

Therapy of imagination in the life and thought of  
Saint Sophrony Sakharov

Summary

The present study highlights the teaching of St. Sophrony Sakharov on the influence the imagination has on the Christian or the monk, during prayer or when he struggles with the passions of the soul.

Imagination plays an extremely important role in spiritual life. If used correctly and morally, it can help the human soul in its spiritual ascent to Heavenly Father, but, of course, used passionately, it can enslave man and mutilate his spiritual life.

The paper is structured in four chapters. In the first chapter, entitled *Biography and Theology of Saint Sophrony Sakharov*, we highlighted the main stages of his biography, necessary to understand the birth of authentic spiritual life and his theology, and we also presented the essential spiritual experiences of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, which determined the whole theological thinking and later ascetic-mystical living.

The second chapter, *Imagination in the Ascetic Literature of the Holy Fathers*, highlights their teaching on imagination and the connection between imagination and passions, imagination and senses, imagination and image, imagination and memory, imagination and prayer, imagination and theology. Here we stopped, when necessary, and analyzed the writings of Archimandrite Sophrony, comparing them with the phylocalic writings, observing, in this sense, profound similarities with the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Simeon the New Theologian, Saints Callistus and Ignatius Xantopol, Saint John Cassian and others. We have also highlighted some ways of healing the imagination that the Phylocalic Fathers show us in their writings.

We titled the third chapter *Imagination in the Life and Thought of Saint Sophrony*. This chapter presents the teaching on the imagination springing from the ascetic-mystical experience of St. Sophrony and its connection with passions, demons, reverie, intellectualism and even academic theology.

The first form of imagination is directly related to the work of carnal passions. According to the teaching of the Holy Father, there is a very close connection between capital sins and imagination. According to the Sophronian vision, each passion has its own energy that is offered to us for consent and sin. If the mind refuses the offer of these images and takes refuge in the heart in prayer and does not consent to it, the passion is extinguished and perishes. The faculty that helps us to distinguish and fight against these forces is the vigilance of the mind or nepsis. With this, the monk, aided by divine grace, can "smell" these fluctuations of the mind and can oppose their spiritual work.

The most fruitful form of struggle against the passions is prayer united with sincere repentance. Father Sophrony recommends the prayer said from one's heart, in the form of a cry. In this personal and personalized prayer, the needy tell their God their pain and helplessness.

St. Sophrony also gives us some practical advice on how to fight against the imagination of gross bodily passions, such as personal prayer (the father insistently reminds us of the importance of the rule of prayer), directing attention to the teaching of Holy Scripture and reading it regularly, spiritual reading, nature walks, discussions with people more experienced in spiritual struggle and even intellectual and physical work.

Another form of imagination that father Sophrony talks about in his writings is the imagination related to the influence of demons. There are many pages in the writings of the Holy Fathers, which we mentioned in part in our study, and which describe how the devil uses our imagination. The Father does not neglect the demonic work in the spiritual life, on the contrary, he points out that this imaginary world, in man, is united to some extent with that of the fallen devils. Imagination can become, for the enslaved and passionate man, the bridge of demons.

The vigilance of the mind helps the needy to stop the passion since its appearance in the inner part of the mind. If the needy says the prayer diligently, then the first passionate thought cannot work and thus he overcomes it from the beginning.

Reverie or daydreaming is another form of imagination with which the needy comes into contact. This can displace man from the sphere of reality in the area of other realms of the imagination. This condition is not healthy. With the advent of television, the Internet and the media, there is more and more talk about reverie and daydreaming that these technical means have on postmodern man. These altered states of consciousness can bring many psychological, moral and spiritual disturbances, sometimes leading man to various forms of deception from the

devil. Man has to deal with these states through vigilance and prayer if he wants to approach God cleanly.

The intellectual imagination, even if it helps the progress of mankind, being one of the engines of unprecedented scientific progress in human history, even if it has a general positive aspect when it intersects with the spiritual sphere, becomes an obstacle and must be eliminated. According to Father Sophrony, science cannot be the only tool for knowing the ultimate truths, because they cannot be the object of its research. It cannot claim to give us an "alternative" view to the religious one, because it does not have the necessary tools for such an approach. For Father Sophrony, to oppose the scientific vision to the theological one is a false problem, as it could be observed from our analysis in the third chapter dedicated to this subject.

The intellectual theologian or professor of theology represents, for Father Sophrony, a real concern. The great temptation for the intellectual theologian is that in time he may come to love his theological creation as himself. If he does not renounce this form of "wealth," he will not be able to know either pure prayer or true contemplation. Behind his love for this creation lies the most treacherous sin, pride. Because of this, the intellectual theologian must be aware of the distance that exists between the theology teacher and the true theologian. The Father confirms the Evagrian theology according to which the true theologian is the one who knows God personally in prayer. Therefore, true theology is based on the personal knowledge of God and not on intellectual or philosophical creations.

Authentic theology always proves the living Christ. If theology does not imply an authentic spiritual experience with God, but refers to Him as an object, according to the Church Fathers, but also to Father Sophrony, it is a theology that does not deserve this name. However, the father Sophrony presents in his works an overview of academic theology. He observes, on the one hand, its natural limits and "negative" consequences and, on the other hand, highlights its positive potential. In this direction, academic theology itself cannot lead to the knowledge of God but recognizes that throughout the history of Christianity, there have been and still are situations in which scientific study has led the researcher or scholar to the knowledge of God.

The spiritual struggle is required to be fought in the realm of the mind and heart. The most powerful weapon that man has in overcoming any form of imagination is prayer. In the teaching of Elder Sophrony, three kinds of prayer are depicted. The first form of prayer manifests itself as a movement of the mind to the outside world. In this form of prayer, since it is dissipated through

the five senses, the mind is separated from the heart. Because of this fact, at this stage, it is the imagination that dominates.

After a long struggle with their passions and energies, which penetrate from the outside to the inside, the needy, through the second kind of prayer, the meditative one, turns his mind from the outside to himself. By directing his mind and memory to the creation of God, to the gospel word, to the saving moments of man's salvation, to the remembrance of death, of judgment, etc., the needy passes, as we have seen, to a more advanced stage in the spiritual life, to meditative prayer.

Discovering his true treasure from within, his heart, and cleansing it through prayer, humility, and all other virtues, the needy, aided by the grace of God, passes to the third kind of prayer, the contemplation. After many struggles with the passions, with the demons, with the intellectual imagination and even with the theological one, step by step, the soul ascends to God, through the inner man. The Christian life is the expression of two wills: the uncreated one of God and the created one of man, and prayer is the quintessential expression of these two wills.

Advancing on the three steps of prayer, the movement of the mind outward, the return to oneself and its ascent through the inner man, and renouncing any form of image or thought, man comes to rise directly to the pure contemplation so loved by the Elder Sophrony.

The last chapter, the fourth, entitled *Means of Imaginary Therapy*, exposes some means of therapy of the mind of any form of manifestation of the imagination. Regarding the spiritual struggle of the mind against the imagination, both the proper and the improper, Father Sophrony is without any deviation from the line of the phylocalic tradition. For him, the purpose of prayer and deliverance from the accursed imagination is the union of the mind with the heart, which is also the realm of spiritual warfare. In this direction, vigilance or the work of the mind, accompanied by prayer, is the basis of healing and ascension to God. During this ascent, the prayer will have to filter his images and thoughts influenced by the sentient side on the criterion of God's will revealed in the supernatural revelation. To oppose the influences of demons, man must run deep into himself, to Christ, the only One who can help him, both in the struggle with his passions and in the struggle with the forces of darkness, with the mind of the enemy. As for the means of therapy of the imagination, he recommends repentance, humility, hesykhia, prayer, meditation in the Christian spirit. As for prayer, he does not recommend a specific practical method, but perfect attention to the words spoken.

In Eastern Christian spirituality, the gathering or practising of the mind's attention does not have as its finality a state of calm or self-control, but the union with the eternal Christ, by calling on the Name of Jesus.

The rejection of the sinful imagination, of reverie or daydreaming, of intellectual and even theological imagination, by the gathering of the mind into God, by prayer and contemplation, should be the work of every Christian, layman or monk.

From the above, we notice that father Sophrony is a great spiritual and theological personality of the Church, strongly anchored in the phylocalic and patristic tradition. He is not only an exponent of this tradition but also a continuator of it.

The mind and heart, freed from any form of sin and anchored in prayer, can overcome any form of imagination, despair, or desolation. The prophetic word of St. Sophrony, referring to the spiritual crisis of today, is hopeful: "It may be that all the desolation and tragic suffering of man contribute to a great and profound spiritual rebirth of many souls. The light of this hope shines with even greater power because suffering opens the way to a prayer that goes beyond the boundaries of the built world"<sup>1</sup>.

Through his life, theology and spiritual work, Saint Sophrony Sakharov is and remains a living example, both for his generation and today's or tomorrow's generations.

**Keywords:** Sophrony Sakharov, imagination, therapy, heart, vigilance, prayer, mind, meditation.

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<sup>1</sup> Archim. Zaharia Zaharou, *Omnia cel tainic al inimii...*, pp. 110-111.

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Chapter I</b> .....	12
<b>Biography and Theology of Saint Sophrony Sakharov</b> .....	12
1.1 <i>Spiritual Biography of Saint Sophrony Sakharov</i> .....	12
1.1.1 <i>Childhood</i> .....	13
1.1.2 <i>Wandering in Oriental Mysticism</i> .....	15
1.1.3 <i>Rediscovering the Personal God</i> .....	17
1.1.4 <i>Searching for the "Absolute" in Art</i> .....	19
1.1.5 <i>Inner Life and Longing for God</i> .....	20
1.1.6 <i>Mount Athos and the Meeting with Saint Silouan</i> .....	21
1.1.7 <i>Returning to Paris and Publication of the Notes of Saint Silouan</i> .....	22
1.1.8 <i>The Importance of the Writings and Teachings of the Saint</i> .....	24
1.2 <i>Sophronian Theology</i> .....	28
1.2.1 <i>Theological Training of St. Sophrony</i> .....	28
1.2.3 <i>Sergei and the Philosophical Currents of His Time</i> .....	29
1.2.4 <i>Sergei and the Religious Currents of His Time</i> .....	30
1.2.5 <i>The Catholic and Universal Theology of the Saint</i> .....	31
1.2.6 <i>The path of monasticism - the experience of brotherly love</i> .....	33
1.2.7 <i>Theology of the Hypostatic Principle</i> .....	40
1.2.8 <i>Stages of Spiritual Life</i> .....	45
<b>Chapter II</b> .....	49
<b>Imagination in the Ascetic Literature of the Holy Fathers</b> .....	49
2.1 <i>Contemporary Scientific Definitions of Imagination</i> .....	49
2.1.1 <i>Definitions of Imagination in Secular Literature</i> .....	52
2.2 <i>Imagination in the Holy Fathers</i> .....	54
2.2.1 <i>Terms used to define Imagination</i> .....	55
2.2.2 <i>Definitions of Imagination in the Holy Fathers</i> .....	56
2.3 <i>Imagination and Passions</i> .....	61
2.3.1 <i>St. John Cassian and the Struggle with the Passions</i> .....	62

2.4 <i>Imagination and Senses</i> .....	66
2.5 <i>The Sense of Sight and the Imagination</i> .....	69
2.6 <i>Imagination and Memory</i> .....	70
2.7 <i>Appropriate and Inappropriate Imagination</i> .....	72
2.8 <i>Imagination and the Holy Scripture</i> .....	76
2.9 <i>Imagination Therapy in the Holy Fathers</i> .....	78
2.9.1 <i>Healing the Mind at Evagrius Ponticus</i> .....	80
<b>Chapter III</b> .....	82
<b>Imagination in the Life and Thought of Saint Sophrony</b> .....	82
3.1 <i>The different Aspects of the Imagination</i> .....	82
3.1.1 <i>Imagination and Passions</i> .....	83
3.1.2 <i>Imagination, Vehicle of Demons</i> .....	87
3.1.3 <i>Oriental Meditation and the Living Prayer</i> .....	92
3.1.4 <i>Reverie or Daydreaming</i> .....	95
3.1.5 <i>Intellectual Imagination</i> .....	98
3.1.6 <i>Theological Imagination</i> .....	101
3.1.7 <i>On Clairvoyance</i> .....	108
3.2 <i>Prayer and Imagination</i> .....	109
3.2.1 <i>The Three Types of Prayer</i> .....	109
3.2.2 <i>Jesus Prayer</i> .....	109
3.2.3 <i>Prayer and Scattering of the Mind</i> .....	119
3.2.4 <i>Art and Prayer</i> .....	120
<b>Chapter IV</b> .....	128
<b>Means of Imaginary Therapy</b> .....	128
4.1 <i>St. Sophrony's Teaching on the Healing of Man</i> .....	128
4.1.1 <i>On Orthodox Psychotherapy</i> .....	128
4.1.2 <i>The Therapeutic Role of the Spiritual Father</i> .....	133
4.1.3 <i>The Sacrament of Confession – A Means of Therapy</i> .....	137
4.1.4 <i>Healing the heart in Sophronian Theology</i> .....	138
4.1.5 <i>Spiritual Struggle</i> .....	141

<i>4.2 Means of Imagination Therapy</i> .....	146
<i>4.2.1 Leaving the Grace and Fighting the Imagination</i> .....	146
<i>4.2.2 Nepsis</i> .....	152
<i>4.2.3 The Prayer</i> .....	158
<i>4.2.4 Banishing Evil Thoughts</i> .....	159
<i>4.2.5 The Descent of the Mind into the Heart</i> .....	162
<i>4.2.6 Meditation</i> .....	163
<i>4.3 Contemporary Challenges and Ways of Mind Therapy</i> .....	168
<i>4.3.1 Depression – A Disease of Modernity</i> .....	171
<i>4.3.2 Religious Media – A Way of Mind Therapy?</i> .....	174
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	177
<b>Annexes</b> .....	184
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	202