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## BYZANTINE HESYCHASM IN THE LIFE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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### ABSTRACT

*In spite of the historical vicissitudes through which the Orthodox Church passed, monasticism represented for the Church a pillar of stability and fidelity to the Gospel teachings and Christian living. Practicing the prayer of the heart, of contemplation in complete silence, of a severe ascension give the possibility to the hesychast monks to see the uncreated light that the Holy Apostles saw on Mount Tabor, at the Transfiguration of Our Lord. The one who strongly supported the hesychast doctrine was Saint Gregory Palamas. The present study attempts to make a short presentation of how the prayer of the heart (the hesychast prayer) has evolved over the centuries, but also a comparative analysis of the rationalist way of thinking, inspired by Catholic schooling, with the hesychast tradition, specific to the Orthodox Church. Also, the study presents some historical landmarks regarding the practice of the hesychast life in the Romanian lands.*

**Keywords:** hesychasm; monasticism; heart's prayer; hermit; Eastern Church; divine light;

### INTRODUCTION

Condemned by the representatives of the West (*for the West, the Easterners were born of heresies and even heretics*<sup>1</sup>), the East is the meeting place for religious and philosophical ideas, the meeting of specific cultures and spiritualities, with profound implications for the history of human culture and civilization. „*Motherland of religions par excellence, the East is also the place of monasticism*”<sup>2</sup>. Human society has, over time, faced various challenges and temptations.

Confidence in the own lights of reason, without the light of God, has removed man from his Creator, feeding his mind with pride. Christian humility and continued prayer were the *medicines* recommended by the Church.

The monks knew how to make the best use of these two *medicines*, living according to the model of the Saviour Jesus Christ. Thus, says Patriarch Daniel, “*whenever there is a spiritual crisis in history, it was monasticism that, in the face of rationalism and secularization, brought the lights of Tabor. It is full of meanings and we think that the tension, which has existed for centuries, has not been sufficiently reflected. XIV thereafter,*

<sup>1</sup> This was one of the accusations brought by the Latins to the Easterners near the Great Schism - 1054. See Nicolae Chifăr, *Istoria creștinismului*, vol. I, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2008, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> André Scrima, *Despre isihasm*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2003, p. 23.



between the light that comes from human reasoning, reductionism and impoverishment, on the one hand, and the light that comes from prayer, on the other. There is an unseen battle in us between the intelligence separated from God and the human intelligence united with God through prayer”<sup>3</sup>.

### 1. PRAYER OF THE HEART IN EASTERN MONASTICISM

In an attempt to present and define *hesychasm*, the historian John Meyendorff presented him as “a monastic movement whose beginnings go back in time to the desert’s parents and, of course, cannot claim to be the only one representing Orthodox mysticism”<sup>4</sup>. The term *hesychasm* comes from the Greek language (hesycha exact silence, contemplation) and defines the way of life adopted by the atoned monks under the influence of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite and Saint Simeon the New Theologian<sup>5</sup>.

This way of life goes up to the beginnings of monasticism<sup>6</sup>. The desert, next to the cross, represented for the first Christians “the test of truth for human creation... The ultimate meaning of the monastic desert is paschal”<sup>7</sup>. The call of the wilderness is understood as the hermit’s call, that of “the perfect part of life with God, for God and through God.”<sup>8</sup> Monasticism “forsakes the world, to bless it immediately from the wilderness and to carry it constantly in its prayers”<sup>9</sup>

Saint Anthony the Great<sup>10</sup> is considered to be the spiritual parent, “Avva”, the hermit monastic life (hermitages). Beside him, Saint Pahomie is the one who will lay the foundations of the monastic (to be obtained) monastic life. Saint Basil the Great and Saint Theodore the Studite will elaborate rules for monastic living. Organized within the Church, monasticism “continued the prophetic function that the Old Testament had already recognized. He represented the counterbalance for a toff and drowsy Church, which had received with great ease in his bosom the Greek-Roman multitudes and who, without making conscience-making processes, profited by the breadth of the «most faithful rulers»”<sup>11</sup>.

The primary form of Jesus’ prayer seems to have been Kyrie eleison (*Lord Have Mercy!*). Its constant repetition in the Eastern liturgies dates back to the time of the Desert Fathers. Evagrie Pontic considered that “being a theologian means really praying, and if you really pray you are a theologian”<sup>12</sup>. This is a paraphrase of the sixth happiness, which illuminates the eternal renewal of the monk or Christian existence. “The renewal of the spirit, the conversion, says Saint Isaac the Sir, is always welcome for all, for sinners as well as for the righteous, who are in search of salvation. The perfection knows no bounds, so the perfection of the perfect ones is nothing but perfection”<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> † IPS Daniel, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Sucevei, *Vocație și destin filocalic la români*, în vol. „Români în reinnoirea isihastă”, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> John Meyendorff, *Sfântul Grigorie Palamas și mistica ortodoxă*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2007, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolae Chifăr, *Istoria creștinismului*, vol. II, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bois, *Les hésychastes avant le XIV-e siècle*, în „Echos d’Orient”, 1901, t. V.

<sup>7</sup> André Scrima, *op. cit.*, pp. 25 și 26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

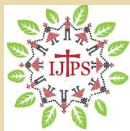
<sup>9</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Relevant aspects of St. Anthony the Great’s life can be found at Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Viața cuviosului părintelui nostru Antonie*, traducere de Pr. Dumitru Fecioru în colecția PSB (Părinți și scriitori bisericești), vol. 16, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Evagrie Ponticul, *Traité de l’oraison*, 60, Paris, 1960.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. André Scrima, *op. cit.*, p. 40.



Evagrie Pontic is the first great coder of the monastic doctrine about the prayer. Saint Macarie the Egyptian, the teacher of Evagrie, considered that the monk's continuous prayer does not have the purpose of releasing the spirit of the body from the prison, but it gives the possibility of man to access from here, from the earth, to an eschatological reality, the kingdom of God, which encompasses His spirit and body in divine communion. Thus, "*Evagrie and Macarie defined all the essential elements of the later spiritual tradition of the Eastern monks*"<sup>14</sup>.

The synthesis of the two great Eastern ascetics was made by the Diadoc of Fotice and Saint John the Scaler. Thus, the prayer of Evagrie's mind became in the East, the prayer of the heart, a personal prayer addressed to the Incarnate Word, the prayer of Jesus or the *remembrance of the Word*, which occupies the main place. "*In Orthodoxy a form of permanent prayer is practiced, the prayer of the heart or mind on the altar of the heart or of the sensitivity full of love and mercy in which Christ is with His love and mercy*"<sup>15</sup>.

After the erection of the famous monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai by Emperor Justinian (6th century), St. John the Scaler - living here - will make it famous throughout the East. In his famous *Paradise Staircase*, St. John speaks of invoking the Name of Jesus in prayer, but also the practice of linking Jesus' prayer to breathing. This practice will be adopted by the hesychasts - in the fourteenth century<sup>16</sup>. He is even trying to define an hesychast. "*An hesychast is the one who says, «My heart is strengthened» (Ps. 57: 8). An hesychast is the one who says, «I sleep, but my heart watches» (Cant. 5,2). Close the sanctum - door in front of the body, the door of your lips in front of the words, the inner door in front of the devils*"<sup>17</sup>.

The name of St. Gregory Sinaitus is related to the time spent at the Sinai monastery, where the traditions of St. John the Scaler were alive. St. Gregory renewed the contemplative life in Mount Athos. He considered that the integrity of the spirit is the only purpose of any contemplation. The "*remembrance of God*", necessary for true life, must be restored by the hesychasts in himself. "*A scholar at «perfect peace» (Hesychia), Gregory Sinait prefers the hermit path to community monasticism as he himself lived in Sinai and as he existed in the great Byzantine monasteries*"<sup>18</sup>.

Established later in Paroria, St. Gregory Sinaitus will spread hesychasm in all Slavic countries. Among the disciples of St. Gregory Sinaitus are also Romanian monks, as noted by the Metropolitan Tit Simeadrea<sup>19</sup>. The historian Răzvan Theodorescu considered that "*the existence of a Romanian monasticism before the second half of the fourteenth century, with some echoes of the monastic life of the Balkan Peninsula from prominent centres, such as that of Chalcidica (Athos), or closer, such as those of Paroria and Kelifarevo ... can be suspected with some basics, some modest wooden or even stone sketes, whose memory has not been preserved, being able to gather together, on the Danube or under the mountain, in the vast forest or hilly regions, on the monks who, far from the cities ..., will have organized*

<sup>14</sup> John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus și experiența Duhului Sfânt*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>17</sup> Sfântul Ioan Scărarul, *Scara*, Treapta 27 (Despre pustnicie (liniște) și singurătate), în „Filocalia”, vol. IX, traducere Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1980, p. 394.

<sup>18</sup> John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Tit Simeadrea, *Monahismul în Țara Românească înainte de 1379*, în „Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, XC (1972), nr. 7-8, p. 675.



*their existence according to the canons of the Orthodox monastic dinner... before the appearance of the first documentary known monasteries in Moldova and Walachia*"<sup>20</sup>.

St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Maximus the Confessor dealt with deifying - in their works. For St. Gregory of Nyssa the spiritual ascent is similar to the ascent of Moses on Mount Sinai<sup>21</sup>. Thus, some essential coordinates of the Christian doctrine of the knowledge of God are established: the mystery of the darkness where God is found and where Moses was allowed to see Him becomes an image of the unknowable which is revealed to man.

Saint Maximus the Confessor, speaking of the knowledge of God, says that "*we can share with God in what He communicates to us, but He remains indivisible in His being that cannot be communicated*"<sup>22</sup>. For St. Maximus, deification is a totally supernatural fact, a work of the Almighty God freely emerging from His transcendence, while remaining essentially unknowable. Pure prayer gives a knowledge of God. Thus, Jesus Christ is intimately present in the heart of the Christian.<sup>23</sup>

Living in the tenth century, Saint Simeon the New Theologian engages contemporaries with his famous hymns about love. He emphasizes the idea of participating in the divine light, considering that the resurrection begins here, before moving on to the other world. According to Saint Simeon the New Theologian, the divine light shines in the Church, with the same brightness as in the time of the Apostles<sup>24</sup>.

Saint Simeon the New Theologian addresses the hesychasts, telling them to be "*like those who went up with Jesus on the Tabor and contemplated the flashing light, the preparation of His garments and the light of His face*"<sup>25</sup>. In order to reach this state the hesychast may resemble Moses, who climbs alone on the top of the mountain and enters the cloud. "*He who comes here will not only see the back of God, but will be consciously in front of Him...; he will first be initiated into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, then give his laws to others; it will be illuminated, after which it will enlighten others...*"<sup>26</sup>.

In his visions, St. Simeon finds two important things: he identifies the light with Christ, and Christ lives in the heart of man especially through love. This conception explains why the hesychast gave such importance to the invocation of the Saviour Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> "*His doctrine takes over, once again, the traditional themes of Eastern monasticism in order to set them on the contemplation of the mystery of the Holy Spirit, as an inward source of light and life of the person*"<sup>28</sup>.

The Hesychast doctrine was crystallized and presented by St. Gregory Palamas (14th century). He is learning that it is not impossible to see the light of divinity, uncreated,

<sup>20</sup> Răzvan Theodorescu, *Bizanț, Balcani, Occident la începuturile culturii medievale românești (secolele X-XIV)*, București, 1974, pp. 219-220.

<sup>21</sup> Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre viața lui Moise*, Editura Sfântul Gheorghe Vechi, București, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, traducere de Pr. Vasile Răducă, Editura Anastasia, București, 1993, p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

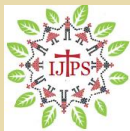
<sup>24</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog, *Chapitres theologiques, gnostiques et pratiques*, I, 79, „Source Chretienne”, vol. 51, Paris, 1957, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Spidlik, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>28</sup> André Scrima, *op. cit.*, p. 49.



immaterial and incorruptible, identical with the light of Tabor. *“It is only a work, an energy and a power of God, which radiates from His unseen being without being identical with it”*<sup>29</sup>.

Varlaam of Calabria is the one who stands up against the hesychast doctrine preached by Saint Gregory Palamas and the Athonite monks. He considered that the light that the Apostles saw on Mount Tabor was created, because if it were not created it would be equal to the Divinity. Therefore, he will accuse the hesychasts of deifying.

The Council of Constantinople of 1341 will decide that the hesychast doctrine is orthodox. Varlaam will be condemned and will leave for Italy, where he will be appointed bishop of Gerace in 1342. The 1345 Synod of Constantinople will condemn Saint Gregory Palama and the hesychast doctrine.

The next two councils held in Constantinople (1347 and 1351) will approve the hesychast doctrine. These two councils will proclaim the hesychast doctrine as the official doctrine of the Orthodox Church. The essence of the hesychast doctrine that prevailed in Orthodoxy *“lies in the fact that the being of God, inaccessible to man, and His divine energies are not separate, though they differ and form a unity, but until man the divine energies or powers come, not the being of God, for God in His being remains inaccessible to people”*<sup>30</sup>.

In Byzantine monasticism, pure prayer was fully identified with the prayer of Jesus and the mysticism of the Word. Despite the fact that in the hesychast prayer it seems that we ask for mercy for our person: *“Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner”*, taking into account the fact that all our sins are committed to our brothers, we pray and for better relations with them or for them not to be touched by our injustices. Saint Isaac the Sir says: *“He who, by mentioning God, honours all man, finds help from all men through the hidden will of God. And he who defends the unrighteous has God fighting for himself. He who gives his arm to the help of his neighbour receives the arm of God in his help”*<sup>31</sup>.

The prayer of the heart to the Athonite hesychasts is accompanied by a psychosomatic technique. Saint Nicodemus Aghiorite inserts the hesychast texts in his *Philocalia* and attributes the following fruits to the *“prayer of the mind”*: detachment of sensitive things, humility, perfect cleansing, unbridled joy, etc.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. SAINT GREGORY PALAMA AND THE HESYCHAST CONTROVERSY

Mount Athos represented for the whole Orthodox Church a unique focal point and centre of spiritual life, *“a place where patient and peaceful islands flourish, with prayer, fasting and asceticism.”*<sup>33</sup> Among the well-known church servants who lived here are St. Gregory Palama, of whom Nichifor Calist Xantopul, his contemporary and biographer, said that he *“performed the mysteries of the priesthood as one who had no body and was, so to speak, outside of himself, that the souls of those who looked at him repented only by seeing him”*<sup>34</sup>. The conflict between cataphatic and apophatic, as modes of knowing God,

<sup>29</sup> Pr. Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Şesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *Istoria Bisericească Universală*, vol. II, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1993, p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvântarea* 73, FR X, 1981, p. 282.

<sup>32</sup> Tomas Spidlik, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului creștin*, vol. II (Rugăciunea), Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, p. 323.

<sup>33</sup> Bishop Veniamin, *De la situation des moines slaves au Mont-Athos* (referat citit la Conferința Bisericească Inter-Ortodoxă de la Moscova, din iulie 1948), în „Actes de la Conference des Eglises autocephales orthodoxes”, vol. II, Moscova, 1952, p. 333.

<sup>34</sup> A se vedea *Sinaxarul* din rânduiala Utreniei la Duminica a II-a din Postul Mare, în \*\*\*, *Triod*, ediția a V-a, Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, București, 1945, p. 290.



materialized in the fourteenth century in the conflict of the hesychast life. For the cataphatic (affirmative) theology, in the western sense, from the concept of being of God his attributes are deduced: his simplicity and unity. *“The ontological laws apply to God as Being”*<sup>35</sup>.

In apophatic theology the being of God is absolutely transcendent, immanent being only His manifestation in the world. God “exits us” through His energies and is fully present in them. *“The energies are common to all the hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, they are uncreated and are accessible to the creature. They do not strike in unity, indivisibility and divine simplicity, just as the differences between hypostases do not make God a compound”*<sup>36</sup>.

The controversy between the atoned monks - the Eastern mystique - and the western scholasticism is based on the confrontation between the spiritual knowledge of God and the scholastic rationalism. If the Eastern mystic affirmed the *deification* of man or his union with God through the uncreated grace that springs from the divine being, the western school emphasized the imitation of God on the part of man through his own efforts, this not uniting with God through uncreated grace, but through created one, which keeps man in isolation from God<sup>37</sup>. Starting from the same premises, the theologian Paul Evdokimov said that *“the Islamism radically separates the East of Rome”*<sup>38</sup>.

The western scholastic, starting from the meaning of the doctrine of Toma d’Aquino – *Deus est actus purus* – came to the conclusion that there is no difference between the being of God and his energies, which are created. This makes human deification impossible. The followers of these rationalist ideas were Varlaam of Calabria, Nichifor Gregoras, Dimitrie Kydones<sup>39</sup>, canonist Constantin Armenopoulos, Grigorios Achindinos, but also the ecumenical patriarch John XIV Kalekas. For them, *“only the arguments of reason have value, and any intuitive understanding of a mystical nature is declared a source of wandering; the inner enlightenment is accused even of the materialization of God”*<sup>40</sup>.

In the controversy with Varlaam of Calabria, St. Gregory Palama makes biblical and patristic arguments about the fact that both the light on the Tabor and the light that the righteous see in this world are uncreated and eternal. That is why, Varlaam will write a series of writings against the hesychasts, to which St. Gregory will answer them.

The controversy is based on three themes: the value of science, the value of prayer and the character of the light seen by the Apostles on Tabor. Trying to approximate the science of faith, the value of science and prayer, Varlaam considered that *“The scriptures of those inspired by God and the wisdom of them have the same purpose as the wisdom that comes from the profane sciences. For in all things it is the same truth, whether it be given directly to the Apostles of God from the beginning, or whether we find it by study. The sciences lead to the truth given to the Apostles of God and help us a lot, to ascend to the original non-material models of things”*<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

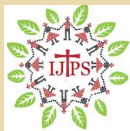
<sup>37</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> Dimitrie Kydones, in his letter to his friend Caloferos, is excited to read Toma d’Aquino's Summa Theologica. "Through him our faith is armed with all possible evidence." His brother, Prohor, states: "Whoever knows the wisdom of God, knows the essence of God." Cf. *ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Sfântul Grigorie Palama, *Tratatul I din triada II*, Cod. Coisl., f. 142 r., apud Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, p. 36.



Saint Gregory Palama does not agree with this way of appreciating the Divine wisdom of the Spirit as well as that of the springs of the profane sciences. To speak thus would mean, says St. Gregory, not to have the experience of the divine gift. *“And he thinks that those given by the Spirit can be analysed with the help of reason, appealing to its distinctions and syllogisms. In reality, they know only the Spirit Who is in the One who receives His gifts”*<sup>42</sup>.

St. Gregory does not reject profane culture. For him, however, the culture of the world is not confused with theology. *“Theology means not the descent of the Lord through an intellectual endeavour to represent Him in the horizontal coordinates of human reason, but the elevation of the human mind, through an intensification of the power of penetration, into the divine coordinates”*<sup>43</sup>.

The victory obtained by Saint Gregory Palama in the confrontation with Varlaam de Calabria, is the victory of Christian humanism over the pagan humanism of rebirth. In the opinion of historian John Meyendorff, the Orthodox Church had to make a choice in the fourteenth century: on the one hand the unitary conception of man, based on the Bible; on the other hand, an intellectualist spiritualism that affirmed the independence or autonomy of the human intellect with respect to matter and which denied that the real deification of man is possible from here on earth<sup>44</sup>.

### 3. HESYCHASM FOR ROMANIAN PEOPLE

The Romanian countries represented in the history of the Orthodox Church, along with Russia, a real Byzantium after Byzantium<sup>45</sup>. *“Besides, after the collapse of Byzantium and after the fall of the Serbian and Bulgarian countries, the only protection shield for the whole Christian East conquered by the Turks, we were the only ones left, the Romanians. That is why, Romanian Countries were the edge of escape when poor monks «had nowhere to turn their heads or reach out»”*<sup>46</sup>.

As promoters and supports for Orthodoxy under Ottoman oppression, the Romanian countries have been and remain a wonderful spread of cultures, at the contact between the East and the West of Europe<sup>47</sup>. Identifying itself with the history, culture and spirituality of the Romanian people, the Orthodox Church on these lands stood beside it both in times of trial and in moments of joy. The need for prayer, for the living of God of the Romanian clergy and believers was made in the Church, *“the place where we go to the resurrection, the resurrection laboratory”*<sup>48</sup>.

Even though there are no monasteries in Romania, but only monasteries, the Orthodox believers have known and know where there are monks bent for spiritual life, researching them. Thus, the spiritual thirst of the people is tempered by the continuous prayer of the heart, which rages from among these living beings.

<sup>42</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Pr. Prep. Dr. Răzvan Andrei Ionescu, Lect. Dr. Adrian Nicolae Lemeni, *Teologie ortodoxă și știință*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2006, p. 168.

<sup>44</sup> John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Bizanț după Bizanț*, Editura 100+1 Gramar, București, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Prof. Diac. Gh. I. Moisescu, *Contribuția românească pentru susținerea Muntelui Athos în decursul veacurilor*, în „Ortodoxia”, V (1953), nr. 2, pp. 239-240.

<sup>47</sup> The general expression on this aspect is that the Romanian Orthodox Church was and is a true bridge between East and West.

<sup>48</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1978, p. 226.



Coming to the Romanian countries through some worthy living, the hesychasm was present in our Romanian monasteries bearing greater fruit. Here it is worth remembering the role and importance of the Scythians monks, Saint John Casian and Dionysius Exiguus in the life of Romanian monasticism. Also, the living hermits at the bend of the Carpathians continued the way of prayer and life specific to the Christian East.

In the fourteenth century, the coming of Saint Nicodemus from Tismana reorganized the monastic life, boosting the spiritual life with elements of hesychast life. *“He, setting a new order in the Romanian monasticism, founded the great monasteries in Tismana and Vodița (in the region of Oltenia), while his disciples raised in Neamț and Bistrița monasteries in Moldova. Soon to be filled with monasteries and cloisters, Romania will play the role of a real turning point in the history of Orthodox monasticism”*<sup>49</sup>.

There is a general consensus on Saint Nicodemus of Tismana that he “was a follower of hesychasm”<sup>50</sup>. From his correspondence with the patriarch Eftimie de Târnovo, an apprentice of St. Theodosius, we see the *hesychast* spirit.

The arrival in the Romanian Country of the Hieronymite Hariton, the protos of Mount Athos, as metropolitan of the Romanian Country, but also of the Holy Niphon, the former ecumenical patriarch, reorganizing the church life in the Romanian Country, strengthened the spiritual connections between the Romanians and Mount Athos. The material support offered by Vladislav I for the erection of the Cutlumuş monastery, the greatest monastery of the Romanian Country, under the abbot Hariton, made that more and more Romanian monks set in this monastery. One of these Romanian monks, Melchizedek, reached the monastery’s ecumene (1370-1375). Before he came to Athos, he had been a archpriest, named Mihai. Another Romanian abbot was the Hieronymite Jacob<sup>51</sup>.

In Moldavia, starting with Alexander the Kind, the works of some hesychast authors such as St. Gregory the Sinaite and the patriarch of Philotheus are brought, being translated into the Church Slavonic<sup>52</sup>. There were some hermitage churches in the Buzau mountains or near the Putna monastery, some hermit monks such as Daniil Sihastru, are just as many reasons for affirming the hesychast life for the Romanians.

Father Ioanichie Bălan from the Bistrița monastery in Moldova has prepared a study dedicated to the lives of Romanian hermits from the 15th to the 20th century. Introducing these hermitage monasteries he says: *“In the tradition of the Tazlau monastery (built in 1497), as in the case of the other monasteries, it was the custom to live around the numerous hermits. They were among the most fortified monastery dwellers, who longed for a solitary hermit life. For this, they were obliged to spend the first years of the public life, in order to learn the mysteries of the spiritual life. With blessing they then went to the mountain, either as disciples of other elders, or alone or with other cohabitants. There they occupied one of the free caves or built their own wooden, stone or earthen huts. Each of them kept in touch with the monastery he belonged to. Every Saturday they descended from the mountain, received their «secret» granted by the ecumene (bread, bread, vegetables, fruits, salt), confessed to the monastery’s patron, the next day they took Communion and again went to*

<sup>49</sup> André Scrima, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>50</sup> E. Norocel, *Sf. Eftimie, ultimul patriarh de Târnovo și legăturile lui cu Țările Române*, în „Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, LXXXIV (1966), nr. 5-6, pp. 565-570.

<sup>51</sup> L. Lemerle, *Actes de Cutlumus*, Paris, 1946, nr. 30-31. A se vedea și Răzvan Theodorescu, *op. cit.*, p. 246; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Isihastă sau sihaștrii și rugăciunea lui Iisus în tradiția ortodoxiei românești*, în vol. „Filocalia”, VIII, Editura Humanitas, București, 2002, p. 528.

<sup>52</sup> Răzvan Theodorescu, *op. cit.*, p. 341.





*their sanctums. The permanent occupation of the hermit priests was the holy prayer of Jesus*<sup>53</sup>.

This hesychasts way of life will continue in the Romanian monasteries until the time of Paisie Velicikovski. Before going to Athos and wearing the monastic robe, Paisie lived in Romanian monasteries such as: Dălhăuți, Trăisteni and Cârnu. *“When the young Paisie emigrated to the Romanian countries, he had already been preceded by a whole generation of his compatriots who, in the high orthodox culture climate of the Romanian environment, had been able to bring to fruition the germs of their own genius and spirituality ... Not in Athos, where yet he spends 17 years, from 1746 to 1763, Paisie breathed the tradition of hesychast Athos is just the ideal reference and the “depository” of the patristic writings that Paisie will endeavour to study with relentless zeal. The life model, the living example of the hesychast tradition, Paisie discovers and makes it flourish widely in the Romanian Principalities...*<sup>54</sup>.

The hermitages and hermits from the Romanian Countries played a multiple role in the lives of the Romanian people: through continuous prayer they kept the flame of our Orthodox faith; they strengthened with the word and the prayer the Romanian believers in the vicissitudes of history, especially in the confrontation with the great powers that surrounded us; with the advice they strengthened our voivodes (an example is the advice given by Saint Daniil Sisastru of Stephan the Great voivode); they urged the voivodes and the boyars to build churches and monasteries for the faithful Romanian people. *“Then the hermits came to the aid of the people with the advice, the confession, the rebuke and the exhortation. The monks, the hermits, the hermits who fled the world loved the people the most, prayed for them constantly. This wanderers of the mountains, these friends of the Carpathians, these inhabitants of the woods were at the same time the closest advisers of the voivodes ... All the voivodes had as religious and secretive confidants the monks and hermits. In them they had the greatest confidence, the greatest hope, they opened their hearts, their counsel was kept with sanctity, from them they asked for prayer and blessing when they left to defend their faith and their ancestral land”*<sup>55</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The popularity of these hermits among the Romanian people is also seen from the use of the name hermit. *“To no other Orthodox people, says Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the name of the hermit did not become so popular, it was not keep with this broad and popular resonance, because neither the hesychast way of monastery was kept the same”*<sup>56</sup>.

From the fifteenth century, on the Romanian territory we can talk about the hermits such as: the pious Joseph of the Church; Hieronymite Sisoe, the disciple of Daniil Sisastru; the pious Ghelasie from Râmeț; the hermit Antonie from Iezerul Vâlcei; Hieronymite Irodion, the abbot of the Lainici monastery; Saint Calinic of Cernica; Abbot Ioanichie;

<sup>53</sup> Ierom. Ioanichie Bălan, *Chipuri de călugări îmbunătățiți din mănăstirile românești*, vol. I, Editura Mănăstirii Sihăstria, 2009, p. 200.

<sup>54</sup> Elia Citterio, *La scuola filocalica di Paisij Velichkovskij e la Filocalia di Nicodimo Aghiorita. Un confronto in „Amore del Bello. Studi sulla Filocalia. Atti del „Simposio Internazionale sulla Filocalia”*. Pontificio Collegio Greco”, Roma, novembre 1989, Comunita di Bose, 1991, pp. 189-190 apud Virgil Căndea, *Locul spiritualității românești în reinnoirea isihastă*, în vol. „România în reinnoirea isihastă”, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 1997, pp. 27-28.

<sup>55</sup> Ierom. Ioanichie Bălan, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

<sup>56</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ișiști sau sihaștrii și rugăciunea lui Iisus în tradiția ortodoxiei românești*, p. 533.



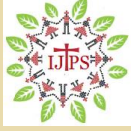
“Grandfather Gheorghe”, etc.<sup>57</sup> “They learn the teachings of purifying passions and the method of incessant prayer. In this way it spiritualizes its nature so that it becomes permeable to the Holy Spirit and to the divine light, just as Christ on Tabor. Then this light, which is at the same time a divine energy, radiates it both as spirituality, supernatural power and endless love for people”<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Many of these hermits were canonized by the Romanian Orthodox Church after 1989, because "God is wonderful in His Saints, the God of Israel" (Ps. 67, 36).

<sup>58</sup> Idem, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus și experiența Duhului Sfânt*, p. 143.



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