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CATECHESIS OF SPIRITUAL LIFE
WITH SAINT SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN

- Abstract -

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Cuvinte-cheie: *catechesis, symeon the new theologian, spiritual life, asceticism, transfiguration, knowledge of God*

This thesis intends, firstly, to present Orthodox Catechesis as a means of transmitting the teaching about the inner and spiritual life, and not only a means of elementary initiation and assimilation of religious knowledge, as well as to propose as an exceptional model for this purpose the spiritual catechesis of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, having a universal adressability within the Orthodox environment, larger than the monastic context where it has been most frequently delivered.

In connection to this objective, we will focus on presenting Saint Symeon the New Theologian from the point of view of his most relevant position: that of a teacher or catechist in a broad meaning, position which at the same time places him in the closest continuity with the evangelical spirit and Orthodox tradition, but it also distinguishes him at the rightful scale in his position as a Theologian in the most important meaning, that of a 'speaker to God' and teacher about God on the basis of his true knowledge of God.

For this, we pursued to explain and study thoroughly Saint Symeon's position as an integral catechist, starting from the foundation of his teaching, which is not only received by faith and transmitted theoretically from this faith, nor is it one exclusively based on books – which he criticizes and condemns relentlessly –, but it is one lived and experienced as an apprentice first, before being shared to others by him as a teacher.

An essential part of this thesis is thus the analysis of Saint Symeon's spiritual evolution as a teacher and 'preacher of God', especially since this is unanimously accepted by researchers, one way or the other, as being defining for his life, attitude and teaching later on. Further on, we reviewed his written work, as a testimony of his teaching, while the main chapter of this thesis consists in the systematic identification of Saint Symeon's catechetical themes, in their inner structure and coherence, with the rightful consideration to the man who is not only 'the greatest mystic of Orthodoxy' or the unusual preacher of inner life between millenia, but first of all a Theologian of the Church in all the power of this name – exactly because this position tends to be frequently depreciated by the persistent and often exclusive concern for his mystical experiences and expressions.

From the methodological point of view, the approach is mixed, because it was necessary to combine the exigencies of the historical method for the existence and controversies on Saint Symeon's life circumstances, with a philological approach regarding his writings, and then with the practical need to create a systematic analysis of Saint

Symeon's teaching, in order to highlight the themes of his thinking and catechesis in a structured manner. Although the research of Saint Symeon's teaching may seem vast and full of multiple interdisciplinary connections, we maintained the theme research area within Catechesis, which governs and subordinates the other aspects of the theme. Thus, although there is a subchapter of history research, we sought to observe the historical context mostly through and for its relevance on Saint Symeon's teaching; even if his teaching has a considerable mystical depth, we had in view not to approach the spirituality theme, except for the extent to which it appears as catechesis in Saint Symeon's orations; while we considered necessary to review Saint Symeon's writings, we avoided going deep into the area of Patrology, by strictly pointing out the catechetical character of these writings; and although the New Theologian's teaching is blended with his theology, we avoided extending the theme in the field of systematic theology, by refraining from rigorous theological assessments. What unifies, consequently, all the aspects involved in our research is the presentation of Saint Symeon as a teacher / catechist, along with the effort of identifying all the catechetical aspects of his writings.

This thesis also pursues to retrieve the perception about Saint Symeon the New Theologian as a teacher of the Church and a theological and spiritual authority of the highest rank, by revisiting his current reduction to the insufficient and fragmentary image of a Philokalic author and particular renewer of monastic life.

The *Table of Contents* is divided into three main parts. The first part is preparatory or introductory, seeking to retrieve, based on the testimony of Tradition and Fathers of the Church, the true meaning of Orthodox Catechesis, as revealed by the teaching of the Holy Gospels, as it was seen throughout the first Christian centuries and then during the great expansion of catechumenate in the fourth century and afterwards, and also from the point of view of the impact this change had, in time, on the Orthodox faith teaching, until the time of Saint Symeon the New Theologian.

From the standpoint of evangelical preaching, 'to teach' (διδάσκειν) means the concern for a word to reach the soul and stay there, and to it another one and another one should add up, for the inner edification that is also referred to by Saint Paul the Apostle, in his words to the Corinthians: 'let all things be done to edification' (1 Cor. 14, 26). This is the purpose of catechesis, to teach with the goal of interior growth – which is a necessary and sometimes forgotten perspective on the evangelical message, very frequently perceived (in

result to the abundant Protestant preaching exegeses in the latest centuries) only as a soul-moving and (possibly) conscience-waking 'sermon'.

The core object of evangelical catechesis is the attaining of the Kingdom of Heaven, of the eternal life in Christ, and the essence of this teaching on Salvation is included in the words: 'For you see, the Kingdom of God is within you' (*Luke 17, 21*). For attaining it, we are taught that man must change completely, must be renewed inside by self-abandonment and abnegation in following Christ: 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.' (*Mark 8, 34*), and this is implicitly the core theme of spiritual catechesis in Orthodox tradition. The inner life revealed by Christ involves the struggle with passions and the spiritual liberation from the power of the devil – aspects so serious and crucial that the great contemporary preacher, Saint Nikolai Velimirovici, the one named 'the New Chrysostom' of Serbia, felt necessary to state clearly that 'morality, if it does not have on its first page the image or face of the devil, is not morality, but only some deceiving aesthetics for the soul. Because it does not show life as a tragedy caused by the conflict between right and wrong, but as a pleasant song for tea and parties.'¹

The apostolic Kerigma was rather the introduction to catechesis than the catechesis itself, and the contents of apostolic catechesis is more closely visible within the further writings of the New Testament. From the epistles-catecheses of Saint Paul the Apostle – he himself both a teacher and a model of the new spiritual life – are emphasized the coordinates of the teaching about the need for inner renewal, for resurrection in Christ as a purpose and also a true consequence of living in grace, about growing from the level of a 'natural man' to the one of a 'spiritual man' (cf. *1 Cor. 2, 14-15*), in one word, about inner transfiguration.

In the post-apostolic writings, *The Epistle of Barnabas*² may be considered a true example of vivid catechesis, not only by the tone of voice, but also by the concern for 'the blessed and glorious [...] spiritual living' by 'the teachings of Our Lord'³. Genuine catecheses are also the two *Epistles to the Corinthians* of St. Clement of Rome (+101)⁴, which reflect the same deep spiritual and pastoral care that pursue to shape up not only the

1 Nikolai Velimirovici, *Thoughts on Good and Evil*, Sophia, Bucharest, 1999, p. 151.

2 *The Epistle So-Called of Barnabas*, in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, PSB vol.1, translated by Dumitru Fecioru, The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1979, pp. 114-137.

3 *Ibidem*, I, 2, 6, p. 114.

4 Saint Clement of Rome, *The Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, PSB vol.1, translated by Dumitru Fecioru, The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1979, pp. 46-79; *Homily Named the Second Epistle to the Corinthians of Saint Clement of Rome*, in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, PSB vol.1, translated by Dumitru Fecioru, The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1979, pp. 94-103.

ethics, but especially the *ethos* of spiritual life. The second of them is also the one that uses, for the first time after the apostolic period, the verb *κατηχεῖν*⁵, which is actually absent from the writings of many of the post-apostolic Fathers⁶.

The apologetic period inaugurates the era of a new reference to 'Christianity' – term created by St. Ignatius of Antioch in the *Epistle to the Ephesians* –, namely a growing concern for the rational character and intelligibility of faith which starts to crystallize in doctrinal testimonies. The systematic confrontation with the paganism does not happen only outside, being addressed by apologetics, but it becomes more and more of an internal issue, of reassuring and rational persuasion of the new converts (who start emerging exclusively from the 'pagans' along with the permanence of vehement opposition of Judaism to the teaching of Christ) about the thoroughness of the knowledge they received (cf. *Luke* 1, 4). From this point forward, the argumentation is no longer based only on the grounds of historical facts and confirmation by direct witnesses (who were no longer alive), but is based more and more on enhancing the doctrinal comprehension of the divine Revelation culminated in Jesus Christ Our Saviour. Yet, reason-based argumentation is a very slippery ground, and two of the most famous promoters of Christian doctrine – Tertullian (160-240) in the West and Origen (185-253/4) in the East –, with a fascinating mental acuity, eventually went astray and were expelled from the Church body.

Pre-baptismal catechesis tends, further on, to formalize as a specific and rather specialized segment of faith teaching, preceding its incorporation into the Church's life in grace – but a segment that would gradually tend, starting with Constantine's era, to substitute and integrally replace the previous catechetical guidance: 'the catechesis thus compensates for the function of the now-gone apostolate'⁷, Teodor M. Popescu will conclude, in a different tone. The personality of the catechumens, in turn, determines the way the catechesis was conceived and conveyed, as we note in the sensitive distinction between Eastern catecheses of St. Cyril or the 'first catechesis handbook in the East'⁸ as *The Pedagogue* of Saint Clement of Alexandria is considered, on the one hand, and the corresponding 'handbook' in the West, *De catechizandis rudibus* of St. Augustine, on the other hand.

5 André Turck, „Catéchein et catéchésis chez les premiers Pères”, *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 47 (1963), No. 3, pp. 361-372, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44413140, date of access: 03.04.2019.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 371.

7 Teodor M. Popescu, *The First Teachers...*, p. 113.

8 Vasile Gordon, *Introduction...*, p. 33.

The second part is centered on the grounds of Saint Symeon's spiritual catechesis, both at an interior and an exterior level, respectively the level of the unequalled inner experience of the New Theologian, as well as the one of his writings, of whose entirety emerges the profound message of the calling to the union with God as the essence of Orthodox catechetical preaching. First, we presented Saint Symeon's continuity with the Orthodox monastic tradition by the spiritual descentance of Saint Symeon the Pious from the famous Studion Monastery in Constantinople. From St. Symeon the Pious, a Studite monk with a monastic life experience already decades-long by the time of his apprentice Symeon's tonsure into monasticism, the future New Theologian inherits all the crucial milestones of his teaching: about tears and repentance, about prayer, about the rules of living and struggles, and about self-awareness and spiritual guidance⁹.

Further on, we analyzed the relevance of Saint Symeon's life and biography for the comprehension and perception of his teaching, due to the particular combination between experience and knowledge in the person of Saint Symeon, which drew his appellation of the Theologian by excellence. The suspicion that the first editor of his biography, the Jesuit I. Hausherr, casts over the entire written biography cannot be accepted as academic assertion, but merely as an expression of reticence and confessional subjectivity, the more so as even its author does not support this suspicion literally and does not provide reasoning based on facts, but he merely makes it look as if it were self-explanatory. By collateral insinuations, the Jesuit theologian implacably goes for a Western understanding of „sanctity”, which unfortunately we find to have been accepted with too much ease also within the area of Orthodox theology¹⁰. From the Orthodox standpoint, such a premise – that a saint of the Church imagines stories about his spiritual father's life and actions, that he takes upon himself to reshape the events without reticence only in order to gain success by self-made 'propaganda' (namely, to get the honoring of his spiritual father as a saint), that he hides incriminating information and distorts certain facts – is not only inconceivable and unacceptable, but it would also involve in such a case the total disqualification of the biographer's person and work, the invalidation of any guarantee about the authenticity and

9 Ilarion Alfeyev, *Saint Symeon...*, pp. 130-145.

10 The worst example being the one of Fr. Prof. John McGuckin, a Catholic that became Orthodox in the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and who issues several opinions that are completely disconcerting for the Orthodox perception of Saint Symeon, in a skeptical and political-demythifying manner possible only within the thinking framework of modern Western Europe - John McGuckin, „Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Byzantine Monasticism”, pp. 357-380.

truthfulness of what he wrote, in which case it would be completely useless the critical attempt to identify the 'authentic' information within the text.

Any attempt to reinterpret the historical circumstances is hazardous, because it categorically parts with the assertions of the biographical text. Eventually, Hausherr himself denies the biography assertions regarding the acquiring of a Court position by the young Symeon in result to his uncle's actions and before the death of 'that illustrious man' (whoever that may have been), and associates that to a later age and period, deduced by reference to *Catechesis* 22, considered to be autobiographical¹¹. In their full context, the scenario and suggestions made by Hausherr are chaotic and arbitrary, in total disagreement with the sources: he insinuates that young Symeon was to be presented at the Court of Romanos II and he refuses, although emperors would have been, nominally, the young Basil and Constantine, then that the young man became a spathocubiculary and member of the senate and then he wanted to abandon these positions, but actually he had not acquired these positions at that time and so he had no position to abandon (!), and that Symeon had seen his life so dangerously threatened because of his 'position' at the Court (which he actually did not have) that he hoped to save himself in a monastery, although we meet him later on continuing his career and imperial service without being under any (hypothetical) danger or threat.

It is obvious though that, by all the autobiographical indications, young Symeon's option for monasticism and for following the guidance of St. Symeon the Pious, as well as all the spiritual life emerged from it, were determined neither by exterior circumstances, nor by any extraordinary spiritual experience, as the later case was on seeing God's Light (which moreover consolidated and then re-woke his initial wish), but by the struggle and searches of a sensitive and profound conscience to truly overcome the scission between theory and practice, between declarative faith and factual lack of faith in the society of the Capital, where he had been sent. Thus, an elementary finding about the New Theologian's life and teaching is required: not that St. Symeon would have made of his own ideas a subjective, rigid and compelling doctrine for his listeners – as various commentators maliciously imply or state –, but that his life is an experience of his teaching, and the teaching is – in the most rigorous traditional meaning, inherited from St. Gregory the Theologian – a proof of the fact that he first lived, and only afterwards he taught others about the peaks of spiritual growth in Christian life. We therefore have enough evidence to consider that the life of Saint Symeon

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. XC.

the New Theologian and the spiritual evolution which he confessed and wanted to see followed by everyone have nothing to do with a failed career-hunting, nor with egocentric aristocratic aims, but they are only the wonderful testimony of the transfiguration of a soul thirsty for God and thirsty to see everyone sharing this, and this is in fact the true perspective in which we ought to regard both the life and the known writings of this great teacher of Orthodoxy.

Further on, we review all the writings available under his name, both the acknowledged ones and the ones doomed unauthentic, as a basis for the findings and analysis in the third part of our thesis regarding the grounds of Saint Symeon's spiritual life. With a particularly oral style, where he always bears in mind and in his address an interlocutor, but with a speech substance that is not aimed at impressing or moving by the vocabulary expressiveness, but by the categorical support of his ideas, we may say that St. Symeon is always an adviser, a *catechist*, and his writings – just as his words, at other times – have no other purpose than to *guide* toward comprehension, repentance and life with God. In this respect, all the writings of Saint Symeon *are* catechetical, beyond their different literary character (speeches, catecheses, letters, hymns).

The third part is dedicated to the effort of reviewing and extensive systematization of Saint Symeon's teachings in their state as genuine catechetical themes, mission which has been partially undertaken also by his previous researchers, but not with such details and rigor. Our systematization efforts outlined the existence of several categories in Saint Symeon's teachings, which start though from a preliminary and critical level of a diagnosis and incrimination of a series of abnormalities and transgressions against the evangelical faith, hidden and covered under the name and appearance of authentic faith. After this first subchapter, there follows the specification of what, in Saint Symeon's teaching, are the basic premises of Orthodox faith and living. After having learned through experience how large the richness of God's grace is, and consequently what an unmeasurable loss it is to disregard its earning, Saint Symeon did not intend to be an original initiator of a particular spiritual renewal, nor the promoter of a unique and rather exotic vision about the connection with God¹², but a sincere confessor of the received grace, a poor soul full of zeal for the salvation of his brothers.

12 As Fr. Prof. John McGuckin tries to provide arguments, in his various articles dedicated to St. Symeon; see, for example, „ Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Byzantine Monasticism (The Life Behind the *Life*)”, pp. 357-380; here, pp. 377-380.

Only after these specifications, we reach the presentation of the actual catechetical themes, structured by the steps of inner life as they result from the Saint's teaching itself, namely: the struggle, metanoia and comprehensive unity with God, or: the ascetic, mystical and dogmatic catechesis.

Saint Symeon's ascetic strictness is not only a conceptual one, nor does it have anything to do with a military-like authoritarianism that he would impose up to exasperation on his monks (as it might create the impression the rebellion of the thirty monks at Saint Marina), it rather has its acknowledged origin in the words of Saint Mark the Ascetic, which moved young Symeon since the beginnings of his spiritual searches, and which stated: 'If you want spiritual health, listen to your conscience, do all it tells you, and you will benefit.'¹³ This rigorous compliance with the urges of conscience soon made him witness to the first and wonderful revelation of God's glory and light, which for him represented a confirmation, beyond controversy or any human interpretation, of the possibility of felt and conscious communion of man with God.

In terms of mystical theology, Saint Symeon particularly insists on a stringently needed specification and distinction between sanctity in general, as the placement of the soul under the power of God's grace, and impassibility to sin as a complete liberation from passion and integral and cumulative achievement of all supreme virtues, as well as on the fact that he himself was made worthy of this, by God's grace¹⁴. Certainly, there is another very necessary specification and distinction, between true impassibility to sin and the pretended impassibility and sanctity with which quite many contemporaries of Saint Symeon invested themselves by self-delusion, based on the impression they generated in people and 'convincing themselves that only the people's praises alone were enough for virtue'¹⁵.

Yet, to attain impassibility to sin is different from overcoming sinfulness or certain passions, and the ascent up to it may superficially be considered completed if these aspects are not known; it is more than the impassibility of the body, which alone is of no use, but also more than the stillness of the soul's passions, because the impassibility to sin is not only a spiritual purge of the lack of passions, but also a fullness of virtues¹⁶. Virtue is the one that has at its core the seeking of future and eternal goods, of earning God's glory and dressing in His light, as well as the suffering, freed from any passion or disturbance, of all the hardships

13 St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law in 200 Brief Chapters*, 69, p. 236.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 233.

15 *The Ethical Discourses* 6, p. 253.

16 *The Ethical Discourses* 4, p. 210.

and troubles that are made through people¹⁷, and only the attaining of virtue makes permanent the liberation from passions, without which asceticism is useless and its work is not victorious¹⁸.

At the roots of Saint Symeon's theological teaching about God is his uncommon gnoseological perspective of theological apophasis, which is frequently reiterated as a leitmotif in all his expositions. We may even assert that the gnoseological apophasis is the center of Saint Symeon's theology, but also the intersection point of his antinomic theology with the mysterious revelation of intimacy with God. It is not a rational apophasis, of finding the inability to comprehend and express God's reality, nor an exclusively terminological one¹⁹, but an experimental and mystical apophasis, of the thrilling awareness regarding the inadequacy of human concepts to What outsmarts the human being in an infinite way, which shows the incapacity and limits of the theological formulation of mental constructions which it always criticizes so much.

Saint Symeon dedicates a wide space to the explanation of the theological conception about creation, whose clarification seems to have concerned him considerably – and this also against the background of another unsubstantiated theological debate started during his lifetime, regarding the forthcoming living of people in the Kingdom of Heaven and the characteristics of this living²⁰. Indeed, his entire theological, ascetic and mystical concern develops against the background of this theology that creates a larger frame of comprehension regarding man's constitution, his mission and his way of relating to God according to this mission. The Saint's specifications are vast and highly analytical, thus showing the importance that this theological ground and its correct understanding has in his spiritual conception and teaching. Saint Symeon also develops the milestones of a Christological anthropology, where the two aspects are in complementary and parallel interdependence.

In the end, Saint Symeon's eschatological ecclesiology highlights that, just as the unity with God and spiritual transfiguration are not postponed until the Judgment Day, but they are meant to begin even from this life, in a similar manner the unity of the saints with

17 *Ibidem*, p. 211.

18 *The Ethical Discourses* 7, pp. 269-270.

19 Which is analytically examined by I. Alfeyev, in parallel with the Aeropagitic one, regarding all its figures of speech: direct negation, use of the superlative, the paradoxal assertions or oximora – the latter specifically abounding in Saint Symeon's discourse; cf. *Saint Symeon the New Theologian and the Orthodox Tradition*, pp. 204-208.

20 *The Ethical Discourses* 1, p. 144.

Christ begins in this life by the same reasoning, because it is the reality of the Church itself, and in the afterlife it will only find its completion. His Eucharist theology adds the mysterious and yet totally accessible revelation that the Holy Mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ are the true fulfilment of all goods, because in them and through them the communion with God in itself is mysteriously given, and apart from this, nothing in the whole world can be worth mentioning nor correspond to the Pauline words about the eternal rejoicing of the saved ones²¹. The difference between current living and the afterlife, for saints, is therefore only one of degree, and not one between continuity and discontinuity.

The thesis conclusions attempt to outline findings and recommendations inspired by Saint Symeon's teaching regarding the catechesis of inner life for our times, its necessity and ways of achievement. As a spiritual father, Saint Symeon reveals himself as a profound connoisseur of inner life, not only from the standpoint of monastic life and habits, but of a spirituality both evangelical and deeply theological, one that transcends the usual division of Christian society into a monastic category formally considered more ardent and one that serenely (and, sometimes, resignedly) adopts the parameters of a living that is less rigorous and frequently defined by the simple spiritual 'survival'.

Saint Symeon brings a new wind of inspiration and clarification regarding Orthodox catechesis, by defining inner life not in relation to the environment and the way of living, nor to ascetic exigencies that are specific and hard to go by, but by edifying inner life on two milestones: firstly, on the conscience testimony about any of the daily attitudes and actions, and secondly, on the undertaking of the evangelical calling of self-abandonment by obeying a spiritual father and adviser. These may seem pretty usual notions and familiar basically to any Orthodox believer, but their importance and value become obvious only together with the comprehension of unspoiled rigor by which these criteria must be followed in order to become truly efficient and active.

But the fruitful use of these valences needs their undertaking by those who try to transmit them, or from whom it is expected to do as such – first of all the priests and fathers of the Church, according to the well-known words of the previous Theologian of the Church, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus²². The catechesis of inner life is thus a pastoral care issue, not

21 *The Ethical Discourses 3*, p. 199.

22 „It is necessary first to be purified, then to purify; to be made wise, then to make wise; to become light, then to enlighten; to approach God, then to bring others to Him; to be sanctified, then to sanctify” – St. Gregory of Nazianzen, „In Defence of His Flight to Pontus or On Priesthood”, in: Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Gregory of Nazianzen and Saint Ephrem the Syrian, *On Priesthood*, translated by Dumitru Fecioru, The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1987, Chapter LXXI, p. 199.

only a rational one, which involves in a profound manner both the person and the experience of the catechist in his position as a spiritual father, and the acknowledgement by the confessor of his spiritual fatherhood to his spiritual sons and his constant concern for their improvement, even beyond the confession chair.