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The Reception of Hesychasm in the Romanian Culture

Abstract

For the Romanians, Hesychasm is not merely an old spiritual technique, but something that continues to nourish the souls during the present times, as it has always done. Hence, Romania currently has the largest number of active Monasteries in the world. For the Romanian Hesychast Fathers, *Hesychia* is understood as being adaptable to the life of Christians who have not followed the Monastic life, which results in attaining the inner peace that leads to their fulfillment as human beings. Thus, the Romanian hesychastic tradition meant not only a way of living in some isolated Monasteries or for some Hermits but



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more than that it was interwoven into the life of the laics around them.

In the last part of this article, I underline the fact that prayer should represent the main activity of any Christian. At the hour of death, believers leave behind all earthly things, and the only thing he keeps is prayer. It is prayer itself that will lead him to the eternal life, as God is eternal and only by uniting with Him, by humble and intense prayer, can the believer enjoy eternity.

Keywords

Spirituality, Hesychasm, Moldavia, Monasteries, Prayer

1 Hesychasm – A Traditionalist and Innovative Current

Hesychasm, whose biblical origins are evident, is mentioned from the very beginning of monasticism. It has been considered the most significant spiritual phenomenon in Christianity since its inception in the 13th century. Hesychasm, a Greek word - ἡσυχασμός, meaning “silence”, “serenity” and “inner focus”, represents an ascetic tradition of the 4th and the 5th centuries, but it was codified in a spiritual and theological rebirth movement in the 12th and the 13th centuries by the introduction of the “Jesus Prayer” as a method of contemplation and inner peace, wherein the soul listens to and opens toward God.

Hesychasm originated specifically in the Gaza Desert and Sinai, became established in Athos and then passed through two

major rebirths that, each time, renewed Orthodoxy entirely, one in the 14th century and the other in the late 18th century¹.

Hesychasm, as an ancient mystical practice attested to in the Syro-Egyptian monastic world ever since the 4th century², underwent a major flourishing in Byzantine monasticism, especially beginning with the 12th century. The hesychastic current commends the believer to getting closer to God not by senses or reason, but through inner union with God through meditation and solitude, with the help of inner prayer from the heart.

In this regard, the Bishop Kallistos Ware noticed that, in principle, therefore, *hesycheia* is a general term “for inner prayer, and so it embraces a wide variety of more specific ways of praying. In practice, however, the majority of Orthodox writers in recent centuries use the word to designate one spiritual path in particular: the invocation of the Name of Jesus.”³

The calling of Jesus’ name is performed, on a normal basis, through the formula, from the Gospels: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner” or, more simply “Have mercy on me”; this “have mercy on me” cannot convey the complete meaning of the verb, but, it could also be interpreted as follows: “cover me under Your mercy, under Your tenderness, under Your love”. (The longer form is: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, have mercy upon me, the sinner”).

¹ Olivier Clément, *Preface*, in Metropolitan Serafim Joantă, *Treasures of Romanian Christianity. Hesychast Tradition and Culture*, expanded English Version, Preface by Olivier Clément, revised translation by Iulia Hâncianu Latiș, (Whitby: Cross Meridian Publishing House, 2013), pp. XIII-XIV.

² Nicolae Iorga, *Histoire de la vie byzantine*, (Bucharest, 1935), pp. 89-90 & O. Tafrali, *Thessalonique au quatorzième siècle*, (Paris, 1913), p. 170

³ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p. 98.

The calling is uttered breathing in and out, and, if God wills it, on the rhythm of the heart beats, as the man's body has been created to become "the temple of the Holy Spirit."⁴

Hesychasm is not *quietism*, as endeavoring to attain serenity, the ideal balance that is Christ's peace; the divine peace exults deep from within one's heart. By laying aside the multitude of worldly cares that are urgent and yet unessential, that, by their many diversions erode one's spiritual vitality, it is possible through the interior unification of prayer, aiming at redemption and deification. "To dedicate your entire life to prayer – this is contrary to selfishness, it means to participate most generously, in the form of than martyrdom – in the immense work of God-Love."⁵

Besides the vigorous renewal of the monastic spiritual life, hesychasm also caused a remarkable revival in art, literature and philosophic-theological thinking, mirrored in the flourishing of painting and literature at that time. "Proper Byzantine religious thinking, which had started to assert itself after the schism found, through the intermediacy of the Hesychastic movement in this century, its most durable manifestation"⁶.

In conclusion, Hesychasm, and particularly Palamism – the new stage Hesychasm which entered during the 14th century, named after its great defender and supporter, St. Gregory Palamas and it represents its apotheosis – was an innovative current, "a spiritual awakening that concerned all aspects of the Christian

⁴ Olivier Clément, *Preface*, in Metropolitan Serafim Joantă, *Treasures of Romanian Christianity*, pp. XIII-XIV.

⁵ Dumitru Dima, *Contribuția românească la cunoașterea isihasmului, Studii Teologice*, (1965), no. 9-10, (576).

⁶ Al. Elian, *Moldova și Bizanțul în secolul al XIV-lea in: Cultura moldovenească în timpul lui Ștefan cel Mare*, (Bucharest, 1964), p. 171.

life”⁷. From this, there results in another essential trait of the Palamite Hesychasm, namely its conservative spirit in the line of the dynamic Orthodox tradition. Opposing the formal conservatism, that consisted in repeatedly uttering the Holy Fathers' formulas, represented by Akindinos and his followers, St. Gregory Palamas proposed the genuine dynamic traditional creative spirit of Orthodox theology that aimed at sharing the living experience of the Holy Fathers.⁸ Saint Gregory Palamas could develop his theology on the Uncreated Divine Energies exclusively by this dynamic traditionalism.

2 Reception in the Romanian Monastic Culture

Hesychasm benefited from an extensive spreading throughout Orthodox countries in south-eastern Europe as early as the 14th century, reaching Bulgaria, Serbia, Russia, as well as the Romanian Principalities.

The Bulgarian monasteries of Paroreio and Kilifarevo are two important centers where the hesychastic literature was carefully developed, especially as a result of the reforming Slavic writing by the last Bulgarian Patriarch, Evtimiy of Tarnovo⁹. This hesychastic literature also spread to the north of the Danube, especially in the Monasteries of Moldova, either from the Bulgarian monasteries to the south of the Danube or directly from Constantinople through the intermediacy of the important hesychastic center, the Studion Monastery. The renown scrivener Gavriil of Neamt transcribed a multitude of

⁷ J. Meyendorff, *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, (Paris, 1959), p. 39.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 60.

⁹ Em. Turdeanu, *La littérature bulgare du XIV-e siècle et sa diffusion dans les pays roumains*, (Paris, 1947), p. 8.

hesychastic works, a fact that testifies to the particular interest the Moldavian monastic groups that were coordinating his activity took in maintaining the hesychastic spirituality.¹⁰

Thus, the hesychastic practice, followed and defended by St. Gregory Palamas, penetrated the Romanian Principalities in the 14th century as a result of the close connections with Mt. Athos, but also as a result of the development of the domestic monastic life, and, yet, it registered a remarkable flourishing in the 18th century through the intermediacy of the Venerable Vasile of Poiana Mărului († 1767) and of Saint Paisus Velichkovski of Neamt († 1794) and his followers.

In the case of the Romanians, the monastic revival in the line of the hesychastic tradition was determined by St. Nicodemus of Tismana who founded Vodita and Tismana Monasteries, and, as tradition tells us, Prislop Monastery, monastic centers that observed regulations for practicing Hesychasm. Another major contribution to Hesychasm in the Romanian Principalities is that of the voivode Neagoe Basarab (1512-1521) who authored the well-known work *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son Theodosius*. In this work, we find clear references to the Jesus Prayer.

In the 17th century, the hesychastic revival grew in amplitude through the abbots Vasile of Poiana Mărului († 1767) and Paisus Velichkovski († 1794).¹¹

Metropolitan Serafim Joantă¹² underlines that it would be arduous to talk about “Hesychasm” in the genuine sense of the word before the 14th century and, yet, it seems this kind of

¹⁰ Al. Elian, *Moldova și Bizanțul în secolul al XIV-lea*, pp. 172-173 and Dumitru Dima, *Contribuția românească la cunoașterea isihasmului*, p. 580.

¹¹ Metropolitan Serafim Joantă, *Treasures of Romanian Christianity*, pp. 43-117.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 28-30.

experience of life – not only monahal but also of the hesychastic type, is to be found since ancient times both in Dobrogea and the Buzau Mountains. Thus, Hesychasm could be considered as one of the characteristics of the Romanian people – undergoing a process of formation at that time – at the crossroads of the Christian faith and Romanity, in this Dacia that seemed to be particularly prepared to receive the contemplative message.

Thus, not surprisingly, in the 14th century, when the Romanian nation starts to become aware of itself in the two states of Moldova and Wallachia, they experienced great enthusiasm that entered through the intermediacy of St. Nicodemus of Tismana in intense and immediate vibration precisely at the time of the hesychastic revival at Mt. Athos, promoted by St. Gregory the Sinaite.

The subsequent period became a “golden age” of Hesychasm in our country, the 18th century. One man will give his name to this period: Paisus Velichkovski. The distinct earmark of this century will be an hesychastic one, occurring not only in the case of monks and the common believers but also in the case of the great ruling princes. In this respect, a testimony is a masterpiece of literature, both hesychastic and Romanian, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son Theodosius*, where Neagoe Basarab, the ruling prince of Wallachia tried to draft a portrait of an hesychastic monarch.

During the same period, Machiavelli authored *The Prince!* The *Teachings* of the Romanian prince are to some extent similar to the Cabasilian spirituality, a perspective adapted for the laics. Their author believed in the possibility of attaining Union with God “without leaving the world, by each person performing his function, from the voivode to the most humble of his subjects.

This same characteristic (...) can be found both in the 19th century and in our own time.”¹³

During the 14th and 17th centuries, we should mention a series of Romanian Hesychast saints, such as: Leontius of Rădăuți (14th century), John of Prislop (15th century), Daniil the Hermit (16th century), also called “the father of the Moldavian Hesychasts as well as the spiritual father of St. Voievode Stephen the Great of Moldova, Raphael of Agapia (16th century), Kyriakos from Bisericani (17th century) who lived as a hermit in the Neamt Mountains, Theodora from the Carpathians (17th century), Mavra of Ceahlău (17th-18th centuries), etc.

The great Metropolitan Dosoftei (1671-1686) was the first to write about the Romanian saints “canonized” by the people, in his work *Saints’ Lives*. The popularity of the Romanian Hesychasts is explained by their relationship to ordinary believers, with the people: they are often *confessors* (spiritual fathers), counselors of the rulers (the case of Daniil the Hermit as a typical one), and offerers of effectual prayers for the whole country, philanthropists, and thaumaturges for the crowd that followed them even into their caves.

In the 20th century, Romanian Hesychasm underwent another flourishing stage in its development with our famous spiritual fathers and theologians. In this context, we mention Father Paisie Olaru († 1990), Ilie Cleopa († 1998) and not least Father Dumitru Staniloae († 1993), who, through his monumental work, reviewed and discussed Hesychasm, Palamism, in the spirit of Philokalia. In this context, we also mention Vasile Voiculescu’s poetry, inspired by Hesychasm¹⁴.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. XXVIII-XXX.

¹⁴ Father Nicu Ioan Breda, *Orizonturi teologice*, (2000), no. 2, (178-179).

The academician Virgil Căndea posted, with solid arguments, concluding after studying the manuscripts of the Paisian schools, the age and the continuity of the interest of Romanian Monasticism in the hesychastic writings and underlined the existence of at least one extended collection of Romanian philokalik texts, compiled before the *Philokalia* published in 1782 in Venice and that, the Romanian language is the first modern language used for translating *The Philokalia*.

In this way, we understand that the activity of the Romanian scholars was neither of secondary importance in the Paisian school nor that it started with it. On the contrary, the work of the Venerable Paisus Velichkovski who translated into Slavic the hesychastic writings, found, through its Romanian collaborators, a “stimulating environment, and reliable counselors, knowing Greek and the Holy Fathers” texts.

The great Ukrainian Abbot knew Romanian from an early age and could even write in this language, and the versions of the Romanian translators, as he confesses, were used as criteria for evaluation of the exactitude and clarification in his translations into Slavic. Only recently and by this study, as we mentioned above, such information that put under a different light the place of the Romanians in the Paisian movement has been known and appropriated in the works of Western authors.¹⁵

The importance of the Romanians’ participating in the Hesychast revival was first identified and asserted by Father Dumitru Stăniloae, rightfully considered as the most competent to do this, through his research on asceticism and mysticism, on Hesychasm, Palamism and the oldest translations in our

¹⁵ Virgil Căndea, *Locul spiritualității românești în reînnoirea isihastă*, in: *The Romanians in the Hesychastic Renewal. Studia on the Venerable Paisus from Neamt on the 200th Commemoration of His Death sale*, (Iași: Trinitas Publishing, 1997), pp. 24-25.

country from philokalik texts¹⁶. Most of the remarks made during the recent years as to the Romanians' contribution to the Paisian movement had already been asserted¹⁷ in 1979 by Father Stăniloae:

1. the uninterrupted existence in the Romanian Principalities of an hesychastic and philokalik tradition, at least as of the 14th century; that,
2. it attracted to our monasteries Ukranian and Russian monks before the coming of the Venerable Paisus and,
3. "it was a determining factor in the development of his activity in the Romanian territory";
4. the fact that what he brought to Romanian Monasticism is not the preoccupation with the Jesus prayer – as this continued among the thousands of Hesychasts in the mountains in the Romanian Principalities – but introducing this prayer in the community life and, by this, a revival of the hesychastic spirituality in it;
5. the role of the Romanian patristic literary tradition in the activity in the translation of the works of the Venerable Paisus, who, for his philokalik translations, used as a standard for accuracy the Romanian versions;
6. the distinction between the literary activity connected to *Philokalia* (translating and spreading it) and living according to the doctrine this book contains.¹⁸

Father Professor Stăniloae is credited with underlining the Romanian peculiarities introduced into the Paisian heritage by the Venerable Vasile of Poiana Mărului, the Abbot George from Cernica or Sts. George and Kallinikos of Cernica. For the former, the Jesus prayer is not a contemplative one aimed at an elite cleansed of passions, but a sword of the Holy Spirit made

¹⁶ See the references to the old Romanian translations in the introductions to the texts collected in *Philokalia*, translator D. Stăniloae, Vol. I-XII, Sibiu and Bucharest, 1946-1991.

¹⁷ Vezi Virgil Căndea, *Locul spiritualității românești în reînnoirea isihastă*, p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 18-21.

available to everyone, even to beginners, to fight thoughts and passions. Abbot George stresses more obviously than Saint Paisus the practical side of the spiritual life. This is done not only to assist monks to attain more securely the perfection of freedom from passions, but also to make them useful for the monastic community and even for other people who need help. Saint Kallinikos, the most illustrious representative of the spirituality at Cernica, brings together, in his spiritual profile, amazingly, prayer and the most severe restraint, on one side, along with perfect obedience in the community and providing care to the poor, and, on the other hand, with the activities as a benefactor and founder of churches¹⁹.

These things being said, a distinctive characteristic of Romanian Hesychasm is the tendency to bring together the Jesus prayer, the most important instrument of the hesychastic struggle for perfection, with the daily prayer in the monastic life. Romanian Hesychasm succeeded in joining the constant search for a dynamic spiritual life with the care for the poor. It became the expression of the intensification of the Christian life the entire church should include, especially in the monastic environment.

During the 20th century, a series of personalities of the Romanian culture, such as Dumitru Stăniloae – the translator and synthesiser of the Palamite works, Nichifor Crainic, Radu Gyr, Vasile Voiculescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Virgil Cândea, Rafail Noica, Daniil Sandu-Tudor, Alexandru Mironescu, Șerban Cioculescu, Alexandru Elian, Paul Sterian, Vladimir Streinu, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Benedict Ghiuș, Tit Simedrea, Sofian Boghiu,

¹⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Din istoria isihasmului în Ortodoxia română*, in: *Philokalia or Collection of Texts of the Holy Fathers that Shows How Man Can Cleanse, Enliven and Reach Perfection*, vol. VIII, (Bucharest: Editura The Biblical Institute, 1979), p. 585.

Arsenie Papacioc, André Scrima, Mircea Eliade etc. highlighted the philosophical and theological perspectives of Hesychasm, emphasising that, if man could, at a given time, participate to a certain extent in the Essence of the Divine, that is not comprehensible for the humans, man would not be what he is, but God-like through his nature.

We are, however, created beings, called by God to become through Grace what He is by Nature. Thus, participating in the Divine Energies, man can not only struggle for redemption, but he could reach Deification. Some of the personalities mentioned above understood this and as a result of attending the cultural and literary movement, *Rugul aprins*, consisting of a cultural dialogue group, namely laics and monks, that developed its activities in Bucharest between 1945 and 1958.

Both the Fathers of the Church as the Cappadocian Saints, Dionysus the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, Symeon the New Theologian, etc., and the Orthodox Romanian theologians and philosophers of the 20th century debated extensively this Orthodox teaching and practice – Hesychasm (Dumitru Stăniloae, Nichifor Crainic, Mircea Vulcănescu, Virgil Căndea, Petre Țuțea, Anton Dumitriu, Radu Gyr, Vasile Voiculescu, André Scrima etc.) and emphasized that the Being and the Divine Energies are not two separate parts of God, but two different manifestations of His existence, in His nature and beyond it.

The union of man with God retains the personal character of those who come together; it is one that is not confused, without mixing or absorbing the human identity into the Divine, but it retains the personal character of those who come together. It is a personal communion with the personal God.

Rugul Aprins, mentioned above, “started through asceticism, through meditative practices; and it was met with great persecution. The most prominent members of the group were

arrested, tormented and destroyed. Some of the members died in Communist prisons, or they came out of the prison with their health ruined. However, many of them testified and confessed that in prison, they had practiced the mind-prayer with an ardor they had never experienced before and that they experienced there, for the first time, moments of illumination, reaching the mystical ecstasy."²⁰

3 Major Western Theologians on the Place of the Romanians in the Paisian Movement

A few years ago, Father Elia Citterio wrote on the place and the role of the Romanians in the Paisian movement in a series of memorable articles. Among other things the author mentions in one of his texts, it is worth mentioning that Paisus came to the Romanian Principalities after an entire generation of monks from his country had encountered here a rich Orthodox spiritual life that they had made even more intense and profound.

At Mt. Athos, Paisus discovered the model of the Hesychastic Tradition that he had studied and comprehended, but it was in the Romanian Principalities where they thrived as he founded a spiritual community that observed the monastic rules of Hesychasm. His translations from patristic texts complemented the previous texts in this area and added to the pre-existing rich literary tradition. The Romanian Monasteries had come into contact with Slavic, Serbian and Bulgarian versions of patristic works, then directly with Greek texts, which were used by Paisus and his followers, of whom are mentioned Makarios and

²⁰ Vasile Andru, *Isihasmul sau meșteșugul liniștirii*, (Bucharest: Editura Herald, 2011), pp. 161-162.

Illarionos, to write Romanian editions. This diligent activity led to the appearance in 1769 of a *Philokalia* for the local community after he settled in Dragomirna Monastery. In 1775, at Secu Monastery, Paisus found a rich tradition of patristic translations, and he decides to found his school (Varlaam, then Metropolitan of Moldova, had worked one century before on translating and writing versions of the patristic writings).

Thus, Gerontius, a Romanian, and Dositheos, a Slavic, are sent to learn Greek in Bucharest. What is more, before the edition of the Greek *Philokalia* in 1782, in the Romanian Principalities had already been available, on a large scale, Romanian translations from philokalic authors such as Peter Damaskin, Diadochos, Makarios, John of the Carpathians, Niketas Stethatos, Kallistos, Mark the Hermit and Ignatius Xanthopol.

A 1004-pages translation into Romanian of *Philokalia*, published in 1800 at Neamt, confirms the tradition and the evolution of the local patristic texts, as it presents the first eighteen authors of the Venetian edition, with other texts added. "It is worth mentioning the fact that the translators do not follow the Greek version from Venice strictly, but they use manuscripts they compiled themselves. This stands testimony to the love and seriousness the texts of the Fathers of the Church were being read in the Paisian monasteries."²¹

In addition to pertinently mentioning that "*The Philokalia* is written in a language that could hardly be understood by the contemporary Greeks (meaning the 18th century) neither monarchs nor laics"²², Father Elia also distinguished between

²¹ Elia Citterio, „La scuola filocalica di Paisij Velichkovskij e la Filocalia di Nicodimo Aghiorita. Un confronto”, in T. Špidlík, K. Ware, E. Lanne, M. van Parys et al., *Amore del Bello. Studi sulla Filocalia. Atti del «Simposio Internazionale sulla Filocalia»*, Qiqajon, Bose, 1991, p. 189-191.

²² *Ibid*, p. 201.

what we could call the theory of the philokalic *praxis*. What makes the Romanian contribution to the spreading of *Philokalia* remarkable was the fact that for the first time the texts of the vigilant Fathers, of the masters of the Jesus Prayer, were being translated into a language that was spoken, thus becoming accessible to readers not having special education. *The Philokalia* of 1782 “could not enjoy the success we would have expected”²³ because of the difficult language, the patristic or Byzantine Greek.²⁴

Cardinal Tomáš Špidlík, mentioning the role of the Romanians in the Hesychastic current, asserts the following: “Paisus Velichkovki was the first one to initiate this revival on the Slavic monachism, and it is instrumental to notice how this revival flourished on Romanian land. The national and religious evolution of this nation is one of the most interesting in the history of modern Europe.”²⁵ The awakening of the sense of belonging to a nation and the evolution of the national identity had their origin in defending the Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia and the Orthodox faith against the invading Turks. Paisus, in these difficult historical realities, namely being at the crossroads of empires, stimulated the flourishing of monachism, although hindered by secular regulations inspired by the Enlightenment, whose intensity and profoundness is similar to the Athonite spiritual life.

Particularly interesting is the fact that the motivation of the Romanian scholars in the Paisian community was

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Virgil Căndea, *The Place of the Romanian Spirituality in the Hesychastic Renewal*, pp. 27-30.

²⁵ Tomáš Špidlík, *Presentazione*, in Paisij Velicikovskij, *Autobiografia di uno staretz. Introduzione*, traduzione e note a cura della Comunità dei Fratelli Contemplativi di Gesù, Bressio di Teolo, 1988, p. 7.

predominantly spiritual, rather than cultural. The acetic texts they translated were read to be experienced, for endeavors aimed at “changing the mind” (μετάνοια) into transfiguration, deification, these books being guidelines for perfection. “These books were reserved to the *prayer raisers*, observers of asceticism and contemplation, not to the new modern intellectuals in this country who were wasting their stamina and time with Voltaire and Marmontel.”²⁶

Another great theologian, this time of French origin, Olivier Clément, noticed that: “The Romanian Principalities have been and still are a prodigious crossroads of cultures, in contact with the European West and East, as Romania is both Orthodox and Latin: fed on influences of Mount Athos and the Holy Places [...] and gained its unity and status of a modern country thanks to France, whose language is still spoken by its elite.”²⁷

The Moldavian monachism and spirituality, which originated in the melting together of hesychasm and the pre-existing religious life, is acknowledged as the starting point of evolution that gave birth to a new paradigm in the entire Orthodox world. This unique synthesis between history and the spiritual life, namely hesychasm resulted in the “astonishing contemporary balance between the *social apostolate* of Patriarch Justinian and the Romanian *Philokalia* compiled by Father Dumitru Stăniloae.”²⁸

The renowned theologian Olivier Clément noticed, an important fact for us: “it seems obvious that we deal with a *monastic civilization*: in Romania there is not a monachism that evolved as a mere way of living, as it appears it had been tried in

²⁶ Virgil Căndea, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²⁷ Olivier Clément, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus*, Translation from French by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, (Bucharest: The Biblical Institute Publishing, 1997), pp. 9-10.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. XIII-XIV.

Cappadocia, on Mount Olympus or in Asia, or on Mount Athos, but a monachism that is understood as a ferment, living in osmosis with an entire people and being an inspiration for a whole culture.”²⁹

4 The Jesus Prayer – A Source of Strength for the Romanian Venerable Saints, Martyrs, and Confessors

God provided man with something that could help him maintain permanent contact with Him, to release his soul from this world and worldly concerns, to initiate dialogue with Him, to enjoy His life and unite with Him. Prayer is the “result” of thought and of the heart that is fully aware. It could be defined as man’s conscious effort to communicate with God so that he could unify with Him.

To make things clear, it is man’s talking and communicating with God. It is the soul’s life. As the body is alive as long as it breathes and when breathing ceases life ceases, this is what happens with the soul of the man who does not pray, that person is not alive, and the Christian cannot achieve eternal life, as prayer is the key to God’s Kingdom.

Thus, prayer, as the soul’s breath, is for the latter what air is for the proper functioning of the body. Not praying means keeping God outside one’s existence. For some, the humdrum of the contemporary world, the spiritual preparation, and the difficulty to concentrate before and during prayer work contrary to dull moments of meditation and prayer. All the same, only vigil and perseverance in prayer release, simultaneously, the person who prays from the mundane, enslaving concerns of this world, from the preoccupations,

²⁹ Serafim Joantă, *Treasures of Romanian Christianity*, p. 23.

pains, and trouble of this daily life, opening that person toward entering full communication with God.

This is the reason why the Holy Fathers talk about prayer as being beyond the pure necessity for the spiritual life, and they seem to have a constant desire to demonstrate its benefits. They would have preferred not to exist than to exist without prayer.

Setting as a starting point the advice of St. Paul: "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17), the Holy Fathers of the Church urge believers to pray not only at certain hours during the day, but all the day long, each moment of life should become an unceasing dialogue with God. The Jesus prayer or heart or mind prayer has been practiced, taught and commented upon on a large scale throughout the centuries by Eastern Christianity, traced back in the tradition of Orthodox Spirituality to the apostolic times.

In Orthodox Spirituality, the Jesus prayer represented the continuous and unceasing call of Jesus's Name, with the lips, heart, and mind, being aware of His presence, anywhere and at any time, even during sleep. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts. 4:12). It is uttered by these words "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner!" The man who gets used to this call "achieves even greater relief and they feel the need to say it over and over again". After some time, he cannot live without this prayer; it flows by itself, in any place and forever.³⁰

This prayer is gradually uttered, at the beginning with the voice, later in a low voice or in mind, sometimes using a prayer rope. Those who can accompany it in their hermitage or secluded, quiet rooms with prostration to the floor and the sign of the

³⁰ Olivier Clément, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus*, p. 26.

cross. Many of those who practice this prayer connect it with breathing. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," is uttered breathing in, and "have mercy on me, the sinner" is uttered breathing out. Some Fathers show that the text of the prayer could be reduced to the words "Lord Jesus" or simply repeatedly mentioning Jesus's name. Others have shown a certain preference for the formula "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" The prayer has been reduced to a few words, and St does this. Paul's advice: Yet in the church, I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. (I Cor. 14:19). Today, Monks and Nuns utter its full text "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner!"

First, the vigilant Monk meditates, turns to his inner self, to his heart, to be able to obviate everything that could distract him from his dialogue with God. After reaching the state of inner peace, the man who prays works, through the intermediacy of some words to Jesus, to focus. It is a moment to reach "the focusing of thought and keeping in memory Jesus' Name."³¹ Heart prayer is at the same time "a meditation on the uttered words and their meaning, and during the stage of the mental prayer, words cease, it is only their significance that still matter and this kind of prayer becomes uninterrupted by other men or distractions."³² For many of those who practice it, after a while, the Jesus prayer descends to the heart; this is why the prayer no longer needs a conscious effort, but it flows by itself.

This prayer is particularly useful in modern times when the modern man does not have time to pray. If we start practicing this prayer, we shall discover we have more time available for

³¹ D. Mircea Basarab, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus*, *Ortodoxia*, (1994), no. 4, p. 62.

³² *Ibid.*, (71-72).

prayer than we had ever imagined.³³ The man who strengthens spiritually by reciting Jesus's Name as there being no other greater power in Heaven or on the Earth, as calling Jesus's Name means invoking His presence and it is not a mere autonomous and relentless repetition of the same words and some breathing exercises, that could become mechanical. Father Ghervasie Gașpar from Sihăstria Monastery (1925-1948) confessed to a brother: "I am sorry that I must leave this body and I have not learned better the Jesus prayer! In all my trouble this was my only solace."³⁴

The Romanian Confessors and Martyrs who underwent the torments of the Communist prisons, for unjust reasons or just because they were Priests endowed with Grace, Christian intellectuals or pious believers of the Church, asserted, almost in unison, that the only support, help, strength and ease for them during that time of torture and pain was the Jesus prayer. All of them felt an attraction to the serenity, joy, peace and solace offered by prayer. In the penitentiary world, the mind prayer meant escaping and finding spiritual balance, a release for the soul that helped them to fight fear, anguish, loneliness, physical lacks, persecution, etc.

This prayer placed them in the presence of God, no matter how difficult the situations they faced. They felt they were not alone and that Somebody gave them strength. Many of them reached the highest peaks of this prayer. It only because they were ready to learn the lesson of prayer that they could overcome those restrictive situations.

Many of the brothers in the cell who did not make any use of this strong weapon represented by the Jesus prayer gave up to

³³ Olivier Clément, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus*, p. 9.

³⁴ Ioanichie Bălan, *Patericul românesc*, 4th edition, (Roman: Editura Roman Episcopate, 2001), p. 215.

the frightening torments to which they were subjected, some of them even wishing to die, as they had no more physical or spiritual resources with which to continue, had no strength to endure the terrifying torments that seemed endless and more sinister. However, those who were relentlessly uttering the Jesus prayer were receiving Divine strength, support, ease and only by having this Divine help could they resist. Prayer was for them the only supporting mechanism. For them Christ was everything. Relentlessly praying and invoking Christ, they became God-bearers (theophorous).

In this perseverance in relentlessly uttering in mind and heart the Jesus prayer, the Martyrs of the Communist prisons are paradigmatic for all Christians. They would spiritually benefit from starting and persisting in practicing this prayer. Its results are numerous.

In general, when prayer is commonly practiced and frequent, its influence on the spiritual life of the Christian becomes evident and the man starts to perceive himself as he is, he discovers his selfishness, greed, his mistakes in thinking and vanity. Gradually he achieves inner peace, comfort, ease, the harmony of the neurological and moral activities, more strength to endure disease, any suffering, persecutions, poverty, calumny, concerns, losing a loved one, pain, illness and death.³⁵

The time the sick allocate to prayer “is not wasted time, but energized time blessed and brought joy.”³⁶ Even for the terminally ill patient, tormented by pains and suffering, thanks to prayer, the physical sickness cannot weaken the strength of the soul.

³⁵ Alexis Carrel, *Rugăciunea*, (Timișoara: Editura Resurrection, 1999), p. 21.

³⁶ DANIEL, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Comori ale Ortodoxiei. Explorări teologice în spiritualitatea liturgică și filocalică*, (Iași: Editura Trinitas, 2007, p. 11.

Prayer brings to the one who prays the help of Grace. By praying, our entire consciousness purifies. Tears of repentance and the awakening of the consciousness are the fruits of prayer, the most remarkable gift of prayer being the complete transformation or transfiguration of the person who prays.

The spirit of the person who unifies in perfect prayer with God's Spirit gets from Him enlightening, strength and forgiveness of sins. By praying, the joy and peace from the Holy Spirit come upon the soul. By praying for man feels he is not alone, but with God. He feels His help in his life, in enduring the pains of sickness, of temptations and trouble, he gathers strength in faith, grows spiritually in his love for God and His people; prayer helps him and strengthens him to fulfill Christ's Commandments in his life, through prayer his mind is enlightened to understand the depths of the Holy Scriptures and becomes convinced that the spiritual joys are far greater, more intense and beautiful than the worldly, earthly pleasures.

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