

Challenges and concrete hope of participation at the grassroots through the Armenian Caritas mission

Promotion of the grassroots level participation in the implementation of social projects and ministries in the communities is one of the main objectives of Caritas and every catholic social mission. I believe, within the frameworks of the terminology of Catholic Social Teaching and social mission of the Church, the social, or rather, political term '*grassroots*' should be understood as the basic participants or beneficiaries of social work and ministry, implemented by Church organisations or associations, according to the mission and goals of the Church. *Participation* is one of the core principles of the social teaching of the Catholic Church and is based on the dignity and unique value of every human person: 'Since something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person, the dignity of every person before God is the basis of the dignity of man before other men'¹. Promotion of participation of all the members of community in various forms of social activities is also one of the necessary fruits of the more fundamental principle of *subsidiarity*, which is 'indicated as a most important principle of "social philosophy"' in *Quadragesimo Anno*, and as a way of 'defending and promoting the original expressions of social life'². The Compendium of the Social Teaching states, that based on the principle of subsidiarity 'all societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help...— therefore of support, promotion, development — with respect to lower-order societies'³.

The implementation of the above-mentioned principles has its peculiarities and special importance for the communities of the developing countries of the post-soviet territory, where people were used to the dominant role of the soviet bureaucratic totalitarian regime, which totally controlled the original initiatives of the grassroots and compelled them to develop in certain direction and with previously planned content frames. Over the decades, this phenomenon restrained the potential of creativity and self-sufficiency models, and developed a sense of dependence on the opinion of the superior social order or bureaucrats.

For more than two decades, the Armenian Caritas, has been working on eliminating that inherited mentality of restricted creativity and initiative, while offering new models of life vision based on the renewed evaluation of human dignity, freedom, potential of creativity, self-development possibilities, education, employment, social work and volunteering in the light of the Gospel message and social teaching of the Church. Still, there remains a mentality of *constant expectations* of initiatives, already planned and developed social support from the parish priest or Caritas, in the same manner as people used to *expect everything* from the soviets and the Government. When we started the project of Parish Social Ministries of the Armenian Caritas in rural communities, the mentioned behavior was so prevalent, that it was very hard to ignite in people any interest in perspective community development projects, because they were waiting for immediate results though with little participation of their own. However, gradually, alongside the ongoing work with them, small groups of people started to involve in the processes of analysing the problems of the communities and designing projects to solve them with their own initiative. The problem remains with the understanding of the value of volunteer work, of joint

¹ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 29; Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church, 144.

² Cf. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (the encyclical letter on the ethical implications of the social and economic order), 1931, 79-80; Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church, 186.

³ *Ibid.*

efforts, of trusting each other, the Church, Caritas. This mentality refers mainly to the first two generations of the soviet era and their children, who are now fathers and mothers of young families. I should say that, for me there is a much greater hope for their children-the generation born in the late 1990-s and early 2000-s. I would say, they are my real hope and I have decided to focus my work more on this generation investing in their future to overcome the mentality of soviet system.

For me as parish priest of four communities and at the same time the Assistant Priest of the Armenian Caritas, one of the most important steps towards a wider participation of the grassroots (young people, in particular) is the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity. Yet, this need to be brought together with the education models and methods, which enhance integral development of children and youth as:

- devoted followers of Christ with the general goal on holiness - the true basis and the driving force for all other targets and dreams;
- motivated, creative participants, leaders of new generation, aware of their individual and social potential, also of the meaning of their freedom and its responsible use;
- skillful, talented persons with a wide scope of knowledge, capable of enhancing social transformations in accordance with the Christian vision.

Guided by these patterns, several youth associations have been created within the communities, where I work, which have started their own initiatives of community development. These are small communities in the northern part of Armenia, where the standards of living are very low and the climate conditions are very harsh. As a result of our collaboration with the workers of the Armenian Caritas, other organisations working in the field of protection of youth, young people have initiated self-development projects of English learning classes inviting international volunteer teachers, who organise informal classes as well as visits to other youth organisations and Caritas centers. They have also actively participated in the project of Parish Social Ministries of the Armenian Caritas, organising classes of computer programming on voluntary basis. They are involved in various youth projects implemented also by other organisations and social ministries targeted at the relief of the poor of the communities. They are offering a new breath to their communities, being themselves open to new visions and perspectives and new understanding of the mission of the Church in this world and of a citizen in the society. They are doing a great work also in the direction of understanding the principle of *integral human development* of the CST, with the full inclusion of all the components: spiritual, moral and physical. It is particularly important for the large part of the contemporary Armenian society, which now favours modern patterns of pseudo-progressive trends that seem to exclude religious or spiritual component as mandatory from the concept of human and social development. To cope with this challenge is also very important in the mission of the Armenian Caritas, which cannot be effectively carried out without active participation of the grassroots.

Another example of active participation at the grassroots level in the community development is in the day care social centers of the Armenian Caritas for young people, where I work with them closely. In December 2018, in the center of Little Prince of Gyumri, I participated in a seminar on the topics of ecology, conducted by young people themselves. It was amazing to see the creativity and enthusiasm of these young people, most of whom did not have any previous experience of organising any seminars and having a priest and other (church) officials as participants and their listeners! These young people are now going to conduct seminars for their peers in rural communities. These and other multiple examples are bases to rely on and to build our *concrete hope* for the future with the help of Mary Mother of the Church!

18 March 2019

Fr. Hovsep Galstian,

Assistant Priest of the Armenian Caritas,

Parish Priest of four Armenian Catholic communities of Ashotsk, Armenia

Editor of the official web-site (<http://armenianchurchco.com>) of the Ordinariate of the Armenian Catholic Church in Armenia, Georgia, Eastern Europe.

Phone: 0037455698957

E-mail: levongalstianarmcatholic@gmail.com