

Voluntary services in the post-communist era

There are different factors which aggravate the revival of voluntary work in the post-communist or transformational countries extraordinarily.

1. The social responsibility was exclusively carried by the communist state and not by the citizens. It organized and financed the voluntary services. Therefore today many persons in these countries can't understand, why there isn't any longer a public welfare. They think that the state has to take care of sick, handicapped and aged persons. Why should this be a task of the citizens now?

In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon countries, where since the beginning of the modern state system the social responsibility is mainly looked after by the citizens, the welfare state that has been developed in Germany and the socialist tradition in the communist countries know the priority of the state in matters of welfare. The result is that in the post-communist countries exists a low qualitative and quantitative acceptance of voluntary social and nursing services.

2. A voluntary service wasn't necessary in the context of social and medical providing. In communist countries it was only practised in the sphere of leisure time and sport, in the army, neighbourhoods collective etc. Only the small, private circle of the family, friends and acquaintances remained as a place of real voluntary helping solidarity.

3. Because voluntary work has been dictated by the state it wasn't respected. Voluntary activities within the state and in the party meant a kind of collaboration with the hated system.

4. Persons who worked voluntarily had advantages in their political party career. For students and university graduates it was important to prove social commitment. Actually it was compulsory and therefore disapproved by the people.

5. Everything had been directed from above. This is why still today every help, support management and organization of public life is expected from the state. Self-determined and self-responsible social action even was suspicious to the state and the party.

6. Not self-organization but heteronomy - inspired by ideology and state-controlled- had been the decisive factor. Self-determined social responsibility couldn't be developed.

7. Social and cultural creativity as a private initiative had been prohibited. Only the state could create such services. The result was that social creativity could not be formed or that corresponding impulses stunted.

8. In the socialist era existed a strict separation of religion and society. Religion was limited to the church building. Activities outside this area like pastoral visits to sick persons, social welfare work etc. were punishable. Because of that especially for orthodox christians today it is hard to imagine to be active outside their church rooms. Religion inside the church was tolerated. But in society religion in the sense of a work of compassion was out of place.

9. In the communist socialism compassion wasn't necessary any more because with the communist socialism social justice had been established and everyone was medically and socially provided. Compassion was considered as a relict of capitalism where it had been necessary because of the capitalist exploitation.

10. Irreversible sick, handicapped and aged persons were regarded as unproductive, i.e. they could not participate in the work process. This is why today it is difficult for nurses to commit themselves to this group. Why should they prolong life of unproductive persons or devote themselves with regard to them? Their productive value has passed.

11. In the communist countries the participation of women in the work process played an important role. Work should create the new socialist human being. Therefore everyone had to be a member of a work collective. In the West a job was regarded as a possibility of self-realization, creativity, gaining money to make come true wishes etc.. In communism every woman could work, because children at the age of one were looked after at state-run day-nurseries. But these institutions should not serve for the support of women; the state wanted to make sure that children were shaped by socialism from the beginning and not by individualistic value conveyed by the family. Not the family was allowed to decide the fate of the child but the party. Work and collective were instruments to create a socialist society. Therefore it did not exist a mental separation between job and occupation and no self-realization. The result was that there was no spare time for voluntary engagement.

12. To survive today economically in the post-communist societies it is inevitable to have different jobs. This means less free time and therefore less possibilities for voluntary actions. Voluntary assistance is only interesting if there is the chance that it could lead to a permanent job in the foreseeable future.

13. The aspect "time" is likewise evaluated differently. Due to their several jobs the citizens of the post-communist countries have less time at their disposal and at the same they have to spend much time for administrative matters because the bureaucracy still sees itself as a prolonged instrument of power of the state and the party and not as a service to the citizens.

14. Unemployed persons with spare time are not easily motivated for self-help or help for others. Furthermore they have a very calm attitude to time. Nothing motivates social engagement or activities. Lacking jobs and low wages destroy or demotivate willingness to work.

15. There is no middle class that could commit itself to social engagement. The small group of the very rich will at the most donate money for social projects but will scarcely engage itself in social work.

16. The inconceivable large group of poor people in East European countries is partly lethargic and should be mobilized by methods of social pastoral care how it can be seen in the Third World.

17. Most likely one can find voluntary engagement in church parishes or with religious people and spiritual movements or groups that already existed before the fall of the Wall and that now develop further into social responsibility how it can be seen in the Catholic parishes of Romania.

18. In spite of everything there are in the meantime many impressing voluntary initiatives with a Christian background in the different post-communist countries, which I had the chance to get to know

- in Poland with most different tasks and forms of organisation
- in Slovakia as so-called "Vinzenzkonferenzen"
- in Romania charity groups of the parishes and the supporter of the organisation "Christiana" in the Orthodox Church
- even in Nischnij-Nowgorod/Russia Christians have founded voluntary initiatives for example for totally ill or dying persons. But they are not directly supported by the Russian-orthodox Church but indirectly by christian persons in public life.

The ways of charity of the Western, Northern, and Southern European churches may possibly be not suitable for the Middle and East European churches. One has to search for a fourth way. Of course we are not allowed to press their voluntary initiatives in the line of our experiences.