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**Acedia –  
Historical Aspects and Contemporary Hypostases**

**PhD. Thesis – Abstract**

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### **Acedia – historical aspects and contemporary hypostases**

This paper is the result of a personal research, aimed to understand acedia both in its historical development and its manifestations in the modern world. The endeavour would point out that the approach of acedia is a challenging and complex subject, a topic of unexpected actuality. In our opinion, acedia represents an important chapter of the Orthodox spirituality, which has been less treated or almost not at all.

Acedia continues to be present and to work in the world, because acedia is related to the human condition itself. Acedia is an evil of all times. The disappearance of the term *acedia* from the common language impoverished the contemporary culture by the possibility to denominate an important feature of the spiritual life.

A fair approach of acedia requires imperiously a spiritual anthropological vision. According to this view, man is a person endowed with freedom and called, by love, to grow "attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4, 13). In the spiritual growth of man, acedia represents a threshold which, when it is not passed, it stops the growth, and when it is surpassed, it helps to define us, as individuals having the likeness to the One who created us. Acedia affects directly the man's relationship with God, but it can reach even entire communities, because it represents the temptation of all Church members in their pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Heaven. Finally, acedia is a crisis of person. We can state, without exaggeration, that the interest regarding acedia is significant for the dignity and becoming of the human person.

The history of acedia includes particular sequences consisting of significant mutations. Acedia's conversion into idleness, boredom, sadness, depression or any other state resembling to these represents a trivialization of the concept.

Even if today we are witnessing a rediscovery and usage of the term *acedia*, however, contemporary perspective on acedia is different from the patristic one. The contemporary approach preserves the word form, but radically changes the meaning, the word content. Therefore, we consider as opportune an approach of how acedia is manifested in contemporary society, from the perspective of a patristic understanding of the term.

In addition to the theological analysis of the concept of *acedia*, our approach proposes also a multidisciplinary approach. Thus, it allows connections between theology and various

fields of science such as psychology, philosophy, technology and medicine. This approach leads us to consider that the analysis of acedia can provide an opportunity for the dialogue between the Church and other fields of knowledge. Of great importance for us are also the differences that sometimes occur between the theological perspective and the research methods or tools of other scientific fields.

The research is carried out on two different planes, which interfere and complement each other. First, is the historical-critical plane, in which we follow the meanings of acedia throughout history and secondly, the analytic-descriptive plane, in which we examine, in different segments, the manifestations of acedia in contemporaneity. The meeting of the two planes give importance to our research because the analysis of acedia's manifestations in contemporary society is an update of the patristic understanding and vision.

Concerning our research goals, they consist in presenting the most important moments in the history of acedia, the meanings that have been assigned to it and in presenting some aspects of acedia's manifestations in contemporaneity.

The premises of this approach reside in the actuality of acedia and the universal character of Orthodox spirituality. Thus, acedia is a phenomenon as old as humanity itself, even if the idea was later theorized in history.

The analysis is justified primarily by the importance of the topic regarding the value and dignity of human person and its relationship with God. We believe that any approach focused on the man is topical, because the human being is the supreme value on earth. Moreover, the theme is considered to be of stringent actuality, since it is concerned with man's eternal destiny and his relationship with God. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16, 26).

Secondly, the lack of a comprehensive bibliography on acedia in Romanian, but also in other languages, fully justifies such an approach. Even if today we are witnessing a resurgence of the interest in acedia's analysis, the modern perspective carries different meanings. Therefore, we consider appropriate a contemporary analysis in a patristic understanding.

The research methodology, despite the obstacles raised by the lack of a bibliography on the subject so far, is looking to capitalize on the latest references related to this topic. Through our analysis, we seek to offer a fair approach to the patristic understanding, but at the same time, accessible to any type of thinking. In this purpose, specialty literature was consulted, but also literature coming from the sphere of culture or science, for a better understanding of the subject.

We used research methods known in scientific research in order to expose logically and academically this approach, realizing that the interest in the subject transcends the theological field, having great importance for any human consciousness.

The theme proposed for research forms part of the Spiritual Theology, whose object of study is the Christian experience. Thus, in the Patristic approach, we are less interested in the author's personality or the historical perspective given by the work itself, and we are more focused on how life experience related to *acedia* is described. In Spiritual Theology, the specific method used is especially intuitive.

In this research, we also appeal to the analytical method, when analyzing the views of theologians, philosophers and scientists, and examining certain traits of different historical periods, all these helping us to preserve a pertinent approach to the subject under discussion. We also apply the comparative method in the research, by presenting different views and references to *acedia*, that were formulated in the course of time. In the second part of the paper, by using the inductive method, we sought to discover the causes of certain actions that we identify around us. Often, we appealed also to the linguistic method in order to define the etymology of the utilized keywords.

However, the approach of *acedia* goes beyond concepts and methods, because it is a question of human existence in its theological dimension. By virtue of this fact, we expect that our research results will guide the reader to a deeper understanding of the subject in relation to the previous researches and the reality of life in its existential aspect.

Spiritual Theology did not pay a special attention to the theme of *acedia*, or to its modes of expression in contemporaneity. We can even state that this issue has been neglected. In most of the cases, the studies about *acedia* present the prospect of a spiritual Father or a writer. Although these studies are of great importance, however, they are insufficient, due to the importance of this topic for human consciousness.

We believe that there are several reasons why to this chapter of Spiritual Theology was given a feeble attention. Among them, we specify that many writers and scholars considered *acedia* as a typical monastic flaw. Used in the writings of monks for other monks, with some specific descriptions related to the monastic environment, the term *acedia* was considered, by some, to be a temptation for those who made the monastic vows. We believe that such an approach does not represent the Church's conscience. Because "There is one Lord, one faith and one baptism" (Ephesians 4: 5), we can state that there is one spirituality that addresses to all. This unique spirituality is assumed by every Christian, according to his will, power and his love of

God. Thus, we recognize different intensities of living the Orthodox spirituality, but not two separated spiritualities, one of the monks and the other of laics.

Another reason why the theme of acedia was less approached, we believe that it might be explained by the fact that, diachronically speaking, the Orthodox theology was influenced by the abstract and scholastic Western theology, which referred to acedia, either as laziness or as sadness or melancholy.

By resigning the eight evil thoughts in favour of the seven deadly sins, Orthodox theology alienated from a dynamic approach to sin and converged to a legal understanding of it. We believe that the analysis of acedia as sloth or sadness is a reductionist approach.

We consider that another reason for neglecting the theme of acedia is represented by the translations of patristic texts in national languages. Trying to be as precise as possible, often translators have offered various alternative terms for the word *acedia*. However, these terms fail to cover the full meaning of the original. In this regard, the example of translations into Romanian language is eloquent. We believe that interest for acedia reveals the words' ineffability to capture entirely the reality. We conclude by stating that acedia has not been fully understood according to the personal nature of man and his relationship with God in the dynamics of personal becoming.

The novelty of our approach resides in providing a substantial overview of the historical pathway of acedia, pointing out the most important moments and metamorphoses of the term. Also, the analysis of acedia in the works of Church Fathers and Writers seeks to identify a complete nosography (causes, symptoms, effects, remedies) of this vice. From this perspective, our approach represents a unique approach in Romanian theological space. A unique investigation is the analyse acedia in Syriac theology, about which, as far as we know, there is no other study, both nationally and internationally.

Another element which is a novelty of our study is the detailed presentation of acedia's modes of manifestation in the modern world. In some studies, the current states of acedia are only enumerated, without being analysed in detail. At this point, we also identify the limitations of our approach.

The premise from which the research begins, precisely the connection between the personal nature of man, which involves the necessity for his becoming and acedia, as a disruptive factor in this development, we believe that is a plus of this research.

We consider that through this study, we provide a dynamic presentation of Spiritual Theology, since there are presented not only the experiences of some saints and writers, but also

a serious and profound radiography of the contemporary society, indicating some slippages, and also providing solutions. In this regard, Spiritual Theology shows itself fully justified and responsible in having a living and consistent dialogue with the contemporary society.

Next, we will present the structure of this paper on research reports. The thesis consists of two parts. The first part, *A History of Acedia in Christian Theology*, comprises four chapters. The second part, *The Hypostases of Acedia in the Modern World*, contains five chapters.

In the first chapter of the first part, we analyse the meaning of *acedia*, as shown in the Ancient Greek language dictionaries. Then, we briefly present *acedia* in ancient philosophy, mentioning the philosophers who use this word and the meanings they confer to it. A special approach in this chapter is an analysis of *acedia* in the Holy Scripture, because we identify several biblical characters who, in a certain moment of their lives, suffered from *acedia* or some similar conditions. The analysis of *acedia* in the Old Testament uses ideas from rabbinic exegesis, Hebrew mythical folklore, but also interpretations of the Holy Fathers. Even though the term *acedia* does not appear in the New Testament, however, there are certain images that were identified with *acedia* by the theologians from the medieval period. The following chapters of the first part present an analysis of *acedia* according to the three major theological traditions: Greek, Syriac and Latin.

Throughout the Greek theology, the apophthegms of the Patericon referring to *acedia* are discussed. It is not without significance the fact that the first apophthegm of the Patericon refers precisely to the attack of *acedia* on Saint Anthony the Great. Since the Egyptian Patericon reveals the concrete life in the Egyptian desert and gives us a practical picture of the fulfillment of the Gospel, our theme-related stories are relevant in shaping the spiritual meanings of *acedia*.

A comprehensive analysis is reserved to the etiology of *acedia* realized by Evagrius Ponticus. He is the genius in systematizing the Eastern spirituality and the one who gives us the most complex description of *acedia*. Then, we examine a condition similar to *acedia*, by which St. John Chrysostom speaks about. It is a demonic disease, which consists of an inappropriate sadness. In *The Three Exhortations to Stagirite*, St. John often insists on the fact that this state of sorrow is more dangerous than the demon himself.

In analysing *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written by Saint John Sinaites, a reference work for Eastern spirituality, we insist on the thirteenth step, which is about *acedia*.

Even if the work of St. John Damascene is not very suggestive from the perspective of *acedia* analysis, however, the translation of his writings and the manner in which this translation came into prominence in the West represents a significant moment in our theme's approach.

In Greek theology, St. Symeon the New Theologian is the latest evidence of the presence of acedia's attack in the Christian's ascetic life and the extreme violence of acedia.

Our research continues with a new approach of acedia in Syriac theology. For various historical, political and religious reasons, spiritual Syriac literature is less known in Romanian theological space. Our approach proposes a meeting with the beauty of Syrian pondering on the theme of acedia in the works of four authors. Thus, we analyze the prayer of St. Ephrem, in which many commentators have identified the demon of sloth with the demon of acedia. For St. Isaac the Syrian, the fight against acedia holds an important place in his spirituality, therefore he provides precious evidences about this topic. The following studied writers, although they do not belong to the Orthodox Church, bring a valuable testimony to the perpetuation of the conscience of acedia's danger in the Syriac world.

The approach of acedia in Latin theology was inaugurated by St. John Cassian. Throughout his work, we may find many similarities with Evagrius, one of his mentors, but also many personal approaches, imposed especially by the recipients of his work. In St. John Cassian's work we seek to identify the meanings of the cell for an ascetic, but also the surrogate remedies, outlining a nosography of acedia. The analysis of St. Benedict of Nursia seeks to highlight the connection between acedia and *lectio divina*.

We give a particular attention to the analysis of acedia in St. Gregory the Great's vision because he represents a turning point in the history of acedia. St. Gregory is the one who replaced the eight evil thoughts with the seven deadly sins, assimilating acedia to sadness. St. Gregory's vision will have considerable influence on Western thinking. Saint Isidore of Seville is an eloquent testimony to the influence of St. Gregory the Great, but also on how posterity related to the theme of eight evil thoughts and the seven deadly sins.

The analysis of Carolingian theologians' works, St. Pirmin, Alcuin of York, Jonas of Orleans and Raban Maur are particularly interesting, because we are witnessing, for the first time, acedia's approaches addressed to the laity.

Studying the works of medieval theologians from centuries XI and XII, reveals acedia both in its physical and spiritual extent. In scholastic debates on acedia, we identify different approaches and perspectives, developed by theologians in this period. Thomas Aquinas synthesizes the meaning of acedia in two definitions and seeks to answer the question whether acedia is a special sin, deadly, or one of the seven deadly sins. We may also identify interesting perspectives at the followers of Aquinas.

A special contribution to the history of the concept of *acedia* gives us the investigation of

acedia's popular image. The perception of common man on acedia was formed from four sources: the penitential literature, catechetical literature, religious encyclopaedias and profane literature. In this regard, we also make a comparative analysis of the theological perspective and the popular perception of acedia.

Finally, we present several ideas about acedia during Renaissance, concerning how this theme appears in morality and spirituality textbooks, while the history of acedia will be illustrated, as boredom and melancholy, in the second part of the work.

The second part of the paper, *The Aspects of Acedia in the Modern World*, includes a brief introduction, in which we present some features of contemporary society, the attitude towards sin and some arguments on our topic's actuality. We also offer two examples of modern approaches to acedia: scientific acedia and acedia and climate change.

In the first chapter we identify some perspective on acedia, understood as laziness, lack of care and interest. We also illustrate the acedia – laziness report and listlessness – apathy report, showing the similarities and differences between these concepts.

Since acedia brings man into a state in which he relates wrongly to space and time, the next two chapters address acedia from this perspective. Concerning acedia as a false report to space, we describe some aspects of escape in contemporary society, as well as some reasons that determine man to be unhappy with his condition. In our analysis, we pay special attention to the mental escape through imagination, and implicitly identify a few significations of imagination from a spiritual perspective. Our approach considers the media, as it provides the ideal space of refuge. This space correspond to own desires and can always recreate itself according to the user's desire. The escape into the world of media uses certain features related to human structure. The media is, par excellence, a place of escape, and obsession with newness, advertising, zapping phenomenon, fully prove this. Assiduously seeking for entertainment can be an indicator of acedia's presence in our lives. When the media turns into a place of escape, acedia can throw the user into the polluted world of pornography. At the end of this chapter are presented some escapist attitude effects on human life.

In analysing acedia as a false report to time, we analyse boredom. By offering a brief history of boredom, actually we continue the historical presentation of the concept of acedia in Renaissance, presentation that was open up in the first part of the paper. The lack of consensus on boredom assesses an attempt to define it and to establish a symptomatology. In addressing the manifestations of boredom, we appeal to Heidegger's philosophy, therefore, the approach has some philosophical overtones. In presenting the causes and effects of boredom, by offering

different perspectives, we highlight both the complexity and the actuality of the theme under discussion. Towards the end of the chapter, we propose an analysis of the relationship time - boredom, stressing the unique value of time and its relationship with eternity. The end of the chapter contains a comparative analysis between acedia and boredom, in which are mentioned the similarities and differences between them.

The analysis of acedia's contemporary hypostases continues with the analysis of acedia's pathological dimension. Identifying acedia with depression, which many researchers propose, represents a challenge for our approach. A short glance over depression statistics highlights that this is the most common mental disorder spread worldwide, a real health problem. In analysing the types of depression, we also encounter situations where the disease has spiritual causes. Melancholy is the binding of acedia and depression, which led to their identification. The fourth chapter concludes with a comparative analysis between acedia and depression, identifying the elements that make them similar or distinguish them.

In the last chapter of the second part, we examine acedia's existential dimension. Man's situation in the world demands, imperatively, the need for sense. The immutable sense of the human being was offered by God himself through the act of Jesus Christ's Incarnation. Under the aspect of time (*specie temporis*), man is fighting a lack of sense, and inner emptiness and nihilism are eloquent examples of this fact. As middle age is likened, by some interpreters, to the period when the noon demon attacks (midday, when the sun seems still in the sky) and it is a crisis of meaninglessness, we give a short approach to this theme. Manifested in the form of meaninglessness, acedia can throw the man into a terrible despair, that may culminate in suicide. At this point, acedia shows its true face.

The paper concludes with a brief statement of the important concepts that emerged from the investigation, presented in the general conclusions. These beliefs, presented concisely, are closely followed by indicating specific references to the subject treated, providing an overview of the subject of acedia and, not least, providing to those who are interested a scientific support for a consistent approach to the theme, which is increasingly current.

As it can be easily noticed by simply consulting the existing bibliography, the theme proposed for research proves its unique character. The major importance of the research we propose is given by the actuality of this theme. In this regard, Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov stated: "With few exceptions, all humanity is now living in the state of accidie. People have become indifferent about their salvation. They do not seek divine life. They confine themselves to forms of life which appertain to the flesh, to everyday needs, to the passions of this world, to

mundane activities. God, though, created us out of nothing, in the image of the Absolute and after His likeness. If this revelation is true, then the absence of concern for salvation is nothing else than the death of the human person"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *Words of Life*, Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, Essex, 2010, p. 16.