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Prayer and Life

Vasile VLAD

Vasile VLAD

“Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad
E-mail: prvasile_v@yahoo.com

Abstract

Whilst the vital elements (values) for the bodily life, like the oxygen, the food, the clothing, the environmental conditions, and others, they make possible the earthly existence of the man, and imprint in the body the quality and the energies specific to them, the prayer gives to the bodily life and to the soul's life, that Life owned by the One Who said: I am the bread of the Life, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Within the Church's space, the cultic prayer gives again birth to the human life, it corrects the “nature's shortcoming” through the initiation Mysteries, and during the existence, the prayer maintains and deifies the life. The prayer relentlessly accomplishes a new creation, for the prayer means a together-working of the man with God “in the act of creating immortal gods”. The prayer is the answer given to the heavenly Father through which the man is deified. Each power of the human nature, when it is overshadowed by prayer, it becomes from above world.

Keywords

Prayer, the vital value, Prayer as much-speaking, the passionate imagination, the spiritual meditation, the cell, the monastic rule, Eastern Tradition

I. Prayer – a vital value

In the Christian-Eastern Tradition, the prayer, understood like the work “of the godlike Ghost within man”, and like uncreated Light of the Holy Trinity within the human nature, and as life into grace that penetrates

everything within us, it is considered to be *amongst the vital values*. “The prayer is, according to its feature, *the man’s accompanying and uniting with God*; and according to the work is *the sustainer of the world*¹. Out of this accompanying and uniting, caused by the prayer, the man achieves a principle of life that elevates, both the body and the soul, in a more profound register than the biological and the psychological ones. Through prayer, the man values the unmixed presence of God into creation, and His openness towards communion, and he becomes receiver of His grace, by elevating his life into God. Like the one who is on a boat, and he pulls the rope tied on the shore, says Saint Dionysus the Areopagite, he doesn’t move the shore towards the boat, but he moves himself and the boat towards the shore, likewise, the one who prays, he doesn’t bring God down, “Who is everywhere”, but he elevates himself into God². The prayer mysteriously gives birth to perichoresis (the interpenetration and the reciprocal co-dwelling) of the godlike life with the human life. The human life is elevated to God, and the life of God it penetrates within man. The man becomes partaker to the godlike life³.

The glory given to God by the man, by working the prayer, it turns back upon him, becoming cause of life to him. “What somebody calls by praying himself, and what one can see with the soul’s eye, that he is attracting to him, through prayer”⁴. Like the sunflower, turning towards

¹ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, “Scara dumnezeiescului urcăș”, 28,1, translation by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, in: *Filocalia*, vol. IX, București, 1980, p. 403.

² Sfântul DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, “Despre numirile dumnezeiești”, 3, 1, translation by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: Sfântul DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Opere complete*, Editura Paideia, București, 1996, p. 144.

³ “By working the prayer, writes Archimandrite Zachariah, the man’s life is removed, *it is hidden* in the being of God, whilst the life of God comes and dwells into the man (we are into Christ and Christ is into us). This means that it takes place an interpenetration of the godlike life, with the one of the man, in a twofold movement: the man stretches his spiritual power towards God, and God descends towards the man. To the human impulse it is characteristic, and irrepressible, and tormenting thirst of repentance, an insatiable need for praying and a sweet love. The humble descent of God within man *brings with itself a radical transformation of the man’s entire being* and an untold peace of the love into heart”, ZAHARIA Arhimandritul, *Lărgiți și voi inimile voastre! Lărgirea inimii în teologia Sfântul Siluan Atonitul și a Starețului Sofronie de la Essex*, translation by nuns Mariam Vicol, Tecla and Fevronia from Essex, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2009, p. 156.

⁴ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, “Despre desăvârșire”, translation by Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, in: Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Scrisori*, partea a II-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, pp. 460-461.

sun, it is fed and animated by the sun, likewise the man, turning himself towards God, through prayer he is nourished and spiritually animated by Him. From praying, says Saint John Climacus, some people come out as from a fiery oven, cleaned up of all mess, and “others are as lightened by a light and dressed up in the vestment of the humbleness and of the gladness”⁵.

Through prayer, the man participates to that life from above nature, and thus *the live of the man is transformed* by the work of that One. In this way, the prayer is vital value that elevates the human existence in the register of the immortality of God. Without the state of prayer, mediated by the Holy Ghost within man, and without the prayer that permanently elevates the man’s life into God, human life remains a vain blowing, little different from the one of the beasts⁶. Without prayer the man is exhausted within world, and he is assimilated by creation. The lack of prayer surrenders the man’s life to the inanimate elements, it accommodates the man to the world, to reify him in the end.

A contrary, the prayer understood as vital value, it makes the man truly alive, for it imparts to the bodily and to the soul’s life, the Life of the Holy Ghost, the uncreated Light of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, between prayer and life there is established an organic and ontological report. The prayer is the source of the life in the sense of ontological regeneration of the man’s life.

Whilst the vital elements (values) for the bodily life, like the oxygen, the food, the clothing, the environmental conditions, and others, they make possible the earthly existence of the man, and imprint in the body the quality and the energies specific to them, the prayer gives to the bodily life and to the soul’s life, that Life owned by the One Who said: I am the bread of the Life, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

⁵ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, “Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș” 28,52, translation by Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, in: *Filocalia*, vol. IX, București, 1980, p. 415.

⁶ *Ecclesiastes*, 3. Saint Gregory of Nyssa calls the people passionate and idolater in their faith, as minotaurs (a combination between beast and man): “many of these ones, succeeding in living a somehow beautiful life at surface, due to their faith in idols, are, though, as some people with calf head (namely just like the minotaurs are described). Others, being in the person of the Christian man, but submitting their bodies to a totally material life, likewise the animals, they show themselves just like some centaurs or some dragons from tales” – Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, “Despre desăvârșire”, translation by Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, in: Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Scrieri*, partea a II-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 458.

Within the Church's space, the cultic prayer gives again birth to the human life, it corrects the "nature's shortcoming" through the initiation Mysteries, and during the existence, the prayer maintains and deifies the life.

The prayer relentlessly accomplishes a *new creation*, for the prayer means a together-working of the man with God "in the act of creating immortal gods". The prayer is the answer given to the heavenly Father through which the man is deified. Each power of the human nature, when it is overshadowed by prayer, it becomes from above world.

But when, through sin, the man's life estranges from its authentic conditions, and falls from the existential height where the sacramental grace has placed it, the prayer suffers also. The addicted man prays lesser, because the Life of the Ghost diminishes within him. And when the man of the falling prays, he doesn't consider anymore the prayer as a vital value, but, rather, as a burden (a burdensome duty) or, at most, as a modality of attracting the divine benevolence, for being a shield to him, for guaranteeing and for ensuring his terrestrial survival. Thus, one reaches at the stage when the prayer is no longer recorded by the addicted conscience as a vital value, but, at most, as an element of supra-structure. The man of the fall loses the vital need for prayer⁷. He prays sporadically, and enslaves the prayer to the addicted life. He tries, through his prayer, to employ God Himself in the service of his passions.

II. Batalogia – Prayer as much-speaking

That human life that estranges itself from God, and eliminates the prayer from its vital context, it becomes a ruin. By closing itself in an autonomous self-accomplishing, in report with God, and by surrendering itself to an existential dynamism without prayer, the human nature remains, despite any activism, oriented in the frames of the immediate world, as unaccomplished.

The needs and the insuccesses increase, paradoxically, the more they are satisfied. Without prayer, the man enters in a vicious circle in which the sin, become addiction, it rules.

⁷ "The prayer is not the natural longing of the fallen man. That's why we have commandments to pray" – ZAHARIA Arhimandritul, *Lărgiți și voi inimile voastre!* ..., p. 156.

“By increasing his zeal always towards more things, writes Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the man gives to the sin a wide entrance in his occupation [...] by contriving tens of thousands of motifs [...]. And who could speak about all the things through which the sin is mixed in many ways, under many faces, in the human life. And the cause is not other but the fact that people do not ask for the help of God in the things they are zealous. If one uttered the prayer before any work he is about to start, the sin wouldn’t find entrance into soul”⁸.

Without prayer the man enters the slavery of the addiction. The passions generate an irrational interweaving of the man with his own bodily and of the soul nature (becoming a psychic man) and also with his fellow humans, as also with the inanimate world. The passions bring the tearing apart of our inside, by destroying the unity between mind and heart. Being weakened, the man’s sensitiveness⁹, it is chained and enslaved by the irrational pleasure, which he seeks to satisfy in a perverted manner, both using the creation’s nature and his fellow humans.

Commenting Saint Maximos the Confessor, Father Dumitru Stăniloae shows that the passionate movement of the human being finds its engine (the dynamic source) in turning the mind and fixing the desire from God towards the attraction exercised upon the senses “of the beautiful shapes and of the sweet promises of the world”, under the deceiving influence of the ghost of the evil one. In the devil’s work of toppling over, and in the man’s sensitiveness, there must be searched for, both the dynamic and the prime causes of the addictions. The mind “gets mixed” into feeling, namely it places itself in the service of the senses, reaching at occupying exclusively with identifying and searching for the voluptuous aspects of the seen world¹⁰.

⁸ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, “Despre Rugăciunea Domnească” I, translation by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae și Pr. Ioan Buga, in: Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Scrieri*, partea I, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 29, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 404.

⁹ *Sensitiveness*, respectively the capacity of the man to impart himself in a felt way (namely through senses which perceive the pleasure), of the sensitive ones through an act of the conscience.

¹⁰ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, p. 89.

“The mind, writes in this sense also Saint Anthony the Great, it is worldly and changing and leaning towards the bodily things, and it changes its nature”¹¹ and by becoming darkened due to the pleasure “it is being lost”¹².

Having such a position, of losing himself in an entangled existence, through the lusts which tend, relentlessly, only towards satisfying the voluptuousness, the prayer becomes distorted. The prayer becomes, says Saint Gregory of Nyssa, βατταλογία, namely the *much-speaking*, or the prayer of the blind soul, who no longer sees or knows God as the Maker and the Benefactor of all things. The prayer as *much-speaking*, it is hollow and damaging, because it tries to use God in the service of satisfying the voluptuous pleasure.

The prayer as *much-speaking* it is the expression of a mind entered in the *snare of the passionate imagination* that no longer searches for God of comforting, but only for the comfort that God could provide and ensure. Such a praying man identifies the supreme good to the voluptuousness of the senses and tends to make God fulfiller of the addictions which master him.

“The one who uses the prayer recklessly, writes Saint Gregory of Nyssa, he doesn’t elevate himself to the height of the One Who gives Himself, but he wants That One to come down to the low and earthly stair of his lust; and, for this motif, the man presents to the One Who sees into hearts, his passionate impulses, not to heal the undue movements of the mind, but to make them even worse, through fulfilling the evil impulse by receiving help from God. Because that one is troubled, and my heart is malevolent, You hit him, says the man to God. He almost shouts at Him: make my passion hundredfold, or, let my evilness pass to You... He prays Him to get angry together with him, and to become partaker of his wrath. And this means to fall into passion and to feel like a man and to move Himself from His good nature to

¹¹ Sfântul ANTONIE CEL MARE, “Învățături despre viața morală și despre buna purtare, în 170 de capete”, capul 7, in: *Filocalia*, vol. I, 4th edition, Editura Harisma, București, 1993, p. 17.

¹² Sfântul ANTONIE CEL MARE, “Învățături despre viața morală...”, capul 95, p. 39.

a savage mercilessness [...]. All these ones do not do prayers to send up to God, to get rid of the illness that masters them, but to accomplish their illness into deeds. And by reckoning the failure of bringing their illness into deeds as a misfortune, they truly *mutter*, begging God to become helper in the illness of their mind. And what is most dreadful of all, they want to move God towards the impulses opposite to Him, wanting His love for people and His work, to become partaker to their savageness”¹³.

Therefore, in a passionate life, the prayer not only is no longer felt as a vital value, but it is distorted to the stage of being employed for serving to the addictions. For reaching back to its proper conditions, the prayer requests for the healing of the life. And the healing of the life it means the walking on the road of passions removal. Between passions removal – a mind’s getting out from the blindness of not knowing God, and of the heart from the slavery of the irrational pleasure – and prayer, there is an organic determination.

The prayer as sacramental ritual, it makes possible the restoration of the life from the falling into passions, and then also the prayer, as ascetic modality, it fortifies the nature, fixing it on the road of the virtue for, then, to dress it up in the work and in the glory of the Holy Trinity, according to the word, mentioned above, of Saint Gregory of Nyssa: “what somebody calls by praying, and what he sees with the soul’s eye, that is what he attracts to him”; or according to the word of Saint John Climacus, that “some people come out of prayer as from a fiery oven, cleaned up of all filth, and other lightened by a light, and dressed up in the vestment of the humbleness and of the gladness”. Thus we reach at speaking about *the practice and the stairs of the prayer*, which aren’t something else but stages which express the ascension on the way of passions’ removal, and of consummation.

III. Through meditation to prayer

The Paterikon tells us about Abba John Kolovos, that he was bringing and keeping his mind into his heart, through prayer, through meditation, and

¹³ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, “Despre Rugăciunea Domnească” I, p. 410.

by uttering psalms: “once turned back from the field or from the assembly with other elders, he was occupying himself with the prayer, with the meditation, and with the psalmody, until his mind was coming back to the first order”¹⁴.

Therefore: the prayer, the meditation and uttering psalms. Although they are closely interwoven (the psalms often are prayers, and the prayers are formulated as psalms; the meditation opens the prayer, but it is also its consequence) though the Holy Fathers present them with specific nuances and as having special places in the spiritual life. The meditation and the psalmody prepare for the prayer, and, at their turn, they are lighted and strengthened by the prayer. The psalmody is that wisdom with “many faces” and it is necessary for elevating the soul to the prayer which leads to that knowledge from above any image, of God, and to the union with Him. Likewise, the meditation is also preceding the prayer and it is necessary to the one who wants to reach at prayer.

Without meditation the prayer is being lost in dry repetition, it becomes rancid, it becomes not-aerated, and it ends in mumbling. The purpose of the meditation is to gather the mind from scattering and to make the mind capable of feeling itself close to God. The meditation is a spiritual work through which the mind is provoked to deliver itself from the net of the illusions where the indecent imagination has wrecked it. Through meditation, it is proposed to the mind to choose God as subject of the contemplation.

Dynamic reality by excellence, the mind cannot remain still, but it needs to permanently orient itself towards something. The meditation is a call from the grace, an unmediated calling addressed by God to the man’s mind for noticing His Presence. The meditation is an appeal addressed to the mind, to ask itself about the purpose of the existence, and about the meaning for which the man exists.

It is not at all easy to the mind to hear the sound of knocking at the door (“Behold, I am staying at the door, knocking”; Rev 3, 20), to accept to be provoked to the act of meditation. The falling from God has brought the mind in a world of deafening noises (of the discursive rationality) which have made the mind insensitive to the whisper of God (God speaks in silence; the speaking of God – the knocking at the door – it is the speaking in whisper, for He speaks out of and into the register of profoundness).

¹⁴ *Patericul Egipcean*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 1993, p. 103.

Although, the discrete knocking at the door, of God, it can be heard because it always fits to the moment from between two successive drumbeats of this world. And thus, His whisper is impossible to avoid. And the first problem that occurs to the mind is one of common-sense (rational): as in every domain of activity the act of knowledge requires time and energy, likewise in knowing God (achieving the communion with Him) there are required toiling and live.

Meditation forces the mind to see that knowing God is infinitely harder than knowing the world; so difficult it is, than some people renounced to themselves (apparently, for in fact, *by renouncing* they ascertained that they *found themselves* again, fully and profoundly) and to the external forms of the world (the monks, and the Christians living into world, they are living on earth, but having their roots planted into heavens) for quenching their searching for the One Who is above any finding. And thus, the mind understands an elementary thing: knowing God and achieving the Holy Ghost require, daily, at least so much effort and energy, than one invest in his professional preparation¹⁵. By appropriating this perspective, the mind is *already* on the porch of *the spiritual meditation*.

Now it starts the second step. Accustomed with the discursive rationality, that requests method and system in all the domains of the knowledge, the mind has the temptation to believe that also God can be found through a laboratory research (the meditation practices, of yoga type). The meditation suggests to the mind that God, by being a Person, and not a simple above-world divinity (power, force), He can be known only on the measure in which He lets Himself to be approached. There are not formulas, or mantras, which to ensure mechanically, mandatorily, the access to God and to knowing Him. There is necessary Him to come to the man, and to knock at the door, for initiating the dialogue of His revealing. And this dialogue it is called, generally, the oikonomic work of the Revelation, and at personal level: *prayer*. Meditation leads to prayer; it obliges the mind to shout out after God.

The third step of the spiritual meditation it consists of remembering a fundamental truth of the Christian Orthodoxy: in the initiation mysteries the man has been dressed up in the Word of God (in His restoring work),

¹⁵ Marc Antoine Costa DE BEAUREGARD, *Rugați-vă neîncetat*, translation by Rodica Buga și Pr. Nicolai Buga, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 86.

he has received the fullness of the Holy Ghost (namely of That Principle of Life, Other one and Somebody else than the biological life) and, through Eucharist, he has become of-the-same-body and of-the-same-blood with Christ, Who has assimilated Himself to the man's body and blood. Consequently the meditation has as purpose the unveiling of the way towards the "heart" where Christ already dwells.

The fourth step of the meditation it consists in noticing the identity between the Eucharistic Word and the Biblical Word. The first one has dressed up the heart of the man reborn, in the initiation Mysteries, and the second one, speaks about the first One, interprets Him and helps the man in finding the way towards *heart*, for meeting Him and for uniting himself with Christ. In this sense, to meditate it means "to take heed", "to watch at", "to place at the heart", "to keep in the heart" (The All-Pure Mother of the Lord "was keeping these things and weighing them in Her heart"; Lk 2, 19)¹⁶. The meditation that prepares the prayer, it presupposes the knowing of the history of the salvation as we can find it revealed within the pages of the Holy Scripture.

Remembering the scriptural texts, and repeating them, until we learn them by heart, they imprint the mind with the Holy Ghost, Who inspired them. The Scripture's Word rests the mind, by stopping it from scattering, and by rejoicing it of God. That's why the biblical word must be "ruminated". The author of the *Epistle to Barnabas* was expressing this perspective even in the apostolic century:

"stick yourselves with the ones who love the Lord, with the ones who cogitate in their heart to the precise meaning of the word they received, with the ones who know that cogitation is a work of joy, *with the ones who ruminate the Lord's word*"¹⁷.

The monastic rule from the entire monastic space will request the monks this type of meditation, by repeating biblical texts during the whole living into monastery:

¹⁶ A. SOLLIGNAC, "Méditation de l'Écriture aux auteurs médiévaux", in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 10, Paris, 1980, col. 907-914.

¹⁷ "Epistola către Barnaba" 10: 11, in: *Scriserile Părintilor Apostolici*, translation by Pr. D. Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1979, p. 127.

“the one who beats (the semantron), for gathering the brothers, let him meditate while beating”; “the one who at the door of the refectory gives sweet to the brothers, while giving, let him meditate something from Scriptures”¹⁸. “It is impossible to try defining the whole profit brought by learning some paragraphs of the Scripture by heart, writes Saint Theophanous the Recluse. It takes place, within soul, the same phenomenon that takes place with the fruits, when putting sugar for preserving them. The sugar penetrates all pores, and the sweetness penetrates these fruits, and defends them against rotting. Likewise, when the soul is penetrated by the words of God, *which the soul learns by heart*, it rejects the corruption of the evil, or the vain thoughts, and it is filled up with the sweetness of remembering the godlike things”¹⁹.

Therefore, the purpose of the meditation is to gather the mind from scattering, and to bring the mind home, into heart, where dwells the redeemer Mystery of the Embodied God. When it accomplishes this, the meditation becomes, itself, prayer. Until then, the meditation starts from hearing the whisper of God (of His knocking at the door of our existence) and unveils to the mind the fact that, the mystery of the existence itself, it hangs on this staying face to face: Subject with subject, Me and me! And by seeing this neighborhood, the man’s life is set in fire by the longing after the One Who is. Out of the wonder of being, the man enters the courtyards of the Lord’s house – in the work of the Revelation – where the man ruminates the words of the Word, Who nourishes the man with the greenery of the Godlike Mysteries. The meditation prepares the prayer, and when it has brought the mind in the heart’s altar, it becomes itself untold prayer.

IV. Psalmody and prayer

Psalsms belong to the biblical word. They are Scripture and consequently, a revealed and prophetic word of God, towards people. The Book of Psalms

¹⁸ Rules no. 36 and 37 of Saint Pahomie cel Mare, quoted by Tomáš ŠPIDLÍK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului Creștin*, volume II: *Rugăciunea*, translation by Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, p. 141.

¹⁹ TEOFAN ZĂVORÂTUL, *La Psalmul 118*, apud Tomáš ŠPIDLÍK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului Creștin*, volume II: *Rugăciunea*, p. 142.

or “the wisdom in many ways of God” as Evagrius²⁰ calls it, is a synthesis and a sum of the whole Old-Testamentary Scripture, in hymns, which mirror the history of the salvation and the purpose of the creation. From the beginning the Christian Church adopted the Psalmody of the Temple, and made it constitutive part of its own cult. A large part of the psalms are prayers, and the others are prophetic theology, which requires profound meditation to be authentically understood. Their sense opens gradually, as they are learnt, song and repeated (ruminates).

The biblical word (therefore also the Psalms) is the speaking of God towards man. Used as prayer, the Psalms are equally word of God towards man and word of man towards God. Who prays by uttering psalms he doesn't pray with his own words but just with the words of the Holy Ghost Who inspired the Psalms. That's why, understanding the Psalms is especially difficult. It requires a mind emptied of the human understanding, and filled up (dwelled) by the grace of the Holy Ghost. “The Psalmody is the thing of the bodiless powers”, wrote Saint Cyril Philotheos. And Saint Basil the Great highlights that “The Psalm banishes the devils away, attracts the taking care of the angels, and it brings to us weapons against the night's fears”²¹.

The words of the psalms must not cease in the monks' mouths. Eastern Tradition required the monks, in the old days, to daily recite from the Book of Psalms²².

Having the meditation as helper (in this case the interpretations of the Psalms done by the Holy Fathers), reading and learning of the Psalms must be lead to the purpose mentioned above: to the penetration of the Word of God to the man's heart, where Christ the Lord sits, since Baptism, for uniting man with Him, to make the man capable of praying.

²⁰ EVAGRIE PONTICUL, “Cuvânt despre rugăciune”, translation by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Filocalia*, vol. I, Ediția a IV-a, Editura Harisma, București, 1993, p. 85.

²¹ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, “Omulie la Psalmul 1”, 2, in: Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, *Scrieri*, partea I, translation by pr. Dumitru Fecioru, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 17, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1986, p. 184

²² J. BOIS, “Les Hésychastes avant le XIV.e siècle”, in: *Echos d'Orient*, nr. 5/1901, p. 6, apud Tomàš ŠPIDLÍK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului Creștin*, volume II: *Rugăciunea*, p. 93

V. The hour before praying

We prepare ourselves for prayer through our entire way of living (we pray like we live)²³ and, on the other hand, through what we do *in the hour before praying*. Saint John Cassian highlights the need of “cleaning the ground”, for the prayer to be possible. In the first place, says Saint John, there must be banished away the bodily thoughts and the material worries; let remain than, into soul, no place for: defamation, much-speaking, lack of seriousness, anger, sadness and love for money. This it means “cleaning the ground”²⁴. This is a spiritual work that aims the life as ensemble.

Of great help in cleaning the life is the psalmody and the meditation. But the mind is not in a steadfast state neither when uttering psalms nor by repeating the scriptural words. There must be added the vigil in the hour from before prayer.

“Everything thought by our soul, before the hour of the prayer, it necessarily comes into our mind when we pray, writes Saint John Cassian. That’s why, how we want to be found when we pray, let prepare ourselves to be like that, before the time of the prayer. When we pray there emerge into our mind and float before our eyes the same thoughts from before praying: deeds, words, feelings of anger, sadness, lusts or even stupid laughing, shameful thing to be said, maybe stirred up by the memory of a certain fact, or by a saying from before. That’s why, let’s hastily banish away, before prayer, from the bottom of our heart, everything that we don’t want to come into our mind when we pray”²⁵.

²³ “He prays very few, the one who fulfills this duty only in the time when he bends down his knees” Sfântul IOAN CASSIAN, “Con vorbire a X-a. A doua con vorbire cu Părintele Isaac. Despre rugăciune”, XIV, in: Sfântul IOAN CASSIAN, *Scrieri alese*, translation by Vasile Cojocaru, Dumitru Popescu, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 57, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1990, p. 489; Or: “an old man said: if the monk, standing at prayer, he prays only then, one like him doesn’t even pray”, *Patericul Egiptean*, p. 413.

²⁴ Sfântul IOAN CASSIAN, “Con vorbire a X-a. A doua con vorbire cu Părintele Isaac. Despre rugăciune” III, 1-2, p. 455.

²⁵ Sfântul IOAN CASSIAN, “Con vorbire a X-a. A doua con vorbire cu Părintele Isaac. Despre rugăciune” III, 3-4, p. 455.

Consequently, one must insist upon the content of the activities done before prayer. Necessarily, the mind is prepared in advance for prayer, and, depending on the contents gathered before, it will help us during prayer, to ascend towards God, or it will scatter us amongst the earth's worries and lusts. The prayer cannot be prepared by watching a movie for an hour or two, or through the agitation the mass-media violates the conscience with, or by satisfying with food and drinks. The seclusion is mandatory.

The hour of the prayer must be carefully programmed and prepared. Without this prayer before prayer, the work of the prayer will be desolated, because "he never prays, the one who has the knees bent, but he has his thoughts scattered"²⁶.

VI. Cell and praying

Not only the living and the content of the activities from before prayer elevate or desolate the prayer. To them are added also the place (the cell, the room) where we pray, and also the posture of the body.

The Church is, by excellence, the *place* of worshipping. Liturgy has transformed the cult place in the *House of God*, in the *Gate of the Heavens*. Full of angels, the House of God has its Highest place: the Altar. This is the earth become heavens, for in it the heavens are a ceaseless presence. But the prayer is being learnt and exercised the most *at home*. The one who prays has, usually, his place for praying – the House of the Lord prolonged in his own house. The monks call this place *cell*²⁷. Between monk and his cell, there is established such a powerful interpenetration than, getting out from his cell (from the place of praying), it is sometimes reckoned as losing the monk:

"the monk, when is outside his cell, he is like the fish out of water";
or: "remain in your cell and it will teach you everything"²⁸; or:

²⁶ Sfântul IOAN CASSIAN, "Convorbire a X-a. A doua convorbire cu Părintele Isaac. Despre rugăciune" XIV, p. 489.

²⁷ The name *cell* comes in the monastic vocabulary from *kella*, *cella* which means the individual dwelling place of a lonely person (monasterion). Later on, the word served to name the chamber or the ensemble of chambers of a monastery and especially that chamber assigned as dwelling place to a member of a coenobitic community. The cell helps the monk to be a recluse amongst brothers – G. GOUDAUD, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 2, 1, Paris, 1953, col. 396-400.

²⁸ G. GOUDAUD, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 2, 1, Paris, 1953, col. 396-400.

“if temptation happens to you in the place where you live, do not leave the place during that temptation! And if not, wherever you would go, you will find before you the thing from which you are running away”; or: “a brother was sitting in his cell and, being upset by the thought of leaving, he let his father know about it. But that one told him: go and sit in your cell, giving your body as bail to the cell’s wall, and do not get out from there with your body!”; or: “an old man said: sitting into his cell, it fills up the monk with all the good things”; or: “a brother went to a skilful old man and said to him: I am suffering, father. And the old man answered him: sit in your cell and God will give you appeasement”²⁹.

Not less important is the cell (namely the place of the praying and of the living) of the layman. The configuration and the aspect of the layman’s cell can significantly transcendently recuperate the space of the house. The icon from the eastern wall recuperates the space in God. The man no longer lives simply, in a space subordinated to the utility, but in an oriented one – namely opened or epiphanic of the Kingdom of God.

The home (the cell) becomes an eschatological place. A place of praying, the cell is transformed in the space where God knocked at the door (this time at the door of the house) and it has been opened to Him, and where he tarried in dialogue with the man and He accepted to be his guest. That’s why the aspect of the chamber (of the cell) must be propitious to this Presence. The interior of the cell becomes, in a way, a confession of faith.

Getting the room tidy, aerating the chamber, the attentively ordered beddings, the presence of a candle, a flower on the corner of the table next to the Book of Hours, they confess that the prayer means gathering in the same place in a felt manner (and not imaginary) of God and man. The listed gestures are much more significant than one could think at a first glance. The man can utter prayers also in a chamber (cell) characterized by disorder and filth, with his clothes scattered everywhere and with his bed unkempt. Can the presence of God be impeded by such *details*?

²⁹ *Patericul Egipean, XXI: As It is Not Appropriate that Somebody to Easily Move Himself Away, For the Fathers Neither from Their Cell Were Easily Removed*, 4, 6, 10, 12, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 1993, pp. 407-408.

The interior of the cell, during the prayer, unveils, actually, what the prayer is to that man: a monologue or a dialogue, the warm and condescending presence of God, or, on the opposite, a God Who is abstract and suspended in who-knows-where a corner of the Sky, and Who doesn't bother Himself to look at the dusty and filthy details of the cell (because in the eyes of the praying man, such a God has a Paradise according to his cell) but He only looks at man distantly, from His "there", right and only at the heart of the worshipper. And, no less important, it must be highlighted also the fact that the cosmeticized space (ordered, cleaned, embellished, cultured) of the cell, it confesses the hope of the matter, or its sight turned towards man, sighing to be redeemed, through prayer, out of entropy, and elevated to the dignity of being dwelling place to the not-comprised and uncircumcised One. A cell where only the spiders reign, it doesn't wait for anybody.