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The Lives of the Saints - A Living Dogmatics

Cristinel IOJA

Cristinel IOJA

“Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad

Email: cristi.ioja@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this study I tried to present some defining elements of the way in which dogmas are assumed and embodied in the Lives of the Saints, each saint becoming for us a model within the Model and, implicitly, a living Dogmatics. In the Lives of the Saints, the defining elements present in Dogmatics are part of the naturalness of life which is shown to be a “dogmatic life” beyond concepts, integrated in the Model as a living and all-encompassing dogma discovered in Jesus Christ. Thus, from the models of the saints in the Scriptures, relevant to every Christian, we have shown that there is a distinct but inseparable Model - the Trinity and the Duality, as fundamental dogmas of life and perfection. Salvation is not achieved by reflecting from afar on the Model, but by configuring ourselves ontologically-personally into the sanctity of the Model life.

Keywords

Lives of the Saints, dogma, Dogmatics, Trinity, Christ, Model

I. Models of the Saints in the Scriptures

The saints are the ones who interpret the mystery of God’s economy to us as the mystery of the Trinity and the Duality at the same time, spiritually contemplating the data of Revelation. Therefore, if the Prophets and

Apostles proclaimed the Trinity and the Duality to the world, the saints of the Church after Pentecost experienced and proclaimed the true faith of the Trinity and the Duality to the world, in full unity with the Prophets and Apostles, as every Christian is called to this life and confession. until the end of the ages.

“We have the experiences of the Patriarchs, of the Prophets, and then the experiences of the Apostles, which we call them all glory. The Prophet is glorified, it means that he sees the glory of God. The Apostle is glorified means that the Apostle sees the glory of Christ. Seeing the glory of Christ, the Holy Apostle sees from his own experience that the glory of Christ in the New Testament is the glory of God in the Old Testament. Therefore, Christ is Jehovah of the Old Testament and He is Elohim of the Old Testament (...) According to the Holy Apostles we have the experiences of the deified, who are the Fathers of the Church, as well as those who among the Saints came to deification. This succession of the deification experience continues to this day”¹.

In the various confessions of the Saints, the whole economy of salvation realized in and through Jesus Christ is invoked, from creation to redemption and eschatology. The confessions of the Saints are true examples of an experienced and assumed faith, while excelling in the ability to express the entire economy of the human race salvation realized in Jesus Christ in a panoramic way. It is presented as follows: Creation-Falling-Incarnation-Redemption-Deification-Eschaton. One can observe the biblical foundation of the Saints' confessions regarding the economy of salvation, which is presented in the Holy Scriptures, in the writings of the Prophets and the Apostles and which has a pronounced triadological and Christological character.

Holy Scripture plays a fundamental role in the lives of the saints. In the spirit of holiness it is interpreted and experienced by the saints within the Tradition of the Church, until the end of the ages. The unity and interconnection between Scripture and Tradition is given by the same Christ confessed in the same Holy Spirit and by the same exigencies of

¹ Pr. Ioan ROMANIDIS, *Teologia patristică*, transl. Ion Marian Croitoru, Editura Bibliotheca, Târgoviște, 2012, pp. 91-92.

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a holy life based on both Scripture and Tradition. These include not only God's revealed message to the world, but also countless examples of this message's incarnation in the lives of different people from different historical epochs, people who have become saints, and role models for future generations. The study of the Scriptures brings an acute awareness of the fact that God's will is transmitted to us through them in the form of life examples embodied in the highest degree in the lives of the saints, examples meant to shape our lives according to their confessing and enlightening force.

“The study of inspired Scripture is the chief way of finding our duty, for we find both instruction on conduct and the lives of blessed men, delivered in writing, as some breathing images of godly living, for the imitation of their good works. Hence, in whatever respect each one feels himself deficient, devoting himself to this imitation, he finds, as from some dispensary, the due medicine for his ailment”².

St. Basil the Great gives the example of Joseph, Job, David, Moses showing that every Christian can find in each of the saints a model according to him. The saints thus become role models for all Christians, models of the incarnation of God's will in their lives.

“...Thus, generally, as painters, when they are painting from other pictures, constantly look at the model, and do their best to transfer its lineaments to their own work, so too must he who is desirous of rendering himself perfect in all branches of excellency, keep his eyes turned to the lives of the saints as though to living and moving icons, and make their virtue his own by imitation”³.

But what did the saints imitate? They imitated the Trinity and the Duality, fundamental realities and absolute personal models of the life of the Saints.

² Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Epistola a II-a către prietenul Grigorie”, III, in: *Scrieri*, partea a III-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 12, transl. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, pp. 119-120

³ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Epistola a II-a către prietenul Grigorie”, III, p. 120.

Christian teaching is a revealed teaching transmitted in the Church through Tradition that is alive and dynamic, Tradition through which and in which the voice of the Spirit is present. This teaching has as sole purpose its incarnation and assumption in the Christian life in a doxological way. The saints did not necessarily leave us a teaching - although this is not lacking and through the substantial contribution of the saints it was even formulated dogmatically - but a model of life. The absolute model of life is Jesus Christ, and the saint is a model of life for those around him in the name and by the power of Christ present and working in his life. The saints “made themselves, by grace, visible images of the unspeakable and brilliant glory of the great gift of God”⁴. They have sought all their lives to be and to remain within the Truth. They were aware that the Truth leads to Life and Life means the victory of death and Hell, the victory of the devil’s killing people powers. Therefore, the saints lived in the Truth, confessing the Truth in all manifestations of their earthly life.

In the Lives of the Saints we find a model worthy of following the attitude towards creation, the attitude towards earthly life and death, the attitude towards the truth of the Gospel of Christ, the attitude towards individuals and communities. All these attitudes of the saints, understood as models for us, are structured through the prism of a theocentric and Christocentric life. But the Saints also become role models for non-Christians through the power of their wisdom with universal implications.

“At all events two Greek philosophers once came, thinking they could try their skill on Antony; and he was in the outer mountain, and having recognised who they were from their appearance, he came to them and said to them by means of an interpreter, «Why, philosophers, did ye trouble yourselves so much to come to a foolish man?» And when they said that he was not a foolish man, but exceedingly prudent, he said to them, «If you came to a foolish man, your labour is superfluous; but if you think me prudent become as I am, for we ought to imitate what is good. And if I had come to you I should have imitated you; but if you

⁴ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 72, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 80, transl. Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1983, p. 190.

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to me, become as I am, for I am a Christian». But they departed with wonder, for they saw that even demons feared Antony”⁵.

Saint Maximus the Confessor emphasizes the iconic condition of the Saints for the life of Christians, giving the example of David (Old Testament) and John (New Testament), the first as an icon of confessing the sins, of doing and of contemplating, and the second as an icon of repentance, of the philosophy of deed, of detachment, and of knowing contemplation.

“So John is the type of all who are born in virtue and knowledge by repentance in the spirit and keep this habit to the end by unchanging advancement; and David, of all those who fall after coming to knowledge and again acquire the divine joy of the soul on the basis of virtue and knowledge through repentance. Therefore, wanting to be and concentrate the broad content of the word with the spirit in a spiritual way, the great teacher compared those who listen to the words of God, in the image of one or another to John and David - these great men. This is because each of those who live in good faith corresponds, as they consider, in a certain way to one of them, that is, to the shown way of each one. So, it is as if he cried out plainly: All you who have received the divine word of virtue and knowledge, conceived in you through repentance, keep it like the great John, from beginning to end, by advancing, unchangingly, the divine leap of the soul for Him, not being robbed of any sin and ignorance; or, if something undesirable has happened to you on the divine path of virtues, strive with repentance and toil, as Blessed David, to bring back to you virtue and knowledge by the power of patience and by the exercise of divine words”⁶.

Holiness means putting the incarnation of God’s commandments into practice, which opens the way to an imitation of the saints, who are

⁵ Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, “Viața Cuviosului Părintelui nostru Antonie”, LXXI, in: *Scrieri*, partea a doua, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 16, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988, p. 233.

⁶ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 102, p. 251

fulfillers of God's will present and concentrated in the Gospel. Failure to keep the gospel commandments and requirements means indifference to God's will revealed and embodied in the saints.

“For how can we expect for ourselves the happiness of life and the equal citizenship of the saints and the joy of the angels before Christ, if we have preferred the pleasurable life of the flesh to the life of the commandments (of the Lord)? (...) How can I be with any of the saints, I who have not followed in their footsteps?”⁷.

Imitation of the saints means imitation of the Trinitarian and Christological model of life present in their lives and sharing in the deifying communion of the Trinity.

Communion with God and the Saints presupposes Holiness, and commitment on the upward path of holiness. Communion with Christ and the Saints leads to holiness, and holiness strengthens communion. St. Anthony the Great urges the monks to unite “first with Christ and then with the saints, that after death they may receive you also in the eternal tents, as friends and acquaintances”⁸. The dogmas are alive and embodied in the Saints; they reveal to us a true Dogmatics. Following them, we follow Christ, who works in them. Life conforms to dogma, and dogma confirms life, as life in the living and comprehensive dogma, the Person of Christ, God-Man.

II. Trinity – Model in models

The Trinity has its model imprinted in the structure of the cosmos, of man and of the Church. This trinitarian structure is assumed and deepened in the life of the holy man in which man, the cosmos and the Church are unified as a way of divine-human life. The Trinity takes the form within the holy man as Christ takes the form within the holy man or man, in his

⁷ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Regulile Mari”, IV, in: *Scrieri*, partea a II-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 18, transl. Iorgu D. Ivan, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1989, p. 215.

⁸ Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Viața Cuviosului Părintelui nostru Antonie*, XC, p. 243

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ascent to holiness is configured in the image of the Trinity and in the image of Christ present in him.

For Christians in general, the relationship between Creator and creature was fundamental both in terms of their relation to the creature without confusing it with the Creator, and in terms of their relationship with the Creator in order to complete their lives. God is the creator of the seen and the unseen, and creation is not an emanation from God, nor an ordering of the pre-existing elements in the platonic sense, but a creation from nothing by God's will. But who is this God, the Creator? The saints confessed that he is the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In their confession, the Father did all things through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The theme of the world creation is captured in various ways in the faith confessions of the saints, especially in front of pagans and idolatrous persecutors. One of the essential elements of cosmology in the confessions of the Saints was that God made all out of nothing and of non-existence. On the basis of Revelation the saints distinguished between what is created and what is uncreated, between created light and uncreated light, between God and creatures. Creation receives a positive meaning in the lives and confessions of the Saints being permanently related to the glory of God, the created ones are permanently related to the uncreated and eternal ones. The dynamics of holy living in the lives of saints lies within this report.

God is the foundation and source of holiness. For Origen, the Trinity - the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit - is the source of holiness⁹. In fact, the whole work of the Trinity is exercised over the saints¹⁰. Origen shows that all creation participates in God through the Logos, but even if the power of God extends to all creation, "the fruits of the Holy Spirit are partaken only with the saints"¹¹. However, the communion of the Trinity is not broken:

"Let no one indeed suppose that we, from having said that the Holy Spirit is conferred upon the saints alone, but that the benefits or operations of the Father and of the Son extend to good and bad, to just and unjust, by so doing give a preference

⁹ ORIGEN, "Despre Principii", I, 4, 2, in: *Scieri alese*, partea a IV, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 8, trad. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 81.

¹⁰ ORIGEN, "Despre Principii", I, 3, 6, p. 74.

¹¹ ORIGEN, "Despre Principii", I, 3, 7, p. 77.

to the Holy Spirit over the Father and the Son, or assert that His dignity is greater, which certainly would be a very illogical conclusion”¹²

If creation is the work of the Trinity accomplished through the Logos with the presence of the Spirit, and Salvation is the work of the Trinity realized through the Logos embodied by the Spirit, deification is also the work of the Trinity. This is continually accomplished in the Church until the end of the ages through Christ in the Holy Spirit, as the raising of all creation - man and cosmos - within the love of the Father. Thus the whole divine economy concerning man and the cosmos has nothing in view but the raising of man and through him of the cosmos in the communion of life and love of the Holy Trinity. In the divine economy, an economy full of the Trinity presence as a revelation to people of the love between the Divine Persons in order to experience it in grace, people's lives become the lives of the saints. By embodying the loving relationships between the Persons of the Trinity - the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit - in people's lives, they become holy people, both through their communion integration in these relationships by grace and through their communion integration with other people as an indispensable step of their communion with the Trinity. We cannot integrate into a loving relationship with God if we have not previously integrated into a loving relationship with other people as beings created in the image of God and called to holiness in communion with Him and other people. The divine economy regarding man and the cosmos, includes both the horizontal of communion, modeled on the communion of the Trinity, and the vertical of creation as the elevation of human communion in holiness to the deeper experience of the Trinity communion by grace. These two perspectives on communion are involved and condition each other from a soteriological perspective. God descends to man following the catabasis from the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit, so that man experiencing the communion of life with Him - conditioned by the communion with other people - ascends in the Spirit, through the Son to the Father.

Through the power of the Spirit, the saints understood this soteriological perspective in relation to the mystery of creation in which the Sacrament of the Trinity is reflected and worked. They also understood it in relation to the

¹² ORIGEN, “Despre Principii”, I, 3, 7, p. 77

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Mystery of the Trinity in which the mystery of creation - man and cosmos - is revealed and raised to participate in order to deify and transfigure it. Thus, the Sacrament of the Trinity is reflected in creation as Her work for the final transfiguration: new heaven and new earth. From this perspective we can say that the Saints worked and work together with the Trinity to perfect the mystery of creation through its continuous transfiguration in the loving communion between them and the Persons of the Holy Trinity both in the Church and in the world.

III. Jesus Christ - Model in models

Not only is the Trinity imprinted in the structure of man, the cosmos, and the Church, but also Christ, the One in the Trinity. The Trinity and Christ, the One of the Trinity, represent the foundation, the means and the goal of any unification in the cruciform, transcendent-immanent reality of human life. Thus, when we speak of the Model we refer to both the Trinity and Christ, as an absolute, distinct but inseparable Model, and when we refer to the models, we understand the saints, who became imitators of the Model and become models in the Model for us. In their lives the saints surpassed the virtues of philosophy and philosophers. St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of the Nazianz surpassed Xenocrates by virtue of purity, and Antisthenes, Pythagoras and Crates in simplicity. We do not encounter only a sequential and conjunctural observation of the virtues in their lives, but their whole life was an ascending movement in the heavenly philosophy, not according to the “elements of the world” but according to Christ.

In Christianity, the absolute model of holiness is Jesus Christ. Christ is a model of holiness because he discovers the Duality as a perichoresis between divinity and humanity. The saints become models in Christ in the image of the Model whom they live in. In the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, the Holy Apostle Paul shows that “you became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1, 6). This text emphasizes the fact that just as Christ is the image of the Father, so we can see in saints “imitators” of the life of Christ, having them as models of perfection, the absolute model of holiness being Jesus Christ Himself. Here the Duality is revealed to be inextricably linked to the Mystery of the Trinity and imprinted in the mystery of the saints as imitators of the Duality and the Trinity. These models are present

in the Church, Jesus Christ being the Holy of Holies. St. Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes that the beginning and end of all beautiful life and all good occupations and teachings is Christ. Thus

“the beginning of erecting this exalted life is faith in Christ; upon such a foundation we lay the principles of our life, and it effects noble thoughts and deeds in our daily affairs. The head of the universe becomes our head fitting itself to the two walls of our lives--body and soul--which are built by correct behaviour and purity through the cornerstone’s unity”¹³.

Christians, as images of the Image, are called to imitate the model of Christ by deeds, and the holiness of the Trinity life revealed in Christ:

“If we learn the art of painting, our teacher gives us a certain beautiful form on a tablet: each person’s painting must imitate that form’s beauty so that all our tablets might share the model of beauty set before us. If each picture is one’s own life while the choice of this work is the artist’s and the colors are virtues which express the image, there is a danger that the archetypal beauty’s imitation can be remodelled into an ugly, deformed face; instead of the Lord’s form we shadow it over with the marks of evil by means of unattractive colors. But it is possible for the virtues’ pure colors skillfully combined with each other to imitate beauty that we might be an image of the Image, expressing through our works the prototype’s beauty by imitation, as it were, as Paul has done who had become an imitator of Christ by a virtuous life”¹⁴.

St. Gregory of Nyssa sees the connection between the head and the body as a harmonious one between the whole and the part, between the body and the limb so that what represents the head should be the limbs as well to create harmony. Thus, he comments on the Pauline phrase “Christ -

¹³ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, “Despre desăvârşire către monahul Olimpiu”, in: *Scrieri, partea a II-a*, coll. *Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti*, transl. Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 1998, p. 466.

¹⁴ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre desăvârşire către monahul Olimpiu*, pp. 467-468.

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the Head of the Church” emphasizing the implications of the Christian life on the coordinates of holiness according to the model Christ - the Head. This is because

“the perfection of the Christian life is shown by all the names which are contained in the word «Christ»: to have a close connection with Christ in soul, in speech and in all our daily occupations, to keep the whole blessing of the Holy Apostle Paul upon us, the holiness in the whole body, soul and spirit, remaining continuous apart from any mixture with evil”¹⁵.

The saints incarnate Christ in their lives, thus becoming the Life of their life, shining in their whole life. By asceticism understood as the “renunciation of the life of the flesh” the saints let Christ living in them, shining in their lives, so that all manifestations of their lives — deeds, words, thoughts — are seen as Christ’s. The saints identify so much with Christ, the model of their holiness by grace.

The consciousness of the interrelation between the event of the Incarnation and the purpose of the Christian life, that is, perfection or deification, is present in the lives of the saints, who confess Jesus Christ as the deifier of man. Thus, there is a close relationship between the Incarnation and Deification: God became Man in order for Man to deify himself. The mystery of the Incarnation is incomprehensible to the understanding of created and rational beings: men and angels. Thus, both the seen and the unseen creation remain in astonishment at the depth of this Mystery which the redemption and deification of the human nature of Christ is realized through, and by the participation of the whole seen creation to it.

Christian anthropology which is deeply biblical is present in the confessions of the Saints, being permanently related to the redemptive work done in Jesus Christ, God and Man. The biblical truth that man was created in the image and likeness of God appears very often in the confessions of martyrs, man being perfected through the knowledge of the Trinity revealed in Jesus Christ.

We observe the confession of an indissoluble relationship between anthropology and Christology, theological anthropology being able to be deepened and explained in an authentic way only from the perspective of

¹⁵ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre desăvârșire către monahul Olimpiu*, p. 476.

Christology. Jesus Christ is the One in Whom and through Whom man is revealed the origin, meaning and purpose of his life. In Jesus Christ the meaning of human life is holiness and the attainment of eternal life - “the crowns of eternal glory” – together with all the Saints.

IV. The Church and the cosmos - space for the perfection of models in Model

Christianity brings into the world a conception of life that essentially differs from that of the pagan world, namely a conception of a theocentric life and not anthropocentric or cosmocentric. In the Christian life, God’s providence is felt and confessed. For Christians, nothing happens without the will and wisdom of God, present in His entire creation and in the entire life of man. Man’s destiny in Christianity is related to the exercise of his freedom and not to the movement of the stars and is not a relentless one. We find these truths in the Holy Scriptures and in the writings of the Fathers, but also experienced in the Lives of the Saints. Thus, - through natural contemplation - the Saints knew the Creator from His deeds, knowing at the same time His action full of providence. They “... learned that the One whom they knew as the God and Maker of all is also the One who has providence for things”¹⁶. Some, even without having learned to read — such as St. Anthony the Great — knew the providence of God in all things from creatures¹⁷.

Confession of faith in Christ and in the life-giving Trinity was rewarded by the idolatrous pagans with beatings, torture, humiliation, and death. These horrible rewards were transformed into the lives of the saints, as into a purifying fire, into light, joy, the strengthening of faith, and hope in the acquisition of the Kingdom of Heaven, in overcoming cosmic conditioning, and their transfiguration. They assumed all these torments as paths of passage from darkness to light. In the Lives of the Saints, the whole creation reaches the unity and beauty before the fall. The saint is the priest of creation, he is the king of creation as God wanted him, lifting the whole creation through his life totally surrendered to the will of God –

¹⁶ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 57, p. 170.

¹⁷ Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Viața Cuviosului Părintelui nostru Antonie*, LXXVII, p. 236

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which is out of the sphere of egotism - to the stage of creation reunified and transfigured by the power of Christ. The saints were victorious over the body and the world in which they lived without canceling their energies, but only converting them. They saw mainly their transient character, but also the presence of God in them, which triggered a doxological attitude of the saints in creation, seen as a creation of God, as a creation of the presence of God.

“... being undeceptively wounded by the love of God, the saints came to God worthily by the natural signs of the divine imprinted in them, bravely passing through the body and the world. For seeing these contained in one another, the world in the flesh by nature, the body in the world by feeling, and each of them, subject to the other by the communication from one to another, of the property of each; then seeing that none of them, by their own reason, is free from limitation, they considered it a shameful thing to let immortality be lost, and the unceasing movement of the soul to be altered and to be confined together with the mortal and the bounded. That is why they bound themselves, in a way impossible to untie, only to the immortal and above all infinity God, not yielding in any way to the attractions of the world and the body. This is the fulfillment of all virtue and knowledge, I even count the final goal. And though the saints have sometimes been moved to see things, they have not been moved to look upon and know them materially as we do, but to praise God in various ways, Who is and show Himself through all and in all, and thus gather to themselves much power of wonder and cause of doxology”¹⁸.

Examples of a creation reunification in the Lives of the Saints are abundant: the saints live a life of brotherhood with the whole creation devoid of antagonistic, hostile and predatory movements. The wild beasts lived in peace with St. Anthony¹⁹. This is a fulfillment of the prophecy in Job 5, 23: “For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you”.

¹⁸ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 13, pp. 112-113.

¹⁹ Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Viața Cuviosului Părintelui nostru Antonie*, L, p. 222

The saints transfigure the environment they live in, transforming it from a dark environment into a bright and fragrant one. As God dwells in them, all creation obeys them as God and Adam, the priest and king of creation before fall. The ability and calling of man to be a priest and king of creation in the name of God is revealed in the saints. Saint Maximus the Confessor understood the lifting of the Saints - by asceticism - from duality to unity, from the material duality to reach the contemplated unity of the Trinity, as a lifting above the matter and form in order to unite with God in light²⁰. The saints understood the role of man as a mediator between God and His creation and his call to transfigure the whole of creation into dialogue and communion with God. Therefore,

“knowing that the soul is halfway between God and matter, having the powers that unite it with both, that is, the mind with God and the feeling with matter, the feeling towards the sensible through the active relation, they have completely discarded it from its disposition and through the mind alone they became extremely familiar with God”²¹.

Through an ascetic attitude towards body and matter, the saints came to look at creation and Scripture in a different way than the material one, in a different way than the people who are not seriously engaged in the path of holiness. Through this attitude toward creation and Scripture, the saints become role models for us in the knowledge of God and in the knowledge of the divine regarding creation.

“They used not only feeling, surfaces, and figures to acquire the happy knowledge of God, letters and syllables, from which comes error and deception in the appreciation of the truth, but only the mind alone, fully cleansed and delivered from all the material fog. If, therefore, we want to judge in good faith, mentally examining the reasons of the sensible, let us look at them as they advance correctly on the right path, to the flawless knowledge of God and the divine”²².

²⁰ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 64, p. 182

²¹ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 64, p. 182

²² Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 44, pp. 157-158.

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There are many clues in the Lives of the Saints about the Mysteries of the Church, their significance, their central role in the Christian life and their transfiguring-soteriological role. The faith of every Christian stands or falls with the participation in the Mysteries of the Church, a participation that drives away all the work of the devil. The Lives of the Saints are not a textbook of ecclesiology, but they emphasize that the saints did not conceive the Christian life outside the Church and her Mysteries. This was even the case of the hermits who, although separated from the community for a time, returned from time to time to its bosom or partook with the same Mysteries of the Church as the community. The whole ascetic-mystical effort aimed at communion with the Mysteries of the Church, as the maximum union between God and man in and through creation.

The Mysteries of the Church intensify the experience of the Christ's light to the maximum which transfigures the bodies of the saints and is an occasion for their transfiguration. In the Lives of the Saints there are many accounts that emphasize the relationship between communion with the Holy Sacraments, the experience of light and the transfiguration. But the Mysteries of the Church are Mysteries of communion with God and people. The saints participate in this communion in the Church at the Holy Liturgy. The Mysteries of the Church were central to the life of Christian communities, as a means of communion with Christ and with people. Of course, not only the Mystery of the Eucharist is present in the Lives of the Saints, but the other Mysteries too.

V. Eschatology - The model in models

In the Lives of the Saints we encounter an unmistakable combination of history as space and the possibility of perfection and eschatology as the ideal the whole historical-cosmic life of Christians is oriented towards. They do not see existence in dualistic terms: here it is history and beyond eschatology, but in paradoxical terms: history is penetrated by eschatology, it is oriented towards the Kingdom of God, which we can experience even from here, in history, depending on the limits of our condition. The eschatological orientation of the Saints does not imply the annulment of the historical meaning of existence, but its perfection. It does not imply the annulment of the historical-cosmic framework of perfection, but it supposes

the identification of the essential purpose of human life in this framework. In the life of the Saint the emphasis falls on the essential, on the Kingdom of God present in history and fully experienced beyond history. Thus, we can say that the Saints lead a life in an eschatological perspective. There is no separation between natural and supernatural, but interpenetration: the latter penetrating and transfiguring the former which does not change quantitatively, but qualitatively. Therefore, the Saints affirm the superiority of that life which participates - in the cosmic conditions - to the eternal life discovered in Christ.

This eschatological character of the Christian life is still found in the writings of Holy Scripture and embodied in the early Christian communities. The expectation of Christ's coming must take place in a continual process of holiness. "Let grace come and pass this world! (...) If anyone is holy, let him come. If he is not, repent! Maran atha"²³. Because "the Lord will come and all the saints with Him"²⁴ There was an eschatological consciousness in all the manifestations of the first Christians' life. They were convinced that if they were partakers with Christ in the immortal ones, much more should they partake the mortal ones?²⁵. This pronounced eschatological consciousness lies at the foundation of the lives of the saints, who, without despising life here, show the fulfilment of its meaning in eschatology. Christians in general and the Saints in particular live by faith, confessing and waiting, but also experiencing the Kingdom of God from here, of course in an incomplete way, and the mystery of the Kingdom of God inaugurated with the coming of Christ in the world.

"Wisely knowing the instability and successive passage of this life, the saints understood that this is not the life God gave to men in the beginning. They secretly learned that in the beginning God created another kind of life, divine and always the same, one they understood to be worthy of God, Who is good. To this lifting up wisely the eye of the soul by the grace of the Spirit, as much as possible to the people of the underworld, and conceiving the divine desire for it, they rightly thought they should renounce

²³ "Învățătura celor 12 Apostoli", X, 5, in *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, transl. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1979, p. 30. Also see I Corinthians 16, 22.

²⁴ "Învățătura celor 12 Apostoli", XVI, 7, p. 32. Also see Zecharias 14, 5.

²⁵ "Învățătura celor 12 Apostoli", IV, 8, p. 27.

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this present life, if they want to acquire it in a pure way, as reason demands (...) Having succeeded this by voluntarily mortifying themselves, the saints made themselves strangers to this life and travellers in it”²⁶.

The eschatological consciousness of the saints makes death an opportunity to doxologize Christ, the sacrificed and risen one, a doxology brought to the work of Christ and of the Spirit within the saints. Following Christ’ model, the saints make themselves a confessional sacrifice before the world and the persecutors of Christ. Martyrdom for Christ mediates eternal life. An essential feature of this confession of eternal life before temporary death is that it had a personal-communional and doxological-soteriological character with profound eschatological implications. In the “logic” of the saints, the condemnation to temporary death for the confession of faith in Christ means liberation from eternal condemnation. This eschatological consciousness of the saints gives birth to attitudes that are increasingly misunderstood by pagans. The emphasis on eternal life in the lives of the saints causes them to look upon and even receive the torments for the confession of faith in Christ with joy. Roman the martyr receives the death sentence from the judge and is put to death by burning at the stake with “a cheerful face and a very friendly and serene appearance”²⁷. St. Polycarp ends his earthly life in a doxological way, strongly confessing his faith in the risen Jesus Christ²⁸.

The saints distinguish between biological death and eternal death. It is not biological death that must frighten man, but eternal death as eternal separation from God. To die in order to gain immortality was considered a great wisdom in the Christian conception of life, while in the pagan polytheistic conception it was considered madness. The saints have the eschatological consciousness that earthly life is not life, but life in death, and all who love it in their quest for salvation will die for eternal life. In the Lives of the Saints, we find the Judgment of God closely related to repentance and vice versa, as a proof of the deeply eschatological

²⁶ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, II, 43, pp. 156-157.

²⁷ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, “Martirii din Palestina”, II, 2, in: *Scrieri*, partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 13, transl. Pr. prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987. p. 397.

²⁸ “Martiriul Sfântului Policarp, episcopul Smirnei”, XIV, 1, in: *Actele martirice*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 11, trad. Pr.Prof. Dr. Ioan Rămureanu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 32.

dimension of their lives. The thought of Judgment often gives birth to images of repentance, the desire to change one's life from a debauched and passionate one to a pure and virtuous one. The saints had a pronounced eschatological conscience, confessing the evangelical teaching of the Church about the resurrection of bodies at the end of the ages in various ways. This eschatological consciousness, inspired by the message of the Gospel of Christ and cultivated in Christian communities, especially through the Holy Sacraments, gave them an extraordinary power to place themselves above a strictly immanentist and utilitarian conception of man and the cosmos. Therefore, this eschatological consciousness of the human body has an ecclesial-sacramental dimension. Of course, the resurrection of the flesh is related to the Judgment and the biblical teaching about Heaven and Hell.

This eschatological consciousness underscores the lack of fellowship between Christ and the devil, between those who confess and live in Christ and those who renounce Christ and thus become servants of the devil, trying to gain earthly life at the expense of eternal life. Heaven and Hell as realities that will be experienced by man in eternal life are present in the consciousness and confession of the Saints. They confess Christ as God and are aware that they will rejoice with Him in the joys of Heaven, the torments of Hell being prepared for idolaters of all kinds and heretics. The "gift" of martyrdom opens the kingdom of God to the saint, the temporary torments here bring him the eternal rewards in the Kingdom of God.

The cult of the Holy Relics recorded a spectacular development in the first Christian centuries and we are told about this reality in various ways. At the basis of this cult was the idea that through death communion does not break but receives new connotations: the one who has passed through a holy life, remains present through his relics full of the power of the Holy Spirit not only to the testimony of his holiness and God's love for the holy man, but also as a healing power which proclaims the miracles of God's love as the pillar of eternal life in the world until the end of the ages. The Stories of holy relics are varied and abundant in the Lives of the Saints. Especially during the persecutions, the early Christians fought a real battle and showed a true spiritual heroism in recovering the bodies of martyrs left prey by persecutors to the wild birds and beasts or simply left to rot in the indifferent sight of idolaters. The pagans were aware of the flourishing of the Holy Relics cult, so they guarded the bodies of those killed by them in various tortures and torments.

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This heroism is based precisely on their belief in the spiritual and soteriological-communal value with the relics of those who have acquired the Kingdom of God and thus become permanent prayers and intercessors of all those who want to live in the love of God. Christians honoured the relics of the Saints more than any riches because through them the true perspective of the Christian life was revealed, being full of the power of the Holy Spirit. The saints confessed these eternal realities in their lives by always relating the transient realities of earthly life to the permanent realities of eternal life. Moreover, they showed that by embodying eternal realities amid earthly realities, the latter will be transfigured, pneumatized as are the Holy Relics, who have acquired a value superior to anything earthly and transient.

“Accordingly, we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place, whither, being gathered together, as opportunity is allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps”²⁹.

Christian places of worship were built on the graves of martyrs. During the Eucharistic prayer this communion is experienced in holiness as the Church mentions the saints anamnetically, highlighting their presence in the history of salvation and the relevance of their model of life for Christians of present and future times.

“Instead, may we find mercy and grace with all the saints who through the ages have been well-pleasing to Thee: ancestors, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, teachers, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith”³⁰.

²⁹ “Martiriul Sfântului Policarp, episcopul Smirnei”, XVIII, 2-3, p. 33.

³⁰ “Liturghia Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur”, in: *Liturghier*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 165.