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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

FOOLS AND FOOLISHNESS FOR CHRIST.
AGHIOGRAPHY AND AGHIOFANY IN ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

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SUMMARY

The theme *of folly for Christ* occupies a unique place in Orthodox spirituality due to its paradoxical and scandalous, yet deeply theological nature. Although seemingly marginal and inconsistent with the balanced spirit of the Orthodox ethos, this ascetic and prophetic way of life expresses one of the most vivid reactions of the Church to the moral, social and ecclesial crises of different historical periods. *The hagiography* of the fools for Christ involves not only a discursive analysis, a research approach to sources or the evaluation of historical data, but also a theological vision of the phenomenon itself, a dimension that opens up to *the aghiofania* of the fools for Christ, as a charismatic and revelatory discovery of their work. Moreover, in Orthodox theology, *hagiography* (the dimension of knowledge of the lives of saints) also contains *hagiography* (the manifestation of their holiness), the terminological distinction remaining more at the discursive level than at the ontological and theological level, a good knowledge of the life and work of the fools for Christ also having the revealing dimension of their presence (at once grace-filled and enigmatic) in the life of the Church.

The practice of folly for Christ has provoked different reactions both socially and within the church and theological thinking. Approached with great reserve because of its disturbing and indecent nature, considered by some theologians to be foreign to the Christian spirit, provocative and uncomfortable both for a desacralised and secularised society, which is content with formal religious discourse without undergoing ontological transformation, as well as for the ecclesial space sometimes lacking the fervour of authentic Christian confession, folly for Christ is nevertheless a dimension of Orthodox spirituality assumed by the Church through the canonisation of fools for Christ and their integration into the synaxarion and the liturgical cycle.

Foolishness for Christ has been recognised by the Church as a form of asceticism, with a strong social and ecclesial dimension, for those who have a specific vocation and a precise calling from God. The Synaxarion of the Church includes the lives of saints who were mad for Christ, from the Byzantine period to modern times. The reserved attitude that we sometimes encounter in theological discourse towards those who are mad for Christ is caused, on the one hand, by the complexity and peculiar nature of this phenomenon, often considered irrational and insane, and on the other hand by the pseudo-foolishness for Christ that developed in the shadow of the authentic one and required a reaction from the Church, including synodal and canonical. This will be one of the main objectives of the research, to separate the authentic from the false in the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ, and to show that the purpose of the madmen for Christ was to scandalise in order to awaken consciences, while hiding their holiness

under the guise of simulated foolishness, keeping as a warning the words of Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, who emphasised that it takes a lot of grace and spiritual discernment to recognise a truly¹ madman for Christ. Considering that Father Dumitru Stăniloae, synthesising patristic thought, distinguished true holiness from false holiness through three fundamental elements: integrity of faith, the garment of humility, and the work of dispassion², it is imperative to carry out a theological evaluation of this spiritual practice, which in certain historical periods and spiritual contexts has developed into a veritable phenomenon.

Motivation and choice of topic

The choice of this theme for the current research stems from the desire to conduct a comprehensive study on this particular ascetic practice in Orthodox spirituality, given that no such research has been carried out in Romanian theology. In fact, the theme of folly for Christ is rarely addressed in our theological writings, and when it is, this phenomenon is viewed either exclusively from a hagiographic methodological point of view or strictly from a historical or comparative-religious perspective. I also believe that the theme is particularly relevant for defining Orthodox spirituality, as the message of the madmen for Christ is an exhortation to live the Christian life authentically in any era or historical, social or spiritual context. Personal motivation also plays an important role in the choice of topic, my affinity for such a challenging and complex topic being determined by my personal readings of the lives of these ascetics for Christ, and amplified by the spiritual attachment felt towards some of the fools for Christ, one of whom (Romanian, contemporary, uncanonised) has worked openly and beneficially in my life.

The object and premises of the research

This study aims to provide a systematic theological exploration with interdisciplinary implications of this phenomenon, based on the hagiographic corpus and research into the historical and spiritual context, taking into account the scriptural and patristic foundations.

Based on the symbolic value of the Old Testament prophetic vocation and on the evangelical dimension of the folly of the cross and preaching, later valued and expressed theologically in patristic thought, folly for Christ has manifested itself throughout its history in two distinct but complementary forms. The first of these, known as *the quiet form*, was practised

¹ † Hierotheos, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Person in Orthodox Tradition*, trans. by Paul Bălan, Bunavestire Publishing House, Bacău, 2002, p. 323.

² See Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe (Asceticism and Mysticism in the Orthodox Church)*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2002, pp. 5-6; Dumitru Stăniloae, "Forms and Causes of False Mysticism," in *Theological Studies*, Series II, Year IV (1952), no. 5-6, pp. 251-272.

mainly in the monastic environment, being assumed as an extreme way of acquiring humility. In this case, madness was hidden from the eyes of the world, being oriented towards inner perfection and the cultivation of perfect humility. The second form, much more visible and frequently encountered, is *the provocative form*, characterised by an active and often scandalous presence in the public sphere.

The historical evolution of foolishness for Christ has its origins, initially quite fragile and isolated, in Egyptian monasticism through Saint Isidora (4th century, Tabenisi, Egypt), later taking shape in Byzantine spirituality as a distinct ascetic practice, first in the Syrian parts of the empire through Saint Simeon the Fool for Christ (6th century, Emessa, Syria), and later in the Constantinopolitan environment through Saint Andrew the Fool for Christ (10th century, Constantinople), the Byzantine fool for Christ being called *salós*, and his asceticism *salia*. From there, the tradition spread to Russian spirituality, where, starting in the 15th-16th centuries (through the Reverend Michael Klopsko, Saint Nicholas Salos, Saint Basil the Blessed, and others), it underwent a remarkable development, becoming a true phenomenon in Russian society, both in terms of the number of fools for Christ and their recognition by the Church. A particular challenge for the ecclesiastical world was the appearance and manifestation of false fools for Christ, who parasitised the meaning of this asceticism and distorted it. In Russia, the fool for Christ is called *iurodivii* and the phenomenon itself *iurodtsvo*. Manifestations of this form of asceticism have also been attested in Athonite monasticism, paradoxically linked to the practice of hesychasm, as well as in Greek and Georgian traditions, continuing in some cases into the contemporary era. In Romanian spirituality, although to a lesser extent, expressions of this asceticism can also be identified, confirming its universal character within Orthodoxy.

The main premises from which the research started and which were mostly verified after studying hagiographic sources and theological works (but not only) are the following:

- a) The fools for Christ began their spiritual mission only after receiving a call from God and attaining dispassion.
- b) Their folly was simulated, as inwardly they were perfectly rational and aware of their role in the Church and in the world.
- c) The fools for Christ, even though they retained a great deal of freedom of external and internal expression, were integrated into the life of the Church and based their teachings (lived and spoken, rarely written) on the truth of faith.

- d) Foolishness for Christ emerged and developed in a specific historical and theological context, as a reaction to the desacralisation of social life, in periods when Christianity was no longer manifested in a striking way through martyrdom.
- e) Foolishness for Christ manifested itself as a reaction to the formalism and lack of vitality of church life, with them first fulfilling and then demanding from those around them complete dedication to the service of Christ.

Purpose and originality

The research is based on an extensive corpus of primary sources (lives of saints, synaxaria, patristic works) and secondary sources (historical and theological studies, interdisciplinary works), but also on sources from the specialised literature in related fields, with particular reference to the chapter on the historical, medical, philosophical and cultural meaning of the concept of foolishness. In this regard, applied treatises in medicine, psychology, philosophy, and cultural history, as well as specialised dictionaries, were used. With this foundation, the research fulfils several *fundamental objectives*:

- a) To construct an overview of foolishness for Christ through a thorough examination of hagiographic, historical, and theological sources in the Orthodox tradition;
- b) To investigate how this asceticism manifested itself in different historical and spiritual contexts, such as the Byzantine world, the Russian tradition, and the Athonite, Greek, Georgian and Romanian spaces;
- c) Drawing parallels between the folly for Christ in the patristic period and its modern or contemporary forms, in order to capture elements of continuity and transformation;
- d) Formulating a coherent theological framework to ground this way of life as a legitimate expression of holiness and a prophetic response to spiritual crises;
- e) A critical and phenomenological analysis of the criteria of authenticity of foolishness for Christ, with a view to clearly distinguishing it from false, pathological or deviant forms;
- f) Moving beyond a strictly historical-hagiographical approach in favour of a profound theological understanding that brings to light the spiritual meanings of this asceticism in relation to the Orthodox ethos.

The original contribution made in this research can be summarised in the following points:

- a) It is the first comprehensive and systematic study in Romanian theology devoted exclusively to the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ in the Orthodox world;
- b) It proposes, without claiming to be exhaustive, a clear and rigorous typology of foolishness for Christ, a set of criteria for validating asceticism, by distinguishing authentic forms from false or pathological ones;
- c) It analyses comparatively, based on primary and secondary sources, the manifestations of this phenomenon in the Byzantine world, in the Russian tradition, in the Athonite or Greek space, in Georgian and Romanian spirituality;
- d) The research contains, in a dedicated chapter, the first analysis of the manifestation of foolishness for Christ in Romanian spirituality, with a comparative view of other Orthodox spiritual areas;
- e) It brings to attention the lives of contemporary madmen for Christ, who are not yet fully integrated into theological discourse; it records important testimonies, collected personally, of the manifestation of foolishness for Christ in the Romanian space;
- f) It provides a theological analysis, in a separate chapter, of this phenomenon, focusing on the main aspects: criteria of authenticity, ecclesial and social dimensions, and the manifestation of charisms as an expression of the work of grace in the lives of these ascetics.

Structure and content

In terms of *the structure of the work*, we note that it consists of seven chapters, preceded by a prologue and followed by conclusions, with an appendix containing a calendar of the holy fools for Christ. The chapters of the work are structured in a logical, progressive and thematic order, so as to support and argue the hypotheses formulated in the introduction and to verify the validity of the premises from which this research started.

The introduction briefly presents the motivation for choosing the topic, the premises from which the research starts, the objectives it sets, and the structure of the work. It summarises the theory and methodology used, highlighting both the original contribution that this research brings and the state of research in the field.

The prologue introduces the reader to the topic of the paper and outlines the conceptual and methodological frameworks of the research. It presents the theological meaning of hagiography in Orthodox spirituality, which, without distancing itself from historical and

scientific data, goes beyond simple biographical narrative and reveals its profound character of theological knowledge. Here, the difficulties of studying the hagiography of the fools for Christ are presented, as well as the importance of approaching them from a perspective that combines scientific analysis with spiritual understanding, avoiding as much as possible both the ahistorical rhetoric of pietistic pseudo-hagiography and the metamorphosis of hagiography into a rationalist discourse devoid of the ontological dimension of grace.

Chapter I, entitled **Incursion into the conceptual history of madness**, analyses the concept of madness from its meanings in ancient philosophy and medicine to its medieval connotations and secularising modernity. The historical and cultural evolution of the concept of madness starts from an analysis of the phenomenon and terminology in ancient philosophy and medicine, then attempts a realistic view of the medieval attitude towards the phenomenon and concept of madness, in a broad and diverse conception, from *the ships of fools* in the West to *the well-known xenones* in Byzantium, and then moves on, through *the famous eulogy of madness*, to modern pathologisation.

Chapter II, entitled **Biblical Foundations and Patristic Reception of Foolishness for Christ**, proposes a possible scriptural foundation for this asceticism as well as the way in which it was received in the tradition of the Church. The Pauline themes of the folly of the cross, prophecy, humility and the saving paradox are explored, and then the main interpretations of the Church Fathers on this way of life are analysed. Attention is drawn to the conceptualisation of folly in the light of Scripture, both in the Old Testament sense of folly as opposed to wisdom or folly as a form of unbelief, as well as in the sense of prophetic vocation, and especially in the New Testament sense of the folly of preaching or the folly of the Cross, as the scriptural foundation of the phenomenon of folly for Christ. It then takes a look at the patristic reception of this asceticism, mentioning the monastic form of folly for Christ, practised with the aim of acquiring humility, analysing in antithesis or similarity the cynic and the fool for Christ, or the stylite and the fool for Christ.

Chapter III, entitled **Foolishness for Christ in Byzantine Spirituality**, deals with the emergence and development of the phenomenon in the Byzantine space. It analyses the concept of *salós* (Greek σαλός) and *salia*, which have become established as the classical terminology for defining the madman and foolishness for Christ. It presents the causes and methods of practising foolishness for Christ in Byzantine spirituality, the main stages of its manifestation (the Syrian stage of the 6th century and the Constantinopolitan stage of the 10th century), and its specificity in the Byzantine world. Although an hagiographic journey is made through

Byzantine madmen for Christ, the phenomenological analysis of *the Byzantine hall* is based mainly on the theological evaluation of the lives of the three madmen for Christ representative of Byzantine spirituality: Saint Simeon the Madman for Christ (Emessa of Syria, 6th century), Saint Andrew Salos (Constantinople, 10th century), Saint Basil the New (Constantinople, 10th century). For each of them, the hagiographic sources of their lives are mentioned and evaluated, their relationship to this asceticism is analysed, as well as its reception by the Church and Byzantine society, the specificity of personal asceticism and its significant ecclesial and social role. The chapter concludes with possible parallels and (paradoxical) convergences between *salós* and mystical theology in Byzantine spirituality, argued historically and theologically.

Chapter IV, entitled Foolishness for Christ in the Russian-influenced tradition, explores the further development of the phenomenon in the Russian tradition, where it takes on unprecedented proportions, becoming a true phenomenon. It will be emphasised that from Byzantium, folly for Christ passed into the Russian sphere of influence, with the Russians borrowing from the Greeks the various forms of asceticism specific to Orthodox spirituality, including the extreme ones. The terms *iurodivîi* and *blajenîi*, which define madmen for Christ in this area, are defined in the Russian cultural and spiritual context. Three major periods can be distinguished: *the early phase*, from the 11th to the 15th century, when the fools for Christ appeared mainly in the Pecerska and Novgorod areas, represented by the Venerable Isachie of Pecerska or the Venerable Procopie of Ustiug; a *middle phase*, in which the phenomenon developed significantly, especially in the Moscow and Pskov areas, culminating in the 16th century, when Christ-fools became a real phenomenon and when false Christ-fools began to appear, a period in which Russian *iurodivîi* such as Saint Nicholas Salos or Saint Basil the Blessed represented true spiritual and social landmarks; a *modern phase* of Russian society, after the reforms of Peter the Great, which brought about a decline in the momentum of this phenomenon, but which nevertheless continued, in isolation, until contemporary times, from Saint Theophilus of Kitaev or Saint Xenia of Saint Petersburg to Saint Gabriel the Georgian. Each stage is illustrated with concrete examples of holy fools for Christ, whose lives are presented and analysed not only from an hagiographic but also from a theological perspective, analysing in each case their specificity and characteristics in relation to the Byzantine fools for Christ or those from other historical periods. The chapter highlights the prophetic and social dimension of the Russian *iurodivîi*, who not only rebuke sins, but also have a significant social and ecclesiastical role. It analyses how the Byzantine hagiographic paradigm of *salós* is

respected by the Russian iurodivî, how the tsarist power and the Church related to the phenomenon of iurodstvo, as well as the image of the Russian iurodivî in the eyes of foreigners.

Chapter V, entitled **Foolishness for Christ in the Athonite and Greek worlds**, focuses on manifestations from the Athonite Hesychast period and the Greek world, up to the present day. It highlights the quiet forms of foolishness for Christ, integrated into the Hesychast tradition, but also contemporary cases of eccentric holiness. The manifestation of the phenomenon in the Hellenic world after the fall of Byzantium is explored, when historical conditions led to its diminution and differentiation from the Byzantine period, not only semantically, through the new concept of *salotes*, but especially structurally and symbolically. However, mad saints for Christ are mentioned during the Athonite Hesychast period, such as Saint Sava Vatopedinul and Saint Maxim Cavesoclivitul, who integrated foolishness for Christ into the asceticism of humility. In the modern era, the phenomenon revives in milder, local forms, illustrated by ascetics such as Saint Sophia of Klesouria, Tarso or Steliana Mitsakidou. The chapter shows the discreet but profound character of foolishness for Christ in Greek spirituality.

Chapter VI, entitled **Foolishness for Christ in Romanian Spirituality**, is an original contribution of the work, both in terms of the reception and experience of foolishness for Christ, bringing to attention a theme that has been little explored in previous research: the existence and reception of foolishness for Christ in the Romanian space. Although it did not develop spectacularly, the phenomenon was also present in our country, emphasising the fact that, unlike the Byzantine and Russian spaces, Romanian spirituality showed a natural inclination towards balance and moderation, which meant that extreme asceticism, such as foolishness for Christ, did not gain significant momentum. A rigorous analysis is made of the spread of manuscripts with the lives of madmen for Christ in the Romanian space, and memorable literary figures are highlighted, such as Creangă's priest Duhu or Lumânărică from Negruzzi's stories, which could constitute hagiographic pages given the proven historicity of the characters. Examples of Romanian madmen for Christ are analysed, from the monk Gherasim from the Neamţ Mountains, Irodion, the Romanian ascetic from Athos, to Mother Antonina from Tismana or the "Pious" Gherontie the Madman for Christ in contemporary times. Finally, the way in which the phenomenon and terminology of foolishness for Christ were received in Romanian spirituality is discussed. Among the points of view mentioned will be that of Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, who, analysing the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ, considers Romanian Christianity to be unsuitable for such asceticism, but nevertheless mentions madmen

for Christ in Romanian spirituality, evaluating this asceticism positively when it is authentic. Also, that of researcher Cătălina Velculescu, who, studying the manuscripts of the translations of the Life of Saint Andrew the Fool for Christ into Romanian, considers that in Romanian spirituality, the old Byzantine *salós* was taken over and processed into the pious, wise and charismatic. The last part of the chapter deals with how this phenomenon has been perceived, evaluated and rediscovered in the modern and contemporary era. While in the past manifestations of folly for Christ were met with caution or even restraint, in recent decades the example of the "Pious" Gherontie and the numerous testimonies of his charismatic work have contributed to a reconsideration of this phenomenon in the Romanian ecclesial and theological mindset. Currently, a more open view is emerging, which recognises the special role of the fools for Christ as witnesses of divine love and as spiritual provocateurs of consciences.

Chapter VII, entitled The Theological Dimension of Foolishness for Christ. Fundamental Features and Phenomenological Evaluation, constitutes the theological synthesis of the research. In this final chapter of the work, attention is directed towards understanding the theological reasons for the existence of fools for Christ, towards the criteria for recognising the authenticity of their vocation and towards the impact they have on the life of the Church, defining the fool for Christ as a Christocentric dimension manifesting itself as a reaction to the desacralisation of social life and as a reaction to the relativism of ecclesial life, achieving the renewal of the Church in the world and of the world in the Church through the charismatic manifestation of the holiness of their lives.

The conclusions set out the fundamental ideas of the research, the way in which the premises from which we started were verified, highlight the novelties that the present research brings to Romanian theological study and the aspects that cannot yet be clarified. New directions for research are proposed and the relevance of the topic for the contemporary world is highlighted. The work concludes with an **appendix** containing a calendar of the holy fools for Christ in Orthodox spirituality, as they appear in the synaxaries of the canonical Churches, followed by the bibliography used and consulted during the research.

Limitations and difficulties of the research

Beyond the premises established and verified through source research and phenomenological analysis, there are several aspects of the topic that remain under analysis from a theological evaluation perspective, thus defining certain *limitations and difficulties* that the research on the topic of folly for Christ raises:

- a) It is quite difficult to express a theological position on this phenomenon, maintaining a balance between hagiographic criticism with marked demythologising tendencies that impoverish the text of its spiritual dimension, and, on the other hand, the hyperbolisation of certain hagiographic collections with pronounced pietistic aspects that distort the profound soteriological meaning of this struggle;
- b) There are lives of fools for Christ that do not explicitly contain the moment of divine calling or even of sacred entrustment for this asceticism; there are elements that suggest that in some cases this practice was undertaken by personal decision, in an attempt to imitate the old Byzantine *salos*. In these situations, ecclesial tradition has the role of discernment, often manifested through acceptance or rejection by the fullness of the Church;
- c) Despite some criteria of authenticity of this practice formulated even within this research, expressed in theological principles, at a practical level it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the real and the pathological, between the authentic and the false, between holiness and imposture. Appealing to the spiritual dimension of the ecclesial body is imperative, because only *grace can sense grace*, that is, only the one with grace can recognise the one full of grace, beyond the mask of foolishness, passion or even simulated demonisation.
- d) It is very challenging to express the cultic dimension of the fools for Christ, given that some fools for Christ, especially those from the Byzantine period, did not manifest an active presence in liturgical life, although they imperiously demanded it from others; unlike them, Russian *iurodivîi* are much more anchored in the cultic life of the Church; we notice the same difference between the madmen for Christ of old and those of the contemporary period, with the clarification that the current ones manifest a complete anchoring in liturgical expression;
- e) It is difficult to define the degree of adaptability of those who were mad for Christ to the principles of the society in which they lived, although it is evident that they conformed to a certain extent to social behavioural norms. One example is the manifestation of bodily nakedness, which was present in ancient times but is avoided in contemporary society, where such a manifestation would automatically be classified as either pathological or exhibitionism.

This work aims to analyse the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ in Orthodox spirituality in its multiple dimensions: biblical, patristic, hagiographic, historical and, above all, theological. The approach was intended to be a synthesis between the rigour of academic research and the depth of Orthodox theologisation, between critical analysis of texts and spiritual mystagogy. In this sense, the conclusions summarise the results of the research and the way in which the hypotheses formulated in the introduction were confirmed by the analysis of sources, testimonies and contexts, as well as the limits of this research. The structure of these conclusions also sets possible directions for research on this topic, which is still insufficiently explored in Romanian theology, as well as the integration and specificity of this phenomenon in Orthodox spirituality.

The extensive analysis of the historical and spiritual contexts in which foolishness for Christ manifested itself provided a detailed picture of the universality and adaptability of this way of life. With biblical foundations in the symbolic behaviour of the Old Testament prophets and especially in the foolishness of the Cross and the preaching of Christ Crucified and Risen, this practice, which originated in the Byzantine world, then spread, with its own specificities, to the Russian space, where it became a real phenomenon, then in the Athonite, Greek, Georgian and even Romanian worlds. This spiritual mobility attests to the almost universal character, in Orthodox spirituality, of a struggle that transcends local culture and is rooted in the mysterious reality of the Kingdom of God. In Byzantium, foolishness for Christ represented a providential reaction to the transformation of Christianity into an ideological structure, to the weakening of ascetic rigour, to the desacralisation of social life coupled with ecclesiastical formalism, with the Byzantine *salos* restoring, through self-sacrifice assumed in times of religious freedom, the lost martyrdom. In Russia, the folly for Christ took on a more pronounced social dimension, with the *iurodivîi* becoming defenders of the poor and rebukers of injustice, assuming a role of public conscience, their social and prophetic role being striking. In the Athonite space, the foolishness for Christ was circumscribed to the Hesychast tradition and practice, manifesting itself paradoxically, but not contradictorily, in currents that are formally diametrically opposed as forms of ascetic expression, but which in their spiritual essence pursue the same goal of restoring the image of God in man. Contemporary Greek society confirms the providential dimension of this struggle, which represents the voice of the humble and abandoned in the cosmopolitan solitude of the modern world. Contemporary Georgian echoes redefine the martyr's condition through the courage of the holy fool's confession, and Romanian spirituality reconstructs in the present the two traditional forms of manifestation of holy folly, the

acquisition of humility in the monastic setting and the social and ecclesial dimension in the midst of the world.

Symbolically, the madmen for Christ integrated features of other extreme ascetic practices. Like hermits, they hid their inner mystery under the mask of simulated passions. Like stylites, they led an extremely austere life, deprived of all comforts, often living in conditions of misery, marginalised by the community and exposed to ridicule. However, they went further: they assumed not only contempt and social marginalisation, but a veritable annihilation of conventional human dignity, cultivating perfect humility and sacrificial service to their neighbours.

The essential difference, however, lies in the place and manner of manifestation. Once integrated into the city, where community and church norms were more rigid, their behaviour became a real spiritual scandal. By feigning madness, passion or even demonic possession, but at the same time calling on others to be pure, temperate and sober, they caused not only confusion but also a profound theological dilemma. How could the exhortation of an apparently unbalanced person to a rational and spiritual life be received? How could the rebuke coming from a supposed passionate or possessed person be accepted? These apparent contradictions can only be understood through the lens of grace. Beyond their scandalous behaviour, their contemporaries recognised in the madmen for Christ, even if not from the beginning, clear signs of the divine presence: special charisms that can only be attributed to those united with God. Authentic discernment was achieved by evaluating the fruits of their lives according to evangelical principles. In their case, these were manifested not only in the correction of those who had gone astray, but also in special charismatic manifestations, through gifts such as clairvoyance, prophecy, and the Christic gift of healing.

The research achieved several *fundamental objectives*:

- g) Building an overview of foolishness for Christ through a thorough research of hagiographic, historical, and theological sources in the Orthodox tradition;
- h) Investigating how this asceticism manifested itself in different historical and spiritual contexts, such as the Byzantine world, the Russian tradition, and the Athonite, Greek, Georgian and Romanian spaces;
- i) Drawing parallels between the folly for Christ in the patristic period and its modern or contemporary forms, in order to capture elements of continuity and transformation;

- j) Formulating a coherent theological framework to ground this way of life as a legitimate expression of holiness and a prophetic response to spiritual crises;
- k) A critical and phenomenological analysis of the criteria of authenticity of foolishness for Christ, with a view to clearly distinguishing it from false, pathological or deviant forms;
- l) Moving beyond a strictly historical-hagiographical approach in favour of a profound theological understanding that brings to light the spiritual meanings of this asceticism in relation to the Orthodox ethos.

With regard to the verification *of the research premises* from both a hagiographic perspective and, above all, a theological analysis of the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ, it has been proven that these were largely justified and correct, retaining fundamental aspects such as:

- a) Authentic foolishness for Christ is not an individual ascetic and unconventional option chosen arbitrarily; it is a vocation within the providential framework of God's work in the ecclesial and social body;
- b) This phenomenon is not the expression of a pathological or irrational state, but a unique, supra-rational way of confessing Christian paradoxes; it is not pseudo-spirituality, but working mysticism, manifested in an eccentric and provocative, but propitious way;
- c) Although very critical of the relativism of church life, the fools for Christ are living members of the Body of Christ, without any schismatic tendencies; their witness is based on the truth of faith, even if its expression is not strikingly cultic;
- d) The phenomenon of foolishness for Christ crystallised and underwent significant development in historical-theological contexts marked by social and spiritual crises and the loss of the martyrdom ethos of the early Church. This extreme form of asceticism and prophetic confession appeared as a response to the latent secularisation of the social space and the diminishing ecclesial consciousness in society regarding the Christian's witnessing vocation in the world;
- e) On an ecclesial level, folly for Christ represented a charismatic reaction to cultic formalism and the relativisation of communal spiritual life. The actions of the fools for Christ constituted forms of spiritual protest, based on a radical personal commitment to living the Gospel. They proposed an authentic recovery of ascetic and Eucharistic praxis, not through external contestation, but through their own kenotic state, calling the

community to metanoia only after they themselves had embodied the demands of a life in Christ expressed through a state of dispassion;

As *original contributions*, especially in relation to Romanian theology, the present research brings several important elements:

- g) It is the first comprehensive and systematic study in Romanian theology dedicated exclusively to the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ in the Orthodox space;
- h) It proposes, without claiming to be exhaustive, a clear and rigorous typology of foolishness for Christ, a set of criteria for validating asceticism, by distinguishing authentic forms from false or pathological ones;
- i) It analyses comparatively, based on primary and secondary sources, the manifestations of this phenomenon in the Byzantine world, in the Russian tradition, in the Athonite or Greek space, in Georgian and Romanian spirituality;
- j) The research contains, in a dedicated chapter, the first analysis of the manifestation of foolishness for Christ in Romanian spirituality, with a comparative view of other Orthodox spiritual areas;
- k) It brings to attention the lives of contemporary madmen for Christ, who are not yet fully integrated into theological discourse; it records important testimonies, collected personally, of the manifestation of foolishness for Christ in the Romanian space;
- l) It carries out a theological analysis, in a separate chapter, of this phenomenon, focusing on the main directions: criteria of authenticity, ecclesial and social dimensions, and the manifestation of charisms as an expression of the work of grace in the lives of these ascetics.

The research reveals the need to explore in greater depth certain aspects relevant to the analysis of the phenomenon of foolishness for Christ, which this study has only touched upon tangentially, as well as the possibility of opening up *new avenues of research*:

- a) Exploring the therapeutic dimension of foolishness for Christ in Orthodox anthropology; an approach that would correlate this unconventional form of asceticism with the process of spiritual healing (therapy of passions) within Orthodox theology would be a challenging and timely endeavour;
- b) Study on the relationship between foolishness for Christ and the phenomenon of social exclusion; an analysis that addresses *the issue* from a sociological and theological

perspective: how these saints identified with the outcasts of society and how they spiritually restored them in Christ.

- c) A systematic study of patristic sources and theological thought regarding the authenticity of religious experiences, with examples from the characteristics of foolishness for Christ and their distinction from forms of pseudo-mysticism or demonic deception;
- d) Critical evaluation of literary, iconographic and cultural representations of foolishness for Christ; an interdisciplinary approach combining theology, culture and art would make this endeavour even more complex;
- e) Study of the updating of the message of foolishness for Christ in the contemporary context; to what extent can this challenging asceticism for society still be practised in its classical forms of manifestation and what would be its specificity today; a study applied to the life of a contemporary salos (e.g. Gherontie the madman for Christ in Romania) would be extremely useful.

One of the essential objectives of the research was to highlight *the relevance of the message of the fools for Christ in the contemporary world*. In an age marked by secularisation, moral relativism, individualism and sometimes religious formalism, the call to authenticity, self-denial and sacrificial love has a prophetic relevance. Foolishness for Christ becomes a mirror that exposes the emptiness of a purely external and formalised religiosity, devoid of spiritual experience. Moreover, in today's societies, where spiritual discernment is often weakened and confusion between the pathological and the charismatic is increasing, this work draws attention to the enormous responsibility of the church hierarchy and the ecclesial community to discern authentic vocations and to form an integrative theological dimension on the ideal of holiness. Thus, an implicit call emerges for the spiritual revitalisation of church life through the recovery of the authentic meaning of foolishness for Christ as a prophetic, kenotic, and Christocentric vocation.

In conclusion, we can say that folly for Christ is not a simple act of religious eccentricity, but a radical yet profound form of sacrificial love. Those who are foolish for Christ do not argue, but testify; they do not justify themselves, but sacrifice themselves; they do not convince through reasoning, but through their crucified life, assumed in complete inner freedom. Their life is a challenge to all those who reduce faith to conformism and formalism. By embracing madness, these saints of Christian paradox become witnesses to a love that fears neither the

contempt of the world nor its judgment. In this sense, they follow in the footsteps of the great witnesses of holiness, as personal testimonies of a faith that prefers to be called folly, if by this it can save and transform souls. They become living embodiments of the evangelical paradox: weak but strong, foolish but wise in God, defying the logic of the world to reveal the depth of a spiritual reality that autonomous reason cannot penetrate. It is no coincidence that at the beginning of the 20th century, in the midst of Bolshevik persecution, a Russian confessor, Maxim the Fool, said: "They say I am crazy, but to live according to the Gospel today, you have to be crazy . When I pronounce the name of the Risen Christ, I am intoxicated with joy. I am Maxim the Madman, and I say that without this madness, one cannot receive the kingdom of God." ³

Those who are mad for Christ are radically opposed to the values promoted by the world and its spirit. In a society centred on cultivating self-image, they deliberately choose to degrade their personal appearance, accepting the contempt and misunderstanding of those around them. In a culture of comfort and convenience, they embrace extreme poverty and a profound but active humility as a way of life. In a world obsessed with preserving its own safety and integrity, the fools for Christ sacrifice themselves in the service of others, in an unconditional devotion that has its source in sacrificial love. Foolishness for Christ is a living testimony to freedom in Christ, to the grace that transforms shame into glory, and to humility that becomes a ladder to holiness, revealing the words of the Saviour: "Therefore, by their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). In today's ambiguous and secularised spiritual context, the voice of the fool for Christ remains, paradoxically, one of the clearest calls to authenticity, repentance and real communion with Christ Crucified and Risen, expressing in a profound and symbolic sense the very condition of the contemporary Christian.

³ Irina Goraïnoff, *I pazzi in Cristo nella tradizione ortodossa*, trans. M. Donadio, Editrice Ancora, Milan, 1988, p. 188.

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