

ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN AND HIS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SEEING THE DIVINE LIGHT

Fr. Prof. Ph.D. Ioan CHIRILĂ¹, Lect. Ph.D. Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA²,
Ph.D. Candidate Bogdan ȘOPTERAN³,

^{1 2 3}„Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University “Babes-Bolyai”, Cluj-Napoca,
ROMANIA,

E-mail: ¹ioan.chirila@ubbcluj.ro, ²stelian.pasca@ubbcluj.ro, ³bogdan.sopterean@ubbcluj.ro

ABSTRACT

Saint Symeon is one of the most representative Eastern theologians and mystics. His speech on God and the knowledge of heavenly realities through direct, unmitigated experience would gain him the title of “the New Theologian”, which, until him, had only belonged to Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus. Therefore, his writings have greatly influenced the Christian East. Saint Symeon has been perceived as a renewer of the tradition of spiritual life and a restorer of the lost or rather neglected spiritual life. In this study, we aim to highlight his experiences in which he partook of the sight of divine light. These mystical episodes marked his life and decisively influenced the way he related to God and to the spiritual life to which Christians must adhere. We will first present these experiences of heavenly light from a chronological point of view, starting with those from the period when he was a layman and culminating with those from Saint Mamas Monastery. Our main aim is to see how each of these mystical experiences has marked his spiritual evolution. We will see that these experiences have helped Saint Symeon reach deeper within the mystery of communion to the One Who is Light and Who is calling everyone to be like Him.

Keywords: divine light; Symeon Studite; mystical experience; unmitigated sight; communion; theologisation;

INTRODUCTION

From Niketas Stethatos' biography, we find out that Saint Symeon the New Theologian came from a noble family and that, ever since he was a child, he was drawn towards meditation. While the other children of his age were playing, he preferred to engross himself in his studies. He thoroughly studied tachygraphy and grammar, without attaching much importance to profane Hellenic culture or rhetoric, as he was searching for other things. His family was foreseeing a great destiny for him in various positions at the palace, but he was striving toward a monastic life ever since he was a child. Therefore, at only fourteen, he tried to retire to the Monastery of Stoudios and settle under the guidance of Symeon the Pious, the advanced spiritual father who would mark his entire life. Bearing in mind his youth and the experience he had gained during his years of spiritual guidance; the old spiritual father recommended the young Symeon to wait a little longer. Even if he was not accepted, he obeyed, went back home, and followed a monastic lifestyle, while still living in the world. From the night to end, until dawn, he would pray fervidly to

God and he would restrain his body to resist temptations. He also started to see the results of his perseverance in this askesis. His soul was freed from the material and was imbued with a strong love for God. The young man started to feel the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit in his life and understood that the Spirit was helping him understand the unintelligible.

Each of his mystical experiences helped him climb up the ladder of knowledge and get acquainted with God's depths. The first moment of partaking of divine glory opened his eyes towards a world he had heard of from his spiritual father, but which he had not yet seen. Embraced by the light of God's glory, he achieved a state of peace, in which the Spirit soothed him. Then, with each experience of seeing the heavenly light, he settled down in a state of unmitigated communion with God, in which he partook of numerous gifts of the Spirit. The apogee was reached during his life at Saint Mamas Monastery. After seeing the godly light, he acquired the gift of theologisation, through which Saint Symeon made God known and offered to those who longed to get closer to Him the necessary reference points for living in the light of His heavenly grace.

Therefore, in our research, we aim to highlight Saint Symeon's ascension towards Light, indicating the stages he goes through in each mystical experience in which he sees the uncreated light shining forth from God's Being. The source texts we will use in our endeavours belong to Saint Symeon¹ and his disciple, St. Niketas Stethatos². Most of the time, we will analyse them side by side to capture their complementarity.

When we deal with the description of the same mystical experience, we will also explain the differences, which are mostly influenced by the context in which these testimonies were written. Besides these main sources, we will also use secondary sources, in which famous theologians such as Ioan I. Ică jr.³, Ilarion Alfeyev⁴ or Basil Krivocheine⁵ underlined aspects which are related to Saint Symeon's theology and mystic. As far as the structure of our research is concerned, we would like to mention that we will present his mystical experiences from a chronological point of view, starting with two experiences from his period as a layman, then continuing with the sight of the light during his life at the Monastery of Stoudios and with his experiences at Saint Mamas Monastery.

¹ ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri I. Discursuri teologice și etice* [Writings I. Theological and Ethical Discourses], transl. by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2001; ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri II. Cateheze* [Writings II. Catecheses], transl. by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2003.

² ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog* [The Life of Saint Symeon the New Theologian], transl. by Ilie Iliescu, Herald publishing house, Bucharest, 2003; ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, "Viața și conduita Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog" [The Life and Conduct of Saint Symeon the New Theologian], in ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri IV. Viața și epoca* [Writings IV. The Life. The Epoch], transl. by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2006.

³ Ioan I. ICA jr., "Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog și provocarea mistică" [Saint Symeon the New Theologian and the Mystical Challenge], in ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri I. Discursuri teologice și etice* [Writings I. Theological and Ethical Discourses], transl. by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2001.

⁴ HILARION ALFEYEV, *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog și tradiția ortodoxă* [Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition], transl. by Ioana Stoicescu and Maria-Magdalena Rusen, Sofia publishing house, Bucharest, 2010.

⁵ BASIL KRIVOCHINE, *În lumina lui Hristos. Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog (949-1022). Viața – Spiritualitatea – Învățătura* [In the Light of Christ. Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022): Life, Spirituality, Doctrine], transl. by Vasile Leb, Gheorghe Jordan, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997.

1. THE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF SEEING THE GODLY LIGHT DURING HIS PERIOD AS A LAYMAN

Saint Symeon had his first experience of seeing the godly light one night when he was a layman. God revealed Himself to Symeon in the darkness of the night, enveloping him in the light of His grace. The event and the state in which the young Symeon entered were later described by his disciple, St. Niketas Stethatos, to whom he recounted in detail what happened when he saw God in that bright light which enveloped him: “One night, while praying and while his pure mind was connected to God, Symeon saw a light from above, suddenly shining down on him from heavens – a strong and pure light, overflowing everything and shining as if in broad daylight. He too was illuminated by this radiance and it seemed [to Symeon, the translator’s emphasis] that the entire house, along with the room in which he was standing, had vanished in the blink of an eye and that he was being lifted into the air, completely forgetting about his body.”⁶ [our translation]. Saint Symeon would later confess to his dear ones that, in that state, he was overwhelmed with infinite happiness, one which he had never felt before on earth. This thrill of happiness overwhelmed him to such an extent that he could no longer contain the tears which were continuously flowing down his face. Saint Symeon was not used to this way of experiencing heavenly light. For this reason, he had been astounded and did not know how to properly react in such situations. The first urge he felt was that of incessantly saying a short prayer, which was being used by monks who were striving to acquire the Jesus Prayer: *Lord, have mercy!*⁷. In such circumstances, when the mystic is overwhelmed by the sight of the divine, he utters words which are meant to maintain him in communion with God and within this wonderful vision. As the Heavenly Kingdom is a kingdom of sight, words are superfluous. The mystic who delights in divine light advances in knowledge, letting himself be enveloped in light and remaining silent.

Saint Symeon realised he was uttering these words only after he had come to his senses, as, in the beginning, he was completely overwhelmed by the sight of divine light. “Therefore – according to St. Niketas Stethatos – in this light, he was able to see and behold, a sort of very bright cloud, without any form or outline, full of God’s ineffable glory, appeared high, in the sky. To the right of this cloud, he saw his spiritual [translator’s emphasis] father, Symeon Eulabes, standing in the clothes he usually wore, gazing intently at

⁶ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 18-19.

⁷ This short prayer is the synthesis of Hesychastic prayer (*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*), which has two well-defined structures. The former summons God’s name and the latter asks for His mercy. Kallistos WARE, *Puterea numelui. Rugăciunea lui Iisus în spiritualitatea ortodoxă* [The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality], transl. by Gabriela Moldoveanu, Christiana publishing house, Bucharest, 1992, pp. 26-27. Monks did not have to say the entire prayer. Everyone was free to utter only those words which suited their soul. Jean GOUILLARD, *Mica filocalie a rugăciunii inimii* [Small Philokalia on the Jesus Prayer], transl. by Ilie and Ecaterina Iliescu, Herald publishing house, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 44-45, 52, 94, 120. But it was important not to omit the first part of the prayer. The last part could miss, but the first one under no circumstances. The act of summoning the name was essential to reach an ecstatic state. Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, “Numele lui Dumnezeu semn al prezenței personale și acțiunea sa mântuitoare (sotirică)” [God’s Name as a Sign of His Presence and Saving Action], in *Studia Universitatis Babeș Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa*, No. 1 (2010), pp. 23-24. In their mystical ecstasy, some monks would only utter the name *Jesus*. Oliver CLÉMENT, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus* [The Jesus Prayer], transl. by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997, p. 26. The second structure of the Jesus Prayer (invoking mercy) was necessary for the shunning of passions. As soon as the fallen man acknowledges his mistakes, God’s grace descends upon him, cleanses him of sin and prepares him to partake of the divine. For details, see Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, “Mila dumnezeiască și reînnoirea spirituală a regelui David” [Godly Mercy and King David’s Spiritual Renewal], in *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa*, No. 2 (2011), pp. 51-66.

that divine light and praying serenely. Being in this state of ecstasy for a long time, Symeon could not tell whether, at that time, he was in his body or out of his body, as he later claimed.”⁸ [our translation]. This experience finds resonance in St. Paul’s confession to the Corinthians concerning the *man* who had been caught up in the third heaven. Just like the apostle, Saint Symeon was unaware of how his mystical ecstasy had occurred. Whether in the body? Whether out of the body? Only God knew! However, it is not this detail that is most important, but the experience of seeing the godly light. It is worth mentioning that, in his vision, he saw his teacher, who was partaking in the same vision. He too was overwhelmed by the sight of that light, which is why he was incessantly praying to remain in that state of communion⁹.

We would like to mention that Saint Symeon also relates this event to one of his catecheses. Choosing a pseudonym (George), the Saint speaks about himself in the third person. Unlike St. Niketas Stethatos, who claims that the vision occurred at the age of fourteen, Saint Symeon says that the *victory bearer* experienced it at the age of twenty. Before recounting this event, Symeon speaks about the moment when he met his spiritual father, who initiated him in the monastic life and practice, by offering him as guidance the writings of Saint Mark the Ascetic. He received this writing as if it were sent by God and he diligently started to apply the advice it contained. He started to persevere in prayer until midnight when he had this mystical experience¹⁰.

In his narration, Symeon provides several details concerning his askesis: “big tears were falling from his eyes every evening and he was kneeling even more often and falling with his face to the ground and, holding his legs close together while standing immobile, he was sobbingly reading his prayers to the Mother of God with so much zeal and, as if God Himself were physically there, he would fall before His most pure feet and, like the blind man, he would ask for compassion and for the ability to see with his soul. However, since the prayer lasted every evening until midnight [...] he did not falter or laze in any way, nor did he move any of his limbs or even turn his eyes or look away, but he would stand motionless, like a pillar or like a bodiless being”¹¹. [our translation]. These efforts were being made to receive the gift of divine sight. Once seen, the heavenly light which shines forth from God’s Being sows in man an endless yearning, leading the body to an unimaginable askesis. One who has partaken of such a sight can no longer find gratification in the light coming from the sun. Divine light can stand no comparison, as with it, the infinite joy of communion, which manifests itself through tears, finds dwelling within the soul.

In one of his discourses on the perception of the grace of the Holy Spirit, Symeon shows that, when one sees the unseen God, he sees Him as light, but does not realise Who the One revealing Himself was. He feels there is an alien presence but does not even dare to

⁸ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, p. 18-19.

⁹ St. Symeon the Studite appeared in the vision of the young ascetic, showing him that it was through his guidance that he had reached that spiritual stage and certifying the fact that his spiritual teacher had reached a high degree of holiness.

¹⁰ We would like to point to a difference between the narration of Saint Niketas and that of Saint Symeon himself. While the former claimed that the prayer and meditation lasted until dawn, the former said that his askesis continued until midnight. In this case, we are faced either with an exaggeration of Saint Niketas, since, as his apprentice, he was seeking to convey the best image of his spiritual father, or with a proof of humility on the part of Saint Symeon. Nonetheless, it is possible that this is a real confession, as Saint Symeon presented his experiences, without suggesting that he is the person concerned.

¹¹ ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scieri II. Cateheze...*, pp. 238-239.

ask who it is; instead, he is amazed, contemplating what he sees. In the end, one who has had such an experience goes to a more seasoned person, to the one who has experienced such feelings and tells that person what he has seen. And that person confirms that it was God that he has seen, thus showing him that he is on the right track. And, receiving such words from the spiritual father, when one sees God again in the light, he dares to humbly ask Him: “My Lord, is that You?” And He answers: “Yes, it is Me, the God Who became a man for you; and I have made you as you see, and you shall become a god”¹². [our translation]. Most likely, here, Saint Symeon the New Theologian alludes to the first moments when he saw the uncreated divine light. The narration suggests that the spiritual father who guided him could confirm to him that it was a vision from God because he had previously experienced such visions.

2. THE SECOND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OF HIS YOUTH

Faith, hard askesis and the state of repentance made Symeon worthy of seeing the divine light. The Saint’s hard askesis prepared him both spiritually and physically for other mystical experiences. Through prayer and askesis, man sharpens his feelings and rises above the materiality of the world and takes care of most of the spiritual. However, the experience of seeing the divine light is not conditioned by these efforts; this can be seen only when God wishes so. Even if Saint Symeon prayed, exercised long rigorous self-discipline, and did not reduce the intensity of his askesis, he was surprised each time by the moment when God made him partake of His glory. The second vision of divine light followed the same pattern: “One day, while standing¹³ and uttering more with the mind than with the mouth: «God, have mercy on me, a sinner!», he was suddenly crowned by a divine radiance coming from above and filling up the entire place. And, when this happened, the young man no longer knew whether he was inside the house or under a roof. From everywhere he could see only light and he did not know whether he was still walking on earth. And, inside him, there was no longer the fear of falling, nor the care for the world, nothing of that which overcomes the people who have a body troubled his mind, but, being fully connected to the immaterial light and feeling that he had become light, he was flooded with tears of happiness and unspeakable joy. Then, his mind soared to heaven and he saw another light, clearer than the one which was close to him. And standing close to that light, that holy, angel-like elder [Symeon the Pious, emphasis added]¹⁴ who had given him the commandment and the book revealed himself to him.”¹⁵ [our translation].

During this new experience of seeing the heavenly light, we notice that Saint Symeon utters a prayer like the one from the first mystical ecstasy. From this, we can infer that the practice of the Jesus Prayer had an essential role in such experiences. These episodes of

¹² ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Cartea discursurilor etice...*, p. 245.

¹³ The saint narrates his experience in the third person.

¹⁴ After he became a hegumen at Mamas, every year Saint Symeon piously commemorated his spiritual master, even if the latter was not canonised or included in the calendar. Saint Symeon’s attitude can be understood if we bear in mind the fact that it was, he who had guided him towards such a spiritual level, he himself having a lot of experience, but especially if we think that God revealed to him that he was a saint. The first time he saw the divine light, he also saw him next to that cloud of light. From this, Symeon understood that his spiritual father was dwelling next to God, with the saints. These are only a few of the reasons why Saint Symeon organised a great ceremony to commemorate his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious. How could he not have venerated him when he saw him in the uncreated divine light, when he heard from God that he was an apostle of Christ while he was writing that letter to his father? ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața și conduita Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 295-307.

¹⁵ ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri II. Cateheze...*, p. 239.

seeing the heavenly light could only be attained through considerable spiritual efforts. Even if there were exceptions concerning the first visions, in the case of the following ones, the saints had to make considerable efforts. We would like to mention once again that these experiences could not be acquired because of human askesis. The one offering these partaking of light to the mystic was God.

In the same catechesis, Saint Symeon would later insist on the fact that the partaking of light is the fruit of faith, confirmed through good deeds. The Saint confessed that he did not seek to partake of this kind of experience at all costs. He was striving to keep his conscience clean. However, his striving and his zeal for spiritual struggle would earn him great divine gifts. God does not consider the age, nor the fact that a longer period is necessary to make the faithful worthy of such mystical experiences. A short but very intense vigil is enough to attract God's mercy, to make Him pour down the grace of the Holy Spirit and to find the one who honestly seeks Him worthy of things which are so advanced.

The man struggles to reach communion with God, and He reveals Himself to him in light and gives him strength in this communion. As a result of this experience, in the light of divine glory, man no longer feels the materiality of the body, he becomes translucent¹⁶ and thus unites himself with God¹⁷.

When we have in mind the experience of divine light, it is necessary to consider the stage preceding it, the stage of ascetic practice, and the stage right after the light withdrew, when we can see. In this respect, St. Niketas Stethatos underscores the spiritual state which marked his spiritual guide, stating the following: "Much later, this light gradually faded, and he saw himself again in his body and his room, his heart full of unspeakable joy, while he was loudly calling out: «Lord, have mercy». His whole being was filled with a divine shudder and his face was soaked with tears which were sweeter than honeycomb and honey. From then on, he felt that his body became thinner and lighter, like a spiritual body, and this feeling lasted for a long time afterwards."¹⁸ [our translation]. Also, we determine from Saint Symeon what happened after he came back to his bodily senses and what happened right after that. The effect of seeing the light endured in his heart and gradually faded.

During this time, due to the joy he was feeling, he kept on shedding tears of happiness, which soothed his soul. When he fully came back to his senses, he sat on the bed and heard the rooster sing. He understood that it was already midnight and, no longer intending to go to sleep, he started to read the Psalms at Matins. These experiences provide both the soul and the body with a clear spiritual vigour. The body is awake, endowed with renewed strength to continue the ascent towards heaven through askesis. The fatigue, which often overwhelms monks, vanishes as if it had never existed so that the strength endowed upon him gives him the necessary framework to re-enter the state of communion with God¹⁹.

¹⁶ Translucence indicates the transparency of a person and reveals that person's union with God. The term indicates a level of spirituality in which the hypostases do not intermix. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology], vol. 3, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997, p. 16.

¹⁷ See ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri II. Cateheze...*, p. 240.

¹⁸ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri II. Cateheze...*, pp. 239-240.

3. THE ROAD TO THE MONASTERY OF STODIOS AND HIS PAULINE EXPERIENCE

St. Niketas Stethatos continues by saying that, after this experience, young Symeon expressed again his desire to enter the monastery. He was once again advised to wait. This waiting ended six years after his first experience of seeing God's light, when his spiritual father, St. Symeon the Pious, assented to the young man entering the monastery. Although he had fully decided to embrace a monastic life, his entering into the congregation of the Monastery of Stoudios did not occur at that time. St. Symeon first returned home to Galatia in Paphlagonia, to give up the office he had received at the palace and to say goodbye to his parents. The events occurred in a time of fasting, during which he intensified his struggles and his praying schedule. Once back home, young Symeon searched for a book which could be useful for that period in his family's library and found Saint John Callimachus' *Ladder*, from which he retained the following teaching in particular: "Insensitivity is the demise of the soul and the death of the intellect before the death of the body"²⁰. Saint Symeon would not show indifference, nor insensitivity. On the contrary, he would deepen his spiritual preoccupations and grant them the place they deserved in his life.

During this time, St. Symeon faced temptations and fierce confrontations with demons. One night before his admission to the Monastery of Stoudios, he was home in his chapel. Suddenly, he heard a great number of demons rushing and slamming on the door of the chapel to get in and attack him. Seized with fear, young Symeon stretched up his hands to heaven and put his whole faith by being saved in God. After standing still in this position for a few hours, he was greatly surprised to see that the doors of the chapel had remained closed and that the demons could not get in. After this victory against the demons, Symeon started to dedicate his entire time to reading and praying. In moments of acedia or agitation, to remind himself of the importance of prayer, he would go near tombs and try to think about the nothingness of human life and thus get out of the state of insensitivity and laziness which threatened him²¹.

Before going to the monastery, Saint Symeon's father tried to convince him to give up this thought, but he failed. His love for God was much stronger than his love for his natural father. He left everything behind and headed towards the Monastery of Stoudios and towards his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious. On the road to the monastery, he had another experience of seeing the divine light. He was in the mountains, when "he was suddenly enveloped from above by the radiance of the grace of the Spirit, as if by fire, just like it happened with Paul before, and he felt overwhelmed with a joy and peace he had never felt before, which strengthened his love for God and his faith in [Symeon the Studite] his spiritual father"²². [our translation]. We notice that Saint Niketas compares the experience of his father with that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus when he was halted by a dazzling light. It is worth mentioning that the light Saul saw was meant to make him realise his mistake of persecuting the Christians. On the other hand, the light Saint Symeon saw was meant to help him. After this mystical experience, he understood that the road he had set off on was the one blessed by God. The resemblance consists more of the fact that the two saints of the Church were travelling when they experienced the divine light.

²⁰ See ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 21-22.

²¹ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 20-23.

²² ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, p. 25.

4. THE SIGHT OF DIVINE LIGHT DURING HIS TIME AT HE MONASTERY OF STODIOS

The period when he stayed at the Monastery of Stoudios was full of trials, but also full of joy. By entering under the direct observation of his spiritual father, St. Symeon the Pious, he became aware of the fact that it was necessary to fully obey, to give up his own will and to fulfil that of the one guiding him towards perfection. And it was not easy for him. First, he was advised to act like a stranger, to be reluctant towards talking to other monks, and to rather seek to keep his mind clear away from external thoughts. Then, he was made to do exhausting work, which made his body feel tired. He did it all with a lot of devotion. After a while, seeing him persevere in his obedience and fulfil the tasks he received, the elder made him obey things which were contrary to fasting and vigil, to subjugate his will. He asked him to eat and sleep, which to Saint Symeon was against the vocation to which he had been called. Nonetheless, he fully obeyed his spiritual father's commandments. As he was going up this spiritual ladder, the devils were seeking ways to make him fall into sin. However, the saint was protected both by his spiritual father's prayer and by his struggles and his full obedience²³.

Yet great trials started to arise when several monks from the Monastery of Stoudios began to feel envious of Saint Symeon. This struggle was redoubled by his father's and his family's attempts to make him leave the monastery. However, he was helped by Saint Symeon the Pious, who encouraged him, telling him that, under those difficult conditions, it was necessary to maintain his soul pure and clean, for only in such a soul did God's grace dwell. While going through such difficult moments, Saint Symeon asked his spiritual father to pray so that he would receive the divine grace. His spiritual father told him that God would give him the double grace he had received. Symeon was astonished to hear such words and, at the moment, he did not understand what his guide had meant to tell him. However, God would prove to him that his spiritual father's words were true as soon as they parted around the third hour of the night.

In those early hours of the morning, Saint Symeon was once again found worthy of pretesting communion with God and of seeing the uncreated light. At first, Symeon had the impression that it was dawning earlier, but soon, he felt it was something else and he realised he was "surrounded by a light coming from somewhere above, enveloping him in a radiance resembling that of the sun. [This light] penetrated his mind, took hold of it, and made him feel immense joy. It lifted his soul even more towards the divine love and, with his troubled spirit and his contrite heart, he knelt before God, confessing, and giving thanks. Then, while lying on the ground and shedding tears, an unseen miracle happened: right now, when he was worshipping God, a bright cloud appeared, descending towards him, and making him feel his soul full of joy, peace, and godly love, as the earthly burden of thoughts related to bodily pleasures was starting to disappear."²⁴ [our translation].

This bright cloud marks the unmitigated presence of God²⁵, Who, nonetheless, hides. In this respect, the scriptural episodes in which the cloud of divine glory shows itself are relevant. We would like to recall, in this regard, the pillars of the cloud which led the Jews through the desert. By day, it protected them from the heat, and, by night, it turned into a

²³ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 26-30.

²⁴ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 34-35.

²⁵ Ioan CHRILĂ, "Kavod și Şekina – Slava lui Dumnezeu pre luminarea creaturii" [Kavod and Shekinah – God's Glory for the Enlightenment of the Creature], in *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă* [Annual of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology] (2013-2014), tome 17, Renașterea publishing house, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, p. 24.

pillar of light, that divine light giving warmth to the Israelites²⁶. This cloud would dwell above and within the Holy Tabernacle²⁷. Through this visible sign, God made the sons of Israel aware of His presence among them. Manifesting Himself under similar conditions during the consecration of Solomon's Temple, by filling the sanctuary with smoke²⁸, God reassured them that He was there beside them. Then, on Mount Tabor, God reminded the three Apostles that He was the God of their fathers, making them partake of an experience which only the two leading figures of the Old Testament (Moses and Elijah) had had²⁹. In this context, we would also like to point to the fact that, while seeing the godly grace, Saint Symeon also noticed other persons, just like God's Apostles³⁰.

This experience is also narrated by Saint Symeon in his catecheses, where he provides further details: "thus entering the place where I usually prayed and starting with «Holy God», remembering the Saint's words, I was so moved to tears and to yearn for God that I cannot put into words the joy and delight I was feeling. For I suddenly fell with my face to the ground and behold, an abundance of light spiritually flooded me, taking with it my entire intellect and my soul, so that the unexpected miracle filled me with astonishment, and I was as if outside myself [in ecstasy]. However, not only that, for I even forgot where I was standing and who I was and where I was, calling only «Lord, have mercy!», as I found myself saying when I came to my senses; but, the father, who the one speaking or moving my tongue was I do not know – he said –, only God does. For whether in the body, whether out of the body [2 *Corinthians* 12: 2-3], I was speaking to that light, a fact known by that light which scattered the fog from my soul and the earthly thinking and which chased away all thick matter and my soul's burden, which had been brought to my limbs by lethargy and sleepiness. For, oh, frightening miracle! Therefore, much tensed and invigorated my relaxed articulation and muscles, due to my great effort that I felt as if the vestment of death had been pulled off me; but not only that, also a lot of joy, spiritual feeling, and sweetness above anything I had seen before mysteriously flooded my soul and freedom and forgetting of all earthly thoughts and even the manner of getting out of this life were miraculously given to me and made known to me. For the senses of my intellect and of my soul connected only to that unspeakable joy of light"³¹. [our translation].

We considered it important to present the entire experience, as it captures the essential moments of such a mystical experience. First, the Saint prays, then he is filled with heavenly light and, without knowing whether he is in the body or out of the body, he utters the prayer *Lord, has mercy* to remain in the state of communion. Unlike other narrations, here, Saint Symeon mentions the fact that he felt a new sensation, in which he managed to get detached from the weaknesses of human nature and to understand the rationales God put in His creatures. In those moments, the Saint fathomed the meaning of man's freedom and what happens when a man passes from this world to the heavenly one. His progress in knowledge

²⁶ Edmond JACOB, *Théologie de l'Ancient Testament*, Delachaux & Niestlé, Paris, 1955, p. 63.

²⁷ Thomas WAGNER, *Gottes Herrlichkeit: Bedeutung und Verwendung des Begriffs kabod im Alten Testament*, Brill, Lieben, 2012, p. 98.

²⁸ Giovanna Maria PORRINO, *Le poids et la gloire, gloire de Dieu, gloire de l'homme – La racine 722 spécialement dans les livres des Proverbes, de la Genèse, de l'Exode et des Psaumes*, Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 2016, p. 436.

²⁹ R. T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co, Grand Rapids, 2007, p. 645.

³⁰ Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, Claudia-Cosmina TRIF and Ioan POPA-BOTA, "The Iconic Representation of the Taboric Light", in *European Journal of Science and Theology*, No. 1 (2021), p. 32.

³¹ SAINT SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri II. Cateheze...*, pp. 190-191.

by unmitigatedly seeing the divine glory allowed the New Theologian to understand man's mystery³².

Shortly after this event, because of the accusations of envious monks, the hegumen of the monastery tried to separate Saint Symeon from his spiritual father. He was envious of Symeon the Pious. Seeing that Symeon did not obey him, he expelled him from the monastery.

5. MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES AT SAINT MAMAS MONASTERY

Although short, his life at the Monastery of Stoudios was essential for Saint Symeon's spiritual life. During that period, he could live in direct obedience to his spiritual father, which was a spiritual level much above the one acquired during his period as a layman, when he only met him from time to time³³. It was also due to the intervention of his spiritual father that Symeon was received at Saint Mamas Monastery by its hegumen, Antony. Symeon would spend most of his life in this monastery: here, he would be tonsured as a monk, receiving the name Symeon, after his spiritual father, and, here, he would also lead the congregation as its hegumen for 25 years³⁴.

Saint Symeon escaped the envy of the monks from the Monastery of Stoudios, but his family and in particular his natural father continued to pressure him to leave the monastery. Under these conditions, after entering Saint Mamas Monastery, Saint Symeon wrote a letter to his father, showing him how he should address his son, who had a monastic vocation. And, while he was writing this, Saint Symeon experienced once again the sight of divine light. This shone down from heaven into his room and filled his soul with joy. It was at night, the candle burning in the candlestick went out, but the whole room was full of light. Just like a voice was heard from the cloud on Mount Tabor (*Matthew 17: 5*), now the Saint heard a voice from that strong light, telling him: "To the apostles and disciples of Christ, to our mediators and ambassadors to God". These are the words which should be used when addressing a letter to one's spiritual father. In those moments of mystical ecstasy, Saint Symeon felt an alien force moving his hand to writing, while a divine voice was telling him what to write³⁵.

After this vision of the uncreated light, Saint Symeon became even more ardent in his love for God, he intensified his schedule of askesis and praying, and he dedicated long hours to meditation on the scriptural text. He ate and slept little and the physical work he was doing was that of copying texts from the holy books, as he had unbelievably beautiful writing due to his calligraphy studies. Meanwhile, he had been tonsured as a monk and was about to be ordained, priest. Patriarch Nicholas Chrysoberges (980-992) and the congregation of Saint Mamas Monastery assented to that and Saint Symeon was ordained. It is important to mention that, while being ordained, when he was kneeling in front of the patriarch, he had a new vision: The Holy Spirit was coming down "as an infinite, pure,

³² Both narrations complete each other and offer us an unseen image of a special mystical experience. Bearing in mind the dialogue which took place between the spiritual father and his disciple before this episode, we can notice that what Saint Symeon experienced does nothing else but to support what his spiritual father had told him before going to his cell: "you'll be given double the grace I have from Him". ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, p. 34.

³³ Hilarion ALFEYEV, *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog*, p. 21.

³⁴ Ioan I. ICA, *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog...*, p. 13.

³⁵ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 37-38.

simple and shapeless light”, covering his head. [our translation]. This vision from the beginning of his ordination would repeat itself during every Divine Liturgy he celebrated as a priest³⁶. The Holy Spirit enlightened his mind and offered him sensitive eyes to be able to see God’s unseen mysteries...

As hegumen of Saint Mamas Monastery, Symeon embarked on an ample program to reorganise it. He started the restoration of the buildings of the monastery and continued by reorganising the congregation and the liturgical schedule, proposing at its centre the daily Communion with God’s Flesh and Blood, not with indifference, but with tears and a pricked heart. However, the monks he was guiding proved to disagree with him. Many of them were outraged and even left the monastery. Symeon wanted to show them what the conduct of monks should be and how they should fully dedicate themselves to Christ, but they failed to understand him. Even if his activity as hegumen was taking up more time, even if he had greater responsibilities, Saint Symeon was careful not to neglect his askesis and prayers. Due to this perseverance, God offered him the gift of being pricked in the heart. The hegumen dedicated three moments of his day to prayer, to the dialogue with God: at dawn, after Matins, during the Divine Liturgy, and at dusk, after the evening services. The latter prayers would last until late in the night. One night, while fervently praying to God, the divine light and the voice speaking from within, which he had heard before, revealed themselves again. A state of unspeakable joy overwhelmed him while he carefully listened to that voice, revealing to him mysteries which surpass human reason and offering him teachings which were unheard of. The light gradually withdrew, but the grace lingered in Saint Symeon’s heart, making him wiser. This vision of divine light offered the hegumen the charisma of theologisation. From then on, he would speak about God with great wisdom and mastery, not only in a speculative way but also as one speaking from his own experience³⁷.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Saint Symeon got to theologise, speaking about God just like the Apostles or the great Church Fathers. In this context, Saint Niketas Stethatos compares Saint Symeon with John the Evangelist himself. This comparison would later be reinforced by the appellative Saint Symeon would receive. In Orthodox Tradition, three personalities received the appellative of “theologian” *par excellence*: St. John the Evangelist, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and Saint Symeon. While the first two are called “theologians”, by comparison, Symeon is considered “the New Theologian”, that is, a renewer of the tradition of spiritual life, a restorer of the lost spiritual life³⁸. This gift of theologisation gave Saint Symeon a strong urge to write theological treatises, exegetical and catechetical discourses, or letters through which he was teaching the readers about divine mysteries or guide them in their spiritual life³⁹.

After this experience, there was a revolt of the monks. Thirty of them, outraged by Saint Symeon’s attitude and requests tore their cloaks and left the monastery. Patriarch

³⁶ Saint Niketas mentions the name of a certain Meletios, who claimed that he often saw how a luminous cloud completely enveloped Saint Symeon during the Divine Liturgy. ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 44-46. See also ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața și conduita Sfântului Simeon ...*, pp. 262-263. ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, p. 48.

³⁷ We would like to mention that Symeon did not seek to study in detail the profane Hellenic culture of the art of rhetoric, so that we cannot call him a scholar of that time.

³⁸ Dan ZAMFIRESCU, “Probleme teologice și hagiografice legate de supranumele Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog” [Theological and Hagiographic Issues with Respect to the Appellative of Saint Symeon the New Theologian], in *Ortodoxia* [Orthodoxy]. No. 3 (1958), pp. 46-61.

³⁹ ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 51-52. See ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața și conduita Sfântului Simeon ...*, p. 268.

Sisinnios (996-998) wanted to exile them, but the hegumen forgave them and allowed them to return to the monastery. Indeed, Saint Symeon's words were hard to accept and understand. The monks often heard their hegumen sharply tell them that the mystery of baptism was useless to those who did not feel God's grace working in their hearts, that it was pointless for those who did not see Christ in the eyes of their souls to receive the Holy Communion and that none of them could be saved if the slightest passion still lingered in their lives. It was, therefore, difficult to be a part of the congregation shepherded by Saint Symeon. However, he wanted to rise his flock to perfection; to show them that there should be no trace of insensitivity in their spiritual life and that all their thoughts, words, and deeds should be directed towards Christ⁴⁰.

In old age, before dying, Saint Symeon fell seriously ill. He had passed almost thirteen years in exile in the city of Paloukiton, in the Monastery of Saint Marina, where he had founded a true monastery⁴¹ and where he was preparing to die. He called his disciples and predicted when he would die and that, thirty years after his death, his body would be moved to Constantinople. On March 12th, 1022, after receiving the Holy Communion, Saint Symeon asked his disciples to start singing the burial songs. With candles in their hands and tears in their eyes, they started to sing. They accompanied with light the one who had hoped his entire life to dwell in the light. Afterwards, he prayed a little more and said: "Into your hands, Christ the King, I commend my spirit", at which point his soul went to the Lord.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The seven mystical experiences in which Saint Symeon saw the divine light marked the steps he took to enter the state of unmitigated and continuous communion with God. Each experience of light marked a stage in his spiritual fulfilment.

During the first one, which Saint Symeon had during his period as a layman, he experienced a state of happiness he had never felt before. It was still during this mysterious experience that he acquired the gift of tears. During the second episode, which he also experienced in his youth, the Saint felt his ascetic body become spiritual and translucent in the light God was pouring onto him. Simultaneously, the Saint acquired a physical and spiritual vigour which helped him continue his struggle to get close to God. His third experience, which marked his period as a layman, brought to his soul a peace he had never felt before. It was also then that his love for God was established and the faith that his spiritual father was guiding him well was strengthened.

The fourth episode, in which the Saint saw the divine light occurred at the Monastery of Stoudios. There, he was surrounded by a bright cloud, like that described in the Old and the New Testament. The Holy Spirit enveloped him in His grace and offered him the possibility of overcoming his passions. Freed from temptation, Saint Symeon felt the gift of full freedom, which allowed him to know the man's mystery and the telos to which he is called.

⁴⁰ Hilarion ALFEYEV, *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog...*, p. 51

⁴¹ After he finalised his work and the congregation was organised, Symeon fully dedicated himself to hesychia, to prayer and to askesis. During this time, he reached an extremely high level of spirituality: "inspired by the divine fire, fully becoming fire and light each day, he became god by appointment and, as a son of God, he mysteriously talked to God the Father, with his face uncovered, like Moses." [our translation]. These special mystical experiences were the source of Symeon's important writings, such as his hymns or his apologetical and antirrhetic discourses⁴¹. ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 129-139, 139-140. See also Basil KRIVOCHINE, *În lumina lui Hristos*.

⁴² ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața și conduita Sfântului Simeon...*, pp. 333-334

The last three experiences of seeing the light occurred in the monastery dedicated to Saint Mamas in Constantinople. During his mystical ecstasy, he understood the importance of the spiritual father before God and he experienced how the Spirit inspires and guides people towards the knowledge of God's rationale. The sixth episode occurred during his ordination. Then, he saw how God's Spirit descended above his head in the shape of a bright cloud, which remained there. Some of his close ones saw how the Spirit surrounded him while he was celebrating the liturgy, filling everything around with light. His experiences at Saint Mamas Monastery would culminate in the one when God's voice spoke to him from the cloud, revealing to him the hidden mysteries of the Godhead. During this episode of seeing the light, Saint Symeon would be endowed with the gift of theologisation and with the capacity to reach God's unapproachable depth to know teachings which were unheard of.

Therefore, the mystical experience of seeing the uncreated light offered Saint Symeon the possibility of knowing infinite happiness, the gift of tears, the translucence of the body, freedom from passions, spiritual peace, love for God, faith in his spiritual father, man's mystery, the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit and the gift of theologisation.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by TeMATIC-Art Project co-financed by FEDR through Competitiveness Operational Programme 2014 – 2020, Funding contract: 14/01. 09. 2016

REFERENCES:

- [1] ALFEYEV, Hilarion, *Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog și tradiția ortodoxă* [Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition], translated by Ioana Stoicescu and Maria-Magdalena Rusen, Sofia publishing house, Bucharest, 2010.
- [2] CHIRILĂ, Ioan, "Kavod și Şekina – Slava lui Dumnezeu pre luminarea creaturii" [Kavod and Shekinah – God's Glory for the Enlightenment of the Creature], in *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă* [Annual of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology] (2013-2014), tome 17, Renașterea publishing house, Cluj-Napoca, 2015.
- [3] CLÉMENT, Oliver, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus* [The Jesus Prayer], translated by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997.
- [4] FRANCE, R. T., *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co, Grand Rapids, 2007.
- [5] GOUILLARD, Jean, *Mica filocalie a rugăciunii inimii* [Small Philokalia on the Jesus Prayer], translated by Ilie and Ecaterina Iliescu, Herald publishing house, Bucharest, 2008.
- [6] ICĂ, Ioan I. jr., "Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog și provocarea mistică" [Saint Symeon the New Theologian and the Mystical Challenge], in ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri I. Discursuri teologice și etice* [Writings I. Theological and Ethical Discourses], translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2001.
- [7] JACOB, Edmond, *Théologie de l'Ancient Testament*, Delachaux & Niestlé, Paris, 1955.
- [8] KRIVOCHEINE, Basil, *În lumina lui Hristos. Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog (949-1022). Viața – Spiritualitatea – Învățătura* [In the Light of Christ. Saint Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022): Life, Spirituality, Doctrine], translated by Vasile Leb, Gheorghe Jordan, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997.
- [9] PAȘCA-TUȘA, Stelian, "Mila dumnezeiască și reînnoirea spirituală a regelui David" [Godly Mercy and King David's Spiritual Renewal], in *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa*, No. 2 (2011).
- [10] PAȘCA-TUȘA, Stelian, "Numele lui Dumnezeu semn al prezenței personale și acțiunea sa mântuitoare (sotirică)" [God's Name as a Sign of His Presence and Saving Action], in *Studia Universitatis Babeș Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa*, No. 1 (2010).

- [11] PAȘCA-TUȘA, Stelian, Claudia-Cosmina TRIF and Ioan POPA-BOTA, “The Iconic Representation of the Taboric Light”, in *European Journal of Science and Theology*, No. 1 (2021).
- [12] PORRINO, Giovanna Maria, *Le poids et la gloire, gloire de Dieu, gloire de l’homme – La racine 722 spécialement dans les livres des Proverbes, de la Genèse, de l’Exode et des Psaumes*, Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 2016.
- [13] ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, “Viața și conduita Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog” [The Life and Conduct of Saint Symeon the New Theologian], in ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri IV. Viața și epoca* [Writings IV. The Life. The Epoch], translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2006.
- [14] ST. NIKETAS STETHATOS, *Viața Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog* [The Life of Saint Symeon the New Theologian], translated by Ilie Iliescu, Herald publishing house, Bucharest, 2003.
- [15] ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri I. Discursuri teologice și etice* [Writings I. Theological and Ethical Discourses], translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2001.
- [16] ST. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Scrieri II. Cateheze* [Writings II. Catecheses], translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2003.
- [17] STĂNILOAE, Dumitru, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology], vol. 3, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997.
- [18] WAGNER, Thomas, *Gottes Herrlichkeit: Bedeutung und Verwendung des Begriffs kabod im Alten Testament*, Brill, Lieben, 2012.
- [19] WARE, Kallistos, *Puterea numelui. Rugăciunea lui Iisus în spiritualitatea ortodoxă* [The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality], translated by Gabriela Moldoveanu, Christiana publishing house, Bucharest, 1992.
- [20] ZAMFIRESCU, Dan, “Probleme teologice și hagiografice legate de supranumele Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog” [Theological and Hagiographic Issues with Respect to the Appellative of Saint Symeon the New Theologian], in *Ortodoxia* [Orthodoxy]. No. 3 (1958).