

The fight between sin and virtue in the Georges Bernanos' writing

- Abstract -

The PhD thesis *The fight between sin and virtue in the work of Georges Bernanos* has the purpose of being an interdisciplinary work, finding itself between theology and literature preoccupations, being the fruit of the fascination coming from the novel *The diary of a countryside priest*. In total agreement with the title of the thesis, the work is an attempt to discover the interference between literature and theology, and even more than that, between the work of a Catholic writer and the common elements with the Orthodoxy. The initial hypothesis is that a Christian, a practicing one, can discover when reading a work, the theological subtleness suggested by it. The work is structured in five chapters, in such a way that it follows the three concepts suggested by the title: sin, virtue, spiritual fight. The title of the thesis makes reference to the theological notions inserted in the literary work of the Christian existentialist writer Georges Bernanos. Also known as the "French Dostoyevsky", G. Bernanos deals with the issues of good and bad from a Christian perspective. His message is a supernatural one.

In the introductory chapter *Bernanos – la grace de l'écriture*, we showed that *the writing hand* is directed by grace. In this way, the grace offers sacredness to the writing. The writing is seen as a gift from above being offered to the reader. We showed that for Bernanos, the writer's vocation is a sacerdotal one. We have underlined the fact that for Bernanos, writing is the only way to express him and to live. Furthermore, it is the condition of existence for his moral life. We consider that God's gift has revealed itself through writing in Bernanos's case. We have recurred to examples from the author's life to better illustrate this. We have then mentioned that by the means of written words, G. Bernanos leads a permanent battle between light and darkness, sin and virtue. We have fully agreed on D. Claudiu Dinu's thesis referring to Bernanos's vocation as a priestly one.

We have showed that the scenes from Bernanos's novel offer a profoundly theological vision over fundamental concepts of good, bad, sin, virtue, fight. We have also illustrated the influences that come from the Catholic theology in his work due to the fact he was a Catholic. His affirmation : *I am a Catholic who writes* comes to emphasize the fact that he does not want the separation from the Church of Christ, but

rather to be an active member of it, a humble believer who does not forget to make his daily prayer - as his confessor, father Perezil, says.

We have asserted that Bernanos is the prototype of the writer who writes with his soul, who puts his entire being in the writing act. Moreover, he assumes his condition as a writer as a fulfillment of his supernatural destiny.

Chapter 1

In this chapter we have noticed that the concept of sin is a deeply theological one. Till what depth do we have to dig to find the *blue abyss*? In our times, the term of sin does not arouse interest anymore, neither as a word nor as a phenomenon. However, sin is equivalent to killing God according to Bernanos. The definition is a profoundly theological one. Every sin crucifies God for the second time. We have tried to show further the course of the etymology of the word. The word *peccatum*, coming from the theological area, means breaking the divine law. According to Socrates, the term is interpreted as ignorance. The antiquity, when using the word penitence, refers to sin as losing connection with God. In the Christian Orient, the doctrine about sin comes to light in the 3rd century A.D. We have further noticed that Kierkegaard considers the sin an object of faith. The sin is a metaphysical notion, a spiritual one. The root of sin is to be found in the mystical depth of our human being. I have tried to debate on the difference between the Catholic and the Orthodox vision of sin. In the Orthodox vision, the sin is not perceived in a judicial manner as it is understood in the Catholic theology, but rather in a deeper meaning, as losing innocence and the communion with God together with losing the grace. In Roman-Catholicism sin does not appear as an interior damage of the image of God in the man, but just a juridical guilt.

Regarding Bernanos's attitude towards the persons who sin, I have noticed a certain respect, a fact also proven by the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar in his work *Le Chrétien Bernanos*.

The mystery of the hereditary transmission of sins is proven by the example of characters like Mouchette from *Sous le Soleil de Satan* and the "false priest" from *A Crime*.

We have further analyzed suicide, which is considered a sin against hope. The characters that are affected by this trespass are victims of their own solitude and of their misunderstanding of the others.

In order to elucidate the problem, I have used the study of the critic William Bush, while for demonstrating the Orthodox vision I have used the resources offered by the French theologian Jean Claude Larchet. The main idea of this sub-chapter is that life is a gift from God and its purpose is the escalation to better. Every young man that looks for love or pleasure at a superficial level is actually looking for The One that is the spring of every joy, the One that is consistent.

In the next sub-chapter I tried to reveal the aspects of lying, the sin that has generated the drive away of Adam from heaven. The imposture, an aspect of lying, affects more characters of the author, the most eloquent by these means being the case of the priest Cénabre. I have showed that this is one of the severe sins that distance the man from God and even from himself. According to Max Milner's affirmation, the lie transforms into an experience of sin and we think that the lie is the root of sins. The distance the impostor takes from the love of God is very dramatic itself, because the most severe form of deception is denying God's presence.

The boredom- an old disease - as well as modern passion can be found in the pages of Bernanos's work. I tried to make a parallel between the theological analysis of the term of boredom and the significance given to it by the author, which makes a point of this thesis. The synonym of the term *l'acedunite*, the boredom, is like a worm that gnaws the conscience.

The debauchery - pleasure on the face of things- essentially brings pain. To this sin, I dedicated a sub-chapter. Georges Bernanos was not particularly preoccupied by this aspect of morality, but rather mentioning some deviations from it. I have showed that the author focuses his interest towards the influence the sin has over the spiritual part of man.

Chapter 2

Frame of mind which is going to make good and avoid evil, virtue was presented in the second chapter of the dissertation.

Faith, hope and love, the three theological virtues retrieve in writing pages of Bernanos. The most important of them – love is related to understanding, love for his native country – France -, for essential values of human dignity. Lack of love means cold, hell gets this definition of deprivation of love in Bernanos understands.

Sin is the opposite of love – the supreme structure of human and divine communion. A queen virtue, in Bernanos understands love is the divine origin; the author emphasizes the aspect of love in the sense of deep connection with divinity. The second virtue - hope, is treated in full contact with love.

Hope as different as reliable and completely different from optimism. Bernanos noted that if you want to meet hope you must go beyond despair. Bernanos notes that optimism is a false hope only to the leave used.

Hope is a virtue, VIRTUS - , determination means a heroic soul. The heroic form of overcoming despair and hope is born. Optimistic courage helps only to overcome some minor difficulties. I presented that in spite of all: exile, weight materials, Bernanos was the holder of an invincible hope remains.

Signs of a profound belief, love and hope remain two stones supportive during the author's existential.

In turn open your eyes inword faith. In the same chapter I learned aspects of virtue in terms of spirit of rebellion for the author. Naturally wonder is the material poverty a virtue or a sin. In the evangelical sens, poor is the man who eats from the hands of God. True precepts of St. Therese of Lisieux, Bernanos understands poverty as a voluntary service of those who suffer. The priest of Ambricourt concludes that poverty is our fundamental deception image, it preserves the fundamental deception image, it preserves the memory of lost paradise. It wasn't nails that hold him to the Cross, but His love for me and you.

Chapter 3

Approach in this demonic evil as the absence of God, that we do not impose undue forcibly the absence of God enjoy good opponent is that I tried to discuss in chapter III. Reading it in Bernanos it is very clear that for him evil is sin in his entire suite of events. For Bernanos, the evil agents are: lies, despair, fear, spiritual wilderness, boredom disease, imposture, etc. To have a more complete picture on Bernanos's vision in this respect, I searched patristic resources of Western and Oriental influence. May has come to mind Saint Augustine's conception and western doctrine is based on his teachings. His main idea is that evil doesn't come from God, but is man's own choice. On the other hand, Saint John Chrysostom looks bad from a practical point of view. He looks evil as suffering; he stressed the educational value of it, because evil can be converted to the final good of man. Bernanos supports the same concept in fact suffering also brings an action purifying fire of precious metals.

We pointed out that in Bernanos's novels evil meets its opponents that defeats particularly through humility.

In "Satan's sun" evil is a real presence, not a childish image horned goat, but a presence that feels comfortable in dark shelter.

Chapter 4

While the different forms of appearance of bad have the gift of making us reject it - thanks to Bernanos -, in the 4th Chapter, we have presented the fruits of good. In the first sub-chapter, I have put emphasis on giving credence to the idea that joy is a fruit of Good. Joy is according to Bernanos, a sign, a stamp that gives credit to the one bearing it. Joy is one of those virtues you cannot simulate. When you got it, it is quite visible. There is something hidden, something mysterious about this virtue. When creating the Christian portrait of Chantal, Bernanos gives priority to the mystery, to the secret that only two persons know about. Joy is a deeply buried treasure, but once found, it makes the one who has it the richest man, having God on his side. Father of Torcy, a venerable voice of a priest, gives evidence that the Church is in fact is the spring of joy for all the people. He says: *the Church comprises all the joy reserved for this sad world*. The reason why he would like to dress like the queen of Saba is that the priest is the ambassador of joy. Bernanos attributes a special role to the mother and child relationship as well as to childhood both as a physical and spiritual state. Nobody else than the mother can bring back the smile on the face of a hurt, driven away or aggressed child. This is the reason that determined me to offer childhood – as a spiritual state- a special place in the next sub- chapters, along with the way in which the Good triumphs in this world. You can find in children three qualities that you can hardly find in an adult. These are purity, joy and courage. It was obvious for me as I went along the way to knowing Bernanos's work that the writer wants to place the child on a pedestal and to insistently say: Look at this. Here is the model! His act is not far away from what Lord Christ did when saying: *Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*. The critics and the exegetes of Bernanos's work testify that childhood is a dominant subject matter in his preoccupations. We have revealed in these sub- chapters a tougher voice of the author that was a witness to so much sufferance children had to bare because of war, or hunger or political regimes. There are visible more icons of childhood: that of humiliated child, of a painful child, of an innocent child. Bernanos shows his toughest part when he depicts the image of children and teenagers that are victims of grown-ups' lack of concern.

The history of the Carmelite sister Blanche de la Force is revealed in a more optimistic tone. Her name has theological connotations that are well abstracted by Bernanos. White is the immaculate colour, but in its purity there lays a true force. White

is the colour of cloth of the Resurrection, a cloth of light. Life has the final word, not the death. Light has conquered the darkness. *Have I become a child?* is the question that should persist in our minds because human's access to Paradise depends on this answer. Jeanne d'Arc produced intense feelings in Bernanos's soul. He dedicated to her an essay in which he extols every child's chance to be spiritually triumphant by innocence. Chantal de Clergerie is the child who reaches sanctity. True sanctity lies in the spirit of childhood more than in heroism. Child Jesus, who has to deal with Irod from the very first days after being born, becomes by this fact very close to every child in the world that is persecuted by the modern Irod who searches to take his life and to take away the innocence of this world.

Chapter 5

We dedicated the last chapter to the spiritual fight and its protagonists. The tension of Bernanos's novels is generated by man's desire to touch perfection. Even the man that accumulates fortunes or the one that gives himself to more subtle passions like the spiritual ones, the bodily passions is looking for God, the obligatory mention being here that the sense of the search is totally wrong in these cases. There are in Bernanos's writing heroes of faith who found the right path to God. Their mystical adventure to sanctity, their desire for perfection, their personal effort to become better make of Bernanos's saints true masters of the Holy Spirit. The desire for better, the desire for absoluteness is rooted in the human being. However this thing is so hidden that there is need for rationality, attention and perseverance. Georges Bernanos asserts what the biblical story of creation says: man is created of mixture, soul and mud and we can notice this fight within us, every part asking for its rights. This is to be observed even more when the evil has access to our hearts. That is why we have to choose where the battle takes place if we want to win. The most important is for the human being to choose the place of the fight. It is important to notice that it is easy to be attracted to the mud where all of the world restlessness is. How can we choose the place? It is simple. It is by choosing Christ! But sky is very high! Oh no! Here it is! The Church is the gate to the heaven. Let's not accept the challenge but only here, in the Church!

We have many times said that Bernanos sends obvious signals that his saints were victorious because they reached at the values existing in the Church: the prayer, the confession of sins, the Eucharist, humility, ennobling sufferance. In this world in which good and bad fight roughly, the Child or the Saint are real heroes.

Satan exerts its power in thousand ways, but out of all the most dangerous is still the pride. The creatures of God possessed by the devil can be very dear to Bernanos's heart because, he says, we have to show only compassion to them, and not harsh critic.

Saint Paul is very clear in his exposition: our fight is not against the flesh and not against the body, but our fight has only one enemy and that one has no body but spirit. This is very important. We see encarnalized enemies: people, nature, even our own body. But these can only be allies of our enemy. The only enemy is the devil and our fight is a spiritual one. What does it mean to fight with the spirits? The attack of the enemy is against your soulful part. Even if he submits the surroundings, the nature, people or the body, he is only concerned about the soul. During the Liturgy, the priest

says: *Let we praise You as to always be protected under your* Only God can save us and the only way to be protected is by listening to God. The way to do this is to offer you as a gift, as an offering to Him. Otherwise we cannot be protected by God. The Saints and the angels are not a protection and guarding company that can be hired. They serve God by serving us and God protects us by his saints and angels. The order is a single one. God is he Lord. We cannot have the protection of a country if we do not respect its laws. But there is always the eternal problem of pride. How could I be a serf, a pursuivant of God? If not, you become a slave of devil. Whoever is a serf of Christ is free. *Tertium non datur.*

Conclusion

In conclusion Bernanos's work opens a new perspective to us, one that is in full unity with theology, capitalizing on the precepts of Christian moral in a very original way. The writer establishes a connection between us and the spiritual dimension of reading through examples of saints from the Christian calendar or those known by God only. The permanent fight within us between good and bad, sin and virtue , gets unsuspected valences in the work of french writer G. Bernanos.