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# **A**kedia or “The Noon Demon” **(Daemonium Meridianum):** **The Unnamed Spirit of Our Time** **Cătălin Adrian MOISESCU**

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## **Abstract**

The seen is a reflection of the unseen. Today’s society is growingly unaware of this reality, and is increasingly falling into the orbit of superficiality and illusion. The source of these imbalances lies in the sphere of human interiority. The deepest segment of interiority is man’s connection with God. From the root which is the connection with God depends the health of the whole organism. The Church can be seen both as a spiritual hospital and as a spiritual barrack where the spirit rests after its battles, where it is armed and trained. For contemporary society, which is becoming more and more spiritually wounded and/or conquered, rediscovering the therapeutic/mobilising wisdom of the early Church is vital. Although technologised communication at a distance has become generalised in today’s times, humanity is feeling, more than ever before, the pressure of loneliness. This has given rise to countless psychological problems. In this context, it is absolutely necessary to shed light on the Church’s experience of the inner world.

## **Keywords**

passion, thought, acedia, temptation, experience

## I. The Evagrian catalogue or the eight fundamental thoughts of evil

In order to eradicate a plant, it must be pulled out by the roots. In order to eradicate evil from human life, it is necessary to know its roots and destroy them.

According to Gennadius of Marseille, but also according to contemporary researchers, Evagrius Ponticus is the systematiser of the ascetic-mystical thought of the Fathers of the early Christian centuries. The latter is at the origin of the catalogue of the eight fundamental thoughts of evil<sup>1</sup>. These eight thoughts/spirits are at the root of all evil, and their elimination coincides with the process of detachment.

Before moving on to the presentation and analysis of the Pontic-Egyptian monk's teaching on the eight roots of evil, I consider it beneficial to give a brief overview of the life of Evagrius Ponticus, whose writing we are about to meditate on<sup>2</sup>.

Evagrius, son of a bishop, was born around 345 in the south of the Black Sea, in Ibora of Helenopons. He probably studied in Neocaesarea, after which he was ordained a reader by Saint Basil the Great. Later, he became a close associate of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, who ordained him as a deacon. Between 379 and 381, he helped Gregory in his fight against Arianism<sup>3</sup>.

After Saint Gregory's retirement to Cappadocia, the young deacon Evagrius remained in Constantinople. Here he fell in love with a woman of noble birth. Before he could fall into the sin of fornication, he had a frightening vision, after which he left the capital of the empire and came to Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>. Here, Melania the Elder managed to cure him of his depression

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<sup>1</sup> Avva EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, commentaries by Gabriel Bunge, transl. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2006, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on his life, writings and the more or less positive influence of his thinking on posterity, see Augustine CASIDAY, *Evagrius Ponticus (The Early Church Fathers)*, Routledge, New York, 2006, pp. 5-35.

<sup>3</sup> Avva EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*; p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> PALADIE, *Istoria Lausiacă (Lavsaicon)*, transl. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2007, pp. 88-89.

and guide him towards Egyptian monasticism. He arrived in Egypt in 383 and spent two years in Nitria. From 385 until the end of his life, he lived as a hermit in Kellia. His mentors in the desert were Saint Macarius of Alexandria and Saint Macarius of Egypt. He studied the works of Origen. From 390 onwards, Evagrius had as his disciples for several years figures who would become very well known, such as Saint John Cassian and Palladius. He passed away on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 399<sup>5</sup>.

Evagrius, as Patriarch Justin Moiescu stated, was one of the greatest spiritual writers of the Egyptian desert, both in terms of quantity and quality, as well as the influence of his writings on posterity<sup>6</sup>.

However, under the influence of Origen, whom he studied diligently, dogmatic errors crept into his theological work<sup>7</sup>. In the context of the Origenist disputes of the 4th-6th centuries, Evagrius is condemned as a follower of Origen's heretical ideas. Although the documents of the Fifth Ecumenical Council do not mention Evagrius' name<sup>8</sup>, he is mentioned in the first canon of the Quinisext Council, among those who were anathematised and despised, alongside Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Didymus<sup>9</sup>. However, his ascetic-mystical works remained a reference point<sup>10</sup>. Due

<sup>5</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Florin VÂRLAN, "Din memoria istoriei, Evagrie Ponticul și opera sa în preocupările Patriarhului Iustin Moiescu", in: *Revista Românească de Studii Axiologice*, nr. 2, 2020, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the value of ascetic writings, as well as the dogmatic errors found in Evagrius' work, as perceived by the great theologian and fighter against Origenist influences, Saint Maximus the Confessor, largely disseminated through the monastic environment (whose main exponent is Evagrius), it is useful to read Polycarp SHERWOOD, *The Earlier Ambigua of St Maximus the Confessor and his Refutation of Origenism*, Studia Anselmiana 36, Rome, 1955, pp. 92-102, 137-149. See also "Introducere" to Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, transl. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2006, pp. 7-60.

<sup>8</sup> See "Cuvântul traducătorului. O scriere antică despre rugăciune și tâlcuirea ei modernă", in: Arhimandrit EMILIANOS SIMONOPETRITUL, *Despre rugăciune: tâlcuire la Capetele despre rugăciune ale Avvei Evagrie*, transl. Agapie Corbu, Editura Sfântul Nectarie, Arad, 2018, p. XI.

<sup>9</sup> *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe*, I, transl. Răzvan Perșa, Ediție bilingvă, Basilica, București, 2018, p. 264.

<sup>10</sup> Here is an enlightening word about the spiritual value and dangers hidden in Evagrius'

to the delicate political, ecclesiastical, and heresiological context, his valuable works were published under another name, that of Saint Nilus<sup>11</sup>.

Evagrius was a very strict ascetic who fought a fierce battle against the spirits of evil. His ascetic writings are both the fruit of his own experience and a reflection of the thinking of his teachers, whom I mentioned above.

In what follows, we will analyse Evagrius' writings on the eight thoughts of evil. These are the strategic points through which and from which the unseen war begins.

First, it should be noted that this catalogue of fundamental thoughts of evil first appears in Origen. Evagrius shows the importance of these thoughts/spirits on the ascending scale of evil in the human soul and also places these thoughts in an ascetic order. He starts with the bodily, material passions related to lust, continues with those related to irascibility, and ends with the spiritual ones, which are more subtle and refined, which are more readily perceived by those who are spiritually advanced and which attack them more<sup>12</sup>.

The idea of the origin of evil in the inner universe of man is a biblical one: "For **out of the heart** come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matt 15, 19). Likewise, number eight in Evagrius' catalogue of fundamental thoughts of evil is inspired by Scripture. The Saviour states in the Gospel that the unclean spirit that was cast out of the man in whom it was working takes with it seven other spirits (eight in total) and returns to the one from whom it was cast out. Finding the house empty and the door of the soul open, these demons will make "the last state of that man worse than the first" (Matt 12, 43-45). This word of the Lord was interpreted both by Evagrius' indirect

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writings: "John's answer: Do not accept teachings of this kind. Read from his writings, if you wish, those that are useful to the soul (...)" VARSANUFIE ȘI IOAN, *Scrisori duhovnicești*, coll. *Filocalia*, XI, p. 602, transl. Dumitru Stăniloae, Humanitas, București, 2009, p. 503.

<sup>11</sup> Arhimandrit EMILIANOS SIMONOPETRITUL, *Despre rugăciune: tâlcuire la Capetele despre rugăciune ale Avvei Evagrie*, pp. X-XI; Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Vision of God*, translated by Asheleigh Moorhouse, preface by John Meyendorff, The Faith Press, American Orthodox Press, Clayton, Wisconsin, 1963, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, pp. 17-18.

teacher, Origen, and by the disciple of the monk from Pontus, St. John Cassian, as the foundation of the struggle that unclean spirits wage on the soul, but also as the basis for identifying eight spirits/thoughts that are the root of all evil.

As stated above, the eight thoughts of evil identified by Evagrius (gluttony - gastrimargia, fornication - porneia, love of money - philargyria, anger - orge, sadness - lype, boredom - akedia, vain glory - kenodoxia, pride - hyperephaneia) can be grouped into three categories. This division is made by the author of the catalogue of thoughts in connection with the three temptations that the Saviour faced in the wilderness of Carantania. Thus, all the other thoughts of evil arise from these eight, and these eight arise from three (which are found among the eight) that the Saviour also struggled with (gluttony, love of money, and human glory), and the one that gives birth to the three, and therefore to all that exist, is self-love<sup>13</sup>.

“The first of the passions is **the greed of the belly**”<sup>14</sup> teaches the great ascetic Evagrius. As with all passionate thoughts and those related to the greed of the belly, in order to achieve the purpose for which they are placed in the mind of man by the spirits of evil, they attract arguments. This happens, however, only when the will of the soul has opened the gate of conversation to the mind, moving from the stage of enticement to that of accompaniment. The arguments put forward by this passion could be related to the weakness of the body, to the sufferings brought about by illnesses that can arise from excessive restraint. Restraint is the weapon against greed. However, for it to bear the expected fruit, it must be used

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<sup>13</sup> EVAGRIE PONTICUL, “Capete despre deosebirea patimilor și a gândurilor”, coll. *Filocalia*, I, transl. Dumitru Stăniloae, Humanitas, București, 2008, pp. 52-53. For the statement that self-love is at the origin of all passions, see AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, p. 112; Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, “Răspunsuri către Talasie”, coll. *Filocalia*, III, transl. Dumitru Stăniloae, Humanitas, București, 2009, p. 30. See also the subsequent approach to the theme of the eight fundamental passions in the vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor: Dr. Bogdan-Vlăduț BRĂNZĂ, *Patimă și pătimire în teologia Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul: relevanța lor pentru teologia morală contemporană*, Doxologia, Iași, 2021, pp. 222-228.

<sup>14</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, p. 65.

with discernment, "the best of all"<sup>15</sup>. Without this, it leads to spiritual and physical harm.

"He said again: «There are some who have melted their bodies in asceticism, and because they did not have right judgment, they have distanced themselves from God»"<sup>16</sup>. Likewise, self-restraint without prayer is like tilled and unsown land, as Saint Mark the Ascetic, disciple of Saint John Chrysostom, teaches<sup>17</sup>.

As noted above, the passions in Evagrius' catalogue follow in ascending order, from the grossest, such as the one we are referring to now, to the most subtle. Saint John Cassian shows that fornication (the next thought/spirit in the Pontic monk's list) is preceded by gluttony. He states that those who have filled their stomachs will not be able to fight the devil of fornication in their minds<sup>18</sup>.

As a conclusion to everything that has been said about gluttony up to this point, we present Evagrius' comprehensive vision communicated through a visual image:

"A well-trained horse, lean in body, will never throw its rider, for the stallion, restrained by the bridle, obeys the rider's hand, and the body is tamed by hunger and vigilance; therefore it does not jump when the thought rides it, nor does it neigh when aroused by passionate desire".

The next thought is that of **lust**. It tries to work in souls to compel them to desire different bodies. It fights those who restrain themselves with greater force to make them believe that their restraint is futile and thus return to the greed of the belly to facilitate the act of what preoccupies the mind. Both the greed of the belly and fornication imply a lack of self-control<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Sfântul IOAN CASIAN, "Cuvânt plin de mult folos despre Sfinții Părinți din pustia sketică și despre darul deosebirii", coll. *Filocalia*, I, p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> AVVA ANTONIE, *Patericul*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Sfântul CUVIOS MARCU PUSTNICUL, *Scrieri*, trad. Ștefan Voronca, Egumenița, Cartea Ortodoxă, Galați, Alexandria, 2008, p. 175.

<sup>18</sup> Sfântul IOAN CASIAN, "Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății", coll. *Filocalia*, I, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății*

Once the thought of lust has taken over the mind, it also brings with it **the love of money**. As bodily desires grow ever stronger, they require more and more material things for their satisfaction, and these can be obtained to the extent that one has “money” at one’s disposal.

The spirit of love of money implies, in all its manifestations, a pathological selfishness. Man’s purpose in life is to enter into real communion with the Supreme Community, which is that of the Divine Persons, and, starting from this or through this, with human persons<sup>20</sup>. The selfishness to which the soul is drawn, engulfed by the love of money, prevents us from fulfilling the salvific purpose of life.

The arguments that this thought brings to mind, in order to fulfil itself, also reveal unbelief and spring from it, from distrust in God’s care, hence the many personal worries about the future and the desire to accumulate.

Those who struggle for food, women, or wealth cannot escape **anger**<sup>21</sup>. Deprivation of one of the above causes hatred towards the obstacle to obtaining what is desired, but also **sadness**. Therefore, for Evagrius, the order in which anger and sadness occur is not fixed, as they can appear one before the other. Sadness can also arise as a result of the failure to fulfil the desire for revenge triggered by anger. Sadness is reprehensible only when it is generated by the frustration brought on by passions, but when it is determined by longing for God, it is praiseworthy<sup>22</sup>.

Next comes the most oppressive spirit, akin to sadness, the spirit of **akedia**<sup>23</sup>. If during the time of the holy apostles, of persecutions and then of the emergence and flourishing of monasticism, there was much zeal, determination, perseverance, spiritual diligence and manliness in the Christian community, today a high percentage of the Christian world finds

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*și Replici împotriva lor*, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, I, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2010, p. 427.

<sup>21</sup> EVAGRIE PONTICUL, “Capete despre deosebirea patimilor și a gândurilor”, coll. *Filocalia*, I, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>23</sup> For a broader approach to the subject of akedia in the monastic writings of the early centuries, see Bogdan TĂTARU-CAZABAN, “Akedia. Portretul unei patologii spirituale în monahismul primelor secole”, in: Daniel LEMENI (ed.), *Ascetism și hagiografie în antichitatea târzie*, Doxologia, Iași, 2023, pp. 163-202.

itself in a state of great sluggishness, which is precisely the work of the spirit of akedia.

Akedia can be translated as boredom, sluggishness, lack of vigour, spiritual laziness, discouragement, wasting time, draining spiritual energy, and satiation<sup>24</sup>. Contemporary society, which could also be considered the world of speed, is in a constant rush. Although today's people seem to be full of power, vigour and strength, their actions conceal a crass spiritual weakness. The concerns of Adam's sons today are less and less spiritual and more and more earthly. While the vast majority of people in ancient times sought the protection and support of God or other deities or higher powers of a different nature, today's people increasingly consider themselves self-sufficient, with technology offering the illusion of the possibility of self-deification. Behind this reality lies, to a large extent, the spirit of akedia.

The desire to draw closer to God, to seek Him, to enrich oneself in virtues, seem like very harmful, useless, difficult or even impossible endeavours. The flight from prayer<sup>25</sup>, from church, from any asceticism, but also from other works that can enrich man in his self-development, which train mechanisms related to his inner side, meditation, introspection, critical thinking, reading, study, reflection, and rigorous intellectual pursuits, often originate from the demon of akedia. The same can be said about the preference for a comfortable life and the desire to always have fun. However, the modern world (especially the "civilised" one) is not satisfied with all the comforts it enjoys (the fruit of the same spirit), feeling a strong inner emptiness (conscious or unconscious) caused by the separation from the Creator. Proof of this is the high percentage of suicides, mental illnesses, divorces, alcohol consumption, drugs and/or other stimulants<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> For an evolution of the concept in theological literature and beyond, see: Siegfried WENZEL, *The sin of sloth: Acedia in medieval thought and literature*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1967.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding prayer as a form of communication with God, see the chapter "Comunicarea, surogat al comuniunii", from Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Captivi în internet*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Sophia, București, 2018, pp. 284-286.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding the psychosomatic implications of the spirit of akedia taking hold of a person, as well as the therapeutic remedies proposed by the Church, see Arhimandritul Spiridonos LOGOTHETIS, *Deprimarea și tămăduirea ei în învățătura Bisericii*, transl. Șerban Tica, Sophia, București, 2001, pp. 10-39.

The thought of akedia, which we have arrived at, is considered the most burdensome, because it encompasses all the others. It is also called the demon of noon, because it is as scorching as the midday sun, because it is characteristic especially of middle age when man is full of strength, but does not use/direct it towards the essentials precisely because of this spirit, or because it manifests itself especially at noon<sup>27</sup>. When it is harboured, this demon paralyses and suffocates the mind and makes man a “living dead”. In this passion, faculties of the soul meet that will have contrary works in it<sup>28</sup>. One is irascibility, which stirs up the soul against those it commands, causing it to despise them, and the other is desire, which makes it want what it does not have. Akedia is a complex phenomenon that affects all the powers of the soul. According to Evagrius, there are human passions and animal passions. The former refer to the cognitive functions of man, and the latter to the irrational ones, irascibility and concupiscence. Through the spirit of akedia, man in his entirety, with all his spiritual faculties, is affected. First, this passion perverts the power of desire and anger, then it darkens the mind, pushing the soul towards ignorance that separates it from God<sup>29</sup>.

The last two thoughts relate to the devil’s more subtle work on the human mind. **Vain/ glory** involves the desire for appreciation, praise, honour, notoriety, high office, power, dominion, and flattery. This spirit is

<sup>27</sup> According to Abba Evagrius, the spirit of akedia manifests itself especially between the fourth and eighth hours (10 a.m. to 2 p.m.), see AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, p. 126. During this time, in the East, the sun is at its hottest, sluggishness takes over every living thing, and lethargy settles over man’s physical and spiritual powers. In this favourable environment, the sixth thought of evil appears with great ease, which does not mean that outside this interval it cannot or does not appear. See Gabriel BUNGE, *Akedia. Plictiseala și terapia ei după Avva Evagrie Ponticul sau sufletul în luptă cu demonul amiezii*, transl. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Sibiu, 2007, pp. 74-75.

<sup>28</sup> For an understanding of akedia as hatred for everything the soul is/has and desire for everything it is not/does not have, see: Leszek MISIARCZYK, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2021, pp. 234-250.

<sup>29</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, pp. 126-128. Gabriel BUNGE, *Akedia. Plictiseala și terapia ei după Avva Evagrie Ponticul sau sufletul în luptă cu demonul amiezii*, pp. 83-87. See Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, “Răspunsuri către Talasie”, coll. *Filocalia*, III, p. 58: Akedia “is also the heaviest of all other passions”.

very cunning and can arise from anything, both wealth and poverty, health and sickness, etc.

“Of all thoughts, only that of vain glory **has many births**, encompasses almost the entire inhabited world, and opens the door to all demons, becoming a cunning traitor to the city”<sup>30</sup>. This spirit can steal the fruits of asceticism, since those who do good to please people “have received their reward” (Matt 6, 2.5.16).

The connection between vain/glory and the last thought, that of **pride**, is masterfully expressed by Evagrius: “The light of lightning heralds the sound of thunder, and the presence of vain glory heralds pride”<sup>31</sup>.

Pride, the image of the devil, is separation from God, taking credit for all successes, blasphemy against providence.

Evagrius’ catalogue of the eight fundamental thoughts of evil is a manual for diagnosing and treating spiritual illnesses. The therapeutic teachings found in the writings of the Pontic-Egyptian monk can be summarised as follows: each passion is healed by its opposite and by eradicating its roots. Hence the importance of classifying passionate thoughts, and therefore of the work of the great ascetic from Kellia, Egypt.

## II. Temptations as a factor of spiritual growth

In the depths of divine wisdom (Rom 11, 33), the actions of demons are used pedagogically for the spiritual benefit of humans, as means of self-knowledge, which is indispensable for salvation, since it is the catalyst for humility.

“No one untempted will be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. For it has been said, «Raise up temptations, and there is no one who can be saved»”<sup>32</sup>. Temptations and trials can therefore represent both a ramp for spiritual elevation and a slope leading down to the abyss of passions. The

<sup>30</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> AVVA EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *În luptă cu gândurile: Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor*, p. 100.

<sup>32</sup> AVVA ANTONIE, *Patericul*, p. 4.

appearance of temptations is inevitable, “for it is necessary that scandals come” (Matt 18, 7).

Human reason, according to the teachings of the Holy Fathers, summarised by Father Dumitru Stăniloae, does not remain capable of perceiving the truth in all circumstances of life. When reason has fallen to the role of servant of passions, its vision of the world is altered. Instead of perceiving the reasons behind things and, through them, God, reason ends up inventing “rational” arguments for irrational acts, which are those of passions<sup>33</sup>. Hence the different responses to temptations depending on the health of the faculties of the human soul.

“In a crooked mind, even what is right becomes crooked”<sup>34</sup>, said the great enlightener of souls, Saint Arsenie Boca.

On the path of man’s approach to God lies the world through which he must pass. The world, with all that it contains, is for man the stone on which he must sharpen the faculties of his soul, the teacher to Christ, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it can also be the path to hell<sup>35</sup>.

A certain hermit named Diocles, in Palladius’s *Lausiac History*, states in simple words the conclusion of what has been stated above: “When the mind departs from thinking about God, man becomes either a demon or an animal”<sup>36</sup>.

The fact that temptation contributes or can contribute to our spiritual growth and can even be its catalyst is confirmed by many experiences of the fathers of early monasticism<sup>37</sup>.

The pious John Moschus recounts in his *Spiritual meadow* about a certain priest named Conon from the Penthoucla monastery, whom he heard about from Avva Athanasius from the monastery of Saint Sava. He had an improved life and was appointed to baptise. While anointing

<sup>33</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, pp. 234-235.

<sup>34</sup> *Părintele Arsenie Boca mare îndrumător de suflete din secolul XX*, Editura Teognost, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 185.

<sup>35</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>36</sup> PALADIE, *Istoria Lausiacă (Lavsaiicon)*, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> John CHRYSOAVGAS, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers with a translation of Abba Zosimas’ Reflections*, World Wisdom, 2003, pp. 37–39.

a woman with Holy Chrism, he lost his mind. For this reason, he wanted to leave the monastery. Before he could do so, Saint John the Baptist appeared to him, telling him to be patient because his struggle would be eased. Another time, a beautiful woman came to be baptised. The priest was unable to anoint her with Holy Chrism for this reason. For this reason, the girl waited two days without being baptised. The Reverend Conon decided to leave the monastery. As he was walking along the road, moving away from the monastery, Saint John the Baptist appeared to him again, saying the same words he had said when he first appeared to him. The priest resisted. Then Saint John made the sign of the cross three times on him, below the navel, and from then on his body no longer trembled at the sight of women's faces. But here is what the Lord's messenger said to him: "Believe me, Father Conon, I wanted your struggle to be rewarded! But because you do not want it, I have made your struggle easier, but you will not be rewarded for your efforts"<sup>38</sup>.

We understand from this story that patience in temptation was for the ascetic Conon a reason to earn heavenly crowns. Success in resisting the enemy's traps is achieved only by clinging to the Lord. Perseverance in this resistance brings with it an intensification of the personal relationship of love with God. Temptations are also means of self-knowledge. Without self-knowledge there is no humility, and humility is the indispensable condition for drawing closer to God. Here is what Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite teaches about this:

"God does not use means of coercion or humiliation except when man begins to trust in himself. Then He brings him to self-knowledge. Sometimes God allows man to fall into errors, greater or lesser, in proportion to his greater or lesser estimation of himself. But where there is no self-esteem, as was the case in the soul of the Holy Virgin Mary, there is no danger of falling"<sup>39</sup>.

Temptation can also mean trouble, not just an urge to sin, but also a terrible unpleasantness that God may allow to come upon us. In what

<sup>38</sup> IOAN MOSHU, *Limonariul sau Livada duhovnicească*, Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2014, pp. 32–33.

<sup>39</sup> Sfântul NICODIM AGHIORITUL, *Războiul nevăzut*, Egumenița, Galați, p. 18.

follows, I will present three cases of monks who were corrected, who used spiritually, the inner suffering of struggles with passionate attractions, with cunning urges, but also the troubles that befell them.

Also in the Spiritual meadow of venerable Ioan Moschus, we are told how there was a very devout brother in the Penthoucla monastery, but who was terribly tormented by the passion of fornication. One day, unable to bear the inner burning caused by his lust, he left for Jericho to curb his urges. As soon as he entered the house of prostitution, he was struck with leprosy. Realising this, he returned to the monastery, giving thanks to God and saying, “God has brought this disease upon me so that my soul may be saved”<sup>40</sup>.

From the same ancient writing (7th century), we learn how in a monastery in Lycia, where about forty nuns lived, five of them, struggling with the passion of fornication, tried to flee the monastery at night to take men. As they were gathering their clothes to leave, they were demonised. When this happened, they could no longer leave, confessed their sins and thanked God with these words: “We thank the Great God for bringing this punishment upon us, so that we may not lose our souls”<sup>41</sup>.

We find a similar story in the Egyptian Paterikon, in the chapter dedicated to Abba Isidore the priest. During his time, there was a very pious deacon, Abba Isidore, who wanted to be ordained a priest and remain in his place. Out of humility, he did not accept. However, the devil sowed envy in one of the elders of the monastery. He hid a book in the deacon’s cell. Then he went to Father Isidore and told him that one of the brothers had stolen a book from him. He took two other monks with him and went from cell to cell to look for “what had been stolen”. Of course, they found the book in the deacon’s cell, took it to the church and, in front of the deacon, Father Isidore and other worshippers, revealed the “theft”. Unexpectedly, the deacon bowed down to all those present, asked for forgiveness and penance. He was barred from Communion for three weeks. For three weeks, he stood at the entrance of the church and asked everyone for forgiveness. After this period of time, he readmitted to the Eucharistic communion, and the one who wronged him got exorcised.

<sup>40</sup> Ioan MOSHU, *Limonariul sau Livada duhovnicească*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ioan MOSHU, *Limonariul sau Livada duhovnicească*, p. 158.

Suffering this, the envious old man confessed his mistake, but he wasn't healed until the wronged man prayed for him<sup>42</sup>.

All these examples show that the trials and tribulations that the aforementioned people went through caused them to grow and improve their spiritual state. Through them, they gained humility, strength, boldness against passions, peace of mind towards sinful attractions, and knowledge of God's judgments<sup>43</sup>. Of course, the experiences recounted indicate that those in question had a serious Christian life, since such things rarely happen to those who are totally indifferent to their salvation. From this we understand the authenticity of the words of the Apostle Paul: "And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons: «My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him. For whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives». Endure for the sake of wisdom, God treats you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? And if you are without chastening, of which all have part, then you are illegitimate sons and not true sons" (Heb 12, 5-8).

In order for temptations to truly become an impetus towards God, it is necessary to always keep in mind the words of Abba Or: "He said again: in all temptation, blame no one but yourself, saying, «This is happening to me because of my sins»"<sup>44</sup>.

Temptations are therefore for some an opportunity for confession, correction, steadfastness, and closeness to God, and for others a cause for falling. A simple word from Abba Macarius the Egyptian summarises what has been stated in this subchapter: "With a bad word you make even the good bad, and with a good word you make even the bad good"<sup>45</sup>.

This apophthegm can be related to everything that a person encounters in life (people, events, deeds, temptations, troubles, etc.). It depends on the helm of the mind whether, on the sea of life, the ship of the soul will use

<sup>42</sup> Avva ISIDOR, *Patericul*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the enrichment of knowledge by following the practical school of the desert, see: Lillian LARSEN, *On Learning a New Alphabet: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the Monostichs of Menander*, in: S. RUBENSON, M. VINZENT (eds.), *Studia Patristica*, 55, Peeters Publishers, 2013, pp. 59-77.

<sup>44</sup> Avva OR, *Patericul*, p. 257.

<sup>45</sup> Avva MACARIE EGIPTEANUL, *Patericul*, p. 149.

the waves of trials to move faster towards the final destination of heavenly bliss, or whether they will become a pretext for sinking.

### III. From demonic temptation to spiritual insight

The moments of severe trial in the life of a Christian are certainly the most painful, but they are also the most precious. Just as in the life of the Saviour, first came the Sacrifice, and then the Resurrection and Ascension, so it is in the life of every person who desires to follow the Lord Christ. Just as a woman first goes through great pain and then rejoices greatly that “a man has been born into the world” (John 16, 21), so too are great divine revelations usually preceded by great struggles, trials, and intense spiritual tension.

The great Moses, the prophet of the Old Testament, was troubled for the people whom he had brought out of Egypt with the power of God, for they had fallen into idolatry, worshipping the golden calf. He painfully asks God for strength and help to carry out the mission entrusted to him. He even seems to be overcome with despair and confusion in his conversation with the Creator about the people he was called to lead: “Behold, You say to me: «Lead this people», **but You have not revealed to me whom You will send with me**, although You have said: «I know you by name, and you have found favour in My sight. Therefore, if I have found favour in Your sight, **show Yourself to me, that I may know and find favour in Your sight, and that this nation is Your people**»” (Exodus 33, 12-13).

After this, Moses sees God from the cleft in the rock (Exodus 33, 19-23). Elijah, after his inner turmoil caused by Jezebel’s command to kill him, after the despair that overwhelmed him, believing that he alone remained faithful, after praying for God to take him from this life, sees God in the gentle breeze.

For a more accurate understanding of the prophet’s inner state prior to the vision, we quote his words: “(...) he sat down under a juniper tree and **prayed for death**, saying: «**It is enough** now, Lord! **Take my life**, for I am no better than my fathers»”! (3 Kgs 19, 4)

The three young men in Babylon **in the fiery furnace** and the prophet Daniel **in the lions' den** enjoyed angelic interventions (Dan 3, 25; 6, 23).

The Egyptian Paterikon offers us numerous examples of charismatic experiences<sup>46</sup>, which, however, followed terrible mystical turmoil. Nevertheless, the number of demonic apparitions reported in the Paterikon far exceeds the number of experiences of grace presented. This is due, however, to the discretion of the fathers. Abba Arsenius, a hermit by divine calling, was asked about those who withdraw from the world to live in solitude, but he avoided describing their way of life:

“Once some elders came to Abba Arsenius and begged him to meet with them. And he opened the door to them. And they asked him to speak to them about those who withdraw and meet with no one. And the elder said to them: when a maiden is in her father’s house, many want to betroth her. But after she marries, she does not please everyone; some defame her, while others praise her, and **she does not have as much honour as she did before when she was hidden! So it is with the things of the soul: once they are revealed, they cannot satisfy everyone**”<sup>47</sup>.

This discretion is an expression of the humility of the fathers, this being the “gate of heaven”<sup>48</sup>. However, Abba Arsenius also tells us, certainly from his own experience, that “if we seek God, **He will reveal Himself to us**; and if we hold on to Him, He will remain with us”<sup>49</sup>.

Anthony, John Kolobos, Sisoës, Silouan, and Zacharias had visions and ecstasies, but what was revealed to them is not shared with us, demonstrating once again their sobriety<sup>50</sup>. Saint Joseph the Hesychast, who passed away in the last century, following in the footsteps of the saints of

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<sup>46</sup> See: *The Lives of the Desert Fathers. The historia monachorum in Aegypto*, translated by Norman Russell and introduction by Benedicta Ward, Mowbray, London & Oxford, Cistercian publications, USA, 1980, pp. 39-45.

<sup>47</sup> Avva ARSENIE, *Patericul*, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Avva IOAN COLOV, *Patericul*, p. 110.

<sup>49</sup> Avva Arsenie, *Patericul*, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Lucien REGNAULT, *Viața cotidiană a Părinților deșertului în Egiptul secolului IV*, transl. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2013, p. 232.

the two Christian millennia, being in the same spirit as the ascetics of the Egyptian Paterikon, stated: “Whether you are in Heaven or in hell, it is ours not to externalise ourselves and to show ourselves to be dispassionate,” so that the demons may not know how to wage war against us<sup>51</sup>.

Also in the Egyptian Paterikon, we find the following story in one of the chapters of the nameless fathers. There was a hermit who had been living in the desert for thirty years, feeding on a plant found there. At one point, it occurred to him that it would be better to return to the world, because after so many years in the desert he had not had any visions and had not performed any miracles, and salvation is also in the city. While he was tormented by thoughts and wanted to leave, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel rebuked him, telling him to ignore the voice of the enemy, to remain in his cell, and to ask God for humility and patience. Strengthened by this revelation, the monk remained in the desert until the end of his life and was saved<sup>52</sup>.

We can see from this account that the spiritual vision followed the demonic temptation. Through temptation and vision, the monk strengthened himself, steadied himself on his path, and refreshed his soul’s powers to such an extent that he remained in monastic life until the end of his life.

We find another similar story among the nameless elders in the Egyptian Paterikon. A brother had been tormented by a thought for nine years and, unable to get rid of it, fell into despair. This was because he considered himself to be the cause of the temptation. As he was about to leave, he heard a wonderful voice telling him that his nine years of spiritual struggle had earned him crowns, that he should return and he would find relief from his thoughts. The conclusion of this story is very suggestive for the subchapter we are in: “we understand that wars cause crowns”<sup>53</sup>. In this case, too, the experience of grace followed the tension of temptation<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Arhim. EFREM FILOTHEITUL, *Starețul meu Iosif Isihastul*, transl. Ștefan Nuțescu, Evanghelismos, București, 2010, p. 118.

<sup>52</sup> *Patericul*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>53</sup> *Patericul*, pp. 437-438.

<sup>54</sup> See an interesting approach to spiritual life as a transition from a state of ignorance of reality (called amnesia) to one of knowledge. This leap is achieved only through a breakaway, which can be brought about by the experience of overcoming temptations. Gregory MAYERS, *Listen to the Desert. Secrets of spiritual maturity from the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Triumph Books, 1996, pp. 54-64.

We also remember Saint Silouan the Athonite, who passed away last century, like Saint Joseph the Hesychast mentioned above. Like the saints of the Egyptian Paterikon mentioned above, he had a special charismatic experience, also following an intense struggle with demons and inner turmoil. The word he received from the Lord shows the importance of humility, taking up the spiritual struggle and enduring temptations for salvation: "Keep your mind in hell and do not despair"<sup>55</sup>!

The joy of the mystical encounter with God is usually achieved after a vigorous sifting through which the soul comes to see itself as it is, eliminating proud impressions of itself. In divine pedagogy, even demonic temptations have a purpose. They represent the sieve that separates passion from virtue within us. This process is followed by spiritual vision, of course, if the one who has gone through it chooses good.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

Christian life involves managing the tension between the attraction to God and that which is contrary to Him, in which the soul finds itself. For this, it is necessary, first of all, to master the self, but also to know oneself. Clarifying the origins of passions, as well as understanding the functions of temptations allowed by God, are indispensable. Among those that predominantly confront the soul in contemporary times, we find that the spirit of akedia occupies a central position. This, in fact, condenses all the others within itself, hence the need for a more extensive/general investigation of the dynamics of spiritual life, in order to understand it in a special way.

Today's society, increasingly troubled by anxiety, confusion, despair, boredom and hatred, is becoming less and less aware of the catalyst for all these phenomena. The devil, the "father of lies", who "from the beginning was a murderer" (John 8, 44), although today he makes his presence felt through apparitions in the case of a small number of Christians, has

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<sup>55</sup> CUVIOSUL SILUAN ATHONITUL, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smereniei. Însemnări duhovnicești*, transl. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, p. 81.

found a means by which he achieves the same goal, managing to hide his signature. In other words, the war he waged against the most advanced ascetics through apparitions is now being waged against almost all people. His work is seen and accepted, and he remains unseen. If, for example, the fathers in the Egyptian desert in the 4th century were shown in the form of wanton women or took all kinds of frightening forms to attract, terrify and ultimately subdue them, today all these illusions are instilled in Christians through technical means, advertisements, films, games, etc. Thinking about the above, we will understand the truth of the words of Abba Ishirion, who prophesied that the believers of the end times would be, he said, “greater than us and than our fathers”<sup>56</sup>, that is, greater than the great saints of early monasticism (the great saints of the Egyptian Paterikon, 4th-5th centuries). The temptations of the great ascetics are experienced today by beginners and the uninitiated.

In conclusion, we consider it more imperative than ever today to rediscover the art of mystical warfare, an art that could also be called spiritual therapy.

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<sup>56</sup> Avva ISHIRION, *Patericul*, p. 127.