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The Organization and Role of Monasticism in the Christian Church Constitution and Activity

Abstract: This paper points out the organization and the role of monasticism in the constitution of the Christian Church. The theoretical and practical considerations of monastic life are presented in a Christian synthesis of early monasticism history. Monasticism is the form of life, based on the spiritual vocation of the union with God, with Christ, in the great community which is the Church. Monasticism is the practical organization of a life based on the evangelical counsels, in order to acquire perfection. In the spiritual life of the Christian Church, every vocation is a personal call from Christ. The religious life is founded on the evangelical message of Christ. The members of the monastic orders, following the biblical word of Jesus Christ – »Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and everyday take up their cross and follow me« (Luke 9:23; Mark 8:34) – live to practice all the virtues, that is the monastic votes assumed for attaining likeness with God or holiness. Christ calls us towards this reality, »Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect« (Matthew 5:48). So, the monastic system, in the Orthodox Christianity, includes many rules and spiritual exercises in a special mode of asceticism, meant for attaining a perfect mystical life or the condition of holiness.

Key words: monasticism, Church, evangelical counsels, monastic votes, spirituality

Povzetek: **Organizacija in vloga meništva v ustroju in dejavnosti krščanske Cerkve**

Članek izpostavlja organizacijo in vlogo meništva v ustroju krščanske Cerkve. Teoretični in praktični vidiki meništva so predstavljeni kot krščanska sinteza zgodnje zgodovine meništva. Meništvo je oblika življenja, temelječa na duhovni poklicanosti k združitvi z Bogom, s Kristusom znotraj velike skupnosti, ki je Cerkev. Meništvo je praktična organizacija življenja, temelječa na evangelijskih svetih, za doseganje popolnosti. V duhovnem življenju krščanske Cerkve je vsaka poklicanost osebni klic, ki prihaja od Kristusa. Redovniško življenje je utemeljeno v Kristusovem evangelijskem sporočilu. Člani meniških redov, sledeč biblijskim besedam Jezusa Kristusa – »Kdor želi biti moj učenec, naj se odpove samemu sebi in vsak dan vzame svoj križ in hodi za menoj« (Lk 9,23; Mr 8,34) –, živijo, da bi izpolnjevali vse kreposti, to je meniške zaobljube za doseganje podobnosti z Bogom oziroma svetosti. Kristus nas kliče k tej resničnosti, »Bodite torej popolni, kakor je popoln vaš nebeški Oče« (Mt 5,48). Meniški sistem

tako v pravoslavnem krščanstvu vsebuje številna pravila in duhovne vaje v okviru posebne drže asketstva, katerega cilj je pridobitev popolnega mističnega življenja oziroma stanja svetosti.

Ključne besede: menišтво, Cerkev, evangelijski sveti, meniške zaobljube, duhovnost

1. Introduction

Briefly defined, monasticism consists of: monks and nuns who have become worthy, by having promised themselves to Christ, to fulfill not only the rules of the moral law, but especially the evangelical counsels, assumed as votes or monastic vows, namely: poverty, chastity and obedience. Once taken, the vows become obligatory, involving a total dedication of one's life to the purpose of salvation, through renunciation to one's self and to the world, in order for the union with Christ to become an increasingly perfect way of life.

Etymologically, the word *monk* (from the Greek words μοναχός – *monos*, meaning single or alone, or κάλως γγερων – beautiful old man) defines the Christian who, withdrawn from the world and especially from the state of evilness, lives in hesychia (the anchorites), in prayer, in order to renounce the physical life submitted to materiality and to renounce the sinful passions for the sake of salvation. The purpose of this renunciation is actually the union with God, according to the Apostle's words »the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him« (1 Corinthians 6:17).

Monasticism can be met both under the form of the life of a hermit, characterized by varying degrees of solitude, and under the form of the life of a cenobite, that is, a monk living in a Christian community of the Church.

Fulfilling God's will and dedicating one's entire life to serving Him is a reality of the Orthodox spirituality and especially of its philocalical, ascetical and mystical spirit. The monks who manage to progress on their way to Christ are engaged in a ceaseless spiritual struggle towards freedom from sinful passions (κάθαρσις), contemplation (θεωρία) and deification or union with God (θέωσις), prayer and obedience. In the Scripture, the complete image of the ascetic life is Jesus Christ and the feminine models of monasticism are the Mother of God and the myrrh-bearing women and the four maidens, daughters of Saint Philip the Deacon (Acts 21:7-9). The main occupation of the members of the monastic community, as shown by Saint Paul the Apostle, is work and prayer, later summed up in the Latin syntagm *ora et labora*:

»I wish that all men were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. Now to the unmarried and to the widows I say that it is good for them if they remain single, as I am.« (1 Corinthians 7:7-8)

2. Theoretical and practical organization of monasticism

Monasticism always entails asceticism, or the practice of the spiritual and mystical values. Monasticism, as a way of living in poverty, celibacy, and voluntary obedience to a spiritual leader, has solid biblical foundations. The goal of such practices is a more intense relationship with God, or the service of God through prayer and fasting, meditation, good works and good life. Biblical grounds for monasticism can be found in the Old Testament, where it is rather presented in a veiled manner, but especially in the New Testament, where the idea of living in purity is really practiced. With clear biblical grounds for the ascetic life, the Holy Fathers, organizers of the monastic life, have developed and codified the monastic way of life, but especially have left us their life as an example. As the French historian Antoine Guillaumont shows, we have no reason to believe that Christian monasticism would be the product of historical influences. The emergence of monasticism is determined by the special religiousness of some Christians who want a permanent and close proximity to the divinity. (1997)

Monasticism emerged during the first Christian centuries, as practical organization of the living of the evangelical counsels: voluntary poverty, chastity and obedience, founded by Christ, having as premises several recommendations given by God in the Old Testament, especially to the prophets and bishops »approaching the holy sanctuary« (Leviticus 15-18), who, for this purpose, had to go through a special preparation, whose motivation and implications were repentance and abstinence in all its forms. Of course, closeness to God involves a permanent state of repentance. In the Old Testament, we see how God continually calls people to draw close to Him, to enter in communion with Him in order to have eternal life and to partake of His gifts (Hosea 4:6; 6:1; 11:7; Amos 5:4; Zephaniah 2:3; 3:13; Jeremiah 3:7; Ezekiel 18:31). Yet, repentance is itself a gift of God Who is answering the human effort made in order to release oneself from sin and from sinful passions. The theme of repentance is amply dealt with in the psalms, its starting point being the drama of man drifting away from God because of his sins:

»How much longer will you forget me, LORD? How much longer will you hide yourself from me?« (Psalm 13(12):1).

Hence, the structure of his soul, disturbed by numerous and powerful conflicts of conscience (51(50)), but which turn him to the Creator:

»Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!« (5(4):1)

The Old Testament introduces the forerunners of the Christian monastic ideal. The Old Testament presents man's permanent desire to draw close to God and to return to the paradise lost after the fall into sin. The religious life of the man of the Old Testament is characterized by the desire of acquiring freedom from sin. Although in the Old Testament we find no strict formulations of the monastic

ascetic life, however the life of hermit and the efforts of repentance made by Moses and Elijah are anticipations of the monasticism founded by Christ and organized by the Church, according to the model of His life, based on the practice of the evangelical counsels. The clearest foreshadowing of monasticism in the Old Testament is the institution of the Nazirite. Even the law of Moses highlights in Numbers 6:1-21, the conditions that the sons of Israel who want to become Nazirite must meet:

»If a man or a woman takes an oath to keep himself separate and give himself as a Nazirite to the Lord.« (6:1)

The Nazirite (coming from *nazar* = to bind oneself) is, in the Old Testament, a person wishing to dedicate himself or herself to God for a certain period of time, remaining in a state of purity during his covenant. Thus, the first feature of the Nazirite was temporality. The institution of the Nazirite was accessible to both men and women. The commandments of God, followed by the Nazirites and the prophets, before exercising the mission entrusted to them, are a foreshadowing of the evangelical counsels. The Nazirite was a person with a distinct life, dedicated to God, following a special oath, practicing celibacy even for a short period of time, from seven to thirty days. (6:2-8)

The state of repentance lies at the basis of prayer and of the intensification of the communion with God. The repentance of the Nazirite during the oath was aimed at obtaining worthiness to be closer to God, this is why he had to refrain from any kind of alcoholic beverage, which would have kept him bound to the worldly spirit. Just like the Nazirites, the prophets of Israel were approaching the Lord to receive His commandments, after they had previously repented for sins, by abstention from certain foods and acts, so by fasting and prayer. The Prophets, to get ready before receiving the divine words, had to go through a period of purification, carried out either in remote locations or in their communities. Moses, before receiving the tables of the Law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20), repents to be worthy of the high calling of God. Out of the prophets, the Holy Prophet Elijah (3 Kings 17:20; 19:10; 4 Kings 1; 2) and his apprentice Elisha, through their lives, foreshadow the monastic life, by their zeal and retreat in solitude, as they live a life of repentance, in the deserts (St. Elijah withdraws by the torrent Cherith when Ahab threatened him (3 Kings 17:1)), in communion with God, by prayer.

In the New Testament, repentance is the first condition of entry in the kingdom of God, preached and founded by our Savior Jesus Christ, presented under three aspects. First, Jesus Christ speaks about a kingdom that is realized in the inner man (Luke 17:21), namely in his conscience, where repentance is what initiates it. Then this kingdom is about the communion with the other believers in the sacramental space of the Church (Matthew 6:33; 21:43; Mark 12:34). And third, the kingdom of God is presented as being also the one in Heaven, the future kingdom which will include all the good people who have gained everlasting love (Luke 16:16; 18:17; Matthew 21:43), being dogmatically defined as the triumphant

Church. The militant Church has as means necessary for acquiring the heavenly kingdom the Holy Mysteries by which the believer enters into communion with Christ, pre-tasting the eternal joy. In the first centuries, the Christian life of the Church community was the basis of the monastic life, seen as communal living, because the Christians were sharing commons. (Spidlik 2000, 24)

Monasticism as an institution was organized in the fifth century, and more specifically, at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451. Before this council, the monastic communities functioned under the influence of the great founding Fathers or of their successors. The Fourth Ecumenical Synod places monasticism under the jurisdiction of the Church authority. Indeed, Canon 4 of the Council of Chalcedon, regulates:

»For the first time legally, by a decision of an ecumenical council and, generally, through a canon valid throughout the Church, the relations between the monastic state and the ecclesiastical authority in the sense that monasticism is subordinated to the bishops.« (Floca 1991, 76)

Henceforth, monasticism is an organized institution, involved and subordinated to the ecclesiastical authority exercised by bishops. The Christian life of monasticism has many forms. A monk or a nun gives up the will to direct the course of his or her life. Instead of working towards self-improvement, a monk's or nun's main concern is abnegation, and their highest aim is perfection.

3. From evangelical counsels to monastic vows

Monasticism is a form of service to Christ, by the practice of the evangelical counsels or counsels of perfection, assumed as vows, namely voluntary poverty (or perfect charity), chastity and obedience or submission to a spiritual leader.

In monasticism, the evangelical counsels taken by the vow made before God by the candidate who takes on to renounce the world and the worldly cares, become obligatory and their application is irreversible, they are actually the vows: chastity or virginity, poverty and obedience, whose consequence is the state of continuous sacrifice expressed in the monastic environment by the syntagm the yoke of Christ. (Vlahos 2005, 38)

Although in the Orthodox terminology, no distinction is made among the evangelical counsels, following an old division of virtue into virtues of the soul and virtues of the body, we must say that the evangelical counsels or monastic vows are ascetic forms necessary for perfection, which together with the commandments open the heavenly kingdom (John Damascene 1864, 85–89).

Without insisting too much and needlessly on the legalistic distinction between biblical commandment and evangelical counsel, as the Catholic ethics does, which defines commandment by *erga superogatoria*, namely super-meritatory actions that are part of its treasury of church, given as indulgences in the past by

the popes, but also without denying them totally as the Protestant theology does, which considers the counsels of Christ as given to those predestined to salvation, the Orthodoxy recognizes the value of both (commandment and evangelical counsel) for the salvation of man and implicitly in the Christian life, be they Christians living in the world or in the monastery, monks or nuns, because: »The Holy Scriptures do not know about such a distinction, they want everyone to lead a monk's life, even if they are married.« (John Chrysostom 1863, 373 A)

In addition to the ten commandments of the Old Testament and the evangelical counsels, the Savior gave the Christians nine other exhortations, by which the divine law is made perfect, to help man reach moral perfection. Yet, these have not been given under the form of commandments, but in the guise of beatitudes, because they fit our Savior Christ's lowliness and meekness perfectly. On the other hand, the nine Beatitudes are so suited to the aspirations of a Christian soul that just hearing them, we feel like fulfilling them. But according to the canonical moral teaching one must make a difference between commandment and evangelical counsel.

»The commandment is a precise provision of the law and about committing a clearly defined, obligatory act, or about the interdiction to commit illegal acts. The evangelical counsels: chastity, obedience and voluntary poverty, unlike the commandments, are recommended by our Savior to enhance the mystical union. The moral counsel is also included in the general provisions of the moral law, but does not refer to the obligatory good claimed by the law, but to a non-obligatory good, a good permitted or only advisable. By disobeying the counsel, the Christian does not sin, and does not go astray from fulfilling his purpose; however, by fulfilling it, he can reach a higher degree of moral perfection more easily.« (Mladin 2003, 92)

Voluntary poverty or perfect charity (from the Greek Ὁμολογία ακτημοσύνης or πτωχίας, in Latin *votum pauperitatis*) as a monastic vote, supports the realization of a full service of Christ because the monk's preoccupation is only God. In monasticism »poverty is leaving the worldly worries (material life), freeing oneself of all the needs of life, voyage without hindrance (to heaven), loyalty to the (divine) commandments, moving away from sadness« (John Climacus 1980, 251).

The monastics, by giving up on the worldly cares, sense the spiritual life and this life is attraction to the good, and this means following Jesus Christ:

»If any man has the desire to come after me, let him give up all the other desires, and take up his cross and come after me.« (Mark 8:34)

Material things are not bad in themselves but become bad by misuse, because they get to enslave the human nature, and this is why the Savior said:

»It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.« (Matthew 19:24)

The evangelical counsel of poverty is based on Jesus Christ's words from the conversation with the young man:

»You lack one thing – go, sell whatever you have and give the money to the poor; then you will have a treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.«
(Mark 10:21; Matthew 19:21)

Virginity or chastity (from the Greek Ὁμολογία παρθενίας, σωφροσύνης, αγνείας, Latin *votum castitatis*) for the monastic life implies purity of the body and of the soul in every sense and especially sinless life lived in justice and in love. The moral importance of virginity is shown by Saint Paul the Apostle when he says:

»I want you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the things of the world, how to please his wife.« (1 Corinthians 7:32-33)

The full purity of life makes the human body receive an angelic dignity, because it gets united and sanctified by partaking of Christ daily. So the vote of willing poverty involves a pure life, renunciation to the worldly cares and the acquisition of the state of virginity as a moral state.

The vote of virginity or chastity is based on the Savior's words:

»For there are eunuchs who have been that way from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by others: and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this should accept it.«
(Matthew 19:11-12)

Origen shows that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolizes chastity, which rejects the preoccupation for the body. Certainly, we must not understand the body as he does, as an evil reality and mutilate or destroy it, because the body is meant for sanctification, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). Theoliptus of Philadelphia says that whoever has promised himself to this sacred vow should stay away from the world of sin and avoid the connections with the wicked man. Diadochus of Photice considers virginity to be a constant prayer, a state of purity, as »living forever connected to God« (1947, 334). The full purity or chastity requires the monks and the nuns to adhere to a strict schedule of prayer and services to God and this means an organized life of religious and spiritual asceticism.

Obedience or submission to a spiritual father (from the Greek Ὁμολογία ὑπακοής, in Latin *votum oboedientiae*) for the monastic life is the means by which man, in general, and the monk, in particular, in order to escape the slavery of sinful passions, submits his will to the moral law that his spiritual father and Christ the Lord command:

»Continue to obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who must give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be of no advantage to you.« (Hebrews 13:17)

Or:

»Every person must be subject to the governing authorities because there is no authority except by God's appointment, and those that presently exist have been instituted by God. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience.« (Romans 13:1; 5)

For the monastic community, obedience means obedience to the spiritual authority.

Obedience in the Christian monastic life consists in the fact that the monk does not live according to his will, but according to the Savior's prescriptions, put into practice under the supervision and direction of the one to whom the guidance of one's spiritual life has been entrusted. St. John of the Ladder (Climacus) defines obedience likening it to a »tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility« (1980, 79). The true disciple has a sincere desire to learn and is aware that Christ by obedience leads to knowledge and truth. Disobedience leads to sin, which is one of the senses of sin in the Scripture, since man, Adam and Eve, disobeying God's commandment in heaven, fell into sin. St. Basil, archbishop of Caesarea (329–379), says that obedience actually means learning by living in Christ: »He who murmurs has estranged himself from the brothers' community and his work can no longer be used by them.« (1857c, 750)

As an example and connective bridge and model of ascetic life, the Holy Gospels show Saint John the Baptist, a dweller of the desert who spent his life in fasting and prayer until he began his work of preaching repentance, at the age of almost thirty (Luke 1:80; 3:23).

John the Baptist was born six months before Christ (1:36) in the city of Orini of the parents: priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth (1:5). The birth of prophet John being part of the plan for the salvation of the world, was announced by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, while he was serving at the temple. The priest Zechariah, when he heard from the angel that his wife Elizabeth, who was barren, will bear in her old age a child, because he was not convinced of the good news brought by the angel Gabriel, asks for a sign, and remains dumb until his son is given his name. At birth, asked by his relatives, Zechariah wrote on a tablet the name John, a name that means servant of God. Zechariah, full of grace, prophesied blessing God about the mission of his son John who was to prepare the way for our Savior Jesus (1:68-80). Another example, perhaps of Nazarite for life, is that of Anna the Prophetess, who, after the circumcision and bringing to the temple of the Infant Jesus, was praising God announcing about the Infant to all those who were awaiting redemption in Jerusalem. About her life, the Holy Gospel informs us that

»And there was one, Anna, a woman prophet, the daughter of Phanuel, of the family of Asher (she was very old, and after seven years of married life, she had been living as a widow and was now eighty-four); she was in the Temple at all times, worshipping with prayers and fasting, night and day.« (2:36-37)

From among the Hebrew people, there have been people »who chose celibacy out of religious reasons, especially the Essenes. The Nazarites also practiced abstinence, but only for a while.« (Mihoc 2002, 18) Whether we are talking about the Pharisees, who were either priests or laymen, dedicated law interpreters, rigorous regarding Moses' prescriptions, but lacking good works, or the Sadducees, aristocrats who were following the biblical law, but not the traditions of the Pharisees or the Essenes, who were a party of priests and laymen, they all practiced a false asceticism, considering themselves chosen and consecrated, the only ones entitled to know the divine mysteries. The rigidity of the faith of these religious parties generated their repulsion to the activity of our Savior. Even though among them one can meet people that lived the life of single men: the Essenes and the Nazarites, their mystical life could not have had as an end the mystical union with God because it was devoid of the binder of communion with God – grace.

The perfect model of monk is, however, Jesus Christ himself. Although he has spent most of his earthly activity preaching to the crowds, the Gospels relate that on various occasions the Savior withdrew into the mountains to pray at night: »And after sending the crowds away, he went up on the mountainside by himself to pray: and when evening came, he was there alone.« (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12; John 6:15) The desire of following and living Christ was lit by the Holy Spirit, Who has made the first Christians, even since the day of the Pentecost, leave the world and withdraw to deserts to serve God completely. »In the first centuries of Christianity, celibacy represented a form of asceticism, meant to help receive the being of a martyr (testifier) for Christ.« (Spidlik 2000, 72)

Of course, the need to flee the persecutions initiated by the Roman Emperors increased the number of monks. For example, during the persecution of Diocletian (285-305), the number of monks in Egypt increased. But, as St. Basil the Great shows, the perfection of the spiritual life is based on the imitation of Christ, not only in the life paradigm that He has given us, but even in His death:

»The *oikonomia* of our God and Savior with a view to saving the human nation is to call it from the state of fall and lift it from the alienation brought about by disobedience to the intimacy with God. For this, the coming of Christ in the body, the image of the evangelical mode of living, the Passion, the cross, the burial, the resurrection; for the saved man to enjoy, by the imitation of Christ, that adoption (quality of God's son) of yore. Therefore, to attain the perfection of life it is necessary to imitate Christ not only following the example of His life, His gentleness, humility and patience, but even in His death.« (1857b, 128 C)

Thus, in the Christian monastic life, public vows confirm the public profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience in all that involves the spiritual and ascetic life.

4. The organization of monasticism in history based on the ascetical practice of the evangelical counsels

The organization of the Christian monasticism, based on the ascetical practice of the evangelical counsels, begins with the life of the Christians withdrawn in the desert of Egypt and Syria in the 4th century AD, initially because of the persecutions, and later due to the changes that occurred in the Roman Empire on the level of the society as a result of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine the Great to Christianity and of the transformation of Christianity into a religion tolerated throughout the Empire (Lawrence 2001, 2). Now, the Christians who want to reach perfection, withdraw from the cities to the wilderness, living in fasting, prayer, and the practice of the evangelical counsels.

»The desert was for the monks the most favorable place for practicing hesychia (a life of peaceful prayer of the heart), as the foundation of any monastic ideal, but also the place of the demons, which manifested themselves mainly in the form of thoughts, and against which the monk had to fight to defend his hesychia (peace) and fulfill the goal for which he was in the wilderness: the union with God.« (Guillaumont 1998, 93)

Saint Antony and Pachomius proved to be important ascetic leaders in the desert of Egypt. Saint Antony stressed the need to live in seclusion in order to carry out the spiritual and physical acts necessary to prove devotion to God, reach spiritual purification, and atone for sins. The first communities living a life of monk were organized along the Nile Valley in the 4th century AD. The Saints Anthony the Great and Pachomius (d. 346) are viewed as organizers of the Egyptian monasticism, but, before them, the one considered the First Hermit was Saint Paul of Thebes. Classically, the first great ascetics are considered the founders of monasticism. (Evdokimov 1964, 165)

The Christian known as the First Hermit is Paul of the Thebes in Egypt (227–347). Paul of Thebes or Paul the Anchorite was born around 227, he was a young Roman soldier converted to Christianity and he lived in Egypt, namely the Upper Thebaid, was rich but also educated. He fled into the wilderness, spending his whole life in the desert during the persecution of Decius (250–253). Since 250, finding out that his uncle, in order to take his property, intends to hand him over into the hands of the persecutors, he withdraws into the wilderness of Egypt living in asceticism, fasting and prayer. St. Anthony the Great, meeting him, is impressed by the reality of his improved life, by his life of hermit and by all the endeavors towards perfection he had made during his life of 114 years, of which 91 spent in the wilderness. Of course all the historical data about this pious Christian are not

clear; nevertheless, a sure fact is that the organization of the monastic life was realized based on the constitutional foundation of the religious moral, customary and then canonical law. After the introduction by Pachomius of the community life, in the mystical societies some rules have crystallized, provisions regarding the cohabitation imposed by the community lifestyle. Pachomius did not constitute a code of laws and did not draw up a general plan for the organization of the monastic communities, but introduced rules of conduct with a generally obligatory character, absolutely necessary for the monastic communities.

St. Anthony the Great (251–356) is the first organizer of the monastic life under its anchoritic form, specific of the different communities (lavras) of the Egyptian desert, out of which the most famous were those of Nitria, Kellia and Scetis. Saint Anthony was the first Christian to live a life of solitude consecrated to God. As a hermit in the desert, he lived a long and saintly life that influenced countless people both in his time and for generations thereafter, even to this day. Around Saint Anthony, over 6,000 monks gathered together, and after his death, their number rose to 10,000. For all that, St. Anthony is considered the father of Christian monasticism. St. Anthony was born in the village of Coma (Kemn-el-Arouse) in Middle Egypt in 251, as the son of wealthy Christian peasants; here he became a practicing Christian. After the death of his parents – Anthony was then aged 20, he entered the church to hear the Gospel, in which our Lord speaks to the rich young man:

»If you want to be perfect, go sell all you have, give to the poor and then come follow me.« (Matthew 19:21)

St. Anthony received the word as if addressed to him directly, and after having shared his wealth to the poor, leaving his sister in the care of a community of virgins, he withdrew into solitude. He lived at first in a hut in the margin of the village of Como, in obedience to another ascetic of the region, who was older, and then in a deserted idolatrous grave. His disciples introduced for the first time the monastic vows, which, once taken, became obligatory. The life of Saint Anthony, written by Saint Athanasius, reveal him as Father of monasticism, as »the first who reached holiness without tasting martyrdom« (1988, 244). Macarius and Amatas are two disciples who lived for 15 years with Anthony in Mount Kolzim, who witnessed his death and buried him in an unknown place, as Anthony himself asked.

St. Anthony was the first who gathered together the ascetics of the desert in an organized community. This community was very little close and totally voluntary; although its members did not practice the vote of obedience, instead they were held together simply by their will to live in communion with Christ in the Church community. St. Anthony, in 286, at the age of 35, settles himself in a deserted fortress located on the right bank of the Nile at the edge of the desert, in the place called Pispir, where he remains for 20 years until 306, when his rebel followers force him to leave this place where he lived ascetically, reaching the mystical union with God by grace. In the year 312, he settles himself in mount

Kolzim (or Kolzum/Qolzum, not far from the Red Sea shore, where one can find today the monastery bearing his name). Here he lives up to his death (356), together with two disciples, leaving this place only to visit his disciples or to make a second trip to Alexandria, to support St. Athanasius, persecuted by the pro-Arian party.

The persecutions of the year 305 led many Christians to begin to come around St. Anthony, so it seems that the number of his disciples soon reached 6,000. Thus, a monastic center was created around him, known as Faium. The monks, disciples of St. Anthony the Great, because of their large number, did not live in one monastic settlement, so that the monastic mode created by St. Anthony monastery must be considered rather a colony of monks, zealous towards perfection.

St. Pachomius of Thebes (292–347?) or Pachomius the Great is considered the organizer of the monastic community with cenobitic life. He considers the cenobitic life as a family, entrusted to the starets, as father of the monastic family, just like a father of a family. Under his supervision, a little later another eight monasteries of monks and two of nuns were formed. Around the year 326, Pachomius founded a monastic community in Nitria, northwest of Cairo. (Schaff 1894, s.v. »Pachomius«)

St. Pachomius was a disciple of St. Anthony, he gathered the ascetics in a community, living in individual cells (from the Greek κελλία), but working together, eating together and attending the church together. This kind of monastic organization is called cenobitic order, or community order. According to the rules of Venerable Pachomius, the monastic community was organized in a manner similar to that of a military order. The monks were divided in groups consisting of ten people, working in the same domain. They lived in a block of cells that were called together House (*domus*), led by a teacher (*praepositus*). Some houses formed a tribe (*tribus*), whose head was the teacher of the oldest house. A monastery was composed of 10 tribes; thus 30 or 40 houses each with 40 brothers add up to more than a thousand monks in a monastery. Each house had a sort of administrator and an assistant administrator, and over the whole monastery there was a general administrator. The teacher was taking care of all the household and assured the spiritual care of his disciples. Above all was Abba or Avva, namely the abbot of the monastery. (Pachomius 2000, 9–18)

The emphasis of the Pachomian rules falls on the community life, developed and manifested in three areas:

- 1) joint worship;
- 2) living, sleeping, eating in a joint manner in a building isolated from the outside world;
- 3) jointly earning the living by joint work.

In the communities of anchorites, the members take care, alone, of the goods necessary for life; it is only in the fourth century, by the Rules given by St. Pachomius that weak tendencies towards a common organization of the monastic com-

munity emerge.

Along with St. Pachomius, as organizers of the monastic communities are also known: Macarius the Egyptian (300–390) who established a monastery in the wilderness of Nitria, in the desert of Skete, around the year 300; Hilarion, in Palestine; also around the year 345, Epiphanius founded another monastery with cenobitic life in Palestine.

St. Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea (329–379), was born in the city of Pontus towards the year 329 and died in Caesarea on January 1, 379. He comes from a Christian family: his father, Basil, was a famous lawyer and orator in Pontus, known as a teacher of virtues, he married Emilia, daughter of a martyr, and they had nine children, five boys – all saints – and four daughters. His sister Macrina embracing the monastic life as well, implemented the monastic rules of his brother in the monasteries of nuns. St. Basil studied in Caesarea and later on in Constantinople and Athens, standing out since his young age by his profound knowledge of philosophy, astronomy, geometry, medicine and rhetoric. In Athens, he became a close friend of St. Gregory of Nazianzus who was always impressed by his deep intelligence and profound spirit. The life and the work of St. Basil the Great reveal his true knowledge of God and man.

»In the light of Christ, St. Basil understands to appreciate ancient wisdom, both in order to reject it when it was no longer useful and in order to use it for something better, to give it its full meaning in God.« (Caraza 1979, 131–132)

From Egypt, monasticism passed into Asia Minor, organized by St. Basil the Great. The life of the Christians in the 4th century is enriched by the activity of the Cappadocian Fathers, especially that of St. Basil the Great. Very many Christians, moved by the Holy Spirit, turn to hermitages, to quiet places, to serve God, where they dedicate themselves to an asceticism meant for reaching perfection; based on these desires of embracing the life of a hermit, the Christian monasticism emerged.

For a proper organization of the monastic communities, St. Basil the Great composed *the Great and Small Rules*, an ample functioning status, better composed than that of Saint Pachomius, still valid to this day in the Orthodox Church. The monastic statutes of St. Basil the Great are contained in three of his writings:

- 1) Moral Teachings;
- 2) Great Rules, comprising 55 rules;
- 3) Small Rules, containing 313 short answers for solving various problems of the monastic community life.

Based on the principles of the Christian apostolic community described in *The Acts* and *The Epistles*, St. Basil (329–379) promotes a cenobitic life, namely a monastic life in an organized community. This is conditioned by:

- 1) Possession in common of the property, according to the model of the apostolic community, following the commandment of love for God and our neighbor;

- 2) Good works aimed at relieving our neighbor's physical and spiritual distress;
- 3) Counsel of voluntary poverty;
- 4) The principle of asceticism, of abnegation, by the vote of chastity;
- 5) Counsel of unconditional obedience to the head of the community;
- 6) Reading the Holy Scriptures, in alternation with prayer and work;
- 7) Daily Holy Communion, as a sign of the communion with Christ, in the ecclesial community.

St. Basil leaves as a rule for governing the monastic communities, the institution of the starets, the direct obedience to a Father (starets), chosen by the community, actually:

»The starets himself, as a parent taking care of his true children, will investigate the need of each one of them and will assign, to each of them, proper care and protection; and he will group any member that is really weakened in soul or body, with a love and benevolence befitting a father.« (1857a, 1408)

The organization of the monastic life based on the practice of the evangelical counsels, as St. Basil the Great shows, is inspired by The Holy Scripture. In this sense, the great Cappadocian says: »Every word or act ought to be confirmed by the testimony of the Scripture inspired by God to instruct the good but also to shame the wicked.« (Amand 1948, 82)

The rules made by St. Basil are general rules for the cenobitic life, which relies on brotherly love, which differs from the anchoritic life – in this sense the great Cappadocian says:

»None of us is able to meet the needs of his body on his own; and to acquire the bare necessities people need one other. For as the foot has some power, but it needs another, as well – because without the help of the other members he does not find even his own power strong enough or sufficient for its needs for life and cannot replace by something else what is missing /... /. For this reason, in the life in common, the power of the Holy Spirit, which exists in him, needs to pass at the same time to all.« (1857d, 928; 932)

All this shows that monasticism is a state of grace, present in the Church community. The entry into monasticism, as the Cappadocian Saint shows, is realized since the moment one takes the monastic vows, of: obedience, poverty and chastity, which, together with cleanliness, with keeping watch over the heart, with humility, with love and with prayer are prerequisites of the community-based ascetic life.

Compared to the monastic rules formulated by Pachomius, the rules of St. Basil give the monastic community a centralized organization. St. Basil organized the monks in brotherhoods that did not exceed 15 people. Feminine monasticism has

the same rules as masculine monasticism, because it has the same goal: purification from sinful passions and acquiring holiness, both man and woman being images of God.

St. Basil advises the monks to deal not only with work and the order of prayer but also with physical work, intellectual work and especially moral, ascetic work. St. Basil the Great, in his Rules, compares the monks with the endeavurers of the Gospel desiring the Kingdom of Heaven for which they make efforts for sanctification of all of their life. So, monastic asceticism became an authentic way of life and union with Christ, which generated a new way of life in Christianity, namely monasticism. Continuing this tradition in the Eastern Christianity, three types of monasticism were formed in history: eremitic and coenobitic and the skete. The skete is a very small community of monks or nuns under the direction of an Elder.

Since the first centuries, monasticism was present in the Church life of the Daco-Romans in the Roman Province of Dacia. The massive dissemination of Christianity and of the Church organization in the territory between the Danube and the Carpathians and the Black Sea is confirmed by the approximately 35 basilicas of the 4th–6th centuries found in the main urban centers of the province: Tomis, Callatis (today Mangalia), Tropaeum Traiani (today Adamclisi), Histria (today Istria), Axiopolis (today Cernavodă). In the fifth and sixth centuries, the Romanian monasticism is represented by: St. John Cassian and Dionysius Exiguus, and the Scythian monks of Scythia Minor – John Maxentius, Leontius, Achilles, Maurici. (Me-yendorff 1979, 34) But before the Scythian monks in Scythia Minor there was an Orthodox Episcopate in Tomis, the present-day Constanta in Romania.

Of course, in the Orthodox Church, Saint Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, is the one who gives the monastic rules a meaning to underlie the organization of the monastic community's life and introduces the charitable service as a work discipline, while the organization of Western monasticism is realized by St. Benedict of Nursia (6th century), considered the founder of Western monasticism, whose rule is based on that of St. Basil. The Benedictine rule formed the basis of life in most monastic communities until the 12th century. In the Middle Ages the monastic orders of the Carthusians, Cistercians, or friars – Dominicans, Franciscans, and Carmelites – emerged. In the Orthodox monasticism there are no religious orders as in the West, because this monasticism was organized based on the monastic rules of St. Pachomius of Thebes and St. Basil the Great, whose norms encouraged an active and »contemplative« life, this generating the unity and communion in the Church.

5. The emergence of feminine monasticism in the history of the Christian Church

Christian history reveals the important role of women in the life of the Church, where any human being has dimension and ecclesial participation, given by the divine image borne, restored by the grace of the Holy Baptism. Certainly, from a

historical perspective, the existing information is not clear about the primacy of the monastic communities of monks or nuns, because at the beginning there were also mixed communities.

As Fr. Kallistos Ware states (1978), normally when we talk about St. Anthony of Egypt as the father of Christian monasticism, we must not forget that before giving up all his possessions and becoming a great ascetic, he entrusted his younger sister to a monastery of virgins, which clearly shows that there was a feminine monastic community, already organized, preceding even the first cenobitic monasteries of St. Pachomius. So, we are entitled to affirm that the organization of the community-based monastic life for monks is simultaneous to the organization of the first monasteries of nuns. The first Christian settlement of this kind for nuns mentioned in documents was created by St. Pachomius for his sister Mary.

Since the second and third centuries, the first monasteries had rules that guided the first monastic communities of nuns. (Macy 2007, 9–13) The entry of women in the monastery involves a radical transformation of life, and means following Christ, and this was done under the guidance of monks. Saint Jerome appreciates Marcella, Paula the Elder and Paula the Younger, Eustochium and Demetrias for their practice of asceticism, substantiated in their modest apparel, considering that »a simple apparel demonstrates a clean soul«. A life dedicated exclusively to God requires spiritual effort from man.

As forerunners of the Christian feminine monasticism, in the history of the Church we find different religious groups, like:

- 1) 1) The widows – an ascetic and practical community, composed of women who assumed the chastity vote. The age of entry into the widows' group was about 60 years. »To be accepted into the society of widows, the widow had to have been married only once, had to live a life of solitude and prayer, abound in good deeds, be submitted to the bishops, priests and deacons in whose subordination they were.« (Floca 1990, 501–502)
- 2) 2) The virgins – they lived in abstinence and prayer, taking upon themselves the vow of chastity, under the guidance of the widows. The virgins' group was joinable at the age of 17.
- 3) 3) The priestesses – they were a special category of women dealing with religious instruction and moral guidance to the young.
- 4) 4) The deaconesses – women who were voluntarily in the service of the local churches. This category was the largest women group in the old Church. They helped the priests when they officiated the baptism for women, anointing them with holy oil; with the deacons, they took care of the good order in the church; they guided and took care of the widows and the virgins, who had to obey them; they catechized neophyte women, but especially they devoted themselves to acts of physical and spiritual charity in harmony with the sacrificial love of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Important for the feminine monastic history, but, of course, together with the community of men of St. Basil, is the monastery of nuns led by his sister Macrina. St. Paula also builds in Bethlehem a community of monks and next to them three monasteries for nuns. Saint Melania the Elder edified a monastery for virgins not far from the monastery of monks of Rufinus. Besides his monk communities, Blessed Augustine also organizes a nunnery where he ordains his sister as abbess. St. John Cassian from the Province of Dacia does the same in Marseille: he founded two monasteries, one south of the city, on the other side of the harbor, a monastery that became the famous abbey Saint-Victor and the other, even in the city, a nunnery, later known as the Saint-Sauveur, for his sister, whom he met in Marseille. (Benoit, 1966) St. Gregory the Theologian, speaking of his sister Gorgonia who was leading an ascetic life, attests her presence in the monastery.

The foundation and organization of monasteries formed either of monks or of nuns occurred wherever monasticism has spread. The organization and functioning of the monasteries formed of nuns was the same as that of the monasteries formed of monks. Precisely because nuns are governed by the same monastic rules as the monks, there are no specific rules created for them in the Eastern Christianity. For this reason, the monasteries of nuns, which shone in those times of great bloom of Christianity, did not create from themselves a rule of their own, but relied on the principles formulated by St. Pachomius.

Of course, in the sense of absolute ministry, the most emblematic image of feminine monasticism is the Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. The life of sacrificial ministry of the Theotokos, her following Christ and especially her perpetual virginity under all aspects, both physical and spiritual, represents in fact a genuine practice of the evangelical counsels, which the Virgin Mary accepts since the first moments of her life, when she was dedicated to the temple, but especially in her adulthood, when, in front of the Archangel Gabriel, she takes on this ministry, saying: »I am the servant of the Lord; may it be to me as you say. And the angel went away.« (Luke 1:38)

Along with the Virgin Mary, the Scripture presents the myrrh-bearing women, who were also living a special life, with a strong ascetic character.

Naturally and logically, the appearance and development of feminine monasticism occurred at least at the same time as the masculine one in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.; in the fourth century, there were some mixed monasteries, as well, but which were banned in the 6th century by Emperor Justinian. In the Christian West, the monasticism for women was initiated even since the 3rd century by grouping consecrated virgins (*virgines sacratae*), who were devoting their lives to God (*Deo dicatae*) by taking a vow of virginity before the bishop, and, after this moment, they would wear a veil as their headwear.

6. Conclusion

The Christian monasticism was founded by Jesus Christ, but was organized based on the practice and living of the evangelical counsels by the Church. The church is made up of clergy (priests) and believers or people, of course this category also includes the monks and the nuns. In Christianity, monasticism is a special group among the Christians, but not broken from the community of the Church, and their activity is put in the service of the Church.

Monasticism was first developed in the sense of the practical life, then in the sense of the canonical order, certainly at first in relation to the theology of the Holy Fathers and then in relation to the Holy Canons established at Ecumenical and Local Councils. In the history of Christianity, monasticism was one of the central dimensions of life during the Western Middle Ages and until the late Byzantine Empire.

The most flourishing period of monasticism was that of the 8th century and it lasted until the 12th century. During this period, monasteries became an essential part of the society, often participating in the efforts of liturgical unification and clarification of the doctrinal disputes. In the West, the emergence of religious orders meant an institutionalization of the monastic life. The increasing pressure of the nation-states and the monarchies of the time weakened the wealth and power of the monastic orders over time. In the East, monasticism continued to develop as well after the Great Schism of 1054, becoming the center around which the Christians gathered even after the fall of Constantinople under Turkish dominion in 1453. Therefore, for the Christian East, monasticism was the force of spiritual resilience with cultural, social, political and economic implications.

Monasticism as an ecclesial state of grace is involved in and realizes the ministry of our Savior Christ, but in close connection with the Church, because

»the Son of man did not come to have servants, but to be a servant, and to give his life for the salvation of men« (Matt 20:28).

So, monasticism is the authentic evidence of the Christian ministry by which man lives with the purpose of salvation from sin and death, and this is reflected as well in helping others. Although paradoxically there are outstanding representatives of monasticism who lived far from the world, namely the hermits, they were part of a Church community, with which they were participating to the prayer, to the union with Christ by the Holy Eucharist, and especially for the good of which they were praying and interceding to God. The Christian monasticism is a reality of love and of ministry to God, involving man and the world as a whole, and not a dissident group broken from the Church of Christ. Today, when we all witness the various crises of human and spiritual orientation, monasticism reminds us by the voice of tradition and history that the only truly good thing that ennoble humanity, is a life in Christ lived with the aim of acquiring the Kingdom of God.

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