

Vainglory and Pride in the Vision of St. John of the Ladder

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Summary.

Our study presents the broader framework of fourth-century spirituality, the role of Sinaitic spirituality in its context, and the importance of defining spiritual doctrines about the passions and virtues for which the ascetic has to fight. Among these, vain glory and pride are the most important passions threatening the fruit of virtuous living, dispossessing or emptying the soul of the true purpose of life and the treasure of grace. The false design of the imagination and of the reason that very subtly attacks the soul, even with the "pride of being humble", is the main cause of these passions, and the guarding of the eyes, of the thoughts and of the humility, is the main strategy to fight against them. The St. John of the Ladder's language, full of analogies and plastic expressions, but also of other holy saints invoked, expresses the sublimity of this spiritual teaching to vindicate these spiritual passions.

Keywords:

Vainglory, Pride, St. John of the Ladder, .

3. Preliminaries

In the middle of the 4th century, some Christian ascetics established several monastic communities of the desert in the Sinai region. The larger cenobitic settlements were also in close connection with various hermits, offering them support. The two most important centers were the Raithu Monastery, on the Red Sea coast and the Burning Bush Monastery located at the foot of Mount Sinai. Both monasteries "*served as the central point of a living ascetic culture*"². Later, in the context of

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² Fr. John Anthony Mc. Guckin, *Dicționar de Teologie patristică (Dictionary of Patristic Theology)*, Translation from English by Dragoș Dâscă and Alin-Bogdan Mihăilescu, Edited by Dragoș Mârșanu, Doxologia Publishing, Iași, 2014, p. 451.

growing political instability in the wilderness of Egypt and the decline of monasticism, once flourishing here, Emperor Justinian authorized the massive fortification of the Sinai Monastery. The fortifications and buildings have remained to this day as a remarkable testimony of Byzantine Christianity in the 6th century.³ Justinian's work made the Sinai Monastery⁴ a living Chalcedonian presence even after the Byzantine Empire lost control over Egypt. Sinai clergy maintained closer ties with Jerusalem than with Alexandria. Although the region of Sinai has always been little, it received the status of autocephalous Church, being led by an abbot who has been archbishop ever since.

Currently, St. Catherine's Monastery of Sinai holds several masterpieces of early Christian iconography⁵, as well as collections of manuscripts of invaluable importance. The majestic mosaic in the apse of the monastery church – built almost a century before the time when John was abbot and which still exists today – depicts the scene of the *Transfiguration* of the Savior⁶, thus associating the other “mountain of glory” – the Tabor – with the Sinai peak (since Moses showed up on both).

Bishop Kallistos Ware, in his *Introduction* to one of the English-language editions of *The Ladder*, states about its author that: “both figuratively and spiritually, John's imagination was dominated by these two mountains: Sinai and Tabor, both of which are illustrated in the book he wrote”⁷: Sinai - because he lived so close to it,

³ For more details see: George H. Forsyth, Kurt Weitzmann, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1973, 20 pages of text and 198 plates and Triana Baddeley, Earleen Brunner, *The Monastery of St. Catherine*, Published by St. Catherine Foundation, London, 1966, 119 p.

⁴ The original dedication of the monastery was “*The Burning Bush*”, being dedicated to the Mother of God. The Burning Bush is seen as a symbol of a “type” of Her and in particular it paid Her homage as *Theotokos* (Cf. J. D. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire*, Oxford: Mowbrays, 1966, p. 169). Only in the fourteenth century, the enthusiasm for the cult of Holy Martyr Catherine, whose tomb is still preserved in the monastery, caused the name of the settlement to be changed. (Cf. H. Skrobucha, *Sinai*, translation by G. Hunt, London, 1966, p. 65).

⁵ J. A. McGuckin, *The Enigma of Christ Panel at St. Catherine's at Sinai: A Call for the Re-Appraisal*, in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (52), no 3-4 (1999), pp. 29-47. See also Kurt Weitzmann, *Studies in the Arts at Sinai*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1982.

⁶ The mosaic was built nine years after the construction of the monastery church, probably between 565-566 (See the conclusions of the research of V. Besnešević, *Sur le date de la mosaïque de la Transfiguration au Mont Sinai*, in *Byzantion* 1 (1924), pp. 145-172).

⁷ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Edited and translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell. Notés on translation by Norman Russell, in col. „The Classics of West Spirituality. A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters”, Paulist Press, New York, 1982, *Introduction*, p. 2.

and its rough neighborhood must often have reminded him of the event in *Exodus*, chap. 20; Tabor – as a place of showing and announcing the glory of Christ, the scene in which he probably meditated being that of the *Transfiguration* of the Savior, rendered in Matthew 17:1-8⁸. As abbot, St. John must have spent many hours contemplating this representation which he would have seen from his chair during his long vigils⁹.

We stated that the Sinai Monastery became the central point of a living ascetic culture, a fact attested by *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* belonging to Saint John of the Ladder, one of the most representative abbots of Sinai. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of Saint John of the Ladder is considered the masterpiece of Byzantine spiritual guidance¹⁰ in the ascetic context of the monastic predecessors. Naturally, St. John's knowledge and assimilation of a vast ascetic-monastic literature should not be ignored, but important is the line of thought – from the basic teachings of the Egyptian desert to the training guidance of the elderly in Gaza – that Saint John entrusted to his successors in Sinai. Saint John was able, in a remarkably ingenious way, to transform into a unique form and in his voice the teachings he had received and which would be identified as *from Sinai*, forever shaping monastic thinking and writing.

The ascetic literature in general and St. John's *Ladder* in particular, presents us with generous and more concrete opportunities for the discovery of the inner world of the human being, than other patristic, theoretical and discursive writings do.¹¹ St. John of the Ladder – no matter who his Egyptian or Palestinian predecessors were and what their influences were on him – is one of the most important authors who provide advice of remarkable subtlety regarding the spiritual life.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ The whole life of St. John of the Ladder “was a prayer offered to God, an exemplary life of love. The light in him reflected the light seen by Moses on Mount Sinai and the three Apostles on Tabor. John himself went out of the world out of love for God, just as Moses and the Apostles went out of theirs, but the divine light experienced by these visionaries could not remain hidden (Matthew 5:14-15) precisely from love for light. In John's life, as in the lives of many hermits, a creative struggle between loneliness and the service of others can be seen” (John Chryssavgis, *Sfântul Ioan Scărarul. De la Pustia egipteană la Muntele Sinaiului* (St. John of the Ladder. From the Egyptian Desert to Mount Sinai), Translation from English by Gheorghe Fedorovici, Sofia Publishing, Bucharest, 2005, pp. 39-40).

¹⁰ Cf. P. Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 237.

¹¹ Details at B. S. Salaville, *St. Jean Climaque*, in *Echos d'Orient*, 20, (1923), pp. 400-454, A. Saudreau, *La doctrine spirituelle de St. Jean Climaque*, in *La Vie Spirituelle*, 9, (1924), pp. 352-370; P. Pourrat, *La Spiritualite chretienne*, Paris, 1947, pp. 453-469 and F. Von Lilienfeld, «*Anthropos Pneumatikos*» - «*Pater Pneumatophoros*»: *Neues testament und Apophthegmata Patrum*, in *Studia Patristica*, 5 (1962), pp. 382-392.

St. John occupies in the ascetic Theology the similar position “*his contemporary*” - St. Maximus the Confessor - occupies in Christology. They are both subtle synthesizers, uniting together and creatively integrating disparate elements from previous traditions. That's why his work – *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* – it is in this sense the first, remarkable and successful attempt to make “*a guide to monastic spirituality*”.¹²

When reading *The Ladder*, we must consider two very important aspects: first of all, that the work was written for the monks of a monastery (*cenobium*); and then, that the writing is also relevant to lay believers.¹³ Indeed, *The Ladder* has influenced both monks and marriages over the centuries. Nikita Stethatos, St. Simeon's biographer the New Theologian, gives us the significant detail that St. Simeon discovered the *Ladder* in his father's library, a layman from the aristocracy of the tenth century, and confesses that “*it became very familiar and like a good land he received the seed of the word in his heart*”.¹⁴

We mention that the monastic life was understood by the Holy Fathers as “*living according to the Gospel*”,¹⁵ in the sense that all people are called to respond to Christ's call for salvation and perfection. If the modalities or forms of the response may differ externally, however, the path itself is one. It has been said that “*the Ladder is an invitation to pilgrimage*”¹⁶, an extended invitation to all those who want to be saved, provided that this desire is sincere.

St. John states that his desire is, first and foremost, to relate his personal experience, accumulated in the 40 years spent in the deserted wilderness of Sinai, and this account to determine a similar experience in the believers. That is why we can say that the work is addressed directly to all categories of readers. Personal experience is, therefore, the work constantly stressed by St. John, in provoking a “response”, in determining readers to a qualitative leap in faith, in bringing them to the stage of

¹² Kallistos Ware, *The origins of the Jesus Prayer: Diadochus, Gaza, Sinai*, in vol. *The Study of Spirituality*, Edited by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold SJ, Student edition, printed in the United States of America, 2000, p. 181.

¹³ Kallistos Ware states that: “*Except for the Holy Scriptures and books of worship, there is no book in Eastern Christianity that has been studied, copied and translated more than St. John's Ladder. In the Orthodox monasteries, during the Great Lent, it is read aloud in the church or at the refectory. Thus a monk gets to listen to it fifty or sixty times during his monastic life*” (John Climachus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent...*, Introduction, p. 1).

¹⁴ Cf. I. Hausherr, *Un grand mistique byzantine: Vie de St. Symion le Nouveau Theologien [par Nicetas Stethates]*, in *Orientalia Christiana*, XII, 45, Rome, 1928, p. 12.

¹⁵ Saint Basil the Great, *Epistle CCVII – Ad clericos Neocaesarienses*, 2, in *P.G.*, t. 32, col. 762B.

¹⁶ G. Florovsky, *Questions Disputées*, Paris, 1935, pp. 105-106.

personal engagement and meetings with God.¹⁷ From one end of the *Ladder* to the other, personal experience is interwoven with the permanent appeal to the tradition of previous fathers.¹⁸

We can say that *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is an existential work, concerned with the concrete experience. Although dedicated to monks, it is equally relevant for every reader, including, for the laity, for anyone determined to “climb” on its steps. Those readers who will read it will existentially appreciate its value.¹⁹

4. Vainglory and Its “Faces” or Ways of Manifestation

Vainglory is also called *kenodoxia* and derives from the verb *kenodoxeo*, which means having poorly founded opinions, deceiving oneself in appreciation of a thing or a situation.²⁰ The noun *kenodoxia* is made of *kenos* – in the sense of emptiness, void, and *doxa*, in the sense of glory, and it means vanity, vaingloriousness, futility, baselessness, that is, motivation, especially when you value your qualities too much.²¹

In this way, the concept of vainglory that plays out *kenodoxia* receives the meaning of the exacerbated opinion about itself, as an exclusive self-confidence, characterized by the desire to affirm, as well as the unanimous recognition and appreciation of one's qualities. This is pride, as “*self-inflation*”. It is also called arrogance, in the sense of the importance that someone applies to himself.²²

¹⁷ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent...*, Introduction, p. 10. For St. John, the purpose of ascetic life is beyond simply accepting certain doctrines and rules. It is rather spiritual and pastoral than didactic and normative. St. John stated: “*As it is impossible to acquire sight by words, for they are of the mouth, and the sight of the eyes, so it is impossible to acquire the beauty of prayer after what has been heard from others*” (*Scala Paradisi*, 28, 63, in *P.G.*, t. 28, col. 1140C; St. John of the Ladder, *The Ladder*, Translation, introduction, and notes by Fr. Prof. PhD. Dumitru Stăniloae, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1992, p. 448. From here on we will quote: *The Ladder...*, *Step...*, p...).

¹⁸ See the broad discussion on this issue at K. Ware, *Tradition and Personal Experience in Later Byzantine Theology*, in *Eastern Church Review*, 3, (1970), pp. 131-141; John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent...*, Introduction, p. 59.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, Introduction, p. 10.

²⁰ Cf. A. *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. A Translation and Adaptation of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsch Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*, Fourth revised and Augmented Edition, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, The University of Chicago press, 1973, p. 428.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Cf. Fr. Prof. PhD. Sorin Cosma, *Ascetica*, Marineasa Publishing, Timișoara, 2003, pp. 216-217.

The Latin term for rendering kenoxia is vanity, in the sense of emptiness, versatility, pretension, deception.

Transposed morally, the idea of vainglory or pride, is synonymous with arrogance, then with boasting. *Kenodoxia* also manifests itself in the form of falsehood, which seeks to assert false qualities, more precisely the faces of virtues that hide the secret vices. Hypocrisy is based on the consciousness called “*Pharisaical*”, precisely because it falsifies the moral consciousness by deceptive appearances, confusing, through the confusion between good and evil. Another form of manifestation of kenodoxia is ostentation, as a provocative display of an uncommon quality. And here the deception appears, because the qualities are asserted by themselves.

Vainglory or *kenodoxia* “resides, therefore, from the irresistible desire for magnification which continues insatiable also after the fulfillment of the object sought. It manifests itself through the praiseworthy prowess, the superficiality, the lack of an objective finality. It is the characteristic of the proud, deceitful, infatuated, luxurious and pompous people.”²³ A fundamental characteristic of those who are controlled by this passion is the unwavering desire to stand out in front, to appear in front of the world to be praised, appreciated, applauded.

Holy Scripture knew how to bind glory to moral and religious values. Thus, God is the only solid foundation of glory (Psalms 62:6-8). Glory is “empty” when it seeks the reward of the virtues in people's lives and grows with the progress of the virtues, but it undermines their value.²⁴

Evagrius Ponticus shows that “*the thought (or logismos) of vainglory is extremely subtle and it easily insinuates itself into the one who succeeds in his virtues, making him want to make his struggles public and to hunt down the glory of men. It makes him imagine demons screaming, healed women and crowds touching his clothes; it also foretells the priesthood and brings to his gates people who seek him; and if he does not want to, they will bind him in vainglory, and thus making him overweened in vain hope, it leaves him to be tempted by either the demon of pride or the one of sorrow, which brings other thoughts against his hope; and sometimes it even turns him over to the demon of indulgence, who shortly before was a holy priest and had been brought to the priesthood bound hand and foot*”.²⁵

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

²⁴ Tomás Špidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, in col. „Cistercian Studies”, No 79, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1986, p. 254.

²⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, *In luptă cu gândurile. Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății și Replici împotriva lor (In Battle with the Thoughts. About the Eight Thoughts of Evil and the Answers against Them)*, Comments: hieromonk Gabriel Bunge. Translation and presentation by deac. Ioan I. Ică Jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2006, p. 129. Abba Isaac, the priest of Cells, escaped by fleeing,

From this text, we observe how Evagrius deciphered directly and deeply, the bizarre imagination and the whole behavior of the monk possessed by the vainglory. Thus, he imagines that his holiness is so convincing that it determines those around him to force him to accept the priesthood, because, in general, the monks, being impregnated with the spirit of humility, did not dare to approach the priesthood.

Elsewhere, Evagrius says: *“Of all the thoughts, the only one of the vainglory works by many means. It encompasses almost everyone... becoming a kind of cunning traitor to the city”*.²⁶

Saint John Cassian describes widely and varied the vainglory, showing that: *“this passion is very subtle and not easily noticed even by the one who is passionate about it. The attacks of the other passions are more obvious and therefore it is somewhat easier to fight them, for the soul knows its adversary, and immediately overthrows it by the resistance of the word and prayer. But the sin of vainglory, with its many guises, is difficult to overcome. He tries to stab the people of Christ by any means, by voice, by word, by silence, by work, by observation, by passion, by prayer, by reading, by quietness, even by long patience”*. He then shows that the vainglory is *“an enemy with many and varied faces and so subtle that with the keenest eyes it can hardly be seen and recognized”*.²⁷

In *Step 21* of the *Ladder*, St. John synthesizes the ascetic thinking and practice regarding the vainglory: *“Vainglory is, by nature, changing nature and morals and staying away from defamation. And according to the quality, it is the scattering of the work, the loss of the welders, the niece of the unbelief, the forerunner of pride, the drowning of the ship in the port, the ant in the area”*.²⁸ A Latin proverb says *Honores mutant mores*. Thus, the modest man from yesterday, who reached a higher position, changed overnight to no longer recognize him. His nature has changed, as St. John's said, *“his morals were crooked”*. When it takes control of the monk, the vainglory makes him want to be glorified for his real or imaginary virtues.

refusing priesthood and gave up only when they brought him to ordination tied up (Cf. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in *P.G.*, t. 65, col. 224C; *Patericul*, Alba Iulia, 1990, p. 108).

²⁶ *Idem*, *Capete despre deosebirea patimilor și a gândurilor (On the Distinction of Passions and Thoughts)*, in *The Philokalia*, 1st volume, Bucharest, p. 59.

²⁷ *Așezămintele mănăstirești și despre tămăduirile celor opt păcate principale, Cartea a XI-a (Monastic Settlements and the Healing of the Eight Main Sins. Book 11)*, in volume St. John Cassian, *Scrieri alese (Selected Writings)*, translation by Prof. Vasile Cojocaru and Prof. David Popescu. Prefață, introductory study and notes Profesor Nicolae Chițescu, in col. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești (Church Fathers and Writers)* (P.S.B.), no 57, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1990, pp. 240-243.

²⁸ Cf. *The Ladder...*, *Step 21*, 2, pp. 267-268.

It is called “*the waste of pains*”, because “*all the virtues gathered by man through pains are polluted as a cauldron of milk by a drop of oil*”.²⁹

St. John shows that “*the ant is waiting for the wheat to be gathered and vainglory waits for our wealth (spiritual). The former is glad that it will be able to steal seeds and the second that it will scatter our virtues. The spirit of despair rejoices to see the increase of sins; the spirit of the vainglory, seeing the virtues multiplying. The gate of the first is the multiplication of wounds, and the second is the wealth of the pains. Be mindful and you will find out this vicious glittering glory blooming to the edge of the grave in flowers, clothes, perfumes, entourages, aromas and more. This passion can be likened to the three-edged pieces of iron, which, no matter how we throw away, still keep an edge pointed upwards; so it can cut the one who walks on it*”.³⁰ That is why St. John concludes that “*the lover of vai glory is an idol worshiper, because, appearing to glorify God, he wants to please people and not God. The fast of the lover of vainglory is unpaid and his prayer is in vain because both of these he commits to being praised by men. The ascetic lover of vainglory loses double-folded: It also melts its body and does not take any reward*”.³¹

As for the flatterer, St. John shows that “*the flatterer is the servant of the devils, the guide of pride, the destroyer of the piercing of the heart, the loser of goodness, the one who deviates you from the right path*”.³² And the perfect ones are able “*to bravely and joyfully withstand contempt, but it is proper for the saints and the brave to pass unharmed through praise.*”³³

St. John recommends that when “*when you hear that your neighbor speaks ill of you in your absence, or being present, show him your love by praising him... Humble thinking shows not the one who defames himself..., but he who cares for another does not diminish his love for it*”.³⁴ The perfection of humility lies in joyfully enduring false accusations. St. John advises us to show the love of the one who slanders us, praising him, because only in this case, the accused, praising the slanderer, does not flatter him, nor push him to the sin of the vainglory, but shows him his love. He will feel at that moment that he is not flattered and will not fall into vainglory but will be ashamed of what he has done, for he will see that he has done wrong to the accused. And this will help him straighten up, by taking the example of the goodness of the other.

St. John draws attention to the fact that the vainglory is manifested in one way in the lives of those who live in public monasteries and another in the lives of those who

²⁹ *Ibidem*, Scholia 556, p. 268.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 268-269.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 269-270.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 270.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

live in the wilderness. Thus, “*the vainglory goes out before the laymen who arrive from the world in the monastery and pushes the more frivolous monks to come out to meet those who arrive; it likes to fall at their feet and the one ruled by pride dresses in humility. Those who sit at the table (the lover of vainglory) it urges them to eat, and those below it reprimands them mercilessly. From those who sing psalms, those drowsy it calls them men, and the voiceless it praises them as having a beautiful voice, and those who sleep are praised as watchmen. The one who arranges the order of the song it flatters him and begs him to give him priority; he calls him teacher and father until the strangers leave... Many are vainly tormenting their bodies for not bearing pains, for the riches of their gifts, for the work of wonders, for the power of foreknowledge, not knowing, the wretched ones, that it is not their pains, but rather their humility, that is their mother. He who has gifts for his pains has laid the wrong foundation. But he who thinks himself indebted will suddenly take an unexpected wealth*”.³⁵

The mode of action of the vainglory on the hermits is different but just as clever. St. John illustrates this through a hermit who had the gift of seeing things: “*Sitting in prayer (sinaxa), the devil of vainglory and the devil of pride came and sat on my side. And one shoved my rib with his finger, lover of vainglory, exhorting me to talk about a sight (contemplation) or work I have done in the wilderness. And after I cast it out saying «Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul» (Psalms 34:4), quickly the one on the left whispered in my ear: «Okay, well you did and great you did, defeating my too shameful mother». To this I continued the next part of the stikhos, saying: «Let them be turned back those who tell me: Okay, well you did». I asked that one: «How is vainglory, the mother of pride?» And he replied: «Praise rises and swells, and when the soul has risen, pride takes it to the heavens and brings it down to the depths»”.³⁶ The devil, therefore, is constantly seeking through passionate thoughts to push us into sin, either by thinking or by doing. Both exhortations, apparently good, are overcome by the monk with the help of humility. The deeds to which the monk is exhorted are good in themselves, but they are not good since the exhortation to them comes from demons, that is, they appear together with the temptation of pride.*

³⁵ This statement of St. John of the Ladder is quite contrary to the theory of Roman Catholic theology on merits and supra-merits. All the Christian endeavor pursues the purification and perfection of nature and not merits received from outside. And perfection is an endless advance. Also, the gift of God comes from itself, not as a merit, otherwise it would not be a gift. Our free love is met with the free love of God and vice versa (Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 272-273).

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 275-276.

St. John then shows that “*the beginning of not searching for the vainglory is the guarding of the mouth and the love of ungodliness. At its heart is the stopping of all working thought of the vainglory. And the end (if there is any end of the bottomless depth) is to do in a senseless way before the crowd those that bring ungodliness*”.³⁷ The sign that someone is working or progressing in virtues is that he can restrain his tongue. And the inability to restrain the tongue shows that it is not engaged in the practice of virtue. There is no end to the contempt of vainglory. For this is equal to humility. And humility is a depth or an endless height. For there is a wonder of God, Who is infinite, also making it grow to infinity.

Against the vainglory, St. John recommends crying and prayer made with fear and trembling. If we do not succeed with these, we should chase it away, be afraid of the shame that follows the glory, for “*he that humbles himself shall be exalted*” (Luke 18:14).³⁸

That is why St. John considers that “*the vainglory is the rejection of simplicity and the pretended life*” and perfecting it “*it bears pride, which is head and perfection of all evils*”.³⁹

3. Pride (or Hyperrefania)

Some passions refer mainly to the body, and others to the soul. Some are easier for the young, while others are for the older ones. Some last and manifest themselves in a certain period of life, others throughout life. Spiritual experience shows us that, for example, greed is more evident in young people, as well as in lust, which is formed out of it. While pride appears since adolescence, it dominates the elderly and older, lasting a lifetime.

If it is appreciated that the original sin started from greed and disobedience, then pride can be counted as a natural expression of disobedience, as those who claim that pride is the beginning of sin and its source do not err. Pride is the worst and most deadly sin of spiritual life.

The Holy Scripture declares it to be the beginning of all sin, as a total detachment from God: “*The beginning of man's pride is to forsake God and turn his heart from the One Who made him. The beginning of sin is pride and the one, who lives in it, is as if it were always raining over him*”.⁴⁰

This sin is above human nature. It belongs to the angel of light, who, wishing to be greater than God, became a promoter of darkness. Pride entered the human soul

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 277.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *The Ladder...*, Step 21, p. 278.

⁴⁰ *Ecclesiastes 10:12-13*.

through the temptation of the devil, when the first man accepted the urge to be like His Creator, but detached from His life-giving and sanctifying light.

If vainglory means forgetting God to find one's appreciation of facts and in the transient things of life (beautiful voice, beautiful hair, luxury, jewelry, aggrandizement), pride is a deliberate opposition to God, a denial of His gifts, and a failure to acknowledge His help.⁴¹

The Holy Scripture attributes this sin to the pagans, who, especially because of this sin, oppose God and do not recognize Him, as it is clear from General Holofernes' statement: "*Who is God, if not Nebuchadnezzar?*" (Judith 6:2).⁴² We must specify that pride is by definition also the sin of modern man, who considers himself the exclusive demiurge of the cosmos, and removes God from the equation of his existence and declares that he no longer needs Him, that he can live without God.

Origen explains that pride or conceit is the greatest of all sins, being the chief sin of the devil.⁴³ In the conception of St. John Chrysostom, pride is "*root, spring and mother*" of sin.⁴⁴

Evagrius Ponticus, one of the great theoreticians and practitioners of asceticism and a great authority in the spiritual realm, says that: "*the demon of pride brings the worst fall to the soul, for it persuades him not to confess the help of God, but to believe that he is the cause of all his victories (success, author's note), to boast about his brothers as mindless, because they don't know this about him. It [pride] is followed by anger and grief and ultimate evil: losing of mind, madness and lots of demons seen around*".⁴⁵

Saint Maximus the Confessor says that "*the demon of pride is full of double-folded wickedness, for or it incites the monk to trust in himself for his salvation, and not in God, Who is both the giver of the good and the help to succeed in evil, or, not*

⁴¹ Fr. Prof. PhD. Sorin Cosma, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231.

⁴² Tomáš Špidlík, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁴³ *Homily IX In Ezechielem*, 2, in *P.G.*, t. 13, col. 734CD.

⁴⁴ *Homily IX*, 2, *In Ioannem*, in *P.G.*, t. 59, col. 72.

⁴⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, *In luptă cu gândurile... (In Battle with Thoughts...)*, p. 132. St. John Cassian shows that: „*the eighth battle we have against the spirit of pride. This is very terrible and wilder than all before it. It especially wounds the perfect and those who have climbed to the top of the virtues, trying to crush them. As the plague of corruption destroys not only a member of the body, but the whole body, so the pride, not only destroys a part of the soul but the whole soul. Each of the other passions, although it disturbs the soul, is only warring with the opposite virtue, seeking to overcome it, it darkens the soul only in part. But the passion of pride darkens the whole soul and sinks it into the deepest chasm.*” (Cf. *Așezămintele mănăstirești (Monastic Settlements)*, Book 12, 1; *P.S.B.*, no 57, Bucharest, 1990, p. 249).

being able to relent into this, he instilled the thought of despising the less perfect among the brethren."⁴⁶

Saint Gregory the Great does not place pride among capital sins, as he considers it to be their *root*. Instead, to indicate pride, he keeps the vainglory⁴⁷.

From the invocation and presentation of these patristic testimonies, based on a long ascetic experience, it turns out that pride (or *hyperefania*) is the most "dangerous" of the eight *logismoi* (or thoughts of evil), because it encompasses the whole human soul, which, blinded by the darkest darkness, collapses into the depths of the chasm. If vainglory or kenodoxia refers – in its superficiality, cunning, and subtlety – to one's aggrandizement, Pride is the *fierce selfishness* directed against both God and fellow humans. It is a delusional inflation of the soul, eager to become everything. That's why the words of the Scripture warn us of the truth that "God resists the proud but gives grace unto the humble." (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5).

St. John the Ladder with his analytical spirit of great finesse, which characterizes him, says that "Pride is the denial of God, invention of demons, people's contempt, mother of condemnation, granddaughter of praise, sign of unfruitfulness, outcast of God's help, forerunner of losing one's minds, causer of falls, causer for falling under the dominion (of the devils), spring of anger, door of hypocrisy, causer of unmercifulness, guardian of sins, bitter accountant, judge of the people, hostile to God, root of blasphemy".⁴⁸ It is the denial of God, because he, who believes that what he does is only due to his powers and not to God's help, denies or rejects God and His help. That is why he falls, forsaken by the grace of God Whom he has disregarded.

That's why he adds: "The beginning of pride is the beginning of vainglory. Its midst is the contempt of the neighbor, the shameful proclamation of one's pains, self-praise in one's heart, hatred of reproof. And the end of it is the denial of God's help, the boasting of one's zeal, devilish vice".⁴⁹

Analyzing the Pharisee from the "Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee", St. John specifies: "I saw man thanking God with his mouth and boasting with his mind. The Pharisee testified about this when he hypocritically said: «Thank you, God» (Luke 18:11). Where the fall happened pride was first. The second thing is the announcer or the trumpet of the first".⁵⁰

⁴⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Capete despre dragoste, Suta a doua, (On love, Second Hundred)*, 38, in *The Philokalia*, 2nd volume, 2nd edition, Bucharest, 1993, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁷ "Inanis gloria" – Cf. *Moralium*, Lib. XXXI, col. 620-622. *Caput XLV*, in *P.L.*, t. 76, col. 620-622. Nil the Ascetic reports pride in virtuous life and says pride is "an irrational passion that slips into every work of virtue"; "it grows with the other virtues", but it "kills their brilliance".

⁴⁸ *The Ladder...*, Step 22, pp. 278-279.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 2, p. 279.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 4-5, p. 279.

St. John compares the proud monk with the cypress. As the “cypress tree does not leave its branches to spread to the ground, nor does the monk with a proud heart, to obey... The punishment of the proud is the fall, and the inciter is the devil”.⁵¹

Pride insinuates itself with much subtlety in the soul, and only those with much spiritual experience can decode its manifold modes of manifestation. St. John tells us a suggestive event in this regard: “A very knowledgeable old man gave spiritual advice to a conceited young man... And the young man, being blind, said: «Forgive me, father, I'm not proud». And the too wise old man said to him: «And what more obvious proof of this passion can you give us, son, than the word you have just said: I'm not proud»”.⁵²

We notice that here also St. John of the Ladder captures the same interweaving of the passion with the opposite eagerness, as in other places before. The sap of passion rises in man from his stained nature, along with the sap of virtues, as corruption in the fruit of a tree. He who considers himself humble is not humble. You must always remove from your virtue the awareness that you are virtuous. The conscience that the one who strives for perfection must have is that all virtues are powers of God in us. The ascension to such a consciousness implies a continuous effort of distillation, of thinning of nature, to make God transparent, by removing any thickness of it. In parallel, the one engaged in such an effort acquires the “wedding dress”, of which the Savior speaks and which is the grace of the Holy Spirit. He that is not worthy to clothe himself in it, will not be a partaker of the heavenly marriage, nor the spiritual dinner.

Then the portrait of the true monk is drawn: “The true monk – says Sf. Ioan – is the one with the unblinking eye of the soul and the unmoving feeling of the body. True monk is the one who calls the enemies like beasts and whips them to flee from him. The monk is so changed by virtues, as is another by pleasures... The monk is a bottomless bottom (an abyss) of humility, in which his whole spirit sank and drowned”.⁵³ The definition given to the monasticism is extraordinary, and it is worth noting: “The monasticism is an endless light in the eye of the heart”.⁵⁴ It is a perpetual light, because the monk being constantly attentive to his nature, gets to see through it uninterruptedly, the endless light of God, through the transparency of the heart as through an eye in which the light of God is seen.

⁵¹ “If one (Lucifer, author’s note) fell from heaven only through this passion, without another, it must be seen whether or not someone happens to ascend to heaven only through humility, without any other virtue”. (Cf. *Ibidem*, 7-12, pp. 279-280).

⁵² *The Ladder...*, Step 22, 14, pp. 280-281.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 22, p. 283.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

At the end of the analytical presentation of pride, St. John points out a serious consequence of this passion: “*Pride is about forgetting their own mistakes while remembering them is the cause of humble thinking*”.⁵⁵ Forgetting one's sins sometimes causes *self-imagining*, other times *callousness*. The proud one, losing the consciousness of his sins, in his imagination does not differ from God, and therefore does not see his foundation. But the humble one, knowing his mistakes or his pettiness, sees the foundation that sustains him forever, forgiving him.

The increase of pride in the soul leads to an increasing distance of the Christian from virtue: “*The further the darkness is from light, the stranger the proud is from virtue. Words of pride will be born in the hearts of the proud, and heavenly visions in the souls of the humble*”.⁵⁶ The proud therefore does not know God, nor does he live in peace with men. The hardening of the heart caused by pride makes him despise gentle people. Especially towards them, he behaves harshly, because he is afraid of the strong and when he needs them he flatters them.

The vainglory is the horse on which pride rides and these two deadly passions can be mastered and defeated only if they are fastened with “*the rope of obedience*” and hit with “*the whip of humility*”.⁵⁷ Another redoubtable weapon, recommended by St. John of the Ladder against pride, is *self-remembrance*. He then closes that “*the humble humility and self-remembrance will laugh at the horse and his rider, singing the song of victory with diligence: «Let us sing to the Lord, for He is glorified. Horse and rider were thrown into the sea» and the depths of humility*”.⁵⁸

So pride can be suppressed “*if we attribute to God our good deeds*”⁵⁹ and generally through humility. “*The devil can imitate all the good deeds we seem to do, but he is truly overcome with love and humility*”.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 23, p. 283.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 26, p. 284.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 28, p. 285.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 286.

⁵⁹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Capete despre dragoste, Suta a treia (On love, Third Hundred)*, 62, in *The Philokalia*, 2nd volume, Bucharest, 1993, p. 115.

⁶⁰ *Vie de Sainte Mèlanie*, 43, in S.C., no 90, Paris, p. 211. About St. Macarius the Egyptian we read the following: “... *A devil grabbed Abba Macarius with a knife, wanting to cut off his leg. And for his humble thought it could not, and the devil said to the father: «We have what you have; it is only with the humble thought that you differ from us and you overcome»*” (Cf. *Patericul (Paterikon) – For Abba Macarius the Egyptian* – , 33, Alba Iulia, 1990, p. 139).