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The Woman Between Love and Sacrifice: Her Spiritual Vocation and Responsibility in the Renewal of the World

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Abstract

This study examines the theological and spiritual significance of holy women in the Orthodox tradition, in the context of the Romanian Patriarchate’s designation of 2026 as the Commemorative Year of the Holy Women of the Calendar. Beginning with the Most Holy Theotokos and continuing with the Myrrhbearers, the Gospels present women as exemplary figures of courage, fidelity, and profound spiritual receptivity. Christ’s encounters with the Samaritan woman, the Canaanite woman, the bent-over woman, and others reveal His recognition of women’s dignity and their vocation as bearers of truth. In a society that often distorts or diminishes authentic femininity, the Church highlights the woman’s essential role in the renewal of humanity through love, sacrifice, purity, and spiritual strength. The Mother of God remains the supreme model of transfigured femininity, while the Myrrhbearers embody steadfast devotion and the first witness to the Resurrection.

Keywords

Orthodox spirituality, holy women, Theotokos, Myrrhbearers, feminine vocation

I. Introduction

Given that 2026 has been declared by the Romanian Patriarchate as the Commemorative Year of the Holy Women of the Calendar - Myrrhbearers, Martyrs, Pious Women, Wives, and Mothers - this study will specifically examine the significance and impact of honoring these women within Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox Church marks many commemorations of holy women throughout the church year, beginning with the Most Holy Theotokos and continuing with the Myrrhbearers, celebrated on the third Sunday after Pascha. These women, the first to visit the tomb of the Savior with myrrh to anoint His body, offer enduring examples of courage, unwavering faith, and steadfast love, bearing witness to perfect fidelity.

The Savior's encounter with the Samaritan woman (Saint Photini) at Jacob's well, celebrated on the fifth Sunday after Easter, is also included in the same register. Christ reveals Himself to this woman, a stranger to the Jewish people, speaking to her about the "living water" and revealing to her the secret of salvation. Likewise, the dialogue with the Canaanite woman (17th Sunday after Pentecost), the healing of the hunchbacked woman (27th Sunday after Pentecost), or the encounter with the sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany show the Savior's sensitivity towards the suffering, dignity, and faith of women. Christ takes pity on the widow of Nain, whose son He resurrects, listens to the prayer of the woman from Cana of Galilee and heals her daughter, raises the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, and resurrects Jairus' daughter. The New Testament abounds in such examples.

The Holy Gospels are indisputable testimonies to the fact that no woman who asked for the Savior's help was left without support. Moreover, Jesus Christ, unlike all the wise men of the world up to that time, is the first one who considered it appropriate to entrust women with the high secrets of His teaching, recognizing their dignity, spiritual capacity, and vocation to become witnesses of the truth.

The destiny of nations and of centuries depends, in part, on the soul of women. After so many centuries of Christianity - built upon the sacrifices of countless holy women and mothers, heirs of the Myrrhbearers - we become acutely aware of the woman's role in the salvation of humankind,

especially now, when modesty, chastity, purity, fidelity, and the vocation of wife and mother are often disparaged by various media channels. The frivolous woman, the woman reduced to a puppet of luxury and pleasure, the woman who becomes a mask without heart or soul, incapable of love and sacrifice, becomes the ruin of nations and the undoing of civilizations. Conversely, the woman who is wife and mother, the woman who is virgin in purity, the woman capable of love and sacrifice, the woman rooted in the love and self-offering of Christ - she is the glory of nations and the foundation of their greatest victories.

II. The Mother of God – Archetype of Giving, Spiritual Motherhood and Loving Service, Perfect Icon of Transfigured Femininity

During the church year, the Orthodox Church celebrates many feasts dedicated to the Mother of God. The most important are: the Nativity of the Mother of God (September 8), the Entry into the Church (November 21), the Annunciation (March 25), and the Dormition of the Mother of God (August 15). Other feasts of spiritual significance include the Covering of the Mother of God (October 1) and the Enshrining of Her Venerable Robe in the Church of Blachernae (July 2). The liturgical cycle devoted to the Virgin Mary shows her unique place in salvation and in the Orthodox Church's consciousness.

According to the Tradition of the Church, before entrusting His soul to the Father on the cross, the Savior Jesus Christ entrusted His Mother to the beloved disciple, the Apostle John, who "took her to himself" and cared for her with the love befitting the one who bore the Son of God in her womb. After the Ascension of the Lord and the Descent of the Holy Spirit, Holy Scripture only briefly mentions the presence of the Mother of God among the Apostles (cf. Acts 1, 14), but the Patristic Tradition emphasizes her role as the heart and light of the young Christian community in Jerusalem. She was the one who gathered the faithful, told them about the life and work of her Son, and burned unceasingly with longing for Him.

When the days of her earthly life were fulfilled, the Virgin Mary passed to the eternal, submitting to the law of human nature. Her death was not

painful, but a gentle “falling asleep”, devoid of suffering, like a painless birth. Tradition records the wonderful gathering of the Apostles from all corners of the world, who searched for her body and placed it in the tomb of Gethsemane. Three days after the burial, at the request of the Apostle Thomas, the tomb was opened, and the body was found to be missing, only her garments remaining, as testimony to her ascension to heaven with her body, before the general resurrection.

This mystery exemplarily expresses the transfiguration of human nature through grace. Although the Mother of God was born carrying original sin, from which she was cleansed at the Annunciation, her body was not left to decay, but was raised to heaven. Through this, the Church testifies to the definitive victory over death and the anticipation of the resurrection of all humanity in Christ. The Virgin Mary thus becomes the icon of perfect purity and the deification of man, the supreme model of the feminine vocation.

The iconography of the Assumption of the Mother of God profoundly expresses this theological reality. Her body is placed on a funeral bed, surrounded by the Apostles and the faithful of Jerusalem, and above it stands Christ, holding in his arms the soul of His Mother represented in the form of a baby. The gesture symbolizes not only the gratitude of the Son to His Mother, but also the divine pedagogy of the mutual love between parents and children, a love that transcends death and is perfected in eternity.

From a dogmatic point of view, the Orthodox Church affirms three fundamental truths about the Mother of God: her quality as Mother of God (Theotokos), her perpetual virginity, and her veneration. This veneration goes beyond the veneration accorded to saints and angels, without being confused with the worship offered to God. The Mother of God intercedes for people not as an absolute Mediatrix, but as the Mother of the Only Mediatrix, Jesus Christ.

By choosing the Virgin Mary as the “throne of God”, the sublime role of women in the work of salvation and in the life of the Church is revealed. The Mother of God is the New Eve, who, through obedience and purity, opened the gates of life to man again. In her, humanity offers God the

most precious gift, and God responds with the gift of salvation. As patristic theology affirms, in the Mother of God we have in heaven a mother's heart, which beats unceasingly for the world and for its salvation.

The Mother of God is the Mother of life and teaches us how we can obtain full and true life. Saint Simeon the New Theologian says that the Mother of God, due to her holiness, received in her womb the Lord God and our Savior Jesus Christ, and this because she was the Most Pure Virgin. The Holy Fathers say that the Mother of God was a Virgin Most Pure not only in body, but also in mind. Saint Symeon the New Theologian also says in further argumentation of his idea: "If you want God to descend into your souls, into your home, into your life, make your souls virgins most pure and righteous, and God will descend into your souls"¹. How will we be able to achieve this since we are defiled both in body and mind, because our weak mind is inclined to sin?

While Jesus was a baby, the Mother of God was the one who carried Him in her arms and, later, held Him by the hand, as a child; she was the one who accompanied Him without interruption in His mission of preaching; She was by His side, a loving and sorrowful mother, in the dramatic moments of passion, death and burial, the sword passing through her soul, as the old Simeon had prophesied; when he came down from the cross, she held Him in her arms again, as she loved to hold Him when He was a baby. At the moment of His bodily falling asleep, the loving Son, in His hypostasis of God, in turn tenderly and gratefully holds the soul of His Mother in His arms.

In this impressive gesture, we must see not only an act of natural gratitude but also an example of divine pedagogy, given to us, humans. Like the Most Pure Mother, who raised her Child with exemplary dedication, are our Christian parents, father and mother, who raised us with responsibility and sacrifice. There comes a time, however, when old age and illness reduce parents to the condition of helpless "babies", dependent on their children, as children once were on them. And thus something similar to that suggested by the icon we are talking about takes place: just as Jesus

¹ Sf. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Întâia cuvântare morală*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 6, transl. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1977, p. 160.

holds His Mother in his arms to carry her soul to her resting place, so grateful children help their sick and elderly parents to get through their sufferings more easily, preparing them, later, for the transition to eternity. They go with them to the doctor, provide them with the necessities of a decent life, if they are bedridden, they feed them, dress them, wash them, like infants, call the priest to confess their sins and receive communion, they take care that they do not die alone, without a lit candle. In *The Promise of Dawn*, Romain Gary evokes maternal love as the first promise of life, a promise that cannot be matched or fully fulfilled by anyone else. The mother is the figure who offers everything, without conditions, without reservations, without asking for anything in return. Gary's words are imbued with melancholy and gratitude, but also with the pain of loss: "Through motherly love, life makes you a promise at dawn that it never keeps. After that, you are forced to be content with cold food until the end of your days. After that..., whenever a woman takes you in her arms and holds you to her chest, it is nothing but condolences"². This literary image transcends biology and becomes the symbol of divine love: the mother is the one who gives life, protects, encourages, and remains present even beyond death. She is the icon of mercy, sacrifice, and total dedication, in accordance with the Orthodox theological vision of the Mother of God.

Comparatively, C.S. Lewis, in his confessional writings, especially in *A Grief Observed* describes the wife as a complex and polyphonic being, capable of fulfilling multiple roles in a man's life:

"A good wife has in her innumerable people. She has been my daughter and mother, my student and teacher, my submissive and sovereign, and always, besides all this, my trusted companion, my friend, my sailor on the sea of life, my comrade"³.

This characterization is an ode to the complementarity and depth of the marital relationship. The wife is not only a partner, but also a

² Romain GARY, *Promisiunea zorilor*, transl. Daniel Nicolescu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2018, pp. 29-30.

³ C. S. LEWIS, *De ce, Doamne? O radiografie a suferinței*, transl. Tatiana Niculescu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2020, p. 67.

confidant, support, mirror, and guide, in a continuous dance between giving and receiving, between authority and submission, between play and seriousness. Lewis delicately captures the fact that conjugal love is not static, but dynamic and evolving, and the woman-wife is a presence that accompanies, understands, and transforms.

In fact, the two literary portraits - mother and wife - complement each other. The mother is the root of unconditional love, and the wife is the branch of shared love. In both cases, the woman is seen as a bearer of meaning, life, and grace, and her love is a force that shapes the soul, accompanies destiny, and brings man closer to God.

The Mother of God is above all deified creatures, but she is not identical with God. She is a man, but a man raised by the grace of Christ above all creation. Everything she has, she has through God, but she received more than everyone, through her purity and perfect love.

In Orthodox iconography, the Virgin Mary is represented as the throne of the Son, the root from which He takes His body. Her icon is placed closest to the Holy Altar, and in the worship of the Church, she is compared to the New Eve, presenting her Son to both God and the Church.

III. Myrrh-bearing women - on the paths illuminated by the dawn of the Resurrection

Women possess a particular inclination toward the divine; they resonate more deeply when confronted with sacrifice, prayer, suffering, and death, and they receive the call from above as something both awaited and inherently their own. A contemporary theologian observed that “women understand the divine language with their hearts”⁴ referring to the dignified, honest, industrious, virtuous, prayerful, fasting, merciful, self-sacrificing, and loving Christian woman. The enduring qualities of the feminine soul are love and devotion, through which women have been - and continue to be - capable of facing every danger and advancing even to the point of sacrifice. As Metropolitan Nicolae Mladin profoundly observed:

⁴ Vasile CITIRIGĂ, *Cuvinte și fapte ale Domnului Hristos în lumina dogmaticii ortodoxe*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 2008, p. 237.

“Although more fragile, weaker, more delicate, yet the woman’s body is, through love, stronger than all the adversities of the world and even than death. And from love, as from an inexhaustible spring, have flowed self-giving, self-denial, and devotion beyond the boundaries of death. These are the qualities of woman... love and sacrifice, love and devotion, love and self-giving”⁵.

Through love and sacrifice, the woman is called to become a mediator of resurrection. And just as, through the Virgin Mary, God took on human flesh, so too must the Risen Christ take shape - through every Christian woman - in ever new lives.

Many of the women who dialogued with Jesus recognized their sins committed, desiring their correction and sincere repentance. The Savior came for sinners to open a way for them to salvation. He forgave all sinners who repented. Without the forgiveness of sins, we would always be, for eternity, with the burden of the past on our shoulders. Forgiveness unburdens us, frees us; it is the greatest gift that the Savior brought to humanity. Every person, even a non-Christian, is aware of the mistakes they make and has a feeling of guilt. Rodion Raskolnikov, the main character in Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment*, ultimately denounced himself for the sin he had committed, that of murdering a loan shark and her sister. Although he always managed to exonerate himself before the judge, he could not exonerate himself before his own conscience, and from the individualistic nihilist, he ends up, with the help of Sonia, the one he falls in love with, the man eager to atone for his sins, being sentenced to nine years in prison. He preferred Siberia, just to calm his soul, his conscience. He had to pay for the sin he had committed. In the Siberian prison, helped by the scriptural readings, Raskolnikov ends up experiencing the suffering of remorse, the penance of punishment, feeling the purification and deliverance of sinfulness, and achieving *salvation through suffering*⁶.

⁵ † Nicolae MLADIN, *Prin zbućiumul vremii*, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2007, p. 64

⁶ Corneliu Dragoș BĂLAN, “Aspecte dogmatice în opera lui Dostoievski”, in: *Glasul Bisericii*, LXXIV (2015) 7-12, p. 113.

As is the case with most of Dostoevsky's characters, Raskolnikov and Sonia (the one who will go with him to Siberia) go through an impressive labyrinth of suffering, like a Sisyphus who gives up his mission. Just when it seems that everything is lost, that man can no longer be saved from the dark labyrinth in which he is sinking deeper and deeper, several Ariadne's threads appear for the suffering person, the most important of which is faith in God. Faith in God is linked to love or starts from love. Raskolnikov ends up experiencing the faith and love of God, but also the unconditional love of Sonya⁷.

In freedom, he felt imprisoned; in prison, he felt free. There, in the prison, at dusk, Raskolnikov, looking at the moon and feeling free from the burden of sin (because he confessed it and was serving his sentence), expresses the joy of freedom thus: "How beautiful, Lord! How beautiful..."⁸.

The myrrh-bearing women are the holy women who followed the Savior with their devotion. These women who served the Lord Jesus, or perhaps more, came from Galilee, as the Holy Gospels recall (Matthew 17, 56; Luke 8, 3) and some of them the Lord Christ had healed "of evil spirits and other diseases" (Luke 8, 2). And, as a sign of gratitude, they decided to follow the Teacher and His disciples, serving them with their work and wealth.

Here are the names of some of them:

a. *Mary Magdalene* – He had freed her from the power of demons: "out of whom he had cast out seven demons" (Mark 16, 9); she was granted great heavenly gifts by preaching the Gospel in the surrounding area, convincing many Jews of the messiahship of the Lord Christ. She is beaten and persecuted by the Jews for preaching the Resurrection, but she continues to preach in Palestine and Asia until an old age, being stoned to death and saying at the moment of her death: "Lord, as you said to me: rejoice (Matthew 28, 9) and I have made others rejoice in your truth". Her face is found next to the icon of the resurrection, and some painters have immortalized her attachment to the belief in the resurrection. The Byzantine Emperor, Leo the Isaurian (727-754), brought her relics to

⁷ F. M. DOSTOIEVSKI, *Crimă și pedeapsă*, transl. Nicolae Gane, Editura Polirom, București, 2007, passim.

⁸ F. M. DOSTOIEVSKI, *Crimă și pedeapsă*, p. 572.

Constantinople. The Latin Crusade of 1204, plundering Constantinople, transported relics of the saint to Western Europe. Her commemoration is also held on July 22.

b. *Susanna* - a young woman with a special moral sense and gifted with a livel intelligence;

c. *Joanna* was the wife of Huza (a dignitary at Herod's court), a woman of higher social status.

d. "*The other Mary*" (Matthew 27, 61) - we can identify her as the mother of James the Less and Joseph;

e. *Salome*, commemorated on August 3; some identify her as the mother of the sons of

Zebedee, that is, of James and John, although the evangelist Matthew does not call her Salome, but only "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Matthew 20, 20; 27, 56), while the evangelist Mark mentions a certain Salome, among the myrrh-bearing women, but does not add the detail that she is the mother of the Apostles James and John (Mark 15, 40; 16, 1);

f. *Mary of Cleopas*, one of the 70 disciples, the disciple Cleopas, to whom the Lord Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus;

g. The two sisters of Lazarus - *Martha* and *Mary* -, the friend of the Savior Christ, are also mentioned; they were close to the Lord Jesus, being present at the resurrection of their brother. This resurrection was for their faith, the sealing of the hope of the next resurrection. They sacrificed their entire lives to the Savior's teaching, experiencing here on earth the heavenly morality of the Divine Teacher. Martha received martyrdom for the resurrection, being hanged, as Mary did;

h. and, of course, the *Mother of the Lord* (cf. Matthew 27, 55-56; Mark 16, 1; Luke 8, 23; John 19, 25).

In liturgical language, "myrrh-bearers" or "myrrh-bearers" mean "myrrh-bearing women", and this name recalls the holy women who lived with the Savior throughout His preaching and who were with Him at the moment of His death, but also after death. These holy women are not known as myrrh-bearers only because, on the morning of the Resurrection, they went to the tomb, according to custom. This was only the crowning act of their beautiful and tender service. They began their true mission at the

Savior's first blessing, at the moment of conversion. And their conscience was never deceived by betrayals and rejections. Their devotion was divine and admirable, and the Savior Christ rewarded them with the news of the Resurrection.

Early Sunday morning ("very early in the morning" - Luke 24, 1), the myrrh-bearing women set out for the tomb. This attitude of theirs shows us that we too must desire Him and seek Him in every moment of our lives; when it was permitted, they no longer had patience, they no longer waited, showing that we must begin our day with Christ risen from the dead.

They come to the tomb even though they knew, as the Holy Evangelist Mark tells us, that there was a large stone there: "Who will roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb"? (Mark 16, 3). The Church Fathers, interpreting the mystery of the great stone, say that it is related to the sins of people: on the one hand, the great stone hides God from us, and on the other hand, thanks to their faith, the myrrh-bearing women find the stone rolled away, because they are full of courage and full of hope that they will find a solution. The Holy Evangelist Mark tells us that seeing this reality and being informed of what happened by the angel, "they were seized with fear and amazement, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16, 8). Metropolitan Bartholomew Ananias explains this attitude, and especially the fact that they were afraid to tell anyone about the joy of the Lord's Resurrection, by the fact that no one believed in the Resurrection - neither the Apostles nor these women - except that in the case of the women they did not abandon Him, neither in life nor in death. "God reveals Himself first to those who seek Him", the metropolitan observed⁹.

The holy women, from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, were a minimum of six and a maximum of ten. Certainly, however, the number of women who followed the Savior to absorb His teaching was greater. The widow of Nain, the Canaanite woman and her daughter, the daughter of Jairus, the hunchbacked woman, the sinner who was about to be stoned to death, the Samaritan woman or the one who cried out with a loud voice: "Blessed is the womb that bore you" (Luke 11,

⁹ † Valeriu ANANIA, *Cartea deschisă a Împărăției. De la Betleemul Nașterii la Ierusalimul Învierii*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2011, p. 365.

27). Perhaps there were other women, because the Lord Jesus performed many other miracles, he filled them with blessings, and for the women of that time the greatest miracle that the Savior performed was the restoration of normality in an era of masculinity. He listened to them, talked to them, overcoming the stereotypes imposed by society, he healed them, forgave them, blessed them!

IV. The road to eternal life, a path of saving encounters – the crooked woman as a paradigm of the restoration of man

The Holy Evangelist Luke (13, 10-17) tells us the moment of the encounter between the Savior Jesus Christ and the crooked woman in the Temple. This woman “had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years, and was bent over, so that she could not lift herself up at all”.

The reason for the woman’s crookedness “was connected with the work of the evil one” (“Satan bound her” - Luke 13, 16), having “a spirit of infirmity”. Let us note that this case is described only by the Holy Evangelist Luke, who was a physician, and who - as we also notice from the description of other sick people (Luke 4, 40: “...all who had people sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on each one of them and healed them”; Luke 5, 12.13: “At that time, while Jesus was in one of the cities, behold, a man full of leprosy, seeing Jesus, fell on his face and begged Him, saying, Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean”! And He stretched out His hand and touched the leper, saying: “I am willing; be cleansed”! And immediately the leprosy left him”; Luke 6, 6-11: “On another Sabbath, it happened that Jesus entered the synagogue and was teaching. There was a man whose right hand was withered. The scribes and Pharisees watched Jesus closely to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. But he knew their thoughts and said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and stand in the middle”! He got up and stood. And Jesus said to them: “I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? To save a life or to destroy it”? Then he looked around at them all and said to the man: “Stretch out

your hand”. And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as sound as the other”) -, does not in any way reduce all illnesses to spirits¹⁰.

However, the crippled woman did not despair and, although she was sick, did not neglect the synagogue. Here is the encounter of the woman with the Savior. In the case of the crippled woman, calling her, He laid His hands on her and said to her: “Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity” (Luke 13, 12). This first stage of the healing of this tormented woman is, in fact, a command¹¹. Immediately, we have a second stage of the healing of the woman by the Savior Jesus Christ: “And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight” (Luke 13, 13). By laying his hands on her, Jesus takes the second step towards restoring the biological aspect of the woman, who was made straight immediately. “If by word Jesus specifies what is happening inside the sick woman, where were the bonds of the spirit that he broke, by laying on his hands, He shows his divine power through which he acts, healing the woman’s body”¹².

In the case of the first stage of the woman’s healing, we are told that the woman is “loosed” from her physical infirmity. We notice that the same verb is used in the context of the remembrance of this miracle when Jesus rebukes him for being accused of having healed on the Sabbath, because: “Hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the manger and lead it away to water”? (Luke 13, 15)

This healed woman is the face of each of us because Saint Theophylact of Bulgaria (who lived in the 14th century) says in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, thinking that this stooping that the Gospel speaks of is not only a stooping of the body, but can also be a stooping of the soul: “But understand this miracle also for the inner man. For the soul is «stooped» when it is bent only to earthly concerns and does not aspire to anything heavenly or divine”¹³. In other words, we can stand upright with the body, but it is very likely that our soul, our mind, cannot be directed towards

¹⁰ Gerhard MAIER, *Comentariu după Luca*, vol. 4-5, transl. Dorina Schinteie, Editura Lumina Lumii, Arad, România, 2013, p. 598.

¹¹ Silviu Ioan NEGRUȚIU, *Minunile săvârșite de Iisus Hristos – o perspectivă exegetică și sacramentală*, Editura University Press, Târgu Mureș, 2012, p. 131.

¹² Silviu Ioan NEGRUȚIU, *Minunile săvârșite de Iisus Hristos*, p. 132.

¹³ TEOFILACT, Arhiepiscopul Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Luca*, Editura Sophia, București, 2007, p. 191.

heaven and not have an encounter with heaven. We know that this woman came to church; if she had not in church, she might not have had any chance of being healed. She came to church even though she was so sick. Often, when we receive suffering, we question God and refuse communion with Him. However, this 18-year-old woman bore the trial she had received with great, strong, and committed faith, with deep humility, and with long patience because she was not born like this and did not turn away. The Savior heals her; we also know cases when some call on God's help in suffering and do not receive healing. God's attitude in such cases remains a mystery. His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel says eloquently in this regard:

“Sometimes, He does not respond when called, and sometimes He calls us when we do not expect it. In any case, continues the aforementioned author, He loves all of us, even if He does not think like all people, but divinely, that is, above ordinary human thinking”¹⁴.

V. A stranger as a beneficiary of authentic faith and healing in the midst of a world dominated by religious formalism

The Holy Evangelist Matthew (15, 21-28) recounts the Savior's encounter with the Canaanite woman, recalling the moment when Christ healed her daughter, who was suffering, in a region known as “the parts of Tyre and Sidon” - territories located in present-day Lebanon. At that time, these places were perceived as belonging to the pagan world, being viewed with suspicion and contempt by the Jewish people. Through their pagan character and their alienation from God, these cities can be compared - morally and spiritually - to Sodom and Gomorrah, mentioned in the Old Testament as symbols of decadence and corruption, therefore areas “similar in decadence and moral depravity”¹⁵.

¹⁴ † DANIEL, Patriarhul B.O.R., *Evangelhia slavei lui Hristos. Predici la Duminicile de peste an*, Editura Basilica, București, 2016, p. 306.

¹⁵ Marius CIOBOTĂ, *Taina Evangheliei, Scurte glose duminicale*, Editura Spandugino, București, 2021, p. 207.

V.1. Faith and prayer – the dialogue of life with God

The Gospel passage tells us how, through “great faith”, we can receive the right answer to our prayers. True faith means relying on realities that cannot be explained or seen—such as the conviction that God listens to our prayers, even if He does not always answer when we want or in the way we would expect.

Metropolitan Anthony of Souroj describes in depth the mystery of the prayer of a person in suffering: “When we find ourselves in difficulties, in suffering...the Holy Spirit prays within us, attributing another dimension to our human suffering, to our human cries”¹⁶. Only by engaging in prayer and overcoming the formalism of its external meaning do we learn to penetrate beyond words, with the eyes of the soul fully open, like a child who looks with amazement at something, even if he has seen it before. Thus, we too say or hear the same prayer, but with an ever-new freshness. Prayer is not a simple monologue, but a living and personal dialogue with God, in which man does not express himself only to be heard, but to be listened to. He, who was created as a dialogue partner of God, seeks communion with his Creator.

From the midst of the crowd, a woman approaches Him, burdened by the pain of her daughter, crying out: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is grievously tormented by a devil” (Matthew 15, 22).

This Syro-Phoenician woman, although pagan, seems familiar with the Jewish religious tradition, since she addresses Jesus using the title “Son of David” – a messianic title also used by the blind man of Jericho (Luke 18, 38). What is striking in this first and fundamental request is not only the woman’s perseverance, but also the fact that she does not ask the Lord to have mercy on her daughter, but on herself. This profound identification with her daughter’s suffering highlights the pain of a mother who, faced with the child’s helplessness, feels in her own body and soul the evil that torments her daughter.

¹⁶ †ANTONIE DE SUROJ, *Ești creștin sau doar bisericos? Cuvântări despre trăirea autentică a credinței*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2020, p. 48.

The Savior's response, however, is apparently surprising: "But he answered her not a word" (Matthew 15, 23). This is the Lord's first reaction in his relationship with this woman. Jesus does here what, in other situations, he did not do: He, the One who had clearly said – "The one who comes to me I will in no way cast out" (John 6, 37) - He, the One who sat at the table with tax collectors and sinners, who entered people's homes to bring them salvation (as in the house of Zacchaeus), is silent at the cry of a grieving mother.

This silence is profoundly significant. Sometimes, in our lives too, God seems to be silent. What do we do when God does not answer? Divine silence is never absence, but can be a pedagogical way of God to test us, to deepen our prayer and faith. Often, we want an immediate answer, considering - perhaps unconsciously - that God must intervene according to our will. But *His silence can be a test of our steadfastness, patience and trust.*

Silence does not only have forms¹⁷ that can suggest realities and values; silence has a real content and is itself a value. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein develops a true philosophy of silence in his works: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*¹⁸ and *Philosophical Investigations*¹⁹. Wittgenstein argued that silence penetrates where the word no longer has access. Silence proves to be a priority and sovereign over the word because silence encompasses the word and not vice versa. The limit of the word, the density, and the extent of silence impose, in fact, the superiority of silence.

¹⁷ From a pragmatic perspective, pauses of varying lengths may occur within a conversation, both inside a speaker's turn and after its completion. On the one hand, internal pauses (belonging to the speaker) reflect particularities of cognitive or psychological processes and are often associated with specific communicative strategies. On the other hand, pauses between turns - explainable in relation to the rules governing access to the conversational floor - are the only ones designated by some researchers with the generic term "*silences*." According to this criterion, Levinson distinguishes between *gaps*, *lapses*, and *significant or attributable silences* produced by a next-speaker who has been implicitly selected - Stephen LEVINSON, *Pragmatics*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1983, p. 299.

¹⁸ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2001, passim.

¹⁹ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Cercetări filosofice*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2004, passim.

In the essential word-silence relationship, the first idea is that silence represents the void, and the word the full. The impression is hasty and deceptive, and this is because words and speech belong to this world (the temporary earthly creation), as means of communication. Experience shows us that words can often be empty, and silences can be not only full, but can even surpass the fullest words²⁰.

In Orthodox spirituality, silence represents a peak of prayer. Saint Isaac the Syrian says in this regard: “The truly humble in mind, when he approaches prayer, does not dare to ask God for anything, or to believe that he is worthy of it, or to ask for anything, or to know what he should pray for; but he is silent with all his thoughts, waiting for mercy”²¹. This practice of *inner silence* during prayer was developed by the Hesychast monks.

Theology never conceives the word without silence, but rather as constituting a two-dimensional reality, in which each presupposes, contains, and enhances the other. They are so mutually determining that they seem to be of equal value. In Ecclesiastes (3, 7), we are told: “...a time to be silent and a time to speak”; we find the same truth in patristic thinking, that of the balance between word and silence: “He who speaks for God does good, and he who remains silent for God, likewise”. However, the Holy Fathers appreciate that the “time of silence” is higher than the “time of speech”, Saint Gregory of Nyssa saying in this sense:

“That is why, when one speaks about God and asks what His being consists of, then it is «a time to be silent»; on the other hand, when it comes to some holy work, the knowledge of which descends even to us, it is «a time to speak» and to use speech, about its powers, to proclaim its wonders, to recount its deeds”²².

²⁰ George REMETE, *Cunoașterea prin tăcere*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 2004, p. 10.

²¹ ISAAC SIRUL, “Cuvinte despre sfintele nevoițe, Cuvântul V”, in: *Filocalia*, vol. X, Editura Institutului Biblic și Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1981, p. 50.

²² GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Omilia la Ecclesiast. Omilia VII*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 267.

The word silence ratio is determined both by the spiritual level of each person and by the relationship with others. If in relation to oneself, silence expresses the higher spiritual level; on the other hand, in relation to the world, it is imposed, especially when the “unseen war” is being waged inside, the one with oneself. Similarly, if in relation to oneself the word seems to express a descent from mystical heights, on the other hand, in relation to one’s fellow human beings, it must be based on maturity²³. Theology experienced through the word is a condescension, an economy, a descent to meet and benefit simple human understanding. “The Mother of God did not put her thoughts in writing, nor her love for God and her Son, nor the pains of her soul at the moment of the Crucifixion, for we could not possibly understand them”²⁴, says Saint Silouan the Athonite.

Silence is therefore not a problem of sonority, but one of inner balance and peace of mind. *On a spiritual level, silence is experienced in prayer.* Prayer is a work of the soul, of the immortal part of us; it is thinking, raising the mind and heart to God.

We would naturally have expected this woman to withdraw after the initial silence of the Lord Jesus. The apparent refusal, expressed by the lack of any response, could be interpreted as a lack of interest in her suffering. In such a context, many emphasizes the exclusion of the woman from the horizon of Christ’s messianic mission: “I am not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15, 24).

This statement, consciously uttered by the Savior, is not the expression of an absolute rejection but constitutes a new level of trial, a test of perseverance and humility. The woman, although faced with a new barrier, does not withdraw, does not protest, does not enter into a polemical dialogue. She approaches with respect and decency, no longer shouts, but bows down and says simply, but with all the strength of her soul: “Lord, help me!” (Matthew 15, 25)

This prayer, with an almost childlike simplicity, reveals an unconditional faith, a heart that does not ask for rights but awaits the gift. Her perseverance is not annoying; it is not unseemly pressure, but is proof

²³ George REMETE, *Cunoașterea prin tăcere*, p. 582.

²⁴ SILUAN ATHONITUL, *Între iadul deznădejdiei și iadul smereniei*, transl. Rafail Noica, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1994, p. 156.

of a deep faith, of a suffering that is expressed nobly. In opposition to the father of the lunatic child who says, “If you can do anything, help us...” (Mark 9, 22), the Canaanite woman does not introduce any condition into her prayer. In this, she resembles the leper who, falling at Jesus’ feet, says: “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean” (Luke 5, 12) - a formulation that contains both complete trust in the power of Christ and complete submission to His will.

We also remember the example of the Holy Apostle Paul, who, faced with profound personal suffering - which he attributes to a “messenger of Satan” - confesses: “I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And he said to me: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12, 8.9). Accepting weakness thus becomes a path of grace, and suffering a space for the manifestation of divine power.

In light of these examples, we understand that true prayer is not always a loud cry, but can be a humble worship, a simple invocation uttered with all our being: “Lord, help me”! Faith is not measured in momentary emotion, but in the steadfastness with which we remain in expectation, even when heaven seems silent. And true spiritual maturity begins where we stop asking for what we want and begin to receive what God knows is good for us. This is what Anthony Doerr also describes through the main character of his work, *All the Light We Cannot See*, Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a being who became blind, lost her parents during World War II, and who manages to live her life this way, and who says suggestively at one point: “When I became blind, people said I was brave. When my father left (n.n. he was taken to an extermination camp where he died), people said I was brave. But it’s not about courage here - I have no choice. I wake up and live my life”²⁵. Anthony Doerr’s novel explores, through the fate of Marie-Laure LeBlanc, the mystery of the inner light that manifests itself in the midst of historical, physical, and spiritual darkness. Although Marie-Laure is blind and an orphan during World War II, she becomes an icon of hope, resilience, and a life lived with dignity, without rebellion, without victimization. Her words – “It’s not about courage here – I have no

²⁵ Anthony DOERR, *Toată lumina pe care nu o putem vedea*, transl. Iulia Gorzo, Editura Humanitas, București, 2019, p. 402.

choice. I wake up and live my life” – expresses a profound acceptance of reality, reminiscent of the humble prayer of the Canaanite woman: “Lord, help me”! (*Matthew 15, 25*). Both female figures refuse to be defeated by suffering, choosing an active faith that does not ask for explanations, but lives in the silence of God.

Marie-Laure does not see with her eyes, but sees with her heart. She lives in darkness, but she keeps in her soul a light that cannot be extinguished – a light of grace, which does not impose itself, but offers itself in the mystery of suffering. This light is what theology calls “uncreated light”, which is not perceived sensorially but is received through faith. In this sense, the novel becomes a modern parable about the power of God that is perfected in weakness (2 Corinthians 12, 9). Marie-Laure is not the classic heroine, but a witness to a spiritual maturation that is born of deprivation, of loss, of silence. She does not ask for miracles, but lives faithfully in the moment, transforming suffering into a space of revelation.

I would say, in a theological climate, that the message of this novel is that the light that we cannot see is the light of grace, which shines in the souls of those who do not rebel but trust. It is the light of faith that does not demand proof, but worships. It is the light that does not impose itself, but is received in silence, in suffering, in prayer.

It must be emphasized, however, that perseverance, if not supported by authentic faith, can degenerate into a form of indiscriminate insistence, even emotional restlessness or uncontrolled agitation. Likewise, a faith lacking perseverance risks slipping into a comfortable passivity, into a spiritual apathy that weakens the living tension of the relationship with God. The true balance lies in the interweaving of living faith with pious perseverance.

The Canaanite woman offers us an exemplary image of this balance: her profound faith is expressed through a discreet but firm perseverance, unconquered by silence, refusal, or obstacles. She does not ask for anything for herself, but fights, with her whole being, for the suffering of her child. Her prayer thus becomes the expression of sacrificial love and unwavering trust.

Persistence in prayer, when we ask for what is good, just, and pure before God, is neither impudence nor distrust, but a testimony of spiritual

maturity. It is proof that we know Whom we are asking and that we understand, with humility and courage, that blessings are often given over time, in the mystery of a divine pedagogy that works in us a deeper faith and a hope that does not deceive.

It is remarkable that the Canaanite woman does not yield to any compromise. She maintains her dignity, accepting the Lord's entire path:

- silence: "But he answered her not a word" (Matthew 15, 23);
- apparent refusal: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15, 24);
- comparison with dogs, a symbol of marginalization: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15, 26).

This pagan woman thus becomes a paradigm of the relationship between faith and will. Not only does Jesus recognize her faith – "great is your faith" - but he also confirms her will: "be it done to you as you wish. It is one of the few occasions in which man's will is not only tolerated by God but explicitly blessed.

- *faith* (the pagan stranger never doubts, does not get angry, and does not give in to the temptations of dialogue);
- *courage* (to claim, even to cry out in a pagan land for healing);
- *patience and perseverance*;
- *courtesy, politeness and elegance* (she worships the Lord, throws herself at His feet, says: *Lord, help me*);
- *humility* (she recognizes herself as no less unworthy of the Lord's mercy than a poor animal, the dog, considered even defiled by the oriental peoples);
- *intelligence* (accepting the crumbs by which she is convinced that her daughter will be healed)²⁶.

In fact, the Canaanite woman becomes a historical example of the relationship between faith and will because to this woman, the Savior no longer says: "your faith has saved you"! or "be it unto you according to your faith"!, but receives much more: "be it unto you as you will"! This fulfillment of the will is the result of very great faith²⁷.

²⁶ Cf. Nicolae STEINHARDT, *Dăruind vei dobândi*, Editura Mănăstirii Rohia, Rohia, 2006, pp. 47-49.

²⁷ Cf. Dan SANDU, *Eseuri pentru o dogmatică evanghelică. Dimensiunea modernă a hristologiei*, Editura Performantica, Iași, 2011, p. 265.

VI. Conclusions

In a world marked by identity confusion, social pressures, and redefinitions of femininity, the Mother of God remains a benchmark of balance, dignity, and holiness. She is not only a moral model, but a living presence, accompanying women in all stages of life: as daughter, mother, wife, prayerful, and servant.

The contemporary woman, in search of meaning and fulfillment, can find in the Mother of God not only an ideal, but a path: the path of gentleness, purity, sacrifice, and communion with God. In a society that often values the exterior, the Mother of God teaches us that true beauty is the beauty of the soul.

The Gospels are full of testimonies about the dignity of women in the eyes of Christ. No woman who asked for her help was ignored. He raises the son of the widow of Nain, heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman, frees the crippled woman, calms the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, raises Jairus' daughter, and heals the woman with the issue of blood. At Jacob's well, he speaks to a Samaritan woman about "living water", revealing to her the secret of salvation.

The myrrh-bearing women are the first witnesses of the Resurrection, and their courage and fidelity are testimonies of steadfast and sacrificial love. They embody the feminine soul in its highest form: love, devotion, faith, and self-giving.