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Fear of Death. A Theological Perspective

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Abstract

Fear belongs to God's creative act and, according to the biblical reference, if God made everything “very good”, it means that the fear of non-existence is good! For Adam, who was not alienated from God, fear meant the structural capacity of the soul to cling to life, to want to be; through fear Adam identified life in relation to God, he clung to God, considering Him the Source of his life, the Centre of his life. Fear manifests itself as the fundamental concern not to be cut off from God, as the fear of losing God. In this sense fear, as a tendency to cling, to communion and relationship with God, was the same as love of God, perfect love of God, because it was love and union with Life. Love of God was felt by Adam as fear of losing God as the Life of his life! In the act of sinning and after sinning, man no longer perceived God as the Source, the Centre, the content and the meaning of his life. Man's existence became an existence of hiding from God and a gradual replacement of God by the world. In such an existence man's nature has come under the dominion and then the mastery of pathological fear. From the power of nature, fear (which until the fall meant orientation towards God and the fear of not losing Him as the partner of love) was transformed into a state of restlessness, of pathological insecurity, of weakness, of powerlessness, a state concretized in a movement of man's alienation from the finite material values which he invested with the status of the source of life!

Keywords

saving fear, pathological fear, cowardly or irrational fear, fear of losing the world,

falling into sin, healing from fear

I. Fear – a creative gift placed by God in human nature

Man is an alter-ego in relation to God. “In man God makes his self-portrait”¹. “Sons of gods you are, and all of you sons of the Most High” (Psalm 81, 6) exclaims the Psalmist. All that God has from Himself and through Himself He has given to man through the act of creation, making him in *His own image*. Thus, man’s deepest intimacy is linked to *I am who I am*. The fear of *not being* thus appears the ultimate basis of human creation. In this sense, observes St. John Damascene, man’s *fear* of separating himself from the event of life is recorded among his primary movements. He writes:

“It is a natural fear, when the soul does not want to separate itself from the body, because of the natural love and familiarity placed in it from the beginning by the Creator, by virtue of which it naturally fears, agonizes and avoids death. The definition of this kind of fear is as follows: natural fear/fear is a power by which the creature alienates itself from existence. Indeed, if all have been brought by the Creator from non-existence to existence, they naturally have the desire to exist and not to not exist. Their natural character is the tendency towards those things that maintain the nature”².

Saint Maximus Confessor also theologizes the same: fear is linked to the *tendency to be* planted by the Creator in the very nature of man. And this *tendency to be* is shown not only in the avoidance of what spoils the nature, but especially in the attachment to the *One who is*. “Those who are made from what is not, have also the power of persistence in what is, and not in what is not, and proper to them by nature is the inclination towards what sustains them and the avoidance of what spoils them”³; fear is *a logic*

¹ Arhimandritul Sofronie SAHAROV, *Rugăciunea – experiența Vieții Veșnice*, translation Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1998, p. 165.

² IOAN DAMASCHINUL, *Dogmatica*, translation Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, 3rd edition, Scripta Publishing House, Bucharest, Romania, p. 140-141

³ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Disputa cu Pyrrhus*, coll. *Fathers and Church Writers*, volume 81, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1990, p. 327.

that God “has from the beginning planted in human nature by creation”⁴. “Fear by nature is a power that sustains existence by guarding it from what would destroy it”⁵.

So, fear is *a power* of the irritable part of the soul, *a capacity of the divine face of man*. Fear belongs to God’s creative act and, according to the biblical reference, if God *made everything “very good”*, *it means that fear of non-existence is good!*

It follows from the above considerations that for the unfallen Adam, the one who was not estranged from God, *fear* meant the structural capacity of the soul to cling to life, to desire to be; through fear Adam identified life in relation to God, he clung to God, considering Him the source of his life, the Centre of his life. Fear manifests itself as the fundamental concern not to be cut off from God, as the fear of losing God. In this sense fear, as a tendency to cling, to communion and relationship with God, was the same as love of God, perfect love of God, because it was love and union with Life. *Love of God* was felt by Adam *as fear* of losing God as the Life of his life!

II. Pathological fear or Adam’s fear of the fallen one

St. John Damascene completes the above perspective with a second meaning of fear: *fear or pathological fear as a state of being that has chosen to autonomize itself from God*. He calls this form of fear by the term “pitiful”. How does *passionate fear* arise? The devil, the angel alienated from love, the angel who became an expression of fear of nothingness, bent on hatred of being, appeared to Eve - not by chance and not because she was weaker, but because through woman the event of life was to be preserved and multiplied (woman is the seen source of life) - to tempt her with life! We paraphrase the “offer” by which the devil seduces Eve: “do you want life? Are you glued to God because he is the source of life? Look, even the tree (food, building, the world) can give/give you the same life! And you can eat from the tree when you want and no longer depend on

⁴ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Disputa cu Pyrrhus*, p. 327

⁵ Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Disputa cu Pyrrhus*, p. 326

God. And even more: if you eat, you will be like God! You will have life through you". Eve and Adam appropriated their demonic perspective by alienating themselves from God and, not seeing God as the source of life, turned to the world as the fundamental source of life, seeing matter as an alternative to God. The consequence was not long in coming: *the demonic state, pathological fear and death entered man. Henceforth the natural capacity of fear - as an attachment to God - as full Life - was perverted, as man began to define his dependence and orientation from God to the world. As a power of nature, fear pushed man to do everything to avoid dying. However, alienation from the world, which was autonomous from God, meant alienation from death*⁶. Man thus experienced a different kind of fear: *pathological fear, or fear of passion, or fear arising from sin, fear/fear as a disease*⁷. This state has taken on various shades: fear/fear as panic attack, as fright, as horror, as anxiety, as anguish, as despair. In all of these is the human tendency to save one's life by reducing it to the earthly horizon⁸!

Passionate fear began its history from/at the moment of man's autonomy from his Creator. It was through the *fall* that Adam first experienced the feeling of *passionate fear*, also as a *tendency* not to be in

⁶ St. Nichita Stithatul explains, "The lust is at the border between the lust and the rational power of the soul, each of these being like a kind of weapon in their movement contrary to the nature, or conforming to the nature. Lust and reason, moving in accordance with the nature towards the divine, the gall is each of them a weapon of justice, against the serpent that whispers and bewails to them only the partaking of bodily pleasures and the enjoyment of glory from men. But by turning away from the movement of the flesh, and by moving away from the enjoyment of divine things to human things, their swiftness is made the weapon of unrighteousness, to sin", NICHITA STITHATUL, *Cele 300 de capete despre făptuire, despre fire și despre cunoștință*, translation Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 6, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1977, pp. 216-217.

⁷ Through the fall, Adam acquires a nature in which *fear as a disease* (phobos) dominates all his actions, Andrew LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate în teologia bizantină*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2010, pp. 197-213

⁸ Father Stăniloae considers that *fear*, which was given to man through the creative act as a power of nature that kept him glued to God, was perverted, through primordial sin, into a tendency to do anything in order not to be deprived/disconnected from the world, Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica bisericii ortodoxe*, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1993, p. 101.

relationship and communion with the *One who is*, but by hiding/isolating himself from Him and fleeing towards a relationship only with himself and the *tree from which he had eaten*, i.e. with the material building. Scripture notes: (Adam) “I heard your voice/call and was afraid! And I hid myself that I am naked!”; (Cain): “My punishment is greater than I can bear, I will hide myself from Your face and be troubled and fugitive on the earth and whoever meets me will kill me!” (Genesis 4, 13-14) From the two biblical descriptions, in both Adam and Cain, fear is manifested by the terms: *I have hidden myself, I will be a fugitive, he will kill me*; the expressions suggest the content of the fear of sin, i.e. pathological fear: hiding from God, a state of turmoil, the existence of flight. Fear of sin is a flight from death towards death!

III. Pathological fear - other patristic clarifications

The Holy Fathers consider that the source of all the forms that *passionate fear* takes must be sought in man’s vicious relationship with God! In the act of sin and after the commission of sin, man no longer perceives God as the Source, the Centre, the content and the meaning of his life. Man’s existence became an existence of hiding from God and a gradual replacement of God by the world. In such an existence man’s nature has come under the dominion and then the mastery of pathological fear. From the power of nature, fear (which until the *fall* meant orientation towards God and the fear of not losing Him as the partner of love) was transformed into a state of restlessness, of pathological insecurity, of weakness, of powerlessness, a state concretized in a movement of man’s alienation from the finite material values which he invested with the status of the source of life! St. John the Scary describes *pathological fear*: “he who is not afraid of God is also afraid of his shadow”⁹; “if you are afraid of anything in this world, you are not afraid of God”¹⁰! *The Paternity* speaks the same way: “Why is it that when I go out alone at night I am afraid? Because you

⁹ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 10, translation Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 9, p. 266

¹⁰ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 10, p. 266

value life (only n. n.) in this world!”¹¹; “Why am I afraid when I go into the wilderness? Because you are still alive to the world!”¹². The central idea that these statements reiterate is that without God, fear turns from strength into weakness or a disease of the flesh.

The immediate consequence of the transformation of fear from a source of power to a source of illness for the human being concerns his relationship with the world or the environment in which he lives. It becomes vicious and perverted. Man invests the world with the attributes of God, with His status of being and of generating life, and material goods isolated from the relationship with God provide man’s senses with a pleasure that locks him into an addiction that will eventually kill him. This is because matter not having life in and of itself, and being under the sign of decay and death, gives man the dependence of death! On the other hand, dependence on the world necessarily produces in man’s soul the *fear of losing the world* as the source of life, and identifies life only with what the senses can offer and manifest. Man thus becomes dependent on sickening fear. The “natural” impulses of fallen/addicted man will be those of *his body*. Vladimir Lossky states that man’s mind most often acts by following the natural impulses of temperament, character, heredity, social environment and his own past, which suggest to the mind that life is in direct and exclusive dependence on the world¹³. Although man’s truth is beyond all conditioning, and his dignity lies precisely in the power to free himself from the irrational impulses of nature contained by death, yet, removed from the only authentic source of life, God, man mastered by his nature and acting according to his natural properties (which are subject to death), becomes dominated by the *pathological fear of losing his life*. And instead of establishing his *dependence on God, the only one that ensures his dependence on Life*¹⁴, man, paradoxically, wanting to preserve his life,

¹¹ According to Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Therapeutica bolilior spirituale*, translation Marinela Bojin, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 188.

¹² According to Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Therapeutica bolilior spirituale*, p. 188.

¹³ “Knowing and willing according to his imperfect nature, the person is, in practice, blind and indecisive. He no longer knows how to choose and too often yields to the impulses of a nature that has become the slave of sin”, Vladimir LOSSKY, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006 p. 177.

¹⁴ Dependence on God means dependence on the Independence of God alone or dependence on the absolute Freedom to which the creature also has access.

depends on the world, i.e. on death. In this way, *passionate fear* will be mixed up in all man's decisions and actions.

The states of fear that arise from man's vicious relationship with God and the world constitute the material content that the imaginative capacity of reason processes. As a power of the mind, the imagination fills thought with irrational obsessions, irrational fears¹⁵. Father Stăniloae points out that in the mind of a man who is far from God there appear both good thoughts arising from his own superconsciousness and the passionate thoughts aroused by passionate movements and retained by the subconscious memory of the soul bound to the biological¹⁶. St. John the Scary calls the state of *irrational fear* by the term *cowardly fear*. He writes: "Cowardly fear means the deluded view of dangers before danger. And, it is a troubled feeling of the heart staggered and frightened by impending misfortunes"¹⁷. Fear acquires an *imaginary and phantasmagorical* status.

Cowardly, irrational fear is found in what psychology, philosophy and medicine call *panic attacks* and *anguish*, the equivalent of what the Holy Fathers mean by the *soul's stench*, i.e. the state in which the fallen mind distorts reality through the imagination that has become sick¹⁸. *The stunted soul* (gripped by *panic attacks*) sees only events that cannot be addressed, circumvented and overcome and only fear of the unexpected!

IV. Alienation from God and pathological fear

The Holy Fathers affirm, as we have shown above, that the *only source of pathological fear* is alienation from God or sin:

¹⁵ "When the mind has refused its movement, according to nature, towards God, having nowhere else to move, it surrenders itself to feeling, and this deludes it incessantly, causing it to wander to the surface of the sensible, by which the soul, forgetting the natural goodness, turns all its work towards the sensible, by which it breeds undue anger, lust and pleasure", Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, translation Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, coll. *Church Fathers and Writers*, volume 80, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1983, p. 110.

¹⁶ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, p. 127.

¹⁷ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 3, p. 264

¹⁸ Sfântul IOAN DAMASCHINUL, *Dogmatica*, II,15, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1943, p. 75.

“where fear appears, it bears witness to the sin in the soul”¹⁹; “he who lives in sin is always fearful; and just as those who have to travel a road on a dark and moonless night tremble with fear, although no one and nothing threatens them, so sinners are always afraid; even when no one rebukes them, their heavy conscience makes them fear everything, shun everyone and everything seems to them fearful and terrifying, and nothing fills them with anxiety”²⁰.

But sin is, on the one hand, the work/decision of man’s will and freedom to autonomize himself from God, and, on the other hand, it is also the work of the demon’s will and freedom that can suggest man’s work and will²¹! At this point *fear* presents a nuance specific *only to the* theological perspective. Its understanding and approach belongs *only* to the field of faith: that is, *pathological fear* is not only a psychological state but also a transfer of a demonic state onto man! This statement is particularly “hard” for the modern world and therefore unacceptable, since

¹⁹ Sfântul DIADOH AL FOTICEII, *Cuvânt ascetic în 100 de capete*, 100, translation by Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: Filocalia, vol. 1, 4th edition, Harisma Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p. 474.

²⁰ Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omilii la Ioan V*, 4, translation Maria-Iuliana Rizeanu and Mihai Grigoras, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, p. 63; and Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Tâlcuiri la Psalmi, Psalmul 142*, 4, translation Laura Enache, Doxologia Publishing House, Iasi, 2011, p. 666-667: “Such are the souls of wicked men. There is not a moment when he is not troubled not only by present torments, but also by future ones. There is never peace with them, not fearlessness of soul, but their soul is more troubled than any great. Neither by night nor by day is there an end to their storm, but they are driven everywhere, though there is no one to trouble them, but they have war within themselves, nor can they enjoy what they have already gained, being torn by worries for what they have not yet acquired. They care for the things of all, meddling in the possessions of all, counting within themselves how to persuade one, how to frighten another, how to flatter one how to force another. They have nothing in their minds but slander, buying, selling, wills, guarantees, interest, capital, carrying with them the refuse of all evil. And when all things go their way, then they are more troubled. You see that rich man being troubled when his tzarina was gnawing at him, and being perplexed, and being in trouble, and saying, What shall I do? I will spoil my jitters and build them bigger”.

²¹ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 9, p. 266

it has no access beyond the phenomenal world, to the unseen reality of angels, and cannot subject the existence of the devil to the experience of positivist science. The 17th century saw the birth of the *metaphysical cold* for the European world, i.e. the idea that *the physical world* can be thought of logically, ontologically and theologically as perfectly *autonomous*. In other words, that the physical world is a closed and isolated system that can validate itself and whose meaning is exhausted by its own existence²². The autonomy of the world meant its independence from God and from any involvement of the divine order in its structure and workings. The ‘logical’ reasoning of modernity went all the way:

“If the world is truly autonomous, writes Roman-Horea Patapievici, then God is nowhere (and nowhere), and the physical world forms an isolated and closed system. (...) If God cannot be found a place in the world, then, de facto, God ceases to exist, regardless of His institutional postexistence, which, for a time, de jure, continues to have effects - like those corpses visible in the night only after they have decomposed as a result of luminescent chemical reactions. The question of God’s place in the world is, after all, the question of God’s existence. To be nowhere (*nullibi esse*) is equivalent to not existing (*non esse*)”²³.

So, at least three are the consequences of the thesis about the radical autonomy of the world: God is nowhere, i.e. no longer is, then the world is a mechanism of itself and mechanistic by itself in all its processes and becoming, and, thirdly, man also belongs to this autonomous world since he is pure nature without anything transcendent in him. *The natural man* becomes the measure of all things and the goal of all human enterprises. By shunning the spiritual order and placing himself in the natural order, modern man has confined his existence to the condition and laws of inanimate matter. Although man’s endeavour through the phenomenon of

²² Horea-Roman PATAPIEVICI, *Omul recent. O critică a modernității din perspectiva întrebării „Ce se pierde atunci când ceva se câștigă?”*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001 p. 68

²³ Horea-Roman PATAPIEVICI, *Omul recent...*, p. 131.

civilization is to master nature, yet unwittingly he remains confined to this world and subject to its order. In this world void of all transcendence, *the natural man* is a prisoner of death and tributary to it in everything. The *fear of death* is therefore an implicit presence in all the actions and deeds of modern man. Technology, civilization and culture are unwittingly (also) man's (desperate) ways of overcoming death. The *fear of death* is implicit in every approach of positivist science.

Among the sins (forms of alienation from God) that cause *fear* and that cause anxiety in the human nature, we mention only two: *pride* (with empty glory) and *spiritual laziness*.

St. Isaac the Syrian writes about pride as a source of fear, that "he who lacks humility also lacks perfection. And he who lacks these is always fearful"²⁴. In the same vein, St. John the Scary also thinks: "the proud soul is the slave of cowardly fear, because it relies on itself and fears the noise of things and shadows"²⁵. Likewise, St. Gregory Sinai says that pride is followed by delusion; delusion, boasting; boasting, fear; fear, trembling; and trembling, insanity²⁶. Nemesius of Edessa (4th century), analysing the fear of passion, states that it manifests itself in six forms: as hesitation, modesty, shame, horror, stupor and anguish. Hesitation is the fear of starting an action, horror is the fear of an overwhelming impression, amazement is the fear of an unusual impression, anguish is the fear of failure and misfortune (we feel it when we fear that we will fail in our actions), modesty is the fear generated by the expectation of blame (which can be a good feeling), shame is the fear of wrongdoing (it can also be good, through correction). Modesty differs from fear in that the shamed one is saddened by what he has done, but the modest one fears that he may lose his reputation. Old-timers used these two terms interchangeably,

²⁴ Sfântul ISAAC SIRUL, *Cuvinte despre nevoință*, 21, Bunavestire Publishing House, Bacau, 1997, p. 105

²⁵ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 3, p. 264.

²⁶ "Delusion through delusion begets fear of strange sights in waking and sleeping, which some call fear and trembling of souls. So pride is followed by delusion, delusion by blasphemy; blasphemy by fear; fear by trembling; and trembling by going out of one's mind (madness)", Sfântul GRIGORIE SINAITUL, *Capete foarte folositoare în acrostih*, translation by Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: Filocalia 7, Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1977, p. 152.

abusively. Fear springs up in a shiver of chill, or conversely, of fierceness that runs through your heart²⁷. This happens independently of man's will²⁸ since pride closes man in self-sufficiency, in the circle of the immediate world and implicitly in fear of losing the world and its goods. Because of pride man has a delusional knowledge of reality, he is no longer able to turn to God as the source of all that is seen²⁹, and he closes himself off from his fellow men, withdrawing into the narrow world of his own self, and always acting under the impulse of this egoistic self which he exalts to infinity. Pride opens the door to all passions³⁰ as it is the *beginning, root, source and mother of all sins*³¹, from which *cowardly/pathological fear* also springs. *The fear of pride* is the devil's working ground in the human heart. The devil suggests to the proud that he and the world are the ultimate and supreme reality and that he must do everything not to separate/lose the world and earthly life. By making himself a devil through pride, man fills himself with the reality of fear specific to the devilish state. From this

²⁷ According to NEMESIUS OF EDESSA, *On the nature of man*, Liverpool University Press, 2008, pp. 143-144

²⁸ The fall into sin also meant Adam's passage from freedom through grace to psychophysical determinism and the determinism of the world's stigmata; nature or his psychophysical nature with its determinisms took hold of the person, and man began to exhaust the event of his existence within the boundaries of nature's demands; "the fall is defined (...) as the fact of freedom which is self-defeating within the boundaries of the relationship between person and nature. The person submits to nature, is determined by nature, becomes an individual - a monad, an impersonal unity of nature", Christos YANNARAS, *Persoană și eros*, translation Zenaida Luca, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 245.

²⁹ "God is forgotten as the principle of being and life, as the meaning and centre of existence; He is denied, ignored, rejected as the kindly preserver and guardian of every creature. Fear reveals the delusion into which man has fallen, believing that he has been abandoned and thinking that he can or must rely only on his own powers, being deprived of God's help", Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, p. 189.

³⁰ "For God permits the devil to war with him (the proud) mentally, that on the plane of activity he may shake the modes of virtue, and on the plane of contemplation disturb the clear reasonings of conscience. In this way, realizing one's own weakness, one will recognize that God is the only power that can destroy the passions in us and will humble himself by repenting and renouncing his inflated self-esteem", Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Răspunsuri către Talasie*, 52, translation Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: Filocalia 3, Harisma Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 232.

³¹ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XXII, 1, p. 278

pitiful state man can be saved only when his conscience is pierced by the divine grace of faith. Only faith in God as the source and sustainer of life can place man beyond the haunting fear of self-loss through loss of the world. It is the divine propitiation, which wants all men (even the proud) to be saved, that alone can leap the soul, overwhelmed by the fear of death, into the register of the fearlessness of death. St. Paul reminds the one in anguish: “God himself said, «I will not leave you, I will not forsake you»” (Hebrews 13, 5). Trust in the work of the Preacher is the chance for the soul to feel that the presence of the helpless and unapproachable God, who offers His help, penetrates into it:

“When a man sees that his heart is not quiet because of fear and trembling, he will understand and know that this fear shows him that he lacks someone else to help him. For the heart bears witness through the fear that weighs it down and wars within it that it lacks someone. For it is God’s help that saves”³².

Spiritual laziness, as a source of fear, involves the conscious non-working of the gifts/talents with which God has clothed human nature. Willful spiritual ignorance leads the soul into a *languor*, *languor and inner impoverishment*, from which springs a diffuse and uncertain state of *existential fear*, materialised as a *lack of purpose and meaning in life*. Human life falls into a kind of disarray, into a spiritual mediocrity that most often ends in a dark ignorance of God and a desperate attachment to the pleasure of the senses³³. A diffuse feeling of fear of the “I’m afraid and I don’t know why” type arises since his life is in fact a survival strictly on the level of bodily feelin

“The affections that come into the flesh as a result of sin, writes Father Stăniloae, as an inner separation from God and one’s

³² Sfântul ISAAC SIRUL, *Cuvinte despre nevoință*, 21, Bunavestire Publishing House, Bacau, 1997, pp. 102-103

³³ St. John of Sinai says that spiritual laziness is an *all-embracing death* that gives a softness in spiritual things and a dynamism towards pleasure: “it brings trembling and headaches and hot and dizzy (when the time of prayer comes), and when the table is laid, it leaps from the bed”, Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XIII, 5, p. 210.

fellow men, are ‘weaknesses’ or ‘weaknesses’ in many senses: they manifest a need for fulfillment of our nature (hunger, thirst, tiredness), close to the nothingness from which it has been taken out and to which it has approached again; a pain through some stinginess and irregularity entered into it; a fear of pain and death, which leads the nature in an extreme degree to nothingness. They have thereby an ontological character, being an impoverishment of existence, an approach to the nothingness from which we have been removed by creation”³⁴.

V. Healing pathological fear

Fallen Adam, clothed in *garments of leather*; that is, in a new ontological condition, the divine prophet did not leave him. The fear of not losing the world, to which he desperately clings, is ambivalent: on the one hand, it highlights Adam’s perverted nature which seeks life in the direction of death, and, on the other hand, it underlines that man remained, even after the fall, a creature eager to *be, not to die*. The fear of death, present in the heart of man, shows that he longs for *eternity, for the absolute*. God is embracing man’s freedom precisely at this existential level. By not finding a way to man’s conscience by offering him His wisdom, goodness and love, God is taking hold of man’s finitude and fear of death³⁵.

Here are some possible steps by which human freedom can move from passionate fear to good fear: first, the acquisition of existential *lucidity*. It

³⁴ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, note 95 to Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Cuvânt împotriva elinilor, Cuvânt despre Întruparea Cuvântului, Trei cuvinte împotriva arienilor*, coll. *Church Fathers and Writers*, vol. 15, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1987, p. 363.

³⁵ “Christ offered His wounds and His sufferings to man, that He might buy his will... Unable to seduce man by His wisdom, goodness and art, He seeks from the cross to move him by His sufferings; and to show His love He does everything, endures the pains and dies”, NICOLAE CABASILĂ, *Despre viața în Hristos*, translation Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997, p. 175.

is a matter of reaching the register of essential questions: what is/what is life? What is man? Who is God? These questions can *only* be answered by the mercy of God who allows *trials* to pierce man's conscience! The instability and fragility of earthly life, the presence of suffering and the fear of death, are meant to direct man towards the existential register of essential questions. God makes *redemptive* and *preventive* use of all the physical and spiritual impasses and sufferings that make up the life of man alienated from the Garden of Eden. The *fear of death* is exploited by God to make it *the door* to authentic life. If man reaches this existential crossroads, his conscience acquires the need for reconciliation with God. God's saving propensity does not cease to entrust man's freedom and heart: "I will not leave you, I will not forsake you!"; and in man's heart begins the inner sense of the words of the psalmist: "The Lord is my helper, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the keeper of my life, whom shall I fear?.. If an army be gathered against me, my heart shall not be afraid. (Psalm 26, 1-2.5); "for if I walk in the side and shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 22, 4).

Wonderful faith or *miracle faith* can be the next step in the process of healing from the *fear of death*. It should be noted that the believer is tempted to reduce faith in God to the data of mental reason (scientific knowledge) and to subordinate it to the laws governing both the psychosomatic nature and the material world. The Holy Fathers observe that *faith* in fact begins only when our total abandonment into God's hands takes place, i.e. at the point where man's power ceases completely: in the face of death and the grave. Here and now *faith* can utter its wonderful power: God can raise the body from decay and dust to life! *Miraculous faith* moves *fear* from the crushing register of death to the register of Life: *fear of death* is transformed into *fear of losing the One who conquered death*.

Wonderful faith is the preamble to what Scripture calls the *fear of God* or *saving fear*. This has two stages: the beginner's stage, which comes from the fear of suffering and the fear of not losing earthly life, and, the second stage, the fear of loving God or loving fear of God. "There are two fears, writes Ava Dorotheus. One is of the beginners and one is of the perfected; one is of the beginners, of the God-honouring, and the other of

the holy and perfected, of those who have reached the measure of love”³⁶. *Beginner’s fear* is born in the soul of the one who fears pain and calls upon God for help to guard/ensure the stability of his earthly life. “One does God’s will out of fear of torment. (...) He does not yet do good for himself, but for fear of beatings”³⁷. There are three reasons that can cause the *fear of God* in the soul of man: fear of temporary and eternal punishment, self-love that has in view the acquisition of salvation and disinterested love of God³⁸. The *fear of the servant*, of which Dorotheus of Gaza speaks, although it is close in manifestation/motivation to the *fear of the world (of not losing the world)* is not identified with it. The *fear of the servant* senses God as a living Person actively involved in the destiny of man and the world, whereas *pathological/passionate fear* belongs to the fantasies of the mind in which God is perceived only as a supermundane (mostly impersonal) force that threatens to crush life. *Beginning fear* is necessary for the spiritual life because it mobilizes the soul towards the work of the divine³⁹. Saints Ignatius and Calistus Xanthopol note: “Repentance is the ship, fear is its helmsman, love is the divine shore. Fear therefore places us in the ship of repentance and takes us across the sea of life, covered with salty steam, to the divine shore which is love”⁴⁰. Until we reach the threshold of God’s love, fear of God, as a *beginning fear*, is absolutely necessary because it leads the soul to repentance, then brings about a return to self and finally brings about healing. Although it may

³⁶ AVA DOROTEL, *Despre frica de Dumnezeu*, 1, translation Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: Filocalia 9, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1980, p. 513

³⁷ AVA DOROTEL, *Despre frica de Dumnezeu*, 1, p. 513

³⁸ “Whether we please God by fearing torment, and so are in the feeling of the servant; or whether we do what is commanded, seeking to gain reward, and so for our own benefit, and so are like the symbolic; or whether we do good for Him (God) Himself, and in this case are in the feeling of a son”, AVA DOROTEL, *Despre frica de Dumnezeu*, 2, p. 514.

³⁹ “With fear and with hope, therefore, salvation is worked out. With fear, for the fickleness and shakiness of the human nature”, Petroniu TĂNASE, *Ușile pocăinței*, Trinitas Publishing House, Iasi, 2011, p. 108.

⁴⁰ CALIST and IGNATIE XANTHOPOL, *Metoda sau cele 100 de capete*, 81, translation Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: Filocalia 8, p. 178.

seem uncomfortable, it is the *fear of God* that gives rise to the awakening necessary to guard against impure thoughts. The man whose heart is filled with the fear of God struggles with sinful desires because the *fear of sin* brings in him the revival combined with the will not to offend God, which gives him better vision, stability and inner strength⁴¹. St. John Chrysostom writes of the benefits of *beginning fear*:

“See how many benefits fear brings? If fear were evil, parents would not have appointed educators to children, nor magistrates to cities. What could be more terrible than hell? And yet nothing is more profitable than fear of it; for fear of hell brings us the crown of the kingdom. Where there is fear, there is no envy; where there is fear, the love of silver does not arise; where there is fear, anger is quenched, evil lust appeased, and every irrational passion exterminated... when fear has dominion over us, none of the chief passions will assail us, but will be driven away by the despotic power of fear. And this is not its only advantage, but a greater one. For not only does it drive away our passions, but it gathers all the virtues with great ease. When there is fear, charity is done with zeal, and intense prayer and warm tears... for nothing swallows up sin and makes virtue nourish like the continual state of fear”⁴².

Analyzing the relationship between the *fear of beginners* and the *fear of love of God*, Father Stăniloae says that “there is an inversion: beginners do the will of God, because they fear; the perfect love Him and therefore

⁴¹ “Our retreat here, in solitude, is of the greatest use to us, because it appeases the passions, giving the mind the opportunity to banish them completely from the soul. For just as wild beasts are easy to control if we tame them, so also strong desires, such as lust, anger, fear and grief, these evils that poison the soul, can be calmed by a life lived in silence”, Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, *Epistola 2, II, Către prietenul Grigorie (Teologul)*, translation Pr. Teodor Bodogae, coll. *Church Fathers and Writers*, vol. 3, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 32.

⁴² Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omilia la statui*, translation by Stefan Bezdechi, Holy Bishopric of Râmnic-Noul Severin, Râmnicul Vâlcea, 1937, pp. 175-176

are afraid of falling out of love and therefore do His will. The fear that springs from love is different from the love that grows out of fear”⁴³.

The fear of the servant or the fear of beginners is the first stage in the spiritual ascent and is a form close in manifestation to the *fear of passion*, although the foundations are different. As we have shown above, the latter is the fruit of the fall, while the former is not foreign to grace. Although they seem identical in that both *fear of God* and *pathological fear* exhibit a degree of irrationality and self-interest, yet the *novice fear* is not only the blind obedience of the servant but also exhibits some degree of *joy*: the servant rejoices in obeying the Master because on the one hand he feels His care and love, and on the other hand he feels in his heart the joy of service even in the act of obedience out of fear (the commandment - God’s law enlightens, His commandments rest the heart of the one who fulfills them regardless of motivation). In his *fear* the servant looks upon God as a living Person, open to relationship and benevolent, in contrast to *pathological fear* - the birthplace of the phantasmagorical world - which experiences God as an impersonal, cold and crushing force. St. John of Sinai makes a remark to this effect by saying that “he who has made himself the servant of the Lord will fear only his Master”⁴⁴, that is, he perceives the Person of the Master God. *The servant’s fear* takes over human fears which, by relating them to God as the absolute and Almighty Master, he feels how *the fear of the beginner* gives rise to hope:

“and through what is counted unpleasant, through sickness, hardships, toil, helplessness, undesired sorrow, darkness, ignorance, poverty, unthankfulness in all things, fear, sorrow, dishonesty, grief, lack, and through all that is contrary to what has gone before, we come to patience, humility and good hope in the age to come”⁴⁵.

⁴³ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, note 1062 to AVA DOROTEI, *Diferite învățături de suflet folositoare*, in: *Filocalia* 9, p. 515.

⁴⁴ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 10, p. 266.

⁴⁵ PETRU DAMASCHINUL, *Învățături duhovnicești*, in: *Filocalia* 5, translation Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1976, p. 148.

Avva Isaiah states along the same lines, “He who lives in tranquility is bound to have the fear of meeting God walking before his breath. For as long as sin hardens his heart, he has not yet become afraid of God and is far from God’s mercy”⁴⁶.

The fear of beginners has to do with events at the end of earthly life⁴⁷ transforming itself by divine grace into a source of strength, as some succeed in transmuting pathological fear into an intermediate (but necessary⁴⁸) stage of a real fear, of spiritual realities; the irritable power paralyzed in pathological fear passes, through the *fear of God*, from the state of weakness to that of strength so that it strengthens itself, thus approaching the *fear of love*. In other words, the *beginning fear of God* is the absolutely necessary gateway to *perfect fear*.

We have shown above that man’s alienation from God was done through the suggestion/workings of the devil to whose perspective man’s freedom consented. The devil is the very embodiment of fear and therefore any presence of his leaves behind the feeling of irrational fear. The struggle against the *spirit of fear* is a fierce one, as it seeks to drag the soul back into the sinful state of inner paralysis. Avva Joseph Hazzaya has a longer passage in which he pertinently observes the presence and work of the demonic in *pathological fear*:

“After the battle of the akedia, upon the brother who lives in the solitude of the chiliasm comes the demon of fear. Thus he comes

⁴⁶ *Patericul mare*, III, 9, *Despre străpunerea inimii*, translation Pr. Prof. Constantin Coman, Byzantine Publishing House, pp. 243-244

⁴⁷ Avva Elijah said, “I fear three things: when my soul will go out of the body; when I will meet God; and when sentence will be passed against me”, *Patericul, Pentru Avva Ilie*, I, Alba-Iulia, 1980, p. 84

⁴⁸ “The soul desires to be saved, but, lusting after vain things and occupying itself with them, flees from afflictions. For indeed His commandments are not hard, but our wills are crafty. For for fear of the sea and fear of robbers we are accustomed to deny ourselves of all things and to cast away all our possessions without delay, though we know that after a little while we die. But for the little time we have left to live we despise all things and count ourselves happy if, by losing all, we save ourselves either from the hand of robbers or from the fury of the sea. And he who a little before was foolish to gain an obol, willingly throws away all only to gain a little passing life. Why should we not think these things about eternal life? Why should not the fear of God have power, as a saint said, as much power as the fear of the great”, *Patericul mare*, II, 151, f, *Despre înaintarea în desăvârșire*, pp. 183-184.

like a small and disgusting worm, crawling through the cell, or like a buzzing mosquito, and the heart of the monk is troubled, like that of one fallen into the hands of robbers. Then this cursed demon makes his presence felt in the monastery several times and in various fearful ways, at the sight of which the monk's body becomes, through fear, like a spring of water. Fear grips the monk to such an extent that his tongue clamps in his mouth and he can no longer speak. And if God's mercy did not sustain the monk in this struggle, perhaps even his soul would leave his body. But you, brother, against whom this struggle is being waged, when you see these fearful faces, make the psalter of the son of Jesse resound, saying: «May God be raised up, and may his enemies be scattered, and may those who hate you flee from your face. As wax melts from the face of the fire, so let your enemies perish from before you»; and «Lord, do not fulfill the lust of the wicked, and let not his cunning plot succeed»; and «God, deliver me! Lord, be my helper! Let those who seek the destruction of my soul be ashamed and confounded!»; and «Lord, deliver me from the hand of the lawless one!»; and «Strengthen, O Lord, my hands in war!»; and «Give me the joy of Your salvation!»; and «Shame with Thy help those who hate me!»; and «Bow down Thine ear, O Lord, and answer me» so that «the iniquity of him who hates me may turn on his head» and «fear and trembling may fall on the enemies who fight against me!» When thou hast smitten him with these arrows and with these spears of the verses of the son of Jesse, mark all thy senses with the sign of the cross, and the demon shall flee from thee at once”⁴⁹.

We must remember that the Mystery of Baptism banishes both the presence and the power of the evil one from the human heart. After Baptism the unclean spirit of fear tries to take hold of man's nature through

⁴⁹ IOSIF HAZZAYA, *Scrieri duhovnicești*, translated by hierom. Agapie Corbu, St. Nectarios Publishing House, Arad, 2019, pp. 92-93

the senses, from the outside to the heart⁵⁰. It easily touches the body and through the sensations induced in it, writes St. John of Sinai, seeks to sneak its specific state, *fear*, into the soul: “the body is afraid when a spirit is near us in an unseen way”⁵¹. The fear that has crept into man’s nature from the work/presence of the devil begins to be overcome when we manage to surrender ourselves completely⁵² to God: “but when the soul rejoices, humbling itself, an angel stands before it. Therefore, knowing from the work the state of his face, let us quickly leap to prayer, for our good guardian has come to pray with us”⁵³. *To leap to prayer* is to surrender one’s life into the hands of the divine mercy. This is what *the Catechism* emphasizes when it speaks of those who are convinced that God’s saving will is behind everything that happens in life: “Avva, if some misfortune should befall us, would you fear? The old man replies: If heaven should fall to earth, Theodore would not fear.” *For he (Theodore) had prayed to God to heal him of all cowardice*.⁵⁴ The fear of the Lord breaks the spirit

⁵⁰ Sfântul MARCU ASCETUL, *Răspuns aceloră care se îndoiesc despre Dumnezeuiescul Botez*, translation Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae in: *Filocalia* 1, Archdiocesan Publishing House, Sibiu, 1947, pp. 298-299

⁵¹ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 10, p. 266.

⁵² It should be noted that the integral surrender of man into the hands of God is particularly difficult since man is fragmented within himself. His unconscious and subconscious, until it is cleared and brought to light, represent a majority of the self, which, as it becomes more and more purified, gradually becomes enlightened. The integral self-giving into the Lord’s hands, the daily entrusting of the self to the Pardoner, consists in fact of a *partial wholeness* achieved subjectively until, through the Lord’s grace, we reach the objective wholeness of the whole self which surrenders itself to the Pardoner. In this consists the effort to put a *good beginning* in each day of Christians. Father Simeon Kraiopoulos shows how, from the little content of our self that we can control (consciously), if we place it in the Lord’s hand - it is healed, through a continuous entrustment into His hand, we come to the point that the whole self is brought to light: “Yesterday he entrusted what he could entrust, today he entrusts himself again in its entirety, since the soul is not cut into pieces. The moment you entrust this part of your soul, the conscious, because it is not cut by the subconscious, but is joined by a tail, pulls that part up too. Thus man feels the need to say the next day: “again I want to entrust myself to God!”, Simeon KRAIOPOULOS, *Sufletul meu, temnița mea*, Byzantine Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 23. For this reason fear is also healed, fully, hardly, since it is deeply woven into the fibres of the adamic man.

⁵³ Sfântul IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, XX, 10, p. 266.

⁵⁴ *Patericul mare*, III, 22, *Despre străpungerea inimii*, p. 426

of fear! St. Simeon the New Theologian writes: “He who fears the Lord is not afraid of the assault of devils, nor of their impotent attacks... for they flee from him rather than he from them, lest they be burned by the blaze of the divine fire that springs from him”⁵⁵. The fight against *fear of demonic origin* must be continuous and under the guidance of the discernment of a spiritual Father. In his introduction to the *Lausician History (Limonarius)*, Palmyra writes about the need to know the struggle from the experience of the Father:

“My purpose was that you, having in it a collection of holy and saving parables for the soul and an unforgettable cure, might be able to banish from yourself every form of craving that arises from unreasonable lust, from sloth and discouragement in moments of need, every wavering and weakness of will, anger and trouble, sadness and unfounded fear, the temptations of the world, so that you might advance on the path of godliness”⁵⁶. “A tried and tested teacher is indispensable, writes Avva Joseph Hazzaya, so that he may direct the joy of this stage through humility, and the sorrow through the hope of promises, based on the mercy of God, Who, following repentance, gives forgiveness of sins. If at this stage the brother is not instructed, then the demons either fill him with vain glory and his mind is shattered by the images they pass on to him, or they throw him into sadness, fear, despair and return him to the Egypt of wickedness”⁵⁷.

The spiritual father is meant to help the disciple’s mind overcome the obsessive thought and fear planted in him by demonic temptation⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Sfântul SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Cele 225 de capete teologice și practice*, translation Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Filocalia* 6, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1977, pp. 36-37.

⁵⁶ PALADIE, *Istoria lausiacă*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2007, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁷ IOSIF HAZZAYA, *Scrieri duhovnicești*, p. 29

⁵⁸ Obsessive fear states generate compulsive behaviours. The treatment of obsessive thinking is not about fulfilling the *pattern*, but about abruptly breaking out of it, which can only be achieved with external help. The aetiology of obsessive pathologies shows their demonic origin. Saint Ignatius Brychtianinov writes in this sense: “evil spirits

Returning to the *fear of the Lord*, both as a state of beginners and as a way of fighting against the spirits of wickedness that seek to paralyze the soul of man through the *spirit of pathological fear*, we affirm once again that it is an absolutely necessary step for the acquisition of true *knowledge of God* and the attainment of *fear out of love* or *fear as holiness*. Thus, from the *fear of God* as the judge of life, the soul moves to the joy and love of Heaven and God. Saint Porphyry Kavsokalivite writes in this regard that “striving through fear, we slowly enter into the love of God. Then hell is gone, fear is gone, death is gone”⁵⁹. At this stage *fear* fills life with the positive content of love. We now speak of *perfect fear* or *fear out of love for God*. Clement the Alexandrian notes, “we do not fear God, but we fear lest we fall from God”⁶⁰. “The perfect fear, writes Dorotheus of Gaza, of one who has tasted the sweetness of being with God and is afraid of falling from it, is afraid of being deprived of it”⁶¹. As man’s life becomes more and more fully identified with the holiness of the Master, *the love that banishes the servant’s fear* makes itself felt in the soul: “said Avva Antony: I no longer fear God, but love God. For love casts out fear”⁶². The measure of holiness is the measure of love of God. The soul that comes to God’s love has only one *fear*: not to lose the one it loves. It seeks the God of consolations, not the consolations of God! This is *the fear of the perfected*, and on this stage *fear is covered/confused with love, with the likeness of God*. Man seeks God not for what He might give him, nor for what man might give Him, but because between the two lies love! The fear of death is no more because love is stronger than death.

wage war against man with such cunning that the thoughts and imaginations brought into the soul by them seem to be born in the soul itself, not from the evil spirit, alien to it, which works and at the same time endeavours to hide itself”, Dmitri AVDEEV, *Psihiatria pentru duhovnici*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, p. 151.

⁵⁹ *Ne vorbește părintele Porfirie*, Egumenița Publishing House, Galati, 2009, p. 178.

⁶⁰ CLEMENT ALEXANDRINUL, *Stromate, Stromata a II-a*, VIII, 40, 2, translation Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, coll. *Church Fathers and Writers*, 5, Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1982, p. 134.

⁶¹ AVA DROTEI, *Diferite învățături de suflet folositoare*, p. 513.

⁶² *Patericul, Pentru Avva Antonie*, 34, Alba-Iulia, 1980, p. 13