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**CONTEMPORARY ASCETICISM IN
FRS. SOPHRONY SAKHAROV, AIMILIANOS OF
SIMONOPETRA AND BASIL PENNINGTON.
CONCEPTUALISATION AND COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

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2. KEYWORDS

asceticism, ascetic, ascetic struggle, contemplation, meditation, asceticism and technology, ascetic substitutes, Sophrony Sakharov, Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Basil Pennington

3. SUMMARY

The contemporary society has rediscovered the topic of asceticism because in many aspects of its existence it focuses on different practices of renunciation, either to food through dieting, comfort through body-weight exercises, pollution through environmental policy approaches and rationalization of consumption, all of which are nothing else than answers to excessive consumption, exhortations to moderation, that is, a general form of asceticism. However, this is a still form of asceticism which lacks the religious connotation. If we add the religious component, we will notice that today's theological discourse tends to recover the values lost during the last centuries of Reformation, returning to the issue of human body and coexistence of body and soul together, even if the general consumerist society does not encourage such an ascetic discourse. Contemporary theology must find ways to go beyond this wall and present the old perspective of the Church, not as an historical analysis, but rather as a balanced and healthy theological vision, a response to the modern-day ascetic substitutes.

Today, the ascetic discourse of the Church seems to be often perceived as being related to the monastic spirituality or a specific category of clergy and not to the entire mankind, and this is a consequence of the institutionalization of asceticism over the ages. Moreover, there is sometimes an overemphasis on asceticism in the Orthodox Christian environment, especially in the field of monastic spirituality, which betrays both a lack of proper understanding of the ascetic phenomenon and a slightly distorted view of the human body and its value. However, laymen, clergy, monks and nuns, they are all called to asceticism, to flee the world, that means to avoid the confrontation with the sin and the opportunities that can bring the sin into their lives, then to find the narrow path that will lead them to the Kingdom of Peace. Unfortunately, this ideal of the Church can not always be fulfilled, so that today we see with pain a tendency to separate the contemporary theology from the ascetical and liturgical life. For this reason we have chosen three authors, theologians and ascetics, who share a common testimony about the indissolubility

of dogma, asceticism and liturgical life, which form a single whole – the life of the Church and our life. This is also one of the main thesis of this research: *the unity between asceticism, dogma, and sacramental life – a constant of Orthodox spiritual life*. Through this unity, men and women advance to their ultimate goal, union with God and perfection, but this journey is one that must be reiterated daily, having no end on this earth. Every single day, Christians eradicate vices and plant virtues, open their being and receive the work of grace in a continuous process.

The analysis of the ascetic discourse of the three contemporary personalities represents a new step in shaping the perception of their writings in the spiritual consciousness of the Christian Church. Moreover it is a new step in the inter-confessional and inter-religious dialogue based on the ascetic practice. Although today, an attempt is made to study asceticism using the interdisciplinary model, from different perspectives: historical, cultural, phenomenological and theological, removing the ascetic discourse from the purely Christian or religious context, there is a need for a systematization of contemporary Orthodox Christian ascetic discourse, which can testify about the millenary tradition of Church's practice and its relevance for the contemporary world. The writings of the three authors can easily be placed in the sphere of contemporary experiential theology, as this discourse does not remain purely theoretical or academic, but it is based on an earlier ascetic practice of the authors and it guides the reader towards an ascetic life.

The ascetic thought of the authors is subject to the most diverse influences, through the Russian theology, from thinkers such as Vladimir Lossky, Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyaev, the patristic tradition of the Church, from Egyptian monasticism to Philokalic spirituality, through Anthony the Great, Macarius of Egypt, Evagrius Ponticus, Abba Isaiah, Hesychius of Sinai or Maximus the Confessor, and continuing with some openings to Western Christianity, through Benedict of Nursia, William of Saint-Thierry, John of the Cross, or Thomas Merton. We believe, therefore, that the present work succeeds in reconciling three contemporary ascetic visions from different backgrounds and positioning asceticism at the basis of an ecumenical dialogue emerging from the religious practice. Through these complex visions, the research relates even to some contemporary ascetic movements, especially from the Western world or from the Far East.

In the following part, we will present the chapter structure of the thesis together with a brief description of each section. So that, in *Chapter 1 - Fundamentals of Asceticism*, we

have focused on discovering how the three authors understand the fundamental elements of asceticism, without making references to the contemporary interdisciplinary vision. Everything is firmly grounded in the authors' discourse and refers exclusively to the foundations of Christian asceticism. In the section titled *Definition of Ascesis*, we have shown that, in their vision, asceticism can be a voluntary and repetitive struggle that does not come to an end, and leads to the attainment of the highest Christian goal, viz. perfection. We have pointed out some nuances related to the expectation of the outcome of this struggle, showing that there is a certain tendency of the Western thinker to pursue a final result, vision that doesn't apply for the Eastern authors. In accordance with St. Gregory of Nyssa's thought, asceticism is also an art, and Fr. Aimilianos explicitly speaks of such an art in which human's will harmoniously unites with God's will, and the ascetic work becomes a wise one. The Orthodox authors offer to asceticism a pronounced communal character, so that the private ascesis proves to be a participation in the ascetic life of the whole Church, and on a personal level, a cry while waiting for God, a new language that includes only three words: *God, expectation, desire*. Asceticism is also a martyr's sacrifice, a daily martyrdom of the ascetic, in which he or she sacrifices himself or herself, standing before God and waiting for Him.

In the *Foundation* section, we have pointed out the relationship between asceticism and dogmatic consciousness, showing that there is an organic, indissoluble link between ascetic practices and dogmatic consciousness. Depending on the dogmatic consciousness of the ascetic, of what he or she expects from God, according to the image that he or she has about God, the ascetic will follow that practice that will support him or her in this quest for the relationship with God, and this is generally applicable in most of the religions and philosophies. Ascesis is also grounded on the conscience of sin, and it is an answer of repentance. Archimandrite Aimilianos is the one who brings another dimension to the birth of a new man, so that we have a triad: *repentance – ascesis – new life*, in which the ascesis proves to be the connection between repentance and the new life, a connection that will encourage the repentance and will wait for the fruit of life. The Eastern authors also make an insight into Pauline theology when they speak of the “law of sin” (Romans 6:6; 7:23), seeing in this law a factor that causes an ascetic struggle, an element that generates negative ascesis.

The *Goal* section analyzes the target that men and women pursue through this ascetic process. The authors speak of an immediate goal and a long-term one, the first being just

an impatient expectation and an attempt of the human person to quickly embrace a totally free God, a limited attempt destined to failure. The second aspect is what Fr. Aimilianos calls “waiting for God”, a central theme in his theology, in which the asceticism is the unceasing waiting for God. The ascetic is willing to perform ascetic acts for his or her entire life, having the image of the encounter with the desired One. The asceticism is both a self-oriented process, a work of self-deprecation, that is, a returning to the natural state, the recognition of one’s own condition, and one directed towards God, that is, a seeking and a receiving of Him in one’s own being.

Chapter 2 – The Positioning of Asceticism connects the ascetic discourse of the three authors and the contemporary lines of study of asceticism, a field that is interdisciplinary analyzed from more and more perspectives. Asceticism can be regarded as a universal phenomenon because in all cultures of the world it has been a particular form of dedication for a high purpose with the whole being. It is possible to identify common typologies and practices in the Jewish, Greek-Roman and Christian worlds, but also in the different forms of Oriental religions, in all these environments, the ascetic was a special figure, the embodiment of ultimate devotion to an ideal. In this regard, we noticed the lack of a theoretical systematization of the ascetic phenomenon from a multicultural perspective. In this regard, we have noticed the lack of a theoretical systematization of the ascetic phenomenon from a multicultural perspective. Even though there are specific studies about different forms of asceticism, in different historical periods, designing of a framework that joins together fundamental elements of various traditions has not yet been made. Through this thesis we have tried to contribute to shaping of such a direction of study and to filling of an existing void in the contemporary research.

The *Universality of Asceticism* section presents an extended vision of God, the One Who is incomprehensible by the human faculties, aspect which provides the asceticism with a general note. Archimandrite Sophrony is the author who has an elaborate discourse on the cosmic and above the cosmos dimension of Christian life. This has implications on all the three fields of Christianity: dogma, ecclesiology and asceticism, the latter evolving from a private act into a communal one having cosmic dimensions. Speaking about the perception of the ascetic practice in different cultures and traditions, we have shown that asceticism and religious experience can successfully position themselves in the dialogue between different traditions, especially Christian, where differences in terminology and variations in practice can be overcome, to a certain extent, on the basis of a sincere and

profound experience. Next, we have pointed out the position of Orthodox asceticism and its three basic features. The first aspect of Orthodox asceticism is ecclesiality, that is the communal participation in the Church's practice, and not isolation in a private system. A second aspect of Orthodox asceticism is its connection with theology, which is eminently experiential. The third aspect is freedom from form, knowing that the Orthodox ascesis does not impose a rigid system of forms, methods and rules, but it offers freedom to the individual to choose whatever fits the ascetic.

In the *Orthodox Asceticism* subchapter we have presented how asceticism refers to various elements such as holiness, grace or reward, in order to better understand the value of asceticism in the spiritual life, pointing out some common misconceptions about it. Ascesis is always seen by the authors as a means (most of the times a negative one) in order to reach a (positive) goal, but this is not complete as long as it is not accompanied by the work of grace. Without grace, it remains a simple human effort that can not fulfill its purpose. Of course, by seeing the ascesis as a means there is a tendency to underestimate its value and reduce it to an optional work. Ascetic efforts must be understood as the limited attempts of human person to acquire purity of the mind and unceasing prayer, preconditions for a life centered entirely on the relationship with Christ, leading to deification, mystical union between the creation and the Creator. In the vision of the three authors, we can not dissociate the two elements, the personal effort and the work of grace, but they have to work together, to represent a divine-human synergy, and the authors placed these two aspects in a close relation. We have also tried to show that this ascetic practice is not an exclusive privilege of athletes of contemplation or of consecrated persons, monks or nuns. The existence of a genuine and high ascetic life presupposes the acquisition of a consciousness of universality, understanding that one's own effort is part of the Church's ascetic struggle, of all the members that form it, and that the heart of the ascetic must encompass all, not to limit itself to a physical, private and isolated practice.

Going further, we have seen that there are certain metrics of evaluating or observing the ascetic progress in the spiritual life, as this involves an even closer spiritual encounter with the divine life, ultimately reaching a complete harmony between the two. In order to reach this most harmonious state, Orthodox theology has identified from the experience of previous generations a certain ascending path in form of stairs, which begins with basic virtues and practices and is fulfilled with the ultimate stage of living in God or living God's live. Dom Basil, as an exponent of the Western tradition, expands this ladder model

and understands that the ascetic can receive the gift of the Spirit on any step of the ladder, this gift of the Spirit is not conditioned by a certain spiritual level and, therefore, this model is called “vertical ladder”.

Chapter 3 - Ascetic Forms includes a detailed analysis of ascetic forms promoted by the three authors. It is not an exhaustive presentation of various ascetic forms that existed during the ages and those that are still practiced today, but rather a focusing on specific ascetic and practical aspects essential for the spiritual life from the perspective of the authors. In addition to the recommended ascetic forms that can be adapted to different contexts of life, we will also present deviated forms, called heretical, that means, forms that have lost their original meaning and endanger the spiritual path of the ascetic.

The *External Asceticism* section includes the outer framework, the extreme forms, the limitation to an external asceticism, discretion and exterior manifestation, and two essential aspects of renunciation: to food and pseudo-needs (fasting) and sleep and comfort (night vigil). The place where the ascetic opens himself or herself before God is called “the upper room”, that is heaven on earth and the hidden chamber, the battlefield in the unseen warfare, here is where the ascetic stands all the time before God, and in this chamber (Matthew 6:6) the ascetic may whisper to the Lord the hidden things of his or her heart, and may become worthy to hear the still and whispered voice of the Spirit. As for the external context of asceticism, the use of a fixed procedure in order to obtain an expected result is not a recommendation of the Church, since the will of God can not be constrained in any way, nor can it be limited by the creature to its own understanding. However, there are specific elements accepted by the authors that can become a real help in advancing in an ascetic practice. Throughout the history, there were also extreme forms of external asceticism, but the key element for their understanding is that they were not oriented against the body as if it were a negative element. The term “supernatural asceticism”, that is part of the Church’s liturgical tradition, is a response to a need of the soul, and not an invention of new and new torments, this is also pointed out by Archimandrite Sophrony. The fire of repentance can push the soul towards such gestures that seem extreme, but for that particular person it is a natural response to a need of the spirit.

The aspects of renunciation that we have referred to are night vigil and fasting, analyzing both the effects on the body, the spiritual fruits, and the different forms they can have, depending on the personality of the ascetic and the spiritual school to which he or she belongs. Our authors put a high value on fasting, which is the fundamental element

upon which other ascetic gestures are built. This hunger is not an element that slows down or interrupts the spiritual progress of the ascetic because, paradoxically, it has the potential to support this struggle on the three levels: mind, spirit and body. So, the weakening of the body is, paradoxically, proving to be a support of the spiritual struggle. We have seen that today this ascetic practice is rediscovered, in different forms, in different frames and contexts. Some people use it successfully in their experiments of living in community, but also in their attempts to give up the ordinary delights of life to live in a form of self-imposed loneliness, renouncing the “pseudo-needs”. In the context of global and social crisis, we note that the fasting involves both a renunciation practice and the transformation of this renunciation to a gift for someone else. Further more, the night vigil is an ascetic means of special significance, especially in the thought of Fr. Aimilianos. The private vigil of the ascetic is so important that the author talks about an equivalence between the night life and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Night vigil becomes a personal liturgy, that is, a bloodless sacrifice in which the ascetic stands alone with God, giving Him all his or her being, mind and heart, in a state of full presence. The vigil will be silent as silence creates the favorable conditions to hear God, in that “still small voice” (*1 Kings* 19:12) in which the Lord promises to reveal Himself to the seeker. A spiritual fruit of all this external asceticism is sensitivity, the ability to stay silent, to listen and live in the world of God, eating the heavenly bread. By living such a life, the ascetic acquires the power to distinguish and remove even the most insignificant gesture of the body that is not centered on God. From here and to the state where the ascetic sees himself or herself a sinner is just one single step, because through asceticism, human person expresses the very feeling of alienation from God, he or she calls for God and understands that sin is the one that leads him or her to alienation and death.

The *Inner Asceticism* section focuses on the inner work of the ascetic, which includes both the culture of the mind and the culture of the heart. If in the first case we can speak of a negative work of avoiding the opportunities of sin, even at the level of the thought, in the second case we can speak about a state of humility and obedience risen from love and spiritual realism. From an eschatological perspective, this new mind is called the mind that reaches “beyond the veil of the eighth day” where sin has no root to survive, where it can not and does not want to live, where Christ’s mind live and sanctify any thought that desires to enter this universe. Here we have mentioned the practice of accepting the accusations, as a sign of perfection and spiritual health, especially if it is accompanied by

joy. The struggle of living without sin, according to the words of the prayer, “Count us worthy, O Lord, of passing this day (night) without sin”, is a central theme in the thinking of Archimandrite Sophrony, who tries to teach his disciples to be vigilant, to constantly watch, day and night, to avoid any co-operation with the sin. It is not enough to reject the thoughts, but we must always follow Christ, focus on Him, that is a painful struggle about which both Fr. Sophrony and Fr. Amilianos speak. Next, we see how watchfulness and thoughts during prayer can be understood from different perspectives by the Eastern and Western authors. The Eastern authors talk about a gathering of all the thoughts into one, through a negative struggle that can be painful, but in the Western Christianity, this struggle is avoided and a positive attitude of accepting the thoughts and transforming them into prayer is encouraged.

Within this section analyzing the inner state of the ascetic, we have noticed that there are two distinct and possibly non-complementary approaches to the topic of comfort in the ascetic struggle. The Orthodox authors speak more of an ascetic tension, a state of tension by which man becomes a martyr of the spirit, gives blood and receives spirit. Dom Basil sees in the effects of prayer, especially the acquisition of a clarity of mind and a physical relaxation, not necessarily a tiring and negative state. Another antinomy that we have analyzed is the connection of asceticism with joy, all three authors see in happiness and joy precisely a state that man must reach starting from here, from earth, and not a future joy and a present torture. But the way the ascetic reaches that state is viewed from different perspectives, depending on each one’s understanding of the role and value of suffering, self-accusation, watchfulness and repentance. From the Eastern perspective, only when joy comes from asceticism (in all its forms) we can speak of the fruit of spiritual martyrdom that enlightens the world.

There is also a section in which we present derivative forms of asceticism adapted to the lay context. Asceticism is not, as sometimes is said, an exclusive practice, accessible only to insiders who want to achieve certain “spiritual performances”, but it is the life of every single Christian, lay or ordained servant. Christian life is ascetic life, renunciation and acquisition, labor and restfulness, pain and comfort. We should not talk about asceticism as a monastic practice because this can easily lead us to its distortion. In the view of the three authors, because of their monastic formation, asceticism has a single definition, but the visible forms can be slightly different, depending on the personality of the ascetic and the conditions of his or her life. Here, we have also witnessed a real

movement to promote monastic and ascetic values in the secular environment that has developed in the Western society in recent years. Dom Basil is the one who is opened to such a spirituality, not yet encountered in the Christian East, or at least, not in this institutionalized form.

Finally, we have mentioned a series of ascetic practices that endanger the spiritual integrity of the ascetic, evaluating them according to the Orthodox theology of the two authors and noticing the effects they can produce. We called them *heretical*, because by practicing them in this form, the ascetic shows a lack of understanding of the principles on which asceticism is based, and he or she starts to practice some deformed forms that will not produce the expected results, but will only deepen him or her in this spiritual wandering. Practicing asceticism without spiritual discernment, by following one's own will and avoiding dialogue, the personal struggle to reach deification through one's own effort, reducing the asceticism to the fulfillment of a rule, seeking to see God at any cost, and also the practices inspired by the Oriental asceticism, all are heretical forms of asceticism from an Orthodox perspective. We have focused on a relevant field for today, the danger of impersonalism and Oriental practices that do not cultivate a relationship with a personal God. Here, Archimandrite Sophrony is the Orthodox author who will outline the essential differences between the two approaches, and Dom Basil Pennington will open the discussion towards an understanding and even adoption of Oriental forms in the Christian practice.

In *Chapter 4 - Asceticism and Contemporaneity* we link the ascetic discourse of the three authors presented in previous chapters with the contemporary issues where asceticism can constitute an answer. We are talking here about the relevance of ascetic discourse in a society that confronts with the issue of consumerism, the lack of a right understanding of the underlying principles of asceticism and with various ascetic surrogates that seek to eliminate the religious element from these practices.

The three authors identify in the contemporary world a lack of ascetic struggle, a weakening of the capacity and interest of contemporary man towards ascetic practice, as it characterized the life of the Church in the past centuries. However, Dom Basil identifies an increase in today's interest in meditation and some forms of ascetic practices that it involves. This is particularly true in developed countries, as technological progress is strongly visible in everyday's life of the connected and interconnected society. So, the interest in meditation is precisely a response to the alert rhythm of the society, the

searching for a path of salvation in this whirlwind that swallows up everything in its quest for progress and well-being. Nowadays, the promoted values are opposed to the precepts of asceticism. When asceticism pleads for different forms of renunciation, the contemporary society promotes eroticism, cultivation of personal emotions, abundance, consumption and self-promotion a positive things.

Regarding the modern ascetic surrogates, the distinction will be made at the level of the principle upon which the practice is built. Diet can not be equated at all with true fasting, since the latter is initiated and even amplified by the struggle of the mind to follow the commandments, and not by an exterior motivation to acquire a good state of health or a good looking body. Fasting is about giving more freedom to the spirit, it is about a burning love that can only manifest its strength through ascetic forms. Also, the abstract contemplation of idealistic and impersonal principles is seen especially today, when different Oriental practices have gained a considerable popularity, practices which propose an identification with the principles of Good or Eternity through hard meditation. These ideas of Oriental meditation and contemplation are spread through different mediums and are easily made available to the contemporary men and women as true methods of accessing the ultimate spiritual height, with beneficial effects in everyday life. Fr. Sophrony draws attention to this contemporary danger, he faithfully follows the Palamite theology of seeing God and cultivating a personal relationship with Him, therefore he sees in meditation and contemplation practices of growing in the love relationship with the Creator, and not an abstract contemplation of idealistic and impersonal principles.

In the section titled *Asceticism and Contemporary Interdisciplinary Directions* we have mentioned the connection between asceticism, as a discipline of study, and various interdisciplinary fields such as ethics, ecology and ecumenism, as shown by the contemporary research and according with the theological principles of the three authors. Today we see a new ecological dimension of asceticism, which can take most various forms, a dimension that appeared mainly from the striking contrast between the rich and the poor world, the compassion for nature, the crimes against nature, and even the new vegetarian and vegan diet. Asceticism can be easily seen as an unceasing human effort to limit the disastrous effects on the environment, to impose a self-control in relation to the whole nature. Further more, certainly, asceticism will not be the decisive element in the unity of all Churches, especially today, when its importance is questioned, but it can be a basic, common element of all traditions that we can make use of it as a bridge between

them for a better mutual knowledge. Asceticism, as a praxis of faith, can easily fit on the list of decisive elements for the inter-religious and inter-confessional dialogue. It is a common element at the basis of any religion, having different forms and shapes depending on the local tradition. This is also the ecumenical vision used in this thesis, as a process of approaching, knowledge and enriching based on the current ascetic practice, thus avoiding endless confrontations on dogmatic and doctrinal topics without any practical result.

In the *Methods of Implementing the Contemporary Asceticism* section we have included various practical forms of asceticism that arise from the contemporary issues, such as the use of technology, the perception of socialization, meditation, and spiritual recipes. Men and women are motivated today by the generous and appealing offers of the Oriental movements, promoting precise methods which, if followed strictly, can bring the expected results. We have seen from an Orthodox perspective that the goal is not the fulfillment of a specific rule, but the adaptation of this norm to our own ascetic constitution, certainly, under the supervision of a spiritual guide, since the ultimate goal lies not in the fulfillment of a rule but in the preparation of the being for receiving the grace.

Today, there is a need for a continuous asceticism in a society that is scattered and concerned with many things. This is the daily asceticism, in the most insignificant and ordinary things, so that by gathering all these small ascetic gestures we obtain an ascetic character of our whole life. Ascesis can be seen as the human breath, all the daily gestures should be ascetic, that is, moderate, temperate, turned towards God, so that they form together what we call an ascetic life oriented towards God. This ascesis relates to various practical issues, such as socialization and access to technology. We have seen that social life consumes an important amount of energy, and this is not encouraging for a profound ascetic life, aspect which was also observed by St. Isaac the Syrian, the one who connected the capacity to observe a fasting season and the amount of socializing with others, solitude and silence, as the fundamental elements of Orthodox monasticism. Then, the use of technology must take into account two aspects: self-control (*enkrateia*) and watchfulness (*nipsis*). By self-control we attempt to restrict the use of these various technological means so that they only serve our daily needs and prevent them to become time and energy consuming elements that can distract the mind of the ascetic. Watchfulness is a protection measure against the abundance of images and information brought by technology through the Internet, media and communication means. If the human person does not take much

care and does not filter this flow of information through the sieve of watchfulness, it may easily happen to become a stranger to himself or herself.

4. CONCLUSIONS

I. Results

The fundamental purpose of this study is to systemize the ascetic discourse of the three authors, identifying the common elements, the constants of their thinking, placing asceticism at the basis of the inter-confessional dialogue, and presenting this message as a relevant one to the conditions of the postmodern society. Looking at the ascetic topics and subtopics that were identified as common elements among the authors, we can say that the essential purpose has been fulfilled. The thesis that we defend concerns precisely this similarity in the thinking of three personalities from different theological backgrounds, from different geographic locations, based on asceticism, of course, having some inevitably different nuances.

Through an extensive reading of the writings of the three authors we have identified that their ascetic discourse addresses to an increasingly specialized audience. If Dom Basil addresses mainly to the large public, Christian and non-Christian, Archimandrite Sophrony talks for both contemporary lay men and women, and the monastic brotherhood that he has guided, and Archimandrite Emilianos speaks especially to the monks he guides. So we find a gradual specificity of their ascetic discourse, on three levels, from general information to the general public, to the most specialized details, designed especially for monks and nuns. In this sense, we have a wide range of ascetic discourse that can be addressed to a very large audience.

Through this study we have extracted the basic principles of asceticism as they appear in the writings of the three authors, identified the constants and the differences, conceptualized a model of asceticism, and linked this discourse to the challenges of the contemporary society. The approach was a comparative one, analyzing each subtopic in the thought of the three authors, which allowed us to dissect each perspective and to highlight the different and common elements.

II. Original contributions

- a. *Grouping of the three personalities.* We are not aware of the existence of any study that brings together the theology of the three authors, and even more, their ascetic discourse. The connection between the three is represented by the age in which they lived, the receptivity of their works in their environment, their position of spiritual fathers and directors, the time spent in the midst of the

Athonite spirituality, one that formed their thinking by generating a strong ascetic speech.

- b. *Identification of three levels of specialization in their ascetic discourse.* We have identified a gradual specificity of the authors' ascetic discourse on three levels, from general information for the general public to the most specialized details, especially for monks and nuns. The authors use a different terminology depending on the audience type.
- c. *Comparative analysis of Eastern and Western asceticism.* Throughout this study, connections between the principles of the Christian-Orthodox asceticism and those of the contemporary Western environment (especially the Roman Catholic) have been made, so that ascetics have become a common element in the dialogue between the two spiritualities.
- d. *A new step towards the dialogue between Orthodox and Far-Oriental ascetic spirituality.* The analysis of Fr. Sophrony's ascetic perspective on the Oriental religions is a new research topic for the Orthodox theology at a neo-patristic level. Today, it is particularly relevant, as the Orthodox Church must find ways to relate to the new spiritualities and must try to propose a valid Orthodox answer, but at the same time, an attractive and practical one.
- e. *Analysis of the perception of asceticism in the contemporary society.* In order for us to understand the contemporary society's perception of asceticism, we have conducted an online survey distributed in the Western Christian world, with respondents from different countries, most of them Orthodox believers.

III. Future research directions

- a. Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue
- b. Patristic foundation of the ascetic discourse
- c. Asceticism and contemporary non-religious surrogates
- d. Dualism and the value of human body
- e. New contemporary perspectives

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