

Saint Paisius Velichkovsky and the Hesychast Renewal in Romanian Monasticism of the 18th century

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Abstract:

The first part of this article answers the question, Who is St Paisius highlighting his birth, family, education, spiritual formation, and monastic life in Ukrainian and Romanian monasteries and on Mount Athos, and his return to Moldova where he lived in Dragomirna, Secu and Neamț. The second part is dedicated to a short description of the monastic life in Neamț Monastery. The third part demonstrates the underlying importance of the translation of *The Philokalia* for Orthodox monastic spirituality. In the fourth part we present some rules of living established by St Paisius as experienced in the monasteries where he lived. Finally, we show how St Paisius is respected and venerated today in the Orthodox Church.

Keywords: *St. Paisius, monasticism, philocalia, hesychast renewal, monastic rules*

1. Who was Paisius Velichkovsky?

Born in Poltava, Ukraine, on the 21st of December 1792, he received the name Peter at Baptism, probably after the name of the great Metropolitan Peter Mogila (also spelled Mohyla) of Kiev, a Romanian of origin and author of the *Confession of Faith* discussed and ratified in a Pan-Orthodox synod held in Jassy in 1642 and who died on the 22nd of December 1646, being venerated widely amongst Ukrainian Orthodox. Born into the family of a priest and raised in a spiritually sound environment, Peter manifested from an early age a calling toward the spiritual life. In his parents' home he grew accustomed to praying and

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reading the Holy Scriptures which intensified his longing for God even further (†Daniel 1997: 6).

He studied between 1735-1739 at the renowned Orthodox Academy of Kiev, founded in 1633 by Metropolitan Peter Mogila. The school he attended, although prestigious in the Orthodox East, did not offer young Peter the climate he was seeking, because of the Western scholastic character by which it was influenced at the time. Thus, after graduating he began his search for a higher life in the monasteries of Ukraine. At the beginning of the 18th century one part of the Ukraine was under Polish Catholic domination, and the Uniate movement was in full expansion and hostile to Orthodoxy. At the same time, in the Russia of Peter the Great and Catherine II, influenced by Western rationalism, there were a series of restrictions to spiritual life, contributing massively to the secularization of the Church's life. At the same time, in the West the Age of the Enlightenment was gaining momentum, an age characterized by rationalism and self-sufficiency in opposition to the mystical experience, the true experience of humankind's relationship with God. Hearing through some Ukrainian monks that in the Romanian Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia there are monks with an enhanced spiritual life, probably influenced also by the figure of Peter Mogila, he decided to begin a new stage in his quest for God (†Daniel 1997: 7; Păcurariu 2013: 132-133).

In 1741 he left for the Romanian Principalities, and 1743 found him at Trăisteni Monastery, in today's Buzău area, where he met a great ascetic of those times, Staretz Basil of Poiana Mărului, Ukrainian by birth, today numbered among the Saints of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Seeing brother Peter (now named Plato as Rassaphore) and knowing his spiritual life, the Staretz offered him ordination, but he refused. Here, at Trăisteni, beside Staretz Basil he encountered for the first time the work of translating the texts of the Church Fathers from Greek into the Slavonic and Romanian languages (†Daniel 1997: 8-9; Păcurariu 2013: 133; Drăgoi 2002: 5-27; Ivan 1997: XI-XVII).

Later on, he will dedicate many years of his life to this activity. After four years spent in the Buzău area, during which he learned Romanian and initiated himself into the Romanian monastic life, where the two fundamental principles of that particular monastic life, prayer and

obedience, were followed strictly and intertwined harmoniously, he left for Mt. Athos (†Daniel 1997: 8).

For four years, 1746-1750, he led a life of solitude in the proximity of the Kyparis Skete. In 1750, Staretz Basil, coming to Mt. Athos on a pilgrimage, advised Plato the Monk to lead a communal life and, following his advice, he established a small community where the first monks were Romanians. Also in 1750, he is tonsured as Stavrophore by Staretz Basil and receives the name of Paisius, a name that will remain in collective memory forever. In 1758 he is ordained an hieromonk and, the same year, moved with his community to St Elijah Skete, under the auspices of the Pantokrator Monastery. After a very short while, due to the intense spiritual life and the well organised liturgical program, St. Elijah Skete and its Father Confessor, Hieromonk Paisius, became known throughout Mt. Athos. In those times, at the Pantokrator Monastery was also living the Ecumenical Patriarch Seraphim of Constantinople, whose confessor became the young Hieromonk Paisius (†Daniel 1997: 8-9).

In 1763, St. Paisius, along with sixty-four other monks, came and settled in Moldavia, at Dragomirna Monastery, where he will stay until 1775. Following the peace treaty between the Russians and Turks, signed in 1775 with Austrian intervention, the North of Moldavia, where Dragomirna Monastery was located, is placed under Austrian domination. Under these conditions, St. Paisius, along with 200 monks, moved to Secu Monastery, in Neamț county, where he will stay until 1779. Because the community at Secu grew substantially, so much that the monks could no longer fit inside the monastery, in 1779, with the blessing of the Metropolitan of Moldavia, Gavriil Calimachi, he moved with his community to the Great Neamț Lavra where, after a short while, the number of those who formed the monastic community, being brought by the spiritual personality of Staretz Paisius, grew to over one thousand souls, Romanians, Ukrainians, Russians, Serbians, Bulgarians, Greeks, etc. Staretz Paisius remained at the forefront of this large community until his death, which occurred on the 15th of November 1794 (†Daniel 1997: 9-10; Păcurariu 2013: 134-135; Bălan 1994: 55-57; Dascălu 1994: 52-54; Nicolaiciuc 1994: 104-107; Citterio 2002: 5-11).

2. Spiritual life at Neamț Monastery during Staretz Paisius' time

Having a rich spiritual experience, accumulated since his youth alongside some renowned confessors, like Staretz Basil, and deepened continuously through personal ascetic struggle at Mt. Athos and in the Romanian monasteries (Dragomirna, Secu, and Neamț), Staretz Paisius organized the monastic life of the Neamț Monastery community so well that it became a new Athos. The innovations realized by Staretz Paisius at Neamț Monastery, which have influenced the lives of many monasteries in the whole Orthodox world, can be synthesized thus:

a.) *The Intensification of the rules of monastic life after the Athonite model* (†Daniel 1997: 10-11; Ivan 1994: 114-115), which consisted of a communal life based on self-imposed complete poverty and obedience to the Staretz; the study of Scripture and the Church Fathers; sacrificial love towards the older monks and ministry to the sick; openness toward the devout who came in pilgrimage, showing them hospitality and Christian charity (†Daniel 1997: 11).

b.) Also, Staretz Paisius *intensified the relationship between the communal life and the Prayer of the Heart*. In all three Romanian monasteries (Dragomirna, Secu, and Neamț) at the heart of the monastic life was attendance at all liturgical services which followed the Greek *Typikon*. Prayer inside the Church was continued in private, in the monk's cell or at his work place, employing the Prayer of the Heart. According to the Eastern tradition the Prayer of the Heart (or the Jesus Prayer) was practiced in solitude. Staretz Paisius thus *brought a new element correlating this private effort with the communal life*, in other words, *he brings Hesychasm into the communal life*, which contributed to Romanian monastic spirituality's renewal and consolidation during those years (†Daniel 1997: 11). The services in the Church were performed alternately in both the Slavonic and Romanian languages, and the confessors were, in turn, fluent in both Slavonic and Romanian (†Daniel 1997: 11-12; Căndea 1997: 17-38; Ursu 1997: 39-84; Pelin 1997: 85-120).

c.) An important aspect which defined the life of Staretz Paisius and of the community of Neamț Monastery is the steadfast diligence and preoccupation for the *translation of Patristic texts*. Two teams of translators were at work: one team of Romanian monks who translated

from Greek into Romanian, and another of Slavic monks who translated from Romanian into Slavonic. Staretz Paisius was insistent that each monk, and especially the monastery's father-confessors to be keen connoisseurs of the Holy Scriptures and the Church Fathers. Staretz' daily schedule had two components: during the first part of the day he would receive his subordinates, the confessors, monks, and brothers, and in the afternoon he would retire to his cell not to be seen by anyone until the following day. He was praying and translating, continuously struggling with himself and offering others of the fruits of his spiritual experience. His *magnum opus* is the *Philokalia* in the Slavonic, published in 1793 in St Petersburg under the title *Dobrotoliubie*, one year before his passing (†Daniel 1997: 14-15; Căndea 1997: 25-26; Ică jr. 2002: 72).

3. The importance of printing the Slavonic Philokalia

The Hesychast movement at Neamț Monastery and the translation of the *Philokalia* had a major and immediate impact on the whole of Romanian Monasticism, as well as on those in the Ukraine and Russia. Speaking on the Hesychast movement of the 14th century, initiated by St. Gregory Palamas, and renewed through Staretz Paisius, His Beatitude Daniel, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, shows that when the fall of the Byzantine Empire was prepared (1453), Hesychasm demonstrated that the world should not remain bound in ephemeral kingdoms but rather should attach its heart to the eternal light of Tabor, of the Kingdom of God. This light was experienced by the Hesychast Saints even during their lives on earth as a foretaste of the heavenly Glory. Referring to the printing of the *Philokalia*, the Greek edition printed in Venice in 1782, apparently with the support of the Mavrocordat princely family of the Romanian Principalities, and the Slavonic edition translated at Neamț Monastery and printed in 1793 in St Petersburg, this same author speaks about a Romanian *philokalic destiny* and a *philokalic vocation* which was elevated by the first *Philokalia* with commentary, the Romanian *Philokalia* edited by the most important Orthodox dogmatic theologian of the 20th century, Father Dumitru Stăniloae (†Daniel 1997: 13).

Through the movement of Hesychast renewal, known as the *Paisianist* movement, and through the translation of the *Philokalia*,

Romanian monasticism came to meet the spiritual crisis which, beginning with the 14th century, became more and more pronounced and advanced from Western to Eastern Europe. Hesychasm placed the light that comes from prayer, meditation, and the study of the holy writings, above humanistic rationalism.

4. Some rules of monistic living

In 1763, when he was at Dragomirna Monastery, Staretz Paisius drafted an *Institution (Rule)* (“Așezământul paisian de la Dragomirna (1763)” 2002: 440-455), for the monks at the monastery. He did the same in 1778 at Secu Monastery (“Așezământul paisian de la Secu (1778)” 2002: 457-466), subsequently transferring this latter *Rule* to the Neamț Monastery. In these *Rules* the monastic life was regulated in the minutest details. There was no other way, considering the fact that in the monastic community of Neamț there were over one thousand monks from various ethnic environments.

The First and most important rule, which was compulsory to all those living in the monastery, was *attendance of the daily divine services* (†Daniel 1997: 11; “Așezământul paisian de la Dragomirna (1763)” 2002: 443; “Așezământul paisian de la Secu (1778)” 2002: 465). Concerning this matter the liturgical program was well organized, the monks being divided into groups, some celebrating, while other performed the chanting and liturgical readings.

The Second important rule was *obedience with humility*. “Humble each in front of the other”, says Staretz Paisius, “give precedence to the other and love one another in the Lord. Only then will there be in you one soul and one heart in the Grace of Christ.” (Citterio 1997: 135). It is interesting that the Staretz did not emphasize merely obedience toward the superior, but was asking for mutual obedience among brothers. Obedience, however, is not a goal in itself, but it assists in the internalization of the prayer (Citterio 1997: 136). Humble obedience and silence are not seen as simple exercises of one’s will, but as works of molding the heart to allow it to immerse even deeper into prayer. According to Staretz Paisius there is no Prayer of the Heart in the true sense of the word without true obedience from which meekness results.

Daily confession of all sins was also a rule followed with great stringency. “Each is to confess and discover in their Confessor all their heart’s mysteries, not concealing anything, for without frequent confession one cannot achieve the straightening of the soul and guidance toward God’s path” (“Așezământul paisian de la Secu (1778)”, 3, 2002: 464).

In their cells, monks and brothers were advised to *read the Holy Scripture and from the writings of the Holy Fathers* (“Așezământul paisian de la Secu (1778)” 2002: 464; Citterio 1997: 143-144), and outside them each had to fulfill their role *working with their hands what is needed for the monastic life*, so that there is no need to go out into the world to buy their necessities (“Așezământul paisian de la Secu (1778)” 2002: 466). Some of the brothers had the *responsibility of caring for the aged and sick*, the monastery housing a small hospital called *bolniță* (infirmary) (“Așezământul paisian de la Secu (1778)” 2002: 465). Caring for the ailing was not only a response to a concrete and pressing necessity, St. Isaac the Syrian (or St. Isaac of Nineveh) says that “there is no exercise in humility more effective than to comfort the sick” (Isaac the Syrian, apud Delkeskamp-Hayes 2012: 162; Sava 2012: 40). Thus, caring for the ailing was both a necessity, a philanthropic act, and an exercise of humility.

The final goal of all their spiritual labors was *perfected love for God and toward others*. Staretz Paisius used to say: “When I see the brothers, I do not consider them brothers, but angels” (Citterio 1997: 131). In others Paisius saw Christ. “When you are angry with your brother”, said the Staretz, “you are angry not at him, but at Christ Himself” (Citterio 1997: 145).

Synthesizing these principles and norms of living we easily observe the fact that the Paisian Hesychast movement is not an exterior reform-movement, but a mystical one, of interior renewal, a movement that transforms a certain brother into a *Monk (kalos gherontos)*.

5. Paisius Velichkovsky in contemporary Orthodoxy

In 1988 the Russian Orthodox Church named Staretz Paisius among the Saints, calling him *St Paisius from Neamț*. In December 1989 the totalitarian and atheistic Communist system was obliterated, democracy

being instituted in its place. In this new context, the Romanian Orthodox Church initiated a multitude of activities and projects that were not permitted until then. Among those it was the canonization of some older and more recent saints. In the June 1992 session of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in conjunction with other Saints, St Paisius from Neamț was canonized also; his Feast Day was assigned as being the 15th of November, the day of his passing (*Sfântul Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române – Sesiunea de lucru pe anul 1992. Sumarul ședinței din 19-20 iunie 1992* 1992: 163-194; *Slujba, Viața și Acatistul Sfântului Cuvios Paisie de la Neamț* 2004).

A wondrous thing happened at Neamț Monastery in May of 1986. In the middle of the alleyway between the main Church and the bell tower the pavement began to rise and open. Seeing this, the Fathers of the monastery dug into the ground and found the relics of a Saint, incorrupt and exuding a fragrant aroma. They gathered them in a great hurry and hid them in the Altar, under the altar table. When the Securitate, alerted of this event, came to investigate, the Fathers told them that they had laid the relics together with the others in the monastery's crypt. Some say that these relics are Saint Paisius's, while others express doubts.

In 1990 the relics were taken out of the Holy Altar and placed in a shrine in the church, to be venerated by the faithful. Until this day these relics bear the name of "Unknown Saint."

In 2014, when 220 years since Saint Paisius's passing was celebrated, Metropolitan Theophan of Moldavia and Bukovina decided that the grave of Saint Paisius, located in the main Church's nave at Neamț Monastery, was to be opened. Inside they discovered parts of a Saint's relics, no doubt the remains of St. Paisius, relics which this year, 2015, on the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, Neamț Monastery's dedication day, were laid in a silver-gilt shrine, fashioned through the support of His Beatitude Daniel and the current Staretz of Neamț Monastery, Archimandrite Benedict.

About St. Paisius, many articles and books have been written, which showcase his holy life, his competencies as a great organizer and agent of Monastic life renewal, as well as his scholarly interests and efforts. Personally, I had the honour to participate in a multitude of cultural and spiritual events dedicated to St Paisius from 1990 until today,

and to be appointed to the Liturgical Commission assigned to compose the divine service of St Paisius from Neamț. Currently, I supervise a doctoral thesis with the title *The Typikon in the Activities of Saint Paisius Velichkovsky and in the Monasteries in which He Lived*. In the contemporary activities of Neamț Monastery, both cultural and spiritual, the presence of the Paisian spirit can be distinguished, yet more importantly, his presence among us is noticeable in the multitude of pilgrims who visit Neamț Monastery every day.

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