

Father Proclu



WORDS OF WISDOM

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REVIVAL OF SAINT PAISIUS'S HESYCHAST SPIRIT IN THE 20TH CENTURY MOLDAVIAN MONASTERIES AND HERMITAGES

**Father Proclu Nicău – a disciple
of Venerable Paisie and
Venerable Cleopa of Sihăstria**

From Its descent upon the Holy Apostles and to this day, the Holy Spirit has continued the work of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, namely that of renewing the creation, the Universe. In particular, people, created in the image of God, are called upon by the Holy Spirit to work together with Him in order to become like God, true sons of God through grace. This renewal was also mentioned, a long time ago, by prophet David: *"Create in me a clean heart, O God,/And renew a right spirit within me."* (Psalm 50, 12, The Orthodox Study Bible) and it starts with repentance.

In every age and time, God has made His chosen ones rise in order to lead the faithful people towards the Evangelical truth and their redemption. Every charismatic Father is a sign sent by God for his generation. His words and pieces of advice contain the answers to the problems

faced by the people living in his time. In this way, the Holy Spirit reveals to His chosen ones new meanings of the Evangelical truth, which contribute to the renewal of spiritual life in the monastic world, but also among laymen.

Divine revealed truth is unknowable in its essence, but it leads to the unification of the mind and heart in their primordial unity, the paradisiac state of Adam before the Fall and while we get closer to the eschaton of this world, theology itself as an expression of this divine Truth becomes increasingly more concise, clearer. In fact, this is exactly what the great ascetic and Orthodox theologian Saint Maximus the Confessor wanted, that the theological doctrine of faith should be a real support that helps the Orthodox ascetic in his spiritual growth, in his striving to unite with Christ, our Truth and life. In his simplicity and humbleness, a monk turns his deeds into philosophy and by practising ascesis and cleaning his heart of passions, he can contemplate God's creation in the Holy Spirit and can participate in the providential work of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who was crucified and rose from the dead on the third day, the Redeemer of mankind, acquiring, after many efforts and trials, the saving grace that makes us adopted children of God.

"According to Saint Maximus' doctrine, a Christian can philosophize in three ways: by commandments, by dogmas and by faith. Commandments clean the mind of passions, dogmas offer an introductory basis for the

knowledge of the essence and faith is the prerequisite for the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.”¹

Orthodox monasticism is, par excellence, the space where theological culture and ascetical practice are harmoniously combined so that a monk that practices ascesis can attain the goal of monastic life, that of becoming one with God, with Christ.

The history of Christianity knows many periods of blooming monastic life, the closest to us being that during the time of Venerable Paisius Velichkovsky. Coming from the Saint Mount Athos together with a group of disciples, Venerable Paisius brought the Athonite hesychast tradition to our country.

Hesychasm has always been present in the Christian monasticism, but it emerged as a dogma in the Church in the 14th century, at the Hesychast Synod to which Saint Gregory Palamas had a great contribution. He taught about the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit or the uncreated energy of God in the life of Christian Orthodox monks, based on his experience of the Holy Grace in Mount Athos.

Mount Athos or the Garden of the Mother of God is the place chosen by the Holy Theotokos as a sacred place of ascesis and spiritual perfection for monks, where women are forbidden to enter. From here, from Mount Athos, monks that lead a holy life through their humble

¹ Prof. S. L. EPIFANOVICI, *Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul și teologia bizantină (Saint Maximus the Confessor and Byzantine Theology)*, translated by Rev. M. Corja, Evangelismos Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, pp. 212-213.

ascetic efforts keep guard over the world, somehow from above the world and are the prophetic witnesses of God's kingdom, to which they participate. The Holy Mother of God Herself is the secret mentor of hesychasts and those who have a broken and humble heart are given the gift of incessant prayer.

The Athonite Fathers have constantly demonstrated an *indisputable sense of Orthodoxy* and true theological knowledge which they acquired by permanent participation in the church worship services, by studying the Patristic writings and, moreover, by their hesychast spiritual experience. Saint Gregory Palamas in his Hagiorite Tome, says that „a true theologian is one who has become worthy of directly feeling God's presence.”²

For what is the purpose of stillness or hesychia? It is to sustain and cultivate the flame ignited inside us after partaking in the Holy Eucharist of our Lord Jesus Christ during the Holy Liturgy: „Fire and light should be for me the partaking in your Most Pure and Life Giving Sacraments, my Saviour [...]”³. We sustain this fire, this divine flame by prayer, especially by repeatedly calling ever so often on the name of Christ, our Saviour, so that He may have mercy on us.

Saint Paisius Velichkovsky said that two things lie at the basis of a monk's spiritual work: receiving the Holy Eucharist and permanently saying the Jesus prayer.

² Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Athosul și duhovnicii pe care i-am cunoscut (Mount Athos and the Spiritual Fathers I have known)*, translated by M. Bojin, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 240.

³ The sedalion from the Canon of Holy Communion

Stillness or hesychia should be the target aimed at by all monks, both living more isolated, in seclusion and of those living in a monastic community, as part of a collectivity.

However, stillness or hesychia can only be achieved by practising obedience, the highest virtue and the very basis of monasticism, according to the great Fathers of the church who practiced a lot of asceticism. The mystery of obedience, revealed only in the Holy Spirit "*which is, at the same time, a mystery and life within the Church*"⁴ is not the same as institutional discipline. The person who obeys and willingly accepts this "slavery", by obeying, is offered in exchange the true freedom of the spirit, according to Venerable Sophronios the Athonite.

At Dragomirna, by organizing the monastic life based on Athonite principles, igumen Paisius placed the mystery of obedience at the very foundation of life in the monastery.

The monks obeyed their igumen, they humbled themselves before each other and they constantly kept saying the Jesus prayer. They would read the writings of the Holy Fathers, confess every evening their thoughts to their spiritual father and participate in all Church services.

Being attracted by the spiritual personality and brotherly love of Venerable Paisius, almost three hundred and fifty monastery residents will gather at Dragomirna.

⁴ Archim. SOPHRONY, *Nașterea întru Împărăția cea neclătită (The Birth into the Unshakable Kingdom)*, translated by Hierom. R. Noica, Reîntregirea Publishing House, Alba Iulia, 2003, p. 179.

Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan

A SPIRITUAL TALK WITH FATHER PROCLU⁷

Father Proclu is a modest monk who started his monastic life at Slatina Monastery. We know that a conversation with his holiness is necessary by the fact that he was blessed by God to live for years as a recluse in the mountains and to accumulate a certain spiritual experience, which most people do not have. Undoubtedly, a recluse's life is rewarded with untold spiritual joys. Yet, so are the storms of thoughts and devilish temptations the recluses have to fight. Only those who have lived in seclusion, in complete solitude, in constant prayer, fasting and being humble may reveal to us some of the secrets of this life.

So let us listen to a few of Father Proclu's confessions:

– Tell us, Father Proclu, how did you come to live in seclusion?

– Fathers, I came to the monastery as a young man. First I was at Sihăstria, then at Slatina, where my spiritual father also lived. That is where I became a monk. I spent

⁷ Recorded in a manuscript belonging to Father Ioanichie Bălan, from 4 November, 1973.

about twelve years in the community, as community life is like a school. I was doing my best looking after the cattle, cutting wood, working in the kitchen or in the church. I could not work much because I was always ill. But I really loved seclusion, solitude and the forest. I liked going to the mountains, hearing and reading the Lives of the Saints, praying alone, following the way of the recluses...

Even though it is not a good idea to trust dreams, one night, after Matins, I prayed a lot to God to help me live in seclusion. Then, falling asleep, I dreamt of a black lake of water and mud and I heard a voice saying to me: «Only those who can cross this lake without sinking can reach beyond and live in quietude». My spiritual father⁸ would always warn me that life in the wilderness was hard, with many temptations, it required great patience, constant prayer and confession. «Woe - he said - for he who is alone! If he falls, there is no one to pick him up». It would be much better, he advised, if I brought someone along, who had the same intentions as myself. Then it could be easier to avoid the devil's snares: thoughts, loneliness, night visions, fear and laziness."

– And after that, did you go to live in the wilderness, Father Proclu?

– Not right then, only after three years. I was ill for a long time. I thought I would not survive. When I got better, I decided to go into the wilderness. I want-

⁸ During that period of time, Father Proclu went to confess to Father Cleopa.

ed to die in solitude. My spiritual father gave me the blessing to give it a try for a while. If I could handle the toil of living in the wilderness, I could stay and if I could not, I was to return to the monastery. Then I fasted for three days, I confessed all my sins since childhood, I partook of the Holy Eucharist, I packed some bread-crumbs and some-thing to wear and I left...

When I reminisce about this, father, I want to cry. How diligent I was then and how I am now! In the wilderness I had great joys of the heart, which I no longer feel now, no matter how much asceticism I may practice. But I also had hard temptations, which I have not had ever since!

After spending a long time in prayer with a humble heart and a mind clear of thoughts, I experienced the greatest joys. But the devils would rejoice over me if I paid little attention or let my thoughts wander when I prayed. In the wilderness, the biggest war you fight is the one with your own mind. And the greatest comfort is to pray constantly with a clean mind, free of thoughts or products of your imagination. When my mind got scattered in prayer, I had great temptations and a lot of damage. And I had to strain myself for a day or two to return to my former state.

– What is the secret of spiritual tranquillity in the wilderness?

– To pray constantly, day and night, and to have your mind set on God all the time.

– Did you pray out loud, with words or in your mind?

– No, it was a wordless prayer, done in secret, in my mind and I would also strive to feel the prayer in my heart. And sometimes, when the grace of the Holy Spirit visited me, I shed tears in prayer. This prayer comforted me the most. When I prayed carefully and with a painful heart, I could overcome the devilish temptations more easily, but if I lost the thread of the prayer and lowered my mind from God to material things, to worries, or devilish delusions, then the devil would wage a terrible war against me. My tears would also fail me and sadness would fill my heart...

– How did the devil tempt you in the wilderness?

– Through delusions and thoughts. During the night terrifying delusions would fight me the most, so that they would scare me and make me leave the woods. Yet, the hardest temptations I suffered during the day, not through delusions, but through evil thoughts.

– What were the most difficult temptations you faced during the day and during the night, which you were mostly confronted with?

– Sometimes it was fornication and delusions I had to battle, recollections, evil thoughts, and passions. When I noticed my imagination would go astray and was taking over, I would fall into despair and bitterness. I used to think that would be my end. I could not drive them away. Then I would start praying out loud and shouting: «Lord, do not leave me! Lord, do not leave me!». During these