

## Following the Spiritual Father – The Way of Experiencing the Mystery of the Cross and the Lord's Resurrection.

Herban Laurențiu Mihai, PhD<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

Our spiritual resurrection began on earth on condition that we are partakers to the Lord's Passion. *The Life-giving Torment* (νέκρωσις ζωοποιός) of the Lord takes place here in the one who "lets himself sacrificed and totally killed by killing his own will."<sup>2</sup> The path of initiation in the Mystery of the Cross and Lord's Resurrection is, for Saint Simeon, embodied in following and obeying his spiritual father - the icon of Christ<sup>3</sup>. A Christian cannot partake of Christ's Resurrection but by participation to the Cross and His Death by cutting his own will and fulfilling His will. The God-bearing Father emphasizes the close link between Passion, Cross and Death of Christ and enhancing them personally by cutting will, stressing the key role of the spiritual father without whom no one can enter the Mystery of the Church as communion in the Holy Sacraments is accomplished through the living ones<sup>4</sup>. Based on his own experience in connection with his spiritual father,

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Herban Laurențiu Mihai, PhD at Orthodox Theological Faculty St. „Andrei Șaguna”, University „Lucian Blaga” Sibiu.

<sup>2</sup>*Eth. I, Scrieri I*, p. 338, The meeting with the whole of St Symeon's work within the Romanian space is made accessible by the effort of Archd. Ioan I. Ică jr. The life and work of the New Theologian are translated into Romanian in four volumes at Deisis Publishing House as follows: Sf. Simeon Noul Teolog, *Discursuri teologice și etice*, Scrieri I, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2001; *Cateheze*, Scrieri II, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2003; *Imne, Epistole și Capitole*, Scrieri III, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2001; *Viața și Epoca*, Scrieri IV, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2006. Reference on the writings of St Symeon will onwardly be made from these editions with the following abbreviations: *Discursuri Etice* (Eth.), *Cateheze* (Cat.), *Imne* (Imn.), *Epistole* (Ep.), *Capitole* (Cap.). where necessary, we accessed the critical edition issued in *Sources Chretiennes*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cat. 20.

<sup>4</sup>*Ep. 3, Scrieri III*, p. 338.

he testifies of the need to have a father to bring forth the Holy Spirit<sup>5</sup> into our souls.

**Keywords:**

Symeon the New Theologian, Cross, Resurrection, spiritual father, mistagogy.

*4. Saint Simeon the New Theologian – Notes on a Charismatic Challenging Biography*

The main sources giving us information on the charismatic challenging personality of St. Symeon the New Theologian - "Life" by disciple Nikita Stethatos and his own writings - highlight four main acts that take place during the earthly life of his divine Father. The first period of his life begins with the birth year, 949 in Galatia of Paphlagonia (Asia Minor). Finishing primary education at the age of eleven he comes to Constantinople where, under the protection of his uncle, ended secondary education corresponding to nowadays high school<sup>6</sup>. At the age of fourteen he met the decisive person who would mark his spiritual destiny - Pious Simeon, a simple monk without sacramental ordination. During this period, he lived his life to the full, for many years, in the home of a patrician until the age of twenty-seven when he joined the monastic community at the Studion Monastery<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, in 976 a new stage in the life of St. Simeon began, by entering this well-known Constantinople monastery, where he remained for some time, after which he moved to St. Mamas<sup>8</sup> monastery. Only three years after, the young Simeon became a monk, was ordained and elected abbot of this monastery. For twenty-five years he tried, being in this position, both by living his life and through his speeches, to initiate his monks into the mysteries of the inner spiritual and contemplative life to overcome the limits of celebrating barren and rigid rituals and forms<sup>9</sup>. His reputation in speeches, life and guidance of his spiritual children

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<sup>5</sup>Ep. 4, *Scrieri III*, p. 348-349.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Athanarios Hatzopoulos, *Two Outstanding Cases in Byzantine Spirituality: The Macarian Homilies and Symeon the New Theologian*, Thesalonikē, 1991, p. 38; and *Scrieri IV*, n. 4, p. 244.

<sup>7</sup>*Viața, Scrieri IV*, p. 252.

<sup>8</sup>*Viața, Scrieri IV*, p. 258.

<sup>9</sup> I consider a testimony worthy to be taken into consideration *Ethical Discourse 14* itself, from which I hereby briefly quote: „Celebrate only to get mercy from God through their prayers [the saints']. But even so, do not think that things done by you are a real celebration, but rather think they are only a prefiguration, a shadow and a symbol of the feast. For what

gathered around him influential and famous people in Constantinople. Also, his requirements, addressed to the monks in the monastery, based on fulfilling rigorous commandments of the Holy Gospel caused - in 996 - the revolt of a group of about thirty monks<sup>10</sup>. In 1005 Saint Symeon retired from the position of abbot leaving the place to one of the disciples - Arsenio.

The onset of the third act on the stage of life was marked by the withdrawal from the abbot position and his dispute with Stephen, resigning bishop of Nicomedia and patriarchal sincler, an exponent of speculative theology of Constantinople. The dispute began in 1003 after Stephen's question to Symeon with reference to intra-trinitary relations and the answer given by the latter which circulated either in the collection of *Hymns (Hymn 21)* or separately in the form of a letter in verse (rhymed prose) and ended with the forced exile of St. Symeon in an Asian suburb of Constantinople - Plaukion<sup>11</sup>. Here he restores the small monastery dedicated to St. Marina refusing to return to Constantinople and also the Patriarch's proposal to be ordained bishop. St. Symeon embraced his exile seeing in it the actual possibility of personally sharing the suffering and passions of the Saviour, of the Apostles and the old Fathers, preferring to continue living at

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*partaking would have, tell me, the holy but lifeless and entirely lacking emotions with the spiritual [intelligible] ones, the godly and filled with life or, better to say, spiritual and alive and giving eternal life? Let it, therefore, be a feast to you, when celebrating with discernment and piety not the light spread by a lamp in order to be turned off later on, but the very pure brightness of your soul, which is the knowing of divine and heavenly things, given by the Holy Spirit to the one who is one of Israel in mind", Eth. 14, Scrieri I, p. 379.*

<sup>10</sup> *Viața, Scrieri IV*, p. 268. Father J. McGuckin places this revolt of monks against their abbot in relation to the increasing efforts of Vasile II to suppress aristocratic opposition. The author reads the life of St Symeon in a political key, *Scrieri IV*, p. 371.

<sup>11</sup> An analysis of this conflict we find in I. Hausherr, *Introducerea ediției critice a vieții Sfântului Simeon (Introduction to the critical edition of the life of St Symeon)*, Nicéas Stéthatos, *Un Grande Mystique Byzantin. Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949-1022)*, Orientalia Christiana, vol. XII, num. 45, 1928, p. LXVII; also: A. Hatzopoulos, *Two Outstanding cases ...*, which supports uncertainty about the real cause of controversy; also in Paul McGuckin, „Introduction”, in *Symeon The New Theologian. The Practical and Theological Chapters and the three Theological Discourses*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1982, p. 17-21. The author is of the opinion that the essence of controversy was of hermeneutical manner, a problem of emphases and theological formulations. The Patriarch understood probably in time this aspect of the controversy, which explains the fact that St Symeon was condemned due to the very thorough worship of his spiritual father before being officially canonized. Certain is the fact that the exile and the condemnation of the Holy Father were not the result of any dogmatic deviations but rather connected to things in relation to Church administration.

St. Marina in hesychia as martyr of conscience<sup>12</sup>. Once with the completion of the monastery restoration he intensified hesychia life and, being enlightened by grace, he composed the *Hymns* of divine love<sup>13</sup>. The last stage of his *Life* shows specific miracles and prophecies of the Saint, both before and after his death (March 12, 1022). St. Simeon bears testimony through his life and writings of what he acquired through experience: the *life-giving torment* he bore in himself<sup>14</sup>. "His spiritual portrait is a synthesis of all dimensions of a full spiritual life, also ascetic and practical, contemplative, theological, apostolic teaching and martyr"<sup>15</sup>.

### 1. *Catechesis 20*

In *Catechesis 20* we have a beautiful exposition of St Symeon the New Theologian's ideas on giving spiritual advice and the role the spiritual father plays in everyone's life. The spiritual father must be a charismatic sent by God in answer to our earnest prayers. He is for us the living icon of Christ - Christ Himself. To follow him means to follow Christ in all aspects and moments of his earthly life up to Death and Resurrection<sup>16</sup>.

Yet from the very beginning of the *Catechesis* - that seems to be more a letter than oral speech<sup>17</sup> - the Pious Father exposed the core element of the *Catechesis*: The Mystery of the Cross and its taking in spiritual life, the only way to perfection and to partaking in the Glory of Resurrection. Whether expression of blood martyrdom, or martyrdom of asceticism, taking the cross in everyone's life is an "active - personal - clash" to preserve until death obedience to the will of God, through which one reaches deification. Salvation of human beings is not only the Lord's crucifixion for us but also the fruit of Cross sacrifice acquisition to satisfy wishes of happiness. On the contrary, every believer should crucify himself not out of obligation, but out of his own volition, just as Christ, because only through this desired self-crucifixion may one reach participation in the Mystery of the Cross<sup>18</sup>.

"The Cross" is for St. Simeon "the full torment of one's own will", uprooting all appetites and sinful desires, it also means the crucifixion of selfishness and of

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<sup>12</sup> *Viața, Scrieri IV*, p. 317.

<sup>13</sup> *Viața, Scrieri IV*, p. 318.

<sup>14</sup> *Viața, Scrieri IV*, p. 330. The theme of *live-giving-torment* is developed by the Pious Father in *Ethical Discourse 11* and *Catechesis 28*.

<sup>15</sup> Deac. Ioan I. Ică jr „*Viața Sfântului Simeon și epoca sa*”, *Scrieri IV*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> B. Krivocheine, *n. 1, SC 104*, p. 335.

<sup>17</sup> „*Διὰ τοῦτο καθάπερ ἠτήτασθε γράψαι νῦν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ὑμῶν...*”, *SC 104*, p. 330.

<sup>18</sup> Rev. Ioannis Romanides, *Dogmatica Patristică Ortodoxă, o expunere concisă (Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics, a Brief Statement)*, Romanian translator Dragoș Dâscă, Ecleeziast PH, 2010, p. 105-107.

self-love by obeying the will of God because "for nothing else were we taught by the Scriptures that we must bear the cross to the end and we do not find out this from experience itself, but because of having patience in troubles and trials and ultimately, willingly going to death, that in those times of heresies, many have chosen by martyrdom and by all manner of afflictions, and now by the grace of Christ, in a time of deep and perfect peace we were entrusted that nothing else is <cross> and <death> than the full torment of one's own will."<sup>19</sup>

St. Simeon develops along *the Catechesis* a theme dear to him, the theme of "imitating Christ" under the guidance of a spiritual father, together with him and following him. He insists on an identification between Christ and the spiritual father one needs to look at as Christ Himself. Of course, Christ is the only Saviour, but He is the One Who, in the Holy Spirit, reveals by earnest prayer a charismatic father: "Do, therefore, brother, as I have said, and go to the man whom God will mysteriously show to you or to a servant of His. And looking at him as at Christ Himself and talking to him, you should honor him and you will be taught by him useful things"<sup>20</sup>.

Starting from the Christological destiny of man, "because He [Christ] is the uncollapsed foundation for beginners, shameless hope for those in an intermediary state, never-ending love and endless life for the ones who got to perfection"<sup>21</sup>, St. Simeon exposes the true meaning of obedience to the spiritual father: imitation of Christ and mystagogy in the Mystery of the Cross, Death and Resurrection: "Brother, call God earnestly, that he may show you a man that can minister you in a beautiful manner, whom you need to listen to as to God Himself"<sup>22</sup>. It is not the subject of my study to develop the problem of obedience in the Church, but this requires attention because as important it is, as the first condition to advance and enhance during spiritual life, that much it has given rise to numerous deviations, especially when when obedience is understood as a simple soldierly discipline.

Jesus Christ often withdrew into the wilderness - withdrawals that are key points of His life<sup>23</sup> - to find in solitude the "opportunity" to meet God the Father, distant from the muddle and agitation caused by crowds. Using a verse of *Mtt 10, 37-38*: "<sup>37</sup> He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. <sup>38</sup> And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.", the lover of God

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<sup>19</sup> *Cat. 20, Scriveri II*, p. 223.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

<sup>23</sup> *cf.* Mentions and suggestions of Hanna Hunt, *A guide to St. Symeon The New Theologian*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2015, p. 35.

Father introduces clarifications on the subject of following the spiritual father and being obedient to him. Following the confessor, the disciple follows Christ Himself and is made partaker of "divine activities placed by the Risen Christ in His human nature that He ascended above death"<sup>24</sup>. Giving up one's own will and following the spiritual father opens the prospect of meeting God, climbing the Mount of Transfiguration where nature partakes of the Uncreated Light of Divinity, the fullness of living a divine life: "*If you hear from him: <Get out of the land (of your will) and from your kindred (of your mind) [Gen, 12:1]>, do not hesitate nor be ashamed (...) For there God might show to you (...) If He calls you to climb to the mountain [Mtt. 17, 1-6], go up earnestly, for you will see, I know, Christ transfigured*"<sup>25</sup>.

By following the spiritual father - icon of Christ - to the Supper<sup>26</sup>, in Passion<sup>27</sup>, in Glory and Light<sup>28</sup>, the disciple crosses the stages of spiritual life: purification, illumination and deification. By cutting will and obedience whose essence is fulfilling the commandments of Christ, nature partakes of eternal life energies, the soul's powers of knowledge intensify, gnoseologic capacities of the mind are healed (illumination)<sup>29</sup>, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit manifest on the human. Thus, the disciple understands the reasons and meanings of things beyond their surface. Human life is gradually changing in that it fills more and more with the presence of God and the Glory of Resurrection, "as far as it is possible to people" still living their life here<sup>30</sup>. For St. Symeon –as noted by Vasily Krivoshein - "the spiritual father is a charismatic person, the living image of Christ, Christ himself. To obey him means to imitate Christ in His entire earthly life to live the great moments of the Gospel: Transfiguration, Passion, Death and Resurrection. And even beyond Christ's earthly life, in the Pentecost, which reproduces inwardly in every true Christian, with undiminished power, since apostolic times. The Holy Spirit sends the spiritual father as a result of the

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<sup>24</sup> Rev. Vasile Vlad, PhD, *Dimensiunea liturgică a vieții religios-morale (The Liturgical Dimension of Religious Moral Life)*, Universitatea Aurel Vlaicu PH, Arad, 2009, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Cat. 20, Scrieri II*, p.224.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 226.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 227.

<sup>29</sup> See Hieromonk Calinic Berger, *Teognosia – sinteza dogmatică și duhovnicească a părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae (Teognosia – A Dogmatic and Spiritual Synthesis of Father Dumitru Stăniloae)*, Romanian translation Hieromonk Nectarie (Dărăban), Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2014, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Cat. 20, Scrieri II*, p. 227.

searches and our earnest prayers. Our spiritual father gives us birth for the spiritual life; without him we are not even born to eternal life"<sup>31</sup>.

## 2. *Mystagogic Paradigms: The Cloud and the Chariot*

St. Simeon does not systematically treat specific themes or aspects of spiritual life, but they blend organically in his writings, into the core of which lies the living testimony of the Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection he lived *in mind, feeling and knowledge*. The God-bearing-Father says that he who has faith and is meek and in humility is obedient and a follower of his spiritual father - in whom he sees Christ-, is fulfilling the commandments of Christ embracing the Cross of the Lord through the martyrdom of asceticism, being, therefore, a gradual partaker to the energies of eternal life. To better understand the God-bearing Father, it is required to take account of his demands regarding conscious and real experience of God in response and recovery of the grace received in the Holy Sacraments. In the Orthodox Church we find out all means by which we can come to life "by nature", "to the stature of a perfect man, to the measure of fullness in Christ stature"<sup>32</sup>. The knowledge of God is reached through a spiritual rebirth and by a thorough self-knowledge. The path to be climbed to the heights of spiritual knowledge is - for Saint Simeon - meekness and a living imitating Christ<sup>33</sup>. In this imitation of Christ, the spiritual father has an important role, as discussed in the previous chapter. The rational discerning of the apprentice is essential for his becoming and his spiritual rebirth. The synergic work between man (spiritual father) and the grace of the Holy Spirit gives the child (the spiritual son) the opportunity and framework to get to spiritual maturity<sup>34</sup>: "*like a tank with running water, so our holy father partook of the abundance of our Lord Christ and filled with the grace of His Spirit, which is the water of life [Jn 4, 10]. However, again, like the one that to satiety gets out from the tank re-flowing water because it is very abundant, similarly we ourselves have seen, we have received and drank from the fullness of grace poured out forever from our holy father and we washed from it [Jn 9, 6-7]*

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<sup>31</sup> Arh. V. Krivoșein, *În lumina lui Hristos – Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog (949-1022) Viața – Spiritulitatea – Înviătura*, Romanian translation Rev. Ass. Prof. Vasile Leb, PhD and Hierom. Gheorghe Jordan, IBMBOR PH, Bucharest, <sup>1</sup>1997, <sup>2</sup>2005, p. 103.

<sup>32</sup> *Theol. I, Scrieri I*, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, p. 80, SC p. 122, in Saint Simeon, the theme of the imitation of Christ does not have the sense given by Catholicism but the sense of "life in Christ" developed by Nicholas Cabasilas.

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Hunt, „*Manifestation of thoughts and spiritual fatherhood: a Byzantine reappropriation of the desert tradition*”, Dissertation, Course tutor: Dr. J.A. McGuckin, University of Leeds, Department of Theology, August 1993, p. 21-23.

hands and feet, then we bathed [Jn 13 9-10] our whole body and the soul itself in that immortal water"<sup>35</sup>.

The spiritual father is the mediator of God's grace. This mediation which he personally experiences with Pious Simeon is highlighted in *Catechesis 36*, where he develops "the mystical symbolism of washing hands and feet and head indicating Pious Simeon's role in this mystical ablation"<sup>36</sup>. To emphasize the mystagogic link that binds the disciple of his father, St. Symeon uses the image of the chariot which lifted up Elijah into heaven and the cloud that rises the Saviour to heaven. The disciple-spiritual father relationship is personal and vivid. The Holy Spirit is the One Who guides and makes both ascend. By the expressiveness of the images from the Holy Scripture he manages to highlight both the mediator role of the confessor and the Holy Spirit's work: "because neither Elijah ascended to heaven bodily without that fiery chariot [2 Kgs 2, 11] nor our Master and God without the cloud of the Spirit Who lifted Him up [FA 1, 9]. And although the Master could move Elijah from earth to heaven, without that chariot that appeared, as Enoch [Gen 5, 24], and He Himself could ascend to heaven without the cloud and the angels who followed him, He never did it. Why? To teach us that our mind, too, certainly needed someone to make it ascend to heaven and show it the sights there and discover the mysteries of God to it; for as the bird cannot fly in the air without wings, similarly, human mind cannot climb to the ones it who fell from, if it does not have the One to take it and bear it there"<sup>37</sup>.

The paragraph captures the theme of the ascent and infinite perfection of man in God and also the role the spiritual father played in this gnoseologic ascension. "Adopted and born of God through the Holy Spirit, the faithful, advised by an experienced spiritual father is guided to the true Christian gnosis, which is only experimental knowledge in prayer to the Mystery of the Trinity(...) authentic Christian gnosis is indispensable mystagogic pedagogy"<sup>38</sup>.

The discussion up here moves accents on the moral and spiritual quality of the mystagogue and requires certain clarifications. The text highlights the spiritual father's role of mediator and intermediary (*μεσίτης*). In the writings of St. Symeon the spiritual father appears in several ways: a doctor (*ίατρος*), counsellor and adviser (*σύμβουλος*), mediator and intermediator (*μεσίτης*), guarantor

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<sup>35</sup> *Cat. 6, Scrieri II*, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> Deac. Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, *Scrieri IV*, p. 130, n. 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Theol. I, Scrieri I*, p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> Deac. Ioan I. Ică jr., (cover IV) in: Hieromonk Gabriel Bunge, *Părintele Duhovnicesc și gnoza creștină după avva Evagrie Ponticul (The Spiritual Father and the Christian Gnosis according to Abba Evagrius of Pont)*, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2000.



(ἀνάδοχος)<sup>39</sup>. Through his intercession before God the spiritual father re-births and reconciles his sons with Him. Of course, we cannot consider this mediation in the strict sense of the word because the only mediator between God and man is Jesus Christ, the God-man, "For God is One, One is the mediator between God and men, the Man Jesus Christ" (*I Tim 2, 5*). The confessor's intercession is always closely related and depending on that of the Saviour<sup>40</sup>.

We face again with the constant insistence of the Pious Father on experience in "knowledge and spiritual sight" that the spiritual father should have, familiarity and boldness before God. As Kallistos Ware mentioned, no one can be a true "oldman" (Elder, abbot, Abba, Father) secondhand. The Father must give testimony of what he felt and saw himself. To be an advocate of another's reconciliation with God, he must be reconciled with God himself<sup>41</sup>. The Mysteries of God mystagogue must have seen and experienced himself these mysteries about which he can testify according to the apostolic principle: "As many have tried to compile a story on facts fully shown true among us / the way they were left by those who had seen them from the start and were ministers of the Word (*Lk 1, 1-2*)".

St. Symeon considers the spiritual father's quality of a mediator necessary because he introduces the sinful into the atmosphere of God's presence. Our spiritual father intercession directs us in two directions: on the one hand, he is the representative and the mediator of people before God, on the other hand, he is God's representative ahead people. Since he is a living icon of Christ the confessor's word must be received as coming from the mouth of God. Therefore, no one can be a mystagogue, a spiritual father, if first he did not acquire himself, in a direct and conscious manner, experience of the Holy Spirit. The conscious and palpable need for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual father's life is a constant theme in his writings<sup>42</sup>.

### 3. *The Need for Searching and Finding a Spiritual Father*

From the issues raised we may draw the necessity for searching and finding a spiritual father, a need strongly linked to the problems of perfection and deification. The confessor is the one preceding the disciple in this becoming his experienced guide. A simple and quick confrontation between the writings of the divine Father and the practical reality in the current life of the Church regarding

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<sup>39</sup> Kallistos T. Ware, „The Spiritual Father in St. John Climacus and St. Symeon The New Theologian”, in *SP XVIII/2* (1989), p. 299-316.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 304.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 305.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306.

spiritual advising raises some questions that we cannot avoid: the need to have a spiritual father the criteria set forth by St. Simeon just need his personal? Is the need to have a charismatic and experienced spiritual adviser a necessity only for a certain category of people? For example: monks in monasteries, priests and a small number of Christians. Are all these demands expressed by Saint Symeon about the confessor and spiritual fatherhood any longer relevant to the era in which we live?

Sacramental confession, as we understand it today had another sense in the Byzantine context of St. Symeon the New Theologian. "Initially a public act, required from the sinners who either were officially excommunicated or committed deeds which called for excommunication - gradually, and particularly after the IV century - Confession took the form of a particular confession followed by a prayer of absolution pronounced by the priest. Then it almost completely identified with the practice of particular spiritual advising, largely widespread, especially in monastic communities"<sup>43</sup>. Today, in the general practice of the Church spiritual advising is closely associated and identified with the sacramental priesthood, so that for the overwhelming majority of Christians their spiritual advisor is the parish priest and for the monks, the abbot or any of the officiating priests of the monastery who almost exclusively have a sacramental ordination. Things were presented slightly differently during the times of St. Symeon. As such, it is required to be cautious when we want to look at his teaching through the lens of XXI century, especially when referring to the fact that any monk can hear confessions and may pronounce absolutely thereof. What remains relevant to us from the teaching of divine Symeon is the fact that the authority of that who performs the Holy Sacraments relies in the indwelling Holy Spirit evidenced by a pure life, which is the true source of sacramental authority. St. Symeon presents his arguments in his *Epistle on Confession*<sup>44</sup>. Obviously, he never denied the work of the Holy Spirit by means of the Holy Sacraments. Moreover, we find no expression on the invalidity of sacraments

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<sup>43</sup> John Meyendorff, *Teologia Bizantină. Tendințe istorice și teme doctrinare (Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinary Themes)*, II<sup>nd</sup> edition, Romanian trans. by Rev. Prof. Alexandru Stan, PhD, Nemira PH, 2011, p. 286.

<sup>44</sup> A detailed analysis of this epistle is offered by Father Alexandru Roșu in his PhD Thesis *Experiența Harului în teologia Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog – teză de doctorat (încă nepublicată) (The Experience of Grace in the Theology of Saint Symeon the New Theologian – PhD Thesis)* – yet unpublished, work defended within the Department Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology, coord. Rev. Prof. Ștefan Buchiu, PhD, Bucharest, 2013, p. 209-218. I only wish to add three vivid models of contemporary spiritual advisors who did not have sacramental ordination: Siluan of Athos, Hesychast Joseph and Paisius the Agiorite.

administered by unworthy priests or a rejection of hierarchs whose paths in life have often been far from perfect<sup>45</sup>.

Father John Meyendorff states that "around the XV century, private confession to a priest, followed by a prayer for forgiveness of sins, became a generally accepted practice among lay people, there existing also the alternative of confessing to non-ordained monks in a monastery. This lack of clarity both in theology and in practice had a positive effect: Confession and Penance were interpreted primarily as a form of spiritual healing. For sin itself, in the Eastern Christian anthropology is primarily a disease, it is sinful passion. Without denying the Petrine privilege of keys given to all bishops or the apostolic authority to forgive sins, authority given to the Church, Byzantine theologians had never fallen into the temptation to reduce sin to the concept of legal offense that must be condemned, punished or forgiven; yet they were aware that the sinner is primarily a catch of Satan and, as such, is deathly ill. Therefore, Confession and penance - at least ideally - have preserved the release and healing from an ill state more than the one of being trialled; hence the great diversity of forms and practices as well as the inability to close them in static theological categories"<sup>46</sup>.

Under these terms and these frames did St. Symeon the New Theologian understand confession, repentance and the need to have a spiritual father as mediator, doctor and good counsellor, in order to begin the work of repentance and that of becoming virtuous, in order to prescribe "a spiritual cure" that everyone needs and bravely stand before God for us<sup>47</sup>. The need for a spiritual father is expressed in relation to the restoration of nature fallen by sinning, rebirth from death caused by sin in man's nature and reconciliation with God, after Baptism: "*If a man dies, what else would he wish than rise and the debtor that cannot give the debt back, what else would he wish than receive debt forgiveness and not be thrown into prison until giving back his debt? (...) Similarly, the one crushed to death by thieves (...) the power of his soul being broken by contempt, lies as frightened and pathetic sight for those who see well, or rather see spiritually, the soul falls. Thus, the one who made himself devil captive by sin (...) and of jeer to God and Father, being trampled by enemies who have departed from God, stripped of the royal velvet, left in darkness and getting, instead a child of God, child of the devil, what will he do to get back into the possession of those he fell from? Surely, he will seek a mediator and a friend of God who can restore him to*

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<sup>45</sup>The reference above were taken from the study of Robert John Beeson, „St. Symeon The New Theologian on Binding and Loosing”, in *SVTQ* 57 (2013), p. 89-99.

<sup>46</sup> John Meyendorff, *Teologia Bizantină...*, p. 287-288.

<sup>47</sup>*Ep. I, Scrieri III*, p. 310.

what he was before and to reconcile him with God and the Father<sup>48</sup>. We have, in the first paragraph, consequences of the Fall exposed: the powers of the soul collapse manifested by a loss of balance and health, for the evil of sin "binds him with indissoluble chains, it enslaves the mind and to the captives it will do the worst of all, taking them to the worst acts that it is established through and that it gives birth to every time, being born and giving birth to it at the same time as in a circle. It is a permanent disability still inherent in human nature. One could call this our state of disease. On the other hand, the man derailed lost his true orientation, namely the path to his perfection"<sup>49</sup>.

Another natural consequence of sin, of departing from God is soul death, spiritual death. "Being separated from God means to destroy oneself and not be anymore. And <as far one is still a slave to the tyrant, as far one is from being alive and an heir: for cohabiting with the evil he comes to stay away from God; and this means to be completely dead>"<sup>50</sup>. By gratification and sinful passion fulfilling, through the pursuit of pleasure "man creates the impression of life in himself, while essentially [passions] do nothing more than cover the absence of real life, namely spiritual death. It is about life dead or corrupted as Cabasilas called it. Man does not live spiritually, but simply biologically, since by removing God he lost the breath of the Spirit, by Whom the soul showed it had life in it"<sup>51</sup>. Another result of sin after Baptism is the loss of garment, of the "royal velvet" the Christian is dressed with at Baptism. This loss amounts in fact for St. Symeon to the insensitivity of feeling grace or death of soul so beautifully expressed by the metaphor of the corpse from *Ethical Discourse 5*<sup>52</sup>. Gradually the speech focus moves towards the need of a mediator and on the moral and spiritual "quality" of this mediator who should have courage and familiarity that may reconcile us with God.

Having a brief overview on the life of the Church, on its nowadays course, we may glimpse two ways of Christians' reporting to spiritual advising. Some - the smallest - whom maintain a living connection with the spiritual father and another category of most Christians, for whom spiritual guidance - if we can call it that - is confined either to a confession at least four times a year, once or more often, for others to an occasional tip and so on. A standing question remains: is

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<sup>48</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 309.

<sup>49</sup> Panayotis Nellas, *Hristos, Dreptatea lui Dumnezeu și îndreptarea noastră – pentru o soteriologie ortodoxă (Christ, God's Righteousness and our Atonement – For an Orthodox Soteriology)*, Romanian transl. Rev. Prof. Ioan Ică jr, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2012, p. 94.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup>*Eth. 5, Scrieri I*, p. 236-237.

there a need of spiritual guidance, the way it is presented in the ascetic and spiritual writings of the Fathers (most if not all - monks) for all Christians?

We deliberately chose the paragraph above in order to understand that the effects of sin produced in human nature are the same: weakening the powers of the soul, death of the soul, spiritual insensitivity, loss of communion with God and of adoption received in Baptism, be it clergy or monks or married or unmarried laymen, children, young and old. All men who sin after Baptism, and "like a dog returns to his vomit" needs to seek and find a spiritual advisor.

In *Epistle 3*, the God-insufflated Father shows us the main cause that determines the difference between Christians, that some feel the need for spiritual advice and the need for a spiritual father who should initiate them into the commands and mysteries of God and others do not feel the need or most likely maintain a superficial relationship with their parish priest. This is all about our *not* knowing ourselves: "*Because when someone has concerns and wastes away in this world as he would never die and spends day and night only in worldly things and invents ways on how to win, on how to build great houses, he gathers around lots of beasts, animals and slaves and acquires pots, clothes and rich carpets, and makes any whims and bodily pleasure to himself, one like this - tell me! - does he recognize himself? No! He does not recognize himself, of course, neither himself nor the things he has done. He only knows himself to be the same, but by what he does he shows that he does not know himself and his condition, nor does he know what he is doing. For he lives as he would never die*"<sup>53</sup>.

Ignorant Christians and who say they do not need spiritual guidance are full of themselves and unaware of the fact that they know nothing. Love of this world is their spiritual blindness. To avoid this category of ignorant, the receiver of the epistle, possibly a close spiritual son, as evidenced by the warm and familiar addressing at the end, is urged to pray to God that the "eyes of the soul" open to know himself and his state should alert him to the fact that: "Christ gave him His commandments, common to all and did not command separately, some to the monks and to the laymen others"<sup>54</sup>.

The urge addressed to the spiritual son at the end of the letter is comprehensive and summarizes the teaching of the Saint on the need for spiritual guidance: "*Thinking all these in yourself, my dear spiritual child, learning which is the usual order of things, fight, as much as you can, to be a Christian not only by name, but especially in deed. Earn yourself a spiritual father, earn yourself a*

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<sup>53</sup>*Ep. 3, Scrieri III*, p. 334.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 336. For fundamental reasons determining the need of spiritual fatherhood in Saint Symeon, one may consult: H.J.M. Turner, *St. Symeon The New Theologian and Spiritual Fatherhood*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, New York, 1990, p. 71-73.

teacher, an intercessor with God; stay close to him with love, with faith, with fear and longing, to be with Christ Himself, to make yourself worthy to unite with Christ Himself through him, and to partake and inherit His Glory and eternal Kingdom, to praise and glorify Him together with His Father and the Blessed Spirit forever. Amen"<sup>55</sup>.

Therefore, the first condition for the Christian who wants to show "true repentance according to the commandment of God" and to advance in the spiritual life to the extent of the perfect man in Christ our God<sup>56</sup> is to have a spiritual father, and because it is not easy to find a charismatic spiritual father having experienced the Holy Spirit, he has to be sought. Or this, as shown by Irénée Hausherr in his book dedicated to spiritual paternity is not easy given that "the present generation seems always degenerate (...) Hesychius of Sinai, who lived after St. John of the Ladder, says from the first chapter of his first *One Hundred Practical and Theological Texts* that: <because of its greatness and beauty, or rather because of our indifference and our lack of concern, today purity of the heart is rare among monks>. This today never ceased. For this reason it was never easy for the ascetic aspiring to fulfil his first duty: that of choosing a spiritual father out of the great number of priests and monks (...) Very important it is that he knows the signs that lead to his recognition"<sup>57</sup>.

For St. Symeon choosing and looking for a spiritual father is to be made with great responsibility and earnest prayer<sup>58</sup>. God's grace will help us find the right advisor if we seek him honestly and we accompany our pursuit with good works, charity, fasting, prayer, incessant demand<sup>59</sup>. He calls for an active search of such an adviser and shows as model centurion Cornelius who sought out St. Peter differentiating him and distinguishing him from false teachers<sup>60</sup>.

God reveals spiritual fathers and holy advisors and prophets to those willing to fulfil their word. A wonderful reversed perspective is that in which the son gives birth to his spiritual father and makes him a prophet to the extent of his desire to reach God: "*If you want to be the true, faithful and chosen disciple of Christ, bring yourself to such life, do similar works, similarly fall and call God by charity, fasting and prayer and you will open the eyes of your soul to see a man yourself, as Cornelius saw an angel (...)* Therefore, those who were zealous and

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 344.

<sup>56</sup> *Cat. 14, Scrieri II*, p. 176.

<sup>57</sup> Irénée Hausherr, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în Răsăritul creștin (Fatherhood and Spiritual Advising in the Christian East)*, Deisis PH, Sibiu, 2012, p. 221-222.

<sup>58</sup> *Cat. 20, Scrieri II*, p. 223.

<sup>59</sup> *Ep. 3, Scrieri III*, p. 331.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 328-329.

*took care of their salvation and started from themselves those regarding salvation, those who, as it were possible, sought God and worked the good, those were discovered by God the right spiritual father then and they are discovered nowadays apostles, prophets, righteous and holy people, they were made known to those and they received them, they honoured them as some teachers of piety, as some mediators of God"<sup>61</sup>.*

Spiritual guidance is absolutely necessary to anyone wanting to reach perfection and deification. There remains a problem: that in which the majority of Christians do not have a spiritual father or their relationship with the priest is minimal, often summarized in relationships of the kind: religious "service-provider": of baptism, wedding, funeral, etc. I think it is not wrong to state that the presence or absence of authentic spiritual guidance makes the difference in a monastic or parish community between holiness and mediocrity.

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<sup>61</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 329-330.