

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY FROM CLUJ-NAPOCA
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**The Impact of Monasticism on the Moral-Spiritual Life of
the Russian Society from the Beginning of the 19th Century
until Today. Optina Monastery**

– PhD. Thesis –

Abstract

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CONTENT

Abbreviations.....Error!
r! Bookmark not defined.

Introduction
.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

I. Motivation
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

II. Necessity and topicality of the theme
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

III. Purpose, novelty and content of the thesis
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

IV. Theme, objectives, delimitation
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

V. Stage in the research process
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

VI. Other bibliographical marks
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

VII. Methodology of the research
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter I. Abbots from Optina Monastery – preservers of the Russian monasticism
.....**Error!**

r! Bookmark not defined.

1.1 From the history of the Russian monasticism
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

1.2 Pages from the history of optina Monastery.....**Error!**
Bookmark not defined.

1.3 Saint Paisius from Neamț – renovator of the Russian monasticism.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

1.4 Disciples of Mons Paisius from Neamț – followers of the hesychast tradition.....**Error!**
r! Bookmark not defined.

1.5 The origin of the tradition of the abbots and its essence.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

1.6 Russian priorship – phenomenon of Orthodoxy.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

1.7 Biographic summary of the abbots from Optina. Their character and spiritual portrait
.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

1.7.1 Monk	Lev
.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.7.2 Monk Macarie	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.3 Monk Moise	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.4 Monk Antonie	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.5 Monk Ilarion	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.6 Monk	Ambrozie
.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.7.7 Monk Anatolie	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.8 Monk Isaachie	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.9 Monk Iosif	
.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.7.10 Monk	Varsonufie
.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.7.11 Monk	Anatolie II
.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.7.12 Monk Nectarie	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.13 Monk Nikon	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.7.14 Monk Isaachie II	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
1.8 The role of the abbot's peresonality in the formation of the exterior and interior life of the monastic community – from the experience and perspective of the abbots from Optina	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.9 Sarov Pustyn and Optina Pustyn, important spiritual centres.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10 The typikon of the services from Optina Monastery and its adaption to the necessities of the Russian pilgrim	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter II. Virtues and passions in the persepctive of the Abbots from Optina...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1 The spiritual unity of the abbots presented by their spiritual sons.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2 The moral teachings of the abbots from Optina for the youngmen.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3 The moral-spiritual advice of the abbots on virtues	Error! Bookmark not defined.

2.3.1	<i>On humbleness</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.3.2	<i>On the purpose of life</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.3.3	<i>On penitence</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.3.4	<i>On patience in sufferance</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.3.5	<i>On prayer</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.3.6	<i>On faith</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.3.7	<i>On the love for God and for the neighbor</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.4	The teachings of the abbots on passions	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.4.1	<i>Pride</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.4.2	<i>Anger</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.4.3	<i>Self-Love</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.4.4	<i>Judging our neighbor</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
2.4.5	<i>Malevolence</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
Chapter III. The relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and culture			.....Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
3.1	The historical and social context of the interaction between Russian intellectuality and the Orthodox Church from the 17th to the 21st century.....Error! Bookmark not defined.		
3.1.1	<i>The 19th century. The important Christian values in the Russian culture. “The golden age” of literature</i>	.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.1.2	<i>The 20th century. On the eve of the revolution. “The silver age” of Russian literature</i>	.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.			
3.1.3	<i>The Communist era. Shattering the fundaments of the social and religious life.</i> Error! Bookmark not defined.		
3.1.4	<i>The 21st century. From resurrection to ignorance. Secularization and the need to rediscover Orthodoxy</i>	.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

in	3.2	Spiritual relations between the Russian intellectuals and Optina Monastery	
		the	19th
			century
			Error! Bookmark
			not defined.
	3.2.1	<i>Philosopher Ivan Vasilievici Kirievski</i>	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	3.2.2	<i>Writer Nicolai Vasilievici Gogol</i>	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	3.2.3	<i>Writer Lev Tolstoi</i>	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	3.2.4	<i>Fiodor M. Dostoievski's visit to Optina Monastery – between the interdisursive perception and the memorialistic literature</i>	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	3.2.5	<i>Russian intellectuality at Optina Monastery</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
	3.2.6	<i>The visit of Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna of Russia at Optina Monastery</i>	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	3.2.7	<i>Pilgrimage of bishop Iuvenalie at Optina Monastery</i>	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	Chapter IV. Optina Monastery from the 20th century until today		Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	1.8	The perspective of the abbots from Optina on the political life in the Russian Empire in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century	Error! Bookmark not defined.
	1.9	Destinies of the monasteries from the 20th century	Error! Bookmark not defined.
	1.10	Optina in the years of persecutions	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	1.11	Historical experience and current tendencies of social service in Optina Monastery	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	1.12	Optina Monastery today	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	1.13	Tradition and renewal in the life of Russian monasticism	Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	Conclusions		Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	
	Appendix		
			Error! Bookmark not defined.
	Bibliography		Error!
		Bookmark not defined.	

Keywords: monasticism, monastery, Optina, abbot, Russian society, monk, moral life, virtues, passions

THEME: THE IMPACT OF MONASTICISM ON THE MORAL-SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE RUSSIAN SOCIETY FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE 19TH CENTURY UNTIL TODAY. OPTINA MONASTERY.

– ABSTRACT OF THE PHD. THESIS –

Motivation. The idea of writing this thesis came to life during a conversation I had with Rev. Prof. PhD. Ștefan Iloaie, in a peaceful evening we spent at Piatra Fântânele Monastery, several years ago. Identifying a theme for the thesis was not difficult. Since I chose the path of monasticism from a young age, I have always wanted to contribute to the discovery and promotion of this beautiful style of living and of the values that monasteries have in general. In the same time, coming from the Republic of Moldova, from the land of Bessarabia, which was estranged from everything that is Romanian for a long time, I chose a subject that is less known in Romania and that could constitute a bridge between the two banks of Prut River, especially in the context of 100 years from the Great Union, and also on the anniversary, this year, of 300 years from the birth of Saint Paisius of Neamț – the light of the Romanian hesychasm. A premise of this proximity may be rightfully considered the relation between the Romanian and Slavonic monasticism, and intersection where we find ourselves in Bessarabia, through the astonishing personality of Saint Paisius of Neamț and of his vast spiritual inheritance.

Since I speak Russian, I had the occasion, from a young age, to visit several times the great monastic centres from Ukraine and Russia, where I became closely acquainted with the Russian monasticism from the perspective of services, obedience and other monastic rules. During these pilgrimages I have met people with various knowledge and life experience, which helped me for a certain perspective on the Russian society and spirituality.

Necessity and topicality of the theme. In the natural aspiration to get into contact with the vivid experience of the spiritual life that I followed in my personal readings and in pilgrimages, I did not find too often monastic communities in which the deeds I was reading about were actually professed. Especially in the 90's, when almost all the monasteries were preoccupied to rehabilitate their churches, only few of them had monks with authentic spiritual lives. My great joy was when I discovered at Optina a monastery which, although not completely rehabilitated and also not very big from an urbanistic point of view, directed all its efforts not to

the exterior restoration, but to the interior one, to the restoration of the spirit of an authentic monastic life. With every visit I found this monastery more and more rich spiritually.

Little is known about the Optina Monastery in Romania, in comparison to other spiritual centres from Russia. There are, of course, translations from Russian of various texts written on this monastery and its abbots, but these are *official* translations, as I would call them, translations from which the reader can only have a superficial impression and which offer only sketchy information on the history of the monastery, its abbots and their writings. But there are no extended studies about Optina Monastery translated into Romanian as we find in the Russian historiography and which served as a support for this thesis. Therefore, the necessity of the theme is imposed by the importance of the role that Optina Monastery had in the 19th century as spiritual nursery and spiritual hearth in which renowned abbots were formed, who shaped through their personality and advice of great moral-spiritual value the Russian society of that time.

We hope that this thesis will be of interest especially for those who live in monasteries, especially for the abbots and spiritual fathers who work to restore the monastic communities. With the help of the example given by Optina Monastery we tried to present how beautiful a monastery can flourish in the light of the authentic spiritual advisers so that later on, when it has a solid fundament of spiritual life, to transfigure the entire society, maybe, firstly, through its great personalities. We also believe that the thesis will be helpful to those who wish to know better the essence of the Russian monasticism, both spiritually and in the manner it influenced morality in the Russian society from the 19th century until today.

Purpose, novelty and content of the thesis. Through this thesis we wish to bring forth to the reader a more comprising and clear image of everything that Russian monasticism, spirituality and society means, all these through the perspective of the unique phenomenon of Russian priorship. In the context of the contemporary geopolitical difficulties, many people, even Orthodox Christians, understand wrongly many of the aspects of the Russian religious life. In this thesis we did not attempt to assess the mistakes that the ecclesiastic or laic administration has made in Russia regarding the monastic life, but to *restore*, if we may say so, to a humble extent, the beautiful image of the Russian monasticism which has a rich spiritual treasure, similar

to the Romanian monasticism, with which it is connected on the line of the inheritance of the great abbot from Neamț.

For the 19th century, a century in which the Russian monasticism goes through a revival, Saint Paisius Velichkovsky had the same importance as Saint Sergius of Radonezh for the 16th century. He was the one who succeeded in reviving the spirit of true monasticism, a spirit which penetrated into Russia initially together with Christianity, flourished and developed uniformly for centuries, but then started to *decay*, and transformed into a religious formalism during the reign of Peter I. That is why, for the Orthodox monasticism in general, but especially for the Russian monasticism, there was the need of an influential person, who, by the power of the word, of the personal example and of his authentic manner of living, could revive this experience in the monasteries from Russia.

In the Christian-Orthodox world, Optina Monastery is known as a centre of hesychasm and of the intense efforts in the area of Russian monasticism. Due to the high spiritual life and to the guiding activity in their correspondence with their spiritual sons, the fathers from optina have become known all around the world. They are the ones who have restored the spiritual path both for the monks and for the Christians of their time. Of the fourteen abbots who enriched the spiritual treasure of Optina Monastery in the 19th century, the most famous are: monk Moise, schemamonk Macarie, schemamonk Ilarion and Anatolie and, of course, the renowned schemamonk Ambrozie.

The general purpose of this thesis is to prove, based on the example of a single monastery – Optina Pustyn – the great spiritual impact of monasticism on the Russian society, which the monastery supported along the years and to the moral renewal of which it still contributes until today. We tried to promote the message that the Russian monasticism, when *it returns to its origins*, to the origin of the authentic spiritual living, it causes beautiful changes both in the life of each individual who turns to it with a heart thirsty of God, and in the life of the entire society. Also as a purpose of the thesis we may consider the approach and the through description of the inheritance left by the abbots from Optina through their writings, which, for the monk or laic of our days, are just as useful as they were two centuries ago, when they were first published.

The religious and moral ideas that one can find in the Russian classical literature and, especially, in the writings of Dostoievski, Gogol and Kirievski but especially the confessions

from the spiritual lives of these great thinkers, present in detail the important impact that the monastic spirit from Optina Monastery produced on them and, through them, on the culture of the Russian people and on its orientation on the path of the true Orthodox values. The rich spiritual experience of the holy abbots from Optina as a fruit of asceticism and their perpetual service when facing the most intense spiritual pains of the people, supplied for over a century the most brilliant minds of the Russian intellectual society, proving once more the close relation and power of cooperation between the mind and the spirit. Inspired and attracted to the spirit of the monasticism from Optina, to the simplicity, harmony and effective power of the words of the abbots, many Russian intellectuals have managed to find an answer not only to their own spiritual quests, but also to the hunger for the truth of an entire generation, hunger of which we suffer today as well.

The great challenge of monasticism today is, surprisingly, similar to that of the abbots from Optina: on the one hand, the world, in a grinding but unconscious suffering and quest for meaning, needs a sincere and generous welcome into the heart of the authentic Orthodox values, which calls monasticism to be open to the people's needs, and on the other hand, the fact that these authentic values can only be transmitted as a consequence of a similarly authentic life. The testimonies of numerous pilgrims on the experiences they had at Optina converge on the fact that love, with which this holy settlement received them when they first arrived, bonded them forever with the *spirit of Optina*.

Theme, objectives, delimitation. From the point of view of the themes approached, the thesis is linked to disciplines such as: history of the Church, especially history of monasticism, Liturgics, Patristic, Philosophy, Universal literature, diverse and vast fields, which can be found in the literary, social and spiritual activity of the great abbots from Optina.

The objectives of the thesis are: to accustom the reader with Optina Monastery; to describe the essence of the Orthodox phenomenon known under the name of "priorship"; to create the bio-bibliographical profile of the abbots from Optina Monastery; to establish the abbots' perspective on virtues and passions; to reveal the importance of the interaction between the Russian monasticism and intellectuality; to follow the pathway of the Russian monasticism based on the example of Optina Monastery, from the 20th century until today; to determine the

ways of promoting the tradition and tendencies of social service from Optina Monastery in their present stage. Guided by these objectives, we structured our thesis on four chapters:

1. Abbots from Optina Monastery – preservers of the Russian monasticism
2. Virtues and passions in the perspective of the Abbots from Optina
3. The relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and culture
4. Optina Monastery from the 20th century until today

This thesis does not intend to accomplish an exhaustive approach of the entire patristic experience, not even one of all the Russian fathers, but is limited to a determined period in time, the days of revival of the Russian monasticism and, with its help, of the entire Russian society.

Stage in the research process and bibliographical marks. The topic of the relationship between the monasteries and the world and with Optina Monastery especially hasn't been approached by any work written in the Romanian theological space. Also, there aren't any works that explore analytically the teachings of the abbots from Optina regarding the moral theology and spirituality. However, there are a few works in which we find clear references to the overwhelming influence that the hesychast current initiated by Paisius had over the spiritual action of the fathers from Optina. We mention here, selectively, the study by father deacon Ioan Ică Jr. in the volume: *Cuviosul Paisie de la Neamț, Autobiografia și viețile unui mare stareț, urmate de Așezăminte și alte texte*, 3rd completed edition, introductory study by rev. Elvio Citterio, an edition presented by deac. Ioan I. Ică Jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2015, and also to the book by father Hrisant Tsacharis, *Sfântul Paisie Velicicovski – înnoitor al vieții monahale și organizator al slujirii liturgice. Influențele operei sale în Bisericile Slavă, Română și Greacă*, Doxologia, Iași, 2021. Obviously, we find short references to the spiritual inheritance that Saint Paisius of Neamț left to the monastic life in Russia in the 19th century also in the works of the professors and theologians who wrote about the History of the Romanian Orthodox Church, but because the space is short we will not mention each one here, but their works can be found in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

And so it becomes that the main bibliographical resources we used in the research of this topic are mainly Russian. Of all these, we consider the most important to be: Vladimir KOTELINIKOV, *Asceții ortodocși și literatura rusă. În drum spre Optina*, Moscow, 2002. In this work, starting from the bright images of the abbots from Optina, the author presents the unity

between the Russian Orthodoxy and literature, which is due mostly to the unique phenomenon of the Russian priorship, which attracted and influenced the lives and thought of the of the important intellectuals of the 19th – 21st centuries.

Tatiana GHEORGHIEVA, *Cultura vieții de zi cu zi: Cultura rusă și Ortodoxia*, Aspect Press, 2008. The work presents an extended study of the progress of the Russian literature and of the church life of the country from a social and historical perspective.

Igor SMOLICI, *Monahismul rus*, Moscow, 1997. This work offers the reader a thorough study of the historical evolution of Russian monasticism from its first flourishing period in the Kievan Rus' (12th-13th centuries) until the beginning of the 20th century. A very important chapter for our thesis is “Priorship and asceticism in the 18th and 19th centuries” in which the author presents the evolution of Russian priorship from its roots in the Middle Ages, followed by a description of the school of Paisius Velichkosky.

Sergei HORUZHYY, *Fenomenul stărețismului rus. Exemple din experiența duhovnicească a stareților*, Moscow, 2006. This reader on the topic of Russian priorship represents the sum of the attempts of various writers to penetrate into the mystery of this phenomenon through the research of the personalities of the most famous abbots, both monks and priests, who although they acted in different times and places, they were bearers of the same spirit.

On the whole, the bibliography of the thesis is diverse. Almost all the materials about Optina Monastery available in Romanian were used, and not only those, now most of them are translations from Russian. These works and many others which served us in the research of the phenomenon of the Russian priorship and of the social and political context in which it manifested along the centuries, are the most representative works for now that approach the topic of the relationship between Russian monasticism and the world in its social and cultural aspect. In this thesis we tried to combine all these aspects, approached thoroughly in the works we have already mentioned to offer the reader a complete image on the manner in which the Russian monasticism, which flourished in the time of the abbots from Optina, influenced profoundly the Russian society during the past centuries.

Methodology of the research. In our thesis, in order to achieve the objectives we set, we used a varied methodology. Firstly, we used the historical method to sketch and differentiate the social and cultural context in which the movement of spiritual renewal appeared and manifested

with the name of *Paisianism*. Besides the historical method, and to some extent as a continuation of it, we used the descriptive and analytical methods, which allowed us to observe clearly certain historical realities of the time and to present several details related to the life and activity of the abbots from Optina, or to present and question certain aspects of the Russian intellectuality who came into contact with the spiritual atmosphere from Optina Monastery. In order to identify the moral and spiritual teachings of the abbots from Optina we used the exegetical and synthetic method. We hope that this thesis which is the result of a personal spiritual aspiration, and also from the need to fill out a void that existed in this field, written in a simple manner, in the quiet of a monastic cell, will satisfy the reader willing to know and partake of the rich inheritance of the Russian monasticism from Optina, to form an idea on the difficult evolution of the Russian monasticism in the past centuries.

Conclusions. The life patterns of the abbots from Optina and their writings nourished the spiritual lives of the monks of this community for centuries, cultivating in this monastery the spirit of an authentic Orthodox living – the only one capable to heal, console and guide thousands of souls thirsty for God in the tumult of the historical events which shook the Russian nation in the past centuries. In this context, my personal opinion as a spiritual father is that before starting to study the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church, it is very helpful to get acquainted with the writings of the monks from Optina because they present in an easy and simple manner the Orthodox teaching.

The openness of the abbots and monks from Optina to the world in a spirit of love, understanding and fatherly guidance is another characteristic of the monasticism from Optina, which transformed this community into a spiritual spring capable to water spiritually thousands of souls of the Russian nation. We express our belief that we managed to identify and present extensively such features of the monasticism from Optina, offering the reader a clearer image of the events that link the Russian man with “his abbot, and the soul of an entire nation to a particular monastic community. The great writer Nikolai Gogol wrote that: “I have never seen such monks. It seemed to me that each of them talk with the divine. I didn’t ask them what is their life: their faces said it all...”.

On the other hand, our analysis underlined the importance of the relations between monasticism and the Russian society based on the example of relationship which the abbots from

Optina sustained along the years with the most important intellectuals of this nation – writers, philosophers and political people of the highest rank, whose works and activity bore, without a doubt, the mark of their meetings with the famous abbots from Optina. Through personalities such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoi, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Kirievsky, the Great Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna and other members of the royal family, composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky and others, the teachings and “spirit” of the monks from Optina spread into the whole of Russia, and the abbots embraced the entire society not only with their prayers, but also with the cultural values impregnated with the spirit of Orthodoxy – values which are the most noble product of the interaction between monasticism and intellectuality and which constitutes until today the treasure of Russia and of the whole world, even though only a few are aware of this cultural richness that Russia presents to the world. Certainly, monasticism succeeded in influencing positively the Russian society from the 19th century until today, mostly through the intellectuals, whose illustrious representatives, by the grace of God, came into direct contact with the priorship from Optina.

As one may conclude from our research, the main form of social and spiritual service of Optina Pustyn is the fatherly care to call for prayer, to the rituals of the church, working for the neighbor, to which all the pilgrims are called. This tradition corresponds with the monastic spirit from the time of the abbots, but also with the monastic practices in general. The vivid spiritual atmosphere, which is supported by all the members of the community who respect their monastic vows of obedience, prayer, poverty and chastity has a great impact on the pilgrims, who testify about it in unison. As a contemporary spiritual father of the monks, Abbot Joseph the Vatopedine, said: “When we strive for our salvation carefully, fulfilling the monastic rules, we transform into missionaries for the people without having to leave the monastery”. This thought in particular stood at the basis of the missionary work from Optina Monastery in the time of the holy abbots and we believe that the nowadays monks are still guided by this thought.

“Saint Abbots from Optina, pray to God for us!”