

Romanian theologian, there can only be “Churches in communion” or “communion between Churches”, which can only be achieved through “open sobornicity”. According to him, “sobornicity is the perfect Christian unity in the confession and living by all Christians in communion of the apostolic heritage; so that it can be said that the one Church that ecumenism must aim to achieve is the apostolic and sobornic Church” (p. 339). According to Stăniloae, open sobornicity is an ecclesiological vision that places the limits of the Church beyond its canonical borders.

The present work is intended to be a tribute to the thinking of the Romanian theologian, a “modest attempt to highlight the theological genius of Father Dumitru Stăniloae”, his ecumenical commitment and the contributions he made within the ecumenical movement, as a balanced theologian, anchored in patristic thinking, in the spirit of the Fathers from the East and the West and open to dialogue with those of other religious traditions.

Rev. Dr. Caius Claudius CUȚARU

Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Athosul și duhovnicii pe care i-am cunoscut. Însemnări 1974-2015 (Mount Athos and the Confessors I Met. Notebooks 1974-2015)*, translation by Marinela Bojin, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2023, 245 pp.

The work published at the prestigious *Sophia* Publishing House, in 2023, is a translation of the original published at Editions des Syrtes, Geneve, Switzerland, 2022 under the name *Mont Athos, Carnets 1974-2015*. The author Jean Claude Larchet (b. 1949) is one of the best-known Orthodox theologians and patrologists, of French origin, with a consistent work in the field, translated into 17 languages. He was born into a French Roman Catholic family, immediately after the end of the Second World War, and at the age of 22, he met the Orthodox Archimandrite Serge Chévitch, who would change his entire life, by converting to the Orthodox Church in

1971. After a deep period of introspection and deepening of Orthodoxy, he continued his studies becoming a doctor of philosophy from the University of Nancy in 1987, and then a doctor of theology from the University of Strasbourg in 1994. He was very concerned with the two researched fields, teaching over three decades in the field of philosophy and editing 33 books and numerous studies, especially in the field of patristics. He initiated and edited the collection *Great spiritual men of the 20th century*, published by L'Age d'Homme and Syrtes, in 31 volumes, being a genuine seeker of genuine spirituality and eager to acquire the charism of prayer, as he saw it in the spiritual fathers. He is well known in specialized literature, through works such as: *The Theology of Illness*, Oastea Domnului Publishing House, Sibiu, 1997, 2nd edition: 2005; 3rd edition: Sophia, Bucharest, 2020; *Mental Disorders and Spiritual Healing*, 1st edition: translation by Florin Sicoie, Harisma, Bucharest, 1997; 2nd edition: translation by Marinela Bojin, Sophia, Bucharest, 2008; *Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses*, translation by Marinela Bojin, Sophia, Bucharest, 2001; *Life after death according to the Orthodox Tradition*, translation by Marinela Bojin, Sophia, Bucharest, 2006; *Saint Maximus the Confessor. Mediator between East and West*, translation by Daniela Cojocariu, Doxologia, Iași, 2010 and many others.

His most recent work, however, is *Mount Athos and the confessors I met. Notebooks 1974-2015*, which is a summary of the author's ten trips to Mount Athos between 1974-2015. Researcher and rigorous seeker alike, the author records in this diary-like work the accumulated experiences with the Athonite monks, especially those experiences of prayer of the heart or the of the unceasing prayer, which is the constant theme that runs through the pages of this volume. The paper concludes with a study-like conclusion, entitled *The Prophetic Role of Mount Athos in the Contemporary World*.

The author's first two experiences in the pilgrimage to Mount Athos in 1974 and 1978 are revealing and it seems that they will mark his entire existence. Being at the beginning of the road, after converting to Orthodoxy in France, he strives to deepen the treasury of Christian-Orthodox spirituality, namely the unceasing prayer, or the prayer of the heart. Right from the introduction, he confesses that daily conversations with Father Sophrony Sakharov from the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Maldon (England), occasioned by a visit to the United Kingdom, provided him

with countless teachings, but the place of reference for a person concerned with spirituality remained Mount Athos. (p. 5)

The charm of the first experience in the garden of The Mother of God in 1974 can be seen since the steps to obtain the *diamonitirion* (entry and residence permit), which in those years confirmed the difficult access for pilgrims, especially for those coming from the West. The journey from the port of Ouranoupoli to Daphni de Kareia in the Holy Mountain was rudimentary, and the image of a road to a simple place full of prayer seemed mythical. Also in this context, the storyteller notices the difficulty of contact with the monks, since at that time they were not cultivated people, coming from several cultural spaces, who knew languages with international circulation. To these were also added the spartan conditions of living in the monastery: *there was no running water, the toilets were completely primitive, there was no electricity either, but only gas lamps, with a bad smell, that lit weakly and flickering, and in winter, the poor heating, with wood, which in the monasteries on the northeast coast could not cope with the cold winds that entered the cells through all the cracks* (p.11). The 1970s found coenobitic monasticism very degraded, with depopulated monasteries, with 1145 inhabitants, compared to the year 1910 when it counted no less than 9,800 inhabitants. At the same time, since the beginning of the Cold War, the countries of the communist bloc forbade those wishing to live as monks to settle in Mount Athos. Thus, the idiorhythmic life had grown, in the sense that many cells were populated by a single monk, as the leader of his own life, and this sometimes gave rise to much indolence and reprehensible moral behaviour. However, although the author observes with spiritual indulgence the deficiencies in the monasteries, he remains very attentive to the islands of holiness, little known and made public in those times.

Jean-Claude Larchet, in a very pleasant and dynamic way, describes the meetings with special monks, who with great love are willing to share their spiritual experience and who prove to be decisive in the author's spiritual development. The discovery of the community of father Joseph the Hesychast (+1959), like the hieromonk Arsenie with his disciples, Haralambie, Iosif and Efrem, or other wonderful hermits with great spiritual qualities open pages of beautiful experiences. All these figures, as well as

many others highlighted in the volume, are parents of a high spirituality, being considered landmarks that illustrate the 20th and 21st centuries. All the synthetic and useful information for those who are not very familiar with the Athonite monastic tradition is presented in a very pleasant way by the author. Basically, the book is a kind of diary or memoir, written day by day by the author, in small notebooks, during various stays in Mount Athos. In fact, the entire work, as confessed in the introduction, is presented with maximum sobriety and objectivity, through the descriptive style. To these are added *some biographical elements relating to the past or later becoming, known through a look back from a current perspective, of the personalities encountered at that time* (p. 19).

What captivates the reader are the special images described, but also the successful attempt to convince you that you are on a pilgrimage with the narrator. The people he knows or meets again are described so faithfully, with concrete and contextualized data, that he does not allow you to get lost in the details, on the contrary, he fascinates the reader through contrasts. The description of the meeting with father Simeon (p. 37), an old friend of the author, is very nicely illustrated, especially since the Athonite monk had an extremely varied past in skills. A sympathizer of the *hippy* trend in the 1968s, Miguel Angel Jara Higgingson from Peru, born into a noble family, goes with the hippies through Asia and Europe, settling in France, where he works as a chef in a vegetarian restaurant. Here he meets an Orthodox monk, ordained a monk by Father Justin Popović, who discovers the values of Eastern spirituality, which he deepens by attending the Orthodox church in Vanves (France). After a pilgrimage to the monasteries in Serbia and Greece, Miguel is received through the Sacrament of Chrismation into the Orthodox Church, after a period of initiation at a Greek monastery on the continent, he settles at the Gregoriou Monastery on Mount Athos. An aspect noticed several times is related to the attitude of the monks towards the heterodox, as well as the diversity of the approach to ecumenical issues in the Greek space. For example, most of the Athonite monasteries do not recognize the validity of a reception into the Orthodox Church by anointing with the Holy Chrism, although it is a practice throughout Greece and in the dioceses of Northern Greece, located like Mount Athos, under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. At the same

time, it is noted that in most monasteries the Ecumenical Patriarch is not mentioned, due to *relativistic and syncretistic ecumenism*, and *where he is mentioned, it is done through economy* (pp. 40-41). In his editorial approach, the author is often surprised by the tendencies of many monks to break with the official Church, a fact that contradicts the state of humility and obedience that characterizes the monk's party. However, it should be noted that the great monks of Athos, such as Father Joseph Hesychast or Ephraim of Katunakia, after being in the camp of the old calendarists, returned to the official Church.

Most of the book unfolds on the sharing of spiritual experiences of the fathers, provoked by the author, who is in a deep state of search. Prayer techniques, theological issues, social challenges, hesychastic practices and more are the themes that abound in the text. After the two visits close in time, respectively in 1974 and 1978, the author returns to the story *After twenty years and those who followed...* (p. 159). In this second part of the work, short journeys are described, which capture true metamorphoses in the blessed space of Mount Athos. The priests known in the 70s are mostly gone to the Lord, and the living conditions are much improved. However, there are descriptions of fathers coming from former Soviet countries, who infused the monastic environment with spirituality, such as father Dionisie Ignat from the Colciu Hermitage, described with great tenderness as the central personality of the 1999 pilgrimage (pp. 173-176). Each visit from the ones that followed, more and more often (2001, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015) describe meetings with the old familiar fathers, but also meetings with new monk figures, some of them with a culture solid and eager to strengthen the Athonite monastic tradition, some of them being now present at international conferences or even authors of books.

Very interesting, however, is the chapter *Changes and constancy* (pp. 207-217), in which the material changes, at first glance, had *rather negative repercussions on the Athonite monastic life and on the approach to the pilgrims* (p. 209). The ascetic character of the road from one monastery to another is replaced by the extensive road infrastructure, which inoculates the feeling of a tourist-style development. If in the past the monks rarely left the monastery (only for medical reasons), after 2015 the abbots are all the time outside of Athos, where they hold conferences, confess nuns and

many believers, found metocs, or seek financial aid. Due to the widened access of pilgrims, there is an abundance of tourists, in such a way that the abbots of the monasteries or even some monasteries have acquired *a different atmosphere than before, with noisy evenings in the rooms and not much participation in the early-morning services... In many hermitages the "world" thrown out through the big gate, entered through the "small window" of the computer* (pp. 211-212). Despite many human weaknesses, Mount Athos maintains its spiritual scope, continuing to attract and fascinate not only pilgrims, but also many young people who decide to become monks. Although the distinguished monks who made it shine in the 20th century have passed on to the Lord, there are still little-known parishes and idiorhythmic laymen who retain a wonderful spirituality. The steadfastness of Mount Athos is rendered by the solidity of its institutions, by the rigorous preservation of the liturgical typology and traditions related to theology and spirituality, but above all by the direct support of The Mother of God, The Protector of the Holy Mountain.

The experience gained in the pilgrimages carried out over a period of more than three decades, the meeting and counselling with great spiritual monks, meanwhile canonized as saints in the Orthodox Church, but also the academic rigor led the author to conclude the work with a study dedicated to updating the Athonite monastic spirit in a modernist society. Themes from the study such as the *Call to renounce sin, to purify passions and work on virtues, or Exhortation, consolation and edification of people* outline the paradigmatic character of monastic life in general and Athonite monasticism in particular. Faithfulness to Tradition and the defence of the Orthodox faith as a descriptive element of a constant preoccupation of the Athonite monks is argued by the struggle of Saints such as Saint John Damascene, Saint Theodore the Studite or Saint Gregory Palamas for the triumph of the right faith. This responsibility entails the need for spiritual and theological scope of the monks of the 21st century, which convinces modern man through authenticity, especially when we *observe a considerable weakening of the dogmatic consciousness and in which many Orthodox see as secondary or even insignificant elements of the faith for which generations of Christians have fought...* (p. 241).

Such an editorial approach is recommended for reading especially

during the blessed period of Lent, when our ascetic struggle needs victorious models, like many of the monks mentioned by the author. Most of the text is written in the style of memoir or travelogue, making it very accessible and a way to learn from the source. The alternation with additional information for understanding the context and the theological skills of the author, gives the reader peace and the opportunity to meditate on the consistent truths, so necessary in these relativized times of society.

Archm. Casian RUȘEȚ

Ioan BUDE, *O necesară și mai corectă interpretare – dimpreună cu Sfinții Părinți – a textelor biblice despre „nașterea” dintâi a lumii*, Editura Învierea / Editura Eurobit, Timișoara, 2023, 107 pp.

The present exegetical study, called *The First Birth of the World*, refers to the creation of the seen world, contained in the first four chapters of the book of Genesis, in order to distinguish between three other “births” or “rebirths” of this world: the partial “rebirth after the Flood”, the universal “rebirth” (objective salvation), accomplished through the Sacrifice and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the total “rebirth” (resurrection) at the Parousia: “The new heaven and the new earth”.

Preceded by a *Word to the Reader* (pp. 5-10), by *Abbreviated names of biblical books – in alphabetical order* (pp. 11-16) and a brief excursus on the *Septuagint* (pp. 17-18), the work is structured in four parts, following the exegesis of each chapter of the book of Genesis. As the author shows, the creation of the seen world as described in the Book of Creation is divided into two units: the first unit (chs. 1, 1-2, 3) is the general history of creation, as God created it in time; then, beginning with ch. 2, 4 another history is related, namely from Gen 2, 7 is about heaven or earthly paradise (vv. 8-14) and about the man called Adam whom God placed on this earth