

REACHING THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN- AN ORTHODOX VIEW

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the author evaluates the relevance of St. John Cassian’s teachings in Institutes of the Coenobia (De institutis coenobiorum) and Conferences (Conlationes) for ordinary Christians. In the first part, the essence of monastic life is presented, as viewed by Cassian. According to his instructions, the immediate goal of a monk is the healing from principal faults (i.e., vices, spiritual diseases, or deadly sins) and the crowning with virtues, while the final one is reaching the kingdom of heaven. In this effort, asceticism is an agent, but not an end in itself. Following this thought, the monk can attain spiritual growth and feel God’s grace in his heart. In the second part of the study, two modern examples are provided, demonstrating that St. John Cassian’s teachings are also relevant to ordinary Christians today. Under the careful guidance of a skilled spiritual father, and following an asceticism adapted to their condition, the ordinary believers can attain an authentic spiritual growth, deepening in the intimate man–God relationship.

Keywords: St. John Cassian; Christian life; spiritual growth; scholasticism; Holy Communion;

INTRODUCTION

St. John Cassian (†c.435) is one of the greatest holy fathers from the Roman province of Scythia. His life exemplified holiness, and he served as a skilled guide for those seeking spiritual progress. His profound understanding in this domain was cultivated through a synthesis of teachings gleaned from eminent ascetics and Church scholars of the late 4th and early 5th centuries, many of whom he personally knew.

Notable among these influences were the monks of the Egyptian desert and St. John Chrysostom. Additionally, Cassian’s own ascetic practices contributed significantly to his spiritual insights. His writings, particularly the *Institutes of the Coenobia (De institutis coenobiorum)* and *Conferences (Conlationes)*, have been instrumental in disseminating globally this spiritual wisdom, even to the present day.

John Cassian was born between the years 360 and 365 in the Roman province of Scythia, in a village (Casiana/Κασσιανά, the so-called *vicus Cassiani*) located in the rural territory (*chora*) of the city of Histria (now Istria, Romania), in present-day Dobruja Gorge Natural Reservation (Constanța County). He became a monk at a young age, possibly in a monastery near his hometown. Before long, Cassian left Scythia, traveling and spending

various periods in Palestine (at Bethlehem), the Egyptian desert, Constantinople, Rome, and ultimately in Massilia (now Marseille, France), where he also passed away.¹

This study addresses the theme of spiritual progress and the relationship between man and God as they emerge from the works of St. John Cassian. At the same time, in the second part of the presentation, the relevance of these aspects for the modern lay believer will be analyzed, based on two contemporary examples.

1. THE PATH TO SALVATION IN THE VISION OF ST. JOHN CASSIAN

In his writings, John Cassian extensively addresses the theme of spiritual progress and the relationship between man and God. He places at the foundation of this relation the deification of human nature, understood as the ascent of man towards likeness with God. From his perspective, the ultimate goal of every believer should be the attainment of the kingdom of heaven, and the path to reach it is through a pure heart, achieved by cleansing oneself of principal faults (i.e., vices, spiritual diseases, or deadly sins) and crowning with virtues.² It is an elaboration of the theology of the Apostle Paul, which the ascetics of the Egyptian desert strove to fulfill in their lives: “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (Rom. 6:22).³

Based on this teaching, John Cassian emphasizes in his writings the importance of the Christian to engage in the struggle against principal faults (gluttony, fornication, covetousness, anger, dejection, accidie, vainglory, and pride)⁴ with the aim of acquiring virtues, seen as gifts from God. From his point of view, without this struggle, the Christian deviates from his ultimate goal and becomes estranged from God: *The immediate goal is purity of heart, which he [i.e., the Apostle Paul] not unfairly terms “sanctification,” without which the afore-mentioned end [i.e., eternal life] cannot be gained; ... for if it be not constantly fixed before our eyes [the purity of heart], it will not only make all our toils vain and useless, and force them to be endured to no purpose and without any reward, but it will also excite all kinds of thoughts opposed to one another.*⁵

¹ On St. John Cassian, see Ionuț Holubeanu, *Christianity in Roman Scythia—Ecclesiastical Organization and Monasticism (4th to 7th Centuries)*, coll. *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450*, vol. 90, Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2024, pp. 228–238.

² Iohannes Cassianus, *Conlationes XXIII* (hereafter cited as *Conlationes*), I.4.1–3, Michael Petschenig (ed.), coll. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 13, Prague/Vienna/Leipzig, 1886, pp. 9–10; John Cassian, *The Conferences* (hereafter cited as *Conferences*), I.4, trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson, coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II/11, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 716.

³ Cf. *Conlationes*, I.5.1–4, p. 310; *Conferences*, I.5, p. 717.

⁴ St. John Cassian thoroughly described the principal faults, considered by him as the source of all sins, in his work *Institutes of the Coenobia* [Iohannes Cassianus, *De institutis coenobiorum* (hereafter cited as *Institutis*), V–XII, Michael Petschenig (ed.), coll. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 17, Prague/Vienna/Leipzig, 1888, pp. 78–231; John Cassian, *The Twelve Books on the Institutes of the Coenobia, and the Remedies for the Eight Principal Faults* (hereafter cited as *The Twelve Books*), V–XII, trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson, coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II/11, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994, pp. 505–708]. Later Church Fathers included vainglory within the concept of pride. In this way, the number of principal faults was reduced from eight to seven.

⁵ *Conferences*, I.5, p. 717; *Conlationes*, I.5.2, 4, pp. 11^{2-3, 5-7, 26-28}–12¹⁻²: “*scopus uero est puritas cordis, quam sanctificationem non inmerito nuncupauit, sine qua praedictus finis [i.e., uita aeterna] non poterit adprehendi ... quae si prae oculis nostris iugiter statuta non fuerit, non solum cunctos labores nostros uacuos pariter atque instabiles reddens in cassum eos ac sine ullo emolumento compellet effundi, sed etiam cogitationes omnes diuersas sibiue contrarias suscitabit.*”

Through active involvement in this spiritual fight, the believer comes to experience the work of God's grace in his heart, and, thus, the joy of the Holy Spirit. These signify the deepening of the intimate relationship between man and God (son/daughter–Father) and the person's experience of the joy of truly feeling God as Father, as stated in the Holy Scriptures: "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'" (Rom. 8:15).

Following this logic of spiritual progress, John Cassian drew attention to two deviations from the Orthodox faith that were widespread in the West during his time in Massilia. It concerns Pelagianism and the teaching of predestination. Combatting these two doctrinal errors and explaining the opposing Orthodox faith,⁶ he indirectly indicated what generated these heresies, namely the lack of authentic spiritual living: *All the Catholic fathers ... have taught perfection of heart [i.e., the way in which the grace of God works in the heart of man] not by empty disputes of words, but in deed and act, ...*⁷

With these words, Cassian pointed out a major danger that had started to haunt Christianity. It is about scholastic theology ("empty disputes of words"), which marked the life of the Church throughout the entire Middle Ages, and still exists today. This stands in opposition to empirical theology, which is grounded in experience and practice: *The method of these things cannot possibly be taught or understood or kept in the memory by idle meditation and verbal teaching, for it depends entirely upon experience and practice. And, as these things cannot be taught save by one who has had an experience of them, so they cannot even be learned or understood except by one who has tried with equal care and pains to grasp them;*⁸

On the one hand, John Cassian's explanation regarding the cause that led to the emergence of the two heresies is entirely accurate. In fact, both Pelagianism (formulated by Pelagius) and predestination (conceived by St. Augustine) address a soteriological and, at the same time, anthropological theme closely linked to Christian living. The two heresies were the consequence of a misunderstanding of how God's grace sanctifies human nature.

On the other hand, the case of St. Augustine is particularly noteworthy. At that time, he was one of the most respected Western Fathers, even in the Eastern Christian sphere. He had the aura of a true pillar of the African Church, which was grappling with various heresies and schisms. One of the clearest pieces of evidence of the esteem in which Augustine was held in the East is the invitation extended to him by Emperor Theodosius II of Constantinople (408–450) to participate in the First Council of Ephesus (431).⁹ His case is significant as it reveals the danger posed by scholastic theology even for theologians (hierarchs, priests, or professors) zealous in preaching and defending Orthodox doctrine.

Even more striking is the situation of those who, although showing exceptional zeal in leading an austere ascetic life, turn out to be strangers to the work of God's grace in their

⁶ See *Conlationes*, XIII, pp. 361–396; *Conferences*, XIII, pp. 1067–1100.

⁷ *Conferences*, XIII.18, p. 1099; *Conlationes*, XIII.18.4, p. 395^{19–20}: "et idcirco hoc ab omnibus catholicis patribus definitur, qui perfectionem cordis non inani disputatione uerborum, ..."

⁸ *The Twelve Books*, Preface, p. 401; *Institutis*, Praefatio, 4–5, p. 5^{4–10}: "praesertim cum harum rerum ratio nequaquam possit otiosa doctrinaque uerborum uel tradi uel intellegi uel memoria contineri. totum namque in sola experientia usuque consistit, et quemadmodum tradi nisi ab experto non queunt, ita ne percipi quidem uel intellegi nisi ab eo, qui ea pari studio ac sudore adprehendere elaborauerit, possunt."

⁹ See *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* (hereafter cited as *ACO*), vol. II/5, Eduard Schwartz (ed.), De Gruyter, Berlin/Leipzig, 1936, p. 103^{1–7}; *ACO*, vol. I/1.2, Eduard Schwartz (ed.), De Gruyter, Berlin/Leipzig, 1927, p. 52^{21–25}.

hearts. In this category fall the Scythian monks of the 6th century in the East, and St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, their contemporary, in the West. Although the former had the reputation of great ascetics,¹⁰ they were advocates of unconditional Augustinian predestination.¹¹ Similarly, the African bishop, despite adhering to and imposing a severe ascetic life on those around him, professed the same erroneous doctrine.¹²

This misunderstanding of the relationship between divine grace and human agency in the process of salvation reveals, indeed, a lack of awareness of how God works in the human heart. The situation seems bizarre when considering that these individuals, driven by the desire to attain the kingdom of heaven, had fully dedicated themselves to an austere lifestyle. Viewed through the explanations provided by John Cassian, it was determined that, the mentioned monks and hierarch, in their ascetic endeavors, did not focus on the healing of principal faults but rather on a physical torment, spiritually unproductive. In his writings, Casian also exposes certain similar situations in which monks engaged in excessive asceticism lost sight of the purpose of their endeavors, namely the acquisition of pure love through the healing of principal faults.¹³

Beyond this purpose, asceticism becomes an end in itself, rather than a means of acquiring virtues, as it should be. Therefore, neglecting inner sanctification and focusing on the formal, purely external fulfillment of certain precepts or canonical dispositions is a trap, into which even some monks of the Egyptian desert fell.

In the history of Eastern monasticism, from this point of view, a suggestive case is the one that took place in Russia during the 15th and 16th centuries, where the precepts promoted by the monastic school of St. Joseph Volotsky (1439/1440–1515) were opposed to those promoted by the school of St. Nil Sorsky (1433–1508).

The rules of the former, which emphasized physical labor, strict adherence to church regulations, and the outward behavior of the monk, resulted in the development of commendable social assistance. However, they endangered the inner perfection of the monk and, thus, led to the emergence of a form of monastic secularism.

On the other hand, the precepts advocated by the school of Nil Sorski promoted an internalized asceticism of the hesychast type, emphasizing the importance of the spiritual

¹⁰ In this sense, see the words of praise written about the Scythian monks by St. Dionysius Exiguus: “men burning with heat and admirable in the placidity of their manners” (“*uiros semper eduxerit calore feruentes et morum placiditate mirabiles*”), “their faith, that bright by its relation with their deeds” (“*quorum fides, operis conexatione resplendens*”), “[their] heavenly life in the fragile body” (“*caelestem conuersationem in carne fragili*”), and “being free of any worldly concerns” (“*nullius prorsus mundanae sollicitudinis nexibus inuoluti*”); Dionysius Exiguus, *Praefatio ad Ioannem et Leontium*, 1–2, in *Scriptores Illyrici minores*, Salvator Genarro (ed.), coll. *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, vol. 85, Brepols, Turnhout, 1972, pp. 55^{4-6, 11, 13-15}.

¹¹ See I. Holubeanu, *Christianity in Roman Scythia*, pp. 312–324.

¹² On St. Fulgentius of Ruspe and his teachings on the relationship between divine grace and human agency in the process of salvation, see Gabriel-Guillaume Lapeyre, *Saint Fulgence de Ruspe: un évêque catholique africain sous la domination vandale*, P. Lathielleux, Paris, 1929; Donald Fairbairn (ed.), *Fulgentius of Ruspe and the Scythian Monks: Correspondence on Christology and Grace*, trans. Bob Roy McGregor and Donald Fairbairn, coll. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 126, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2013; Francis X. Gumerlock, *Fulgentius of Ruspe on the Saving Will of God: The Development of a Sixth-Century African Bishop's Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4 during the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 2009.

¹³ See the case of the old monk Heron, about whom St. John Cassian affirms that he was deceived by the devil precisely as a result of his ascetic exaggerations (*Conlationes*, II.5.1–5, pp. 44–45; *Conferences*, II.5, pp. 753–754).

ascent of the monk. In this way, they aligned with the Eastern ascetic tradition from the patristic period, as also endorsed by St. John Cassian.¹⁴

2. EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AMONG LAYPEOPLE

The recipients of the writings of St. John Cassian were monks. This aspect is clearly expressed by the author himself in the introduction to his first writing (*Institutes of the Coenobia*).¹⁵ This raises the issue of the compatibility of Casian's teachings with the spiritual life of lay believers. In this regard, at least two questions can be posed: 1. To what extent can the recommendations of St. John Cassian regarding the struggle against passions be followed by the inhabitants of a contemporary city? 2. The involvement of ordinary believers in this spiritual struggle leads to a sense of God's grace and divine pedagogy for them, or are these exclusively reserved for monks?

To find answers to these questions, the following pages will present the results of a spiritual analysis conducted over several years in an urban parish. Under the guidance of the priest serving there, parishioners were directed towards the struggle against principal faults recommended by John Cassian. They were carefully supervised, with their spiritual progress and shortcomings observed. From the multitude of cases analyzed, only two will be presented here, considered representative for the current theme.

Before presenting these, however, an important clarification regarding the severity of the asceticism recommended to the examined lay believers must be made. As already pointed out, in the spiritual struggle, asceticism is not an end in itself but merely a means to achieve the immediate goal (sanctification of life) and the ultimate one (the kingdom of heaven). Based on this consideration, believers were not encouraged towards overly harsh asceticism but directed towards realizing the spiritual goals they need to pursue. Their asceticism was adapted to the level of their physical abilities, their background, family situation, work, etc.

Acceptance of a lower level of asceticism should not be viewed with suspicion. In fact, Casian himself, at the end of his introduction to the work *Institutes of the Coenobia*, makes a very important clarification in this regard: *I shall, however, venture to exercise this discretion in my work,—that where I find anything in the rule of the Egyptians which, either because of the severity of the climate, or owing to some difficulty or diversity of habits, is impossible in these countries, or hard and difficult, I shall to some extent balance it by the customs of the monasteries which are found throughout Pontus and Mesopotamia; because, if due regard be paid to what things are possible, there is the same perfection in the observance although the power may be unequal.*¹⁶

It is clear from these words that adapting the level of asceticism to the possibilities of each believer is by no means a decrease but a positive aspect in the process of sanctifying human nature, which every spiritual leader (be it a hierarch or a priest) must take into account

¹⁴ Nicolae Chifăr, "Monahismul slav răsăritean (ucraineano-rus)"/ "Eastern Slavic (Ukrainian-Russian) Monasticism," in *Monahismul ortodox românesc: istorie, contribuții și repertoriizare/ Romanian Orthodox Monasticism: History, Contributions, and Inventory*, vol. 1, Mircea Păcurariu and Nicolae Edroiu (eds.), Basilica, Bucharest, 2014, pp. 197–200.

¹⁵ *Institutis*, Praefatio, 3, 6–7, pp. 4–6; *The Twelve Books*, Preface, pp. 400–402.

¹⁶ *The Twelve Books*, Preface, p. 402; *Institutis*, Praefatio, 9, p. 7²⁻⁹: "illam sane moderationem opusculo huic interserere praesumam, ut ea, quae secundum Aegyptiorum regulam seu pro asperitate aërum seu pro difficultate ac diuersitate morum impossibilia in his regionibus uel dura uel ardua conprobauero, institutis monasteriorum, quae per Palaestinam uel Mesopotamiam habentur, aliquatenus temperem, quia, si rationabilis possibilium mensura seruetur, eadem obseruantiae perfectio est etiam in impari facultate."

in his relationship with his parishioners. In this matter, Casian followed the pedagogy of John Chrysostom, whom he considered his disciple,¹⁷ and, through him, that of the Apostle Paul. In his commentary on 1 Cor. 7:5, the great archbishop of Constantinople, although a monk and leading a very austere lifestyle, while explaining Paul's advice, revealed the danger posed by the ascetic exaggerations of some of the married couples:

Thus, suppose a wife and husband, and let the wife be continent, without consent of her husband; well then, if hereupon he commit fornication, or though abstaining from fornication fret and grow restless and be heated and quarrel and give all kind of trouble to his wife; where is all the gain of the fasting and the continence, a breach being made in love? There is none. For what strange reproaches, how much trouble, how great a war must of course arise! since when in a house man and wife are at variance, the house will be no better off than a ship in a storm when the master is upon ill terms with the man at the head.¹⁸

It is evident from this paragraph, on the one hand, that asceticism needs to be adapted to the specific situation of each believer, and, on the other hand, the importance of focusing spiritual effort on acquiring pure love [“τί τὸ κέρδος τῆς νηστείας καὶ τῆς ἐγκρατείας, ἀγάπης διερρήγμενης; Οὐδέν.” (“where is all the gain of the fasting and the continence, a breach being made in love? There is none.”)].

3. THE FIRST CASE

The first case of the spiritual investigation presented here is that of an unmarried young woman. Coming to confess, she was asked, among other things, if she harbors feelings of envy. The young woman answered affirmatively and even admitted that she often has malicious inclinations towards those around her. It was explained to her that these feelings are a form of pride manifestation, and she was advised to combat these inclinations. At the same time, she was granted permission to receive communion.

Asked at the next confession if she had managed to fulfill the given recommendation, the young woman claimed that she had tried but succeeded only to a small extent. Moreover, she confessed something particularly important: “Father, before coming to you for the first time, I sometimes realized that I was mean, but since I've been trying not to be like that anymore, I've come to the conclusion that I am much worse than I thought.”

She was advised to continue on this path, and, at the same time, as encouragement, she was assured that she was on the right track. Once again, she was granted permission to receive communion.

At the third confession, she once again described the effort she put into battling her malice and the results: feeble accomplishments and numerous failures. At the same time, she

¹⁷ John Cassian considered himself the disciple of John Chrysostom, whom he also served as a deacon; see Iohannes Cassianus, *De incarnatione Domini contra Nestorium*, VII.31.1, 4, 6, Michael Petschenig (ed.), coll. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 17, Prague/Vienna/Leipzig, 1888, pp. 389–390; John Cassian, *On the Incarnation of the Lord, against Nestorius*, VII.31, trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson, coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II/11, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994, pp. 1575–1576.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homily 19 on First Corinthians*, 7:5–9. Available at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/220119.htm>. Accessed 2024 January 31; Joannes Chrysostomus, *Homiliae XLIV in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios*, 19.1, in PG 61:153^A: “Ἐστω γὰρ γυνὴ καὶ ἀνὴρ, καὶ ἐγκρατευέσθω ἢ γυνὴ μὴ βουλομένου τοῦ ἀνδρός· τί οὖν, ἂν ἐκεῖνος ἐντεῦθεν πορνεύῃ, ἢ μὴ πορνεύῃ μὲν, ἀλλῆ δὲ καὶ θορυβῆται καὶ πυρῶται καὶ μάχηται, καὶ μυρία τῇ γυναικὶ πράγματα παρέχη; τί τὸ κέρδος τῆς νηστείας καὶ τῆς ἐγκρατείας, ἀγάπης διερρήγμενης; Οὐδέν. Πόσας γὰρ ἔνθεν λιοδορίας, πόσα πράγματα, πόσον ἀνάγκη γίνεσθαι πόλεμον;”

confessed again to feeling unworthy, experiencing it even more intensely: “Day by day, I become more aware of the seriousness of my malice. I don’t know, Father, what else to do.” And once again, she was told that she was on the right path and advised to continue this spiritual struggle. And this time as well, she was granted permission to receive communion.

Although she felt an increasing collapse and the helplessness of her nature in the struggle against pride, this young woman was truly on the right path. For her sincere desire for healing (which we can call a ‘pure conscience’) that drove her in her ascetic efforts, she was illumined by the grace of the Holy Spirit, without being consciously aware of this aspect. In the light of grace, she had begun to feel the depth of her fall, thus laying the foundation for her spiritual ascent. This aspect is revealed by St. Sophrony Sakharov, a disciple of St. Silouan the Athonite, who states:

Only the divine light, when it shines within us, allows us to see our sins. ... Instead of advancing spiritually, we subtly witness the ever-growing deadly sins that dominate us. Paradoxically, this sense of spiritual regression is progress. Even if we haven’t yet seen the uncreated light of the Holy Spirit, because of its presence, we see our sins.¹⁹

After a while, the young woman became puzzled. She confessed that she was experiencing an unusual feeling, which she didn’t know how to categorize: a temptation (a malevolent imagination) or a pure experience (a positive reality): “Father, I’ve noticed that after receiving communion, it’s easier for me to struggle against my faults. Is it a temptation, is it my imagination, or is it supposed to be this way?”

Although she didn’t have profound theological knowledge, the young woman began to feel the work of God’s grace in her heart. She practically felt how Christ Himself accompanied her, helping her fight against her faults.

4. THE SECOND CASE

The second case is that of a young married woman with children. She showed zeal for the Christian life, frequently participating in the Eucharistic service, feeling the need to confess her sins regularly, and being sincerely engaged in the struggle against faults. After a while, however, she came to confess an unusual occurrence that she frequently faced after receiving communion: “Father, I’m dealing with something strange, and I don’t understand why. Often, after I receive communion, some misfortune happens to me.

” When asked about what misfortunes she meant, she replied: “Once I lost my wallet, another time I bumped my car in the parking lot, etc. At first, I thought it was just a coincidence, but now I don’t believe that anymore. That’s why I came to ask you: Why is this happening to me? Where am I going wrong?”

The first thing that comes to a spiritual father’s mind in the face of such a confession is that the person in question might not have a pure conscience. But where exactly was the woman going wrong? Unable to provide a clear answer, the priest asked her for some time to think. However, immediately after the end of the discussion, the explanation came to the priest’s mind. But, since he had begun the Eucharistic service, the woman had to receive the answer after the conclusion of the Liturgy.

At the end of the service, the woman came, and before the priest could explain the reason for her troubles, she herself said: “Father, I think I understand why all these things

¹⁹ Arhim. Sofronie [Saharov], *Din viață și din duh/ Sophrony Sakharov, From Life and Spirit*, trans. into Romanian by Ecaterina Voloharu, Pelerinul, Iași, 1997, p. 25.

happen to me. Because I partake with the intention of gaining the things of this world, not those of the Kingdom of God.” This was also the answer the priest was prepared to give her.

This case seems to be taken straight from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Pateric). It seems (or that’s how it happened) that Christ Himself separated the priest from the woman to answer her directly, leaving the confessor only with the task of confirming that she had received the correct answer. It is an example of how God Himself corrects the deviant behavior of some ordinary believers, who, although not driven by malicious intentions, sometimes lose sight of the true meaning of salvation and thus deviate from the true purpose of asceticism.

It is necessary to emphasize, furthermore, the lowliness of mind of the two believers from the examples above. Both submitted to the spiritual analysis what seemed unnatural to them, allowing the priest to pronounce on the matter. Moreover, the second one, even when she found the answer to her dilemma, presented it to her spiritual father for confirmation or rejection. This attitude is a healthy one, as in the spiritual struggle, deviations resulting from the thinking of those lacking experience can have serious consequences.²⁰

Based on these two cases, the following answers can be provided to the two previous questions: 1. John Cassian’s recommendations are applicable to ordinary believers as well. The struggle against principal faults and the pursuit of virtues should be the primary goal for them, too. Therefore, spiritual fathers must direct their parishioners on this path, being followers of it themselves. Otherwise, ascetic practices (fasting, prayers, various bodily disciplines, etc.), carried out by both priests and lay believers, are spiritually unproductive; 2. The ordinary believers can feel the work of God’s grace and His guidance, even in the absence of severe physical asceticism. What truly matters is the sincere desire for God by the believer and a broken spirit, according to the words of the Psalmist David: “A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit, a broken and humbled heart God will not despise” (Ps. 50:19).

5. A FEW CLARIFICATIONS

A few clarifications regarding the two previously presented examples are offered here. The first aspect concerns the right of the spiritual father to disclose publicly information related to the confessions made by the faithful during the Sacrament of Penance. The second pertains to the skill of the spiritual father. The analysis of these aspects will be conducted based on the statements of John Cassian.

In one of his *Conferences* with the great ascetics of Egypt, Cassian presented the case of an elderly monk who, in a moment of anger, publicly rebuked one of his spiritual sons, loudly recalling the sins that the latter had confessed to him in secret. As expected, the old man’s attitude was condemned by St. John Cassian. He did so through the words of abba Moses, one of the great ascetics of Scetis.²¹

However, since Cassian himself presented numerous examples in his works (both positive and negative), he felt compelled to provide clarifications on this matter: *And as I want to give you an instance of this, I will tell you a fact which may supply us with some wholesome teaching, without giving the name of the actor, lest we might be guilty of*

²⁰ See also 2 Pet. 3:15–16.

²¹ See *Conlationes*, II.12–13, pp. 52–58; *Conferences*, II.12–13, pp. 763–767.

*something of the same kind as the man who published abroad the sins of the brother which had been disclosed to him.*²²

Therefore, from his point of view, the spiritual father can publicly expose elements related to the Sacrament of Penance if they are beneficial for the spiritual edification of other believers, provided that the anonymity of the one who confessed is preserved.

Regarding the issue of the spiritual father's skill, St. John Cassian addressed it using the same case of the elderly monk who publicly humiliated his spiritual son by mentioning his sins. In this regard, Cassian openly stated that not all those who become spiritual fathers are sufficiently prepared to guide others. For this reason, he urged believers to seek a spiritual father who is capable of guiding them on the path of virtues. From his point of view, this should be the priority underlying their choice: *Just as all young men are not alike in fervour of spirit nor equally instructed in learning and good morals, so too we cannot find that all old men are equally perfect and excellent. For the true riches of old men are not to be measured by grey hairs but by their diligence in youth and the rewards of their past labours. ... And therefore we are not to follow in the steps or embrace the traditions and advice of every old man whose head is covered with grey hairs, and whose age is his sole claim to respect, but only of those whom we find to have distinguished themselves in youth in an approved and praiseworthy manner, and to have been trained up not on self-assurance but on the traditions of the Elders.*²³

Similarly, one of our contemporary saints—Paisios of Mount Athos (†1994)—, referring to one of the clergy who was a good administrator but was dominated by soul-damaging passions, stated: “He is like the walnut tree, which has good wood for furniture, but if someone sleeps under its shade, he wake up sick.” And to another one, who delivered good teachings but lacked discernment, he said: “You may be tossing golden crowns studded with diamonds to other people, but the way that you throw them can smash heads, not only the sensitive ones, but the sound ones also.”²⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above explanation and analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The struggle against principal faults, recommended by St. John Cassian for monks, should be the primary goal for laypeople as well. The spiritual father must lead the faithful on this path, adapting, however, the level of their ascetic practices to the general situation of each of them;

²² *Conferences*, II.13, p. 764; *Conlationes*, II.13.4, pp. 53²⁶–54³: “*cuius rei uolens uobis exempla proferre, auctoris nomine praetermisso, ne nos quoque illius, qui patefacta sibi fratris uitia publicauit, simile aliquid admittamus, rem tantum gestam, quae instructionem necessariam uobis conferre possit, exponam.*”

²³ *Conferences*, II.13, p. 764; *Conlationes*, II.13.1–2, pp. 52²⁴–53^{1,6–11}: “*Sicut non sunt omnes iuuenes pari modo uel feruentes spiritu uel disciplinis ac moribus optimis instituti, ita nec senes quidem cuncti uno modo uel perfecti possunt uel probatissimi repperiri. diuitiae enim senum non sunt canitie capitis, sed industria iuuentatis ac praeteritorum laborum stipendiis metiendae. ... et idcirco non omnium seniorum, quorum capita canities tegit quosque uitae longaeuitas sola commendat, nobis sunt sectanda uestigia seu traditiones ac monita suscipienda, sed eorum, quos laudabiliter uitam suam ac probatissime conperimus in iuuentute signasse nec praesumptionibus propriis, sed maiorum traditionibus institutos.*”

²⁴ Jerom. Isaac, *Viața Cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul/ Hieromonk Isaac, Saint Paisios of Mount Athos*, trans. into Romanian by hieroschemamonk Ștefan Nuțescu, *Evangelismos*, Bucharest, 2005, p. 451.

2. Engaged sincerely on this path, every believer can feel the help of God's grace and its necessity for his spiritual progress. In this way, the foundation of the intimate relationship between man and God is established;
3. The spiritual evolution of every believer must be closely monitored by the spiritual father to avoid any deviations from the right faith. For this, the priest himself must be genuinely committed to the path of spiritual progress to be able to guide the faithful.

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