

Discussion

Fr Vasile Bîrzu: I will not talk about love, but about an issue that was highlighted by Professor Sebastian implicitly, namely, this aspect that escaped from the nuances raised, the excess. Love as the source of life is agapic, the love that flows from the Holy Trinity. As a source of life, as a source of uncreated divine energies, it organizes and feeds all creation. Life in the kingdom of God, about whom the Gospel says at one point that is taken zealously. He who forces conquers it, earns it. Here it came to my mind an example of life of a hesychast, more or less known, namely Alexander the Akoimetos, who excelled through ascetic excess, and troubled the entire Church of the fifth century. As a result of his very turbulent activity he has forced the following ecumenical councils of the fifth century to regulate monasticism through certain canons. As a saint, he was not so famous in Church history, because the hierarchy did not like, and his monastery remains famous through Marcel of Ancyra, the abbot who followed him. From his life emerges precisely this escalate of the kingdom of God, precisely this categorical imperative of fulfilling the Gospel commandments, which could not be tried and convicted by any human law, or canon. Because through the ascetical zeal he wanted to show the real life and this aspect of the excess, of the zeal, which, if well targeted, fits perfectly into the source of life, and that can not be judged. On the contrary, from this perspective, indifference, accommodation with the world, present in the life of every clergyman – clericalism, finally – can be seen precisely as a disconnection from the source of life. When you enter the logic of the Spirit and begin to feel God's commandments, just like Mark the Ascetic, as remorse for what you have not accomplished the day before, as a call to accomplish more than you accomplished yesterday, you basically enter on a path to the final running for the kingdom of God. And in this way, the canon laws are outweighed by the spiritual laws.

Sebastian Moldovan: I would just like to make an observation which is required after the intervention of Father Vasile, namely: if love is an excess, not any excess is love.

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Vladimir Yakuntsev. I have got no questions. I just wanted to thank you for your paper because it arises again the sense of beauty. Beauty manifests itself when what is given by God is used exactly as He wants it. Indeed there is the law, the commandment of God. When they are fulfilled in the spirit of love, that is, in the spirit of Tradition, as we discussed this morning, this brings amazing fruit. It is beautiful. But against this background, a problem arises: what if fulfil the commandments not in the spirit of love? It turns out that it also happens so. Moreover, it is a serious risk. In this regard, at the very beginning of your paper you mention that Christ was crucified in the name of the law, that is, for the sake of fulfilling the commandment: ‘We have a law, and according to that law he must die...’ (John 19:7). Once again I want to thank you for your paper and for raising this question.

Fr Ioan Mircea Ielciu: I think I speak for you, for all, when I say that Professor Sebastian Moldovan submitted an essay particularly deep, highlighting the relation between *nomos* and *agape*, between imperative and love. Through the patristic texts which he brought relevant to its allegation, He showed us how love can be a commandment and how present can be imperative, or command in love. And because Father professor Birzu appealed to the spiritual fathers and to a great spiritual authority, I would like to appeal to St. Anthony the Great. Because usually the imperative the command arises in us, in people a sense of fear and St. Anthony has a special phrase. He says “I do not fear God, I love God”. This thing is very important. That is true love, sacrificial love, cancels the fear of the command, or of the imperative. Another issue that I would like to refer is the one that has emerged from this essay, namely that we can overcome the fear of death only with the thought of death, having this thought throughout our existence. Therefore the spiritual fathers recommend thinking about death as a shield against evil. What does it mean to have the mind to death? It means having the vivid awareness that we are not forever on earth, that we are travelers, that the biological death, as a phenomenon, is a gate, it is not the irremediable end of the existence, but a step which opens the prospect of another way to being. And St. Anthony has a profound phrase regarding this issue. He says “if man shall have always death in front of him” – that is the thought of death – “immortality is. And if he shall not have it, death is”. And John Chrysostom adds that it is not of death, as a phenomenon, we should be feared, but of distancing ourselves from God, which is brought by sin – this produces remoteness from God – the distance which is more bitter than death. Also, emphasizing the fact that the logic of life is the growth and multiplication, which is identical to the sacrificial love, it is very important, because love is dynamism, love means sacrifice. In this context, St. John of the Ladder also said, emphasizing the responsible dimension of love, that love is the supreme

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responsibility for each other. Hence when you love, you feel responsible to the one you love. Only by giving we survive, we gain life plenarily. That is why, an Orthodox witness and survivor of the Communist prisons, during the communist repression – I am referring to the worthy to remember Nicolae Steinhardt, father Nicolae *From Rohia*, wrote a book, entitled suggestively: *By giving You Acquire*. Only these remarks I wanted to make, being challenged by the particularly deep text of Professor Sebastian Moldovan. Thank you!

D. Gzzyan: I would like to express my profound gratitude to Professor Moldovan for his paper. It is quite consonant with those intuitive assumptions by means of which I have tried for twenty years now to build my vision of what can be considered Christian ethics and what cannot. In my reasoning I always proceeded from interpreting the image of the tree of life in the paradise and attempting to somehow identify in the Sermon on the Mount some meanings we have not learned yet. But I cannot say I have found answers to my questions during these years. Rather, they have been reshaped and, perhaps, have become more articulated to me. At least, today I am already not so scared of these questions. Although one must still admit we have not yet developed behaviour practices and ethics grounded on the revelation of ‘abundant life.’ We have got some wonderful moments of insight, some of which were mentioned today. Thank God, we have some ascetic experience, which provides inner grounds for possible daily behaviours. But, alas, these very behaviours are still unobvious to us. This can be viewed differently. For example, optimistically: life is not over yet, and we have things to do on earth. On the other hand, probably, one would like to put best foot forward. In this regard, I have got not a question but rather a request to share your opinion on to what extent these considerations are valid. Another question: how realistic is this specifically Christian ethics, which grows from the ‘abundant life’ and multiplies the experiences of such life?

Sebastian Moldovan: You hit the nail on the head! The question is: And what shall we do? How do we transform into practice such a proposal? How many times have we read, have we heard the Saviour saying these things: “if you give to those from which you expect something back, what reward do you have?” And He always asks us: “What do you do more?” I think this is a problem, as long as we focus so much the emphasis and priorities in the Church, only on acquiring liturgical habits, the presence in the Church, the Prayer Rule. Definitely that these things are very important. I’m not convinced we have the same diligence when it comes to apply this principle that our Savior formulates for us: Why did I do today more than the others expected from me, more than they asked me, more than I was im-

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posed by someone to do? If someone expects me to go a mile with him, probably I am not able to go two, but maybe I make a further step, maybe I am not able to turn the cheek to the one who hits me, to the one who humiliates me in one way or another, but maybe I forgive him. I'm not convinced we take seriously the question of forgiveness of our neighbor as we take seriously going to Church. I do not know what is the situation with you and I do not generalize in any way. St. Apostle Paul said "let not the sun go down on your anger". How many of us do not go to bed angry with someone else? Love is not something that you have or do not have. It's one thing to be learned. It is learned through all these little things that we can do, not by the many great things that we can not do. I think we should emphasize more in our ecclesiastical lives the extraordinary importance of forgiveness. Not only in the parish community: in the family, in all aspects of life. Let the wholeheartedly forgiveness of the neighbor become a pastoral priority, something without which we can not do anything further. Perhaps we can not do many great things, but that little we are trying to do, of which we are aware, opens the possibility for the next step. Perhaps we can not multiply the talent, making two talents of one, but maybe we can do another half of a talent. Maybe it's more one half. Perhaps a quarter. And if a quarter is too much, at least a tenth. Anything, it is more than nothing. And, thank God, every day, within 24 hours, we have countless times the occasion for this surplus, no matter how small it is. I think we do not progress because we do not take seriously the little offers that God gives us every day to raise.

M. Naumova: My remark refers to what was said in paragraph 4 of the general conclusions. I think it connects the paper by Fr Nicolae with yours. You said that the sacred canons have divine status and are aimed at healing the souls and getting rid of passions. In my opinion, this should be the norm but it is not present in the practice of church life. Nikolay Aksakov, the famous Russian canonist of the 19th century, said that, unfortunately, 'The Book of Rules' became a museum or an archive, in which canons were buried, getting dusty and rusty because of false interpretations. Canons are often remembered only as a punishment to unwanted persons. In other words, it is not as a therapy patch applied with love to a wound on the body of the church. Thus, canons do not become what they should be, namely 'living members of the living system,' as Nikolay Aksakov said. Canons are supposed to gather the church and heal someone in case of illness or fall, that is, to be a therapy patch. I think life will multiply in the church when the latter will really begin to manifest itself as the organism that, responding to the challenges of the time with sober and wise reasoning, based on the dogma about the church (which has not yet been formulated but already exists), elaborates canons that, first of all, help in gathering and healing the church.

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I also totally agree with the words of Fr Nicolae about regulations that a real church gathering elaborates for itself. In fact, they are often much more vibrant and effective than the canons of the Ecumenical Councils.

K. Mozgov. Thank you very much, Professor Moldovan. The question raised in your paper on the relationship between law and love, *nomos* and *agapi* evoked in my memory another remarkable saying. Dostoevsky said that ‘Christ is not an authority to me because I love Him.’ In its turn, this reminds us of the words of St. Augustine, who in his Epistle to Deacon Deogratias ‘On Catechising the Uninstructed’ (‘De catechizandis rudibus’) wrote him a sort of instruction of how to catechise. He gives an example of a catechetical homily, saying that one can tell this or that, but, still, what matters the most is love. One can, depending on different conditions, say more or less but the most important is to get the message of God’s love across to the man.

Maybe this is one of the issues related to the whole topic of this symposium, because if we discuss some distortions of church life, it is clear it is impossible to overcome them at the level of laws, canons, rules (today Fr Georgy has already quoted the words of St. Philaret). However, the church life is often perceived as a set of regulations, laws and canons. Maybe one of the ways to overcome this is associated with how the person enters the church and in what way he or she will see it. Or, to put it more precisely, it is about how the church will reveal itself to this person, including through those who will help him or her to enter the church. St. Augustine was recalled precisely because he wrote about it in connection with catechesis.

Thus, the question raised in this paper leads to the topic of catechesis, because what one perceives when entering the church often becomes a guideline in one’s further church life. In terms of this paper, it often turns out that one regards love as an indicative, while one ought to view it as an imperative. Otherwise one perceives it as a love, which generally exists somewhere but one does not even ask oneself whether it has any connection with one’s own life and whether one has to deal with it somehow.

I am also very grateful to Professor Moldovan for this great selection of passages of the Holy Scripture, which sheds light exactly on this issue. In my view, it might also help those people who are just at the very threshold of entering this experience. Thank you.

Fr Georgy Kochetkov: I echo the words of gratitude for this paper, which really proved a remarkable concluding chord of our work today. When I took a look at the text, I also observed analogies with the tasks we set and attempt to per-

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form during the full catechesis. For many years we practised one-year catechesis but over the last decades we had to extend this term up to one year and a half, not considering catechesis a stage of education. Education, even at the primary level of theology college, is already the next step. And catechesis is a matter of spirit, of life inside the church.

In my view, your paper is a remarkable attempt to put all the concepts related to this world or, at best, to the Old Testament – canon, law, order, decree, discipline, authority, commandment – into the context of love, of life in the New Testament. We do not reject the Old Testament but we have to rethink it, neither to simply keep it nor to abolish but to fulfil it in terms of life in abundance of which you have spoken. The law cannot exist for us in terms of the Old Testament. Only at the very beginning, at the first stage of catechesis, we demand the literal keeping of the Decalogue and other commandments because people come out of this world, having such life background that is simply horrifying. In this case one has to first solve common ethical tasks. Of course, the things you speak of are already not covered by ethics. It is clear that these refer to ascetics as well as to mysticism, to a kind of existential area of life. When we speak of the authority of love, we are within the context of the New Testament, we already depart from the area of ethics, or we should rethink the very ethics in that spirit, about which Professor Gzzyan has just perfectly said.

What you have so wonderfully spoke of has to be explained to people who are maybe not yet baptized or were baptized just yesterday, a week or a month ago. Mystagogy, that is, the third stage of catechesis in our experience, lasts eight weeks, as long as the second stage of catechesis takes place during the Great Lent. How do we try to carry it out? I like this image: there are wonderful paintings, there are even masterpieces. A painting as such, actually a masterpiece, can be compared to our life, the very Life, written with a capital letter, which, as you have just said, is straight from God, because love is from God, and God is love. But this painting also has a frame. An unframed painting looks unfinished and not easy to contemplate. So to speak, it has no boundaries. Fr John recalled of responsibility as a boundary. This is true, but love certainly does not reduce only to responsibility, although boundaries can also be different. Something else must be within those boundaries. The light shines in the darkness, and so there is the boundary between light and darkness. The well-known educational principle is articulated as follows: where there are no boundaries, there is no responsibility.

All these things you name – norm, law, commandment, order, order, discipline, authority – point out the boundaries that let us assume the responsibility. What for? For what is inside this frame. This is the painting, the masterpiece itself, if the person has it, because it is probably given as a gift from God. It is neither

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ontology nor theology, which in the Orthodox tradition is akin to ontology. This is what excels both ontology and theology. Even if this is theology, it is only in the original, ancient meaning of the term, as the doxology of God. And I think that is great, albeit difficult to be explained to people. They easier understand external, disciplinary things. Hopefully, there are no such bishops in Romania, while in Russia there are even such metropolitans who believe and claim that the church is the army, and, subsequently, treat clergy and lay people as a general treats his soldiers and civilians, that is, as with consumable material as if people were bishops' personal possessions.

However, the church is not an army, although there is also order, authority and discipline. However, all these are justified only in the sense in which you said, rooted in the Gospel, Epistles of the Apostles and of the Holy Fathers. This clarity seems to me very important because it justifies ascetics, which goes in-depth growing from ethics. And here we find the path to the mystical experience we have already discussed today referring to *ékstasis* and *éntasis*, recalling Palamism. These levels of spiritual life must be understood as a certain challenge because one has to pass from one level to another. This does not work automatically, this has to be done by the church, catechists, priests, bishops, those whom the Lord blesses. If one is not helped and not transferred from one level to another, one can suffer the shipwreck of faith, as, unfortunately, we often see.

Of course, what you have brought into discussion is one of the very grave phenomena. Of course, practically, there are always exceptions. Otherwise the church would not be the church. But in most cases, we do not see yet how to solve these issues. The church seems to forget to see and master these things. And who else but the church has the keys to solving these issues.

I shared the experience we treasure because we know that if we do not address these issues, catechesis will not be successful. People will not enter the Church, will not find Christ and will not receive the gift of the Spirit or, once having got it, will lose it. Your paper sounded just like a heart-balm for those who are present here and are directly involved in catechesis. Thank you once again.

Sebastian Moldovan: If I may give an example, which cleared these issues for me. I was one summer in the Holy Mountain with the intention of visiting the monastery Gregoriou where I had heard that the parents receive people who use drugs. And I went specifically to see what they do, what kind of program they have with these people, how do they solve this problem. I chatted with the people there, young people under 30 years. I asked one of them: Why do you stay here? We know what a passion is and what terrible power it has. It is that "different law I see in myself" and that is stronger than any good intention I have. And I asked

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them: Why do you stay here, why do you remain here? What do these people have stronger than the force of the passion? And a young man who was near death by excessive consumption of drugs, told me so: “What keeps us here is the love of the monks. We feel that these people love us”. He did not say anything about the program, about rules, about methods of therapy. Of course there are such elements, common life, they are in a particular program. But they are not required to go to the services of the monastery or to confess. It is absolutely voluntary. I was struck by this confession. The day I was leaving I told a parent who had just served the Liturgy: “Look what the told me – they call these children consumers “children “, their children – they said they are here because you love them”. The priest thought for a moment, he looked at me and said: “It is so because we also, the monks, stay here because the father abbot love us”. I think this is actually the Church: this communion of life in which people... Maybe the word *love* scares us. Maybe abuse it too much. Maybe we call *love* everything. But we can quit talking about love. It is not necessary to use this word. Just care for each other, know we are together, and that either perish or save ourselves, we do it together. We’re not on our own. That’s why I really appreciate what you are doing. You’re not a faculty of theology. You are something else. You are a brotherhood, you are a communion. You eat together. You do not get up from the table until everyone is satisfied. We do not need to call it love. It does not even matter what we call it. You stay there until the last member of the community is satisfied. We try to work on very large scale, with many people, with whole nations, forgetting that life makes its joints in things extremely simple, concrete. In the famous hymn to love from 1 Corinthians 13, you get the impression that St. Paul speaks about a kitchen. There someone takes care of somebody else, he does not seek his, he thinks about how to make food, what satisfies the other, what feeds the other. Perhaps our greatest problem is that we look too far. The word is near to our heart and we just have to have the courage. It is true that love has a very big disadvantage. It makes us vulnerable. Who wants to love, should learn to lose. Thank you very much!

Fr. Vasile Grăjdian: In the meantime there have been said many of those I wanted to say. Communion of thoughts, of spirit. I’d also like to thank all those who have spoken, and especially to those who presented papers, because I had personally an experience, somewhere between eforie and apofatism, to lose the meaning or to win more than sense, meaning. When Mr. Gzgzyan began speaking I had the impression, that, in fact the exposure from morning was a response to what Sebastian said. I talk about what God reveals and about our effort. Because this is the answer to the gift of love, the effort. In the morning you’ve also said something that fits greatly with what Sebastian said now, that maybe we talk a lot

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about love. I remembered: about 40-50 years ago, The Beatles had a song, All You Need Is Love. I know it sounds silly, but in the morning you start with something that was very much at my heart, when you said that St. Basil the Great spoke of those received in secret. And of those received in secret, St. Basil the Great says further on, I think in the same place it's better to cherish them in silence. St. Dionysios the Areopagite, speaking about the divine darkness, as the theology beyond words, he always mentioned darkness and silence. Always the visual darkness was linked to the allegory of silence, so I also shut up now.

Fr. Vasile Bîrzu: There have been said certain aspects and Professor Gzzyan asked a categorical question: how to multiply love? Working on a study a long time ago, it just came to my mind a certain tradition, the Jewish tradition found at Philo of Alexandria, in the treatise about therapists, "those who take care of the being". Through what did they care for the being? (The term *being*, *ousia*, is found only once in the Gospel, in the parable of the prodigal son who squanders his being). By fulfilling the Decalogue and of some commandments of love which they lived in their community ascetic oriented, precisely to fulfill the love. It's a document that beareth witness about monasticism before the existence of Christian monasticism. About how were organized those communities that understood to take care of someone... Their reporting was to God, understood as absolute being. Of course, not with all of the Trinitarian theology developed later by Christianity. But what's here to emphasize: this conception of love fulfilled by divine commandments – the Decalogue of the Old Testament and all the other commandments of their community – to preserve its own being in a ratio of inclination towards the absolute being. The picture is completed by the allegorical commentary on the seven days of creation, another work of Philo of Alexandria. One can understand much better this perspective. It falls on a certain type of ontology, found again at Cyril of Alexandria, namely the ontology concerning fellowship, or communication. It is basically a language that speaks, with the term *ousia*, on the divine energies, a language forerunner to the great terminological explanations specific to the dogmatics of uncreated energies. The one who fulfills the commandments relates himself to the absolute being and his own being and fulfills this fullness of love, that man needs to have, as being.

D. Gasak: I also wish to thank Professor Moldovan and all those who participated in our discussions. I think the significance of a genuine dialogue leading to genuine communication cannot be overstated. It is especially valuable when such dialogue takes place at the meeting of the two theology schools. I do not know how it is in Romania, but in Russia this happens seldom. For us, this meeting is a

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great spiritual joy. In my view, our dialogue today was great also for the reason it stimulated our thinking and efforts to discern meaningful nuances in the extremely vast area of Tradition of the Church, to find a common language and some definitions. All this, of course, refreshes the thought and enriches spiritual experience.

It is also wonderful we have concluded our discussion with the topic on Christian love. This morning I thought: how nice that we have got so much time! But now, regretfully, our time is running out. We would like to talk about love in the Old and the New Testaments. Something was said but seemingly not enough. For example, the image of love in the Song of Songs is different from what is described in the Sermon on the Mount or the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. The Holy Fathers have very interesting and important reflections related not only to speculation but to the practice of life, to the way the Christian church has acted in history. The Lord has commanded us not to step out of the story, though the destiny of love in this world, as we know, leads to Calvary. Nevertheless, we are called in our lives, in the history, to act exactly in this way, avoiding the extremes – either stepping out of the history as it was, say, in the Old Believers' schism in Russia (sometimes monks ran to this extreme of neglecting the history), or assuming and entering the history with an attempt to take over the authority of the prince of this world. Thank God that we spoke about it today. Hopefully, this discussion will continue tomorrow.

As we spent the time allotted for the Vespers on discussion, at the end our meeting let us sing only the main hymn of Vespers – 'O Gladsome Light'.

The participants sing 'O Gladsome Light.'