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In choosing the topic that I developed and researched in more detail during my doctoral studies, I was inspired since my years at the faculty of theology, when I felt the need to get to know these remarkable ascetics of the 4th century, known in specialized exegesis as the Desert Fathers, more closely. This fierce desire to understand the Desert Fathers in depth also accompanied me during my doctoral studies, during which I had the opportunity to assiduously research the ascetic spirituality of these renowned Egyptian monks. The topic of my doctoral research is entitled *Asceticism and Holiness among the Desert Fathers*, a topic that opened up a broad horizon for me to research and deepen early Egyptian monasticism. I would like to point out that the chosen theme, approached extremely little in the Romanian theological space, led me to resort largely to specialized sources from abroad, which gave me the opportunity to investigate certain topics very little explored in Romanian theology.

The main motivation that led me to approach this theme is based on three fundamental ideas:

1. The desire to study more deeply a subject little researched in Romanian theology and, implicitly, the desire to promote the ascetic spirituality of these remarkable Egyptian anchorites.

2. Underlining the importance that the Desert Fathers attach to both asceticism and the stages that lead to this ascent of holiness, which are a foundation for any Christian who wishes not only to know the letter but also the Spirit.

3. Dismantling some clichés that are extremely widespread in specialized exegesis, according to which the Desert Fathers were simple and uneducated people. On the contrary, a large part of them displayed a vast culture, some of them even assuming the quality of educators or royal tutors. Therefore, an extremely close connection can be established between academic and spiritual theology within this spirituality of the desert of the 4th century.

The idea of choosing this theme for this work took root in my thinking the most, when I became aware of the need for a theology lived and assumed in a practical way, and I found this kind of theology most evident and clear in the ascetic experience of these remarkable hermits of the desert. I believe that this desire of mine was not accidental, but since God orders all of them without equal, I considered it useful for us to emphasize the spiritual experience of these Elders who, through

their humble behavior, show us the path we must follow to sanctify ourselves in everyday life. The theology practiced, not just spoken, by these great ascetics, should be our backbone when we talk about divine things, that is, starting from their example of life, we must leave the academic sphere of theology, which in many situations does not bring spiritual fruit, a sphere in which we often choose to remain. Although these Fathers of the desert did not write anything, probably out of humility and lest they should have a thought of pride for what they wrote, their apophthegms were collected and edited so that we too can benefit from their ample spiritual wisdom. And, behold, today we have small apophthegms with various incidents or words full of wisdom, from which a living theology, full of spiritual sap, can be extracted. With increased certainty we can say about these anchorites that they understood theology better than anyone, because they were among the first to revolutionize theology in this manner, through their extremely harsh life and struggle in the Egyptian desert. However, for many, including those with a more worldly spirit, these experiences may seem banal, but these experiences reveal the high degree of dispassion and, implicitly, sanctification that the Desert Fathers reached.

Broadly speaking, academic theology greatly developed my theological horizon, it did not narrow it, but broadened it, gave it more material, so to speak, it took me out to a lot of “pasture”. Academic theology helps a Christian, especially a novice theologian, to develop both the skills of organizing and systematizing the material they work with, as well as thinking that goes beyond the usual pattern of the common man. The beauty of academic theology is precisely that of revealing to the theologian such a rich space of theology, here, through an interdisciplinary approach.

Through this more detailed study of the life, practices, teachings and other aspects related to the asceticism and way of life of these anchorites, I have tried to bring to light the necessity of at least partially adopting some of the teachings of the Desert Fathers, in the everyday life of the Christian man.

I believe that the theme that I addressed in that work has always been and will always remain relevant for Orthodox Christian practice. The life of a Christian can be raised to spiritual heights by following the model of the Desert Fathers, even as a layman, not just a monk, because as I have shown below in the work, there were also exceptions to the “rule” in which laymen surpassed in living even some of the Egyptian anchorites.

The thinking, the way of life, the apophthegms, the asceticism and the stages of the spiritual ascent represent the object of this research. In order to be able to argue certain themes and spiritual motives, I have first of all turned to the patristic literature, more precisely to those Holy Fathers who knew these Desert Fathers more closely both personally and spiritually. We recall here Saint Athanasius the Great, the biographer and disciple of the great hermit Saint Anthony the Great, but also Saint John Cassian, Palladius, Jerome and other Church Fathers and Writers of those times.

Of course, in parallel throughout the research, the Holy Scripture constituted the main Book that helped me describe and sketch the way of life of these Egyptian monks, perfect examples of the man in the condition of that Kata Physyn.

During the research, we will come across several words that are constitutive elements of the literature of the Desert Fathers. Among them, we recall the most essential: Avva (Abba), apophthegma (apophthegma), hermit, anchorite, ascetic/asceticism, logismoi, diakrisis, hesychia, monk.

In the Romanian theology space, the theme of the Desert Fathers has mostly only tangential references to certain topics in which the Egyptian hermits were mentioned in passing. For unknown reasons, outside the Romanian Orthodox space, in the Western world, there are numerous notes, studies, publications, both scientific and specialized research on patristic literature regarding the Egyptian monks, as well as archaeological discoveries made in this regard, with all the research subsequently published in this regard.

In Romanian theology we have the basic translated sources, which also formed the basis of this work, among which we mention:

- The Egyptian Pateric, published by Sophia Publishing House in Bucharest in 2012, translated edition after the Venerable Pafnutius the Teacher of 1828, diorthosite, completed and annotated by Filotheu Bălan;
- The Pateric or the Apothegms of the Fathers in the Desert, published by Polirom Publishing House, in Iași in 2007 and translated by Cristian Bădiliță;
- The Great Pateric, published by Bizantină Publishing House, in Iași in 2016;
- The Egyptian Pateric, published by Reîntregirea Publishing House, in Alba Iulia in 2014, in fact this is the Pateric after which I worked the most in order to elaborate my doctoral thesis, after this there were also the most citations in the work.

- The Egyptian Pateric or the Apophthegms of Our Fathers in the Desert of Egypt, published by the Publishing House Învierăa, in Timișoara in 2002, translated by Dan Ungureanu.

The other sources that have been translated into Romanian do not necessarily concern the theme described by the Apophthegmata Patrum, but they are important because they are certain writings, biographies or conversations of the Desert Fathers. We can call them sources and related works and we mention the following among them:

- Saint John Cassian, Selected Writings. Monastic Settlements and Spiritual Conversations, in PSB (Church Fathers and Writers) volume 52, translated by prof. Vasile Cojocaru and prof. David Popescu, notes by prof. Nicolae Chițescu, published by the Publishing House of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Bucharest in 1990;

- Saint Macarius the Egyptian, Writings. Spiritual Homilies, in PSB volume 34, translation by Fr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornițescu, introduction, indexes and notes by Nicolae Chițescu, published by the Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in Bucharest in 1992;

- Evagrius Ponticus, the Monk or the Doer (Practikos), one hundred chapters on the spiritual life, Introduction and comments by Schearchimandrite Gabriel Bunge, Romanian translation by deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2016;

- Saint Anthony the Great, Teachings on the moral life of people and on good conduct, in Philokalia vol. I, translation from Greek, introductions and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Orthodox Church, Bucharest, Bucharest, 2008;

- Saint Athanasius the Great, Epistles and Life of our venerable father Anthony, trans. by Fr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, Publishing House of the Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute, Bucharest, Bucharest, 2010;

- Blessed Jerome, Three Lives of Monks. Against Helvidius. Epistles, trans. Constantin Răchită, Publishing House of the Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute, Bucharest, Bucharest, 2011;

- Saint Isaiah the Hermit, The Asketicon, Publishing House of the Buna Vestire, Bacău, 1997;

- Saint Nilus the Ascetic, Very Necessary and Useful Ascetic Word, in *Philokalia*, vol. I, Publishing House of the Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute, Bucharest, 2008;

- Paladius, *History of the Lausiac (Lavsaiicon)*, trans., introd. and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, Publishing House of the Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute, Bucharest, 2007; Evagrius Ponticus, *Practical Treatise*, introd., trans. and comments by C. Bădiliță, Publishing House Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2009.

However, in the Romanian space we have several reference works that have opened this horizon of desert spirituality in Romanian theology. We recall here the notable works of Associate Professor Dr. Habil. Daniel Lemeni:

- Abba, tell me a word! The dynamics of spiritual guidance at the Desert Fathers, Publishing House Doxologia, Iași, 2017;

- The Spirit blew in the wilderness. The spiritual world of the Desert Fathers, Publishing House Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2014;

- I have seen the true light, *Elements of Orthodox Spirituality*, Partoș Publishing House, Timișoara, 2015. I consider these three works, well-written and meticulously researched, to be just the "tip of the iceberg", but we can certainly admit that they were the first to "break the ice" in Romanian theology for this branch of theological study.

In addition to these three significant works, we also have a translation from ancient Greek of a fundamental source for this branch of theology:

- *Historia Monachorum* (History of the Lives of the Monks in Egypt), translated by university lecturer Gheorghe Ovidiu Sferlea, edited edition with introductory study, glossary and bibliography by Daniel Lemeni, a work published by Doxologia Publishing House, Iași, 2021.

We also mention here two translations into Romanian from French by the authors Lucien Regnault and Irénée Hausherr. The work entitled *La Vie quotidienne des Pères du désert en Égypte au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in *Revue des études byzantines*, volume 49, published by the Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, Paris, 1991, (Romanian translation: *Viața cotidiană a Părinților de deșertului în Egiptu l-século IV*) by Lucien Regnault is translated by deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, published by Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2013. And Irénée Hausherr has the work entitled *Direction spirituelle en Orient autrefois*, in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, in volume 152, no. 2, Presses Univerisitaires des Frances, Paris, 1957.



From the Anglo-Saxon space I mention the following works by John Chryssavgis: *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004 (*Saint John the Ladder: from the Egyptian Desert to Mount Sinai*, translated by Gheorghe Fedorovici, Sophia Publishing, Bucharest, 2005), *Soul Mending. The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass., 2000, and *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom Publishing House, Bloomington, Indiana, 2003. We also mention here the Anglican priest, archaeologist and writer of Orthodox spirituality, Derwas James Chitty, with his work *The Desert a City. An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1995 (*The Desert – The City of God: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism during the Christian Empire*, translated by Gheorghe Feodorovici, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010).

The topicality and relevance of the theme addressed in this work needs to be highlighted. The holiness and importance of the Desert Fathers in all its aspects is not only denied and contested in modern and postmodern societies, which subject them, together with the entire Judeo-Christian tradition, to a radical deconstruction; ignored and, moreover, not accurately understood, it is not authentically practiced, neither in contemporary Christianity in general, nor even in Orthodoxy, which has most faithfully preserved their memory and living tradition to this day. This is the main motivation invoked by me in the Introduction: deciphering the true dimensions of a traditional spiritual phenomenon, which has a supreme existential relevance for today's Christians

The deliberate hermeneutical goal is to offer, based on a "historical" retrospective limited to the 4th-5th centuries, an integrative vision of the dimensions of spiritual fatherhood. The theological goal is assumed throughout the work *Apophthegmata Patrum* because here there is a close connection between the daily life of Egyptian hermits and the ecclesial life of the Christian of that time and today. This is materialized through the studies of Spirituality and Christian Morality, which have a value often neglected in the branch of academic theology.

In the elaboration of this work, I researched and studied in detail the original texts of *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* as well as the texts

translated from Coptic, Syriac or Armenian by Lucien Regnault of the apophthegmata of the Desert Fathers. At the same time, I was really helped by Benedicta Ward's translations of the apophthegms and other sources, and especially by John Wortley's translations.

The ultimate desire that animated me in highlighting this spirituality of the desert was based on the evangelical call to follow Christ: "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me."

In order to compose this work, I used several methods for research, in which I tried to use a complex and concise methodology. I began with an introductory exposition to each section of each chapter, so that each chapter would be researched from several points of view. For example, in the first chapter, in the first section, there was also a need for a historical description of the events and social, political and religious circumstances of those times, which were not the cause of these things and themes that I researched but which, in a way, shaped the meaning of that world and, at the same time, the anchorite movement. Then, relying on the sources of the Holy Fathers, I described sometimes biographically, sometimes historically certain aspects of some key figures for my work.

Most of the sections contain a harmonious combination between the historical part (in which we included geographical, archaeological, biological and philosophical elements) and the spiritual-theological one (touching and showing the dogmatic, pastoral, liturgical and moral relationship of this part with the subject of this work). We have avoided rigidifying the subjects and also emphasizing rare and sometimes apparently exaggerated cases, which could distort the purpose of this work. From what has been presented, no attempt has been made to create a fixed and unchangeable typical in Orthodox thought.

Through all the methods used, the only aim was to combine in the most appropriate manner a theological research, in order to highlight the other theological branches that are found in the theme of this work, for a better understanding of what the Desert Fathers represent.

The work entitled *Asceticism and Holiness among the Desert Fathers* is structured in four chapters, each chapter being divided into several subchapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusions, bibliography and annexes.

Thus, in the introduction I specified the reason for choosing the subject, then the object of the research, after which I mentioned the stage of the research, namely all the studies written on this topic that exist in the Romanian space, continuing with the purpose, limits and originality. I also mentioned the methods used in the research of this work. At the end of the introduction I showed what were the difficulties that I encountered during the research.

I titled the first chapter *Ascetic Education in Desert Spirituality*. It is an introductory chapter divided into five sections that shows us in more detail the process of this anchorite movement that appeared in the 4th century, highlighting the beginnings of Egyptian monasticism, but also certain aspects about the place, type and methods of spiritual asceticism of the hermits.

The first section of this chapter, *The Desert Fathers and the Desert Ascetic Revolution*, highlights the beginning of this ascetic “revolution” initiated by Saint Anthony the Great. If until the end of the 3rd century, asceticism was practiced on the outskirts of the villages (that is, in the world or on its edge), starting with the famous Egyptian hermit (approx. 271-275), who would take the path of the desert, asceticism would be understood as a physical separation from the world. This desert movement, initiated by Saint Anthony, would reach its peak in the 4th century, when the Egyptian desert, as Saint Athanasius tells us, would become a city of monks. These Egyptian monks are known in the specialized literature as the Desert Fathers. This “revolution” of the Desert Fathers began in the 4th century along the Nile Valley, a revolution that meant leaving inhabited, prosperous and fertile places and migrating into the immensity of the Egyptian desert. It all started with a few monks, who were later joined by thousands and thousands of monks who formed large monastic communities in the Egyptian desert.

The second section, *The Desert as a Way of Life: An Introduction*, broadly highlights that the desert, far from being just a physical space, represents a way of life focused on asceticism and prayer. More precisely, here we will reflect on several geographical, historical, but especially psychological elements related to the desert. After a few references to how the Egyptians understood the desert, we will approach this theme of the desert from a spiritual point of view, with the emphasis on the significance of this arid space for the Christian anchorite.

The third section, *The Practice of Spiritual Exercises in the Egyptian Desert*, a section in which we will address the relationship between ascetic education and

ancient philosophy. As we know, Pierre Hadot, in his book *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, argued convincingly that ancient philosophy can be understood as a spiritual exercise. Early Christianity took over this terminology, giving it a spiritual significance. Among the most important spiritual exercises that we encounter in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, we recall: tranquility, silence, praxis, manual labor, humility, patience, solitude, charity, etc.

The fourth section entitled “Flee, be silent, be still”: an ascetic pedagogy of the desert in connection with the previous section that was a guide for us to describe what the Desert Fathers practiced throughout their lives. This exhortation of the Lord to Abba Arsenius the Great is a constant call to our return to *Kata Physyn* (the natural state of man). Leaving the city, from the world, fleeing to a place of tranquility, is like the departure of the chosen people from the world of “meat cauldrons” and other passions, to the place where the Lord reveals his will, and in fact the plan of salvation for each individual man.

And the last section of the first chapter, *Desert Spirituality: A School of Respite*, shows us how favorable the desert is for respite, reflection, and for cultivating a maximum of spirituality. And, indeed, the ascetics have shown us through their lives that the desert is the most favorable place for sanctification, contemplation, and especially tranquility. What makes the Desert Fathers stand out from others is that they were the first to live far from the places and neighborhoods of villages and cities, that is, they lived the furthest of all the monks and anchorites of those times and lived in the “great desert.” This is one of the fundamental characteristics that constituted the specific life of these ascetics, and another very important one is the exercise of a special paternity, which they did not acquire on their own but was annexed to them by the disciples they had. These saints had a smaller or larger number of disciples around them, but without them (the Fathers) having sought them out or intentionally attracted them to make them novices in the spiritual life. The two characteristics, living in the wilderness (sometimes in the outermost desert) and the specific fatherhood of the Fathers, constituted the complete alienation from this world, something that was so imperative for them for this arduous climb, because generally the impression was left that once this world was left, the distance from any villages or cities, places where someone could live, what else could one cling to, in such a deserted place and almost devoid of the necessities for survival. But throughout this work, we will encounter several figures of Fathers

who, in our opinion, were struggling with “nothings” or clinging to those “nothings”, but who, according to the experience and enlightened opinion of these ascetics, things were different.

The second chapter was titled The Tradition of Spiritual Fatherhood in Early Egyptian Monasticism. This chapter emphasizes the importance of the spiritual guidance of a novice disciple, under the obedience of a spiritually experienced elder. The chapter is divided into three subchapters.

The first subchapter, titled The Appearance and Role of the Elder in the Tradition of the Egyptian Desert, is an introductory section that shows us how this guidance, so necessary for those who embraced the anchorite life, appeared. In this subchapter we talk about the role of a spiritual guide and what his prerogatives are in the Egyptian desert environment. In some cases, however, the Elder gave neither advice, nor exhortations, nor obediences, but instead he just did what he usually did, so that the one who wanted to be his disciple could learn and obey through imitation.

In most cases, however, an abbot would only keep the apprentice with him for a few weeks or months until he learned to survive in the extreme conditions of the wilderness, after which he would only have to pray, do needlework, and sit in his cell. The visits were sometimes more frequent, sometimes very rare, the apprentices being in the vicinity of the place where the Elder lived, but the visit was made according to necessity and in the spirit of vigilance, when it was useful to go to the abbot and tell him what his thoughts were. Thus it happened that some Elders, after teaching the apprentices what to do, would come every two weeks to visit, while others would only come to the abbot after years and years, as was the case with Abba Macarius.

Abba – disciple: a father-filial relationship is the second subchapter and is probably one of the most beautiful spiritual experiences we find in this subchapter, namely the relationship between a spiritual guide and a novice in the ascetic life, who became a disciple of the venerable elder. The experiences, relationships and circumstances of this father-filial bond differ from one case to another, or better said from one apophthegm to another. Many of the Fathers did not want to have disciples because this separated them from their solitary way of life and especially they had to fight with the spirit of pride due to the form of leadership that an abbot assumed over a novice, but we cannot say that they chased them away when they were tenacious and wanted to be under the obedience of an Elder, although an abbot always tried not

to do his own will, because they went so far as to confess even the drops of water drunk and the steps taken in the cell to the Elders, lest even in these "small" things they make a mistake. In short, everything had to be done with obedience, or better said - so as not to confuse the obedience of the Fathers with what we see today in the monastic space - a permanent spiritual bond, paternal-filial, in which it was always a question of confessing the thoughts (and even more so the deeds), gestures and intentions of the one under whose obedience the disciple was.

The third and last subchapter of Chapter II is entitled "Give Blood and Take Spirit": the Process of Spiritual Birth in the Desert Fathers. In this section we discuss the stages and forms of spiritual experience through which a novice in Egyptian asceticism passes. As a continuation of the previous section, the Christian in his novitiate goes through various spiritual trials until he reaches the goal, as the fruit of his labors. In this section we presented the essential lines of what we believe was a radical transformation of the relationship between master and disciple.

We then continued with the third chapter, which we entitled *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the Royal Way of the Desert. We divided this chapter into ten sections, each section having as its central theme one of the most fundamental practices and spiritual motifs of the ascetic life.

The first section *Apophthegmata Patrum*: spiritual themes and motifs. This section briefly discusses some of the essential themes found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and which we will discuss in more detail in the following sections. The main themes in this section are: manual labor, silence, little food, voluntary poverty, vigil, hesychia, little rest, obedience.

The second subchapter is entitled Monastic Obedience and is one of the fundamental lessons, which is a sine qua non in the process of spiritual rebirth. This section deals with various cases of obedience and circumstances that have obedience as the main theme in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

The third subchapter is called "The Cell Will Teach You Everything": the importance of the cell in the Egyptian desert. In this section we want to highlight the spiritual importance of staying in the space called the cell, as well as its practical role, and some physical aspects of this construction.

The fourth section is entitled The Struggle with Thoughts and the Concept of Hesychia. The most common challenge of the Egyptian monks, as it is of every human being, is this constant struggle with thoughts (*logismoi*), to which the Desert

Fathers come with an antidote that we call hesychia. We discuss these two themes in more detail in this section.

Asceticism of the mind: forms of inner awakening in patristic spirituality is the fifth section and shows us the spiritual ascent from a simpler form of asceticism to a much more complex and superior one, which is the asceticism of the mind. The desert fathers relied heavily on this inner awakening, which is the fruit of asceticism of the mind.

Prayer and manual labor is the sixth subchapter and reveals to us, as the angel discovered to Saint Anthony the Great, the importance of prayer united with manual labor, the forms and time of prayer, as well as the reporting and adjustment of work to the time of prayer.

The seventh section is The Spirituality of the Garment in Early Monasticism, in which we see that with the organization of Egyptian monasticism in the 4th-5th century it included, among other things, the elaboration of prescriptions regarding the monastic garment, which later became the external and immediate sign of the monk's social identity. Here we discuss both the spiritual significance of the monastic robe and its physical aspects.

The Significance of Repentance in the Desert Tradition is the title of the eighth section and is the part in which we propose to approach the issue of repentance as it was understood in the spirituality of the desert. We discuss here the mystery of confession, as well as the confession (disclosure) of the disciple's thoughts to his elder.

I have titled the ninth subchapter The Role of Discernment (diakrisis) in the Spiritual Life. Throughout the entire Egyptian Patericon we see that the highest quality of an elder, of a spiritual guide, is discernment (diakrisis), which is essential for the sanctification and perfection of the spiritual man. More important and heart-moving than miracles themselves is the ability to discern things and thoughts.

The final subchapter of the third chapter is entitled "His face shone like the sun": the ascetic physiognomy of the Elder. Within this section, we will make several references to the indissoluble connection between the physiognomy of the soul and its external life, highlighting that the face reflects the inner state of the anchorite.

And finally, the fourth and last chapter of this work is entitled The Desert Fathers: biographical and spiritual snapshots. This final chapter is divided into five sections, and the first three of them describe biographically some of the Desert

Fathers, namely Saint Anthony the Great, Saint Macarius the Egyptian and Saint Arsenius the Great. The penultimate section has the role of scientifically and geographically describing the physical location of the anchorites, highlighting the three monastic hearths that were the cradle of Egyptian monasticism in the 4th century, Nitria, Kellia and Sketis.

The first three sections Abba Anthony: "Patriarch of the Desert", Abba Macarius the Egyptian: "the young-old man" (paidariogeron) from the Skete desert and Abba Arsenius: the imperial ascetic, are both biographical and spiritual sections, because in them I have included as much biographical information as I could from those who recorded their lives in history, as well as from their teachings and especially their apophthegms. In this sense, I have not presented the biography only for the sake of the historical course of their lives, but rather I have tried to bring back to life the apophthegms that described how they lived, more than a simple biographical description. Of course, the three sections have consistent historical and archaeological research for a better understanding of the space and geopolitical situation in which they found themselves.

The fourth section is entitled Ascetic Communities in the Egyptian Desert: Nitria, Kellia and Skete. As in the previous sections, here too I have tried to harmoniously combine history, geography, archaeology, biology, philosophy and even geology with spiritual theology. That is why, for the most part, throughout this section, both parts of a physical and scientific order will be placed side by side, as well as parts of a theologically spiritual and moral nature extracted from the apophthegms that both give us spiritual sap and even technical data related to space and time. The most famous and important monastic hearths were Nitria, Kellia and Sketis. Indeed, here we are not talking about the famous cities of the ancient pharaohs, nor about their magnificent pyramids, obelisks and temples, but against the current, as if against the reasoning of then and now, in the spirit of the Desert Fathers, we speak and as much as we can research the "cities of the desert" that these Elders established through their modest living and through their small cells they transformed this arid and sandy place into the "City of God". It is also worth remembering that although at some point, the monastic communities that were founded (we say not arbitrarily) by an Elder, began to grow after the appearance of other monks, who were either disciples of the Elders or also wanted to be with other more improved monks. But after a while, after the hearths had a real community, the



most experienced and those closest to perfection, went even further from those places, wanting even more to work for salvation and not to fall into the temptation of pride or greed, which the Fathers understood by living together with other brothers.

The Desert Fathers and the Discourse on Holiness, this final section explores the theme of divinization as it appears in the early ascetic tradition. More precisely, we have tried to establish a relationship between the Desert Fathers and the doctrine of the Nicene Creed, or better said, through the Desert Fathers we have tried to show how they lived and put the Nicene Creed into practice.

Throughout the elaboration of this very broad theme, there were of course several difficulties. I mentioned one of them when I discussed the stage of the research. More precisely, as I have already mentioned, in the Romanian space, until Professor Daniel Lemeni, this theme of the Desert Fathers was not systematically approached, but tangentially through various translations from the French-speaking and Anglo-Saxon space.

Thus, initially relying on a bibliography of the works of Professor Daniel Lemeni, I saw that most of the works, studies and articles were by foreign authors, I resorted to specialized exegesis from abroad in my doctoral research

Secondly, I was quite surprised when, during the research, I noticed that a significant number of foreign authors had written about this theme, addressing some essential topics for this work, long before the Desert Fathers were discussed in the Romanian space.

I cannot call it a difficulty, but the fact that all the works were written in English, French, German and even Italian created a certain delay in the progress of my work. The problem was not the knowledge of these languages, but rather the enormous amount of works dedicated to the Desert Fathers, and sometimes, the difficulty of procuring these works. For the most part, the works in English and German were of real use to me, but at the same time I saw, including in the Egyptian Patericon, which we have in several translations and editions (I mostly used the one from 2014, from the Reîntregirea publishing house, Alba Iulia), that the Romanian translations are often inaccurate from a stylistic and scientific point of view. On the other hand, I noticed that a significant number of apophthegms are missing, some of which are shorter than in the foreign versions.

I also noticed that the most famous authors relied on a translation from ancient Greek and others even from Coptic (the language of the Desert Fathers). This was noticeable in the bilingual editions of John Wortley, which had each apophthegm both in English and Greek, and his introductory studies, as well as other notes and commentaries, were of real use in understanding much more the context, culture and forms of expression and experience of the Egyptian monks.

Although this research largely resides in specialized exegesis from abroad, of Catholic or neo-Protestant origin, we believe that the spiritual dimension of the Desert Fathers has significantly left its mark on its content. I observed this in most of the authors I researched, so that I often had the impression that I was not reading the works of a Catholic, Anglican or Protestant theologian, but rather of a theologian from our Eastern space.

Indeed, a major difficulty was the fact that due to the lack of material on Romanian theology, I had to resort to specialized literature from abroad, which I tried to process in the spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy. I already had some books, others I ordered for researching the work, either from the United States of America or from Germany. But in most cases, thanks to today's very advanced technology, I had an exceptional virtual library at my disposal, so the practical path was an easier one for studying certain subjects.

In this context, I emphasize that often, even when I had a work translated into Romanian, I preferred to work on the original works in English, German or French, because I felt that they reflected much better the *forma mentis* of these remarkable monks of the 4th century.

## CONCLUSIONS

The source documents *Apophthegmata Patrum* and *Historia Monachorum* remain fundamental for the importance of the data they contain, about the life, circumstances and complexity of the theological-spiritual thought of the Desert Fathers. They represent both the basis and the proof that the Egyptian anchorites of the fourth century were true lamps of light, sustained by the matter of the Nicene Creed.

In this work I wanted to outline and highlight the importance of the life and teaching of the Desert Fathers and to trace some directions in this regard, which have contributed to the formation of monasticism to this day and especially to the assumption of an ascetic spirituality in the spirit of the Egyptian ascetics.

The location in the historical, geographical and geopolitical context is very important, given the fact that, leaving aside the political context, it was the Desert Fathers who illustrated through their lives the dogmatic resolutions of the Nicene Creed, thus contributing to the formation of monastic life in general.

In my doctoral thesis *Asceticism and Holiness at the Desert Fathers*, I analyzed the fundamental themes in the discipline of Orthodox spirituality, which the Egyptian anchorites lived live.

Although it was not their intention to formulate a specific typikon about monastic life or asceticism, the Desert Fathers were the first revolutionaries of this movement that established itself over time both in practice and in the discipline of monastic ordinances, they were also the confessors of some Holy Fathers, confessors at the time of the Ecumenical Councils.

Following the research and analysis of the lives, confessions and apophthegms about the Desert Fathers, we can draw some conclusions regarding the entire theme related to their asceticism and holiness.

In chapter I I highlighted in detail the process of this anarchetic movement that appeared in the fourth century, outlining the beginnings of Egyptian monasticism, but also certain aspects about the place, type and methods of spiritual struggle of the hermits. I have also pointed out that the term *Desert Fathers*, in all the specialized literature, refers exclusively to the Egyptian monks of the fourth century, without being able to confuse it with other ascetics or hermits from other areas or times.

In the second chapter I emphasized the importance of the spiritual guidance of a disciple, a novice, under the obedience of a spiritually experienced elder. And it is probably one of the most beautiful spiritual experiences that we find in this chapter, namely the relationship between a spiritual guide and a novice in the ascetic life, who became a disciple of the venerable old man. The experiences, relationships and circumstances of this paternal-filial bond differ from one case to another, or rather from one apophthegm to another.

I then continued to address in the third chapter certain central themes that we can find in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, among which we mention the following: manual work, silence, little food, voluntary poverty, vigil, hesychia, little rest, obedience.

Finally, in the fourth and last chapter of this work I have biographically described some representative figures for the spirituality of the desert, namely St. Anthony the Great, St. Macarius the Egyptian, and St. Arsenius the Great. The penultimate part of the chapter has the role of scientifically and geographically describing the physical place of the anchorites, highlighting the three monastic hearths that were the cradle of Egyptian monasticism in the fourth century, Nitria, Kellia and Sketis. The first three parts are both biographical and spiritual sections, because in them we have framed certain biographical frameworks from those who recorded their lives in history, as well as from their teachings and especially their apophthegms. In this sense, I have not exposed the biography only for the sake of the historical course of their lives, but rather I have tried to bring back to life the apophthegms that described how they lived, in short I have sought to go beyond a simple biographical description in outlining the spiritual profile of these remarkable Egyptian monks. Of course, the three sections have a consistent historical and archaeological research, extremely necessary for a better understanding of the space and the geopolitical situation in which the Desert Fathers lived. The final part explores the theme of deification or holiness as it appears in the early ascetic tradition. More precisely, we have tried to establish a relationship between the Desert Fathers and the doctrine of the Nicene Creed, or rather, through the Desert Fathers we have tried to show how they lived and put into practice the Nicene Creed.

The novelty brought to the sphere of Orthodox spirituality, through the elaboration of this work, is structured on several directions that, so far, have only been analyzed in a general way. In this way, I tried to research and broaden the proposed theme in its depths, reaching the following conclusions:

1. The field of Orthodox spirituality includes a number of personalities who have shaped thinking on this branch of theology. Especially in the Romanian space, a lot of emphasis has been placed on the great confessors and especially on the saints of yesteryear or those of today who have shaped the Romanian Orthodox spirituality. Bringing to light again, in a much more elaborate and researched manner, the Desert Fathers, I wished to highlight the dimension of spiritual fatherhood that they perfectly illustrated.
2. A second element of novelty is given by the themes found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* that I wanted to place in a certain order to show their importance in Orthodox spirituality, themes that I dealt with in the third chapter of each section.
3. In order to elaborate and research, I turned to a bibliography from abroad, where there are ample works dedicated to the Desert Fathers. By this I did not want to point out that Romanian theology has certain gaps on this subject, but especially the universality of the Desert Fathers who amazed and still amaze not only Orthodox theologians, but also Catholic or Protestant ones.
4. The Desert Fathers illustrated certain aspects that we, in turn, can deal with in the current religious context. Among these most important aspects, we mention: the institution of confession as they understood and practiced it in the Egyptian desert, the attendance of church services, their relationship to the Holy Mysteries, especially to the Holy Eucharist, the concept of hesychia, the stay in a space, closed and isolated from the world, even from other anchorites, the formation of an ordinance related to the community and certain "rules" of the monks.
5. The Egyptian ascetics of the fourth century, especially through St. Anthony the Great, were true defenders of the teaching of the Orthodox faith. Through their fatherhood and guidance, great thinkers and writers were formed who participated over the centuries, inheriting the good teaching established and promulgated in the Ecumenical Councils.
1. Throughout the work, I insisted on the importance of spiritual discernment (*diakrisis*), which was the fundamental characteristic of the Desert Fathers. This charisma is a novelty that I present here, showing that more important than performing miracles, for the thought of the anchorites was dobândirea

discernment, along the three spiritual stages: dispassion, illumination and deification.

2. The most important role that the Desert Fathers played in the Egyptian wilderness was that of spiritual guide, so the Abba-disciple relationship was one of the fundamental features of desert spirituality. This guidance is the basic characteristic of the paternal-filial relationship that the Egyptian anchorites particularly practiced.

We recall that in the Western space, especially in the German Catholic and Evangelical space, since the beginning of the twentieth century there have already been some monumental works, such as those of Karl Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, Möhr, Tübingen, from 1936, Peter Grossmann, *Eine vergessene frühchristliche Kirche beim Luxor-Tempel*, Cairo, from 1973, Werner Jaeger, *Das frühe Christentum und die griechische Bildung*, Walter De Gruyter Publishing House, Berlin, since 1963.

Also, in the French-speaking space we have some major works, without which I must admit, that research would have been much poorer. We mention here Lucien Regnault, with a vast collection of translations of the apophthegms of the Egyptian monks such as *Les Sentences des Pères du désert, Apophtegmes traduits de l'arménien*, new collection, from 1970, *Les Sentences des Pères du désert, Apophtegmes traduits du copte*, new collection, Solesmes, from 1980, *Les Sentences des Pères du désert*, collection alphabétique, Solesmes, 1981, *Les Sentences des Pères du désert*, Série des anonymes, Solesmes-Bellefontaine, 1985, *Les Pères du désert à travers leurs apophtegmes*, Solesmes, din 1987 and *Paroles du désert d'Égypte. Une vie cachée en Dieu et ouverte au prochain*, Editions of Solesmes, din 2005.

These works, as well as others in exegesis abroad, were of real use in the elaboration and research of my doctoral thesis.

In the light of what has been presented, it becomes evident that the asceticism and holiness of the Desert Fathers represent a living and dynamic model of deification. Far from being mere ritual practices, they are expressions of a profound search for union with God, a search that transcends time and space. Through their lives of renunciation, prayer and contemplation, these great ascetics embodied the

Christian ideal of interior transformation and intimate and profound fellowship with God.

Thus, their spiritual heritage continues to inspire and illuminate the path of those who aspire to a life of holiness and spiritual perfection, confirming to us that True deification is a continuous process of becoming, a journey that is both personal and communal, marked by grace and constant effort.

The present work explores the doctrine of deification, essential in the theology of St. Athanasius, and the role of asceticism in this doctrine, under the influence of the Desert Fathers, of which a central figure remains Abba Anthony. In this sense, we have seen that deification is a process that involves the total transformation of the human person, acquired as a result of the imitation of Christ.

Abba Anthony showed through his life that deification includes spiritual and bodily transformation, achieved through divine grace and personal effort. All the saints are examples who lived this transfiguration "while they were still in the flesh".

For the Desert Fathers, Sacred Scripture was a means of transformation and realization of holiness, the sacred text having the role of highlighting the uncreated light of the great biblical examples. The righteous in Holy Scripture were perceived as vehicles of holiness, transfigured by a brilliant light, exemplifying the Christian ideal of interior transformation.

Subsequently, Byzantine monasticism, especially within the hesychasts of Mount Athos, continued the tradition of the Desert Fathers, orienting the ascetic life towards the attainment of the vision of the uncreated light. The desert fathers offered a dynamic model of deification, representing the expression of a profound search for union with God, a search marked by renunciation, prayer and contemplation.

Theology, as a discipline and experience, can be approached from multiple perspectives. Two of the most distinct and yet interconnected approaches are lived theology and academic theology. While academic theology focuses on the systematic and analytical study of religious doctrine, lived theology emphasizes the personal and community experience of faith.

Lived theology is the living expression of faith in everyday life. It is not limited to doctrinal mastery or scripture study but is manifested through practice, prayer, meditation, and moral behavior. The primary influences of lived theology are often personal and communal, marked by traditions, rituals and spiritual experiences.

Lived theology is reflected in everyday life through a range of spiritual practices and disciplines. These include daily prayer, fasting, pilgrimages, attending religious services, studying the Scriptures and sacred texts, as well as charitable work and caring for others.

The desert fathers, such as Abba Anthony, are classic examples of living theologians. They chose a life of asceticism and prayer, living in isolation to dedicate themselves to a deep search for union with God. Their spiritual experience has often been seen as a form of lived theology, which is why theology becomes a living practice.

Academic theology, on the other hand, is an intellectual discipline that involves the systematic and critical study of religious doctrines, the Scriptures, and Church history. It is often taught in universities and theological seminaries and involves rigorous methods of research and analysis.

The objectives of academic theology include deepening the understanding of religious doctrines, critical examination of sacred texts, the study of religious history and traditions, as well as the development of a coherent and systematic theological framework. Academic theologians use methods of comparative research, biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, and religious philosophy to analyze and interpret religious phenomena.

St. Athanasius the Great and St. Demetrius the Confessor (Stăniloae) are outstanding examples of academic theologians. St. Athanasius contributed significantly to the development of Christian doctrine through his theological writings, while St. Demetrius made major contributions to the field of Orthodox theology through translations, commentaries, and scholarly works.

Although lived theology and academic theology seem to be two distinct fields, they are, in fact, complementary. Lived theology provides the context and living experience that can enrich academic study, while academic theology can provide a deeper and more structured understanding of religious doctrines and traditions.

In a monastic community, for example, lived and academic theology coexist and complement each other. Ascetics and monks devote their lives to prayer and meditation, living theology directly, while also engaging in the academic study of sacred texts and patristic writings. This synthesis between living and academic knowledge enriches both spiritual experience and theological understanding.



Both lived theology and academic theology are essential to a complete understanding of the faith. Lived theology brings life and authenticity to religious practices, while academic theology provides a necessary structural and critical framework for deeper understanding of the doctrines. Together, they form a coherent and dynamic whole, which continues to inspire and guide religious communities and faithful individuals in their quest for union with the divine.

However, we can see that the Desert Fathers did not turn to academic theology to quench their thirst for God. That is why we can safely say, without harming the academic part, before being the letter, it is the Spirit. So the same Holy Spirit dwelt in these ascetics of the wilderness. And it is precisely for a theologian who is in the academic environment, good and useful to understand that all theory if he does not understand it on a practical level, or rather, if he does not practice it in the first place, then theology remains a theoretical concept. The holiness of Father Dumitru Stăniloae was not simply based on the sufferings and confession of hard times, nor on his vast knowledge of theology, but on the assumption and living practice of theology, becoming himself a living book of the Holy Spirit. It is quite possible that these great ascetics also had a great influence on him, whose life and teachings St. Demetrius Stăniloae translated for us for enlightenment.

It is not necessary for man to have a very special preparation in order to be able to partake of the Godhead, although the preparation is useful for the foundation and edification of knowledge about the word of God. It is enough for a man, ordinary or high, to pay attention to the words of Abba Arsenios: "A certain Arsenios said to the blessed Arsenios: 'How do we have nothing of so much learning and wisdom, and these Egyptian peasants have acquired so many good deeds?' Abba Arsenios said to him, 'We have nothing in the teaching of the world, and these Egyptian peasants have obtained their good deeds from their labors.'" The same advice is found in another apophthegm where we see how Abba Arsenios asked an old Egyptian about his thoughts, and another, seeing him, said to him: "Abba Arsenios, how come you have so much Latin and Hellenic teaching, you ask this peasant about your thoughts?" And he said to him, "I do have the Latin teaching, but I have not yet learned the alphabet of this peasant."

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