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Monastics as missionaries of a subversive hope

Abstract

The monastic endeavor is not a search for extraordinary deeds for the few. Its main ascetical emphasis is rather on accomplishing the vows which every Christian took at his/her baptism. So monasticism's mission is to remind and to fulfill the task common to all members of the Church and to highlight the hope that is in us and our midst (1 Pet. 3:15). In this perspective, monks and nuns break with the convenient bonds, namely the relationships in which humans divest themselves of their own freedom—such as relationships defined by biology or the elimination of personhood in the framework of obedience. Monastics also must subvert the idolized past and judge tradition based on evangeli-



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cal truth. Moreover, monasticism opposes the existing social organization and proposes the utopia of forming a different, egalitarian type of society founded on the primacy of love. Finally, monastics are called to herald the subversion of witchcraft and ritualism, which erode religious life at the expense of a free and wholehearted relation with the living God.

Keywords

Monastics, monasticism, mission, missiology, hope, social order, witchcraft

1 Introduction

I think that the difference between Christians and other people can be summarized in one thing: hope (1 Thes. 4:12)¹—not hope in general, but specifically Christian hope. This hope radically differs from worldly optimism, which is more or less positive speculation about a deterministic history route. On the contrary, Christian hope, on the contrary, does not stem from worldly factors. It springs from the living God’s activity in history, an action that brings about something new and engrafts the world with what cannot be born by the world itself. Resurrection, for example, cannot be produced by the world; it must be offered by God. So, Christian hope can flourish even when all worldly optimism collapses, precisely because it intervenes in the world as a gift from the outside.

A gift is offered, but what happens next cannot be predicted. The faithful are invited not only to acknowledge the gift or accept it but also to live it out, which means that constant endeavor, not

¹ This essay is based on my talk delivered at the Annual Meeting of the “Friends of Mount Athos” (FOMA), Oxford 13 June 2015 (See *Friends of Mount Athos; Annual Report 2015*, Oxford 2015, pp. 21-31).

autopilot, propels the faithful's path. That, in turn means that the entire Christian life is fundamentally risky. The philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) was very theological when he said that "hope is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naïve optimism. The category of danger is always within it"²—not in a sense (I would add) that the Lord's promises will fail, but in the sense that humans must be proved faithful to these promises. After all, worldly criteria which purportedly define success in life are decisively questioned by the Gospel. There is nothing more subversive than the Lord's statement that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matt. 19:30)³ and that many who accomplished the most godly achievements—that is, many who prophesied in Christ's name and cast out demons in his name—will finally be proved workers of lawlessness, unknown to Him whose name they had "successfully" invoked (Matth. 7: 22-23). It is obvious that Christ explicitly warned us that the final judgment will be a surprise. But here, a question arises. How can the surprise be a surprise at all if we are warned about it in advance? Why will Christians, ultimately, be surprised when they were alerted about it from the very first moment? I think that the answer is simple and lies in a fundamental contradiction that rules most of our lives. Though we declare faithfulness to the hope in us and our midst (1 Pet. 3:15), in reality, we continue to live according to the criteria of the old world. Christian hope is too subversive and thus unbearable for bourgeois-minded persons⁴.

² "Something's missing: A discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the contradictions of utopian longing", in: Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature; Selected Essays* (tr. Jack Zips & Frank Macklenburg, MIT, Boston 1988, p. 16.

³ English Standard Version.

⁴ Cf. Berdyaev's acute remarks: "'The world' is the bourgeois spirit: it is not God's creation, the cosmos which the Son of God could not deny, but the enslavement and the overburdening of God's creation by passions and concupiscence. A bourgeois is a man who loves 'the world'. The eternal repudiation of the very foundations of his spirit is expressed in the words, 'Love not the world, nor the things which are in the world.'

Christian hope is subversive first of all because it urges humans to repent, which demands willingness for self-criticism and re-orientation, far away from the convenience of self-justification. At the same time, Christian hope subverts the order of this world. It invites humans to distrust worldly leaders (Psalm 146:3), to count not on the security of kinship (Matt. 10: 35-36) and ancestry (Luke 3:8), to prefer forgiveness instead of revenge, to accept the broken and the unprivileged (women and children and prostitutes) as principal witnesses of the truth, to deem the most admirable deeds as rubbish if not imbued by love, to place solidarity above theoretical orthodoxy.

Yes, Christian hope is, by definition, subversive; a stumbling block and folly (1 Cor. 1:23), but not only to non-Christians. Even Christians cannot easily bear it. Stagnation and the mindset of the status quo have too frequently been the easy way. Every so often, prophetic voices emerge in order to remind Christians of their own vocation. To a great degree, monasticism sprang from the guts of the Church as a lay movement⁵, exactly to serve this awakening.

2 The monastic ideal

The ideal of monasticism, said Fr. Georges Florovsky, the Church Father of the 20th c., was to remind and to fulfill the task common to all the members of the Church. The monastic endeavor was not a search for extraordinary deeds for the few. Its main asceti-

To be bourgeois is a bondage, a tie with 'the world', an enslavement by it; it involves the rejection of the freedom of the spirit which follows upon liberation from the power of 'the world'; it does not accept the mystery of Golgotha, it denies the Cross". Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Bourgeois Mind and Other Essays*, Sheed and Ward, London 1934, p. 17.

⁵ Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture* (Collected Works, 2), Nordland, Belmont, Massachusetts 1974, p. 86.

cal emphasis was rather on accomplishing the common and essential vows which every Christian took at his/her baptism⁶. Sixteen centuries before Florovsky, St. John Chrysostom pointed out that Christ blessed the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc., and he sought all people to observe these things without distinction between lay people and monastics, as some wrongly later posited. Moreover, Chrysostom continued, just the fact that Christ named love as the highest good ought to be a constant proof that he seeks the same things from both lay people and monastics.⁷

Florovsky was really daring when he proceeded to elaborate on this precious notion of the *common ecclesiastical task*. Though monasticism, he said, served as a powerful challenge and reminder of this task in the midst of several compromises, which were already taking place in a society that seemed to be Christian,

a worse compromise has been invented when Monasticism had been reinterpreted as an exceptional way. Not only was the Christian Society sorely rent asunder and split into the groups of "religious" and "secular," but the Christian ideal itself was split in twain and, as it were, "polarized" by a subtle distinction between "essential" and "secondary," between "binding" and "optional," between "precept" and "advice." In fact, all Christian "precepts" are but calls and advices, to be embraced in free obedience, and all "advices" are binding. The spirit of compromise creeps into Christian action when the "second best" is formally permitted and even encouraged. This "compromise" may be practically unavoidable, but it should be frankly acknowledged as a compromise. A multiplicity of the manners of Christian living, of course, should be admitted. What should not be admitted is

⁶ Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture*, op. cit., p. 84.

⁷ John Chrysostom, *Against the Opponents of Monastic Life*, 3: *To a faithful father*, *Patrologia Graeca* (hereafter PG) 47, 372-374 (in Greek).

their grading on the scale of "perfection." Indeed, "perfection" is not an advice, but a precept, which can never be dispensed with⁸.

Each way has its own unique expressions and its own rhythm, without one way being considered subordinate to the other. There are many spiritual dwellings within the one house of the Father (Jn. 14:2). In my view, current as well as enduring problems—such as the idealization of celibacy as a higher path, the predominance of the monastic *typikon* over the parish typicon, etc., all have their roots in what Florovsky demonstrated as the worst "compromise."

Therefore, the common vocation of all Church members and their faithfulness to this subversive hope defines to a great degree, the monastics' mission—subversive not by revolutionary violence but by a groundbreaking way of life. Allow me please to touch upon some parameters of this challenging mission.

2.1 Subversion of the convenient bonds

"Convenient bonds" is what I call the relationships in which humans hasten to divest themselves of their heaviest burden, namely freedom. Freedom is precious, yet it is torture. It implies responsibility, dilemmas, and decision-making. On the contrary, abiding by bonds relieves you from all this. A convenient bond, in other words, is a kind of voluntary slavery.

Confinement to biology (not biology *per se*) is a convenient bond. It offers psychological security since the human subject is given a certain place in a given biological series. In this case, truth seems to be what derives from or is confirmed by this biological framework.

Monasticism must be a living reminder of the truth that faith and Church membership are based on biological discontinuity. No one is *born* a Christian; all are invited to *become* Christians. There

⁸ Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture*, op. cit., p. 99. See also p. 126.

is no Christian identity without a personal conversion, even if one is held in a Christian family or a culturally Christian nation. What can be transmitted from generation to generation, in the case of Christian families or people, is the invitation to faith, not faith itself. The acquisition of faith always remains a matter of personal struggle—a personal and responsible response to a gift offered to you.

It may sound strange, but in this respect, monasticism resembles a marriage. Both monasticism and marriage are based not on pre-existing blood relations but on a personal and free option that establishes a new relationship with a hitherto stranger. The members of the marital community, as well as the members of the monastery are not relatives by blood, and they are never going to become so. The same happens with our relationship with Christ. It is the blood of a stranger (that is, Christ) that may save me, not my ancestors' blood, even if my ancestors were great or even holy. And it is certainly not by accident that these relationships, based on freedom, can be broken, while biological relations are compulsory and therefore cannot be annulled, even when love disappears.

Throughout history, many Christians have bypassed a precious passage in Saint Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Speaking of two categories, the celibate and the married, Saint Paul says, "each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" (7:7). Not only does honest (that is, genuine) celibacy correspond to a gift (a charism), but also honest, genuine marriage. And this is confirmed by several Church fathers who interpreted this text and underlined the charismatic character of both celibacy and marriage, if chosen freely and out of love⁹. Even pro-

⁹ See Giogros Patronos, *Gamos kai agamia* (in Greek: *Marriage and Celibacy*), Iera Mone Agiou Neophytou Cyprou, Athens 1985, pp. 162-163, 211, 233 (in Greek). According to Patronos, this stands up to Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749-1809) who was very reserved towards marriage, probably under Western influence. My own feeling, however,

creation must be baptized in the waters of freedom. It is the upbringing of children, not procreation, that matters, says Saint John Chrysostom. Nature does not make us parents; virtue does¹⁰. I would add that parents, after the physical birth of their children, must enter a process of “adopting” them; that is, they have to begin a process of building a relationship based on love generated from freedom, not on love dictated by (and bound to) biology. Notably, “adoption” is the word Saint Paul uses to describe the communion between two ontological strangers: the Creator and creatures (Gal. 4:4).

It is true that, in modern times, certain circles of Orthodox monasticism have fallen prey to feelings of cultural superiority, ethnic competition and nationalism, which Metropolitan Kallistos Ware aptly described as “the bane of Orthodoxy in the last ten centuries”¹¹. When this happens, not only is monasticism distorted, but also the vision of the entire Church, which is then overcome by the mundane bonds of blood and soil.

Freedom, however, is not only the antipode of confinement to biological bonds, but also the antipode of false spirituality, which enslaves the human person. Much has been written about monastic obedience, and unfortunately it is true that obedience to

is that theological schools of thought which consider celibacy superior to marriage exist in the Eastern space as a native temptation—that is, not only as an import from the West. The case of prayers that understand women’s biological functions as spiritually impure is indicative. Beyond this issue, however, St. Nicodemus emphasizes elsewhere that the Gospel commandments concern everyone equally, both laymen and monks. See Nikodimos Agioreitis, *Chrestoetheia ton Christianon* [in Greek: Ethics of Christians], Rigopoulos, Thessaloniki 1984, p. 330 (in Greek) [English translation: Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite, *Christian Morality or Chrestoethia of Christians* (tr. Hieromonk Patapios with Monk Chrysostomos & Archbishop Chrysostom of Etna), Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Belmont MA, 2012].

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *On Ann*, oration 1, PG 55, 636 (in Greek).

¹¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth etc 41978, p. 86.

the spiritual father has very often been misconceived or experienced as annulment of the subject's free will and eventually annihilation of the personality. And, sadly enough, this perversion does happen in many cases. Nevertheless, there is no Christian Gospel if we remove from it the urgent call for personal responsibility. It is therefore especially significant when this Gospel appeal is manifested by open-hearted and open-minded monastics, such as Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), who wrote:

Plead God with prayers and tears for Him to send you a guide who is dispassionate and holy. At the same time, study the divine Scriptures by yourself and particularly the practical writings of the Holy Fathers; so that by cross-examining the teachings and works of your leader with the Scriptures and the patristic works you may become able to see and comprehend. And those teachings that are in agreement with the Scriptures, you should adopt and hold them dear in your mind, while the adulterated and foreign ones you should learn to consider them as such and to turn them away, in order not to be deceived. For know this: many deceivers and false teachers have come forth in these days.¹²

This call was summed up by Saint Sophrony in Essex (1986-1993). The institution of the spiritual father, he said, never exists in order to deliver the spiritual child from responsibility. The one who impinges his brother's freedom falls from the divine life of love¹³. Fourteen centuries earlier, in the same country, a fiery monk who vehemently denounced the corruption of the clergy,

¹² Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Chapters* 32 (ed. P. Christou), in: *Philokalia of the Neptic and Ascetic Fathers* 3 (Greek Fathers of the Church), Patristic Editions Gregory Palamas, Thessalonica, p. 242 (in Greek). English translation in: "Obey a non-conforming Spiritual Father?", <http://www.impantokratoros.gr/0C60CB7D.en.aspx> (access: 16 Aug. 2022).

¹³ Archim. Sophrony (Sakharov), *Askesis kai Theoria* (in Greek: *Ascesis and Contemplation*) (tr. Hieromonk Zacharias), I. Mone Timiou Prodromou, Essex, England 1996, p. 49 (in Greek).

Gildas (500-570), also called for personal responsibility, the vocation of all the baptized:

What do you expect, unhappy people, from such beasts of the belly? [...] In the words of our Savior, if you do not swiftly flee these rapacious wolves of Arabia, like Lot fleeing to the hills from the fiery rain that fell on Sodom, then, the blind led by the blind, you will fall together into the pit of hell¹⁴.

2.2 Subversion of the idolized past

For many people, “tradition” has been a magical word, the clue that reveals the very mind of Orthodoxy. But no word can stand alone—that is, without interpretation. The notion of tradition is inherently connected with the notion of the past. But does it mean that the past by itself is the word of truth?

Admittedly, many ecclesiastical circles affirm this and understand tradition as *the sum* of what we have inherited from our fathers. However, taking the past wholesale as true is completely different from judging everything (the past included) based on truth. As early as the 3rd c., Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 220) and Saint Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200 – 258) as well as the Council of Carthage in 256 (notable in a society which perceived faithfulness to the past as the proof of the truth) articulated his famous golden watchword: “Antiquitas sine veritate vetustas erroris est” (Antiquity without the truth is an ancient error). “Dominus”, Saint Carthage clarified, “ego sum, inquit, veritas. Non dixit, ego sum consuetudo” (The Lord said, I am the truth; he didn’t say, I am the custom)¹⁵.

As is well known, in the late 18th c., Saint Nicodemos from the Holy Mountain (or the Hagiorite) (1749-1809), together with the

¹⁴ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents* (ed. & tr. Michael Winterbottom), Phillimore, London & Chichester 1978, p. 54.

¹⁵ Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Collected Works, 1), Nordland, Belmont, Massachusetts 1972, pp. 98-101.

hieromonk Agapius, edited a kind of corpus of the holy canons of the Orthodox Church, known as *The Rudder* (*Pedalion* in Greek)¹⁶. The editors maintained that the canons are important to Church life and thus have to be distinguished from other texts that have been added to throughout history, such as the proceedings of the synods, introductory notes, annotations by Byzantine canonists, etc. In other words, the texts that were handed down from generation to generation are certainly sources of information, but not a sacred and untouchable entity. In a direct though respectful manner, Nicodemos charged the Byzantine commentators with unwillingness to face the disarray of the texts. “It is amazing”, he says, “how those blessed commentators were so remiss, and made no inquiry and no distinction between the Canons proper” and other interpolations.¹⁷

Apparently, editorial work like this is not some kind of revolutionary initiative! However, for the ecclesiastical milieu of Nicodemos and Agapius, it was both revolutionary and blasphemous! So he met with opposition from the learned hieromonk Dorotheos Voulismas (1738-1819), to whom the Patriarch and the Synod had entrusted the task of checking the *Rudder* as it was in press. Dorotheos strongly believed that everything handed down by tradition was God-given. “No falsehood lies in the ancient” things, he said. In his view, the past was holy and constituted the criterion by itself. So he accused Nicodemos and Agapius of being innovators, deviating from the traditional approach¹⁸.

¹⁶ Monk Nicodemos & hieromonk Agapius, *Pedalion tes Noetes Neos tes Hagias, Catholicikes kai Apostolikes ton Orthodoxon Ekklesias, etoi Apantes oi Ieroi kai Theioi Kanones*, Astir, Athens 1976 (in Greek). English translation: *The Rudder of the Metaphorical Ship of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Orthodox Christians, or All the Sacred and Divine Canons* (tr. D. Cummings), The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, Chicago 1957.

¹⁷ *Pedalion*, op. cit., p. 604, n. 4. See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, *Canons and Freedom: The Metamorphoses of the 108th Canon of the Local Synod of Carthage (419) and the Fortunes of Free Acceptance of Christianity*, Epektasi, Katerini, Greece 2005, pp. 77-129.

¹⁸ Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, *Canons and Freedom*, op. cit., pp. 109-111.

On the contrary, Nicodemus and Agapius put forward an axiom that fosters critical theological thought. Nicodemus brought to the fore the criterion that must inspire the stance of the entire Church: the criterion not of antiquity, but of the truth. It is notable that in order to compose the “Lives of the Saints” (the *Synaxaristes*), Nicodemus collected numerous manuscripts from several monasteries. But he did not handle them as sacred and therefore untouchable. In his Preface, he declared that he purged the text of what was contrary to the Holy Scripture, improbable to rational thought and unacceptable to the critics¹⁹. Note the three criteria he takes into account: Scripture, rationality and critical scholarship.

Similarly in his work on Christian ethics (*Chrestoetheia ton Christianon*), he criticizes distortions that have been legitimized in human life as tradition:

There is no other cause, my brothers, for sin becoming established and increasing in the world, apart from the bad habits of silly and corrupted persons; the irrational superstitions of some foolish people, and the unlawful and ill-considered traditions devised by men of old, and blindly followed and preserved by later generations.²⁰

I singled out some highlights of a renowned monastic father by way of example—highlights which have a special dynamic. There is no need to enter into a detailed analysis of whether Nicodemus himself avoided the same mistakes or contradictions²¹. The precious dynamic I refer to has to do with the Church’s everlasting bravery to perpetuate Christ’s *incarnation* in every era, avoiding

¹⁹ Nicodemus Hagiorite, *Synaxaristes ton Dodeka Menon tou Eniaftou* (in Greek: The Synaxarion for the Twelve Months of the Year), Domos, v. 1, Athens 2005, p. xxxiii (in Greek).

²⁰ Nicodemus Hagiorite, *Chrestoetheia*, op. cit., p. 16.

²¹ See my “Threskeftike Eleftheria Heimazomene: Anatrofes kai Nostagies stis Diadromes tes Orthodoxes Ecclesias” (in Greek: Religious freedom at odds: Subversions and Nostalgia in the Historical Path of the Orthodox Church), *Synaxis* 128 (2013), σσ. 31-47 (in Greek).

incarceration in the past. This dynamic has been characteristically served by two milestones of the living Church. On the one hand, we have the monk Saint Maximus the Confessor, who argued that “the Son of God desires the mystery of his incarnation to take place continuously and everywhere”²². On the other hand, we have Saint Basil the Great, the founder of coenobitic monasticism, who, somehow, anticipated modern discussions on textual interpretation, suggesting that every text has a context: “I am laughing”, Basil said, “at those who do not discern the circumstances behind the laws”²³.

2.3 Subversion of the social order

Monasticism exists in a great variety of forms, both communal and solitary. In every case, however—under the presupposition that the monastic remains faithful to the primacy of love over all other virtue—monasticism does not reject the notion of society. On the contrary, it opposes the existing social organization and proposes the utopia of forming a different type of society²⁴. Monasticism articulates its proposal through its own way of life and its own activity, at least to the degree that it remains a prophetic presence and does not degenerate into an advocate for the old world and the primacy of financial power. And here (as throughout all my text) I am selective: that is, I try to focus on those monastics that really function as missionaries, as a reminder of our common obligation to preach the Gospel, and as a manifestation of our subversive hope.

Georgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher and political theorist, makes a delicate comparison between the monastic ideal of common life on the one hand and the Aristotelian concept of the *polis* (the city) on the other hand. “The idea of a ‘common life’”, he says,

²² Maximus, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1084C-D (in Greek; my translation).

²³ Basil, *Letter 160, To Diodoros*, PG 32, 628B (in Greek; my translation).

²⁴ Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture*, op. cit., especially pp. 85-87, 133-134.

seems to have an obvious political meaning. In the *Politics*, Aristotle defines the city as a “perfect community”[...] and makes use of the term *syzēn*, ‘to live together’, to define the political nature of humans [...]. Yet he never speaks of a *koinos bios*²⁵ [common life].

So, what is this different type of society that monasticism proposes? We have to do here with a society inspired by the Gospel and the eschatological vision of the Kingdom, a society decisively oriented toward love, equality and freedom. It is not by accident that several Church writers interpreted coenobitic monasticism as a reminder of the first Church community in Jerusalem, as well as an example for broader social life. In this perspective, the monastics’ initiatives can be truly groundbreaking. In early Egyptian monasticism, for example, monks categorized various activities as either 1) suitable for spiritual progress, 2) less suitable, or 3) harmful. The intellectually harmful included intense business activities, dealings with large landowners and the production of expensive products which required large infrastructures²⁶. Likewise, Saint Theodore (759-826), the abbot of the Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople, reformed the monastic rules and prohibited slave ownership by monastics, at a time when neither the empire nor the Church expressed abolitionist feelings. “Do not own, as a slave, a person made in the image of God, neither for your needs, nor for the monastery with which God has entrusted you, nor for your fields. This is only allowed for lay people”²⁷. I consider this passage particularly significant.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty; Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, p. 11.

²⁶ Dimitrios Moschos, *Eschatologie im ägyptischen Mönchtum. Die Rolle christlicher eschatologischer Denkvarianten in der Geschichte des frühen ägyptischen Mönchtums und seiner sozialen Funktion*, Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen 2010, especially pp. 268-297.

²⁷ Theodore of Stoudion, *To the disciple Nicolaos*, PG 99, 940D (in Greek). English translation: Paul Halsall, “Medieval Sourcebook: Theodore of Studium: Reform Rules” (Fordham University), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/theostud-rules.asp>

While Theodore recognizes that slavery is a social institution, he subverts it in three ways. First, he abolishes it in the monastic life where it is otherwise “valid.” Second, he highlights Christian anthropology (the divine likeness and the indomitable nature of all human persons), which, being a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, is incumbent on both monastics and lay people. Third, he presents the fact that slavery exists in the broader society as a fall from the ideal. It is worth nothing here that Theodore was also the one who opposed the Emperor and the Patriarch on the criminal persecution of heretics²⁸ – in a manner similar to Saint Nilus of Sora in 15th c. Russia²⁹.

As is well known, many monastics espoused the ideal of a strong monastery, with considerable property and support by the people in power. But aside from this model, we can also discern the prophetic voices that took a critical position towards the powerful of this world. When Saint Nikon the *Metanoeite* (c. 920 – 998), which means “Repent” in Greek (named after the main phrase in his preaching), asked his abbot for leave from the monastery in order to become an itinerant missionary³⁰, the abbot gave him some advice of momentous importance:

Walk [...] according to the Gospel, without carrying a knapsack or money [...]. I want you to avoid the untimely meetings and cohabitation with worldly people, as well as the

²⁸ Theodore of Stoudion, *Letters, II, 47, To Theophilos of Efesos*, PG 99, 1481C-1485D (in Greek).

²⁹ See the recent research and reflections David M. Goldfrank, *Nil Sorsky: The Authentic Writings* (tr. & ed. David M. Goldfrank), Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan 2008, pp. 30-31. Also David M. Goldfrank, “Recentering Nil Sorskii: The Evidence from the Sources”, *The Russian Review* 66 (2007), pp. 359-76.

³⁰ “Nikon Metanoeite: Testament of Nikon the Metanoeite for the Church and Monastery of the Savior, the Mother of God and St. Kyriake in Lakedaimon” (tr. Anastasius Bandy), in: *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A complete translation of the surviving Founders’ Typika kai Testaments* (ed. John Thomas & Angela Constantinides Hero with the assistance of Giles Constable), Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 35, Washington 35, 2000, p. 313.

houses of the rich and the nobles. Keep yourself away from conversations with many people. But be sociable and affable with the poor and foreign men³¹.

Obviously it was these criteria that led Saint Nikon, shortly before his death, to urge his spiritual children to defend and deliver those who suffer from unjust and unlawful hands³². Solidarity with the victims of history belongs to the criteria of the Last Judgment. Defending and liberating implies a dynamic more radical than the usual “charity”. And certainly a liberating activism like this does not contradict the spiritual duties of the faithful; quite the contrary, it is an integral part of Christian spirituality. Saint Gregory Palamas (c. 1296 - c. 1359), the teacher of human’s deification, is quite clear: authentic fasting does not consist in merely observing rituals and subjugating the body; the fasting that pleases God (Saint Gregory says) is “to loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke”.

In this light, even the greatest cultural achievements, such as the refined Byzantine architecture and the erection of splendid church buildings, are judged by the subversive criteria of the Last Judgment. It was a monk from Egypt, Saint Isidore from Pelusion (c. 360 – c. 450), who clarified that the magnificent architecture that is erected at the expense of solidarity and social

³¹ *Vios kai Politeia kai Merike Thavmaton Diigesis tou Osiou Nikonos tou Metanoeite* (in Greek: The Life, Works, and Some Attestations of Miracles of St. Nikon the Metanoeite) (original text and tr. by Georgios Katsoulas), Tenos, Athens 1997, pp. 59-61 (in Greek; my translation). Saint Nikon has been described as “unusual in being presented as a missionary monk”, dedicated to his constant reaching out, rather than contemplating. See Andrew Louth, *Greek East and Latin West: The Church, AD 681-1071*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 2007, pp. 259-260. I think however that Nikon belongs to a special ecclesiastical trend, the itinerant missionaries, such as many Celtic monks and Byzantine anchorites. It is true that the official Church faced this instability with many reservations, because some itinerants tended to be outside any ecclesiastical control.

³² *Vios kai Politeia*, op. cit., pp. 164-167.

justice is nothing else but Pharaonic arrogance and *lithomania*; a passion for building stones!³³

2.4 Subversion of witchcraft

The sacraments lie at the heart of ecclesiastical life. And they are the free encounter of an active, working God with co-operating humans. Sadly enough, however, they can easily degenerate into witchcraft or, to speak more academically, into ritualism. In witchcraft and ritualism, the rite alone—that is, the precise execution of a recipe—produces results in an automatic manner, regardless of the faithful’s disposition, intentions, faith and way of life. Christianity is clearly the antipode of both witchcraft and ritualism. Nevertheless, witchcraft remains the most powerful and the most popular religion, always flexible and always eroding church life. The reason is painfully simple: Witchcraft and ritualism is the easy way. It does not demand personal responsibility, decision-making and ethical conformity to God’s commandments. The mechanical execution of a recipe is enough!

Again, by way of example, I will mention the contribution of two distinguished monastics in the battle against sacramentalism, Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and Saint Cosmas of Aitolia, both from the 18th c. Their teaching touches upon the sacraments of baptism and confession. Nicodemus claimed that whoever has acquired property by voracity and injustice is not forgiven merely by repenting, even if he is baptized after the completion of the injustice. The baptism does not produce salvific results if not accompanied by an evangelical way of life. The wrongdoer, Nicodemus concludes, must restore justice and return to the wronged parties all that he took from them. In the same spirit, Saint Cosmas maintained that, even if all the spiritual fathers, priests, bishops and patriarchs forgive the exploiter, the perpetrator remains unforgivable, if he is not forgiven by the

³³ Isidore of Pelusion, *Letters, 152, To Symmachos*, PG 78, 283C-285A (in Greek).

person wronged – whether the wronged person be an Orthodox Christian, a western Christian or a Jew.³⁴

3 Conclusion

There is a special danger lurking in ecclesiastical life, not in the lack of achievements and great deeds, but actually the achievements and the great deeds themselves. Absolutely subversive of mundane logic and religiosity, the Gospel invites Christians to keep in mind that, even when their feats do exceed ordinary measures, they are still unworthy servants who have only done what was their duty (Luke 17:10). If this blessed antinomy passes into oblivion, then vanity and narcissism fill everything. And if the monastics—who are called to remind the whole Church of their common task—themselves forget this blessed antinomy, the virtues will prove to be a demonic deception. “A proud monk needs no demon”, Saint John of Sinai said. “He has turned into one, an enemy to himself”³⁵.

I think that there is no better way to conclude, than by quoting a passage from a special work of Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. The work is entitled “Confession of Faith” and was a response to Athonite monks who accused him of heresy—an accusation which certain circles easily launch in order to demolish their theological adversary.

Isn't it really lamentable to see so many brothers who left the world, inhabit mountains and caves in order to save

³⁴ *Pedalion*, op. cit., p. 557. Ioannis V. Menounos, *Kosma tou Aitolou Didahes. Filologike Melete – Keimena* (in Greek: The Teachings of Kosmas the Aitolos: A Philological Study with Texts), Tinos, Athens 1979, p. 45 (in Greek). See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Liberation Perspectives in Patristic Thought: An Orthodox Approach», *Hellenic Open University. Scientific Review of Post-Graduate Program Studies in Orthodox Theology*”, 2 (2011), pp. 419-438.

³⁵ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Step 22, On Vainglory)* (tr. Colm Luibheid & Norman Russel), SPCK, London 1982, p. 210.

their souls, shed bleeding sweat, endeavor with fasting, vigils and suffering, carry on their own shoulders heavy provisions and water, walk through rough places and along paths with cliffs on both sides; isn't it lamentable to see that, in spite of all these toils, they feed a venomous snake in their own heart, that is hatred against their brothers? [...] Brothers and fathers, if you do not uproot the hatred from your hearts and plant love instead; if you do not stop defaming your brothers, then you have to know that in vain you inhabit mounts and mountains. All your ascetic labors, toils and sweat are futile. And may I tell you something heavier? Even if you suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ, but you have hatred and you do not love your brothers, even your martyrdom is futile. These heavy words are not mine, but Saint John Chrysostom's [...], who says:

"Nothing is greater than love or even equal to love, not even martyrdom, which is the peak of the good things. Love makes the human a disciple of Christ, even without martyrdom. But Martyrdom without love cannot make you a disciple of Christ"³⁶.

³⁶ Nicodemus Agioretites, *Omologia Pisteos, itoi Apologia Dikaiotete* (in Greek: Confession of Faith, that is Mostly Fair Apology), Venice 1819, pp. 91-94 (in Greek. Translation mine) [Cf. English translation: Nikodemus the Hagiorite, *Confession of Faith* (tr. Fr. George Dokos), Uncut Mountain Press, 2004.]