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## Theology in the spiritual experience and thought of St. Sophrony (Sakharov) the Athonite

### Abstract

This study considers the spiritual elements of St. Sophrony the Athonite's thought on theology as a mode and way of life engaged in personal relationship with God and with fellow humans. His theological understanding and experience are a valuable source for contemporary theologians and the faithful generally. His approach puts both a full and vivid way of living in relation with God, fellowmen and creation.



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## Keywords

Theology, spirituality, discernment, experience, study

## 1 Introduction

In the West, after the Renaissance, the Reformation and the philosophical currents incorporating realism and idealism<sup>1</sup> to varying degrees, Christianity drew on historical and philological developments in order to respond theologically to the various challenges of the time. The Christian sources - Holy Scripture, the Writings of the Holy Fathers, the Decisions of the Ecumenical Synods, etc. - have been approached through scientific research methods and have been analyzed systematically. In this process, theology acquired a scientific function and would be used in an ecclesiastical setting whenever needed<sup>2</sup>.

After a few centuries, in the East, theology also acquired from the West more and more scientific functions and reflexes, and many of the same methodological approaches to revelation and the understanding of the sources of faith were assumed for similar purposes. As we shall note during this study, the Christian Church in the East is still, after several centuries, facing this challenge in theology. There is any connection between spiritual-experimental and scientific aspect of theology. The balance between the two realities has not been found yet.

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<sup>1</sup> These philosophies tried to establish whether in a theory of knowledge and ontology the prime term is: to be (εἶναι) or to know / have consciousness (συνειδέναί). Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία. Είσαγωγή στη Θεολογική Γνωσιολογία*, (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πουρναρά, 2000), pp.14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, pp. 100-101.

There have appeared in the last century numerous works of theology, abundance which can be seen in itself as a theological phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Both in the West and in the East, the need has been felt to solve the social, political, philosophical and even theological problems that produced this phenomenon. There has also been a tendency to establish, from a theological perspective, certain historical, socio-cultural and even political models, which has led to the limitation and reduction of the theological perspective of these works to a strictly human level. Secularised conceptions of theology have been formulated and have proliferated with a tendency to reduce theology to a human creation.<sup>4</sup> This tendency undoubtedly shows a loss of the true meaning of theology. Of course, to some extent, theology relates to any process concerning the human being, but, as St. Sophrony puts it, the contemporary movement in theology “goes beyond any reasonable limits”.<sup>5</sup> Thus we see a theology of beauty, sex, revolution etc<sup>6</sup>. These realities indicate the desire to give the world an absolute value that comes from the need of man to find and imagine himself in an authentic theological plan.

As for the understanding of theology within the Eastern Church, there is, as we have already pointed out, especially lately, a differentiation between a ‘spiritual’ theology and an ‘intellectual’ or ‘scientific’ theology. There is talk of an existential, empirical

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<sup>3</sup> A simple search on the internet, through the Google search engine, of works with the word theology in their title gave us the opportunity to access over two million such works!

<sup>4</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *Striving for knowledge of God. Corespondence with David Balfour*, (Essex:Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist), 2016, p. 319.

<sup>5</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *Striving for knowledge of God*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

theology and another which is academic.<sup>7</sup> And to some extent, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the two.<sup>8</sup>

However, such a division is not specific to the Eastern Orthodox ethos. In patristic tradition and in the life of the Church through centuries, theology has meant living, participating and contemplating the mystery of God in the Holy Trinity. Theology was associated with an essential act of participation in the mysteries of God. If necessary, this experience of the Fathers of the Church was presented in writing for the edification of God's righteous faithful.<sup>9</sup> The writings of the Fathers about theology or teaching about God could never be called writings of 'scientific' or 'intellectual' theology, even though some works, such as those of St. John of Damascus, were presented in the form of an argument and systematically, with references to the Fathers of the Church before him.<sup>10</sup>

These writings, which revealed both the mysteries of God in Himself, but also of God incarnated and presented historically as Man - Jesus Christ - became landmarks for the spiritual understanding and edification of the whole Church. Theology as an experiential process has defined the Church for many centuries. Theology presupposed the personal experience of God, life

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<sup>7</sup> See, Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 100-106 & Ierotheos Vlahos, *Dogmatica empirică*, (Iași: Doxologia, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> "Speaking of the Cappadocian fathers, A. Louth summarizes: «*theologia... means not just the doctrine of the Trinity, but contemplation of the Trinity*»". Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press Crestwood, 2002), p. 56. // See G. W. Lampe, *A patristic greek lexicon*, (Oxford, 1961), p. 627.

<sup>9</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Simeon the New Theologian and other Saints of the Church present in their works the foundations and realities of the theology that they themselves lived. These expositions were conceived and arranged in theological heads or speeches.

<sup>10</sup> Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 103.

in the Holy Spirit in the community of the Church and, as the case may be, knowledge about the nature of man and the world, knowledge of philosophy and natural sciences and the charisma of those writings, etc. All this defined the theology of the Church.

For almost two centuries, out of apologetic, missionary and pastoral needs, such as the need to educate the future ministers of the Church, the Church has taken from the West a model of a scientific theology that can be practised and carried out in institutions called schools of theology. In a new theological and ecclesial situation the Church felt the need to define and adapt itself correctly to this reality. Therefore, as could be expected, academic theology is still seeking its place in the Church, in particular in its relationship to the traditional understanding of theology as living the mysteries of the faith. We are touching on a wide and very complex debate.

In this debate, the appeal to contemporary spiritual Fathers who spoke about these issues can be especially helpful. In this paper we attempt to capture the thinking of St. Sophrony Sakharov, one of the most remarkable spiritual and theological personalities of the twentieth century.

The paper has three main focuses. The first is a presentation of theology in its revealed and experimental depth. The next part of the study deals with the place of academic theology in relation to a more holistic view of theology and to the Church in general. The last part seeks to tackle the spiritual aspects implicit in theology.

## 2 Theology - revelation and personal relationship of man with God

For St. Sophrony, theology can be located in two planes: one broad (the desk of the scholar) and the other which presupposes being crucified with Christ (1 Peter 4:13; Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:11-12) and to find Him in the hiding places of the heart. The first location is accessible to many who are intellectually gifted, and the second type is a theology of confession, born of deep fear of God, which introduces one to the divine reality of the uncreated Light.<sup>11</sup>

In its second dimension theology is an experiential reality related to the existence of man.<sup>12</sup> It follows that the human being has a need to participate in the divine reality, to be a theological being, to feel and talk about God, to be in touch with Him. Theology as an experience of the mystery of God, of salvation and the economy of grace, of the eternal counsel which was fulfilled in Christ, presupposes, as St. Paul tells us, a real revelation in the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> For this reason St. Symeon the New Theologi-

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<sup>11</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *On Prayer*, (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 2016), p. 63-64.

<sup>12</sup> The theological existence of man comes from the fact that the Archetype of the man the God-Word is, as St. Gregory Palamas says, Θεός and Θεολόγος. Therefore, strictly speaking, theology in its full sense was realised by the Saviour Jesus Christ as Θεός and Θεολόγος. The Theology of God the Word (Theo-Logos) is the absolute landmark to which we must relate. Grigorie Palama, *Cuvinte doveditoare despre purcederea Duhului Sfânt*, (București: Patristică, 2005), p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly" Eph. 3, 2 (NIV) // "... The aroma of the knowledge of Christ..." 2 Cor. 2:14 (NIV) // "That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ" Col 2:2-3. (KJV)

an says that only the one who has seen God can speak of Him, just as only he who has seen a man can speak of him.<sup>14</sup> Theology is therefore based on personal knowledge of God.<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, St. Sophrony<sup>16</sup> notices that St. Paul received divine revelation from Christ Himself, a reality confirmed to him by the other Apostles.<sup>17</sup> Following this experience, Pauline theology takes the form of a story.<sup>18</sup> It tells of the divine mysteries lived<sup>19</sup>, just as St. John the Evangelist tells the faithful people of God what he saw, heard, received or touched, in a divine act of communion with the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

According to the teachings of the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers, personal communion and the knowledge of God are the

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<sup>14</sup> Simeon Noul Teolog, *Cuvântări morale*, in "Filocalia românească", (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1977, vol. VI), p. 192. However, remarks Father D. Stăniloae, one can talk about God from what the saints saw and spoke.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Mantzarides, *L'Archimandrite Sophrony, theologien du principe personnel*, in "Buisson Ardent", (Paris: Sel de la Terre, 1995, vol. II), p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, in Ναυπάκτου Ἱερόθεου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ*, (Athena: Ἱερά Μονή Γενεθλίου της Θεοτόκου, 2007), p. 368.

<sup>17</sup> Gal. 1: 17.

<sup>18</sup> "At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" Acts 26: 13 & 15.

<sup>19</sup> For the most part, theological teaching is an account in human words of what the Apostles, Fathers, and Ascetics saw and came to know directly (1 John 1: 1-3; Gal. 1:11-12).

<sup>20</sup> "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life. For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us. That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full" 1 John 1: 1-4.

essential criteria of true theology.<sup>21</sup> For his part, St. Sophrony emphasizes that authentic theology must always be linked to the sight<sup>22</sup> of the Living Christ. By removing this foundation of faith, one inevitably talks about God from outside of Him.<sup>23</sup> Above all, however, "the last possible boundary of theology on earth is martyrdom for Christ. Giving oneself to death for Christ and for the gospel (Jn 12:25; Mt 10:39, Mt 16:25) likens man to God Himself "to the end".<sup>24</sup>

If theology does not involve an experience of God, but instead speaks of Him as an external object, then, according to Byzantine writers, it cannot be called theology.<sup>25</sup> Under these conditions, as Kallistos Ware remarks, the living word of God is brought into logical frameworks and changed from theology to technology.<sup>26</sup> Approaching such a path, the theologians speak of God as if He did not exist.<sup>27</sup>

Theology therefore cannot be and is not a philosophical science, but "it is a living penetration into divine eternity".<sup>28</sup> As a result, "only when the soul receives certain living revelations in relation to any knowledge, only then does the spirit free itself from its existential bonds and surpass through the relational and

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<sup>21</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Footnote 860*, in "Filocalia românească", (București: Humanitas, București, 2002, vol. VIII), p. 453.

<sup>22</sup> Vision is one thing, theology - that is, talk about God - is another. See Grigorie Palama, *Cuvânt pentru cei ce se liniștesc cu evlavie*, in "Filocalia românească", (București: Humanitas, 1999, vol. VII), p. 326.

<sup>23</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2004, vol. I), p.158.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, *Taina vieții creștine*, (Suceava: Accent Print, 2014), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *footnote 827*, in "Filocalia românească", vol. VIII, p. 432.

<sup>26</sup> Kallistos Ware, *La formation théologique selon l'Écriture et les Pères*, in "Buisson Ardent", (Paris: Le Sel de la Terre, Paris, 1999, vol. V), p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Ναυπάκτου Ἱεροθέου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ...*, p. 368.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolae Saharov, *foreword*, in Sofronie Saharov, *Nevoînța cunoașterii lui Dumnezeu*, Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2006), p. 24.



personal act of knowing God any other form of knowledge, even academic theology"<sup>29</sup>, says St. Sophrony.

That being said, beyond the theology revealed by an act of personal communion<sup>30</sup> that embraces in its content all aspects of human existence<sup>31</sup>, there is a theology that is based on the attempt to understand revelation, as it was presented by Christ Himself, by the Holy Apostles and by the Holy Fathers of the Church. This theology has also been called scientific or academic theology.

### 3 About academic or scientific theology and its role in the Church

St. Sophrony presents in his writings an ambivalent view of academic theology; on the one hand, he notices its limits and negative consequences where it is misused, and, on the other hand, he highlights its positive potential.

Not infrequently St. Sophrony emphasised that academic theology in itself cannot lead to the knowledge of God.<sup>32</sup> We can be great scholars in theological science, with many academic degrees, but - he says - we can also remain completely ignorant of the ways of salvation.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, without an experience of

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<sup>29</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 37-38.

<sup>30</sup> At the center of theology is the person. Georgios Mantzaridis, *Știința teologică și teologia științifică*, trad. Sabin Preda, in "Studii Teologice", nr. 1, 2005, p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Saharov, *I love, therefore I am*, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 153// There have also been situations when scientific study has led researchers to meet and know God. Among them we mention Archimandrite Gabriel Bunge, theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, deacon Karl Cristian Felmy and others.

<sup>33</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *De vie et d'esprit*, (Paris: La sel de la terre, 1996) p. 39-40.

God, one cannot truly become a theologian or a priest, that is, one cannot become "a person capable of teaching others the true Christian way of salvation."<sup>34</sup>

In the absence of spiritual foundation, academic theology can produce important theological mutations - even distortions - regarding the understanding of Christianity. Such theology can sometimes even serve to mutilate the ecclesial body, and we have many examples of this in the history of the Church. This is because academic theology is not dependent on man's spiritual life. Academic theologians, says St. Sophrony, even after committing a sin, being torn from God and Church and unrepentant, can continue to write and pursue theological study: "This is the difference between theology as the charism of the Holy Spirit and theology as a human science. It is possible for man to theologise, to write, to be a scientist, but not to be a man of prayer and a saint".<sup>35</sup>

In view of these harmful limits and consequences of a theology devoid of the Holy Spirit, St. Sophrony urges us to be mindful of the temptation and desire to hold degrees in theology as a goal in itself: "So please be saved from the errors of theological diplomas. One day I met here, on the way to our monastery, a man who said he had received a doctorate in theology. And I replied: what can one if it is valued more than holiness in our dark world? Therefore, I would like you to be saved from the errors from which the contemporary world suffers in terms of theology. In Geneva there are more than two hundred doctors of theology with different opinions about God!".<sup>36</sup>

Following his abbot, St. Silouan, St. Sophrony emphasised that if one does not humble himself to the end, man will not under-

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 162-163.

stand the mystery of the spiritual life, will not see the light of Christ and will not reach Christian love<sup>37</sup>:

"In my last word addressed to the abbot Silouan, I said to him:

- I'm sorry I'm always sick and I don't have much time to devote to theology.

With his characteristic gentleness and quietness, he asked me:

- And do you consider this to be something big?

...And, of course, I couldn't answer his question.

- There is only one great thing: to humble oneself, to defeat the pride that prevents one from loving".<sup>38</sup>

However, for St. Sophrony, argues Maxim Egger, academic theology is still of importance, playing as it does a positive role in the historical development of the Church. This understanding is supported by the following statement: "Academic theology gives us information about the teaching of the Church, about events in its history, about the Fathers and the like, but it rarely shares with us the essential knowledge of God. This can be expressed in the following manner: To know what the Church teaches about God is one thing, but to know God through His coming in Man is something else"<sup>39</sup>! As a result, theology cannot be a science, a theory, a speculation or an erudition, but a state of being.<sup>40</sup> Theology itself is a "talk of God" after His personal meeting and knowledge.<sup>41</sup> There is a great difference between the knowledge gained by inspiration from the Holy Spirit and that acquired in theological schools. It can be very dangerous to

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<sup>37</sup> Idem, *Striving for knowledge of God*, p. 154: "Love is the base of theology".

<sup>38</sup> Idem, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 249.

<sup>39</sup> Idem, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Maxim Egger, *Archimandrite Sophrony, moine pour le monde*, in "Buisson Ardent", (Paris: Le Sel de la Terre, Paris, 1999, vol. II), p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, p. 64.

study theology, especially in its apophatic forms, as one would study philosophy and poetry, without an existential experience of life in the spirit of Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the above, St. Sophrony does not exclude any theological reflection. We understand this when he says: "Provided that our mind accepts the limits appointed in theological thinking, the human speculation are admissible".<sup>43</sup> An example of intellectual theological reflection, Nicholas Sakharov points out, are the trinitarian analogies which the Fathers discovered in the created order of existence.<sup>44</sup> But even a cursory analysis of the patristic notion of theology shows its descriptive character, its preoccupation with existential involvement in the acquisition of the true knowledge of God.

Based on the need for a conceptual dimension, theology, in its scientific-reflexive approach, cannot be an end in itself. Knowledge gained in this way is neither a barrier, nor can it mediate a living and authentic relationship with God. Beyond the positive aspect of knowing the experiences of the Holy Fathers, we must know that "what saves us is not the abundance of this knowledge, but the love that the Lord has commanded".<sup>45</sup>

Although historically useful, academic theology without a minimum of personal experience can have dangerous moral and emotional consequences. In general, the academic theologian without love and humility falls into the hard-to-bear sin of self-sufficiency or pride. That is why St. Sophrony points out that "when a scholar meets a unlearned man, he turns away from him with contempt. And he, when he finds no love in the

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<sup>42</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *De vie et d'esprit*, p. 38-40.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, in Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 252.

learned theologian, looks upon him with pity, finding no way to meet him in prayer. And they both get bored of each other. Both are imperfect, yet the second is closer to real life than the first..."<sup>46</sup>

As such, we can agree with the abbot St. Sophrony that "historically, theological schools are absolutely necessary, but for a life in the eternal God they are not immediately necessary."<sup>47</sup> Academic theology involves analysing the historical dimension of the mystery of faith and the Gospel. An integral knowledge of Christianity necessarily presupposes its human and historical dimension. The Fathers of the Church also had such a theological knowledge of the created realities of existence, but in their case this dimension of theology did not have an institutional character. In fact, the great exegetical treatises and the systematic and apologetic theology of the Holy Fathers show strictly historical theological knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

So assuming the created dimension of theology, we may agree that "institutions are absolutely necessary for us at the beginning. But if they are prolonged until the end of life, they become an obstacle to spiritual growth and to the full achievement of the image of God, to the likeness of Christ".<sup>49</sup> We can understand that theological science, although it enriches us in a certain way even in the plane of the spirit, it alone cannot unite man with God. Without living the mystery of faith and without living the true divine life, says St. Sophrony, "it (theological science) is impossible to save us".<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Idem, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Idem, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2008, vol. II), p. 211.

It must be borne in mind, however, that despite the limitations of academic theology as set out above, when it unites with the living faith, it bears very good fruit.<sup>51</sup> It can degenerate very easily, becoming an abstract theory; it may cease to represent a direct and living action of God in us, but it may when sustained spiritually, express the fullness of experiential theology or vivid relationship with God.

We have instances of this kind in the great Saints of the Church (St. Paul, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Cappadocian Fathers, St. John Chrysostom, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus, St. Gregory Palamas) who, by fulfilling the commandments and following the Gospel of Christ, acquired divine experiences, and, through their intellectual engagement with historical experiences and knowledge, fulfilled their calling as theologians of the Church.<sup>52</sup> In this process they did not transform living experiences into scholastic theology, realising a "philosophy of religion"<sup>53</sup>, but used theoretical knowledge to express divine mysteries and experiences, which they presented in an edifying way, given the nature and the historical context of the Church in each age.

However, the intellectual and scientific dimension of theology is not a qualitative or quantitative complement to it, but a historical manifestation of the mystery of faith. The level of scientific knowledge does not necessarily imply a higher level of theology. To understand this fact, the following passage from the writings of St. Sophrony also helps us:

„Question: Many Greek Fathers, for example St. Maxim the Confessor, have a very penetrating understanding and a

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Benga, *Metodologia studiului și cercetării științifice în teologie*, (București: Sofia, 2003), p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 143.

<sup>53</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *On Prayer*, p. 64.

developed logical technique... Did they do it for the defence of Christian teaching against foreign thoughts, or is it needed internally, for salvation?

Answer: It is needed for the whole Christian.

Question: But St. Silouan succeeds without such concepts.

Answer: O, no, he is talking about the same, but in different words. St. Silouan has the same path as St. Maximus the Confessor. But St. Maximus, when they beat him and cut his tongue, said, "Perhaps the Lord will forgive my mistakes." Do you see how he received the suffering? We talk differently, but still our life is one. And what Silouan is talking about is by no means inferior to what St. Maximus the Confessor says: it is the same high sphere".<sup>54</sup>

Human science provides us with tools for the historical expression and presentation of divine experiences. These shared truths, however, do not save us by themselves, nor can they be transmitted to us without the work of grace.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, from the perspective of reality and the context in which we live, academic training, says St. Sophrony, "has become more necessary than in other ages".<sup>56</sup> As we are connected in our very being with the historical development of the world its nature must be studied. What books tell us does not save in itself, personally, but where it is required, it works for the salvation of believers. The horizontal dimension of salvation must not be neglected, especially since it protects us from religious danger, from spiritual deviation, and from any philosophy of this world that man may encounter on his way to the King-

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<sup>54</sup> Idem, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. II, p. 177.

<sup>55</sup> Idem, *On Prayer*, p. 102: "Knowledge of God is existentialist, not abstract and intellectual. Countless numbers of professional theologians are awarded top diplomas yet in actual fact remain profoundly ignorant in the sphere of Spirit".

<sup>56</sup> Idem, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 38.

dom of God<sup>57</sup>. What is useful to us, however, in order to overcome the negative aspects of the world is not scientific theological education, but living participation and real experience of the Living God.<sup>58</sup>

St. Sophrony not only spoke of the need to study theology from a scientific perspective, but he himself tried to do so. After two years of theology at the Orthodox Theological Institute "Saint Serge" in Paris he left for the Holy Mountain, and on his return to Paris after 22 years, in 1947, he wanted to complete his studies. Political elements made this impossible.<sup>59</sup> A little later, the holy abbot Sophrony insisted in the monastery he was leading spiritually (St. John the Baptist - Essex, England) that his disciples undertake theological studies in order to give appropriate answers to the demands of the world in which we live.<sup>60</sup>

A possible misinterpretation of the writings of St. Sophrony in the sense of his contestation of academic theology is therefore unimaginable. This is all the more so as St. Sophrony, beyond the fact that he supports theological studies on the basis of those reasons already highlighted, finds in them a deeply spiritual value. He considers that what is acquired through study becomes part of the content of our relationship with God: "Whoever thinks that I am against academic theology is wrong. Everything we acquire about «theology» through study falls within the content of our prayer. Theology becomes the content of our prayer. After we reach such a state, a higher state follows

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<sup>57</sup> Ibidem: "Theological scientific education reveals the horizontal plane, makes known to us the religious issues of the time. Thus we are no longer vulnerable to the various contemporary spiritual currents, to unexpected events and we remain untouched by the philosophies of this world".

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Rafael Noica, *Celălalt Noica*, (București: Anastasia,1994), p. 170.



- theology as a state of our spirit that lives incessantly in God and through the Holy Spirit. This is our «gnoseology»<sup>.61</sup>

And if we were to identify a school that fits into this line of Orthodox theory of knowledge mentioned by St. Sophrony, a school that reconciles some of the requirements and elements of both a spiritual and scientific nature, perhaps this would be monasticism: "there is also the monastic school as a school of good prayerfulness, the science of overcoming passions. Monasteries and deserts give freedom to weep and repent in a way that the world seldom allows. In this sense, monasticism belongs to an education of a higher order, compared to the academic one. But although he understands this state of affairs, the monk, as I myself bear witness, does not despise academic education, which would be not only a mistake, but also a sin".<sup>62</sup>

From the above we can understand the positive and yet also insufficient and limited character of academic theology. One can perceive both the negative aspect of scientific theology when it is treated as an end in itself<sup>63</sup> and when it leads to ignorance in the spiritual plane, but also the positive one, when it becomes the form in which the revealed divine reality is embodied.

One of the most important services to the Church of academic theology is to provide the means for the historical, cultural, and social adaptation of divine revelation to the human plane. It transfers to the created level that which has been experienced in the divine. Then it has the vocation to interpret in ever new contexts everything that the Church Fathers lived and left in writing from their divine experiences. Academic theology must

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<sup>61</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 152.

<sup>62</sup> Idem, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 38-39.

<sup>63</sup> Daniel Benga, *Metodologia*, p. 38.

achieve what we may call theological development or hermeneutics.<sup>64</sup>

Beyond the hermeneutic aspect of theology, there is also the pure scientific one. The historical embodiment of any revealed truth presupposes many epistemological data concerning man as a historical person. These necessary data establish the scientific, social-scientific and humanistic approaches, such as the history of culture, sociology and archeology, which present the general framework of theological inculturation.<sup>65</sup> This dimension of theology, although secondary, represents the necessary contact with the concrete reality in which lives any human person to whom a theological work is addressed.

Academic theology as a ministry has a strict and well-defined role in an Orthodox theory of knowledge. It presupposes theological and hermeneutical work that must take into account the life of the Church and a scientific work that must assume the data of contemporary scientific epistemology and theory of knowledge.<sup>66</sup> Theology can then use and appropriately adapt the themes of the Christian faith to people's daily lives, it can foster a proper relationship between culture, history and divine reality.<sup>67</sup> All this requires a solid method of scientifically approaching the ever-changing reality.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The theological development of revelation does not imply only a demystification of Tradition, but a de-idolatry of creation through the knowledge of God. Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> G. Mantzaridis, *Știința teologică*, p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel Benga, *Metodologia*, p. 12.

The hermeneutic theological act<sup>69</sup> presupposes that the members of the Church who truly participate in the mysteries of God and who also have a special call to be theologians, after sharing the mysteries of God, present in writing lived-out divine realities, through the many means provided by the academic or scientific study of theology. This requires both experience and intellectual knowledge. This is the model of the Church Fathers who had both experience and knowledge.<sup>70</sup>

If this ideal requirement cannot be met, hermeneutic theology and in this case the academic theologian must, in order to maintain the orthodox spirit of his ministry, relate faithfully to the teaching of the Church, interpret the signs of the times correctly and be a living member of the Church of Christ. These, together with the theological charisma and the intellectual and cognitive qualities of the theologian, are the premises for the authentic fulfillment of his ministry.<sup>71</sup> Any complete theological process

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<sup>69</sup> For more on this topic see Ion Bria, *Hermeneutica Teologica. Dinamica ei în structurarea Tradiției*, (Sibiu: Andreiană, 2009).

<sup>70</sup> Ναυπάκτου Ἱεροθέου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ*, p. 338.

<sup>71</sup> For the Greek theologian Nikos Matsoykas, scientific theology is well founded only if it arises from a charismatic theology, thus implying that the two, even if dependent on each other, represent distinct functions in the theological process. This difference can also be interpreted in the sense that any charismatic theological work is not scientific, or that these two functions can be found in different people; we can have, for example, charismatic theologians and scientific theologians. The same author then divides theology into charismatic theology, scientific theology, and Christian philosophy. This classification, while helping to understand the concerns and nature of a theological work, may exclude the possibility that a theological act may be at the same time charismatic, scientific, and philosophical. Any authentic theological work must bring together all these elements that cannot be treated separately. Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 132 & 134.// The same author finds to a great extent the way of reconciling the unitary exigency of theology through what he calls the double methodology of the Church Fathers. These were, reporting the case of St. Gregory Palamas and St. John of Damascus, both charismatic and

should not be deprived of any of the realities that define it, whether it is the ecclesial, apophatic dimension, or the scientific dimension. Without the apophatic dimension, theology would be devoid of divine mystery, and in the absence of a hystorical expression, theology could be "personalised" and condemned to exist in strictly individual settings, without impact and without community-building influence.<sup>72</sup>

This would be the ecclesial perspective of theology in its academic sense. Any theological work that goes beyond the sphere of ecclesial necessity or is foreign to the Church body is to be rejected. The Church is the environment in which the necessity, the validity and authenticity of any theological work are proven and shown.<sup>73</sup> As a human council in search of God's will, the Church offers all its members the opportunity to identify the role and limits of academic theology. This is because the normative principles of theology are synodality, personal foundations and experiences and divine revelation. In the absence of synodality, personal experiences and divine revelation, any theology lacks real foundation and aim. Without them, says St. Sophrony, the Church is transformed into a "college" or "collective" of specialists in administration or specialists in theology who have no power "to go beyond the plane of human calculations".<sup>74</sup>

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scientific. Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p.143.//For Fr. Daniel Benga's spiritual and scientific theology is a unitary whole. In fact, as Father D. Stăniloae himself points out, the spiritual and theological approach presupposes a scientific way of approaching and living. Daniel Benga, *Metodologia*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>72</sup> Daniel Benga, *Metodologia*, pp. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996, vol. I), p. 70.

<sup>74</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 19.

#### **4 About theological life as a "school of the spirit" and as a premise of true theology**

For the philosopher W. James religious truths are those that we lived and felt before we thought them.<sup>75</sup> Only an existential faith regarding the mysteries of the divine life can be the criterion and premise of a true theology. After receiving the ultimate truths about existence there follows, as far as possible, their awareness and intellectual processing.

Beyond the human aspect of theology presented above, there is an aspect which is implicitly divine. Theology as a way of describing God presupposes, as we have already noted, a life in communion and relationship with God.<sup>76</sup> Theology is to be understood as a divine and human reality, involving both God and man, both the horizontal and vertical perspectives of existence. Of course, the divine reality prevails over the human one as the basis of any theology.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly we now present the last part of our study, namely the experiential dimension of the Christian mystery as a premise of theology at an ascetic level.

According to St. Sophrony, the Christian life is identified with the state of theology.<sup>78</sup> This state is one of self-denial and a sinlessness life. Lack of sin and living according to God's com-

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<sup>75</sup> W. James, *Realism*, Atena, 1925, p. 20 apud G. Mantzaridis, *Știința teologică*, p. 116.

<sup>76</sup> For a balanced approach to theology as an experimental act and see its scientific dimension G. Mantzaridis, *Știința teologică*, p. 117.

<sup>77</sup> Hence perhaps the simplifying distinctions between theology as experience and theology as a scientific act. In essence, it is only one reality of an all-encompassing theology that involves living an authentic relationship with God on an experimental level and defining it on a conceptual-intellectual level. Therefore, the division of theology into academic theology and experimental theology should be understood, only out of the need to specify the differences and distinctions necessary for the understanding of any phenomenon.

<sup>78</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, pp. 160-161.

mandments lead, even the simplest man, to great theological heights: "through this way of life, St. Silouan reached the highest theological state".<sup>79</sup>

The state of theology, therefore, requires sustained attention and effort in relation to God and man. We must immediately "avoid thinking badly of our neighbour in the small circle of public brotherhood where we live".<sup>80</sup> Taking on this dimension of man's being and of the evangelical and edifying relationship with others brings with it the opening to theological participation in the whole mankind. This is "because my close brother represents millions of people who bear a similar character to the billions of people on earth".<sup>81</sup> Having this understanding and following this spiritual need, "theology becomes an existential extension of man and God in us." Therefore, our theological "science" can only be acquired and fulfilled "by patience toward all men".<sup>82</sup>

Theology presupposes on the one hand a sustained ascetic spiritual effort, and on the other hand the acquisition "according to our ability, of the dogmatic orthodox conscience that lies at the foundation of the spiritual life".<sup>83</sup> Theology is, therefore, a way of being and thinking, the theologian having to live ascetically and truly assimilate, in his whole life, "the spirit of divine revelation".<sup>84</sup> For this reason, authentic theology is not very easy to

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<sup>79</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>83</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 51//Without spiritual experience, dogmatic consciousness degenerates into dogmatism that kills any creative knowledge and experience. Νίκου Α. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 51.

acquire. It needs time, repentance, struggle with the passions<sup>85</sup>, prayer and searching of the Scriptures.

According to the Church Fathers, among whose successors is St. Sophrony, theology must be immediately a consequence of prayer<sup>86</sup> and spiritual struggle for perfection: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian".<sup>87</sup> Only the one who prays and feels God as Father is a theologian.<sup>88</sup> Theology can only be an immediate consequence of prayer and the fulfillment of divine commandments: "Theology, as knowledge of God, as a spiritual state of union with God, is acquired through the struggle with the passions and with the "law of sin" (see Rom. 7:23) that lives in us. The Light enters the purified heart, easily and abundantly, igniting the spirit with the love for God".<sup>89</sup>

Theology, as a spiritual work that involves the entire human existence, is a dynamic reality, closely related to the greatness of the divine mystery and the possibility of a human being to penetrate and live out the fullness life of God. The closer man gets to God, the more he can be the exponent of a true theology in the Holy Spirit, and so he can fulfill his vocation to be a theologian. Due to this, repentance, as a spiritual work, is closely linked to theology. According to the St. Sophrony, repentance

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<sup>85</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>86</sup> It is known about the abbot St. Sofronie that "before he writes on the typewriter, he closes his eyes, raises his hands to God, prays and then writes". Ναυπάκτου Ἱερόθεου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ...*, p. 330. // St. Siluan also confessed about this: "And as I pen one word, I as yet know not the next, until it is born within me and I can write it down, too". Sophrony Sakharov, *St. Silouane the Athonite*, (NewYork: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press Crestwood, 1991), p. 501.

<sup>87</sup> Evagrie Ponticul, *Cuvânt despre rugăciune*, in "Filoacalia românească", (București: Humanitas, 1999, vol. I), p. 93.

<sup>88</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem, pp. 30-31.

leads the soul of the needy to the cleansing of sins and then to the communion of God. Pure repentance, therefore, is followed by theology which is preceded and supported by the first former.<sup>90</sup> Only in this way does man become a co-worker together with the Eternal God Himself for the salvation of himself and of his fellow men.<sup>91</sup>

For a great Father of the Church, however, theology and repentance seem at first sight contradictory. In this sense, St. Symeon the New Theologian says that “repentance does not suit either the theology or the theologian. For as far as the sun rising is of the sunset (Ps. 103:12), so theology is higher than repentance”.<sup>92</sup> In fact, nothing differs from what St. Sophrony said. St. Symeon’s vision does not imply that when theology begins, the state of repentance ceases, or that the two are excluded. Rather, it seems to me that he wishes only to underline the height of theology which in its entirety is not compatible with the state of repentance. This is also pointed out by St. Maximus the Confessor, who says that the mind cannot ascend to heaven until it has obtained the purification from the passions, for “as the bird, when it begins to fly with its leg tied, is drawn to the ground by the rope, so is the mind which it has not yet acquired purification, if it wants to fly to the knowledge of the heavenly, it is dragged to the ground by passions”.<sup>93</sup>

What is easy to understand from the perspective highlighted above by St. Sophrony is the spiritual and personal character of divine experience and implicitly of theology. Prayer, spiritual

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<sup>90</sup> Ναυπάκτου Ἱερόθεου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ*, p. 366.

<sup>91</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 338.

<sup>92</sup> Simeon Noul Teolog, *Capete gnostice și teologice*, in “Filocalia românească”, (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1977, vol. VI), p. 50.

<sup>93</sup> Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Capete despre dragoste*, in “Filocalia românească”, (București: Harisma, 1994, vol. II) p. 76.



struggle, keeping the commandments, and repentance are deeply personal. In fact, as Nicholas Sakharov remarks, the main purpose of St. Sophrony's writings is to try to communicate the perception of divine reality in the form of personal "states." Theology is not based, therefore, on the principles of 'formal logic', but on the personal appropriation of divine revelation.<sup>94</sup>

Pure prayer, says St. Sophrony, is another criterion of theology. It is the highest form of prayer, having a very important role in the work of sanctification and perfection of man. Pure prayer can be experienced, therefore, only after a sustained theological life, and true theology can be realised only after pure prayer.<sup>95</sup>

In order to fulfil this requirement of theology, it must be known that this kind of prayer, as St. Sophrony instructs us, is not given to those who study much.<sup>96</sup> For this reason theological science itself seldom leads to pure prayer and therefore to theology. Rather, there must be a balance between the two realities. This is because, as we have pointed out, theology is a reality of the spirit under the action of divine grace and cannot be circumscribed by any unilateral effort of the human intellect. On this principle is based the difference between theology and philosophy, between true and intellectual theology. When divine inspiration reaches the soul, it is inexhaustible and the beginning of eternal life, and is theology.<sup>97</sup>

Theology presupposes a full life dedicated to asceticism and prayer, a image of such a life being the monastic path. Monasticism could be understood from this perspective as a form of a

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<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, p. 49.

<sup>95</sup> Ioan Teșu, *Teologia între discurs și experiență, între vorbire și trăire*, in "Teologia", nr. 2/2002, p. 152.

<sup>96</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *De vie et d'esprit*, p. 38-40.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*.

true theology.<sup>98</sup> We could say that monks living in God are theologians. In this sense we understand why in the history of the Church the monks were beyond the first to speak about the mysteries of the divinity. The monk's theology, as St. Sophrony points out, comes from the fact that "his only concern is how to spend his day without sin".<sup>99</sup> Following this, there comes upon him "the Holy Spirit who reveals to him the mysteries of the Divinity"<sup>100</sup> and especially what man cannot acquire by the ways of abstract theology.<sup>101</sup>

Accordingly St. Sophrony emphasises that theology as a school of the spirit can be found in the most comprehensive form of monastic life, without neglecting the need that Christians can tread on evangelical grounds outside of monasticism. The theology of an ascetic monk is the love of God, victory over the passions, martyrdom in Christ and the keeping of the commandments, the most important of which is the love of one's enemies. Through such living in prayer, through selflessness and righteous confession of faith, one reaches the sight of God

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<sup>98</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I, p. 81.

<sup>99</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>101</sup> Regarding the theology experienced in the school of the monastery in and academic theology, St. Sophrony remarks that the first leads to perfection, and the latter, although useful, when treated autonomously and maximally can lead to disasters, both in the Church and in the world: "When I talk about this school, especially monastic, it does not mean that my attitude towards theological science is negative. No, I'm not saying that; in the historical conditions of our adamic Fall, it is absolutely necessary. I am saddened only by the fact that many of those who spend a huge amount of energy to learn the theological tradition of the Church treat their intellectual knowledge as if they have already reached perfection. With abstract theology it is impossible to attain perfection. In historical life, the power in the Church is given not to the saints, but to the scribes, and this is the tragedy of the world and of the Church" Sofronie Saharov, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. I.

which is not the same as philosophical scrutiny or academic theology.<sup>102</sup>

As such, theology in its deepest sense is not born of books and theoretical knowledge, but of asceticism and prayer, of *kenosis*, humility, and living with personal experience of God.<sup>103</sup> The lack of these realities and especially of asceticism proves to be one of the not insignificant problems that can be encountered among academic theologians.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, some of them sin by condemning the ascetic side of Christianity expressed and lived fully in monastic life. Through their disregard for monasticism, they are also ignorant of its priceless significance for the life of the whole Church.<sup>105</sup> We are, therefore, fully convinced together with St. Sophrony that the theology acquired as a result of the fullness of the monastic experience makes scientific theology an "optional decoration".<sup>106</sup>

This is also because there are theologians who pay more attention to historical knowledge or to reflective, abstract theology, without showing a special interest in spirituality, without personally experiencing the spiritual mysteries of the faith, without feeling the need for prayer.<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, says St. Sophrony, among them are clerical servants who teach people or govern the ecclesiastical affairs of the Church and who base their ministry on the diplomas they have acquired. They can fall into the most dangerous errors possible, dangerous not only for a particular person, but also for the whole Church. For them, says St. Sophrony, "the most earnest prayer is absolutely necessary, in

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<sup>102</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 57.

<sup>103</sup> Idem, *De vie et d'esprit*, p.5.

<sup>104</sup> Ναυπάκτου Ἱερόθεου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ*, p. 302.

<sup>105</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 38-39.

<sup>106</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>107</sup> Ναυπάκτου Ἱερόθεου, *Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ*, p. 336.

order to give a word and a pleasant answer to God every day...".<sup>108</sup>

The service to one's neighbour is also, in the understanding of St. Sophrony, a school of the spirit that is the foundation of theology. Through a sacrificial relationship with others and through participation in the mystery of divine life, the Christian becomes a theologian of the faith and an exponent of a saving theology "infinitely more important than any theological theory".<sup>109</sup> We believe, however, that any missionary act must be sustained spiritually and ecclesially, otherwise it can very easily fall into social assistance that does not immediately have a theological content and purpose.

Theology is, therefore, a complex reality that claims the whole human being in a living relationship with God, with the world and with his fellow men. Any theological act is the result of an understanding and of personal participation in the mystery of created and uncreated existence. Our life must be a living confession of an incarnated theology in the Holy Spirit.

## 5 Conclusions

At the centre of this analysis has been theology as it is presented in the thought of St. Sophrony (Sakharov) the Athonite. We have highlighted the fact that theology is a complex reality that requires the whole man to be in a personal relationship with God. It also involves historical reality, with principles related to the created order. In this context appear elements of an intellectual and scientific theology, realities that adorn and express historically the experimental aspect of theology. We have at-

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<sup>108</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Taina vieții creștine*, p. 62.

<sup>109</sup> Idem, *De vie et d'esprit*, p. 46.

tempted to identify all these perspectives as defining components of any theology in the Holy Spirit.

In this sense, theology must be a way of life and a goal that each of us must achieve. It must also contain experimental, historical, phenomenological and reflective elements. If these principles are preserved, reflective or academic theology has a very well-defined role in the life of the Church. If it is over-emphasised and misused, it will turn into a philosophy of faith. On the other hand, if the experiential dimension of theology is over-cultivated, then it will acquire a dangerously pietistic and sentimental character.

We hope that this study will bring with it an increase in spiritual understanding in regard to the characters of theology. We hope too that we have managed together with St. Sophrony to define the nature of theology, and also the role and place of academic theology in the life of the Church. The difference that is made, most of the time, between these two aspects of theology, is done without presenting the relationship between them. We have emphasised in this regard that science and reason in the theological process have their distinctive role, as well as obvious limits, for otherwise it can be believed that any scientific process in a scientific way is an obstacle to true theology. Theology presupposes both science and experience.

Theology is, therefore, a unitary whole that includes in itself first of all God, then the people, and also the entire created world. Without these realities, argues Ioan Ică jr., theology is "detached from the mystery of the Trinity and its living ecclesial experience, unguided by the spirituality of the Fathers".<sup>110</sup> Without the unitary and living connection of those mentioned

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<sup>110</sup> Ioan I. Ică jr., *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog și provocarea mistică în teologia bizantină și contemporană*, in *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog, Discursuri teologice și etice. Scrieri I*, (Sibiu: Deisis, 1998), p. 27.

above, “the fundamental theological discourse becomes anything, except the theology and testimony of the Church: dogmatics transforms into religious philosophy, morality into a conventional code of ethics, exegesis into philology and literary criticism... Only spiritual experience, and not an external, purely formal conformity with the biblical text, with dogmatic formulas or with the typical liturgy, etc., transforms theology into a living existential testimony and offers the divine guarantee”.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem.*