

## SUMMARY

### Saint Anthony the Great and the Spirituality of the Desert

This habilitation thesis, consecrated to Saint Anthony the Great (AD 251-356), one of the most remarkable figures of Eastern spirituality, is a synthesis of my own scientific contributions made subsequent to obtaining my PhD in Theology.

More exactly, this work highlights several guidelines, which I have outlined, concerning essential themes of Orthodox spirituality, such as the topic of spiritual guidance in early monasticism, or the issue of spiritual authority in the late Christian Antiquity.

In this context I should mention that the subject of my PhD thesis, which I defended at the “Andrei Şaguna” Orthodox Theology Department of the “Lucian Blaga” University in Sibiu, under the coordination of Fr. Professor Ioan I. Ică, Jr., was the spiritual fatherhood in the early ascetic tradition. The first version of the thesis was published by the Reîntregirea Publishing House under the title: *The Tradition of Spiritual Fatherhood in Eastern Christian Spirituality. A Study on Spiritual Guidance in Late Christian Antiquity* (2012). A modified and improved version appeared in 2017 at the *Doxologia* Publishing House, under the title „*Abba, Tell Me a Word!*”. *The Dynamics of Spiritual Guidance to the Desert Fathers*.

Apart from its degree of originality, the main merit of the work, as pointed out Fr. Professor Ioan I. Ică Jr, consists in dismantling certain persistent “clichés” or confusions, the spiritual father being strictly distinguished from similar figures such as the spiritual master, the sage, or the confessor-priest.

Another central concern, both in my PhD thesis and in my ulterior research, has been the topic of spiritual authority in the late Christian Antiquity, along with that of spiritual enhancement, themes which I have summarized in the following two papers: “‘You can become all flame’: deification in early egyptian monasticism”, in John Arblaster, Rob Faesen (eds.), *Mystical Doctrines of Deification. Case Studies in the Christian Tradition*, Routledge, 2018, and “‘It is enough to see you’: saintly body in late antiquity monasticism”, in Paul van Geest, Nienke Vos (eds.), *Early Christian Mystagogy and the Body*, Peeters, 2021 (forthcoming).

Finally, through my specific concerns and research developed in the last few years, starting with my doctoral period, I initiated a thematic direction of an interdisciplinary nature, namely, the relation between early monasticism and ancient Greek philosophy. Theological studies are becoming increasingly receptive to interdisciplinary approaches, so that this relation between the spiritual wisdom of the desert and the ancient pagan *paideia*, has remained and will continue to remain a horizon to be explored in my scientific activity.

All these themes which I have outlined above, largely developed in the collective volumes which I have co-ordinated, and in the papers and books which I have authored, can also be found, in one way or another, in Saint Anthony the Great’s spiritual theology, so that I can highlight a profound continuity of form and content between my PhD thesis and my current scientific research. Moreover, by introducing these topics into the field of academic theology, this thesis aims at stimulating research on the deeply ascetical spirituality of the famous Egyptian hermit, insufficiently explored so far in the specialized exegesis.

Therefore, when drafting this thesis, I was moved by the wish to make some contribution to the opening and development of new thematic horizons in the theological debate dedicated to this venerable figure of Eastern monasticism.

I have structured this thesis in two major parts, of unequal length, each part being split in its turn into chapters and sub-chapters. If in the first part, entitled “Scientific and academic achievements”, I aimed at highlighting my own scientific contributions to certain thematic directions of Eastern spirituality, as well as certain lines of future research in this field, in the second part, entitled “Plans for the evolution and development of my scientific and academic career”, I focused on the methodology and perspectives of evolution of my own academic career.

The first part, which is the largest, is structured in three big sections: I. "Assuming and using the recent exegesis on specific topics in the field of Orthodox spirituality"; II. "Scientific and academic achievements concerning some novel thematic directions", and III. "Developing the field of research by asserting an interdisciplinary perspective focused on the relation between the early monasticism and the ancient Greek *paideia*".

The first section includes one chapter dedicated to the relation between Saint Anthony the Great and the beginnings of Christian monasticism, made of three subchapters discussing the major landmarks which shaped the map of Egyptian monasticism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the first subchapter ("*Monachoi Apotaktikoi* and the Early Ascetic Tradition: *Status Quaestionis*") I tried to highlight the fact that the origins of Christian asceticism are to be traced to the urban areas of the ancient Mediterranean world, and in that context I spoke about those *apotaktikoi*, a kind of monks *avant la lettre*, who lived their asceticism not outside of the world, but on the margins thereof, as early as the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The thesis which I wanted to justify here is based on the idea that Abba Anthony should no longer be regarded as the initiator of the Egyptian ascetic movement, since asceticism was practised almost a century before his solitary retreat to the desert. Certainly, Saint Anthony the Great remains a very important landmark on the map of early Egyptian monasticism, but it should be stated that this ancient tradition of the urban ascetics casts a new light on the origins of Christian monasticism.

In the second subchapter ("The Firstfruits of the Anchorites: Saint Anthony the Great and the Movement of the Desert") I discuss the major contribution made by Abba Anthony to the development of Christian asceticism. Unlike those *monachoi apotaktikoi*, who lived their asceticism in the middle of the world or on its margins, starting with Abba Anthony, asceticism would be understood and assumed as a *physical* separation from the world. Therefore, the new element that Saint Anthony the Great brings to the history of Eastern monasticism is not asceticism as such, but the *physical* place for practicing it, namely the desert.

Finally, the third subchapter ("The Life of Saint Anthony: Biography or Hagiography?") is consecrated to a debate concerning the reason that made the Alexandrian bishop write *Vita Antonii*. In short, what was Saint Athanasius' aim in writing that work? *Inter alia*, current exegesis speaks about this ascetic biography in terms of a literary "construction" meant to help Saint Athanasius realize his ecclesiastical agenda. More exactly, this exegesis claims that *The Life of Saint Anthony* would contain, apart from certain historical data linked to the impressive personality of its protagonist, also several Athanasian "insertions" whereby the ecclesiastical author had purportedly aimed at winning the monks over to his side in his bitter fight against the Arians. Without completely rejecting this line of interpretation, my intention was focused rather on the intense collaboration between these two giants of the Church in order to assert a teaching which was to become the cornerstone of the doctrine of deification in the Christian East. In brief, that which Saint Athanasius achieved on the dogmatic level, Abba Anthony illustrated through his own life, the Egyptian hermit being often regarded as the living example of a deified humanity.

The second section contains a chapter ("The Concept of Spiritual Authority in the Early Monasticism") in which I discussed the issue of spiritual authority in the late Christian Antiquity.

As we know, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, ascetics were not under the control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but formed an independent source of authority within the Church. Thus, the spiritual authority manifested itself in this period under two essential forms: hierarchical authority and ascetic authority. As shown by their names, hierarchical authority is rooted in the "Apostolic succession", while the authority of the monk is acquired through a long asceticism.

We understand, therefore, that in the spirituality of the desert we find a context where the authority of the Elder is *personal* rather than institutional, since his authority is not conferred by a formal deed of the official hierarchy, but by his own saintly life itself. An aspect worth mentioning, when speaking about the two types of authority, is the fact that two models of spiritual guidance arose from them, namely the pastoral model, exerted by the ordained clergy, and the ascetical model, practised by the *avva* in the wilderness. If the first model focuses more on the institutional act of current confession, centred on the "remission of sins", the second model involves no sacramental

aspect, which means that the *abba* in the Egyptian wilderness takes the role of a spiritual father, rather than that of the confessor-priest. Besides, let us remember that most of the ascetics in the wilderness, Abba Anthony first among them, were but simple unordained ascetics. Moreover, unlike the pastoral activity accomplished by the clerical hierarchy, which has a collective and sporadic character, the relation between an Elder and his disciple, apart from the fact that it is continuous and permanent, has an extremely intimate and personal character, being centred on *logismoi*, not on sin. In other words, the confession before the priest or the bishop is retrospective, looking at the sins already committed, while the baring of one's thoughts to an Elder has a profilactic function of preventing the disciple from lapsing to sin. In short, we are dealing here with a "functional" or "institutional" paternity, within which sins are confessed in view of receiving the absolution of sins, and a "charismatic paternity" of the Elder, whose finality is for the disciple to obtain a word (guiding him) unto salvation.

Thus, if in the first subchapter ("Ascetic Authority and Ecclesiastic Authority in the Late Christian Antiquity") I aimed at studying the way in which the two types of authority interacted in the spirituality of the desert, in the second subchapter ("The Mantle of Abba Anthony: Source of Legitimacy and Transmission of Ascetic Authority") I tried to argue that the monk's robe or mantle is a source of legitimacy and a means of transmission of ascetic authority. In *Vita Antonii* we find that episode in which the Egyptian hermit leaves his cloak as a heritage to the two bishops, Saint Athanasius and Serapion of Thmuis. The implication is that, through this gesture laden with deep significance, Saint Athanasius (a bishop) becomes the legitimate heir to the charismatic authority of the Saint (an unordained ascetic).

In the third subchapter ("The Synod of Chalcedon: The Prerequisites of an Ecclesiastical Program") I tried to show that, in this "transfer of authority", we can glimpse the first steps taken by Saint Anthony in the direction of integrating the ascetical movement, of lay extraction, into the official structure of the Church. And, indeed, this integration of the ascetical movement into the frame of the Church will be fully achieved through the canonical legislation issued by the Synode of Chalcedon (451). Following that process of "institutionalization" of monasticism, the ascetics shall be placed under the firm control of the bishop, and their way of life shall be practised, from then on, under the two classical forms of ascesis: anchoritic and cenobitic life.

The third section contains a chapter ("Saint Anthony the Great and Ancient Greek *paideia*") in which I deal with the relation between the spiritual wisdom of the desert and the Greek ancient *paideia*.

In the first subchapter ("Spiritual Fatherhood in Late Christian Antiquity: General Considerations") I discuss the theme of the spiritual guide in Late Antiquity from a double perspective: philosophical and Christian. As we know, in the Greek-Roman tradition most philosophers assumed the hypostasis of authentic spiritual guides, ancient philosophy being understood, according to P. Hadot, as a way of life characterized by a range of spiritual exercises meant to operate self-improvement. Unlike the ancient *paideia*, however, the Elder in the early ascetic spirituality ought to be understood rather in the sense of a spiritual father, since the main focus, in the practise of spiritual guidance in the desert, is on the aspects related to the process or labour of spiritual birth. Thus, in spite of the formal resemblances between the two types of spiritual guidance, a comparative assessment between the ascesis of monks and the philosophical *paideia* has led us to a rejection of the thesis of a continuity between the two practices, as claimed by P. Hadot, in favour of that of discontinuity, proposed by G. Stroumsa. Nonetheless, I tried to argue that the master-disciple relationship, in ancient philosophy, was a *prefiguration* of the spiritual-father – spiritual-son relationship in Christianity, the spiritual guide in the ancient Greek tradition being perceived as a spiritual father *in statu nascendi*.

In the next subchapter ("Between the Desert and the Agora: Saint Anthony the Great and Pythagoras") I placed ancient wisdom, represented in an exemplary way by Pythagoras, a philosopher who was fashionable in the Neoplatonism of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and, respectively, the wisdom of the desert, embodied in an exemplary manner by Abba Anthony, within a wider "competition" between the philosophical *paideia* and Christian ascesis. It has often been said that the *Vita Antonii* were a

”Christian version” of the *Life of Pythagoras*; however, upon a close reading of the two biographies, apart from some obvious similarities, several fundamental differences can be highlighted.

The thesis which I argued in this subchapter considers the wish of Saint Athanasius to convince the pagan intellectual elite of the superiority of Saint Anthony’s ascetical wisdom over the philosophical wisdom, represented in an exemplary way by the legendary figure of Pythagoras.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Neo-Pythagorical tradition was extremely influential among the cultivated class of Alexandria, therefore, by establishing Saint Anthony in the hypostasis of the true sage, the Alexandrian bishop wanted to affirm that the spiritual theology of the Egyptian hermit constitutes a better alternative to the educational ideal of Neo-Pythagorism. In short, Saint Athanasius wanted to accredit the idea that the true sage is no longer the philosopher of Samos, but Abba Anthony in the Egyptian desert.

Finally, the last subchapter (”Rethinking Abba Anthony: the Cultural Significance of his *Epistles*”) is dedicated to a discussion regarding the hermeneutical direction proposed by Samuel Rubenson, a reputed exegete of early monasticism, who tried to demonstrate that Abba Anthony is the author of seven letters proving very clearly that the Egyptian hermit was quite familiar with the Platonism of Origenist extraction. Although Abba Anthony, in these epistles, appears as a monk who was quite versed in approaching profound and complex themes, with ample theological ramifications going as far as Saint Clement of Alexandria or even Origen, we do not fully support Samuel Rubenson’s interpretation.

In my opinion, the huge knowledge shown by Abba Anthony in his epistolary body is of a spiritual order, and not in the least one of an intellectual nature. In short, I do not think that Saint Anthony the Great comes under the typology of the refined ascetic, characterized by an appetite for all sort of theological subtleties or sophisticated arguments. This remarkable saint of the Christian East remains, essentially, an ascetic in the true sense of the word, whose knowledge grows not from theological study or erudition, but from the experience of God’s grace. And, indeed, unlike the ”wisdom of this world which is foolishness with God” (1 Cor 3, 19), the ample knowledge displayed by Abba Anthony in these epistles stems from his profound spiritual experience, rooted both in his radical asceticism, and in his service of the Church.

In the second part of this thesis (”Plans for the evolution and development of my scientific and academic career”) I outlined some plans concerning the evolution and development of my own professional career, both on the didactic level, and on the scientific level.

Acting on the assumption that education is a continuous process, on the didactic level, I insisted on two major coordinates. Firstly, on engaging a spiritual hermeneutics, according to which the in-depth understanding of the content which is being taught is facilitated by a certain familiarity with the text under scrutiny. In other words, in my teaching activity I have been motivated by the belief that, without a ”kinship” between the author of the text and the interpreter’s mind, high quality theology cannot be achieved. After all, acquiring an adequate understanding of Patristic literature is not a matter of theological erudition, but, above all, a matter of inner transformation of the exegete who, apart from the competence of the academic study, should also be existentially engaged on the road toward spiritual maturity.

Secondly, the methodological framework for approaching the great texts of Orthodox spirituality was firmly circumscribed to the active teaching methods which stimulate the student’s creative potential, such as textual analysis, debate, dialogue, and problematization. Considered jointly, these methods stem from the conviction that the study of theology cannot be adequately undertaken except through a personal reflection on the content being taught. In short, the scientific rigour of the outward information must be always doubled by the asceticism of inner build-up, since one cannot be validated as a theologian unless one has, apart from a well-trained mind, also and above all, a pure heart.

On the scientific level, I have outlined some novel thematic directions, meant to revitalize the space of Romanian theology. Thus, apart from the topic of spiritual fatherhood, or that of spiritual authority, I can mention here the ascetical revolution produced by the emergence of the Elder in the late Christian Antiquity, the content of the ascetical education to the Desert Fathers, or that of the

historical landmarks concerning the origins of early monasticism. Likewise, a topic of personal reflection shall remain the relation between the spirituality of the desert and the ancient tradition of Greek-Roman philosophy. In fact, ever since the period of my doctoral studies, I have been engaged in an effort of interdisciplinary research focused on the relation between early monasticism and the ancient philosophy, a thematic direction which I intend to further develop in editorial projects in the near future.

As an essential orientation in my activity of scientific research, I have constantly endeavoured to tap into the latest exegesis dedicated to these essential themes of Eastern spirituality. Likewise, through the papers and books which I have authored, as well as the collective volumes which I have edited, I have tried to contribute to some extent to the popularization of these topics within the field of Romanian theology.

Considering the above-mentioned thematic directions, my scientific activity shall continue to be marked by authoring papers and books, and editing collective volumes, but also by my participation in national and international scientific events, scientifically relevant to my field of research.

After listing the bibliographical references, the thesis is concluded by briefly highlighting certain appreciations made by several reputed Romanian theologians concerning the reception of my scientific results.

I am firmly convinced that a theological education of high quality can only be achieved and strengthened by engaging in the spiritual experience lived in the life of the Church, as well as by rising to the highest academic and university standards.