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**EDUCATIONAL LANDMARKS IN THE WRITINGS OF THE**  
**FATHERS FROM THE PHILOKALIA: SAINTS NEIL THE**  
**ASCETIC AND MARK THE ASCETIC**

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***Abstract***

The young have always needed guidance, someone who knows life and has a profound view on life issues and on how a young person should be. These urgings are all the more so valuable as they come from immaculate people who look at the world from a pastoral perspective. We can say that the advice coming from such people is in fact the advice meant for the young. Surely, wise words come too many times against the indifference and the feeling of the youngsters who think that they know better what they should do and how they should behave. Passions put veils on the eyes and obstruct the ears and these pieces of advice may not find their way inside the unripe. However, words have a special power and, if spoken in the right way and at the right time, they may break open all barriers which we mentioned and may unfreeze hearts. These urgings may be divided into several categories, because man needs to be prepared for life from several points of view and this preparation is made in the name of and with the help of One only: Christ. By the Divine Pronoia, education becomes a general basic rule to man; it starts being nurtured in early childhood and raises awareness in parents.

**Keywords:** education; Holy Gospel; Saviour; fathers from the Philokalia;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Children and youngsters represent an extremely important (yet delicate) age bracket for the society, bracket on which all educational forums focus. Aware of its mission to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16, 15), the Church has always had at heart the best interests of the young Christians in whom the Church has seen the future adults.

The Holy Gospel shows us how attentive Christ is to children, especially when he says: "Let the children come to Me and do not hinder them! For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these

(Matthew 19, 14)”, and then he uses their purity and innocence to set an example for those who want to enter the kingdom of God: “Unless you change and become little children, you will never enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 18, 3). The task to form new generations of true Christians, interested in spiritual life, goes to the Church, in a very special way, the Church which brings back to a new life all Adam’s descendants: a new life in Christ; however, achievement of this great goal also calls for the parents and all those who may help to form a fine character. This explains why the entire Christian community, led by the priest, pays the deserved attention to this age bracket and tries to find the best methods and means to get close to young people. A child sees in the secret universe of God a natural environment which he understands much better than an adult. Speaking about the Kingdom of heaven, the Saviour Himself shows that the spiritual structure of a child is a model to follow by all those who seek the beauty of the eternal Kingdom: “Truly I tell you whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10, 15). “Christian education” means the activity by which the Church teaches and spreads the Word of Life and leads the apprentices on the redemption road. Following the example of Teacher Jesus when he said “Go into the world and preach the Gospel to all creation, whoever believes will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16, 15 - 16), generations of teachers, starting with the Apostles, have sown the seeds of the Gospel into the hearts of all those seeking to escape the darkness of idolatry in order to become sons of Light and reach the stature of the mature man (Ephesians 4, 13), the genuine Christian.

## 2. EDUCATION AND HUMAN PERSONALITY

If one takes into account the purpose pursued by the education process, namely: *shaping the human personality*, “education is one of the most noble and complex human activities” (Cucuș Constantin, 1999, 18), according to one of the most respected Romanian contemporary pedagogues. From this perspective arise both the responsibility and the appreciation of the persons who devote themselves to becoming teachers. Christ – the perfect Model of Teacher - esteems such people by saying: “But whoever practices and teaches will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5, 19).

In terms of character shaping, education goes beyond conveying knowledge which the pupil or the person under training accepts for a while and forgets after a while; it resorts to self-consciousness in order to sensitivise and mobilize towards enrichment, both through acquisition of new information and endowment with special qualities typical of man. Education helps us become authentic people. This is why education, as shaping of human personality, takes an informative manifestation, i.e. of acquiring new knowledge, but, more importantly, a formative manifestation, which puts acquired knowledge to test, through actions.

In a secularized society, a society which focuses on strictly humanist values, education was limited only to its informative manifestation; shaping moral characters was placed only in the religious area. This is how the *term religious education* was invented. Therefore, one renounced the networking between education, as process of formation, and deification, as target of formation. In this context, religious education was assigned the care to provide Christians with conditions of clerical formation; statement was made that the main priority of the religious education is “shaping perfect characters’ personalities” (Bolocan Carmen-Maria, 2003, 403).

It is in the family where such a life starts, the place where the child finds, or fails to do so, the suitable environment to lay the bases of a fully virtuous character. “If children did not learn to love in the family, from their parents, where will they learn to do so? If children did not get used to seeking happiness in the very mutual happiness, in what dreadful and vicious impulses will they seek it when mature? Children take everything over and copy everything...” (Tănăsescu-Vlas Adrian, 2009, 15). This is why the family, the parents, have to provide the ground for a spiritual life and also bequeath both a genetic and moral heritage.

“It is in the children who are born in the clean living of marriage that good propensities emerge and it is these children that will not be defeated by the mean circumstances of an environment which they would potentially find and it is perhaps against such environment that they are ordered. They are more

lucid in seeing God and this is how we know that they have the calling to be His apprentices, and, if time decides so, they will end up being his martyrs” (Boca Arsenie, 2005, 187).

To invigorate the orthodox family and to morally heal the society it is necessary to drink our water from the springs of faith: the Holy Gospel and the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. For almost two millenniums the Church has been keeping the flame of faith alive both through those who sensed the missionary calling and through the Christian fathers who knew how to inspire the innocent hearts of their sons with the love of God and of everything that forges the good. Therefore, generation after generation, all people who have grown into good men have felt it is their duty to further convey their heritage. Some of them are the ones whose writings we find in the *Philokalia* collection.

### **3. BASES OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

Education is understood as the action by which a human being transforms throughout his or her life, not only from a certain age on. Seen from this point of view, education finds its roots in the godly injunction given to the early people: “Grow...”! (Genesis 1, 26). The goal of the Christian education is not to orient man towards satisfaction of material needs which relate to career, family or cultural development, but to prepare him for eternal life, helping him to go up the spiritual path, according to God’s likeness. Religious education is important because leads man to the ultimate goal of the existence: living in communion with his Creator. Upon finding faith in God (revealed in Jesus Christ), man is born to a new holiness-seal life (Şebu Sebastian, coord., 2000, 21).

The incarnation of the Son of God opened the path to the kingdom of perfection and made possible both the route and the access to the spiritual world; for He is the Way El (John 14, 6) and the Gate (John 10, 9), and the One who walks along with us (Luke 24, 15 - 31). In the conception of John of Damascus, “The Son of God incarnated Himself to restore in man what was suitable for him from the beginning. As He was forged “In His likeness”, meaning He is as righteous as a human can be” (Sf. Ioan Damaschin, 1993, 149). The spiritual life is acquired on a personal level with a complete openness to God’s redeeming Word.

God Himself is the first Educator, Who uses the Law and the care to lead His people to the Land of Promise. This is what He tells the people of Israel in line with the Law: “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. Observe the commands of God walking in obedience to Him and revering” (Deut. 8, 5 - 6). So, education represents to God not only a care but a duty, firstly a duty of the parent. And the outpouring of His godly love is meant to render the human being perfect and therefore reach the level of a spiritual maturity.

From this point of view, reading bible texts becomes more than a mere act of knowing or improving some theological knowledge, it is “a paideic endeavor” (Opriş Monica, 2011, 17), an initiation step in the education plan, in the plan of growing towards true life, which is supported by spiritual food of the Word of God.

### **4. EDUCATION OF THE FATHERS FROM THE PHILOKALIA**

The educative value of the Holy Gospel was highlighted by the Church Fathers who explained that the bible text represents the basis and the best example to follow in the application of a sound pedagogy. To reach this purpose, first we have to know the gospel text, then to exploit it on a personal level. Saint John Golden Mouth considers the words of the Holy Gospel as authentic spiritual pearls: “Reading holy Gospels is like a treasure. You could take a small part of a treasure and you could still get rich; similarly, you can find a great power of thoughts and invaluable richness from very small words in the holy Gospels” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, 2004, 22). Everything the Church Fathers wrote and taught relies on the accurate interpretation and the enlightening state of the Word of God.

Even though *Philokalia* includes teachings dedicated rather to monks, this collection of books overflowing the wisdom of the Church Fathers refers to the spiritual life; so, we can see how these writings find their applicability in the life of the lay Christians, especially since “in the Orthodox Church we do not consider there is a clear-cut separation line between the life of monks and Christian life in

general” (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 8). Christian life, that is both monks’ and laypeople’s life, is seen as a godly ascent for which we need a leader, a teacher, to reach the top.

The beauty of man, this creature made by God as an enthroning of His creation, does not lie in the fact that it belongs to this material world, but in the mystery carried in itself, the mystery of being “image” and “likeness” of his Creator. This truth is underlined in the patristic works. This is what Saint Gregory of Nazianzus writes: “In my quality as one belonging to the earth, I *am attached to life here*, but being also a divine particle, I bear within me a yearning for the life to come” (Lossky Vladimir, 2014, 101). According to Priest Professor Dumitru Popescu, “this dichotomy finds its unity in the face of God who embraces both soul and body” (Popescu Dumitru, 2005, 168).

As for the man’s appearance, the Holy Gospel makes the difference between the god-like image of man and man’s likeness to God. In line with the Holy Trinity which advises that man should be created by His image and His likeness (Genesis 1, 26), God actually creates man only in His own image (Genesis 1, 27) because “it takes spiritual and moral effort to acquire God’s likeness” (Popescu Dumitru, 2005, 168).

In relation to man’s deification, the orthodox spirituality shows the possibility of man’s unification to God in Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. This route is shown as a spiritual ascent which starts in the godly given of the human nature – *the image*, and ends to the *likeness* described as “the stature of the perfect man” (Ephesians 4, 13). To illustrate this relation, father professor Dumitru Stăniloae affirms: “The godly image consists in the ontological structure of man, made to wish for supreme union, the structure of the divine Persons who are spring of all communion, human beings as well, while likeness would mean activate this structure” (Stăniloae Dumitru, 1996, 280).

To reach this level of spirituality the one who dare start the route is considered and considers himself to be an apprentice, who fully observes the advice of his master; moreover, he is a spiritual son, brought back to spiritual life by the one whom he considers his spiritual father and to whom he has to show great respect, greater than to his bodily parents. The close relation between the spiritual teacher and his apprentice represents the core of the writings from the *Philokalia* and each author presents this relation in his own way, with deep roots in the teachings of the Holy Gospel and in the tradition of the needy from whom they learnt themselves. Every work may be considered a manual for needy beginners who want to learn how to fight against passions, in order to purify their soul and receive the gift of light and of deification.

It goes without saying that in conveying teachings one must take into account age-related particularities, as Saint Apostle Paul urges the Corinthians in his letter: “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it” (I Corinthians 3, 1-2). This same aspect is also highlighted by the Apostle of people in the letters to Hebrews: “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (Hebrews 5, 11 - 14) Therefore, in the spiritual ascent, just like in the psycho-somatic development, one must consider raising the apprentice in order to be really successful.

Using the same image, Saint Cassian shows that “in acquiring any art or teaching one must start from the basic knowledge and the simplest attempts, so that the mind, fed on their milk, may develop gradually and rise progressively from the lowest to the highest conquests of the mind. After he understood the elementary principles and he kept on going, the gates of the faith confession somehow open for him and the mind may easily reach the mysteries and the peaks of perfection” (Sf. Ioan Casian, 1990, 481).

Of the many writings by the authors from the *Philokalia* which we find in the 12 volumes of the *Philokalia* collection (the love of the beautiful) translated into Romanian language, we have chosen the ones written by Saint Neil the Ascetic and Saint Mark the Ascetic, to whom Saint Paisios of Mount Athos was very devoted and who he often cited.

### 5.1. EDUCATIONAL LANDMARKS IN SAINT NEIL THE ASCETIC'S WRITINGS

For Saint Neil the Ascetic, Jesus Christ is the Teacher and the Model par excellence. This is the reason why he sometimes urges that, to gain the ideal of an accomplished life, the person in need has to reach the stature of the accomplished man by gradually modelling his own self in the image of Jesus Christ, "of Whose we have to be apprentices and also imitators" (Stăniloae Dumitru, 1996, 157).

Analyzing the monastic life of his period, Saint Neil the Ascetic regretfully admits that there are many slippages and this explains why he insists on using examples from the Holy Gospel to raise the awareness of those who should strengthen people and not to lead them astray. He emphasizes on how rapidly some early fighters against passions end up being in their turn teachers, they want to become advisers despite their still being apprentices.

In relation to the steps a man has to take in learning a profession, the Church Father affirms that all crafts require time and much study before reaching the professional level; "only the craft of the crafts (the art of the arts)", which heals the soul, "requires teaching" (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 184). To argue his ideas, the author gives the example of a farmer who would not dare start working the land before he is strongly convinced that he is able to do this and would generate no losses to himself; or the doctor who would definitely embarrass himself before the people who expect him to take their pains away if he is unable to do so, and consequently, he could no longer practice this profession. All the more attentive and careful should be the one who starts this road of the spiritual needs.

Laying emphasis on longstanding study, Saint Neil the Ascetic shows that it is impossible for someone who "yesterday was carrying water to the village pub", that is someone who had an extremely insignificant occupation which lacked too much responsibility, to be "a teacher of the virtue" today, a person "who hardly this morning got away from the vile actions of the city and later on in the evening started walking around the market with a group of apprentices behind him". Such people make "those who know their life yesterday" laugh and entail the wrath of God upon them, "for their reckless audacity" (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 185).

Education is a rather difficult process, which requires a consistent effort both from the student and the educator. Throughout this endeavor, one must start from acquiring knowledge and go towards using them in everyday life. The examples used as landmarks in the pedagogical undertaking are extremely valuable. These are the examples to which Saint Neil the Ascetic relates. Therefore, he writes: "He who wants to learn, learn from Abimelech and Gideon that not the word but the action makes the beginners imitate. The former was carrying a bundle of brushwood and, upon completion of his job, he said: "What you have seen me do, do quickly, as I have done" (Judges 9, 48). And the other was teaching people to do a military job and, after he did this job himself, he said: "Watch me and follow my lead" (Judges 7, 17)".

An important element in the paideic ascent is the relation between the teacher and the learner, meaning that the teacher, the guide, has to be chosen carefully. Starting from the parable of the trees which appoint the briars as their leader (Judges 9, 8 - 15), Church Father states that "... the same amongst the men: once uses deals were made a danger is bound to happen both to those who listened to an inexperienced teacher and to those who became masters as a result of their apprentices' absent-mindedness". So, such relation becomes harmful to both participants, not only to one of them, which means both sides are responsible, as "the inability of the teacher loses the student and the student's negligence jeopardizes the teacher, especially when the latter's ignorance overlaps the former's idleness" (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 188).

In the educative process, especially when one takes into account Christian education, the life-long intellectual training of the teacher is very important. An authentic teacher knows his weaknesses; he is aware that he does not know everything, that he, in this turn, has to learn on a regular basis, and to pay attention to what happens around him or even learn from his students. This is why he has to prove that he is able to pursue efforts consistently in order to meet the requirements of his students and to be of help.

Some are not aware of how responsible and sublime they should be in their mission and these are the ones whom Saint Neil the Ascetic warns: "The teacher should not believe that his job is an occasion

for rest and enjoyment. For, of all things, leading souls is the most tiresome” (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 189). Therefore, a preacher’s mission is not easy and requires both intellectual knowledge and rich experience. It is difficult to find an educator who accomplishes them both flawlessly, however, he who has such a spiritual teacher will be truly happy.

### **5.2. Educational Landmarks in Saint Mark the Ascetic’s Writings**

Compared to the education-related themes tackled by Saint Neil the Ascetic, themes on the pedagogue’s qualities and the disciple’s consistent effort in choosing an experienced guide, Saint Mark the Ascetic considers that studying the Holy Gospel is the basis of all education. Paying attention to the word of the Gospel generates the authentic wisdom. Both bible text reading and focused listening of the holy words may lead to such wisdom. This is what the Church Father says in this respect: “All words of Christ discover mercy and justice, and God’s wisdom, and pour their power into the ears of all those who are pleased to listen” (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 276).

The usefulness of the Holy Gospel as a means of learning lies in its very content, which discloses for those who focus the beauty of the encounter with the Spring of the true wisdom. However, to reach the perfect knowledge, the seeker has to be fully concentrated; to show that he wants to receive it and to feel it as part of his soul. A person who starts the journey of learning is a founder of wisdom and an active seeker of the eternal richness which is the redemption brought by the Son of God Incarnated. In fact, when reading the text of the Bible we find Christ; observing His commands proves that we have found Him.

Saint Mark launches a warning: “So, let’s pay attention and listen to Him. For He is the one who said: «Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them» (John 14, 21). Can you see how He has concealed the apparition in commands?”. “Being pleased to listen” suggests that this attitude is not something forced upon man, but a natural state of man as a creature meant to live in the Kingdom of heaven. Refusal or disobedience entails the unawareness of wisdom and love of God, on the one hand, and the whip of the divine wrath, on the other: “A whip is for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools” (Proverbs 26, 3). And should he resist them too his jaws will be fastened in bridle and rein (Ps. 31, 9)”.

In addition, he who fails to know God, that is to acquire a spiritual formation which should lay him on the road to righteousness, will be lost and in danger as, being away from God, he is abandoned to his wandering will which attracts him to what is evil. “He who does not know the judgments of God”, writes Saint Mark the Ascetic, “walks with his mind on a road surrounded by precipices and is easy to overturn by all winds”. Such character damages itself and the others around. “When praised, he is on an ego trip; when reprimanded, he gets angry; when on a run of luck, he loses decency; when suffering, he weeps; when wise, he tries to show it right away; when ignorant, he pretends to understand; when rich, he gets arrogant; when poor, he claims he is otherwise; when satiated, he is bold; when fasting, he takes all the vain glory; he starts disputing with the one who scolds him; and he thinks that forgivers are fools” (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 273).

Saint Mark approached the aspect regarding the personality and the qualities of the educator. In consideration of his soul-shaping mission, an educator has to possess sound religious knowledge, on the one hand, and a great capacity of self-control, on the other hand. Here is his teaching: “If you were meant to teach about Jesus and no one is listening, let your mind sadden, not the body. Because you will not be doomed along with the disobedient if you are sad. Yet if you are roily you will be tempted in the same way” (*Philokalia* I, 1999, 272). Therefore, besides moral and spiritual qualities, the teacher has to have psychological knowledge, in order to penetrate into the child’s soul and find in due time potential imbalances which jeopardize the fragile character of a beginner and also find the remedy for finding the right path.

In such situations, the educator makes sure that all opposition from his learner should not last too long. In addition, he has to use convincing arguments to persuade him to achieve his task. Under no circumstances must he give in, lest the learner should believe that he can have his way in everything. Of course, everything is achieved in the spirit of God, in the spirit of love. He who reprimands the wrong-

doer “reprimands in fear of God”, and he himself gets stronger in his love and also gets the other on his side. It is by loving our fellows, especially the young ones, that we bring them near.

The one who is wrong is to be reprimanded only in private and is not to be denigrated when the others are around. Nevertheless, one must not do this in relation to people with whom one does not interact, for example, a person who does not belong to the educator’s collectivity: “Do not make direct reproach to people who are not supposed to obey. For this is more about self-control than advising” (*Philokalia I*, 1999, 272).

Familiar with man’s soul, the Church Fathers placed landmarks in safe roads towards educative and spiritual training of the young generations. By means of the landmarks in their writings, we understand yet again how important it is to read or listen to bible texts of which special importance should be attached to the texts of the Holy Gospels, especially the parables enunciated by Jesus Christ the Saviour. Another element that the educator should consider is his own example. One cannot overlook the fact that these pure and honest souls – the children – have the capacity to imitate everything they see and hear around them. The child is easy to influence which means that he will believe as true everything he is told and he will relate to the value criteria which he sees in the people around him. This explains the huge responsibility of the persons who interact with children, especially the ones considered to be examples or prototypes to follow. The environment where children take the first steps in life has to soak in love and spiritual warmth.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

As progress in shaping up human personality, education lies in the command of God: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1, 28). Translating this verse, Saint Basil the Great says: “There are two kinds of growth: growth of the body and growth of the soul. Growing the soul means increasing knowledge towards perfection; growth of the body means going from small to regular stature”. And explaining the difference between the command on “growth” given to animals and the one given to men, the Church Father goes on writing: “This is why He said to animals “grow”, in the physical meaning, namely accomplish themselves, whereas He told us “grow” in the spirit of the inner Man, namely the man who keeps on going until he finds God”.

Therefore, education is a judgment of which man has to take account in his ascent towards becoming. According to priest Constantin Necula, “the goal of the education is neither an idea molded by the human mind, nor a psychological image surfaced to greet the superstitious needs of the society, but eternal God and the message to His world”. To human nature in general, all the more to the Christian in particular, education represents the way to get close to God through one’s calling, having as model and supporter the One who became man, so that man may become god.

In this respect, children are the most entitled persons to get help throughout their improvement process. They are the model of the soul open to God; although they do not possess much knowledge and proper vocabulary, they believe everything, and in their childlike simplicity, they find it easy to receive the godly truths. As far as they are concerned, God exists and that is enough; they do not need further explanations. This is the exact reason why childhood is considered to be the most important period in man’s acquiring religious formation. Many pedagogues of the world have reiterated this truth as it applies to all type of education, not only to the religious one. Copernicus’ s wording “a tree must be bent while it is young”, has been applying throughout history. Childhood years come with the advantage of complete, unselfish, honest openness in relation to religious formation.

As heirs of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19, 14), children are the beneficiaries of a special attention both from their parents and family and from the entire society. Only conjugated efforts of all these factors will contribute to building a morally sound character, which may fully accomplish the second commandment of the Decalogue: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land...” (Exodus 20,12). As inspired text, the Holy Gospel can show people the way to follow towards salvation. Saint Apostle Paul writes: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (II Timothy 3, 16 - 17).

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