling to victims of domestic violence. It is particularly important how the Romanian Orthodox Church participates in combating violence and discrimination, actively involving itself - through priests, religion teachers, and social workers - in programs to prevent and combat violence, intolerance, and marginalization to which women and children fall victim. The activity of members within the Church also involves the organization of meetings with a psychoeducational focus, which fulfills the role of urging responsibility, respect for human dignity, and the avoidance of degrading or humiliating attitudes and behaviors.

Domestic violence is a problem that affects all countries of the world, regardless of their degree of development, culture, or religiosity, and it manifests itself at all levels within society. To eradicate this phenomenon, it is not enough to punish abuses in individual cases, it is necessary to change social structures, collective culture, or mentality, but also the norms, principles, and moral-spiritual values, through education and Christian responsibility. The Church has precisely this role, through intervention within society and family, and by helping individuals also, through priests and believers involved in the administrative-spiritual structure of the Church.

Research aimed at the attitude and perceptions of priests and religion teachers regarding family violence was published in the two volumes that are referential for Romania: „Social work within the Church. Evaluations and researches within the social programs of the Romanian Orthodox Church” (Țugui & Țigmeanu, 2010) and „The Christian family, a blessing for the Church and society” (Ploieșteanul et al., 2012). Priests and religious teachers participating in focus groups believe that violence has an extensive recrudescence countrywide, and its causes can be associated with poor education. Symbolic violence is discussed along with physical violence because it can be inflicted between married people or between parents and children. It was highlighted that the rebellion of the children against their parents is a form of symbolic domestic violence. The emancipation of children was brought into question, in order to discuss opinions that challenge the idea of banning any form of violence against children or against spouses, by arguing that coercive methods - especially in the case of children - aim to shape behavior, but can be used only when other means fail. The majority

believed (Ploieșteanul et al., 2012; Țugui & Țigmeanu, 2010) that means of coercion should not be physical, but symbolic. There were opinions according to which violence would be excusable as long as it does not stem from a negative feeling, but is a measure of love, preserving proportions between what generated it and the severity of violence actually inflicted (Ploieșteanul et al., 2012 ). Priests are aware that they are called to intervene in order to reduce the phenomenon of domestic violence, as it is considered among the top ten social problems affecting contemporary families (Pătuleanu, 2012).

Analyzing the specialized social work services provided by the Romanian Orthodox Church for the eradication of domestic violence and the protection of victims, we can observe how the Patriarchal Administration, including the Archdiocese of Iași, have an important number of specialized social work programs, offered by various accredited providers (parishes, deaneries, monasteries, religious NGO's.), where people who are victims of domestic violence find support and psychological counseling. The social work activity and philanthropic actions of the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding the prevention and intervention in cases of domestic violence are obvious (Nistor, 2019a), considering the concerns and interventions of its own structures, which offer professionalized social services through social work offices of the dioceses, parishes and monasteries, accredited as providers of social services for intervention in emergency and crisis situations; counseling centers for vulnerable people; emergency centers for victims of domestic violence and human trafficking; NGOs that provide social-philanthropic and medical activity; emergency and crisis support centers. All these centers aim to prevent or limit situations of crisis, difficulty, or vulnerability, which can lead to the marginalization or exclusion of people who find themselves in difficulty (Nistor, 2019).

In addition to offering its own specialized social work services, the Romanian Orthodox Church also provides philanthropic services through partnerships with secular institutions, in a mission to protect lonely people, children, and women who struggle with difficult situations, while also developing social and spiritual assistance programs, which promote dialogue and social solidarity, in order to ensure respect for human dignity and improve the quality of life. Another important segment of the Church's philanthropic actions consists of supporting people who have been victims of domestic violence, offering them protection, by providing shelter, food, social and moral-religious assistance, spiritual assistance, and psychological and legal counseling.

The social-philanthropic and medical activity carried out by the diocesan centers of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the NGOs that operate with the blessing of these centers is summarized on the official website [www.basilica.ro](http://www.basilica.ro). In 2022 (Dumitrașcu, 2023), compared to 2018 and 2019 (Nistor, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), 23,729 people (diocesan advisers, specialized and diocesan inspectors, social workers, staff with various specializations - teaching staff, medical staff, lawyers, psychologists, administrative staff - and over 20,000 volunteers) participated in social-philanthropic and medical actions. The online report shows that this activity

was carried out by a number of 767 institutions of social services, which put into practice a number of 1,243 social programs, of which 983 were self-funded, 84 had external financing, 41 had public financing and 135 were developed with mixed funding. The report indicates a number of 199,140 beneficiaries who received assistance, as well as the number of social work centers, social canteens, home food delivery programs, daycare centers for children, daycare centers for the elderly, daycare centers for people with disabilities, residential centers for children, residential centers for the elderly, residential centers for people with disabilities, home care services, institutions offering medical and recovery services, at home socio-medical care services, educational services (afterschool) and other types of services (Dumitraşcu, 2023; Nistor, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

The beneficiaries of the philanthropic activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church and its partners are children from the Church's social settlements, but especially from poor families without means of support, or with parents working in other countries; speech-disabled people, who suffer from sight or hearing impairments; drug or other types of addictions; elderly people from social protection facilities administered by the Church, social transit centers and night shelters; elderly people who are alone, unable to move, abandoned by their families or who have serious health problems; unemployed, adults in difficulty; victims of human trafficking, victims of family violence; released prisoners; victims of natural disasters; homeless people (Dumitraşcu, 2023).

The philanthropic activity, through religious assistance, also extended to military units, penitentiaries, hospitals, and social protection establishments, and it was provided by 464 priests. Through volunteer actions carried out in two social-philanthropic programs, the volunteers of the Chapel of the Cathedral for the Salvation of the Nation implemented the Program „Get involved! Together we achieve more!”, for the benefit of more than 500 families, for the prevention of social exclusion, and the „Help for students” Program, which aims to reduce school dropout, among more than 100 beneficiaries (Dumitraşcu, 2023). The activity aimed at supporting health, as well as prevention and health education, targeted over 27,000 beneficiaries, during 2015-2022, during which time the Romanian Patriarchate also organized blood donation campaigns that included over 12,000 participants.

During the armed conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, the Romanian Patriarchate and its volunteers carried out philanthropic activities for Ukrainian refugees, offering direct support through all dioceses of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in the amount of 3,400,656 euros (hot food, various products, food for newborns, sanitary items, medicines, blankets, clothing, toys, etc.). Actions aimed at helping Ukrainian refugees also involved translation, counseling and guidance, medical, educational, and logistical support, consisting of shelter spaces (tents or containers for accommodation) and transport. The detailed situation of all the actions undertaken to support the victims of the war in Ukraine can be identified and analyzed online, by accessing the official website of the Romanian Patriarchate.

## 7. Conclusions

The Romanian Orthodox Church has a significant role in preventing domestic violence through psychoeducation, due to its considerable credibility in the community. In accordance with the specifics of Christian assistential practices, the Romanian Orthodox Church is involved in numerous alternative ways in maintaining the well-being of Orthodox Christian communities, as well as in preventing violence and behaviors that could endanger the development of harmonious intra-family relationships, and in a wider level, in maintaining a safe social environment. By promoting the values of social harmony and tolerance, the Church educates community members on Christian teachings that contribute to social peace, forgiveness of the Other, love between family members, and respect for the fundamental attributes of the person (life, physical integrity, and health). The priests, but also the staff of partner organizations of the Romanian Orthodox Church, contribute to infusing society with nonviolent messages, through sermons, liturgies, and other religious activities.

Another way of intervention is the development of psychoeducational programs. This line of action is supported by the Church in collaboration with specialists in the field of mental health, to create psychoeducational programs adapted to the specific needs of Orthodox communities. Programs can address topics such as anger management, conflict resolution, effective communication, and parenting. The Church can facilitate the training of priests and other religious leaders in providing support and counseling to prevent violence. Through activities to support victims of violence, the Church offers spiritual and emotional support to victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, neglect, and other forms of violence, through counseling and support centers within parishes or dioceses. In addition, collaboration with organizations specialized in assisting victims enables professionals who activate within the Church's victim support activities to provide holistic support, which represents a considerable therapeutic advantage.

Another way the Church gets involved to eradicate family violence, which has a wide social impact and is very effective socially, not only in individual cases, is raising community awareness, by organizing awareness campaigns regarding violence and its negative consequences, through conferences, seminars, and round tables, which are aimed at promoting constructive discussion and debate. However, there are also challenges in achieving these goals, such as the lack of financial and human resources dedicated to violence prevention programs, the reluctance of some religious leaders to address the issue of violence, due to the sensitivity of the subject, or even the lack of collaboration between the Church and some secular organizations involved in the prevention of violence. The involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the prevention of family violence or in case-by-case intervention creates opportunities adjacent to the state social work system because professional social work networks are developed by parishes and dioceses throughout the country, by involving parishioners in violence prevention programs. The strong moral position of the Church transforms it into an important social influencer to promote nonviolent values, by capitalizing on the rich tradition

of the Church in philanthropy and social work practice. All this reveals a significant potential of the Church to contribute to the prevention of violence through psychoeducation, by developing specific programs to victim support and raise community awareness, aiming to create a more peaceful and harmonious society.

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