

Cuviosul Iosif ISIHASTUL, *Simțirea iubirii dumnezeiești – scrisori și poezii (Feeling the Divine Love - Letters and Poems)*- traducere de Pr. Prof. Constantin Coman and Sabin Preda, Editura Bizantină, București, 2020, 608 pp.

In the year of salvation 2020, the Bizantina Publishing House published the work of Saint Joseph the Hesychast, *Simțirea iubirii dumnezeiești – scrisori și poezii (Feeling the Divine Love - Letters and Poems)* - translated by Father Professor Constantin Coman (the text of the letters) and Sabin Preda (the text of the poems). The book proves to be of great use to lovers of theology and lovers of the ascetic tradition of the Holy Mount Athos. Long awaited by Romanians, this work of St. Joseph the Hesychast was a consolation in times of pandemic for those who had to physically stay away from Church services, being able to watch them only in the online version. In the twentieth century, St. Joseph the Hesychast not only reorganized the Athonite monasticism, but we can say he *revived* it. It is due to him that at present, there are over two thousand monks in the Holy Mountain, who carry on the monastic tradition taught by the Holy Fathers such as Gregory Palamas, Nicodemus the Hagiorite and others.

In this volume, St. Joseph the Hesychast (1898-1959) or Spileot (the one who lived in the caves) presents advice related mainly to monastic life in letters addressed to his disciples from all over the world, but also advice addressed to lay people. In fact, these counsels are not divided into advice for monks and counsel for lay people, as they can be put into practice by all lovers of God who want to be like Him and to be deified. There is not one Gospel for monks and another for lay people, but the same Holy Gospel and the same commandments that must be fulfilled exactly by monks and lay people. Presenting some of the themes of paramount importance to the spiritual life of any Orthodox Christian, found in this volume, we recall topics such as *the love of enemies* that Elder Joseph said on:

“Do you know what it means not to tempt anyone and be tempted by others? Not steal but others steal from you? To bless but be cursed by others? To give alms and be treated unjustly? To praise the others but be blamed? That others come and rebuke you without cause? To shout at you all the time that you are in error for a lifetime? And to know that it is not as they say and see the temptation that drives them? And to repent and weep as if you were the cause of what they say and that you are like that? These are the strongest (temptations) because you are at war with them, on the one hand, and you have to fight with yourself, on the other hand, to convince yourself that this is how people say, but without being so. To see that you are completely right and to convince yourself that you are not” (p. 136).

Not only did Elder Joseph teach his disciples advice on the temptations that come to us from humans but, as a hesychast and hermit, he also taught on the temptations from the devil, which he often confronted face to face, because *the evil one* tempts the people of the world through other people, and he tempts those in the wilderness with his physical presence. In this sense, St. Joseph confessed: “Were you afraid of the threat of a single demon? Never believe what he says, because he is a liar from the beginning and has no power against us, only when we suffer from *pride* and *ignorance*” (p. 178). Regarding the spirit of despair, he would state that “it comes from the pettiness of the soul, which is the offspring of pride. Even though he falls a thousand times a day, the righteous one rises again, and this is considered his victory. Despair is an unforgivable sin, and the devil rejoices in it above all” (p. 179).

Acquiring the grace of the Holy Spirit and maintaining it by maintaining the innocence is another common theme in the writings of St. Joseph Spileot and Hesychast. The rigorous program he imposed on his disciples with his authority as Geronda (an old man tried and skilled in the spiritual life, a spiritual father), such as: daily participation in the Holy Liturgy and the communion with the Holy Sacraments, manual labor, the monastic rule aimed at attracting and maintaining grace in the soul as in a vessel of great value. According to his teaching, grace is preserved by the remembrance of death and of what follows the exit of the soul from man. In this sense, he urged:

“Remember your last days, and you will never sin again. This is the first reason that not only attracts Grace, but also keeps it and multiplies it. It raises the mind to the first divine sight of nature. And apart from this beginning, man finds something small, but after a while he will lose Grace. Because he does not build on solid rock, but tries with different crafts and techniques” (p. 194).

Obedience is the cornerstone of the spiritual growth of any Orthodox Christian. Without the obedience to a experienced spiritual father, the faithful will not advance to perfection. In time, obedience to a spiritual father makes the disciple also adorn himself with the spiritual charisms of his adviser. “Force yourself to obey. Ah, I have never seen a sweeter sleep of relief than when I was obeying. You are happy. I only mourn your abbess that she suffers a lot and her soul is hurt when you say harsh words to her” (p. 210). The Holy Hagiorite Fathers, among whom St. Joseph the Hesychast was a leader, had spiritual experiences inaccessible to the common man, and experiences such as mystical ecstasy during prayer. Out of humility, without explicitly stating that he had such high spiritual experiences (although it is easy to see that these are his own experiences), Elder Joseph states that during the ecstasy

“overwhelmed by Grace, he is filled with enlightenment and boundless joy. And then, unable to hold the fire of love, and overwhelmed, his senses stop and he is abducted in the sight of God. Until now, it is the movement of man’s own will. From now on, he is no longer his master. He doesn’t even know himself anymore, because he was already united with the fire, he has completely transformed. He became God by Grace” (p. 233).

With his great love, Geronda Joseph even assumed the canon of his spiritual sons, if they disobeyed and received punishment in order to correct their conduct. Weakened, he nevertheless fulfilled their canon, and even established and assumed a canon for himself to atone for the sins of his spiritual sons. Thus, on some Easter days, he ate fasting food driven by his love for the progress of his disciples.

“And at Easter, if we live until then, I won’t eat bread at lunch - unless you are forgiven - but only a 25-gram crumb. I set myself a condition: when I punish you, I fast too. So be careful not to disobey, because I will fast too... Have mercy on me, for I will fast for your sake, and for your sins, that they may be forgiven” (p. 319).

The confession of thoughts to a tried adviser is absolutely necessary as often as possible, for one cannot advance on the way of the Spirit without discipleship to a spiritual Father. St. Joseph also taught this, urging *blind obedience* to the spiritual father or abbot, as well as distrust of one’s own judgment, and opinion: “Often confess your thoughts to the abess or to Athanasia so they do not nest in your soul. And blindly obey them. Do not listen to your thoughts!” (p. 338). Elder Joseph had the gift or charism of theology. He knew the writings of the Holy Fathers very well. He confessed in agreement with them that the three stages of deification are: *purifying* Grace, *enlightening* Grace, and *perfectioning* Grace.

In conclusion, we can clearly understand the theology of St. Joseph the Hesychast is not foreign to academic theology, but it is its natural continuation and practice. Geronda Joseph did in the twentieth century a salutary thing for the agonized monasticism, and for the world, one we might say (for his direct disciple, Elder Ephraim of Philotheou and of Arizona, founded nearly 20 monasteries in America; this was possible as a result of his apprenticeship with Geronda Joseph for several decades), making the transition from speculative theology to empirical and lived mystical theology in the daily life of anyone who wants this.

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