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Synechỗs or the Eucharistic Permanence in the Paschal Ethos of the Church – the 18th Century and the Philocalic Renaissance

Abstract

Synechỗs or the Eucharistic permanence in the Paschal ethos of the Church proposes a journey back to the 18th century amidst the debates caused by the need for a rediscovery. The Philocalic renaissance, intrinsically and obligatorily accompanied by the rediscovery of the Eucharistic foundation of spiritual life, was the center of that discovery. By involving both great dogmatists, such as Athanasios of Paros, and well-known fathers of ascetic life, such as Nicodemus the Hagiorite, and by complying to the cultural exigencies of its time in



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a continuous fidelity to the Tradition, the phenomenon of the *Philokalic renaissance* built a few *topoi* of the subsequent discourse of the Church. Romania actively joined that approach mainly through the work and activity of personalities such as Saint Anthim the Iberian, Paisius Velichkovsky. This paper aims to synthetically present several moments in the 18th century in the context of the Philokalic renaissance, highlighting the Eucharistic dimension in the spiritual life.

Keywords

Philokalic Renaissance, the Kollyvades' dispute, Eucharist, Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite, Athanasios of Paros

“I saw in the Thebaid, within the borders of Hermopolis, another holy man, named Apollo (...) He had monasteries under the mountain and was the elder to 500 monks... For the brethren who lived with him would never taste any food before partaking of Christ's Eucharist... Many of them would come down from the mountain only at the ninth hour, commune with the Eucharist and climb back again, being content with only that spiritual food till the next ninth hour. And many of them would do that for many days on end (...) he also said: If possible, monks should partake daily of Christ's Sacraments. For whosoever stays away from them stays away from God. And whosoever does that incessantly (*synechōs*), incessantly receives our Saviour; for the voice of our Saviour says: *Whoever eats My Body and drinks My Blood remains in Me, and I remain in him*. It benefits the monks who unceasingly perform the recollection of the saving Passion to prepare themselves so as to be always ready to receive the heavenly Sacraments, for that is the way to make ourselves worthy also of the forgiveness of our sins.”¹

¹ Ed. A. Festugiere: *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (Subsidia hagiographica 53), 1971, pp. 66-67,69, apud ***, *Împărtășirea continuă cu Sfintele Taine- dosarul unei controversă mărturiile Tradiției*, introductory study and translation by diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2006, pp. 393-394.

1 Introduction

“A Christianity without the Eucharist is nothing but an illusion, and a Eucharist of which nobody partakes – a nonsense.”

(Seraphim Joantă, Romanian Archbishop of Berlin, Metropolitan of Germany and Central Europe)

The 18th century is defined by some cultural and spiritual mutations, mirroring the process of a shift from a medieval type of culture to one of a free type, tracing the schematizing of a modernity based on knowledge. The spiritual dynamics of that century is linked to that which is known as the *Philokalic Renaissance*, a replica in the style of the *Orthodox Enlightenment*, as Eugenios Voulgaris would have said, to the *Voltairean Enlightenment*. Grounded in the living re-assimilation of the Patristic tradition, the phenomenon of the Philokalic Renaissance updates several *topoi* of the discourse concerning the manner of the *spiritual ascent*, or how man *can be cleansed, illuminated and perfected*. It was not an isolated paradigm of liturgical history or of the spiritual discourse but was immediately assimilated in countries which had undergone the Byzantine influence.

The spiritual programmes which had been integrated within the Philokalic Renaissance were subjected in Moldova to the exigencies of the ascetic and philological school born around Paisius Velichkovski (1721–1794), while in Wallachia to the scholarly and spiritual exigencies of the erudite Metropolitan Anthim the Iberian, as well as his follower Neophyte of Crete, who, even though being of Greek extraction, identified himself with the aspirations of the Romanian nation.

As to the pastoral exigencies of the Metropolitan Neophyte, they continue the tendencies of his predecessor, Saint Anthim the

Iberian, who had closely tended to the education of the clergy. Neophyte makes recommendations for the enhancement of spiritual life. In that sense, in his numerous epistles, he mentions three fundamental duties of the faithful: fasting joined with prayer and alms, confession of all sins, and thirdly, partaking of the Eucharist with peace, fear, and shudder. Moreover, in order to correct certain heresies and sins, he brings the argument of the Eucharist. From that perspective, the Eucharist becomes the criterion of the orthodoxy of faith, as opposed to the quasi-Eucharistic concepts attached to the habit of consuming, on the occasion of the Resurrection, that kind of bread

“popularly called *pascha*: firstly, that most people do not even know what the Holy Communion was, but only on the day of the Holy Easter would go to Church, not in order to listen to the service of the Holy Liturgy and partake of the Holy Sacraments, after first confessing their sins and preparing themselves for that Godly Mystery, yet only to take bread and wine, a paximan called by you Pascha, while others have not even been to confession for many years, yet others still, throughout their entire lives, as I have gathered, know not what the Confession and the Holy Communion are, they merely run to their churches on Easter day and take the bread and the unsanctified wine, or take holy water calling it Pascha”².

The Greek counterpart of that attitude of accountability and acculturation was Saint Cosmas of Aetolia, in the same theological horizon with Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite, Neophytos Kafsokalyvitis or Athanasios of Paros. Having studied under the auspices of the Orthodox Enlightenment promoted by the

² Neofit Cretanul, *Pastorală mitropolitului Neofit către monahii și preoții din Țara Românească, 4 martie-22 aprilie 1738*, publicată de Petre Năsturel, „Le Christianisme roumain. Contradictions et faits nouveaux” în *Buletinul Bibliotecii Românești din Freiburg X*, (1984), pp. 248-251, 251-259, apud *Împărtășirea continuă cu Sfintele Taine...*, p. 7.

Athonite Academy of Eugenios Voulgaris (1716-1806) and Nikephoros Theotokis (1731-1800), Cosmas managed, through very simple but highly powerful didaches, to become the highlight of a Balkanic Orthodoxy which was under the double, Catholic and Islamic, threat. Cosmas was born in 1714 in the village of Megálo Déndro in Aetolia. More precisely, in the region called Apókouro, lying between the villages Megálo Déndro and Taxiárchis, in the mountainous area of Trichonída, from Epirote parents. Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite catches some biographical aspects concerning Cosmas: “as, in those years, the School of the Vatopedi Monastery had started [to acquire] great fame in the Holy Mountain, he moved there together with other colleagues of his, not a few; there he studied with professor Panayótis Palamás, becoming accomplished in Grammar, and then in Logic with professor Nikólaos Tzartzoulíos of Metsovo, who taught there after the wise Eugénios; [Cosmas] was still a layman, and his name was Kónstas; even though he belonged to the laity, he would dress with all the decorum befitting the monastic schema, undertaking every endeavor, exercising himself in the most accomplished asceticism;”³ and because, unfortunately, that famous school was destroyed, having need to be later rebuilt from the ground, he moved to the Philotheou Monastery, where he received the monastic tonsure and the name of Cosmas, and then was ordained as a priest.

His biographer and disciple, Ziko Bistrekis, described the echo of Cosma’s preaching in the following terms: “Wherever his beatitude would go three times, a great assembly of Christians

³ Nicodim Aghioritul, *Viața sfințitului mucenic și întocmai cu Apostolii Cosma Etolianul*, apud *Viața și învățăturile Cuviosului și Sfințitului Mucenic Cosma Etolianul. Luminătorul Greciei și Apostolul Săracilor*, Edit. Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, pp. 15-16.

would gather, and they would listen, with a pierced heart and devotion, the sweetness of his words, and thus there was great reformation and spiritual avail.⁴

As Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite writes, “his Didache was, when we became its listeners, quite simple, like that of the fishermen; it was calm and peaceful, and everywhere it looked to be full of the joy of the gladness and peace of the Holy Ghost.⁵” Moreover, he goes on:

“And God from above worked together with him, and bolstered his words with signs and wonders, such as He had also bolstered with wonders the preaching of His holy Apostles.” In Northern Epirus “the divine grace, working together with him, bore many great fruits: he pacified the savage robbers; he brought to mercy the ruthless and unmerciful; he made the impious, devout; he taught the unschooled and ignorant about the godly things, and made them useful in service; all sinners he brought to repentance and atonement, so that everyone would say a new Apostle had come out in their times.”⁶

The leaders of the *Kollyvades* in those times were Neophyte and Athanasios of Paros. Later, they were to be followed by Metropolitan Macarius of Corinth and Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite, who would enter the dispute with moderation, defending the just faith and its canons purposefully and with a tender heart.

⁴ *Martiriul preasfințitului și sfințitului nostru învățător, părintele Cosma, scrisă de ucenicul său, citețul Ziko Bistrekis, apud Viața și învățăturile Cuviosului și Sfințitului Mucenic Cosma Etolianul. Luminătorul Greciei și Apostolul Săracilor..., p. 29.*

⁵ *Nicodim Aghioritul, Viața sfințitului mucenic și întocmai cu Apostolii Cosma Etolianul, apud Viața și învățăturile Cuviosului și Sfințitului Mucenic Cosma Etolianul. Luminătorul Greciei și Apostolul Săracilor..., p. 18.*

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

2 The Eucharistic theology in the thinking of the Pious Athanasios of Paros, the dogmatist of the “Kollyvades”

The Greek Orthodox Church canonized the Pious Athanasios of Paros in 1995, thus validating not only the personal course of the hieromonk but also the historical and spiritual context in which he was integrated. His intellectual education is attributed to the education he acquired in his own country, subsequently completed at the famous school in Smyrna, where he numbered among his teachers Ierotei Dendrino. In 1751 he joined the Athonite school, where he studied with Eugenios Voulgaris and Neophyte. In 1759 he left Mount Athos because of the increasing tensions caused by the *Kollyvades’ dispute*. Starting from that moment he worked as a teacher in various schools in Greece, being highly appreciated for his erudition and pedagogical style. After an educational journey through Thessaloniki, Kerkyra (Corfu), and Mesolonghi, Athanasios returned to the Holy Mountain in 1770.

Athanasios’ course was going to be largely determined by the political changes of his epoch, particularly by the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, a conflict which engendered a serious situation for the Greeks in the Aegean Sea basin. Upon his return to Mount Athos in 1770, the hierodeacon Athanasios was appointed headmaster (*scholarchos*) of the Athonite School. He was ordained a priest by the refugee bishop Macarius of Corinth.

From that position, he rekindled the Kollyvades’ fight, against the background of tensions which were far from being extinguished. A large contribution to increasing the tension of that situation was made by the ambiguity of the Ecumenical Patriarchy, through its letters of 1772 and 1773 which gave satisfaction to both parties. Subsequently, Patriarch Sophronios II (1774–1780) condemned in extremely harsh terms (“apostates, rebels, blasphemers,” etc.) the Kollyvades’ leaders, headed by

“Kakoathanasios” of Paros, to be deposed from priesthood, excluded from monasticism and reduced to the condition of mere laymen. The situation was to be rectified in the time of the Patriarch Gavriil IV (1780–1785) who recognized the reintegration to priesthood of Athanasios, initially appointed as *hellenomouseion*, headmaster of the Greek high-school in Thessaloniki, and subsequently as headmaster of the high-school in the island of Chios for a period of 25 years. He passed to the Lord on June 24th, 1813.

Athanasios’ polemic and combative style was accompanied by a strong pedagogical sense, an aspect which gave a strong coherence to his theological nerve. Apart from the process of recovery and revaluation of the sources of Orthodoxy, Athanasios and his theology are an essential part of a symmetrical Orthodox replica to the radicalism of the French Enlightenment. In that apologetic, recuperating and polemic context, he published in 1784 the Neo-Greek translation of the life of Saint Gregory Palamas († 1359), and one year later, the life of Saint Mark Eugenicos († 1445).

However, the true manifesto of Athanasios of Paros against the philosophy of European Enlightenment, to which he opposes the Orthodox tradition as the “true philosophy,” is contained in his *Antiphonesis*, or *Cry against the irrational zeal of the philosophers who come from Europe, showing how vain and inane is the misfortune that they are causing to our people, and about the true philosophy*. Denouncing in implacable terms the confusion and “spiritual perdition” of those who go to Europe in search for a profane (*exothern*, “outward”) philosophy of lust and moral dissolution, while the true, heavenly (*another*, “from above”) philosophy is to be found in the ascetic tradition of the Orthodox Church, Athanasios, hiding under the pseudonym of the Athonite Hesychast Nathaniel of Neo-Caesarea, concludes by advising all parents not to send their sons to the West for busi-

ness or studies, but to raise them in the spirit of the Church. Another “spiritual textbook” by Athanasios was published posthumously, in 1818, at Leipzig, containing “remedies for curing” the disease of the rationalist critique of the Scriptures by the Voltairists⁷. The same Athanasios wrote a treaty with a liturgical content in the form of a letter addressed to a certain Dorotheos. The work aims at proving that the Troparion of the Third Hour and the other additions have no place in the prayer of the epiclesis. Therefore they are to be omitted. The author, mastering the philological and cultural dogmatic instruments necessary for such a demonstration, manages to highlight the dogmatic incoherence of the epiclesis which contains the Troparion of the Third Hour, the inexistence of that Troparion in older manuscripts of the Liturgy, to which older commentators of the Liturgy (Germanus of Constantinople, Cabasilas, St Symeon of Thessalonica) make no reference; the addition disfigures the philological and dogmatic syntax of the epiclesis.

Due to their personal rigor, apologetic power and courage, the writings and theoretical positions produced in the Athanasian environment gave value, credibility, and coherence to theological thought, making him the Kollyvades’ dogmatist. That is the perspective from which the authority and credibility of the Eucharistic concept expounded in his compendium *Summary of the Godly dogmas*, a work based on the scheme of Evgenios Voulgaris’ theology courses, is derived.

⁷ *Alexikakon pharmakon êtoi Pneumatikon encheiridion...*, Leipzig, 1818, p. 76, apud Ioan I. Ică jr., *Cuviosul Atanasie din Paros. Despre troparul Ceasului al III-lea în Epicleza euharistică*, in „Ale Tale dintru ale Tale-Liturghie-Pastorație-Mărturisire”, prinos de cinstire adus ÎPS Laurențiu Streza la împlinirea vârstei de 60 de ani, Sibiu, Edit. Andreiană, 2007, p. 525.

After polemically elaborating on the nature of the incorruptibility of Christ's Eucharistic Body, the Pious Athanasios inserts a last polemical note alluding to the controversies on the topic of the frequent or infrequent Holy Communion. He denounces the incredible "persecution", to which those "faithful who may wish to approach the Holy Table as often as they can" are subjected, in the following terms: *in these evil days of ours, a new persecution, quite unheard of by devout generations in the past, has started, is active and rules forcefully*: that of the faithful who may wish, as often as they can, to approach this Sacramental Table; for those who wish to enter are chased away from the Godly Supper, not because they have no wedding dress – for that nobody knows but God and each person's conscience – but because they come frequently, and not after many days, as if he who comes after many days, allegedly, were worthy, while he who comes after fewer days were unworthy (...). Ample evidence, both in the Scriptures and the Canons, as well as many testimonies by our Godly Fathers, show – more clearly than any other Church issue – that this continuous godly Communion is both legal and very saving; that has already been expounded in books (the two books on the continuous Communion, 1777 and 1783) so exactly and solidly that nobody else could contradict him, except he who were possessed by a Satanic spirit of deceit and disobedience⁸.

⁸ Cuviosul Atanasie din Paros, *Despre înfricoșătoarea Taină a dumnezeieșii Cuminecări*, apud Ioan I. Ică jr., *Cuviosul Atanasie din Paros (1721-1813)- un dogmatist „colivar” uitat și teologia sa liturgic-euharistică*, în vol. *Omagiu Părintelui Prof. univ. dr. Ioan I. Ică*, Cluj Napoca, Renașterea, 2007, p. 432.

3 *Synechỗs*, or the Eucharistic permanence in the work of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite, the theologian of experience in the assumed Communion

Starting with the year 1777, a special role was played by the Pious Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749–1809). He offered to the Orthodox culture a true theological library and encyclopedia, unique in its own way by its vastness and complexity; the project was initiated in 1772 by the publication, in Venice, of the massive tome of the anthology of Byzantine mystical texts known under the name of the *Philokalia* (its Slavonic version, *Dobrotoliubie*, made in the Paisian school, was published in 1793 in Moscow). The nerve of the Nicodemian work is Christian self-perfection by way of askesis and mystique. Two elements are essential for defining Nicodemus' spiritual portrait. Father Elia Citterio describes them as follows: firstly, the fact that Nicodemus remained all his life a mere monk, he was neither a priest, nor an abbot or a prior with the responsibility of spiritually managing a monastic community, while as a monk he was a hesychast, loving solitude, inner life and contemplation (not an erudite professor like Nikephoros Theotokis or a missionary like Cosmas the Aetolian); secondly, the strong responsibility felt by the Hagiorite monk towards the Greek people under Ottoman rule, at a critical moment for its existence and its cultural and spiritual identity⁹.

Nicodemus' spiritual theology is grounded in man's vocation of becoming Eucharistically united with God. The beginning and the end of Nicodemus' life confirm that typology of credo, his

⁹ Ioan I. Ică jr., *Strategii de promovare a Tradiției patristice în epoca modernă: cazul Greciei secolului XVIII*, studiu introductiv la Elia Citterio, *Nicodim Aghioritul, personalitatea, opera, învățătura ascetică și mistică*, Sibiu, Deisis, 2001, pp. 16-17.

Life testifying for this existentially assumed Eucharistic reality. On his death bed, he uttered these words: *I have put Christ inside of me, so how will I not be at peace?*¹⁰ By asserting his Eucharistic conscience, Saint Nicodemus claims a descent and, at the same time, integration of his spiritual experience into the realism of his predecessor' Eucharistic theology, particularly with regard to his special link with Saint Nicholas Cabasilas. Essentially, the Nicodemian theological current highlights the experimental dimension of spirituality from the perspective of God's interiority in man. That which was to become a framework programme was fixed in the following terms:

“How can [the faithful] extinguish the fire of passions when they do not commune with the Undeclared Sacraments which cast away every weakness, appease the bitter war of the body, and slay the passions? (...) How can they cleanse their mind, make it shine, turn to the beauty all the powers of the soul, unless they commune with Christ's Body and Blood, which are the true cleansing, true beauty, true illumination and nobility of the soul? How could sin be chased away unless they are marked with Christ's precious Blood? In what way shall they set their heart ablaze with the fire of divine love (...) unless they commune with the body and blood of the Father's beloved Son?¹¹”

To support his recommendation of a continuous communion, Saint Nicodemus appeals to *our Lord Jesus Christ's masterful commandments; secondly, to the acts and canons of the Holy Apostles and Holy Synods, and the witness of the godly fathers; thirdly, to the sacred words, order and acts of the Holy Liturgy itself; and fourthly and lastly, to the very Holy Communion itself*¹².

¹⁰ *Bios*, p. 218, apud Elia Citterio, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Nicodim Aghioritul, *Carte foarte folositoare de suflet despre împărtașirea continuă cu preacuratele lui Hristos Taine*, apud ***, *Dosarul unei controversă, Mărturiile Tradiției.*, p. 213.

The Communion with Christ's Undeiled Sacraments is the constitutive element of spiritual live. These are thoughts which Nicodemus expounds in three of his main writings on the Eucharist: the work *On the Uninterrupted Communion*, the Meditation 26 in his *Exercises*, and chapters 1-4 in Part II of the *Unseen War*¹³.

Do you wish, o, Christian, that all your sins be forgiven, even your smallest trespasses that you have committed like a mortal man, whether with your ears or with your eyes? Approach the Holy Mysteries with fear and a vanquished heart, and they shall be forsaken and forgiven. This is also confirmed by Saint Athanasios of Antioch: *if perchance we should come to err, committing some minor trespasses that can be forgiven, like human beings that we are, either with our tongues, or with our ears, or our eyes, or should we be deceived and fall into pride, or into sorrow, or into wrath, or into any suchlike, then let us blame ourselves and confess to God, and thus let us commune.*¹⁴ Moreover, Saint Nicodemus goes on: And again after one has partaken of the Holy Communion, he will muse upon what tremendous and heavenly Sacraments he has communed with, and shall take great care so as not to shame the Grace.

4 Conclusions

The 18th century makes the transition, on a cultural and religious level, from the late medieval culture to the modernity

¹³ Elia Citterio, *Nicodim Aghioritul, personalitatea, opera, învățătura ascetică și mistică...*, p. 230.

¹⁴ Nicodim Aghioritul, *Deasa împărtășire cu preacuratele lui Hristos Taine*, col. *Isoare duhovnicești IX*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea, 2001, p. 54 (v. supra la Ioan Ică jr.).

grounded in knowledge and the acceptance of the challenges of the times. The theological current initiated in that context, on the one hand, takes the form of a replica to the Voltairian Enlightenment, and on the other hand, marks the recovery of a type of identity of spiritual experience in a Eucharistic re-reading. It is that very key of reading that builds a dogmatic positioning, in the person of Athanasios of Paros, a spiritual one through the philokalic renaissance attributed to the cultural and theological environment surrounding Nicodemus the Hagi-rite. The dogmatic grounding of the Eucharistic vision recovered a fundamental dimension of ecclesiology without which everything turns to dry dogmatism, irrelevant to the spiritual life.

The spiritual programmes integrated into the philokalic renaissance also witnessed an extension in Moldova, through the ascetical and philological school surrounding Paisius Velicikovski (1721–1794), while in Wallachia, in the context of the scholarly Metropolitan Anthim of Iberia, Neophyte of Crete, or other great fathers of the Church.

The spiritual dynamic of that century is to do with what bears the name of *philokalic rebirth*, a replica in the style of the *Orthodox enlightenment*, as Evgenios Voulgaris would have said, to *Voltairian enlightenment*. Grounded in the living re-assimilation of the Patristic tradition, the process of the philokalic renaissance updates several *topoi* of the discourse regarding the manner of the *spiritual climbing*, or *how can become cleansed, enlightened and perfected*. This was no isolated paradigm of liturgical history or the spiritual discourse but underwent immediate assimilation in the countries of Byzantine influence.

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