

Penance (μετάνοια) and Renewal in Romanian Hesychastic Spirituality

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Abstract

The forgiveness of sins and the necessity of living a holy life have always been crucial parts of the Christian message. Conversion consists of repentance and faith. It is a turning from sin in heartfelt sorrow for one's transgression against God and His law, and a turning to the Lord Jesus Christ in saving faith. Repentance thus pertains to the very heart of the application of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ to sinners. No one can be a hesychast without repentance.

The hesychasm, whose biblical origins are evident, is attested since the origins are evident, is attested since the origins of monasticism; is spread between the 5th and the 7th centuries with the introduction of the Name of Jesus in prayer – especially in the Gaza desert and Sinai –, it took roots in Athos, then it went through great renaissances that renewed the whole Orthodoxy every time, one in the 14th century and the other at the end of the 18th century.

This study will introduce the reader in this doctrine on hesychastic spirituality and penance. The penance is a fundamental dimension of Orthodox spirituality. There is no spirituality without ascetic efforts and penance, without constant engagement in the struggle against sinfulness and the wicked passions. In Romanian hesychastic spirituality, this process of purification and union with God can only be accomplished in communion with the Church, in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in faith.

Keywords: Penance, Renewal, Romanian, Hesychasm, Spirituality, Jesus Prayer.

1 Sin and penance in Orthodox Spirituality

Sin is a reality, and, unfortunately, one that is central to man's existence, but also the most serious and sorrowful. Man's life, after the fall of our forefathers, is a violent fight against the rupture with God through sins and passions and a search for the return to Him through prayer, good deeds and the cultivation of holy virtues. In this respect man's life progresses in a perpetual change and mobility, man hovering many times between fall and ascension, between the abyss of sin and the peaks of virtues. 'If we say that we have no sins, we deceive ourselves and truth is not inside us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all iniquity.' (I In. 1, 8-9)

Sin is a delusion, a loss, a failure, an existential fail, a fall from the state of love of God and the people, as well as from what is characteristic to man, a dark wall between God and man. Sin is the spring of all evil and the only genuine harm. Sin is a failure because it means fighting against the eternal redemption of man. No matter the perspective, the essence of sin remains the same for all of us. It is an infringement of the divine law, disorder and unfulfillment in love, a contempt for God's will, the returning to the self and the creatures, a dislodgement and alienation from God – the Absolute Good. The sinner does not look for joys, glory, justice and truth in God Himself, but in His creatures, in himself and the others and, thus, falls in pains, confusions and various errors.

Sin is a sad reality, an anomaly in the wrongdoer's soul, thus having a toxic effect on the health of the body and the soul, inflicting disorder in the environment he lives in. Because of sin, man's life takes a different path from the one established by the Creator, the man treading underfoot his dignity and denigrating his superior value, for the value of a human exceeds all the values of this world. Man does have the calling to raise to the top of perfection, not to collapse in the chasm of the sin.

St. Augustine said: 'Because man was made upright, that he might not live according to himself, but according to Him that made him - in other words, that he might do His will and not his own; and not to live as he was made to live, that is a lie. For he certainly desires to be blessed even by not living so that he may be blessed. And what is a lie if this desire be not? Wherefore it is not without meaning said that all sin is a lie' [1].

In the Literature of the Orthodox Spirituality, repentance is referred to as a Holy Mystery and also as a perpetual work within the soul, that is maintained by permanent prayer, the cast off of evil and the bearing of sorrows, living with the hope that by suffering we can clean past mistakes and avoid future temptation. Repentance begins by a complete dissatisfaction and grief regarding the links we have built up with worldly things, which, on the background of not knowing the reasons of God in all things, lead to disorder and sorrows. Repentance manifests itself as a determined turning of attention from the tangible exterior to the intelligible interior, to the Kingdom of God inside ourselves (Luke 17, 21).

'Salvation and repentance are not contempt for the body or neglect of it, but restoration of the body to its real function as the expression and the life of spirit, as the temple of the priceless human soul. Christian asceticism is a fight, not *against* but *for* the body. For this reason, the whole man – soul and body – repents. The body participates in the prayer of the soul just as the soul prays through and in the body' [2: p. 38].

Repentance involves regret and contrition (μεταμέλεια) that involve the desire to change the will and the intentions, then confession (□ξαγόρευσις) of the bad deeds, words and thoughts in front of God through the intercession of the spiritual father appointed by Him for this, as well as μετάνοια, which means to think different than when experiencing sin, the changing of the way you think, speak and live. Because any sin first develops inside the mind, most of the times because of the attack or the allurements of devils, this is the very place where we should start the complete spiritual transformation and revival.

The judgement done by repentance does not cover only the sins, but also the imperfection and the unfulfillment of virtues, it following thus both sins and faulty virtues. Thus, if repentance didn't exist, there would be no tendency of man to progressively surpass himself.

Repentance is also an act of self-criticism and judgement of the consciousness, the latter being, in fact, a law court of God inside man. Yet, true repentance should not be mistaken for despair or a depressing and discouraging discontent. It is a judgment that calls us to a perpetual emulation with ourselves, to a continuous 'higher'.

It is noteworthy that the Jesus Prayer – so much more widely practiced today than was the case fifty years ago – is 'specifically (although not exclusively) a prayer of repentance, especially when used in its expanded form: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*' [3: p. 44].

2 Renewal in Romanian hesychastic spirituality

The contemplative life is not of this world: it belongs to the life to come. It is a desire we carry with us constantly in our hearts, a homesickness for full and perfect joy, a desire for unshakeable, unending peace – „the peace of the God, in other words, the last day when our perishable nature will put on imperishability, our mortal nature immortality” [4: p. 137].

Hesychasm is the most significant spiritual phenomenon of the last centuries' Christianity. The scarcity of the studies regarding Romanian spirituality in general, the role of the Romanians in the Orthodox spiritual life – where pages about the Hesychastic movement in the Romanian Principalities might have been included– was long ago signalled.

The Hesychastic practice, followed and defended by St. Gregory Palamas, penetrated the Romanian Principalities in the 14th century, due to the strong links with Mount Athos, but also to the development of the life and activity of the local monasteries, but it impressively flourished during the 18th century through the work of the Saint Basil from Poiana Marului († 1767), of St. Paisie Velicikovschi from Neamț († 1794) and his disciples.

A series of important figures of the Romanian culture, such as Dumitru Stăniloae – the translator and the critic of St. Gregory Palamas' work, 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, Arsenie Papacioc, André Scrima, Mircea Eliade, etc. Have highlighted the philosophical and theological perspectives of Hesychasm, emphasizing the fact that, if man, at a certain time, participated to a certain extent to the essence of becoming godly, which for man is not understandable, man would not be what he is, but god by nature. But we are creatures, called by God to become by grace what He is by nature. Thus, by taking part to divine energies, man can not only work his redemption, but reach deification as well. Some of the illustrious personalities mentioned above understood this concept thanks to their participation in the activity of the cultural and literary movement *Rugul aprins* made up of group of cultural dialogue, comprising laic intellectuals and monastics and which functioned in Bucharest between 1945 and 1958.

Romanian monastic life between the two World Wars recovered significantly under the influence of great spiritual men such as Ioanichie Moroi, Vichentie Mălău, Nicodim Mândiță and others. At the same time, the intellectual elite of the period-while attempting to elucidate the metaphysical foundations of Orthodoxy, the problem of the relation between the Church and culture, and the issue of 'Romanian identity' – facilitated the rediscovery of hesychast spirituality and the Jesus Prayer. These questions were raised because a number of

Romanian intellectuals were influenced by the 'Enlightenment philosophy' coming from the West – fundamentally atheistic and rationalistic –, because Orthodoxy found itself confronted by different religious philosophies questioning its truth and its timeliness [5: p. 22], [6: pp. 257-248].

In this spiritual monastic life and cultural movement, the periodicals *Gândirea* (*Thought*) of Bucharest, edited by Nichifor Crainic, and *The Theological Review* of Sibiu played an important role. A number of university professors, philosophers, writers, and poets collaborated on *Gândirea* and confronted their views on the problems mentioned above. They succeeded in revealing to the Romanian *intelligentsia* the true face of Orthodoxy: we cannot speak of being or energies without speaking about the person that has them, and speaking about the person we always speak about being and energies. So in God three things existed: the being, the work and the Godly hypostases. This distinction does not introduce in God a division as the opponents of Saint Gregory Palamas. The Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas, approved by the Constantinople synods of June and August 1341, was solemnly confirmed by the Synod of Vlacherne in July 1351 that condemned the last opponent of Saint Gregory Palamas, the philosopher Nichifor Gregoras. *The Synod's Volume*, published by this synod is the official document by which the Orthodox Church approved the doctrine of Saint Grigorie Palama. We will mention only the contributions of the director of the publication, of some poets, and of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, the principal author of the philokalic renewal in Romania after the War. Thus was Nichifor Crainic – a philosopher, poet and professor of theology – led to write on hesychast spirituality and on the Jesus Prayer [7] (he created the first course on asceticism and Orthodox mysticism at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest), as well as on other subjects concerning Orthodoxy, while V. Voiculescu, I. Pilat, I. Minulescu and S. Tudor celebrated the great mysteries of the Christian faith in their poetry [6: pp. 248-249].

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae made a new translation of the *Philokalia* in the years following the war. In *Philokalia*, the principal stages of the union with God in Christ are purification, illumination and deification. These constitute the title and the subject of each of the three parts of this book. 'That the *Philokalia* found such an audience', remarks Fr. Andrei Scrima, 'that an incontestable spiritual gain followed its appearance, and that, finally, it did not succumb to the risk of having its *success* be merely a cultural phenomenon - which is the risk of the spiritual in our century - but that it could rediscover without difficulty its ecclesiastic and traditional function, is because it had right away been sustained, embraced, we will say even enveloped, by the parallel renewal of the hesychastic life' [8: p. 319].

In Bucharest, this renewal had Antim Monastery for its center and was guided by some renowned spiritual fathers, such as Daniel, Benedict, Sofian etc. The 'Burning Bush' Society, centered on the hesychast spirituality and the Jesus Prayer, was born at Antim Monastery. Its objective was to make the Orthodox faith a living reality among the intellectuals, since the hesychastic expression of faith transforms scientific research and all human activity into a place where God and men meet. ... The spiritual work of the Society was not to the liking of the communist authorities who stopped it abruptly in 1958 and imprisoned its leaders: Fr. Daniel Turcea (who died in prison), Fr. Benedict Ghiuș († 1990), Fr. Sofian Boghiu († 2002), Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae († 2003) and Fr. Roman Braga, as well as its main associates: Prof. Alexandru Mironescu († 1990), poets Vasile Voiculescu († 1963) and Paul Sterian († 1984) etc.

After the anti-communist Revolution in 1989, Father Sofian Boghiu worked to revive of the „Burning Bush” at the Antim Monastery, while Father Roman Braga did the same in the Romanian monastic communities in the United States of America [6: pp. 252-253].

3 Distinctive feature of Romanian hesychasm

In this paper, I want also to underline the fact that the first thoughts concerning the elaboration of a collection of hesychastic and philokalic writings didn't belong to the monks of Athos but to the disciples of Paisius Velichkovsky, the great teacher of hesychasm of the Carpathians, abbot of Neamt and Secu monasteries and promoter of the hesychast revival in Eastern Europe in the 18th century. Due to him, Romanian was the first modern language which *Philokalia* was translated in, before Russian and western languages. During his life, his disciples (Platon, Grigorie Dascălu and others) translated from Old Greek into Romanian 'words' or short hesychastic writings.

A distinctive feature of Romanian hesychasm is its tendency to connect the prayer of Jesus, the main tool of all hesychast efforts in the striving for perfection, with daily prayer in monastery life. Romanian hesychasm succeeded in combining the permanent quest for a dynamic spiritual life with the care for the poor. It thus became the expression of intense Christian living which the entire church should embrace, especially in the monastic environment.

Hesychasm is not an archaic spiritual technique, but something that continues to nourish the soul of a nation and the soul of its church nowadays as well as it did in the past. Therefore, Romania has the largest concentration of active monasteries in the world at this point. Characteristic for the Romanian texts approached in my paper is the way in which the practice of hesychia is presented, namely as being adaptable to the life of all

Christians living 'in the outer world', leading to the attainment of inner peace which further leads to their fulfillment as human beings.

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