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PhD THESIS

**FASTING, PRAYER AND ALMSGIVING -
PATHS TO PERFECTION
IN THE LIGHT OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
- SUMMARY -**

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FASTING, PRAYER AND ALMSGIVING - PATHS TO PERFECTION IN THE LIGHT OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

- SUMMARY -

General considerations

This thesis entitled *Fasting, Prayer and Almsgiving - Paths to Perfection in Light of the Sermon on the Mount* consists of 272 pages, and it is divided into five chapters, subdivided, in their turn, into several subchapters.

Overall, this thesis seeks to analyze how the human being can attain perfection nowadays. For this purpose, we took into account the three paths to perfection recommended by the Savior in the *Sermon on the Mount*, i.e. prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

The moral perfection of the human being is an essential aspiration present in all cultures, from the archaic human being to the modern and the postmodern man. For the Christian spirituality, which seeks the salvation of the human being faithful to the Church, through the gracious communion with God in Jesus Christ, the moral perfection is a major concern of existential nature (Mt. 5, 48). It involves feeling the real presence of Christ, the Son of God, within the human soul; this presence is permanently updated by the grace of the Holy Ghost.

Thus, the Christian's entire earthly life aims at perfection; this can be reached only in Christ and with Christ, through moral values, in a dialogue of love with one's peers and with God, especially nowadays, against the background of the spiritual crisis facing humanity. All the values achieved by the human being during his/her existence are involved within a specific dialogical relationship with God, the supreme Good. Therefore, God - the Trinity represents the source, the foundation, the power and the authentic model of Christian life and service shown by His Son, incarnated "at the fullness of time" (Gal. 4: 4), the God-Man, Jesus Christ (Mc 10, 45). The Orthodox spirituality has a strong foundation in the Son of God's person, i.e. Jesus Christ,

for all peoples, in all times and places. Therefore, the Christians' true spiritual ascent is guided by the Savior Christ, as He Himself told us: "I am the way ..." (Jn. 14: 6). No one can climb the steps of moral perfection having other way apart from Christ. Only in Him and through Him the faithful human being can free himself/herself from the selfishness and egocentrism dominating his/her being, in order to achieve an overrun of the world as an immanent reality and inclusion in God's love. The human being cannot fulfill himself/herself by himself/herself or by the material things or by anything else. His/her only perspective remains Christ. Only Christ asserts the value of the human person: "The man is truly a man only by the God-Man and in the God-Man"¹.

The Son of God became man so that the man can reach God. The Savior took the form of human flesh so that the people, created in His image, but who have defiled this divine likeness, are able to re-enter into communion with Him. The Savior intervenes in the salvation history and raises within the human being the desire for God. His kindness and love for the human being are the image of the Father's kindness and love. There is nothing more convincing than a God Who reveals Himself as a person able to perform a dialogue full of love with His creation. The Christian faith is based on divine Revelation, defined as the knowledge of God through God. The Word of God is revealed in the Scripture, which represents the incarnation of the Logos in letters (Ev. 1: 1-2)². We need spiritual eyes in order to perceive the hidden reality, i.e. the divine Logos., beyond the visible and the immediate. Jesus' divine form is perceived only by those who want to reveal it and who are ready to receive this Revelation. For Christians, the Revelation is identical with Christ. Without the divine Revelation, the human being remains with a false personal and subjective image about the world.

The Church acknowledges that not only does the entire Scripture speak of Christ and announces Him, but it is itself the Word of Christ. Therefore, the knowledge of the Scripture coincides with deepening the experience of the Word. If we pay attention to the words of the Scripture, which especially emphasize the imperative of cleansing from sin and all evil, an urge present in Jesus Christ's messianic teachings, we discover that "believing" in God's words means "living in the light of His commandments", which involves a permanent state of sacrifice, i.e. a continual work of self-sacrifice. We used this main source of divine Revelation herein, in order

¹ Iustin Popovici, *Omul și Dumnezeu-Om. Abisurile și culmile filozofiei*, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1997, p. 62.

² God's word identified with Christ is „light” (In. 9, 5), „wisdom” (Proverbe 3, 19), „ways and life” (In. 14, 6). The Word is eternal, like God (Mc. 13, 31; Apoc. 19, 13); it is fruitful to those who receive It (Lc. 5, 5; Evr. 4, 12), by It we become Christians (In. 8, 31) and acquire eternal life (In. 5, 24).

to highlight the significance and value of the prayer, fasting and almsgiving, as a means of renewal and sanctification of the human life. Although a universal practice, common to almost all religions of the world, these paths to perfection will receive the deepest meanings and the richest spiritual values only in the biblical Revelation, and the deepest expression is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount, the first programmatic speech from the Gospel of Matthew, is the Savior's only speech that consists almost exclusively of Jesus Christ's direct commandments. It aims the act and not the theory, the ways of life according to Jesus' commandments. The evangelist Matthew stresses the connection between teaching and practice (Mt. 5, 19, 7, 21-23) and insists upon the fulfillment of Jesus' teachings.

The novelty of the thesis.

Jesus Christ's Sermon is a call for the people in order to receive the reconciliation with God, Who is the only true way of their lives, in order to acquire eternal life, deification. Regarding this practical nature of the Savior's teaching activity, we took into consideration the exegetical dispute around the question of whether the requirements of the Sermon on the Mount are achievable or not, whether the New Law requirements can be met, whether the Sermon on the Mount is what in the current language would be called a maximalist or even an utopian approach.

The novelty of our study lies in the fact that it clearly shows how the three paths to perfection (prayer, fasting and almsgiving) should be harmonized, in the context of today's secular society, in order to achieve our goal, i.e. salvation.

God gives us the gift of reaching divinity: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5, 48). On the other hand, this cannot be reached by the human being by his/her own powers. This was the Judean's great deception: they thought that they could be perfect by themselves, by fulfilling the Law. This perspective leads the human being to an illusory autonomy and self-sufficiency, contrary to the fundamental truth of his/her existence, i.e. the human being is totally dependent on God. The Sermon on the Mount reestablishes the human being in front of the fundamental truth concerning the finality of his/her existence, as the human fulfillment is beyond his/her nature, beyond the self, beyond himself/herself, in God.

Overcoming the challenges is possible only through the participation in God. Moreover, this idea is developed by the entire biblical and patristic theology.

The dispute over the impracticability of the prescriptions in the Sermon on the Mount was generated by the attitude of the contemporary man who, blinded by his/her own self-sufficiency, sees all that comes from someone else as an attack on his/her autonomy and rights. It is the human being's mentality the one that transformed his/her peer into an opponent, into a competitor, and made him/her adopt an attitude of defense, loneliness and introversion. Only placed in such a position, the human being may complain that God asks the impossible. Hence the attitude of many contemporaries, who see the Church as an institution that subjects people to increased living requirements and hardships, as an institution that requires and not as one that provides; therefore, they keep avoiding it.

The attitude of rejecting the commandments because of their too high and difficult fulfillment level is an insidious attitude, which actually justifies the human's alienation from God. Thus, the human being began to define himself/herself without taking into account the Scriptural and patristic teachings, leading his/her life without taking into account the divine will.

By deepening these issues, we chose the topic of our doctoral thesis, i.e. ***Fasting, Prayer and Almsgiving - Paths to Perfection in the Light of the Sermon on the Mount***, in full agreement with the scientific advisor, Prof. His Beatitude Teodosie, the Archbishop of Tomis; this thesis will be useful to priests and theologians and to the Orthodox Christians, giving them some important substantiated milestones, in order to rediscover the paths to perfection indicated by the Savior Christ, "Who will have all men to be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2, 4). This doctoral thesis represents, therefore, a synthesis of the very current issues that deeply concern our modern society, in search of fundamental answers, for the contemporary man.

Method. The exegetical perspective that we propose in addressing this issue involves, undoubtedly, combining the scientific, biblical and patristic research methods, placing greater emphasis on the principles of other disciplines (ethics, psychology, pedagogy, etc.), falling within the theological research requirements³.

³ Pr. Dr. Daniel Benga, *Metodologia studiului și cercetării științifice în Teologie*, Ed. Sophia, București, 2003, p. 189.

Regarding the bibliographic sources, we tried to capitalize the Romanian literature, which gave us very valuable information about the vast area of theology. In this regard, we have a fairly extensive and competent ascetical literature, which we used, in part, in this thesis, in order to capture the most important aspects of this topic.

The bibliography regarding the Gospel of Matthew is very rich in the languages of international circulation and relatively poor in Romanian. Among the used sources, we mention *The Homilies on Matthew*, by St. John Chrysostom, a masterpiece of genius, and the modern commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, by Ulrich Luz, a very documented, comprehensive and balanced study, with extremely valuable contributions on exegesis history, and, especially, on the reception of the Gospel by the Church, and of the various important topics tackled by Matthew.

We have also used numerous bibliographic materials in theology, placing great emphasis on biblical hermeneutics, in accordance with the scientific work requirements. We have also tried to make this information accessible and to update it, offering an array with many different hues.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis includes five chapters and more subchapters, preceded by an introduction, in which we have established the technical details and justified the choice of the subject.

Chapter I

The first chapter, entitled "***The Sermon on the Mount – the Moral Law of Christ's Kingdom***", begins with a brief presentation of the Gospel of Matthew, of the Gospel plan, with emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. "The Gospel" is the good News, i.e. God accomplished in his Son Incarnate, Jesus Christ, all the promises He had made to the chosen people and, through Him, the path of salvation was open to all nations. The spread of Jesus' teachings and miraculous deeds are seen as a first step in shaping the Gospels, taking, as time span, the first quarter of the first century AD.

The Sermon on the Mount – named after the place where it was delivered – is perceived as a synthesis of the Gospel of Christ and as a programmatic speech, normative for the Christian life, but also as a replica to the old Law Gospel.

The two laws, i.e. the Old and the New Testament, are authored by God, and Jesus Christ is the border and bridge between them. When the Old Testament had fulfilled its preparatory mission, the Savior came to fulfill and complete the work of salvation.

The Savior's attitude towards old Law is summarized in the third subchapter. The Savior, preaching His teachings, shows that there is no disagreement between the two Testaments, but a perfect continuation, the New one completing the Old one. The moral and social teachings of the Old Testament were confirmed by the Savior, who completed and perfecting it with advice and new commands: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5, 17).

In the fourth subchapter, we highlighted *the superiority of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount*, through a direct connection between the Old Law and the New Law. The Old Testament is the source from which the New Testament resulted; it is the foundation upon which the edifice of the New Testament was built, both forming the whole edifice of one and the same building, i.e. the kingdom of God. The understanding and knowledge of the real value of the Old Testament is closely associated with the New Testament. The Old Testament contains the history of the human race preparation in order to receive salvation through Jesus Christ, brought in the New Testament. The Old Testament is the promise, and the New Testament – its fulfillment. The Old Testament was the shadow of the future, of the New Testament, of truth and reality. The New Testament is the extension of the Old Testament, and both are integral parts of the same divine purpose: salvation. The entire Scripture is a testimony about Jesus Christ.

It is noteworthy that some precepts from the Sermon on the Mount are, to some extent, similar not only to some precepts tackled by the Old Testament, on which it undoubtedly relies completely, but also to some utterances by the Judean Fathers or by some ancient philosophers and writers, such as Confucius at the Chinese or Socrates and Plato at the Greeks. In this case, it should be noted the deep religious thinking of many Greek philosophers and poets⁴. Due to their innovative vision, which has helped reconsider the person and the earthly life, the Orthodox Church sees the ancient Greek philosophers (such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle) as "Christians"

⁴ Toma Chiricuță, *Religia omului de știință*, Tipografia „Fântâna darurilor”, București, 1935, p. 3.

before Christianity, as a recognition of their contribution to the preparation of the humankind in order to receive Christ's Gospel.

Chapter II

In the second chapter, "**The prayer – a path to perfection in the light of the Sermon on the Mount**", we presented the main coordinates of the prayer, as traced by Savior Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, we have identified those features of the prayer that make it the most dynamic part of religion.

We all know what the prayer is. Or we think we know. Most likely, we cannot talk about the prayer; we should live it. The Savior taught us to ask God for help through the prayer: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7: 7).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ condemns the hypocritical and formalist ways in which many Judeans were praying (Mt. 6, 5; Lc. 18, 10-14) and gave us the model prayer "Our Father" (Mt. 6, 9-13), which "comprises the summary of the entire Gospel"⁵. He also told us that we should pray to the Heavenly Father in the same way He prayed.

The Savior gave us true teachings on the prayer, its perfect model, both in terms of its essential contents, its fundamental purpose and inner condition – i.e. moral and spiritual – under which it should be performed, the prayer measure and the example of the Christian way of life, in spiritual watch and prayer. The fact that the Savior teaches us how to pray means that He knows how to do this in order to get everything we want (Mt 6, 5-15). He showed His disciples how to pray not only theoretically, but also by His example. He spent forty days and forty nights in watch, prayer and fasting, in the wilderness of Carantana, or He withdrew in quiet places, in the mountains or in the desert and prayed: "And He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Lc. 5, 16); "He went to the mountain to pray, and He spent all night in prayer to God" (Lc. 16, 12). All the fundamental moments of Christ's saving work during His earthly activity are preceded or followed by moments of deep meditation, prayer and watch, all taking place between

⁵ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, II (*De oratione*), în „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești (PSB)”, vol. 3, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (în continuare EIB), București, 1981, p. 230.

that initial period of forty days, in the wilderness Carantana – the peak of asceticism, when He withdrew into complete solitude, in fasting and prayer, because He would begin His preaching mission – and on Thursday night, after the Last Supper, when His prayer in Gethsemane was in so great anguish that "His sweat was like drops of blood" (Lc. 22, 44), followed by His betrayal and sale by Judas the Iscariot, "the son of perdition".

By teaching His apostles and disciples how to pray, He added His profound teachings about the moral attitude and tenure that must accompany the prayer for it to be always working: humility and obedience, fasting and abstinence, good deeds, the unceasing effort to lead a life of virtue. He also drew their attention to have discernment, to distinguish between the secular and those that will endure for eternity, between the earthly and the heavenly, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6, 21). He taught them to seek through prayer "the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt. 6, 34).

In His speech from the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior addressed a reproach to the Pharisees, who were praying in synagogues and on street corners, so as to be seen by the people. Their prayer was superficial, not engendered by a sacred belief, but for the sake of being seen (Mt. 6, 7). They considered that by their many words would attire God's attention. Such prayers do not impress through their ethical effects, because they did not notify the soul, but the external aspect of the believer. The *raison d'être* of the prayer is not ethical but religious. The prayer opens the window to the upper world of faith. Religious nonconformity disappointed Jesus. Seeing this escapism, He imposed a mandatory solution, spiritualizing the path that the believers had to approach God: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt. 6: 5-8).

After combating the pharisaical practice as to how to pray, Jesus spoke to the crowd about the conditions that should be met by the true prayer⁶: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Mt. 6: 6). While praying, the Christian descends into the depths of his/her being, where a *kenosis* takes place for his/her transformation or for his/her incarnation

⁶ M.J. Lagrange, *Op. cit.*, p. 124, §.u.

from the old human being into the new human being (Col. 3: 9-10). In this case, the old human being is emptied and filled with the matter incorporated into God's mystery, by the incarnation of the divine Logos and, especially, by His resurrection, when the matter is transfigured and freed from death, granting him/her a meaningful existence.

By teaching the disciples "The Lord's Prayer", He drew their attention to the significance of the prayer and to the mysterious and pious manner in which it should be performed in order to please God⁷.

In the first subchapters (1-4), we have presented *the text of the Lord's Prayer and its interpretations*, making *a brief exegesis on the text*. This prayer consists of few and simple words, but it should be performed in deep meditation, leading to contemplation; this is what the disciples did not understand. The Savior utters the Lord's Prayer in order to give His disciples and all latter Christians the model of the Christian prayer par excellence, performed both in the particular and liturgical worship.

In church tradition, the prayer "Our Father" is considered the first Christian prayer of divine origin, whose full text was preserved in the Gospel of St. Matthew (6, 9-13) and, in a more abbreviated form, in the Gospel of St. Luke (11: 1-4). Representing the very expression of the genuine prayer given to the Church by Savior Christ, in Christian spirituality heritage, there is and there was no other prayer to hold such a leading place as "Our Father". Since the very beginning, the Christian Church has given due importance to this prayer, introducing it to public worship, but the text of the Lord's Prayer, as it has been preserved in Greek, gave rise to disputes and interpretations from the early centuries, debates which continue to this day. It is understandable, therefore, that the Holy Fathers and the Gospel missionaries felt attracted to study, meditate, explain and interpret it, surpassing one another in revealing and assessing its lofty dogmatic, moral and spiritual teachings. By conducting a compared research, by gathering and arranging their exposures in a logical order, we get a treasure of high interpretations that can be very helpful in our work of understanding of the Lord's Prayer. Divine in its origin, human in its shape, simple and accessible to all, the Lord's Prayer will always remain the perfect and

⁷ Evagrie Ponticul, *Cuvânt despre rugăciune*, 142, în „Filocalia”, vol. 1, trad. de Pr. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Sibiu, 1947, p. 91.

matchless model of the most comprehensive and touching prayer, which all human beings, as God's children, can address to their common Father and Creator⁸.

Christ the Savior teaches us to pray continuously (Lc. 18: 1). The prayer is the best means to stand before God and show Him our religious thoughts and feelings, glory Him, thank and ask Him for help, whenever we need it. By praying, temptations are chased, sins are erased and the prayer helps us acquire salvation.

Taking into account both the necessity of the prayer and its beauty and depth, in the following subchapters (5-11), we have presented several aspects related to the *essence of the prayer, its kinds and stages*, as well as *its effects*.

Chapter III

In the third chapter, "**Fasting – a fundamental guideline of Christian perfection**", we made a foray into the Savior's teachings about fasting.

The history of humanity confirms the truth that both the monotheistic and the polytheistic religions regulated fasting as one of the external manifestations of faith. In polytheistic religions, fasting appears as a necessary ritual taming the gods' anger and as a means of bodily purification, in order to get rid of suffering and gain immortality.

The most clear and comprehensive notion about fasting is found in the Holy Scripture, which recommends it to the human being as a way of obedience to God, in order to reach moral perfection. From the Old Testament writings, we can trace the importance of fasting in the manifestation of the monotheistic faith based on supernatural revelation. It is a divine command that we find formulated from the very beginning of the Creation (Gen. 2: 16-17). The Law of Moses, received after a 40-day fasting, regulates in detail the provisions on fasting in the Old Testament.

The first subchapter presents the "Fasting in the light of the Savior's teachings and activity". Our Savior Jesus Christ fasted before beginning His public activity. After being baptized in the Jordan by St. John the Baptist, for 40 days and nights, the Son of God withdrew

⁸ Teoclitos Farmachides, *Comentar asupra Sfintei Evanghelii după Matei*, vol. I, trad. rom. de Pr. C. Grigore și Prof. S.T. Savu, Râmnicul Vâlcea, 1931, p. 249.

to the wilderness of Carantania, near the city of Jericho, in order to fast (Mt. 4, 1; Lc. 4, 1). Here, in the wilderness, the threefold temptation by the devil took place; moreover, here, His great victory over the weakness of the human nature, as well as over the cunning and evil spirit of darkness, took place (Mt. 4, 3-10; Lc. 4 2- 13, In. 6, 32-35, 48, 50-51, 58). The time spent here is for us, the Christians, the supreme example of austerity with oneself – the need for asceticism.

After his 40-day fasting in the wilderness, the Savior began preaching, showing the close correlation in the process of moral perfection (Mt. 4 1-21). He taught His disciples how to fast, emphasizing the appropriate spiritual mood of this act, which should not be made superficially. From the Sermon on the Mount, we find out how to fast, in order to distinguish ourselves from the hypocrites, who are sad and tar their faces, in order to be seen by the people: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Mt. 6, 16-18). The Savior made these remarks, since, at that time, in the practice of fasting, there lacked the sincerity of faith as a connection and communion with God, as well as the naturalness and discretion of the moral acts in front of the people. Specifically, in order to show people that they were fasting, the hypocrites of that time had sad and frowning faces; when they were practicing more severe fasting, they were walking on streets with their heads bowed, dressed in a bag-shaped garment, tarred their faces, and put ashes on their heads. In this downright hilarious form, they did not show any inner repentance, but they were even boasting to God that they were fasting twice a week, as told in the parable of the Pharisee and of the publican. In this form, they were performing a material fasting, devoid of any inner experience. Fasting was reduced to food restriction, without complying with the duty to respect the divine commandments imbued with the spirit of humility and fear of God. For them, fasting meant keeping the state of bodily purity, which had been dragged by eating certain unclean foods. The Savior Christ tells them that the human being is defiled not because of the food he/she consumes, but because of the bad words that come out of one's mouth (Mt. 15, 11). The state of holiness is not acquired by staying away from certain foods, but by mastering the sinful heart (Mt 15, 17-19).

The Savior teaches us that fasting is a profound, positive, bright and active manifestation. Therefore, He commands those who fast "not to tar their faces" but "to anoint their heads" and "to wash their faces". Fasting is a spiritual happiness and joy, the triumph of eternity over transience, the victory of justice over falsehood, of love over hate, of light over darkness.

Being asked by St. John the Baptist's disciples why the Holy Apostles do not fast, the Son of God says that they do not have yet a reason to be sad because the Groom is with them. With this response, the notion of fasting is connected with the state of human pain, which is a means of introspection and honor of God. Christ also enriches the meaning of the term fasting, which He considers to be particularly useful in the human being's fight against the devil. He showed that fasting should be accompanied by prayer, as a means of struggle against the devil's temptations (Mt. 17, 21; Mk. 9, 20).

In this situation, fasting was recommended by the Savior Christ, and His example was followed by the Apostles. They fasted and taught their disciples and followers to practice fasting with prayer (Acts. 13: 3; 14; 23; I Cor. 7, 5; II Cor. 6, 5), paying it the greatest importance on the path to perfection, so as to become worthy of the divine and graceful plenitude, in view of salvation.

After the apostolic period, the theological literature of the Church Fathers and writers presents numerous statements about the practice of fasting. Therefore, in the second subchapter, we have exposed "the traditional testimonies" about fasting.

The following subchapters highlight the *value and meaning of fasting*, but also its role in human internal transfiguration, presenting it as an instrument of virtue or sacrifice to God. Fasting is the believer's freely consented sacrifice to his spiritual progress; it is a voluntary denial of all that enslaves the soul; it is a means of obedience, hardening the will; it is the human being's greatest contribution on the path to perfection. The purpose of fasting is to clean one's body and soul of sin, to uproot the passion and to convert the spiritual energy into contrary virtues.

The Christian fasting seeks *the progressive personalization of the human being*, and its enhancement in his/her relationship with God and with others, by reaffirming the sovereignty of the person over the human nature. The external human being must die in order to enhance the inner human being, where the brightness of the divine image reaches similarity with the Prototype. Fasting is performed by *reconverting* the spiritual and physical energies, by their

reorientation towards God. The body and the soul participate together, under the action of grace, in changing the passions into virtues, understood as personal dynamisms, which connect the human being with God. By temperance, the human being acquires inner freedom and peace with oneself, with God and with the world, since the aspirations of the human being go beyond the earthly spheres and dedicate to the spiritual life, in loving communion with God. It would be a foretaste of the eternal good things, which God hath prepared to those who love Him.

The chapter concludes with brief references to *the attitude of the Orthodox Church towards fasting*. In Orthodox theology, the issue of fasting is among its chief concerns. From the point of view of the Romanian Orthodox Church, fasting is a holy institution of the Church to which we cannot and must not give up, changing, adopting and easing the canonical prescriptions concerning it. This view is based on the importance of fasting in the lives of believers and the Church. It is and it remains a means of salvation and moral perfection. Trying and operating a reform of the ordinances regarding fasting means changing one of the institutions and practices that confer the Orthodoxy a specific note. These ordinances are part of the traditional millenary treasure of the Church, which justifies its place and importance.

Chapter IV

The fourth chapter, "**Almsgiving – proof of compliance with the commandment of love**", includes teachings about almsgiving and shows the Savior's attitude and recommendations regarding the bodily and spiritual works of mercy.

The Savior cared for the lives of all people, of the entire world. Theoretically, He, with "His divine power, has given us all that is to life" (II Ptr. L, 1-10) and "came into the world, that the world may have life" (Jn. 10, 9-14). He took the form of flesh, just like us, and stooped lovingly to soothe body aches and pains, to satisfy the hungry, to lift the poor and to become the merciful Samaritan of all the life's forlorn.

The first subchapter presents the *Almsgiving in the New Law*, with direct reference to the Savior's teachings. Jesus leaves no room for interpretations and calculations when it comes to almsgiving: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Mt. 5, 42) or "Sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Mt. 19, 21). On

the contrary, He encourages us to be merciful when we are deceived and robbed: "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Mt. 5, 40-41).

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior teaches us how to do charity and warns us against a great danger that can result in pride and in the loss of any spiritual benefit: "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Mt. 6, 2-4).

In the Savior's times, the Pharisees were committing acts of charity before men in order to be praised, not for God's eternal reward. Their external actions did not reflect their inner reality and attitude. They performed charity acts in order to capture people's attention, which was a completely wrong motivation, because living for people's praise is foolishness, since the human glory does not last (I Ptr. 1, 24). Through His message, Jesus did not reject charity as something that has no value in looking for a communion relationship with God, but He stressed the need for a proper motivation. Generosity alone is not enough. The Lord is concerned about our motivation and hidden thoughts of the heart. In the act of mercy, will and intention are essential, as they give value to the act. Therefore, Jesus rebuked the hypocrisy wherewith benefits were performed at the time.

The Savior, who is the perfect model of almsgiving (Mt. 11, 32; Mk. 8: 2) tells us that God rewards only honest and disinterested charity. If we want to show someone our good will, first we must show our intention to our heavenly Father, because He has priority to reward us. By helping those in need, God Himself becomes our debtor and will reward us both in the next life and in the everyday life. At Doomsday, the bodily and spiritual works of mercy are those that will open the gates of eternal bliss (Mt. 25, 34-40).

What is the limit of mercy? How and to whom to give? What? Where? When? These are questions that find their answer in this part of the thesis. Charity is an act of Christian mercy that has its source in the love for God and for one's peers, and it is manifested by the moral and material support granted to the peers in need. It expresses the ability to get out of yourself, to love your peer not only as you love yourself, but more than you love yourself, to empathize with

him/her, to feel and suffer just like him/her, becoming, somehow, one with him/her. Charity, in short, requires the ability of leaving yourself and taking another's place, without judging him/her, not beyond good and evil, as Nietzsche said, but beyond justice and punishment, denying the harsh adage "*every man for himself*".

This feeling, this momentum, this complex gift, includes, in varying doses, many other noble feelings such as kindness, love, friendship, affection, sensitivity, generosity, brotherhood, good will. Nevertheless, it should not be confused with any of them. It merges them, and, sometimes, it exceeds them.

This chapter ends with a brief presentation of the fruits of almsgiving. The Savior showed us that, upon Doomsday, the bodily and spiritual works of mercy are those which will open the gates of eternal bliss (Mt. 25, 34-40).

Chapter V

In the fifth chapter, "**Prayer, fasting and almsgiving within a secular world**", we have conducted an analysis of the possibilities of perfection within the modern world, where we live and where we distinguish a serious confusion of the true meanings of human existence.

The spiritual disorder and its disastrous consequences influencing the inner life of the modern human being, who forgot a long time ago to be concerned with his/her spiritual development, warn about the risks of the ignorance of moral perfection. Drugs, alcohol, speed, noise, pollution of any kind are consequences of the incorrect uses of modern civilization and freedom; they represent passions and their consequences, which master and vitiate the modern human being. Faced with these evils, the Christian should be able to impose silence, discipline, self-control and calmness, which are so necessary nowadays. He/she should prove the power to stop and pray in the midst of tumult and noise, he/she should have the power to listen, understand and help his/her peers⁹. However, the modern Christian is sometimes wrong in this direction, stopping halfway. He/she stops to listen to the sufferer, sympathizes with him/her, but does not help the latter enough. Our faith is manifested in listening to one's peer, but it does not materialize in facts, it does not fulfill the word, in accordance with St. James's urge: "Do not

⁹ Paul Evdokimov, *La nouveauté de l'esprit*, în „Spiritualité orientale”, An. 1977, nr. 20, p. 64-65.

merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1, 22). Our mission is, therefore, to be the doers of the heard word, to show that God's grace and word bore fruit in our souls, transformed them and renewed them.

The chapter begins with the presentation of *the relation between prayer, fasting and almsgiving*. This triad, taken from the Old Testament, and perfected by Savior Jesus Christ, has been perpetuated by the Christian tradition of the Church through the ages. We fulfill God's commandment of love through the humble prayer and fasting, as a freely accepted sacrifice or self-giving to Christ. This love manifested by the human being towards God is filled with the former's love of one's peers, expressed by almsgiving, in response to the gifts that the human being receives from God, starting with the very gift of life.

The second subchapter presents the possibilities of achieving the three paths to perfection (prayer, fasting and good works) in today's secularized world, where there is a separation and an increasing alienation from one another and from God.

The Christian life is conducted according to the Savior's teachings. Christianity is not a doctrine that should be endorsed by a mere theoretical study, but "a life which should become an existential property and that can only win by rebirth from the spring of life"¹⁰. It is not enough to know Christianity; we must be Christians and live in Christ. The Christian life, with its real moral and social imperatives, with the affirmation of the human being's natural rights, with moral conscience awareness, should begin with the inner transformation of the human being, with the embellishment of the soul. "Repent" is the word wherewith the Savior starts his activity. Therefore, compressing the craving that engenders sins and dangerous temptations, and flooding the soul with the light of the Christian virtues of love, equality and justice represent the starting point for the formation of the Christian character.

The Savior calls us to perfection (Mt 5: 48), but He also gives us the strength to approach it. The divine requirement manifests itself at the level of the consciousness with an irresistible force. It is exercised not only in the form of laws of moral conduct but also as a character type. The human being should become a moral personality and this means to tend towards perfection.

Obviously, during our earthly life, we cannot reach a morally perfect state, but we should grow slowly and surely on the path of virtue. The importance of the divine grace in this situation is vital, because its work is "the power of the Holy Ghost that moves for the joy and gladness of

¹⁰ Hristu Andrusos, *Sistem de morală*, trad. D. I. Lancrănjan și Moudopoulos, Sibiu, 1947, p. 51.

the heart, assisting it, heating and purifying the soul"¹¹. The grace operates with the human will, only if the latter expresses his/her will to do so, leading to *synergy*, i.e. working with the Triune God, so that the grace comes to the aid of our spiritual effort, which involves an intellectual effort beyond reason, needing the human being's will in order to be fully employed.

In eastern spirituality coordinates, *fasting and prayer* are both paths to perfection and *ways of knowledge*, issue tackled by subchapter 5. The knowledge of God is possible only through a spiritual living, involving the believer's transformation through prayer and fasting. This exceeds the knowledge from "the outside", i.e. the rational knowledge, because the human being takes note of God's presence and feels this presence as a penetrating reality, that makes his/her life transparent to the spiritual meanings, giving it a boost towards the advancement in the spiritual progress, towards the ultimate goal of salvation.

In order to achieve this goal, our whole life imposes a state of *watch*, removing any worldly care, in accordance with Christ's urge (Mt. 24, 42; Mk. 13, 37). A short meditation on this subject is included in the last subchapter of this thesis.

The watch keeps us awake and aware so as not to commit any sin. Only by watch, is the human soul continuously climbing the heights of perfection. However, it is difficult to obtain; total commitment is required in the way of observing Christ's commandments; we have to engage ourselves into a determined battle against the passions that are deeply rooted within our body and soul, by fasting, prayer and almsgiving.

The one who has learned to watch, who is "attentive" all the time, has deep knowledge and unerring measure on the purpose and value of everything. He/she will not be dominated by the worries of life, by selfish interests, by the desire for enrichment and vainglory. He/she will never be defeated by the difficulties arising in his/her way, will not be weakened in faith at the time of testing; he/she will pray constantly, he/she will ceaselessly strive and prepare his/her soul. His/her mind will be clear; his/her spirit will be prepared; he/she will oversee his/her entire being, following Christ's exhortation: "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man" (Lc. 21, 36). The Christian zeal should be employed only with the same unswerving *attention*, in order to be ready to open the door when the Lord comes (Lc. 12, 36).

¹¹ Sf. Grigore Sinaitul, *Capete foarte folositoare în acrostih*, în „Filocalia”, vol. 7, EIB, București, 1977, p. 165.

The Orthodox Christian's life has meaning and value only insofar as it is an important concern for his/her own salvation; this is really achieved in the full communion of love with Saviour Christ, by the graceful union with Him and by the full imprint of Savior Christ's human image, filled with the Holy Ghost.

Argument

In tackling the chosen topic, we had in mind the exegetical debate around the question of whether the requirements of the Sermon on the Mount are achievable or not, whether the new Law requirements can be met. In other words, unless the Sermon on the Mount is what in the current language would be called a maximalist or even a utopian approach.

The dispute over the impracticability of the prescriptions of the Sermon on the Mount, and the attitude of rejecting the commandments because of their too high and difficult fulfillment level was generated by the contemporary human being, who comes to reproach God that He asks the impossible. By this attitude, the human being actually justifies his/her alienation from God.

Currently, the human ideals merge increasingly evidently only with what happens and with what he/she acquires here and now, in this temporary earthly existence, within a secularized society, where the human cues are represented only by what he/she thinks and experiences by himself/herself. If we start from an empirical analysis of the human existence, we will understand better the human being's errancy, who is alienated from God. Everywhere, we find the presence of a conflict between the human being's desire for a perfect existence and freedom, characterized by constant happiness, and the severities of a reality marked, on the contrary, by imperfection, endless conditionings, rare and fragile moments of true joy. Instead, we are faced with many, many sufferings or, if not, at least, with deadly boredom. The conflict is not about the human being's relationship with the world and with his/her peers, but it penetrates to the deepest fibers of his/her being, itself, as a mass of contradictions: his/her inner constitution is torn by the centrifugal tendencies of the intellect faculties, will and affection, to which the humiliating tyranny of the senses add. The body itself is meant to slow and certain biological degradation, culminating in sickness, old age and, finally, death. The uncertainty illustrated in the faculty of discernment is also often troublesome: good and evil seem, therefore, impossible to separate, so

that they are often seen as opposite sides of the same reality. The ethical indistinction, the passage "beyond good and evil" is a reassuring temptation for many.

If the individual's life is so complicated and dominated by the unknown, these trends will appear more oversized at the social or historical level. The society is dominated by the division into strata (rich and poor), governed by more or less straight laws, discriminatively applied and enforced, inspiring discontent to most of its members. As for history, it is enough to think of armed conflicts, of the oppressed and of the endless mischief, to which natural disasters (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, epidemics) add; they all seem uncontrollable, driven by a blind fatality, that does not choose. Often, when there is no other perspective, death itself is desired and seen as liberation from this valley of tears.

It is a disappointing diagnosis resulting from the summary analysis of this world and of the human existence herein, where the human being does not recognize God, and he/she is no longer guided by the commandments of life. This bitter and cold diagnosis assigned to the human life and to our contemporary world, without the perspective of Revelation, may seem legitimate. In this context, the Ecclesiast's pessimistic observation (1, 14) appears as current as possible: "I looked attentively at all the works that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and blowing in the wind". This verse reminds us of a Buddhist text that warns severely: "How can you laugh, how can you enjoy when the world keeps burning? Why do not you look for a light, if you are surrounded by darkness?"¹² This is a call to senses, to the lucidity against a living, governed by inertia, resulting in taking the consequences, no matter how painful they may be.

In order to penetrate this circle of existence, dominated by suffering and death, the human being should fight against the habits and inertia of the natural life and social existence, which requires effort, endeavor, prayer and asceticism. If we want to live within a society where every human being has value and where the moral principles are deeply rooted, we need to turn to God and to understand how He wants us to live our lives and how He wants to organize our society. He does not force us to come to Him; He gives us freedom and lets us try to do as want to do, even without him. Now we know what beings we become without God and we know what society we produce without Him.

¹² *Dhammapata*, 146, apud Hajime Nakamura, *Orient și Occident, O istorie comparată a ideilor*, trad. de Dinu Luca, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1997, p. 72.

The solution proposed by Christianity. In order to save the human being from the attacks of postmodernism, we must turn to the words of the Holy Scripture and to the deep thinking of the Holy Fathers because, as Father D. Stăniloae observed, only such teachings can provide the human being with "a norm of existence"¹³. The human soul will never find a foothold in itself. He/she must seek something more than his own record, something that may be lived within, but whose ontological source exceeds the subjective reality. The human being is what he/she is by God and can reach fullness, fulfillment only with God's help. He/she cannot fulfill himself/herself by himself/herself, by material things, or by something else. His/her only perspective remains Christ.

The situation of the people who say that they believe in God but do not cultivate their spiritual side is sad. We cannot speak of an authentic Christianity beyond the principles and standards established through the Word of God and the Scripture. Therefore, the beginning of the inner changeover process occurs when we understand to obey entirely to our Creator. Obeying the laws of God, living by His commandments, means living like God, imprinting His nature into our being. The reason for our existence lies in the ascendance to God's uncreated, supernatural plan to a life of perfect communion with Him.

The ultimate moral criterion of the Gospel is represented by our likeliness to God and not by the fulfillment of some commandments or debts. Our moral perfection commandment, i.e. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5, 48), is not only a commandment imposed to us from the outside, a command comprising a life ideal recommended by the Savior, whose value is not revealed to us rationally, but it is the law of our own nature, as beings created in God's image and likeliness. However, since perfection implies the knowledge and experience that go beyond human powers, involving, for the Christian, a life in relation with Christ, it is necessary that he/she be in possession of the means to assume this life. In the present study, we examined three of the means or paths that lead to perfection, i.e. prayer, fasting and almsgiving. In general, the paths to perfection are a work of life sanctification, leading to God's saving existential knowledge, through the experience of life in Him and with Him. No one can climb the steps of moral perfection having no other way apart from Christ and no one can get in some other way besides the one represented by Him.

¹³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Elemente de antropologie ortodoxă*, în vol. „Prinos închinat Înalț Prea Sfințitului Nicodim, Patriarhul României, cu prilejul împlinirii a optzeci de ani de vârstă, cincizeci ani de preoție și șapte de patriarhat”, București, 1946, p. 243.

The work of grace in the world. The true greatness of the human being lies not in what he/she is now, but in what he/she should become. He/she is a creature who was commanded to become God by grace; even in this age "he/she is dust and to dust shall return" (Gen. 3, 19). By grace, the human being reunites in his/her created hypostasis, i.e. the divine and the human, in the image of Christ, and, thus, becomes God, by grace.

The Christian cannot acquire salvation only by prayer, fasting and the works of almsgiving. In addition, he/she must seek the help of divine grace. Prayer, fasting, good deeds and divine grace are necessary conditions for acquiring the kingdom of heaven. The beginning of salvation is made by the grace and the believer must give his/her consent. The grace pours upon the receiver, from God's greatness, as stated by St. John Chrysostom, for His mercy is a burning fire. All He wants from us is a small spark of good will, in order to make Himself room in our hearts, to stir it up and to fill it with grace.

In the Eastern Church, grace is felt as present in everything that exists. The true nature of beings and things is represented precisely by their openness to God's grace, by their dynamism towards the perfect union with God, through divine energies. Grace is uncreated. God Himself is the One Who freely shares Himself, while remaining unapproachable and unreachable. In this perspective, respecting our nature means opening ourselves towards the grace and the union with God, as the human being is truly a human being only in God.

The human being, created in the image of God, carries with him/her the ontological dimension of the image, the potential similarity with God, by grace. This is employed by the human will only if the latter expresses himself/herself, by his/her will to do so, triggering *synergy*, i.e. working with the Triune God, so that the grace comes to aid our spiritual effort; this also involves an intellectual effort beyond reason, requiring the human being's will in order to be fully employed. The *image* involves, as a command, the tendency to deification¹⁴, i.e. the human quality to strive through his *image* in the *likeness* to God, which requires the constant effort of spiritual growth. The image is a "gift", but also a "mission". God created humans in *His image* so that they can constantly grow towards spiritual perfection, reaching thus the ultimate purpose of their existence, i.e. deification¹⁵, through their innate aspiration. In order to achieve it, God has

¹⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I, EIB, București, 1987, p. 397.

¹⁵ Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, II, 12, EIB, București, 2001, p. 59.

given us, through His grace, the necessary forces of a holy life, having the power to make us partakers of eternal happiness¹⁶.

The Savior gives us the signs and guarantees of a glorious renaissance, which make us worthy to be the sons of God by grace, for we have reborn spiritually. The new life, a life lived in Christ, the fruit of the hard work and gift of grace, is a life hidden within us, revealed in the light of love and good deeds.

Every Christian, by his experience, is a "standard bearer" of the eternal ideals of Christ's moral perfection, is a sacred light in the great shadow of the world. Therefore, our Savior's call will always remain current: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5, 16).

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