

## HESYCHASM – THE RETURN TO THE PEACE OF THE SPIRIT

**Ph.D. Traian-Alexandru MIU**

Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Education Sciences,  
„Valahia” University, Târgoviște,  
ROMANIA,

E-mail: [traianalexandrumiu@gmail.com](mailto:traianalexandrumiu@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*Hesychasm is the spiritual way of living characteristic of Eastern Christianity. It started out in the monastic area and then spread out among the other believers, giving them all the possibility to have access to the highest form of mysticism. Hesychasm relies on two fundamental principles of the Christian-Orthodox doctrine: that of man’s deification in Christ, supported and formulated by the Greek Church Fathers, and the practical experience of the Desert Fathers, who put into practice the continual prayer. The prayer “of the heart” is an expression of the Holy Spirit, an exercise needed to enter in communion with the essence of life, of union with God. Hesychasm is nothing else but a form of recovering the peace of the Spirit, a spiritual way finding its attainment in the intimate communion with God.*

**Keywords:** hesychasm; prayer; peace; transfiguration; spirituality;

### INTRODUCTION

In the Orthodox spirituality, the word “hesychia” (gr. ἡσυχία = silence, quiet, calm, peace<sup>1</sup>) has a double meaning: on the one hand, it can refer to the hermit, namely to the one who chose the silence of the wilderness as a place for prayer and spiritual endeavors, but, on the other hand, it can designate a form of interior, continual prayer having as a purpose the intimate communion of the believer with God.

This last sense makes out of hesychasm a manner of spiritual life specific of the Eastern Christians, a manner that “*radically separates the East from Rome*”<sup>2</sup>, yet it is also a chance for all the Christians, both Eastern and Western, to have access to the meeting with God by means of this opportunity of returning to the peace of the Spirit. This is obviously about a:

“method of spiritual life, because Jesus’ prayer cannot be considered only a simple persistent prayer, comparable to those recommended by the Catholic piety, although it is not impossible for the Western method of «aspiration» to have descended from the same traditional vein going up to the Desert Fathers. The Jesus Prayer is, however, joined to a doctrine of spiritual life that the Byzantine and Slavic believers consider the heart of the Orthodoxy: hesychasm.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tomás Špidlik, *Arta de a purifica inima*, Rom. transl. Vasile Rus, Ed. Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu-Lăpuș, 2003, p. 85;

<sup>2</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucuresti, 1993, p. 28;

<sup>3</sup> Placide Deseille, *Nostalgia Ortodoxiei*, rom. transl. Dora Mezdrea, Ed. Anastasia, București, 1995, p. 151;

Being a superior form of religious life, this hesychasm became generalized in the sphere of the monastic life to then spread on to the life of the Christian people. It offers all the people the possibility to have access to the highest form of mysticism.

We understand from here that even those who live in the middle of the world can realize that union with God that the hermits or the improved monks attain. God can reveal Himself to each man in turn to the extent to which he is purifying his soul. Consequently, the criterion of the union with God is not at all the social environment someone is coming from, but the degree of cleanliness of the soul.

Nichifor Crainic said that:

“the prayer of the mind plays in the Orthodox spirituality a role of first order. In the historical development of this spirituality, it is a permanent summit to which all the wills for perfection aspire”<sup>4</sup>.

*The Jesus Prayer* has been and is a way by means of which the Christian can reach the state of focus and inner peace allowing the soul to be receptive to the ocean of love given by God. *Hesychia* is in itself an exercise of development of the inner life by continually invoking Jesus' name.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. HISTORICAL STAGES OF HESYCHASM

Hesychasm emerged in the monastic environment (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries) and went through an actual organization in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries when it manifested itself as a profound theological and especially spiritual renaissance.

Beginning with the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the spiritual effort of the monks living in the Egyptian Desert, the so-called hermits, was divided into inner prayer and asceticism, trying to create a certain harmony between them. Yet, even since this first stage of development of hesychasm there appears a deviation from the harmonious way of intertwining prayer with the ascetic effort, initiated by certain monks, called *Euchites*, *Messalians* or *praying people*, who wanted to dedicate themselves completely to prayer and for this reason they did not want to work, living by begging. This heresy made certain theologians of the early period of Christianity become suspicious about hesychasm. Even in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the hesychasts were accused of Messalianism in the well-known dispute with Barlaam of Calabria.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the Church Fathers rigorously recommend manual work combined with prayer (“*Ora et labora!*”), this being also helpful for the poor.

At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Evagrius Ponticus theorizes the spiritual experience of the Desert Fathers, presenting in a synoptic manner the essential stages of the hesychast approach:

1. Corporal asceticism, within which the believer experiences fasting and vigil;
2. Mental asceticism, namely the watch over one's thoughts, a stage during which the fight is waged against pride, anger, envy etc.

<sup>4</sup> Nichifor Crainic, *Sfințenia – împlinirea umanului (Curs de Teologie Mistică, 1935-1936)*, Ed. M.M.B., Iași, 1993, p. 127;

<sup>5</sup> Preot Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1994, p. 213;

<sup>6</sup> Ierom. Asist. Dr. Vasile Bârzu, “*Disputa messaliană - doctrină, istoric, influențe*”, in *Revista Teologică*, no.1/2009, p. 95;

3. Pure prayer, which supposes “*the mind’s talk with God*”, a state in which the mind can lean out “*beyond the self, to the Master, and speak with Him, without anyone’s mediation*”<sup>7, 8</sup>

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Messalian heresy gathers momentum, spreading out in the Oriental provinces of the Empire. Their doctrine excluded the Holy Mysteries and the ecclesial life, as they were saying that the Holy Baptism is useless, just like the other Mysteries, as it was wiping away the sins, but not their root. According to them, all the people, since Adam’s fall, are possessed by a demon exhorting them to do evil. Only continual prayer, united to asceticism, has the power of chasing away the demon and making the Holy Spirit descend in the soul, making man live the feeling of certainty and plenitude, and acquire the power to discern the spirits, the gift of prophecy, revelations, the capacity of seeing demons, but also the contemplation of the Holy Trinity with the eyes of the body. At the same time, they were saying about the Holy Eucharist as well that it is inefficient, which makes us believe that they were also contesting the real presence of our Savior in the Eucharist.<sup>9</sup>

The Council of Ephesus, of the year 431, condemns the Messalian movement. This thing led to a diminution of the area of dissemination of hesychasm in the Byzantine Empire, continual prayer being contemplated with suspicion by those who were not yet making the difference between the radicalism of the Messalian conception and the hesychast doctrine. Thus, the hesychast movement takes refuge at the margins of the Empire:

- in the **Sinai Desert**, where it is supported by Saint John of the Ladder (†649), who in his work *The Ladder of Heaven* speaks about *hesychia* and *hesychast*, recommending the “*monologic*” prayer: “*Jesus*”. He was saying that “*the hesychia (the peace) of the body is a good order and establishment of the customs and of the senses*”<sup>10</sup> and that it supposes “*leaving aside all the thoughts and dropping all worries, even blessed*”<sup>11</sup>;
- in **Palestine**, preached by Saint Barsanuphius the Great, along with his disciple Dorotheus of Gaza, they insisting on the total truth in God;
- in **Syria**, where Saint Isaac the Syrian (the hermit who became Bishop of Nineveh, and then re-became a monk) insisted on the transformation undergone by the one who practices the hesychast prayer, offering him a new vision on what surrounds him. He was saying about the hesychast prayer that “*just as there is nothing to be like God, similarly there is no thing or work like the preoccupation with God in peace and quietness*”<sup>12</sup>.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, at Constantinople, Saint Symeon the New Theologian resumes the principal hesychast themes and integrates them in the framework of the cenobitic life. Practically, he is the one who reconciles the monastic life of the monastic communities with inner prayer, saying that there is no impediment preventing the possibility of practicing a in

<sup>7</sup> Evagrie, Filocalia 1, *Cuvânt despre rugăciune*, c 3, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, “*Une grande spiritualité orthodoxe: l’hésychasme*”, see the web address: [https://www.clio.fr/BIBLIOTHEQUE/une\\_grande\\_spiritualite\\_orthodoxe\\_1\\_hesychasme.asp](https://www.clio.fr/BIBLIOTHEQUE/une_grande_spiritualite_orthodoxe_1_hesychasme.asp), accessed on Wednesday, 22.04.2015;

<sup>9</sup> Antoine Guillaumont, “*Messaliens*”, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Tome X, Ed. Beauchesne, Paris, 1980, col. 1080-1082.

<sup>10</sup> Ioan Scărarul, *Scara Raiului*, Rom. transl. Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu, Ed. Învierea, Timișoara, 2004, p. 264;

<sup>11</sup> Ioan Scărarul, *Scara Raiului*, p. 270;

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte către singuratici*, part II, recently discovered, “*Cuvântul 30, I*”, Introductory study and translation by: deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, p. 343;

the monastery a contemplative and continual prayer, having as fruit the aware and radiant experience of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

After the successful return it had thanks to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, hesychasm went through a new decline period given the spiritual formalism that accompanied the political climax of the Empire. It will undergo a renaissance in the 13<sup>th</sup> century after the great tribulations suffered by the Byzantines between 1204 and 1261, when Constantinople was conquered by the Crusaders and remained under Latin occupation. Saint Nicephorus the Hesychast, a hermit of Mount Athos, is one of the artisans of this rebirth, being one of those who advise the ones who practice the prayer of the heart to do it by correlating it with the respiration. Along with Saint Nicephorus, the metropolitan Theoleptos of Philadelphia preached during this epoch the importance of the prayer of the heart.

Hesychasm is faced during its history with a dispute triggered by a Greek monk, of Calabria, named Barlaam, who accused the hesychasts of false mysticism and superstitions. Barlaam claimed that the Tabor Light, which the hesychasts, is a created light, not identified with God, because it is limited and temporary, just like a creature. If it were identical with the divinity, he said, it would be eternal and invisible. Saint Gregory Palamas (1296 – 1359) states, against Varlaam, that:

“the Tabor Light is not created, but is a divine, eternal emanation, it is a divine work, a combination between eternity and ephemerality, between the world up there and the one down here.”<sup>14</sup>

Actually, Saint Gregory Palamas is the one who manages to synthesize in his theological writings the entire spiritual-pneumatic experience of the Orthodox Christianity, explaining its theological foundation.

“Grafted on the Evangel “of the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21: 20), founded on the prayer life of “the wounded of Christ’s love” (Paul Evdokimov), the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas reaffirmed, at the end of the Middle Ages, the vigor and resurrection-giving power of the Orthodox Church spirituality”<sup>15</sup>.

Growing more and more in size, the dispute between Barlaam and Saint Gregory Palamas led to the summoning of a council in Constantinople (1341) in whose framework the theologians analyzed and decided in favor of hesychasm. Discontent, Barlaam goes over to Catholicism and continues to criticize the hesychastic movement even more vehemently.

In another council held also in Constantinople, in the year 1531 (in whose framework Barlaam was condemned along with other adversaries of the hesychast doctrine), hesychasm was defined as doctrine of the Eastern Church.

After going through an important organization at Athos in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, hesychasm spreads out in monasteries in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania and Russia, having an important influence on the monastic and liturgical life, as it was not separated from the liturgical or sacramental spirituality. Although the hesychast texts were meant for monks and apply best in their living environment, Nicodemus of Mount Athos, collector of philocalical

<sup>13</sup> Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, “*Une grande spiritualité orthodoxe: l’hésychasme*”;

<sup>14</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene Braniște, Prof. Ecaterina Braniște, *Dicționar Enciclopedic de Cunoștințe Religioase*, Editura Diecezană, Caransebeș, 2001, p. 225;

<sup>15</sup> Episcop Teofan Sinaitul, Vicar patriarhal, “*Cuvânt înainte*” in vol. *Rugăciunea lui Iisus*, Ed. “*Orthodoxos Kypseli*”, București, 1992, pp. 7-8;

writings, claims that *the prayer of the heart* can be experienced both by monks and by lay people, as in the Orthodoxy there are no two models of spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

We need to mention the fact that within the hesychastic spirituality there were several trends, one of them, proposed by Saint Macarius the Egyptian insists on *guarding the heart*.

“Actually, in the Orthodox spirituality, the heart (kardia) is not the physical organ, but the spiritual center of man, created in God’s image, the deepest and truest self, the inner altar where one enters in a state of kenosis and sacrifice and where the union with Christ takes place. The heart gives unity to the human person. Therefore, “the prayer of the heart” creates an existential state of unity and integrity of the person.”<sup>17</sup>

## 2. HESYCHASM – THE PRAYER OF TRANSFIGURATION

The fact that Jesus’ prayer, in order to manifest its miraculous effects, needs to be uttered incessantly relies on our Savior’ exhortation to be vigilant and pray, an exhortation that Saint Paul the Apostle repeats as follows: “*Pray continually!*” (1 Thessalonians 6: 17). “*Continual prayer is man’s only means of accomplishing himself in his own humanity, in his own humanness.*”<sup>18</sup> We actually know that Jesus’ presence in us is the engine of any good action: “*Apart from me you can do nothing. The one who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit*” (John 15:5). The constant repetition of Jesus’ name maintains the soul focused and keeps it safe from sinful deviations.

“*The spiritual essence of Jesus’ prayer consists in the tendency to demonstrate experimentally the elevating truth that our bodies are and can be temples of the Holy Spirit. It is the prayer of transfiguration, which is the sublime feature of our Orthodoxy.*”<sup>19</sup>

Saint Ignatius Bryanchaninov says that “*it is impossible to clean the heart and chase away from it the unclean spirits without frequently calling Jesus Christ.*”<sup>20</sup>

Hesychasm relies on two great doctrinal principles: that of man’s deification in Christ, supported and formulated by the Greek Church Fathers, and one practically resulted from the experience of the Desert Fathers who put into practice both incessant prayer and vigilance.<sup>21</sup> The hesychast Fathers considered the theory and the practice of Jesus’ prayer, the meditation in silence on Jesus’ name and the state of peace produced by it not as a goal in itself but as a state favorable to the practice of virtues.

The essential elements of the hesychast spirituality are, according to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, being aware of and feeling the grace, and according to Saint Gregory Palamas, the immediate or direct contemplation of God’s grace under the form of the uncreated divine energies. According to the hesychast tradition, the body needs to participate to the spiritual efforts of the spirit.

“The hesychast asceticism is not looking for suffering and sadness, but for the power to bring about, by abstinence, resistance to the dissipation of the mind and vigilance of the heart to what is essential.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Preot Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, p. 213;

<sup>17</sup> Preot Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, p. 214;

<sup>18</sup> Alexandru Mironescu, *Calea inimii. Eseuri în duhul Rugului Aprins*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 1998, p. 11;

<sup>19</sup> Nichifor Crainic, *Sfințenia – împlinirea umanului (Curs de Teologie Mistică, 1935-1936)*, p. 144;

<sup>20</sup> Sfântul Ignatie Briancianinov, *Despre rugăciunea lui Iisus. Experiențe ascetice*, vol. I, Rom. transl. Adrian and Xenia Tănăsescu-Vlas, Ed. Sofia, București, 2004, p. 254;

<sup>21</sup> Placide Deseille, *Nostalgia Ortodoxiei*, p. 152;

<sup>22</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, rom. transl. Pr. Prof. Ion Buga și Anca Manolescu, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2006, p. 120;

The Jesus Prayer has been called in various ways:

“guarding the mind, vigilance, watchfulness, work of the mind, prayer of the mind – these are various names for one and the same endeavor of the soul, according to the various ways it takes on. The endeavor of the soul turns, in its time, into endeavor of the spirit. The endeavor of the spirit is still the endeavor of the soul but shadowed by the divine grace.”<sup>23</sup>

The hesychast is that person who acquired has inner peace and quiet and lives:

“in a state of continual receptiveness. He is listening to the voice of prayer in his own heart but understands that this voice is not his, but Someone Else is speaking to him from the depths.”<sup>24</sup>

To hear God’s voice, the one who prays must keep silent, watch and be vigilant. An Orthodox writer from Finland wisely said the following words about prayer: “*When you pray, your «ego» must keep quiet ... Keep quiet and let prayer speak*”<sup>25</sup>. Referring to the one who are beginners in prayer, Saint Gregory of Mount Sinai says that they cannot chase away their thoughts alone, but they can be chased away only with God’s help. Even those advanced on the way leading to the union with the divinity wage the war against the thoughts only with the help of the arms offered by the Almighty God. Thus, when thoughts that are harmful for the soul struggle to gain dominion over us, we need to call: “*the Lord Jesus, frequently and persistently, and they will run away. Because, unable to bear the heat of the heart sprung from prayer, they run away as burnt by fire*”<sup>26</sup>. Saint Gregory Palamas said about those who chose the way of the prayer of the mind that:

“they need to be free from sinful passions and need to have set themselves free from the connection with the things in the middle, (in between themselves and God), because it is only in this way that they can reach untroubled prayer; and those who have not reached this measure (of freedom from sinful passions) but are endeavoring towards it, need to go past the slavery to pleasure (sweet slavery to sinful passions), to become totally free from sinful passions”<sup>27</sup>.

To set out to the target searched for by means of the prayer of the heart, according to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, you first need to win three things:

“lack of preoccupation towards the justified and unjustified things, namely death to everything; clean conscience keeping yourself free from blame from your own conscience; and freedom from sinful passions, not leaving yourself attracted by anything of this century or of the body.”<sup>28</sup>

### 3. THE NAME OF GOD – SPRING OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Jesus Prayer or *the prayer of the heart* originates in the biblical conception on God’s Name. The Holy Scripture reveals to us that God’s name is but one of His attributes by which He reveals Himself and by which He manifests His presence. When someone invokes Jesus’ name, he becomes worthy of receiving God in his heart.

<sup>23</sup> Sfântul Ignatie Briancianinov, *Despre rugăciunea lui Iisus. Experiențe ascetice*, p.253;

<sup>24</sup> Episcop Kallistos Ware, “*Puterea Numelui. Rugăciunea lui Iisus în spiritualitatea ortodoxă*”, in vol. *Rugăciunea lui Iisus...*, p. 13;

<sup>25</sup> Tito Colliander, *Le Chemin des ascetes*, Ed. Abbaye de Bellefontaine, p.13, apud *Ibidem*;

<sup>26</sup> Sfântul Grigorie Sinaitul, “*Despre cele două feluri ale rugăciunii*”, in vol. *Rugăciunea lui Iisus...*, p. 63;

<sup>27</sup> Sfântul Grigorie Palama, “*Despre rugăciune*”, in vol. *Rugăciunea lui Iisus...*, p. 65;

<sup>28</sup> Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog, “*Despre al treilea fel de rugăciune*”, in vol. *Rugăciunea lui Iisus...*, p. 75;

The power of the Jesus prayer consists precisely in the miracles the Apostles were performing with the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were healing diseases that were incurable for the human powers, resurrecting dead people, chasing away demons etc. This happened as well when the Apostles Peter and John, going to pray at the temple in Jerusalem, met a lame man who was waiting to receive something. Saint Peter addresses him as follows: *“Silver and gold I do not possess, but what I do have, this I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!”* (Acts 3: 6). This miracle scandalized the Jews in the Sanhedrim so that they ordered that the Apostles should be put under guard, and the next day they were interrogated being asked the question: *“By what power or by what name did you do this?”* (Acts 4: 7). Then Saint Peter the Apostle, illumined by the Holy Spirit said: *“let it be known to you all and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man is standing before you healthy! ... And salvation is in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4: 10, 12). *“God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth.”* (Philippians 2: 9-10)

In the Orthodoxy, life is generally *“Christocentric, it is continual imitation of the Man-God, yet we can say that especially the hesychasm of Mount Sinai and the hesychasm under any historical form is the ardent cult of Jesus’ name.”*<sup>29</sup>

When Jesus’ name is uttered inside the soul, the enemies are chased away and it can irradiate divine light. By invoking Jesus’ help, one chases away from the mind all the residues and so it can better deal with prayer.

By the words of the Scripture: *“See, I am going to send My angel before you ..., be on your guard before him ..., for My name is in him.”* (Exodus 23: 20-21) is clearly expressed the idea that the angel is the one that presents the name and the latter is from that moment on:

“the dreadful bearer of the divine presence. When the divine Name is uttered over a country or over a person, they enter an intimate relation with God. Invoking the name of God is accompanied by His immediate manifestation, because the name is a form of the presence. For this reason, God’s name could only be pronounced by the great bishop on the day of Yom-Kippur, in the Holy of Holies of the temple of Jerusalem. The embodiment makes out of man such a sacrifice-giver, yet man is ceaselessly, at any moment, the depository of the name. The Name of Jesus - Joshua means Savior. Nomen est Omen. It contains in ciphered potentiality the energy of salvation: «God’s Son’s name supports the whole world » says Hermas, because He is present in the world and we are glorifying Him in His name.”<sup>30</sup>

By the fact that man invokes Jesus’ name, he turns himself into a temple of Jesus, therefore becoming a place of the divine presence. Jesus’ name can be invoked in all the circumstances of life, like a seal that needs to be imprinted on anything.

## CONCLUSIONS

Hesychasm promotes the communion of love among persons. *“Hesychia”* means for the spiritual or pneumatic man going away from the wrong ways of selfishness and individualism and channeling himself on the divine way of love, of the communion with God, with the Lord’s Mother and with all the Saints, namely with the whole Church.

<sup>29</sup> Nichifor Crainic, *Sfințenia – împlinirea umanului (Curs de Teologie Mistică, 1935-1936)*, p. 138;

<sup>30</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, p. 201;

The prayer “*of the heart*” is an expression the Holy Spirit, an exercise for entering into communion with the essence of life, for union with God.

Hesychasm is nothing else but a way of regaining the peace of the Spirit, a spiritual itinerary whose final point is the intimate communion with God. The Holy Spirit is the one that guides man during the spiritual experience of prayer. In the spiritual or pneumatic ascension generated by the ceaseless prayer, man is transfigured and purified getting to acquire the stage of “*new man*” who has found again the peace of his Spirit.

Speaking about hesychasm today, when our society is going through the dramatic mutations produced by secularization, when man is looking for forms of spirituality able to give him, rapidly, balance and psychological comfort, we should pay attention to the advice of the old monks who have succeeded in regaining and multiplying God’s grace in man by a manner of living that we barely know nowadays.

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