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- abstract -

Soteriology in the vision of the Cappadocian Fathers

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ABSTRACT

In this PhD thesis I engaged myself in an analysis of the soteriological doctrine of the Cappadocian Fathers, highlighting the importance and relevance of their vision for the current Orthodox theology. In a contemporary world where the tradition of classical patristic thought is increasingly relativized, and in a context in which theological visions are diverted to sociological, philosophical and political dissimulations, the return to the essentials of theology becomes imperative: the purpose of our life here and now is salvation, and all the unrests of the human existence, regardless of the historical or cultural context, find their answer in Christ.

In highlighting this fundamental reference of human existence, the Cappadocian Fathers are referential. They make the transition between ancient thinking and revelation, between theory and practice, between martyrs and saints, between the empire and the Kingdom. The leap operated by them is a huge one, being road openers for the entire history of the Christian world. We cannot imagine, for example, what they would have been without Greek philosophy or without Origen, but at the same time, they overcome all their impasse, all the shortcomings of the past, to look only at the future of the human being in Christ.

Different from the moralizing and literal insistence of an antiochian such as Saint John Chrysostom (the third doctor and high hierarch of the Church together with Saint Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nazianzus), they are theologians in the full sense of the word, their doctrinal treatises being an extension of God's experience in personal life. The mystery of salvation is not an exercise that can be solved in writing, as a western theologian like Anselm of Canterbury seems to prove to us later, but is a continuous search for Christ, begins with Christ and ends with an unceasing union with Him. Soteriology does not stop at the redeeming act of Christ, but it is an ascension, through His Cross and Resurrection, which must mark the whole course of our personal and community life.

*

The theme of doctoral research involved the processing of a rich literature, starting from the biblical, continuing with the patristic and ending with introspections on contemporary thinking, comparing the theological model proposed by the Cappadocian Fathers with the secularized vision of man. Therefore, it involved a multidisciplinary documentation.

In essence, this work consists of an investigation of the works of the Cappadocian Fathers, being an exercise of both historical and dogmatic analysis. Beyond historical contextualization, I first chose to present the soteriological teaching in connection with the more detailed theological vision of the Holy Trinity and the Christological and anthropological elements. The peculiarities identified in the targeted authors were then analyzed in comparison with the previous, contemporary and posterior patristic writings. The dogmatic synthesis could later be transferred to the elements of spirituality, here again emphasizing the indissolubility of the link between dogmatics and morality. The purpose of theology is seen exclusively in the existential plan of meeting with Christ, of union with Him. Finally, the analysis on the soteriology of the Cappadocian Fathers involved the exegesis of the contemporary theology, constantly linking to the various ways in which contemporary theology, not necessarily the Orthodox one, understood the message of the Cappadocian writings.

The proposed radiography required not only the comparison of the philosophical models with the theological ones but the practical extension of all these considerations in an attempt to provide a current response to the various identitary dilemmas of today.

Regarding the bibliographic sources used, I tried to capitalize the Romanian bibliography, as well as the studies and researches outside the country, which gave me a rich and valuable information. The bibliographic sources consist of biblical criticism, patristic works, as well as philosophical and literary works. In addition to the materials available in Romanian, I have analyzed a rich, up-to-date bibliography in English and French.

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- In the first chapter of the thesis I briefly presented the historical framework in which the Cappadocian Fathers activated. When we talk about the Cappadocian Fathers, our thought goes to the three great personalities of the fourth century: St.

Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and St. Gregory of Nyssa. Considered as a core of compact and homogenous Eastern Orthodox theologians and leaders of the Eastern Church, united not only by friendship but also by their similar cultural formation, these personalities together constitute a moral and spiritual authority of prime importance in the process of defense and development of Post-Nicene Orthodoxy. Taken individually, each of them reveals himself to be a distinguished personality and an outstanding theologian of the Christian Church. Though not considered as having the same scope as the other two "great teachers and hierarchs of the world", questioning certain dogmatic expressions, St. Gregory of Nyssa is the Capadocian who has raised the greatest interest in the patristic research of the last century.¹

In this first chapter I presented not only these three great Fathers of the Church in Cappadocia, but also, succinctly, several other Cappadocian Fathers and writers who remained in the memory of the tradition of the ancient Christian Church.

- In the second chapter I synthesized the main information on the doctrinal framework of the Fourth Century Church, with its two main components: Trinitarian and Christological. The Cappadocian Fathers not only contributed to a doctrinal clarification but were language-makers, developed a theological view of the person who influenced all later Eastern theology, imprinted on Eastern thinking a dynamic vision in which God and man are seen in a continuous existential, experiential dialogue. The construction of the notion of person, in the root we have inherited today, largely belongs to the Cappadocian Fathers. In short, it can be said that οὐσία and φύσις designate the universal, undetermined nature, while ὑπόστασις indicates the concretely individualized nature. The hypostasis is particular and distinct in contrast to universal nature. It is what subsists. Applied in the case of the Holy Trinity, the essence refers to what is common (οὐσία κοινή) to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, while the hypostasis indicates what is particular subsistent (ἴδιον), or what is the property of each person (ἴδιωμάτα). In the case of the Cappadocian Fathers, there is then another distinction, almost absent, related to how the divine being is revealed: we can know that God exists, the knowledge of personal property becomes accessible

¹ Andrew Louth, *The Cappadocians*, în Frances Young *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 297.

by revelation, but what God is essentially remains inaccessible. And if the essence is impossible to know, it remains that we can know God through its acts or works (ἐνέργειαι).

- The third chapter consists of a textual analysis of how the Cappadocian Fathers actually see how the act of salvation is fulfilled in Christ. Cappadocian Christology has revealed on the theme of revelation paradigms of Orthodox thought about the Son of God – the incarnate and incomprehensible Logos, paradigms illustrated in dynamic ideas and living and renewing expressions that will make a brilliant career in the future Christological disputes and will form prerequisites for formulating dogma of the Ecumenical Chalcedon.

- The fourth chapter develops a wider framework of the Theology of the Cappadocian Fathers, following the overall vision of human nature and the meaning of its existence. It also highlights the whole issue of the necessity of salvation, starting from the fall of sin and the existence of evil in the world. Finally, the components of the saving act are analyzed, emphasizing the idea of restoration and renewal of the human being in Christ.

- In the fifth chapter, I emphasized the continuity between objective and subjective salvation. Soteriology not only refers to the details of the restoration of human nature in Christ, but concerns how the whole human nature is deified. In this regard, I considered necessary, before analyzing the texts of the Cappadocian Fathers in this regard, the development of a synthesis of the vision of Orthodox theology regarding the conditions of subjective salvation. I have presented in this chapter, therefore, the general coordinates of subjective salvation as an existential prolongation of the objective one in Orthodox theology as well as the way the Cappadocian Fathers have customized the way of thinking of this theology.

- The sixth chapter aimed to present the main elements of the specificity of Orthodox soteriology as a process of sanctification of human nature, from the perspective of the texts of the Cappadocian Fathers. According to them, man is called to be God by grace. Through the union of the human nature with the divine nature in the person of Christ, the humanity of Christ was filled with divine grace. This is also possible for us, through ascetic effort and participation in divine worship. Spiritual life is a continuous effort of sanctification, an endless path to deification. The subjective

salvation, based on the possibility of salvation offered by Christ, is a long lean toward God, in which human reality rises ontologically from *image* to *likeness*, turns into the direction of deification, the coordinates being grace, faith and active nature through deeds. The destiny of human existence appears in the form of a true "commandment" of deification. According to St. Basil the Great, man is the animal that has received the command to become God; he has only one purpose: the likeness of God, and a single commandment in which all encompass: deification.

- The last chapter of the thesis presents, according to the thought of the Cappadocian Fathers, the mystery of the perfection and fulfillment of the human being. We are far removed from a special treatise on soteriology in the case of the authors under consideration, but the concerns of any triadological or christological discussion have as a goal the care of salvation. The reality and possibilities of the full salvation of man are what the Fathers are actually seeking to defend. This was demonstrated first of all by their lives, by the way they lived – in asceticism, prayer, and in a continuous meditation on the eternal truths. Salvation is a continuous ascension to God. But it becomes possible only through Christ, begins and unfolds in Christ the Savior.

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Although at the end of the soteriological ascension we might think that the divine darkness is, the theology of the Cappadocian Fathers is a theology of light. And prefigures or paves the way for the later major developments of some authors such as St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Simeon the New Theologian or St. Gregory Palamas. The Theology of the Cappadocian Fathers attempted to defend the realism of God's connection with man, and of salvation seen as real, devotional, graceful, divine life. By appropriating and developing this model in Orthodox theology, salvation in Christ is seen as the gradual elevation of the human being, which is permeated by an increasing intensity of uncreated energies, which in the end ultimately makes it completely transparent to the Spirit.²

- The summary of all Christology and soteriology can be the famous expression: "God became man for man to become God."³ All humanity participates in what Christ

² Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 2, EIB, București, 1996, p. 126.

³ Sf. Atanasie cel Mare, *Cuvântul întâi împotriva arieanilor*, în PSB 15, trad. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, EIB, București, 1998, p. 202. Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *După chipul și asemănarea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 58, 91.

accomplishes by his resurrection. Thus, "as the beginning of death has begun through one man, and hence passed on to all the human beings, the lot so the beginning of the resurrection passes from one to all mankind."⁴

The death of Christ is an integral part of this plan; thus, St. Gregory of Nyssa has no difficulty in applying the biblical term of sacrifice. Christ is the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep; he is both a priest and a sacrifice. He is the paschal lamb offered for us, the great sovereign priest who sacrificed his own body for the sin of the world.⁵

St. Basil says that the Son of God "gave life to the world when He offered Himself our own sacrifice and grace to God for our sins."⁶ A simple man cannot offer atonement for the sinners, for he himself is guilty of sin. Only man-God can offer God a proper atonement for all of us.

For St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Christ "frees us who are ruled by sin... and gives Himself a ransom for us, able to purify everyone."⁷ He explains that Christ, as the second Adam, is the head of the Body and can thus take on our rebellion by making it his own. As our representative he identifies with us.⁸ That is why he was able not only to take the form of a slave, but to climb the Cross by taking our sins with him, in order to destroy them there. When crucified, he crucifying at the same time our sins.

Although it was holiness itself, God allowed him to be condemned as a sinner and to die under the curse, transferring not only the death we were to suffer, but also our guilt. The sacrifice of such a victim is of an incomparable efficacy and was sufficient to save the whole human race. By dying, his purpose is to save all, and if not all of them come to salvation, it is because they refuse to receive it. The issue of human freedom, as seen by the Cappadocian Fathers, was to be synthesized in the final chapter of this work.

⁴ Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, 16, în *PSB* 30, trad. Pr. Teodor Bodogae, EIB, Bucureşti, 1998, p. 313.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 310-311.

⁶ Sf. Vasile cel Mare, *Omilia la Psalmi*, 28, 5, în *PSB* 17, trad. Pr. D. Fecioru, EIB, Bucureşti, 1986, p. 230.

⁷ Sf. Grigorie de Nazianz, *Cele cinci Cuvântări despre Dumnezeu*, trad. Pr. Gh. Tilea și Nicolae I. Barbu, 1947, p. 105.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

- The act of salvation is, however, complex and cannot in any way be reduced to the legal aspect. As St. Gregory of Nyssa said, "Our weakened flesh indeed needed a doctor, the fallen man waiting for Him who would stretch out his hand, the one who had lost his life awaiting her Giver, the one who had departed from the fellowship of good needed a guide to bring him back from where he had gone, longing for the one lying in the dark, the one who fell into captivity was waiting for the liberator, the one tied waiting for the One to untie, the one in the yoke of slavery, his liberator."⁹ I emphasized throughout the thesis the importance of the ontological aspect of redemption, a point highlighted by the Cappadocian Fathers.

The existential evolution of man is accomplished in the future age, after the restoration of the human integrity through the resurrection of the bodies ("The Righteous shall shine as the sun in the Father's kingdom" - Matthew 13: 43), but the condition of eternity is already being tasted. Human life becomes "life in Christ" (Galatians 2: 20). The Saint appears as the fulfillment of the human. The human being returns to the state of grace, having the destiny to be fulfilled by being fully penetrated by grace.

The influence of the visions and writings of the Cappadocian Fathers was a huge one, marking decisively the way of thinking of Orthodox theology. Summaries of patristic thought, such as that of St. Maximus the Confessor or St. Gregory Palamas, are based on the theology of the "golden age", especially the Cappadocian Fathers - by their monumental effort to create a theology that protects both the divine mystery and the realism of the human deification.¹⁰

Taking on the writings of Antiquity, the Holy Fathers assumed and rebuked them by formulating a proper teaching both with the environment in which they lived and with Holy Scripture. Starting from these two sources, Sacred Scripture and Hellenic Philosophical Tradition, the Church has shaped his teaching about man and his salvation. At the center of its anthropology and soteriology lies *the order of deification*, according to which each of us is called to become *God by grace*, thus fulfilling our *image in likeness*.

⁹ Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, 15, p. 310.

¹⁰ John Meyendorff, *Hristos în gândirea creștină răsăriteană*, trad. Pr. Nicolae Buga, EIB, Bucuresti, 1997, p. 174.

- Rediscovering the thinking of the Cappadocian Fathers is extremely important for the current theological context. And the preoccupations for researching their work are more numerous. St. Gregory of Nyssa has raised the greatest interest, since the first half of the last century, among Catholic and Protestant theologians – more than the Orthodox. The other two Cappadocians, however, are increasingly in need of attention, especially as in the Orthodox world they occupy a privileged place, together with St. John Chrysostom, as the Three Great Hierarchs of the Church, which give us "An integral Christianity".¹¹

For the Cappadocian Fathers, the theological doctrine has never been closed in the framework of subtleties without any connection to the real life, with the experience of the Church. A purely theoretical vision of God can only be revealed as a spiritual evil. As long as we do not live under the auspices of our personal encounter, His life as an opening of the spirit risks to die in us.

According to Théodore de Régnon, "it would seem that in our time the dogma of the divine unity absorbed, as we would say, the dogma of the Holy Trinity, which is only mentioned as a memory."¹² J. Meyendorff interprets these words in the sense that "the dogma of divine unity" is threatened by the theology of "the death of God."¹³

Advancing toward the communion of the perfect love requires an interpersonal criterion of knowledge and access to the mystery, while a more or less dialectical thinking is constantly tempting to reduce reality, to be unilateral.

- For the Cappadocian Fathers, soteriology was naturally the result of triadology. Only the Trinitarian mystery can be the source of the deification of the human. Christ is central, but not exclusively, in this process. He is the one who gives access to eternal communion, healing human nature and adapting it to the possibilities of the communion with the divine life, and this work is constantly accompanied by the sanctifying Spirit.

In particular, the role of the Holy Spirit is highlighted in their writings, emphasizing how the creature is gradually sanctified by union with Christ under the

¹¹ Pr. Dumitru Popescu, *Hristos, Biserică, Societate*, EIB, Bucureşti, 1998, p. 29.

¹² De Régnon, *Études*, I, 135, apud John Meyendorff, *Teologia bizantină*, trad. Pr. Alexandru Stan, EIB, Bucureşti, 1996, p. 243.

¹³ J. Meyendorff, *Teologia bizantină*, p. 243.

action of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit appears to us as the one who fulfills our sanctification, uniting us with the Son and together with the Son with the Father; and then as the one who serves as the "divine environment" in which the Father acts through the Son: a living environment in which the human being is able to look at the Divine Light, because it lives in the Light and itself becomes Light. Numerous texts confirm the illuminating role of the Spirit that makes it possible for God to see: "... as in the Son we see the Father, so in the Spirit (we see) the Son. Worship in the Spirit enlightens our minds ... Worshiping the Son, we worship Him who is the image of God and the Father; worshiping the Spirit, we worship the One who shows in Himself the deity of the Lord. That is why in the worship the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the Father and the Son. And if you are outside the grace of the Spirit, you will not really adore; and if you move within Him, you will never separate Him from God. Because it is impossible for anyone to see the face of the unseen God without the enlightenment of the Spirit. Through the enlightenment of the Spirit we see the enlightenment of God's glory, that is, the Son, and from the Son we raise our minds to the Father, whose image and seal is the Son."¹⁴

About this enlightening activity of the Spirit that transforms us into light so that we can contemplate the light of the Holy Trinity is spoken throughout the entire Orthodox tradition.

The theme of Light of the Holy Trinity reappears many times in the thought of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, but it is conceived in a less hierarchical manner. Here, the viewer who lives God's sight moves from One to Three, and vice versa, having the vision fully absorbed by the Trinitarian Sun, without stopping at the mystagogical question about the mode and the way of vision.¹⁵ We could say that St. Basil narrows his perspective to the Trinitarian economy and the movement to God. St. Gregory of Nazianzus deliberately goes further than this limit to explore new horizons; and thus reveals to the entire Eastern Church a doxological way of seeing God: "As soon as I think of the One, I am immediately enlightened by the splendor of the Three; as soon

¹⁴ Sf. Vasile cel Mare, *Despre Duhul Sfânt*, 26, în *PSB* 12, trad. Pr. Constantin Cornițescu și Pr. Teodor Bodogae, EIB, București, 1988, p. 78.

¹⁵ Pr. Boris Bobrinskoy, *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, trad. Mariuca și Adrian Alexandrescu, EIB, București, 2005, p. 291-292.

as I begin to distinguish them I am brought back to One. When I think of any of them I think of him as a whole, and my eyes are filled, and most of what I think is missing. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to give a greater magnification to others. When we contemplate the Three together, I only see a torch and cannot divide or measure the inner Light."¹⁶

- Another extremely important aspect on the soteriological field is that the Cappadocian Fathers prepare the Christological and Pneumatological ground of the theology of uncreated energies.¹⁷ This theology of divine energies, incipient in their writings, will be further developed in a Christological context by St. Cyril of Alexandria. St. Gregory Palamas will later take over this tradition in his efforts to defend the realism of the sanctification and deification of the human being.

We are far from any legal limitation in this complex process of salvation. At the end of his way to God, the saint, united to Christ, becomes "God by grace," sees "God" in the light of the Spirit, without being able to see through his nature something of the inmost hiding of the One with whom he is united. Ascended by the uncreated light to the stage of being able to see God, man is raised into the "divine darkness" itself – darkness that is but another way of expressing the continual and integral *epektasis* of the human being.

¹⁶ Sf. Grigorie de Nazianz, *Cuvântări*, 40, 41, în PG 36, col. 417.

¹⁷ Cf. John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2004, p. 286 §.u.

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