

The Theology of Hope. Reflections on Life and Death

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Abstract:

I tried to prove it in this paper, through the examples of Romanian saints, the innology and worship of the Church that true life in Christ and fulfillment (here and in eternity) or, as we call it, holiness, must be available to everyone. The deeds of the saints and their lives go beyond any local determination and they are useful to us, who must imitate them, constituting themselves as true role models. I will focus on the innology of cult books, on the Lives of the Saints and on the contributions of Romanian and foreign theologians. It hurts me that for most Christians today, the lives of the saints are a fortuitous and useless reading. Modern man, attached to the transient aspects of this world, no longer sees the saints as examples or ideals to be attained, but replaces them with the „heroes” of our days. So, I tried to show that our life can be fulfilled through the life of Christ and that what we live through the worship and ethos of the Church is real, healing, and purposeful or fulfilling to man.

Keywords: *Holy Fathers, Patericon, life, death, experience*

Introduction

A lot has always been written and said about life and death, about heaven and hell, about God and nothingness and so on (My concerns have also been constant in this regard. I mention a few titles here: Dinu 2004: 202-213; 2007: 275-298; 2009: 61-84). The teachings of the Orthodox Church always confirm to us that the fulfillment of man consists in the realization of holiness. The fact that there have been and still there are saints, people with sound principles about the world, about God, and about themselves is a testimony to the holiness of Christ Our Savior. This reality cannot but have an effect on man and humanity, through the work and grace of the Holy Spirit. The possibility of holiness demonstrates that divine sanctitude was not incarnated only to remain the object of worship, but to morally benefit mankind by bearing saints (*cf. Sfinți români și apărători ai*

legii strămoșești 1987: 5. A recently published book that we recommend to everyone: Calinic 2020).

But this paper refers to death, a somewhat back-side of holiness, and here I want to make a positive presentation of the life-death, holiness-sin or sacred-profane parallel. The present study is intended to be not only a historical-phenomenological presentation of holiness, with elements from the cult of saints, but it is also aimed at highlighting the transgression of death and hell. I believe that by emphasizing the features of the saints and by describing holiness, that is, by outlining the virtues, the teaching about death with all its existential complex is better reflected. I will focus on the innology of cult books, on the Lives of the Saints and on the contributions of Romanian and foreign theologians. For most Christians today, the lives of the saints are a fortuitous and useless reading. Modern man, attached to the transient aspects of this world, no longer sees the saints as examples or ideals to be attained, but replaces them with the „heroes” of our days. Moreover, the saint is perceived today as a maladapted, or, at best, as a superman, and holiness, as a postulate related to the realm of the fantastic. Therefore, I took the responsibility to demonstrate in this paper, through the examples of Romanian saints, that holiness is and must be available to everyone. The deeds of the saints and their lives go beyond any local determination and they are useful to us, who must imitate them, constituting themselves as true role models.

What and, especially, who is death?

I intentionally asked the subtitle question in this way and not otherwise, because I believe that death is not something abstract, as some would think, but it is a reality that we, as Christians, should at least „see” by transposing it against Christ-Life. If He is the Life, the Way, the Truth (John 10: 30), then we can think that death is that which belongs to the person and not to the abstract. Death is or can be a spiritual journey. Death is a tragedy, a great turning point or the hardest test, the only certainty, as some would say (*Cum mor cuvioșii. Despre adormirea robilor lui Dumnezeu* 2007: 5: „Death usually frightens man, although it is the most inevitable thing for everyone. Weeping, wailing, strengthening medicines, striving for a godly attitude or, most wonderfully, joyful sorrow, as it happens in Orthodox monasteries, during the service perdomed at the

passing of the soul of a sleeping monk”). We all realize that *death is a part of life*, that *people are dying*, and we could go on emphasizing many common phrases. *Death is a fact* that we must also see through the viewpoint of a holy objectivity, that is, death is not only a perspective that becomes a memory, but it is the only finality that expresses man or shows his being in its fullness: the soul that will return from where it came, and the body that disintegrates into its constituents.

Death is rest, freedom from toil and the worries of the world. But when you see one of your acquaintances leaving this place, do not be bitter, but break your heart, ponder upon your life, examine your conscience, think that this end awaits you after a while. Be wiser, let the fear caused by the death of another embrace you, stop laziness, think of the deeds you committed, correct your sins, change for the better,

said St. John Chrysostom in his book: *Homilies to the poor Lazarus*.

From the above quote we could highlight the fact that at least the idea of death if not its integrity has preoccupied the human mind, since the biblical account of creation. Between the present life and the future one, in the middle there is death. Lying in a coffin, or locking yourself in a grave during life, is the strongest „metaphor” for „designating” mortification. No one escapes death. We are all subjected to the pain of seeing a loved one around us, leaving for the life „beyond”. This event that was arranged with perfect wisdom by God brings man worries, fears and superstitions so that all his life he keeps thinking that tomorrow or one day he will die and his existence on earth will end or that he may even disappear forever. Mankind as a whole has an uncertain, diffuse and even distorted view of what happens at the hour of death or beyond the grave or at certain times after someone's death. The permanent memory of death is the most „abstract” stage of the spiritual journey and for an Orthodox Christian it is not an anamnesis, a dry and theoretical recollection of a moment or of a torturous state represented by years of illness, years of suffering and so on. The remembrance of death is not a meeting or a gathering, a round table and a symposium, but a step that is difficult to climb, an essential psycho-somatic journey. I could emphasize this by arguing with a paraphrase from the funeral service: „Blessed is the way you walk today, for a place of rest has been prepared for you” (Paraphrase from the funeral service of the laity, in *Aghismatar* 2016) and with a beautiful apophthegm from the Patericon:

It was said of Abba Sisoës, that when he was about to leave this world and the Fathers sat beside him, his face shone like the sun. And he said unto them: Behold, Abba Antony has come!... And again his face turned terrible as the sun and they were all in awe. And he said unto them, Behold, the Lord has come! And the Lord said: Bring me hither the vessel of the wilderness. And immediately he soul left his body. And there was a lightning, and the whole house was filled with a wonderful scent (Sisoës 1990: 209).

In the above examples I think that death is outlined more as a presence of Christ and less as a presence of someone or something harmful to man, much less evil. Only those who want to abide by the correctness of reason can speculate and can make even Christ the Lord responsible as giver of death to a fellow man. In fact, this attitude is currently in fashion, that is, to nitpick and look for any fault from faith, from the Church and ultimately from God [I refer for instance to the book of the philosopher Liiceanu. Starting from the beginning from a position irreconcilable with the reality of the Church, with the Trinity and with Jesus himself, the author considers that “Theology creates mythical complications that later on does not know how to introduce into reality. It looks like someone who would makes a ball from a thread and then, unraveling it, gets entangled by it”] (Liiceanu 2020: 63). [However, this approach is quite far from that of another contemporary intellectual, Dan Puric (Puric 2020)].

Of course, for some people, perhaps for most of them, death is an unspeakable tragedy, a great tribulation or the hardest ordeal. Separation from our loved ones is hard to bear and everything we had before, the way we did the usual things, suddenly are no longer possible. Therefore, death is a reality and the entry into a totally different state from what it was before. If we look at it from a simple, human perspective, death appears as a serious or painful feeling, a fear that is easily instilled inside the human being. Waiting for the moment of death does not bring people closer, but on the contrary most of them are afraid not of the moment of the end itself, but of the fact that they will suffer or be in pain. Many are tempted by the fear of the unknown, of the world beyond, together with the feeling of purity before „the dreadful judgment seat of Christ”. Most of us, especially those tormented by bodily ailments, await death as a deliverance, although this induced feeling is not exactly Christian, but rather an attitude of false courage, because the anguish of death still remains in us on the way to heaven (Larchet, trans. by Bojin 2004: 220).

Let us ponder and do some introspection and look for depths of meaning on the reality of death. This must begin with the Bible or with the certain and inescapable teaching of Christ the Savior. By allowing death, God prepares by His providence the return of man to the heavenly state. Absolutely and ultimately, in an identical manner with the primordial act of creation, this state was fulfilled through the Birth, Sacrifice, and Resurrection of Christ.

For others, death is also a cure for spiritual infirmities. Biblical reference texts may be these: „Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; and if it dies, it will bear much fruit” (John 12: 24) and

But someone will say: How do the dead rise? And with what body do they come? You are fools! What you sow does not give life unless it is dead. And what you sow is not the body that will be, but empty grains, perhaps of wheat, or something else; And God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him, and to every seed a body. Not all bodies are the same body, but one is the body of men and another is the body of cattle and another is the body of birds and another is the body of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; but another is the glory of the heavenly things and another of the earthly things. Another is the brightness of the sun and another is the brightness of the moon and another is the brightness of the stars. For each star is different from the others in its brightness. So is the resurrection of the dead: the body is sown in corruption and it is resurrected into perfection; It is sown into dishonor, it is raised in glory, it is sown into weakness, it is resurrected in power; it is sown as a natural body, it is resurrected as a spiritual body. If it is a natural body, it is also a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15: 35-44).

Revelations about the end of man and the life to come are contained in the Holy Scripture, both in the Old and in the New Testament (Ps. 61: 13; Matthew 16: 27; Romans 2: 6; Revelation 2: 23). A synthesis of the biblical teaching on death and the afterlife is well reflected in the Symbol of Faith: „I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come”. To deny eternal life means not only the denial of Holy Scripture, but of God Himself. If there is an immortal God, then there is also eternal life for the rational earthly beings, made in the image of Dumnezeu (Alexiev, trans. by Ciocioi 2013: 54). We, as Christians believe that death prevented the perpetuation of evil. Without it, the state of sinfulness would have become permanent and all would have turned to self-destruction.

Also in the Bible we can read that God did not create death and does not enjoy the death of the living:

For God did not make death and does not enjoy the loss of the living. He has created all things towards life, and the creatures of the world are redeemed; there is no seed of destruction in them, and death has no power over the earth (Wisdom of Solomon 1: 13-14).

When God commanded the first men not to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge, He also said to them, „On the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2: 17). We all know that Adam disobeyed God's command, even though he was aware of God's words. So this violation of the commandment had consequences for both him and his descendants. Thus death came into the world as the fruit of sin committed. The Holy Apostle Paul would also write: „Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death was passed upon all men, for that all have sinned into it” (Romans 5: 12).

From the above texts I believe that we should first understand that Adam died in his soul at the moment of committing sin, thus losing communion with God, a communion he had enjoyed until then. The body died after several years, which was also due to sin. Therefore, eternal life involves not only the immortality of the human soul, but also its appearance before the Judgment of God, as the Holy Apostle Paul says: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive according to what he has done in the flesh, either good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5: 10). There are people who deny the immortality of the human soul and also the resurrection of bodies; they are like the Sadducees who were against the Pharisees. The book of the *Acts of the Apostles* also mentions that „the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angels, nor spirits, but the Pharisees confess both” (Acts 23: 8).

Therefore at the end of this first part of the study, what can we say about death: is it something or someone? I have tried, so far, to define at least in part what death is, and in the other two parts of this study I will emphasize the biblical and patristic view on death. I also remind you that these reflections on death I presented best in my notes and comments to Dominique Beaufils' book, which I translated into Romanian: “Your faith has saved you. An orthodox view on disease and death” (Beaufils, trans. by Dinu: 2009: 255). In response to the above, I believe that the words of our

Savior Jesus Christ are relevant. Speaking of the death of the righteous and of the sinner, He gave us this teaching: for a sinful man death is a torment, and for a righteous man it is „beautiful”: „You fool, this night your soul will be asked for” (Luke 12: 20), He said of the first, while the second will be carried by angels in the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16: 22). Therefore, the category of death belongs to God and to ourselves. The manner of our death depends on God, and we can make it beautiful or terrible during our lives, according to whether or not we keep His commandments. In any case, death is not a chimera, an illusion, but a concrete fact, a step or a state or completely different from what we feel and live on earth when we unfold the thread of daily life. From the Holy Scriptures and from the supreme example of the life and activity of Christ and, especially, from the pericopes of His Sacrifice and Passion, we can find the pure, orthodox answer that death is something allowed by God Himself, something that can be transfigured by human dignity and proper attitude. The palette of death is so varied and people go from the death sought, desired by some as an act of mad courage to death into God or as a fulfillment of His will. We say that through His death, Christ destroyed sin and compensated the sins of all people, and from this we can conclude that death can also be diabolical, evil, or even an act tolerated by God for correction. In no case can death compete with God, no matter how much we charge the divine and the divinity, as Mr. Liiceanu likes to express himself philosophically (Liiceanu 2020: 59 – „All religions have overloaded the transcendent. And that is because it has no limit, it can be charged with anything, and anything can be said about it”).

Death reflected in the thoughts and experience of the Holy Fathers

As a small preamble to this part of the study, I would refer to the situation of the ancient Jewish people. Special reflections and ideas on death are found in all peoples, but obviously we, as Christians feel connected to Jewish history and spirituality, hence the origin of many experiences and teachings over the centuries.

For the Jews of antiquity, death meant to be reunited with the parents and ancestors (*cf.* Genesis 25: 8 „Abraham died in his old age, full of days, and was reunited with his people”; then the idea is repeated in chapters 37: 35, Jacob „did not want to be comforted, but said: crying, I will go

down to the home of the dead to my son! And so his father mourned him”). As for the cause of death, the Jews regarded it as a punishment for sin (Genesis 2: 17), and it was preceded, as it is today, by some physical suffering such as fever, suffocation, spleen, burning (Deuteronomy 28: 22), infection (Leviticus 26: 25), plague (Exodus 9: 9). I found many aspects related to death, from a Jewish perspective, in the studies and in the books written by Prof. Priest Petre Semen (Semen 1997: 104). Thus, it is known that immediately after death, relatives and dear ones closed the eyes and the mouth of the sleeping person, thereby showing concern for the deceased, because they likened death to sleep. When righteous Jacob was called to Egypt by Joseph, he was afraid of the difficult journey, but the Lord encouraged him, saying,

I am the God of your father, do not be afraid to go to Egypt, for there I will give you a great rank. I will go with you into Egypt Myself, and I will also bring you out from there, and Joseph will close your eyes with his own hand (Genesis 46: 3-4).

Immediately after death, the person who had passed away was given the last kiss, also called „*the last kiss*”. When Jacob died, his beloved son, Joseph, kissed him like that. „And then Joseph fell upon his father's face, and wept upon him, and kissed him” (Genesis 50: 1).

It is known that the Holy Fathers were always inspired by Scripture, that they are tributary, in a positive sense, to biblical models and to that way of life. Especially regarding the end of their earthly path was inspired by the life of the biblical ancestors. Everything and especially death was of sacred value to them. It can be seen in their sayings and deeds that the figures of speech, useless words and multiple gestures disappear, leaving room and even favoring the natural approach, of the unparalleled encounter with God. Nowadays, when we say „death”, „grave”, „coffin” and so on, we think of the subject and of the object as such, in all its frightening materiality and constitution. Without realizing the spiritual connotations to a great extent. Once upon a time, the simple and direct language of the monks and especially the hour of their end was in the image of their life, that is, a true “epic of simplicity” (Bădăliță, trans. by Ilinca 1998: 123). Parents of old and of our times, the real ones, were and are without ambiguities and without metaphors when it came to the death of someone or even their own! Words were replaced by sacred and small gestures, by extraordinary appearances or visions, but not by imagination, by steps or

by a step they had already taken during their last breaths. It is very interesting that in their last moments, any boundary between words and things, between themselves and other people around them, disappeared and they escaped the world of materiality and went into the sensitive world of spiritual feelings, but equally palpable and real. From here one can see in the case of the Neptic Fathers and with any of them the preference for sign language (or nonverbal language) to the detriment of words. But let us address more conclusive examples for a better synthesis of these ideas.

Thus, in a broader apophtegm Evagrius the Monk (Evagrius 1990: 70), advises monks to think about death when they are in their cells and not only then, but also when they are on the road or have various chores to do. Thus, on the one hand, the memory or *remembrance* of hell where sinners dwell in labor, in fire and shame, in darkness and punishment, must bear sighs and fear in the soul of the monk. On the other hand, the recollection or remembrance of the righteous, of those who rejoice in heaven, must urge the monk to follow them. The required condition is easy to understand, but difficult to fulfill, but if the monk - and the comparison to every man is obvious - acts accordingly, his soul bears fruits such as: liberation from filthy thoughts, the birth of spiritual weeping, divine comfort and consolation and finally *inner peace and quietness* of man.

Abba Evagrius said: when you are in your cell, gather your thoughts, remember the day of death, then see the death of the body, remember the need. Take the trouble, defame the vanity of the world, so that you can always spend your days in the love of peace and not lose strength! Remember the state of things in hell ... Think of the scary and terrible judgment! Recall that which is destined for sinners: the shame before God ... the labors, the eternal fire, the sleepless worm, the tartar, the darkness, the gnashing of teeth, the fears and punishments! Also remember the goodness that is meant for to the righteous, the boldness before God ... the kingdom of heaven ... its joy and delight! Bring the memory of both of them to you! ... Try not to forget if even for a moment, when you are inside your cell or outside... (Evagrius 1990: 70).

In this broad paragraph I believe that the main idea is that those who carry out these practices are not pessimists or anxious, spiritual retards and religious masochists and do not have simple representations of the phenomenon of death, future torment or future goodness. Actually it highlights *the clerical progress* (Teşu 2001: 92). These spiritual endeavors, the true driving force of life into Christ, bear fruit such as unceasing

weeping, vigilance, purity in thought and deed (Saint Peter of Damascus 1995: 186).

Here is another example.

The same Abba Theophilus said: what kind of fear and trembling and need do we have to see when the soul separates from the body. For the armies of the hostile rulers, the masters of darkness, the masters of cunningness come to us... And they stand and disclose all that he has done... This is the hour of his need, until he sees what his end will be... Also, the powers of the light stand beside the armies of darkness and they bring forth all his good deed... So let us endeavour to come before God pure and untainted, full of peace, so that we are worthy to hear Him say: Come, ye blessed of my father, you will inherit the Kingdom which was prepared for you from the foundation of the world for ever and ever. Amen (Theophilus 1990: 93-94).

From the above words it can be seen that both Evagrius the Monk and Abba Theophilus urge, listen, command... There are ample descriptions of the delicate moment of separation from the body in which the mind and the soul, reason and feelings intertwine. The verbs used are strong, sonorous and they convey a lot of determination and confidence: „...sitting in your cell... gather your mind... think... look... understand... take the trouble... despise the vanity of this world... leave behind... imagine that scary and terrifying seat... ”.

In many accounts of the Fathers other interesting details can be found (Larchet, trans. by Bojin 2006: 51). Abba Sisoës: „...behold, the angels come to take me away...” (Sisoës 1990: 209), as well as the pious Isaiah the Anchorite who summarizes exhortations:

Before you start or proceed with anything during the day, always remember and think about where you are and where you are going, when you will leave the body; and do not languish in your soul in any day. Think of the honor that all the saints have received and let their zeal inspire you little by little. But think again of the condemnation of sinners and guard yourself against the evil at all times (Isaiah the Anachorite 1991: 126).

Likewise, Abba Anthony the Great states that „death, if man has it in his mind, is immortality; and if he does not meditate upon it, it is death. But it is not death that we must fear, but the perishing of the soul” (Saint Anthony the Great 1999: 25).

Even in those moments of transition, temptation can happen: the evil one wants to take the crown of the saints (The lives of the saints, in

„Sinaxarus”, May, day 3: The life of St. Timothy and Mavra, his wife: <https://doxologia.ro/viata-sfant/viata-sfantului-mucenic-timotei-mavra-sotia-lui>), their spiritual work and therefore when you feel tempted or tried by something in this world, „immediately bring death before your eyes and you will never covet any evil or worldly thing” (St. Anthony the Great, Teachings on the Moral Life of Men and on Good Conduct, (<https://www.crestinortodox.ro/carti-ortodoxe/filocalia-i/sfantul-antonie-mare-invataturi-despre-viata-morala-oamenilor-despre-buna-purtare-80262.html>), pp. 34-35).

In other words, knowing that you are a mortal man, you should always meditate and ponder on your own death and remove any vain imagination. If you let it enter your mind, beware lest you be immediately abducted by it, but rising a moment above it, remember death, and think that it is better to know that thou hast overcome this deception of pleasure (St. Anthony the Great, Teachings on the Moral Life of Men and on Good Conduct, (<https://www.crestinortodox.ro/carti-ortodoxe/filocalia-i/sfantul-antonie-mare-invataturi-despre-viata-morala-oamenilor-despre-buna-purtare-80262.html>), p. 45). Paraphrasing Abba Sisoës again, we could conclude: it is not a great thing to think about God, but it is great to see yourself at the foundation of the whole edifice (Sisoës 1990: 209). Even at the moment or hour of death, the approach on which we have focused here, man must and can guard his soul against falling, to use his body to cut off the thoughts of any idleness or distraction, to have diligence in order to bear salvation, that is, to reach Christ (Evagrius Ponticus 1999: 84).

And to observe the vision of other Fathers, let us now approach a text of St. John Cassian who speaks of a here and now of death. He is of the opinion that „having the icon of death in front of us every day, as we cannot know when it may come”, we can guard ourselves against that tomorrow, for „we know that we have no use of righteousness or renunciation of earthly things, nor of fasts and vigils” [(Saint John Cassian 1999: 127). Another author, Mark the Ascetic, goes so far as to say that „the fear of Gehenna and the love of the kingdom of God give strength to endure trouble” (Mark the Ascetic 1999: 267)] if we continue to be possessed by anger and hatred.

We now turn to another major reality of our identity: what does the orthodox liturgical practice say? In order answer, it is worth noting that in

addition to the Scripture and the *Paterikon*, what happens during our worship services and ordinances is defining. Most liturgical texts in the Orthodox cult make extensive reference to the spiritual practice. One can speak of a true anthology of such texts that impregnate the services of the Church with the defining characteristic of Orthodoxy, which emphasizes the ascetic practice involving spiritual hardships, toils and spiritual struggles and especially „metanoia”, a change of mind, a change of our way of thinking, of seeing things. All the spiritual realities mentioned above can be found in the services, ordinances, prayers and texts that urge us towards the practice of a spiritual attitude or approach regarding death. We call it rather: spiritual work = πνευματική εργασία (*pneumatikí ergasía*).

In one of the morning prayers we are reminded of the attention or care that we should have as concerns our soul because, „without notice, the judge will come and the deeds of each will be revealed” (*Horologion* (Rugăciunile dimineții) (Morning Prayers) 1992: 9). In a beautiful morning prayer, St. John Chrysostom prays to God to give him “tears together with remembrance of death and humility” (*Horologion* (Rugăciunile dimineții) (Morning Prayers) 1992: 15), which in the consciousness of the Christian represents the determining factor not only for the uninterrupted spiritual ascent that we should fulfill, but also as a solution for salvation.

In the order of the daily Midnight Office, there is a troparion where it is said:

On the terrible day pondering, oh, my soul remain vigilant, start your candle and light it with oil for you do not know when you will hear the voice that says: Behold the Bridegroom! But see, my soul, do not sleep, for you will remain outside like the five virgins. But with vigilance, await to meet Christ (*Horologion* (Miezonoptica de toate zilele) (The Daily Midnight Office) 1992: 27).

Because this *pneumatikí ergasía* is certainly frightening, painful and ultimate, as in fact it is about the moments when the soul has to leave the body and to appear before the Judge to receive its reward, that is why the Fathers urge that the whole life of man should be an expectation of this moment. Making the moment of death permanent voluntarily means to reflect on one's own self with vigilance and discernment, essential conditions for a different „journey” than the daily one. Since we are but travellers to our heavenly homeland (Teșu 2001: 99) everything we do should have a higher meaning and we ought to be thankful to God and His

saints while at the same time responsible for ourselves and to our fellow men.

On the same coordinates there is also the following text which states:

How frightening your judgment will be, oh, Lord! Angels standing in front, people gathering in the middle, books opening, facts searching thoughts wondering. What will be the judgment for me, the one born in sin? Who will put out my flame? Who will light my darkness, if you do not have mercy on me, oh, Lord, You who love men so dearly? (*Horologion* (Pavecernița cea Mare) (The Great Compline) 1992: 165).

And in the prayer of St. Basil the Great at the service of the Great Pentecost quoted above, it is said: „Give our souls humility and make our thoughts ponder on the question of what will be at Your fearful and rightful judgment” (*Horologion* (Pavecernița cea Mare) (The Great Compline) 1992: 166). Another important Father in this service is Paul the Monk, who prays to the Mother of God: „And at the time of my passing, guard my wicked soul and chase away the dark faces of the cunning devils... And on the day of the dreadful judgment, *save me from eternal toil...*” (*Horologion* (Pavecernița cea Mare) (The Great Compline) 1992: 174).

Therefore, Orthodox practice confirms the Scripture and the spiritual life, the emphasis being not on a formal confession, only with words, but on a confession with the heart that gives birth to a strong faith in man, a river of life that transcends the daily approach of death. The spiritual present provides a warranty of the future into Christ. For the Fathers of the Church, the road of life seems to be long and many do not even see its end because they do not want to see it out of creatures, the events that create destiny or out of the Gospel of the Lord. Modern man lives in the present moment and he imagines that he will live forever. But whoever breaks this vicious circle by reminding himself that he will die, truly realizes that one day he will close his eyes but that particular day is not known to him so he will do nothing but think of straightening his life. He will set aside greed, injustice and passion; he will love his enemies and no longer give way to slander; he will give alms and no longer focus on the earth, but on heaven, and in the end he would think of nothing but his soul, of God and heaven (Miniat, trans. by Fecioru 1996: 134). For if we have the memory of death and judgment in our souls, it is certain that we will repent and be permanently ready for the great passage to God, and so our lives will change, especially since we do not know when this hour will come.

Don't be proud, oh man, since you are dust and ashes! Why do you raise your eyebrow that will soon rot? Do not exalt yourself above the clouds, but know that you are earth and ashes: you have been taken from the dust and you will return to the dust.

Therefore,

remember, man, that sooner or later you will see the heavens, you will see the angels, and you will appear before the dreadful throne of Christ... (Saint Teophan the Recluse, trans. by Tănăsescu 2000: 17).

This remembrance is added to the judgment of God and with due reward or punishment, but the main idea is that the soul will be free from error (Evagrius 1990: 75). The man or rather the weary one who does so acquires purity of the soul, a spiritual work beneficial for this life here and for the one beyond because he lived wisely. No Holy Father recommends this spiritual work just for the sake of an ascetic experience, but they all see the remembrance of death and judgment only as the means of acquiring other virtues that adorn the soul. Through such an approach, the fruit of happy toil, the great encounter of man with God is prepared – a serene encounter, detached from any material aspect, without selfishness and petty regrets, without bodily nostalgia, etc. – and this can only be beneficial to man.

Conclusions

When you write about thanatology and the contemporary world, it is especially difficult because today's man can only stand ephemerality in television news. Everything else seems eternal to him, especially his own life. I wrote in a previous study, quoted in the first note here, that the world today reminds us of the lamentation at the river of Babylon: „At the river of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137: 1). It is about the holy longing for the Kingdom of God that comes through repentance: „Man who has never had this experience, even for a very short time, who has never felt exiled from God and from true life, will never understand what Christianity is” (Schmemmann 1974: 22).

Man must be seen through the prism of his final dignity which entails the manifestation of responsible freedom. The human being is more important than anything else before God, even if he once fell from His sight. Paraphrasing the words from the funeral service of the laity, a very

optimistic service even as regards the realities of the future, we could say that man, who once appeared as a king over all beings, became a slave of his own self because of sin – and by an irresponsible counsel - but nevertheless the situation can be restored by living into and thinking of Christ who said that the kingdom of heaven is taken by diligence, and those who endeavor manage to seize it (Matthew 11: 12). In addition to the communion with God, there is also the communion with the other people, a true test of the spiritualization or sanctification of the man called to rise in Christ and His creation (Crainic 1994: 101). What is certain is that we have abundant models of authentic life, without inappropriate anxieties and distortions, both in the Scripture and in the living Tradition of the Church. Worship and prayer are also within our reach, all forming that orthodox ethos we need so much.

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