

Arsenie BOCA, *Practica vieții monahale (The Practice of Monastic Life)*, Editura Charisma, Deva, 2019, 176 pp.

The volume *Practica vieții monahale (The Practice of Monastic Life)* appeared under the patronage of the Charisma Publishing House (Deva) and the Publishing House of the Holy Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Deva and Hunedoara, at the end of 2019. It includes a preface signed by His Grace Gurie, Bishop of Deva and Hunedoara, entitled *Thoughts on monasticism* and an afterword signed by His Grace Bishop Daniil Stoenescu, structured in two parts, respectively: *Avva Arsenie cel Mare and Father Arsenie Boca* and *Opening the holy doors of the present*.

The work totalling 176 pages is configured as follows: PREFACE; Chapter I (THE PRACTICE OF MONASTIC LIFE) with 21 subchapters; Chapter II (THE MOMENT OF DEATH AND “MEMENTO MORI”) with 2 subchapters; Chapter III (GUIDELINES, NOTES, MEDITATIONS) with 18 subchapters; AFTERWORD; FACSIMILES.

The volume includes a series of manuscripts of Father Arsenie Boca, collected at various times¹, respectively lessons about monasticism in a more elaborate form or in a more concise manner, written *at the request of nuns who wanted to learn them by heart*². It should be noted that the entire content of the paper is devoted primarily to the monastic life representing advice, practical guidance, notes and meditations on the authenticity of monasticism and the practical way of assuming monastic life. At the same time, in this work are recorded spiritual and moral aspects applicable to all members of the Church: clergy, monks and laypeople³.

In the work attributed to Father Arsenie Boca, the main source evoked in most of the footnotes is the Holy Scripture, respectively the fundamental source of divine revelation. To this source are added Orthodox liturgical texts (*Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion*), reference works from

¹ Exemplum: *Word spoken by Father Arsenie to the nuns of the Prislop monastery during the years 1950-1959*, pp. 132-133; *The letter of Father Arsenie Boca to Bishop Andrei Magieru of Arad from May 5, 1952*, pp. 81-83, *You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ [To the monk(s), 1986]*.

² The broader motivation of the wording can be consulted at footnote 1, p. 40.

³ Chapters such as: *About fasting and prayer; Reading the divine scriptures - spiritual reading*.

the Orthodox spirituality, most of them from the collection *Philokalia of the holy needs of salvation* and from the *Egyptian Paterikon*. Other references are annotated from the works of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite - *Unseen Warfare* and Saint Nicholas Velimirovich - *Thoughts of good and evil*. Only one bibliographic reference belongs to Dr. Alexis Carrel, the well-known French surgeon and biologist.

The advice and guidance contained in the work *The practice of monastic life* reveals a thorough spiritual settlement of the author, who speaks from his own experience, providing examples from monastic life, such as: the problem of repeated confession in monasteries, the problem of conscience research, patience, pride, humility, cutting the will and humble thinking. All these advices have a solid experience in living and are based on the authentic pastoral-monastic practice, without nuances of extremist or relativistic nature. Topics such as *the behaviour of the monk towards his superiors, towards the community, towards obedience and towards the goods of the monastery, respectively the behaviour of the monk towards relatives, friends, acquaintances and towards the believers who come to the monastery, or the behaviour of the monk in the world* fully nuance the conduct of monastic life, as recorded in the regulations related to the establishment and operation of monasteries. *The interpretation of the rules of entering monasticism* is based on the liturgical rules specific to the Orthodox Church and falls within the terms of the traditional interpretation of these rules.

In fact, a broad theme addressed in this paper is the theme of self-denial or *world renunciation*, resumed and analysed in 5 subchapters, as a fundamental coordinate for the authentic practice of monastic life. In summary, on this subject, Father Arsenie concludes: *The first step towards the Kingdom of God is therefore the renunciation of the world. The second is self-denial, the way out of selfishness. The third, the rejection of thoughts, of all thoughts.* (p. 40)

One of the controversial topics in the statement of the title is *The vow of obedience and the personality of the monk. Can the obligation of monastic vows cease?* (pp. 33-34) In this chapter the author makes an analysis of the impact of personality as an *unusual personal endowment* (p. 33) in the discipline of monastic obedience, stating that *personality also has to make its way from face to likeness* (p. 33), but the discipline of listening as a general paradigm *lifts the nature of infirmity, as it*

removes pride from the personality (p. 33). However, in the conditions of assuming monastic obedience, “*personality*” becomes a name, which you must *cast away and get rid of knowing it* (p.34), because this spiritual endowment that corresponds to it is useful in another way, respectively in the capacity to enjoy suffering, in the courage of humility and in the rush of love. Equally, the author specifies the canonical tradition regarding the unconditional obedience to the rulers, until the Church proves their heresy, or the breaking of communion through schism. In the author’s opinion, the way in which obedience is assumed towards the narrator (*out of fear, obligation, goodwill, need, out of trust, love or faith*), makes the monastery a house or a prison.

In the chapter *The moment of death and “memento mori”* an analysis is made of the exit of the soul from the body through the theology of the face and resemblance. In this context, the author reiterates the dramatic moment of the fall of man through the excessive potentiation of the second part of God’s commandment from heaven (cf. Genesis 1, 28). *God’s commandment from the beginning was “grow up” and it was precisely this attainment of resemblance, through obedience and cooperation with the divine will. But the man, not listening to the first word, on foreign advice, hurried with the second part of the commandment, with the “multiplication”, before growing up. This brought him “dressing up” in these “leather garments” whose end is “death”.* (p. 69) Also here, reference is made to the resurrection by the application of the principle of antidote by Christ, Who restores the connection between the image, resemblance, obedience, and salvation. Equally, the picture of the two extreme situations from the exit of the soul, as well as from the party of the last of man, respectively the status of the physical man and the status of the spiritual man, is painted. In his conception, *salvation as the return of the soul to heaven* is the path from the possible and insignificant to the peak of divine light: *resemblance is the need for deification, which gathers in the soul, gaining occasion after occasion from the behaviour of the Holy Spirit, or as Jesus would do, not after the man or passion in us.* (p. 72)

From the chapter *guidelines, notes, meditations* we notice the document presented in the paper, respectively the letter to Bishop Andrei Magieru of Arad from May 5, 1952 (pp.81-83), through which the author (signatory of the letter) proves his sense of reality and prophetic character regarding in which a healthy monasticism can develop. He

makes it clear that *there are always monastery dwellers, but very rarely are advisers born: abbots and clergymen.* (p. 83) Practical opinions from the daily experience of a monastic community, argued by neurological, psychological and endocrinological knowledge, give us the impression of a visionary of contemporary monastic life. It is easy to understand that the practice of monastic life has a constant factor, namely the permanent rule of a monastery, but the author seems to go beyond his time, accurately anticipating the vicissitudes of the Church in coagulating an exemplary monastic community today.

Regarding the nuances regarding the heredity and influence of this aspect in the practice of monasticism, in the subchapter *Self-denial* (pp. 103 - 107 - text also found in the Facsimiles), Father Arsenie concludes: *“So: self-denial, cutting off the will and obedience are one and the same monastic work. Only in the condition of this will is true humility realized, followed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. If this condition is not fulfilled, our life returns to the characteristics of the old man and we lead a dead life. Gifts are lost, eternal life becomes a metaphysical story, Christ a historical figure: the light of knowledge is extinguished, the darkness of ignorance is strengthened, we become only flesh, flood and worthy of fire. Everything from this self-love that does not want to convert to God”*. In the context of this conclusion, in a paragraph concluding the subchapter, the author places a quote from Dr. Alexis Carrel, on which more attention can be paid, namely: *“The circumstances of development work only within the limits of hereditary predispositions, that is, of the immanent qualities of tissues and consciousness. But the nature of this predisposition is never known to us with certainty. However, we must act as if they were favourable. We must give each individual an education that allows the development of his virtual qualities, until the moment when it is proved that these qualities do not exist”*⁴. The theme of biological determinism is known in the approach of Father Arsenie Boca and in other works, from which we mention the best known work *Path to the Kingdom*⁵. The problem of heredity is resumed in the author’s analysis of the *candidates for monastic life*. In the context in which he states that many of these candidates come to such Church institutions *to hide their impotence and failures*, and that the poor quality

⁴ Dr. ALEXIS CARREL, *Man, the Unknown*, Cugetarea Publishing House, Bucharest, 1944, 3rd edition, p. 260.

⁵ Chapter “Heredity and Spirit”.

of the dwellers *can distort the purpose and physiognomy of a monastery, making it an asylum for the helpless, if not worse ... madhouse* (p.85), the author states that it is necessary to research their heredity, as a fixed constitutional factor that does not yield to education or re-education. As an argument, the author supports the text from Exodus 20,5. The theme of heredity is also analysed in the subchapter “*Thoughts*” and *their cunning*, where it explains the text from Matthew 19, 10-11, respectively *only those to whom it has been given can accept this word*. In the author’s analysis, the term *given*, in this context in *its genetic constitution*, is prior to its existence on earth. Also in his conception, *given as destiny, with the help of the special arrangement of mutagenic genes in its specific XX or XY chromosomes, that their tension by nature can favour the conversion of physical love for a sexually opposite person into universal spiritual love for all people, whatever they are*. (p.88). Considering that a nuance is necessary, Father Arsenie adds that all this is done on the basis of God’s personal omnipresence at the microcosmic level, simultaneously with His will and omniscience. (p. 89) As in the above-mentioned paper, the author proves that he has in-depth knowledge in the field of genetics, which can be analysed and which could be referred to by specialists in the field, if they have not already decided.

We consider, therefore, that through the work *The Practice of Monastic Life*, the author makes an articulated plea on the awareness of monasticism in its essence, as an active way of life, in the spiritual dimension of Orthodox life. The text and the argumentation are in line with the traditional line of Romanian monasticism, bringing complementary personal accents, most probably from their own monastic experience, but also from the complexity of the acquired knowledge. Phrases such as *monks in uniform* (p. 110) or *a sad monk is a monk with the lights off* (p. 137) are highlighted as forms of expression specific to Father Arsenie Boca, an authentic dweller of both “*intra muros*” and “*extra muros*” monasticism. The monastic life inside the monastery, but also the perspective of the monastic life assumed outside the monastery, accredited him for this broad vision on monasticism. I also consider that this volume has a current content and is recommended for reading to the monk of the 21st century. The spiritual component is harmoniously grafted to the theological one, confirming the orthodoxy of the author’s confession.

As. Prof. Archim. Casian RUȘET, PhD